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DESOLATION AND DOCTRINE IN THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

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[Many theologians do not know what to make of Thérèse of Lisieux, the latest Doctor of the Church. Here the author proposes that during the "night of nothingness" of her final 18 months, Thérèse experienced solidarity with all those for whom the representations of faith have been drained of meaning. With faith stripped to its core, she articulated a radical doctrine of God's immanence in the ordinariness of the present moment. To interpret this experience calls for a multifaceted theological analysis. Her approach may be uniquely suited to core concerns of postmodernity.]

THÉRÈSE MARTIN WAS BORN January 2, 1873, in Alençon, France. The year turned out to be one of deep desolation for devout Ultramontane Catholics such as her family. On January 1, 1874, a front-page editorial in the Ultramontane newspaper *L'Univers* opined: "There was a universal presentiment that the year 1873 would see something end and something new begin. But now there is nothing, neither life nor death. Humanity seems a void. Asphyxiated, cadavers slide to the bottom of a moral abyss. History offers few examples of this absolute infecundity. Odorless and silent pestilences infiltrate everywhere, killing everything, and nothingness seems to have conquered being."[1]

For these "Assumptionist Catholics," who hoped for the dawning of a new world in which God would miraculously return both pope and king to their rightful thrones, the year had begun with exhilarating hope.[2]

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[1] Quoted in Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1983) 128.

[2] On this period, see ibid. 121–30. For specific background related to Thérèse, see: Louis-Marie de Jésus, "Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et son temps: En France et au Carmel," *Vie Thérésienne* 143 (1996) 7–44; Barbara Corrado Pope, "A Heroine Without Heroics: The Little Flower of Jesus and Her Times," *Church History* 57 (1988) 46–60.

It ended in despair because their faith in this "grand narrative" of God's intervention in the world of politics was disappointed. They did not know, of course, that in the very year of their desolation a saint had been born, a saint who perhaps represents an end and a beginning.

On the one hand, Thérèse can be seen as epitomizing the exhaustion of spirituality in the modern world. Her spirituality has often been characterized as sentimental, privatized, overly subjective, and disconnected from the world of theology. Insofar as this is true, Thérèse can be seen as the culmination of the unfortunate consequences of the widening split between doctrine and lived spirituality that began as early as the 13th century and was thoroughly institutionalized after the Enlightenment.[3]

Yet Thérèse has recently been named a Doctor of the Church. Many professional theologians find this astonishing, or at best faintly amusing. What, after all, can this uneducated, sheltered, pious child contribute to the development of the great and complex edifice of Christian doctrine? As postmodernity breaks upon the world, however, Thérèse may have more to offer than we have yet imagined. At the very least, her doctorate is a wake-up call to academic theology that it is time to rediscover the roots of doctrine in the radical living of Christian life.[4] My article, however, makes the case that there is more. Specifically it argues that Thérèse's immersion in desolation during her final "trial of faith" may open up new vistas for theology and ecclesial practice in the postmodern era. Her radical participation in the "nothingness" beyond all signifiers, surpassing all boundaries in her unreserved solidarity with "sinners," may have forged a new pathway whose significance will take us several generations to chart.

THE ORIGINS OF POSTMODERN CULTURAL DESOLATION

During the very period of Thérèse's life, profound visions of desolation were brewing in the mind and soul of Friedrich Nietzsche. Some regard Nietzsche as the first postmodernist.[5] Others regard him as the culmination of modernity. According to David Harvey, modernity is characterized by a

[3] For various perspectives on this split, see Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998) chap. 2; Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983); Sandra Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *Horizons* 13 (1986) 253–74.

[4] For an excellent reflection on this move in contemporary theology, see William M. Thompson, *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1987). See also the perspectives presented by Philip Endean, Mark McIntosh, J. Matthew Ashley, and Anne M. Clifford in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 3/2 (Fall 1995) 6–21.

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures,* trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1987).

terrible tension between the striving for universalizing grand narratives and the awareness of the abyss of ephemerality.[6] Nietzsche's contribution was to announce the death of modernity's god—that is, "a way of doing philosophy in which a highest principle is sought that grounds the possibility of all things."[7] Nietzsche tore away the mask of high ideals from all grand narratives, revealing that all are self-interested, all are perspectival, all are ephemeral and ultimately empty. In 1885, he wrote:

> And do you know what "the world" is to me? Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This world: A monster of energy, without beginning, without end . . . a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back . . . without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal; without will, unless a ring feels good will toward itself—do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles? A *light* for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men?—*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides![8]

After Nietzsche's deconstruction of all morality, what remains? Graham Ward calls it "aesthetic nihilism"—the impersonal drive simply to produce powerful artistic and rhetorical forms with "infinite indifference."[9] The drama of mass murder at Columbine High School in 1999 was a stunning example of what can happen when esthetic nihilism is actually lived out. The teenage killers are reported to have said, "This is how we want to go out," indicating that the most worthwhile goal to which they could aspire was to kill themselves while creating a horrifyingly well-crafted "story" that would rivet the attention of the whole world.

The astonishing success of the Littleton killers in accomplishing this nihilistic goal has, perhaps, awakened many to the depth of desolation that presently tears at our cultural fabric. Michael Paul Gallagher, in a lecture delivered in 1997, described "cultural desolation" as rooted in people's complete lack of connection to their own deepest hungers.[10] Gallagher quoted the Spanish theologian Josep Vives: "Today, God is missing but not missed."[11] As various commentators have noted, unbelief at the end of the

[6] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990).

[7] Graham Ward, "Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace," in Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997) xxviii.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968) 550.

[9] Ward, *Postmodern God* xxix–xxx.

[10] Michael Paul Gallagher, "Thérèse of Lisieux and the Crisis of Faith Today," lecture given in March, 1997, at the Carmelite Center of Spirituality, Dublin.

[11] Josep Vives, "Dios en el crepúsculo del siglo XX," *Razón y Fe* 232 (May 1991) 468.

20th century was quite a different phenomenon from that known by Thérèse at the end of the 19th century.[12] Then, atheists were often militant and even idealistic materialists and humanists. For millions today, questions of belief, truth, or goodness are not even on the horizon. Postmodern culture immerses its denizens in a narcissistic consumerism that "abandons the search for a single unifying meaning for life and seems content with partial experiences . . . exalts spontaneity, rejects morality and fixed truth, and . . . offers young people a cult of anchorless freedom."[13] This culture offers no language for the articulation of depth or genuine longing, leaving many people in terrible desolation when suffering, serious loss, or the approach of death create crises that cannot be allayed by the available consumeristic means.[14] Although some commentators do find positive religious potential in the postmodern breakdown of traditional cultural forms,[15] it is evident that this phenomenon also is presenting the human spirit with a new challenge of immense proportions.

THÉRÈSE'S TRIAL OF FAITH

So far we have seen that there was a form of desolation at the time of Thérèse's birth, and that there is a yet more profound desolation haunting the roots of our postmodern culture. Our primary topic, however, is Thérèse's own desolation, the trial of faith that began within days of her first hemoptysis at Easter 1896[16] and continued until she died 18 months later. This is her own account, taken from Manuscript C of her autobiography:

[12] See, for example, Luis Gonzalez-Carvajal, *Ideas y creencias del hombre actual* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1991).

[13] Michael Paul Gallagher, *What Are They Saying about Unbelief?* (New York: Paulist, 1995) 71. He is summarizing the insights of José Gomes Caffarena, *Raíces culturales de la increencia* (Santander: Sal Terae, 1988). For another articulation of the spiritual crisis of youth, see Joseph J. Feeney, "Can a Worldview be Healed? Students and Postmodernism," *America* 177 (November 15, 1997) 12–16.

[14] In his lecture, Gallagher references Michael Kearney, *Mortally Wounded: Soul Pain, Death, and Hunger* (New York: Scribner, 1996) for this latter insight. Kearney works with the dying in hospice settings.

[15] See Daniel J. Adams, "Toward a Theological Understanding of Postmodernism," *Cross Currents* 47 (1997) 518–30; Edith Wyschogrod and John D. Caputo, "Postmodernism and the Desire for God: An E-Mail Exchange," *Cross Currents* 48 (1998) 293–310; Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 27 (1997) 4–9; Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God," *Review for Religious* 53 (1994) 6–28.

[16] Thérèse coughed up blood on the nights of both Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Her tuberculosis was entering its final, fatal stage.

At this time I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear *faith,* that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness, and I was unable to believe that there were really impious people who had no faith. I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven, that beautiful heaven where God Himself wanted to be their Eternal Reward. During those very joyful days of the Easter season, Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who have no faith, and who, through the abuse of grace, lost this precious treasure, the source of the only real and pure joys. He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. . . . When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness that surrounds it by the memory of the luminous country after which I aspire, my torment redoubles; it seems to me that the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: "You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the *eternal* possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness."[17]

There is much debate over the exact character and significance of Thérèse's "night." In particular, the connection that Thérèse clearly makes between her own experience of darkness and the reality of people who have no faith has garnered much attention. Since Thérèse was named as a Doctor of the Church in October 1997 (the 100th anniversary of her death), this debate has taken on a new urgency. Is Thérèse's doctorate a throwback to premodern or traditionalist Catholicism? Or does she have a unique doctrinal contribution to make in a postmodern world where faith is a minority stance?[18] If a case is to be made for the latter, a key question will be: What is the relationship between Thérèse's desolation and the desolation of postmodern culture?

Four interrelated sets of questions seem to predominate in most of the

[17] Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux,* trans. John Clarke, 3rd ed. (Washington: ICS, 1996) 211–13.

[18] For discussion of the rationale for making Thérèse a Doctor of the Church, see: John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter: St. Thérèse, Doctor of the Church," *Origins* 27 (November 20, 1997) 390–96; Mary Frohlich, "Thérèse of Lisieux: 'Doctor for the Third Millennium'?" *New Theology Review* 12/2 (1999) 27–38; Servais Pinckaers, "Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Doctor of the Church," *Josephinum: Journal of Theology* 5 (1998) 26–40; John W. Donohue, "Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church," *America* 177 (December 13, 1997) 12–16; Jésus Castellano Cervera, " 'Eminens Doctrina': Une condition nécessaire pour être docteur de l'église," *Vie Thérésienne* 140 (1995) 7–22; Patrick Ahern, "Thérèse, Doctor of the Church," *Origins* 27 (September 4, 1997) 193–95; Camilo Maccise and Joseph Chalmers, "Un Docteur pour le troisième millénaire: Lettre circulaire des Supérieurs Généraux OCD et O. Carm. à l'occasion du Doctorat de sainte Thérèse de Lisieux," *Vie Thérésienne* 149 (1998) 31–47.

numerous discussions of Thérèse's trial of faith. First, what happened? Second, how did she herself understand these experiences? Third, how are they related to the schema of the "dark nights" in John of the Cross? Fourth, what do they have to do with her apostolic mission, especially in relation to those without Christian faith?

On one level, it is impossible to retrieve the exact character of Thérèse's experience. All we have are interpretative statements made by her[19] and by those who accompanied her.[20] Guy Gaucher has contributed a detailed study of the "facts"—that is, the progress of her physical illness from a medical perspective, coordinated with references to her writings and the *Last Conversations* recorded by her sisters.[21] This account leaves little doubt that her physical suffering was immense (in those days, dying nuns received no painkillers whatsoever) and that something extraordinarily difficult was also happening to her in the spiritual dimension. The most reductionist interpretation would say that we need look no further than the effects of extreme physical pain and the ordinary psychology of the dying process to explain Thérèse's night of nothingness.

The second question asks how Thérèse herself understood what was going on. It is clear that she used every means in her power to interpret her experience within the context of Christian faith. Speaking of how the "veil of faith" had become "a wall which reaches right up to the heavens and covers the starry firmament," Thérèse affirms: "When I sing of the happiness of heaven and of the eternal possession of God, I feel no joy in this, for I sing simply what I WANT TO BELIEVE."[22] This is only one among multiple citations that indicate her heroic effort to maintain a stance of faith even as all experimental support for it crumbled away.

A much-discussed issue here is whether Thérèse actually found herself doubting the existence of God, or whether she was merely tempted to doubt the existence of a heavenly afterlife. Pierre Descouvemont has repeatedly downplayed the severity of her crisis by insisting that she did not experience true doubt, but only a more peripheral doubt about heaven.[23] Cardinal Paul Poupard, however, has said that she tasted "the attraction

[19] See *Story of a Soul,* chap. 9–11.

[20] Especially the "Last Conversations" recorded by Mother Agnes and other sisters—although some (most notably Jean-François Six) do not believe that these contain any undistorted information about Thérèse's words and deeds (*St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations,* trans. John Clarke [Washington: ICS, 1977]).

[21] Guy Gaucher, *The Passion of Thérèse of Lisieux,* trans. Anne Marie Brennan (New York: Crossroad, 1973).

[22] *Story of a Soul* 214.

[23] Pierre Descouvemont, "Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 15 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1991) col. 605–6. See also his "L'espérance du ciel chez Thérèse," *Christus* 109 (1981) 110–19.

and the horror of nothingness."[24] Many interpreters make the case that for her the joy of heaven was so intimately linked to her belief in God that to lose one was essentially to lose the other—at least on the experiential level.[25]

Another aspect of the question of Thérèse's interpretation of the experience is the degree to which she felt herself to be a sinner. In Manuscript C Thérèse wrote: "Your child . . . does not wish to rise up from this table filled with bitterness at which poor sinners are eating until the day set by You. Can she not say in her name and in the name of her brothers, 'Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners!' "[26] Godefroy Madelaine, a priest who heard Thérèse's confession in 1896, testified at the beatification process that during this period she believed she was damned.[27] Nevertheless, in 1950 in Hans Urs von Balthasar's major study about Thérèse, he contended that she did not have an appropriate awareness of her sinfulness, and that this prevented her from being mystically open to God—at least until the very last days of her life.[28]

A related nuance is the question of how similar Thérèse's experience was to that of those without faith. Most scholars make the point that Thérèse's night of faith should not simply be equated with the forms of darkness through which unbelievers experience suffering. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini insists that Thérèse was the opposite of an atheist, and that we should not dignify unfaith by making it appear equivalent to the spiritual trial of a saint.[29] Others, however, conclude that her entrance into the experience of those alienated from God was radical. René Laurentin once

[24] Cardinal Paul Poupard, "Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus, docteur de l'amour et le monde de l'incroyance," *Vie Thérésienne* 122 (1991) 79, 83. Cardinal Sotano also said that Thérèse "experienced the painful trial of religious doubt" (Letter to Mgr Lacrampe, 20 June 1991, for the 50th anniversary of the Mission de France; quoted in Jean François Six, *Light of the Night: The Last Eighteen Months in the Life of Thérèse of Lisieux,* trans. John Bowden [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1998] 173).

[25] Poupard, "Docteur de l'Amour"; Jean Guitton, "Le génie spirituel chez Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus," *Nouvelles de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* (Mai 1973); Jean-François Six, *Light of the Night,* esp. 52–54, 169–73.

[26] *Story of a Soul* 212.

[27] *Bajocensis et Lexoviensis beatificationis et canonisationis servae Dei Sor. Theresiae a Puero Jesu Monialis Professae Ord. Carmelitarum Excalc. in Monasterio Lexoviensi Positior super virtutibus, etc.* 528; quoted in Ida F. Görres, *The Hidden Face: A Study of Thérèse of Lisieux,* trans. R. and C. Winston (New York: Pantheon, 1959) 253.

[28] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity,* trans. D. Nichols and A. E. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius 1992) 334–54.

[29] Carlo Maria Martini, *Thérèse et le drame de l'incrédulité,* trans. G. Isperian (Saint-Augustin, 1997).

commented that during Easter 1896 Thérèse was "seized within by a radical atheism."[30] Dominique Fontain, moderator of the Mission de France,[31] delicately balanced these positions when he wrote: "She lived an intimate insertion of unbelief at the heart of her faith. Unbelief entered into her faith. Her faith became a bare faith, reduced to trust. . . . Accepting that it will not be one or the other that will win, accepting to go forward in this dance of faith and non-faith linked together, that, I believe, is the spiritual path that Thérèse of Lisieux has discovered and which she invites us to take on today."[32]

The third set of debated questions has to do with the relationship between Thérèse's trial and the purificatory "dark nights" described by her mentor John of the Cross. Balthasar, as already noted, believed that Thérèse was not a true mystic and did not even approach John's "dark night of the soul." He calls her trial "a prior state of variation of the 'dark night.' "[33] While he is not entirely clear on this point, Balthasar may be taking a stance similar to that of Norbert Cummins who contended that Thérèse was dealing with the "dark night of the senses" phase which, in John's schema, precedes the more terrifying and total "dark night of the spirit."[34] Pierre Blanchard, on the other hand, identifies Thérèse's "ordinary state" as the night of the soul, giving as evidence her temptations against faith.[35]

This position is more fully developed by François Marxer, who discusses it in conjunction with the question of the relationship between Thérèse's experience and that of contemporary unbelievers. First he observes that Thérèse was in a far different position from the unbeliever exactly because she was deeply imbued with John of the Cross's teaching that the night is a precious time, a time of being "hidden in the secret of God's face,"[36] where God's transforming grace is very much at work. Nevertheless,

[30] René Laurentin, *Le Figaro* 3 January 1972; quoted in Six 31. Attacked by Six on this point, he said it was a case of the limits of journalism. See René Laurentin and Jean François Six, *Verse et Controverse* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1973) 113.

[31] The Mission de France was a movement of priests founded at Lisieux and focused on evangelizing unbelievers.

[32] Dominique Fontain, "Thérèse, la Mission de France et l'Incroyance" and "Thérèse de Lisieux: Un nouveau chemin vers Dieu. . . ", *Vie Thérésienne* 113 (1989) 17–27, at 26.

[33] Balthasar, *Two Sisters* 334.

[34] Norbert M. Cummins, O.C.D., "The Night of Faith," in Thomas M. Curran, ed., *The Mind of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Dublin: Carmelite Center of Spirituality, 1977) 37.

[35] Pierre Blanchard, "Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux," *Spiritual Life* 9 (1963) 165.

[36] John of the Cross, "The Dark Night" II 16:13; see also "The Living Flame" 2:17; both in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross,* rev. ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS, 1991). The "Holy Face" was Thérèse's most foundational image of God.

Marxer believes that understanding her trial of faith in relation to John's night of the spirit permits "seizing what despite everything connects the Thérésien night to contemporary unbelief: here as there, it is the representations of faith, the signifiers, that are in crisis, because they are untenable, impossible, or irrelevant."[37]

Here the question of the appropriate categorization of Thérèse's trial begins to merge into the fourth set of questions, regarding the import of Thérèse's "night of nothingness" for her apostolic mission in relation to contemporary unbelievers. Simon Tugwell rejected the category of "dark night" altogether, asserting that what is important about Thérèse's darkness is that it is "a way of identifying herself totally with unbelievers and sinners" by descending radically into Christ's desolation on the cross.[38] Poupard took a similar stance, also rejecting the "dark night" identification. He saw Thérèse as showing us the way "by carrying the very dereliction of this world which is ours at the heart of the holy agony shared with the Savior."[39]

Frederick L. Miller, building on a little-known idea of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, proposes that Thérèse's trial was a "reparatory night of the spirit."[40] Garrigou-Lagrange had written that although normally the night of the spirit ends with "a perpetual summer," the lives of some great servants of God "make one think of a prolongation of the night of the spirit even after their entrance into the transforming union. In such a case, this trial would no longer be chiefly purificatory; it would be above all, reparative." In such cases, "the reparative souls must resist the temptations of the souls they seek to save . . . ."[41] Miller's thesis is that Thérèse actually was already beyond John's "dark nights" because she was in the state of transforming union (mystical marriage), but that she was given a special charism of participating in Christ's redemptive work by suffering a darkness like that of unbelievers.

While Miller restricts himself to the most conservative sources, a surprisingly similar conclusion is developed by Jean-François Six, the "bad

[37] François Marxer, "Sur Thérèse de Lisieux: Une salve de publications," *Christus* 179 (1998) 377.

[38] Simon Tugwell, "St. Thérèse of Lisieux," *Doctrine and Life* 33 (July–Aug. 1983) 343–44. See also Ernest Larkin, "Thérèse's Prayer (3): Trial of Faith, the Absence of God," *Spirituality* 4/20 (1998) 303–9.

[39] Poupard, "Docteur de l'Amour" 79, 83. For a similar stance, see also Guy Gaucher's introduction to Martini, *Thérèse et le drame de l'incrédulité.*

[40] Frederick L. Miller, *The Trial of Faith of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York: Alba House, 1998).

[41] Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life: Prelude to Eternal Life,* trans. M. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947) 2.497–510, at 510.

boy" of Thérésien interpreters, who draws upon the widest possible range of Christian and secular interpreters.[42] Six builds especially on Thérèse's statement that "in order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lower Itself, and that It lower itself to nothingness and transform that nothingness into fire."[43] He argues that Thérèse's "night of nothingness strictly means that there is 'nothing': neither God, nor heaven nor the beyond. There is a gulf which gives her a radical vertigo, a vertigo against which she never ceases to struggle . . . ."[44] Feeling herself at an immeasurable distance from God, she abandons herself to letting God love through her all those who are "nothing."[45] Finally, her trial shifted her attention from desire for a heaven "elsewhere" to a passion "to be involved in, to throw herself into, the 'present moment'—a moment composed only of love."[46]

These then are some of the varying interpretations of what Thérèse underwent in her trial. The majority of commentators conclude that Thérèse most likely experienced the highest degree of subjective dereliction, although she did not "lose faith" in the strict sense. Most (Balthasar is the major exception) also interpret her as saying that during this period she knew herself as standing among the sinners, no longer separated in any way from their condition. Although her experience was different from that of an unbeliever because of her core stance of faith, subjectively she seems to have felt the fullness of alienation from God.

But does her subjective experience matter at all, from the viewpoint of theology? As we will see later, strong voices have recently been raised in criticism of contemporary tendencies that take "experience" all too seriously. While there still may be debate over exactly where she stood in relation to the "nights" of the soul, the really crucial matter is Thérèse's stance of faith and the way that confirms her as a participant in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. From this perspective, this is the only language in which one can speak of her as having any role in relation to those without Christian faith.

From another perspective, however, there are other connections that can be found between Thérèse and postmodern desolation. My argument will be that this latter approach has the potential to be a rich vein for future theology and ecclesial practice.

[42] Six has been consistently ostracized by Lisieux "insiders" because of his very negative attitude toward Mother Agnes (Thérèse's older sister and the person responsible for much of the re-writing of Thérèse's texts). His scholarship and his interpretations are generally worthy of attention, but the vitriol that repeatedly surfaces must be taken with many grains of salt.

[43] *Story of a Soul* 195.

[44] Six, *Light of the Night* 173.

[45] Ibid. 134–45.

[46] Ibid. 193.

THÉRÈSE AND POSTMODERNITY

Thérèse's sisters and early commentators suppressed knowledge about Thérèse's trial of faith. They cut the strongest evidence of it out of the published texts, and interpreted her spirituality without mentioning it. The evidence began to re-emerge with the work of André Combes in the 1940s, but even then official interpreters such as Pierre Descouvemont and Conrad de Meester strongly resisted regarding it as particularly significant. Within the last 30 years, however, fascination with this aspect of Thérèse's spiritual journey has expanded rapidly as witnessed by the many studies I have cited. It is noteworthy that this corresponds closely with the period during which postmodernity has established itself on the cultural level.

Indeed, Marxer's statement that in both Thérèse's night of faith and contemporary unbelief "it is the representations of faith, the signifiers, that are in crisis, because they are untenable, impossible, or irrelevant,"[47] points the way to finding a connection—although not an equation—between Thérèse's desolation and postmodern desolation. A recent study by Amy Hollywood compares the "catastrophe" advocated by the seminal postmodern philosopher Georges Bataille with similar practices of Angela of Foligno (the 14th-century mystic whose writings Bataille read with great admiration).[48] Bataille gleaned from Angela the practice of an unusual, lacerating form of meditation that would induce a catastrophic dissolution of the self; only in such moments could he experience ecstasy and a form of communion.[49] What makes him postmodern, however, is that he adamantly refused to surround this practice with any form of meaning-giving narrative. He sought to plunge himself into nothingness, in the most radical sense of that term. Here is his description of the resulting "night":

> Contemplating night, I see nothing, love nothing. I remain immobile, frozen, absorbed in IT. I can imagine a landscape of terror, sublime, the earth open as a volcano, the sky filled with fire, or any other vision capable of "putting the mind into ecstasy"; as beautiful and disturbing as it may be, night surpasses this limited 'possible' and IT is nothing, there is nothing in IT which can be felt, not even finally darkness. In IT, everything fades away, but, exorbitant, I traverse an empty depth

[47] Marxer, "Une salve de publications" 377.

[48] Amy Hollywood, "Mysticism and Catastrophe in Georges Bataille's *Atheological Summa,"* paper given at the "Mystics" Conference at the University of Chicago, May 14, 1999. See also her " 'Beautiful as a Wasp': Angela of Foligno and Georges Bataille," *Harvard Theological Review* 92 (1999) 219–36.

[49] Bataille's meditation practices included focusing intensely on photos of the broken body of a Chinese torture victim; see Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience,* trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY, 1988) 112–28. Angela focused similarly on the broken body of Christ; see Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works,* trans. Paul Lachance (New York: Paulist, 1993) 145–46, 184–85. For an example of Angela's experience of self-dissolution, see 197–98.

and the empty depth traverses me. In IT, I communicate with the "unknown" opposed to the *ipse* which I am; I become *ipse,* unknown to myself, two terms merge in a single wrenching, barely differing from a void—not able to be distinguished from it by anything that I can grasp—nevertheless differing from it more than does the world of a thousand colors.[50]

Clearly Thérèse, like Angela (and unlike Bataille), understood her confrontation with the "night of nothingness" within the context of the Christian meaning-giving narrative. Furthermore, it does not appear that Thérèse directly sought the dissolution of the self through the kind of lacerating meditations practiced by Angela and Bataille; rather, this night was simply visited upon her (assisted, perhaps, by the dissolving effects of tuberculosis on her own body). Nevertheless, there is a point of connection here between the sheltered Carmelite Thérèse and the wild atheist Bataille. Each describes being swallowed up by an originating void that is radically destabilizing but also immensely fecund. We certainly cannot say that they had the same experience, since Thérèse stands firm in the insistence that this is a trial sent by her beloved but hidden Divine Father, while Bataille revels in affirming its absolute meaninglessness. We can say, however, that Thérèse appears not to have been a stranger to the roots of postmodern desolation.

The fruit of the trial, for Thérèse, was the collapse of her desire for heaven as another world and its replacement by the discovery of heaven as love in the present moment.[51] This was by no means a loss of faith in eternal life with God, but rather the discovery that eternal life is now. Graham Ward has said that the postmodern philosophers (Bataille among them) have sought above all the "puncturing of the circle of immanence" by pointing to an "originating . . . destabilizing, differentiating source."[52] Thérèse too taught an immanence that is broken open at its heart to the unnameable, ungraspable divine.

Perhaps one can detect a hint of this link to the postmodern worldview in one of the last lines in Thérèse's *Story of a Soul,* where she wrote: "Since Jesus has reascended into heaven, I can follow Him only in the traces he has left; but how luminous these traces are! how perfumed!"[53] Traces is a

[50] Bataille, *Inner Experience* 124–25. His term *ipse* refers to the reality of himself unlimited by the mere I. "[T]here is still knowledge, strictly speaking, as long as *ipse* can be distinguished from the whole, but in *ipse's* renunciation of itself, there is fusion: in fusion neither *ipse* nor the whole subsist. It is the annihilation of everything which is not the ultimate 'unknown', the abyss into which one has sunk" (ibid. 115–16).

[51] *Story of a Soul* 214.

[52] Ward, *Postmodern God* xli.

[53] *Story of a Soul* 258. Michael Downey was the first to point out this link to me; he later employed the image in his "Luminous Traces: The Inbreaking Spirit and Cultural Fragmentation," *Review for Religious* 58 (1999) 118–36.

central term in postmodern thought, where its implication is that there are no essences to be known, but only ever-shifting, ever-reinterpreted traces. The immediate context of Thérèse's use of the term, of course, is a spirituality of faith in the absent or veiled God. Yet the terminological conjunction offers a rich opportunity for some reflection on potential "intertextuality" between Thérèse and postmodern philosophy.

Jacques Derrida, for example, rejects all metaphysics of presence in favor of attention to the movements of language. In a remarkable essay entitled "How to Avoid Speaking," Derrida analyzes texts of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart and shows how their strategies of multilayered quotation (of others) and address (to others) construct an event of apophasis—a language-event that "prescribes to us the good and accurate apophasis: how to avoid speaking."[54] For Derrida, then, apophasis is not an essence or immediate, language-free experience, but an event that may (or may not) leap forth in the midst of intersubjective communication.

Kevin Hart, discussing whether Derrida's philosophy can possibly be consistent with belief in God, sketches a portrait of a Derridaean believer: "He or she would trust in God's presence while not expecting to experience it in the present. The life of faith would center on the interpretation of traces. It would be a negative way, not necessarily by virtue of accepting a 'negative theology' but by dint of experiencing an aporia, an inexorable demand to choose between legitimate alternatives. One would look to the God rendered possible by exegesis and philosophy, while at the same time answering to the God who upsets the realm of the possible, who arrives in a singular manner outside the known and the expected."[55]

Thérèse, especially in her last months, almost eerily incarnates this sort of believer. She is no negative theologian in the rigorous intellectual sense of one who thinks through the affirmations, negations, and negations of negations that are essential to a full-fledged philosophical articulation of who God is and is not. Rather, she lives the aporia of standing in the terrible nowhere between the God she trusts—the loving God "known" in Scripture, liturgy, Church, and world—and the abyss, the nothingness, of a God who can never in any way be known, controlled, or grasped. Her resolution—insofar as there can be one—is simply love. The following are a few excerpts from her most famous text, her account of discovering that her vocation is love:

> Is there a soul more *little,* more powerless than mine? . . . But just as Mary Magdalen found what she was seeking by always stooping down and looking into the empty tomb, so I, abasing myself to the very depths of my nothingness, raised

[54] Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," in Ward, *Postmodern God* 175.
[55] Keven Hart, "Jacques Derrida (b. 1930): Introduction," in Ward, *Postmodern God* 165.

myself so high that I was able to attain my end. . . . Yes, I have found my place in the Church and it is You, O my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be *Love.* Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized.[56]

Then, in one of her most theologically redolent sentences, Thérèse essentially defined God in terms of the mission of bridging the ultimate aporia through love. She wrote: "Yes, in order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lower Itself, and that it lower Itself to nothingness and transform this nothingness into *fire.*"[57] In mundane acts of love, here and now, the nothingness of the here-and-now may be transformed into fire and thus reveal God. This, in Thérèse's doctrine, is our only hope.

Her "little way," then, is not the saccharine piety of affecting the multiplication of good deeds (as it has often been portrayed). Nor is it a search for extraordinary positive or negative experiences. Rather, it is the most demanding ascesis of simply living neighborly charity in the very ordinary here and now. In the end, Thérèse no longer expects to encounter God in "essence"; she simply trusts in the "event of apophasis" as it occurs in the midst of her daily acts of love.

THE ROLE OF "EXPERIENCE" IN THEOLOGY

In a recent monograph, Mark McIntosh eloquently makes the case that the profound spiritual transformation that a mystic undergoes does indeed have theological implications.[58] In fact, McIntosh argues, the mystic in some sense actually becomes an event of divine speech; hence the lives and writings of genuine mystics are not marginal to theology, but are its very root. An important resource for McIntosh is a 1995 book in which Denys Turner astutely criticizes the experientialist tendency in contemporary spirituality.[59] As McIntosh puts it:

While no one would want to discount the significance of experimental phenomena in the spiritual life, if these are seen as the defining features then spirituality seems to lose its theological voice. It becomes seen as a particularly powerful expression of human subjectivity. The analysis of spirituality in terms of that subjectivity washes out the theological implications of the subject's transformation—the trace of the divine other vanishes behind one or another aspect of human self-consciousness.[60]

My exploration of the doctrinal import of Thérèse's desolation must now come to terms with this critique of the tendency to overemphasize the significance of experience for the development of theology and spirituality.

[56] *Story of a Soul* 193–94. [57] Ibid. 195.
[58] Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998).
[59] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995).
[60] McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* 9.

Turner's contribution analyzes such seminal figures as Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Bonaventure, and Eckhart, to show how these theologian-mystics were not writing about "experiences," but rather were engaging in a carefully constructed philosophical critique of the human tendency to seek God within the bounds of experience. Turner thus reveals the faultiness of present-day assumptions that reduce the mystical to an "experience of negativity" rather than recognizing (as did these great patristic and medieval theologians) that Christian life is founded on a "negativity of experience." The problem with contemporary experientialism, in Turner's view, is that it tends to encourage people to abandon or denigrate the ordinary way of Christian life (i.e., moral and liturgical practice) in favor of going on a wild-goose chase looking for some sort of pure negative experience. The great theologians, says Turner, taught in rigorous philosophical categories the insight that the apophatic moment is a grace that one discovers in the midst of ordinary life—not in some esoteric elsewhere.

As far as it goes, Turner's analysis is extremely helpful. The distinction between the "experience of negativity" and the "negativity of experience" is a crucial one. Yet, as Bernard McGinn has pointed out, Turner perhaps goes too far in denying the significance of experiences. McGinn has argued that Turner "downplays the ongoing interaction between apophatic and more cataphatic, or consciousness-laden, elements in the history of Christian mysticism, and therefore he tends to forget that mysticism is a whole process of personal transformation, not just one aspect of it."[61]

Examining Thérèse's case in view of this discussion, we note that although she clearly had an abundance of painful and dark experiences such as physical suffering, affective distress, mental turmoil, and spiritual emptiness, the more significant organizer of her consciousness during her trial of faith was the abyss that offered absolutely nothing to either resist or cling to except what Dominique Fontain has called "bare faith, reduced to trust . . . this dance of faith and non-faith linked together."[62] The difficult part of understanding this appropriately is articulating the fact that it was not necessarily an experience, even though it certainly had experiential implications. It is here that I see the need to employ a kind of transcendental analysis that can distinguish between intentional consciousness (experiences) and a nongraspable ground or horizon of consciousness.[63] The

[61] Bernard McGinn, "Quo Vadis? Reflections on the Current Study of Mysticism," *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6/1 (1998) 16. See also McGinn's review of Turner in *Journal of Religion* 77 (1997) 311–13.

[62] Fontain, "Un nouveau chemin vers Dieu" 26.

[63] For a systematic presentation of the theory of mystical transformation that underlies this approach, see Mary Frohlich, *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic: An Analysis of Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars, 1994) esp. chapters 5 and 7.

sense of nothingness, insofar as it is not an object of intentional consciousness, is not strictly speaking a negative experience; yet it seems to engender both intensely painful experiences and (at least potentially) a life-transforming reorganization of selfhood. Perhaps we could restate the gist of Turner's point by saying that to seek negative experiences—whether in the sense of seeking suffering, or in the sense of seeking pure consciousness—is misguided because seeking, by definition, is an activity of intentional consciousness, while the real mystical event is never reducible to an object of human intentionality.

In a recent lecture, McGinn suggested a set of categories that I find helpful in thinking through some of the issues.[64] Examining a number of different Christian figures, he noted three distinct kinds of negativity that appear within Christian mystical traditions. "Negativity one" is negative theology in the strict intellectual sense, that is, the rigorously constructed "unsaying of God." "Negativity two" is what might be called the kataphatic or descriptive form of negative theology, expressed either in the practice of ascetical detachment or in the use of "contrary signs" (for example, Paul's statement that "[God's] power is made perfect in weakness," 2 Cor 12:9). Turner's analysis essentially deals with these two forms of negativity, clarifying their distinction from one another and showing how the first order *description* characteristic of negativity two should not be confused with the second order *analysis* of negativity one. Using McGinn's terminology, we can say that Turner's conclusion was that it is the analytic insight of negativity one that is the more genuine mystical contribution to both theology and spirituality.

In regard to Thérèse, what McGinn calls "negativity two" can clearly be seen in her formation within a highly ascetical spirituality that lauded physical and emotional forms of self-denial, as well as in the fact that she chose as her root metaphor for God the image of the veiled and wounded Holy Face of Jesus—an image that elides within itself the fullness of both presence and absence.[65] These elements certainly have rich potential on a practical level for those who wish to learn from Thérèse; indeed, on the pastoral level, this is the level that probably is most likely to grasp people's attention in a transformative way. Yet since Thérèse clearly did not proceed to make an analysis on the level of "nega-

[64] Bernard McGinn, "Vere Tu es Deus Absconditus: The Hidden God in Luther and Some Mystics," lecture given at the "Mystics" Conference at the University of Chicago, May 13, 1999.

[65] See Mary Frohlich, "Your Face is My Only Homeland: Thérèse of Lisieux and the Devotion to the Holy Face," in *Theology and Lived Christianity,* ed. David M. Hammond, College Theology Society 45 (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 2000) 177–205.

tivity one," by Turner's standards she would have little to contribute to theology.[66]

McGinn proposes, however, that Turner's presentation leaves out of account a third form of negativity, namely, mystical dereliction—the all-encompassing sense of being radically alienated from God. It seems that insofar as Turner recognizes this, he conflates it with "negativity two." But mystical dereliction needs to be distinguished from the more humanly constructed and humanly controllable elements of ascesis and "contrary signs" that characterize negativity two. An essential dimension of the experiential terror of mystical dereliction is exactly that it goes beyond an "experience of negativity" to a "negativity of experience." It is the sense of being catastrophically overwhelmed by a void, a nothingness, that seems to annihilate the very roots of one's sense of meaning and existence. Although not an "experience" in the sense of an object of intentional consciousness, it is radically "experiential" in that it engages the very ground of one's personhood. It is in these terms, I would suggest, that we can best understand the character and contribution of Thérèse's final trial of faith.[67]

DESOLATION AND DOCTRINE

Within a postmodern context, are there doctrinal implications of Thérèse's desolation? Turner and McIntosh have clarified that its significance is not simply in its being a negative experience. The next step for McIntosh is to develop the perspective that what is significant in any mystical transformation is that it participates in the "divine speech" that culminated in Christ's life, death, and Resurrection. Thus, a mystic's life and writings are theologically significant insofar as they articulate this

[66] Within the emerging academic discipline of spirituality, it has become commonplace to invoke Walter Principe's distinction of three levels of spirituality as an aid to clarifying which aspect one intends to discuss. The three are: lived spirituality; articulated "wisdom expressions"; and systematic analysis of the spiritual life. This distinction may be helpful here: the spirituality that Thérèse learned and taught was on the level of "wisdom expressions," while what Turner calls for would involve a more systematic analysis than she was prepared to engage in. The element of "lived spirituality" undergirds both of these, as well as the aspect to be discussed in the following paragraph. See Walter H. Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12 (1983) 127–41; see also his "Spirituality, Christian," *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality,* ed. M. Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993) 931–38.

[67] For discussion of the question of the relationship between intentional consciousness and mystical "experience," see Frohlich, *Intersubjectivity of the Mystic* 17–20, 45–47, 128–30, 204–10, 227–30.

divine speech in a way that communicates transformatively with others. What is important in the mystic's text is not descriptions of her experiences, but the presentation of "a new theological *gestalt,* a hermeneutical field within which everything is seen in a new light and is charged with a new resonance."[68] A key factor for the discernment of the theological significance of a mystic's text will be whether, in fact, it draws others toward transformation. If it does, this is an important sign that the mystic has fully entered into the life of Christ, who poured himself out for others on the cross.

In this interpretation, Thérèse's "night of nothingness" during her trial of faith was her participation in the kenosis of Christ. Evidence for this can be found first in her own testimony that its chief fruit was her increasingly concrete commitment to love of neighbor, and secondly in the actual transformative effects of her life and writings on others subsequent to her death. The doctrinal significance of Thérèse's desolation will primarily be its fresh re-articulation of the most basic elements of Christian revelation: the centrality of Christ's life, death, and Resurrection and of the life of the Church to which it gives birth. Through Thérèse, the "divine speech" tells the old story in a new idiom; contemporary hearers who are open enough may find there a reconfiguration of the speech of theology.

As a Catholic theologian, I agree with the affirmation that all claims of theological significance must ultimately refer back to these basics of Christian revelation. Thus, I find the core of McIntosh's interpretation compelling. I am not convinced, however, that this approach says enough. It moves somewhat too blithely from the "negativity of experience" to the specificity of revelation as available to human intentional consciousness. In the context of personal faith, witness, and evangelism, this may be appropriate. One can argue that Thérèse is a saint exactly because she committed herself without reserve to this revelation. Another perspective, however, is that Thérèse is a saint because she committed herself without reserve to loving, even when every aspect of the deposit of revelation that is available to intentional consciousness fell away like so much dust.

I would not want to paint these two perspectives as radically opposed to one another. Thérèse *was* faithful to the deposit of revelation, with every ounce of her strength; it is right that we as Christians encourage one another to equally heroic fidelity. Yet in the end, her strength was not what was decisive. She had to fall into the abyss of nothingness in order to be fully taken up by the grace of God. In her words: "In order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lower Itself, and that It lower itself to nothingness and transform that nothingness into fire."[69] When love "low-

[68] McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* 143.
[69] *Story of a Soul* 195.

ers itself to nothingness," it abandons all distinctions between "sinner" and "saint" in favor of transforming *all* by the fire of love.

It is here that we may encounter—by the back door, so to speak—the conjunction of Thérèse's desolation and that of postmodern culture. The nihilistic celebration of the void (explicitly, in the case of philosophical nihilists such as Nietzsche or Bataille; implicitly, in the case of "lowbrow" nihilists such as the Littleton killers) seems to be at the opposite extreme from Thérèse's resolute faith-encounter with "nothingness." But is it? Yes, insofar as the nihilist makes the void an object of intentional consciousness and perversely revels in its meaninglessness. But no, insofar as the void is really a void, incapable of being apprehended within intentional consciousness. Thérèse was there. She was with them. She was no different from them. In the truest sense, she became the sister of the nihilists.

In short, Thérèse may have a remarkable affinity with present-day generation-X youth. Much that appears as an embrace of nihilism, such as grunge and gothic clothing styles, shocking lyrics and images in music videos, body mutilation, the dramatic exaltation of suffering, etc., is actually the expression of a poignantly courageous quest for spiritual grounding.[70] The theology that will make the bridge between this generation and the Christian tradition will have to be similarly courageous, unhesitatingly grounding itself in the witness of those like Thérèse who have plunged beyond all limiting signifiers to the broken-open core of the paschal mystery.

In view of this, the project of grasping the full theological significance of Thérèse's life and writings will require an analysis that goes beyond simply affirming their character as participation in the "divine speech" of Christian revelation. For the "divineness" of the speech requires that it reverberate and create new communities far beyond its intrinsic boundaries. To do the theology necessary for the postmodern age, perhaps we will need to develop a kind of "theological perichoresis" among a transcendental analysis such as that of Lonergan, a "dramatics of revelation" such as that of Balthasar, and an ethics of solidarity such as that of Levinas.[71] I suggest that our newest Doctor of the Church points us in this direction because her final trial of faith is, all at once, a radical transcendence of intentional consciousness, a heroic exemplification of the kenosis of Jesus Christ, and an unreserved act of solidarity with those most abandoned to nothingness.

[70] Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

[71] See Robert Doran's more fully developed proposal of a similar approach in his "Bernard Lonergan and the Functions of Systematic Theology," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998) 569–607, at 604.