

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

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PAY OUR DEBTS

St. Therese of Lisieux wrote to her sister Celine, "Tomorrow, in an hour, we shall be at port, what joy...to contemplate Jesus face to face all through the whole of eternity. Always more love, always more joys...happiness without clouds" (*Letter 94*). She is describing the tomorrow of eternity.

But what does happiness in this world of time do for us? Joy, bonded with love, cries out for more joy, for greater joy that is like a sweet refreshment granted even now from the source of all delight. Psalm 16 tells us where earthly joy will lead. "My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices.... You show me the path of life. In Your Presence is fullness of joy. In your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (9,11). The psalmist assures us that what God has in store for us surpasses any bliss this world's passage can offer. We don't look back and regret that earlier days are over. They had their place in the scheme of things for us, but now we move forward, taking hold of the special grace each succeeding moment contains.

Therese quotes the Gospel of Matthew, "'The yoke of the Lord is sweet and light," (11:30) and then goes on, "When one accepts it, one feels its sweetness immediately and cries out with the Psalmist, 'I have run the way of Your commandments when You enlarged my heart' (Ps 119:32)....I run with joy in the way of your new commandment. I want to run in it until that blessed day when...I shall be able to follow You in the heavenly courts, singing Your new canticle" (*Story of a Soul* 225,6).

The French Carmelite is telling us how grace expands the heart and gives us a gladness that energizes us so that we *run* on the way pointed out for us by the Good News of Jesus. As we hasten forward, we see the final goal of the race, the prize that will be given to us: happiness everlasting.

But what about sin? What about the times I have not measured up? The resolutions not kept? The things I should have done differently? The people I wish I had treated more gently? Relationships which are not as loving as I had hoped they would be? All this is the great pile of my human failures. Yes, much of it is my fault though for part of it I can plead my excusable human vulnerability.

What do we do with our heap of personal shortcomings? We do not let it overwhelm us, destroy our joy which is based on the sure promise of Jesus. We have a Redeemer Who frees us from the burden of our deficiencies. As we look back on the years we have lived, memory takes us to good times and to bad, to what we have done well for God, at least rather well, to the times when we have fallen short. How do we look upon these failures, upon what we admit are sins? The answer is: Yes, we regret them, but we view them now through the lens of the cross of Calvary. We beg forgiveness and experience a Savior's loving release.

When a human life draws closer to its last chapter, grace has a special work of completion to accomplish. The temporal pace is accelerated. Postponements become too risky. Loose ends must be tied up. Nothing can so focus our attention as the realization that ultimately death will come for us. That is true whenever we contemplate the end of our earthly existence, whether it seems near or far away. For Christians, this is not a morbid preoccupation, for we cling to the One Who has conquered death. But when the certainty that our last breath is palpably close, then our focus takes on a special intensity.

Therese said less than two months before she died, "I can depend on nothing, no good works of my own in order to have confidence....This poverty was a grace for me...Never in my life would I be able to pay my debts to God....Then I made this prayer: O my God, I beg You, pay the debt....I remembered with great consolation these words of St. John of the Cross, 'Pay all debts'....We experience such great peace when we're totally poor, when we depend on no one except God" (*Her Last Conversations*, p.137).

Therese is not saying that in paying our debt, God removes our human responsibility. Her lesson is that God elevates our human efforts through grace. Discouragement gives way to peace as we see God at work to undo any evil that has invaded our lives. We are empowered for reparation and for building up what may have been torn down. Grace enables us to pardon ourselves and others and to say to God: "Pay all debts."

Every day, but especially during these Paschal weeks, we celebrate what Christ accomplishes for us in each 24-hour period of our lives. We listen, as Therese did, to the words of the Epistle to the Ephesians. "**Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering**" (5:1). May that sweet fragrance of Jesus permeate our hearts and communicate itself to everyone we meet in the passing hours.

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