

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Therese of Lisieux, "Flower Child" of the 19th Century

The "Flower Children" of the sixties made us all stop and think. They walked too slowly on busy city streets. They dressed with complete unconcern for the styles advertised in daily papers. They challenged many of the accepted institutional norms, and they talked a great deal about 'love' in the face of the violence and war that was in the air everywhere.



Recently I was reminded of these "Flower Children" when I picked up Dorothy Day's biography of St. Therese of Lisieux and noted the heading she gave to the second part of the book, "If a little flower could speak..." It made me think that, in many ways, this amazing young woman, Therese, the Little Flower, whose life story came to acclaim in the beginning of our own century, struggled with many of the questions and fought for many of the values of the "Flower Children" of this last decade. She was a great champion of love as the strongest force of human growth on both the individual and social levels — love which went far beyond mere sharing of life with kindred spirits, but which demanded great unselfishness for the sake of complete strangers. It urged her to leave the comfort of her family home for the austere simplicity of a Carmelite community, and to "waste her life" in ways that would appear completely unproductive according to standards of worldly efficiency.

Dorothy Day's attraction to the Little Flower of Lisieux grew out of her awareness of the futility experienced by many Catholics who felt useless and powerless in the grip of the complex industrialized society of these times. To be so small in a huge city, to be only a number in a long line, is to lose one's sense of personal worth and of personal control over one's own life. Dorothy's consuming effort through her Catholic Worker movement was to convince the faceless poor of our cities that they were persons of great dignity in the eyes of God, and that they were called to take responsibility for their own lives and for others in the spirit of Christ's love. And she saw in the family of the Little Flower an example of people who shared their gifts responsibly with others and tried to be faithful to the gospel even when the official stance of the state in their native France was atheistic and torn with class struggle.

It was Therese, herself, who chose the symbol of a flower to express her personal experience of being little and fragile, but of great dignity and importance. She looked at the mystery of God's gifting his people as she looked at a garden of many varied flowers and realized "that all the flowers he has made are beautiful." She writes in her autobiography, "The rose in its glory, the lily in its whiteness, don't rob the tiny violet of its sweet smell, or the daisy of its charming simplicity...The sun's light, that plays on the cedar trees, plays on each tiny flower as if it were the only one in existence..." With the eyes of faith she realized



that God has a special concern for each person and shapes the life of each one as if there were no other like it. "Everything conspires for the good of each individual," she points out, "just as the march of the seasons is designed to make the most insignificant daisy unfold its petals on the day appointed for it."

So the power of this Little Flower's holiness was rooted in such a firm belief in God's personal concern for her that she was able to give herself with great unselfishness to others. Even as she writes about the fire of God's sun, she writes about "the fire of sufferings, outward and inward," that brought her to maturity and strength. Hers was not a merely sentimental piety, but one grounded in a deep knowledge of the cross as integral to resurrection. "I am like a flower that can lift its head, refreshed after the storm has passed by," she says having struggled through many life challenges that would have overwhelmed most of us.

It was no wonder that she came to believe so strongly in God as unfailingly kind and merciful because her childhood home was one of tender nurturing, a model no longer taken for granted today. Her father was truly a gentle man and lavished her with attention, calling her his "little princess." Her mother reinforced this experience of devotion for

Therese, and both of them spoke to her often of God's love.

When Therese was only four, her mother died, and this separation plunged the child into a period of withdrawal and diffidence which lasted for ten years and was punctuated with episodes of deep depression. Despite the warmth of her family life, and events which she speaks of with great delight, she experienced acute mental and physical sufferings and came close to death on two occasions.

In today's climate of alienation and anxiety, there are many among us who suffer from similar disorders because of their highstrung, sensitive natures, and who can look to Therese for inspiration and guidance. She, herself, was very attentive and compassionate in her later years toward those who experienced similar kinds of illness and wanted to care for them and give them her support whenever possible.

At the age of fourteen Therese was healed of this kind of depression, and became aware of a new life and of a new call to live the life of a Carmelite Sister. She set about convincing her father and her guardian uncle of the rightness of this call for her, but she could not convince the Superior of the Carmelite Order who insisted, according to regulations, that she wait to enter until she was twenty-one. The story of her seeking an exception to this ruling from the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII, is a magnificent tale of courage and advocacy. Today, it is not unusual to see our young people questioning the validity of certain regulations, but in 1887 the sight of a teen-aged woman breaking the conventional rigid silence of a papal audience to convince the Pope that the norms regarding age of entrance into Carmel should be overlooked in her case - this was extraordinary.

It was the determination to do in all things what she believed God wanted of her, that characterizes Therese's life. "My mission," she wrote, "is to make God loved, to make Love loved." She accomplished this task by being faithful to the demands of a very ordinary life - the kind of life that most of us are called to live. She believed in the promise of Jesus regarding the tiny grain of wheat which has the transforming power of a seed to put down roots and push up through soil, to bring forth stem and branches and fruit, and to bear new seed to be cast again upon the earth.

As a Carmelite nun in a secluded monastery, she wanted to be completely dependent on her God, to be unknown, to remain childlike, and in so doing she championed all of the "little people" that are tempted to think themselves ineffective in a highly technical world. She continually fought inertia and boredom and daily renewed her effort to live responsibly her life of love.

Thus, Pope Pius XI was able to say, in the homily he gave at her canonization, "If the way of spiritual childhood became general, who does not see how easily would be realized the reformation of human society..."

vatican news

Everyone Needs Work

Castelgandolfo (RNS) - As Italy's month-long summer holiday came to a close, Pope Paul urged the Italian faithful to take up their daily work in a truly Christian spirit.



He also urged Italian authorities to continue in their efforts to tackle the nation's unemployment problem and appealed for harmony between labor and management.

Speaking to a large crowd of pilgrims and visitors at his summer residence here at noon on Aug. 28, Pope Paul said, "Today we think about returning to work after the long-summer holiday. Now that we are going back again to our usual jobs, it is worth spending a few moments to consider our attitudes in this matter, since our work makes up most of our daily activity.

"In fact, work is always on our mind. It is part of the way we think. It comes into consideration when we

are making any plans. There are endless discussions today about work and man's concern for work is part of the restlessness which afflicts modern society."

He continued, "Today, then, let us remind ourselves of a few basic points about work, which are fundamental to our thinking as Christians:

"First of all, all work involves a certain intrinsic pain, weariness, and expenditure of energy. This is something which we just have to accept. It is part of our development as people, not only in the economic sphere, but also in our civil and spiritual dimensions...

"We need to see our (individual) work, with all its elements of discomfort, within the context of our common labor and our common growth. If we can grasp this intelligently and commit ourselves to our responsibilities, then there will be no problem of idleness in our working lives, or shifting the hard job onto someone else's shoulders.

"The second point we must remember as Christians is that everyone needs work and therefore work should be found for every man. Unemployment is a

terrible problem, especially where young people are concerned, and this is one which will just have to be solved.

"We know that it is a very difficult problem to do anything about, but a solution must be found

"Blessed indeed are those who dedicate themselves and offer their talents, time, and money to provide honest labor for the unemployed and who make available the jobs that are so badly needed by the young generation, who represent the hope for the future.

"Finally, as a last point, let work become a bond of unity among the different social classes. It is true that the various class groups have different interests, but at the same time we should try to complement those interests at all times, so that we may work together for our common good and for an order in society based on freedom and not selfishness.

"As we return to our jobs, we ask Our Lady, the humble working girl who is also the Queen of Heaven, to protect us."

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