
The Little Way of Hiddenness

Ah! Lord, let me hide in your Face,
There I'll no longer hear the world's vain noise,
Give me your love, keep me in your grace
Just for today.
"My Song for Today"¹

As it is commonly understood, "evangelizing" is something done as a public event, often in stadiums, where seekers hear an altar call and come to Jesus; on television and radio stations where dynamic speakers tell the story of their conversion; and in megachurches where hundreds gather to praise the Lord.

I felt the full force of this kind of evangelizing in a "rally for Jesus" event I attended when I was in college. The enthusiasm of everyone around me was irresistible. Jesus was there in music, song, and liturgical dance. It was not easy to leave this mountaintop experience and return to my local parish, but it had to be done.

That is why to place evangelization in the context of the hidden life seems at first glance to be a contradiction in terms. And yet, is this not where Jesus himself began his ministry? Turning to the Gospel of Luke, we meet him as a boy of twelve teaching in the temple after which we

are told he rejoined his mother Mary and his foster father, Joseph, went with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them (see Lk 2:51). Between that time and his reappearance at his baptism around the age of thirty (see Lk 3:23), Jesus led a hidden life. All we know is that he increased in wisdom, in age, and in divine and human favor (see Lk 2:52). These years of obscurity do not preclude evangelization; instead they provide its preparatory ground.

There can be no doubt that Thérèse has a predilection for hiddenness. In her *Story of a Soul*, there are innumerable references to the word "hidden." From childhood onward, Thérèse trod the path of suffering. In his psychological and spiritual reflections on her life, Fr. Marc Foley, O.C.D., author of *The Context of Holiness*, reminds us that she was scarred emotionally by the death of her mother when she was only four years old; that she was bedridden as a result of a neurotic episode at the age of ten; that she struggled with debilitating scruples most of her life; and that she underwent an agonizing dark night of the senses and the spirit ending in the consumption that killed her. And yet, few people knew of these multiple nights of faith. Affliction was the hidden flower Thérèse picked for Jesus from the garden of her brief existence and from the treasures she found in the Gospels. God himself unveiled them to her as loving parents reveal the secrets of how to live a holy and happy life to their children.

Thérèse strove to be empty of self-centeredness so that she might be found worthy to be made full of God. She placed herself under the direction of God's sovereign will. Having once been the center of everyone's attention, all she wanted as a Carmelite was to hide every sign of self-absorption from others so that in her they would see

Jesus. To be a mirror of her Beloved for others meant that she had to hide away all her accumulated mental and emotional baggage and be ready at every moment to receive him in her heart.

As a child, Thérèse loved to play hide-and-seek with her sisters and their friends. It was as if she considered it to be a foretaste of what God had in store for her: "I felt that Carmel was a *desert* where God wanted me to go to hide myself."² She intuited that the way to serve God did not lie in the performance of striking works but in hiding ourselves from the passing glitter of vainglory. In secret, Jesus instructed her that she was to practice virtue in such a way "that the left hand knows not what the right is doing."³

The hidden life became for Thérèse the soil in which the Lord planted the seeds of evangelization that we are to harvest with his help over a lifetime. Self-giving, self-effacing love is the most recognizable trait shared by the Christ-centered, Gospel-oriented children of God. Because Jesus had found her in her hiding place, it was not necessary for Thérèse to devise new ways to come to Christian perfection; her path to holiness consisted of responding to the guidance of the Spirit in the mundane details of convent life. Her dependence on the Lord unlocked for Thérèse a veritable treasury of spiritual truths; it increased her ability to discern occasions for evangelical witness others might be inclined to overlook. These "little nothings" were not self-chosen but divinely initiated. They were housed in the limited but blessed circumstances of her life at Lisieux. She practiced self-abandonment to Divine Providence by witnessing to Christ when she was folding "up the mantles forgotten by the Sisters"⁴ or transporting Sister St. Pierre to the refectory.⁵ Doing these "little

nothings” became the preparatory school that enabled Thérèse in both intention and action to carry Christ’s message of redemptive love to the whole Church.

When you think about it, is not your life for the most part a series of the same kinds of “little nothings”? Who but God notices when you go to the drugstore early in the morning to pick up a prescription needed by a family member or when you take a moment on the way to work to telephone a sick friend or when you pay for a person’s cup of coffee when she runs short of change?

To evangelize is not only to know the truths of our faith, its creeds and doctrines, but to cultivate the gifts of seeing needs as they arise and understanding how to become “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16). Thérèse accepted that she was too weak to perform evangelical feats in foreign missions but that she was strong enough to release through her acceptance of everyday life with its sufferings and joys the graces most needed at home and in the world as a whole.

The little way of spiritual childhood emphasizes the efficacy of hiddenness. It invites us on a daily basis to emulate the untold life of Jesus of Nazareth and to see its “nothingness” as a veritable treasury of graces. Mustard seed theology (a mite produces a mighty tree) does not preclude contact with the wider world, especially through prayer. It reveals the paradoxical reality that good deeds can abound with or without others knowing their origin. Self-emptying was the condition for Thérèse’s being made full of God. By showing others that she owned nothing at all, she was able to give everything she accomplished to them as a gift from the Lord. From the voided vessel she was, she poured the fullness of God’s presence into

the heart of everyone she helped, from young novices to aging nuns. She proved day by day that we only excel at the work of evangelization when we make maximal room for Jesus to do what needs to be done with no egocentric interference on our part.

Remaining abandoned *to* the mystery was especially challenging since Thérèse had every reason to feel as if she had been abandoned *by* the mystery. It was as if she saw this facet of spiritual childhood as a discipline of *non-effort*, distinct from an *effort of the will*. This paradox of *effortless-effort* taught her how to let go and let God be her all in all. This exercise of non-effort flies in the face of activism; it presupposes that one allows the divine directionality to prompt one to serve others in a totally self-abandoned way. Thérèse gave herself to God in the manner of a trusting child who holds nothing but his hand in hers. She thought of herself as a little ball that Jesus could bounce around at his good pleasure. This disposition of *effortless-effort* filled the soul of this future saint with courage and confidence. She tried to go where the inspiration of the Holy Spirit led her, only to discover the truth in the Apostle Paul's claim that when we are weak, then we are strong (see 2 Cor 12:10).

By replacing will power with the will to love, Thérèse was able to accept other paradoxes coalescing in her experience. She was a child who lived in unknowing, yet she came to know the secrets of mystical love. Every obstacle she encountered in community life became an aid to her life of asceticism and mysticism. Although she used to be a pampered child fearful of suffering, now she chose the way of the cross as the aperture into which the full force

of God's grace could be poured. The greater her surrender, the more initiative God took with her.

Although her illness plunged her into the midnight moment of naked faith, she declared with confidence that the sun still shone. Dense as this inner darkness was, it deepened her conviction that Christ would never abandon her. The more faults she found in herself, the surer she was of the mercy of God. The short length of her life did not matter to Jesus because it had from the beginning a sanctified purpose. She did not have time to waste in an exhausting search for human perfection; she simply had to accept her mistakes and continue to operate from the center of her humility. For example, she saw that the simpler she was the more courage she found not to complain and run away from disappointing situations. Simplicity of heart allowed her to find in every situation what God's will was. She saw that in each task she performed, Jesus wanted her to manifest his presence. Her joy was to decrease that he might increase (see Jn 3:30).

Thérèse's commitment to the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth allowed her to perform good deeds of seemingly little consequence in secret, rather than aiming to excel in noticeable works that were forbidden to her. In her autobiography, she pens the following prayer:

Jesus, I cannot fathom the depths of my request; I would be afraid to find myself overwhelmed under the weight of my bold desires. My excuse is that I am a *child*, and children do not reflect on the meaning of their words; however, their parents, once they are placed upon a throne and possess immense treasures, do not hesitate to satisfy the desires of the *little* ones whom they love as much as they love themselves. To please them they do foolish things, even going to the extent of becoming

weak for them. . . . The heart of a child does not seek riches and glory (even the glory of heaven). She understands that this glory belongs by right to her brothers, the angels and saints. . . . What this child asks for is Love. She knows only one thing: to love You, O Jesus. Astounding works are forbidden to her; she cannot preach the Gospel, shed her blood; but what does it matter since her brothers work in her stead and she, a *little child*, stays very close to the *throne* of the King and Queen. She *loves* in her brothers' place while they do the fighting. But how will she prove her love since love is proved by works? Well, the little child will strew flowers, she will perfume the royal throne with their sweet scents, and she will sing in her silvery tones the canticle of Love.⁶

The Holy Spirit inspired Thérèse to see that though it was impossible for her to preach the Gospel or to shed her blood, it did not matter since her brothers and sisters went to work in the world in her stead. Her chief task as a cloistered Carmelite was to stay as close as she could to Jesus—to love him in the corridors and cells of the convent while those missioned in his name fought his battles on foreign shores. She could accomplish this apostolate by seeing to it that not one sacrifice escaped her attention. She chose instead to profit from the smallest look or word she was asked to express and to do so with love. This discovery enabled her to find a way to make Jesus known and loved by all. This “fragrant shower,” she said, these “fragile, worthless petals,” and undoubtedly “these songs of love from the littlest heart” will *charm my Beloved*. “I will be irresistible to him and what I ask of him I am likely to receive.”⁷

Every routine experience she had as a nun offered Thérèse yet another occasion to relinquish herself and to live in God. She felt no need to craft elaborate methods of prayer. It was enough to place herself in the presence of her Beloved and to cultivate continual remembrance of him. Joyful perseverance hidden from the naked eye may not be the most exciting of virtues but its staying power is undeniable.

Never will I forget the day (April 28, 1980) when Fr. Adrian van Kaam suffered an acute heart attack rendering him, as his primary care physician and our personal friend told us, in a “touch or go” state of health. It was uncertain for the first few days whether he would survive. Excellent care and round-the-clock prayer saw him through these precarious hours. What amazed me the most was that during the initial days of his recovery, he asked me to bring him a blank journal and his favorite pen. I did so the next day. When I visited him shortly thereafter, he showed me the title he had written on the cover. It was *The Blessing of a Coronary*. I knew then that he had found the courage to persevere with joy and to fulfill his calling to the best of his ability. He chose to see in this episode of physical debilitation a meaning beyond this new set of limits. Like Thérèse, he drew upon the grace that enabled him to use his suffering to benefit others. Leaving his hospital room that day, my heart swelled with gratitude. Suddenly the ordinary had become extraordinary. In this unbelievable obstacle, Fr. Adrian had found a new formation opportunity.

Aside from her awareness of the indwelling presence of the Trinity, Thérèse, like Fr. Adrian, had no special revelations or flights of ecstasy. The crux of her spirituality lay not in what she did but in the way she did it. She reached

the heights of great holiness without performing any dazzling feats, thereby teaching us in this era of evangelization that as long as we listen to the whispers of the Spirit in the here-and-now situations in which we find ourselves, we will honor our call to discipleship and respond accordingly.

Practicing mustard-seed theology as she does in all her works, this saint and Doctor of the Church reaches the conviction that, above all else, these “nothings” please the Lord. Against the bane of bigness, Thérèse says it is littleness that brings “a smile to the Church Triumphant.” Flowers unpetalled in and through love will pass from her fingers into the hands of Jesus. The fresh blooms she gives him may have no earthly value, but they will prove to be invaluable to the Church. Because the Father himself has selected them, they will be invested by the Holy Spirit with the power to gain the victory that belongs to the Son: *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.*

In summary, there are five portals of spiritual childhood, beginning with our reclamation of the efficacy of the hidden life. These are not the meandering thoughts of a mystic but the instructions all of us must be willing to follow in this era of evangelization.

The first portal to spiritual childhood is to *cultivate a humble heart* that resists the slightest temptation to ego-inflation or self-absorption. Such humility results in the overcoming of all fears and frustrations and lets us find comfort by simply walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

The second portal is to *accept the fact of our finite, limited existence* and derive from it a more realistic outlook on life as wholly reliant on God.

The third portal is to *live each day with a grateful heart and to surrender to God's grace in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.*

To live detached from the need for puffed up self-importance is the fourth portal. We shun the illusory promises embedded in power, pleasure, and possession and enjoy instead the self-effacement of being who God intends us to be.

Finally, we reach the point where we can *behold in every person, event, and thing the guiding hand of Holy Providence drawing us forth from the shadows of earthly suffering to the threshold of heavenly joy.*

First Facet of the New Evangelization

To emulate the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth in your own "Nazareths of everydayness."

Questions for Reflection

1. Can you recall a few "seeds of evangelization" you may have planted in ways unnoticed by others but nonetheless pleasing to God?
2. When you share your faith with others, do you try to root your words and deeds in the mundane details of daily life, thereby linking your evangelical accomplishments to the richness of the ordinary?
3. Can you describe an experience in your own ministerial endeavors of "effortless-effort"—when you knew that what was done was not done by you but by the grace of God?

Closing Prayer

Lord, I want to follow the way of hiddenness, in imitation of your mother Mary, but I can only do so if you grant me humility of heart and grateful surrender to your holy will. Please detach me from the paralyzing need for self-importance so that I can be an instrument of your providential care wherever you place me in suffering and in joy. Amen.