

## Chapter One



# The Grace to Conceal a Grace

My dear Lord, twice I have had the temerity to write in Your Name, using Your words as I imagined You would use them if You spoke to me as to Your other self. I have had the boldness to do this, although how bold it was I do not really know. Since You dwell in all who are one with You in Your mystical body, it does not seem too out of place that I should have taken this liberty.

Yet who am I to presume to speak ostensibly in Your Name?

If I have been bolder than I should have been, I am not afraid, however, because like Thérésè, I am confident that You forgive, permit, and even delight in boldness so long as it is inspired by love, by confidence, by trust in You.

What I seek to do now is quite different. I shall try to speak to You, Lord, in my own way from the depths of my soul. I

shall try to share my thoughts with You even though there is no need to share what You already perceive more clearly than I. No thought that I shall ever have was unknown to You a thousand years before I came to be. What does the psalmist say? "O Lord, you have probed me and you know me . . . you understand my thoughts from afar . . . Your eyes have seen all my actions; in your book they are all written; my days were limited before one of them existed."

Yet just as those who truly love are not afraid and do not consider it time wasted to say to one another what each already understands full well, so I shall do. But I know, Lord, that I share these thoughts with You not for Your benefit but for mine.

You know, dear Lord, it was decided a few weeks ago that I should undergo surgery, because the problems I was having with a grossly enlarged prostate gland were so severe that I was being ground into exhaustion. Being able to sleep for only four or five hours night after night, and being under the pressures that the prostate condition also produced during the day, was rapidly debilitating my energies, as well as making me irritable and hard to live with. So it was determined that surgery was in order. And since the gland was enormously large the operation would require an abdominal incision, necessitating a stay of some two weeks in the hospital and a period of rather complete rest for an additional three to six weeks after I returned home.

You know, also, Lord, that a fortnight or so before I was to enter the hospital I became filled with dread of the ordeal, not just fear but dread, extreme apprehension. It was not that

I feared the possibility of death. Truly it seems to me that I love You enough and trust You so completely that death in itself has no terror for me. I believe I am totally honest in saying, Lord, that my only regret at leaving this mortal life would be the grief that would inevitably come to my dear ones: to Kathleen, our thirteen children who are Your gifts to us, their husbands and wives who are now also our sons and daughters, and my sister and brothers; also, of course, the dear friends who have become part of me as I am part of them; and in a particular way those who are my fellow members of Your clergy, Your priests and my fellow deacons.

Except that they would feel loss, I say the prospect of coming totally into Your arms and being permitted to see You with an intellectual gaze, as Paul says "face to face," holds only joy.

Why, then, did this impending surgery occasion so much alarm? Well, You will remember, dear Lord, some years ago when I underwent an operation to replace the detached retina of my left eye. At that time, almost twenty years ago, the patient, both before and after surgery, was required to lie on his back for days on end. When the time came to begin to bring the patient back to his feet he was raised up in bed and gradually reaccustomed to sitting and then to standing upright. Usually some nausea was involved and sometimes vomiting, but it quickly passed.

When, after some three weeks on my back I began to be raised to a sitting position, I immediately became most violently nauseous. Day after day the doctors and nurses tried to bring me to a sitting position, without the slightest success. No matter how gradually they raised me, nothing availed.

Sometimes, even after they gave up the effort for the moment and replaced me flat in bed, I retched and regurgitated so explosively that some particles struck the ceiling and others shot out fifteen feet across the room. They tried all the remedies they could conceive of, beginning with such simple ones as motion sickness pills and culminating in the suggestion that I go through the cancer clinic. I became dehydrated and they gave me glucose intravenously. For eight days this condition continued. It was the most excruciating, agonizingly painful, and enervating experience of my entire life. Fortunately, the retina held.

As I thought of this new surgery, wondering if a similar situation would develop, I became anxious, then worried, and finally almost obsessed with foreboding until it was with true dread, not just fear, that I approached the ordeal.



Then, Lord, as You do so often in Your care of us, a care that we accept unthinkingly, You provided the answer. For a long time I have been devoted to little St. Thérèse. It was reading her *Story of a Soul* that helped bring me closer to You many years ago by seeming to strike fire in my own soul. I know that the book in the edition available at that time was saccharine, naive, emotional, and, from a literary perspective, in some respects poorly written. But it has moved more persons toward goodness, inspired more to selflessness, urged more to seek You in love than perhaps any work published during this century. It is in the last two sections, especially as now

officially translated by Ronald Knox, that the book becomes truly the story of a soul.

Both these portions were written within approximately the last year of her life. The first, done in a period of three days in September 1896, elaborates on her “little way”—coming to You by offering You all the small gifts of life. The other, written mostly between the beginning of June and early July of 1897, reveals some of the innermost secrets of her relationship with You, Lord, and speaks very intimately of Your loving care.

Under the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, at the height of my dread, I came again on the story of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. I was looking at some of the books on the shelves of my library and You seemed to say to me, “Read this again, and it will help you.”

I picked up the book and began to leaf through it. I was not interested in rereading the first portion, but beginning with the second part I began to read one chapter every day. You know what happened, Lord. I lost all fear of the operation. Totally, completely, effectively You removed every vestige of dread, fear, even anxiety.

I don’t know exactly when all of this occurred. I do know that within two days at most, not only had anxiety departed, but I began to look to my surgery with a sense of anticipation as something that I was being privileged to offer to You. In addition, I felt urged to try as conscientiously as I could to imitate all the aspects of Thérèse’s little way for which You gave me opportunity.

You know, dear Lord, how beautifully she speaks of the vocation of love. How does she express it? “Love is the

vocation which includes all others.” I cannot say that I had, as Thérèse did, a restless ambition to be for You everything at once: apostle, missionary, priest, victim, soldier. But what did strike me strongly again—as it had so often in the past—was her confidence in You and the inspiration to do what she had done. To ask that all Your saints obtain for me not only a portion of their love of You, but a double portion, so that like Thérèse, I could love You with all, and even more, of their loves combined; and even to go on to ask You to obtain for me all of Your own love so I could return it to You. I don’t mean that there was anything remarkable in this, surely nothing mystical. But my whole attitude toward the surgery and also toward my daily life suddenly and dramatically changed.



Lord, I have often wondered about the understandings and lights that You give me. I used to accept as a matter of course, that everyone, at least everyone who showed any regard for You, received lights of this nature. I thought that I just had the temerity, the boldness, even the bad taste to reveal them, whereas others kept them in their inmost hearts where perhaps they belonged. Now, I don’t know what I believe in this respect.

Ever since I read years ago the remark of Francis de Sales, another of my spiritual heroes, that “the grace to conceal a grace is no small thing,” I have wondered about the wisdom of writing as I have done and am now doing. You know, Lord, that there can be terrible danger in writing about the inmost

thoughts that You give us. People think of one as a holy person for expressing these insights. Even though one has a sense of unworthiness, there is the insidious temptation finally to accept the smug notion that one really is “holier than others.” I remember, dear Lord, that when *My Other Self* was published I wished to have it appear anonymously or under a pseudonym so that no one would know I was the author. I still wish at times that I could have remained anonymous.

I recall how mortified I was one day when I happened to be in a rather large gathering—it was the occasion of our daughter Carol’s graduation from college and I was the commencement speaker. The crowd was milling around outside the auditorium after the commencement ceremony when a young nun came rushing up to me, all in good will I’m sure, and said something to the effect that “no one could have written about prayer as you did in *My Other Self* without surely being in the unitive way.” Persons in that day still spoke of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways.

What I replied I don’t recall, but I probably stammered foolishly—I hope I did, so that she would see what a fool I really am.

One reason, perhaps the major one, that I put my name to *My Other Self* was a growing conviction that it would be cowardly not to do so. Somehow, Lord, I knew that *My Other Self* would achieve a wide circulation and the thought that there would be some notoriety attached to this was not at all attractive to me. Here I was, an employee in one of the large agencies of the federal government, and I envisioned myself being pointed out as a kind of holy Joe, a religious nut, someone so

queer as to profess openly to the world that he was in love with You. I shrank from that. I was afraid that people would think I was better than I am; yet I have to confess that another part of me was proud enough to want people to think of me as better than I know I am. Pride is always breaking out in me.

For better or for worse, the book did come out under my name, though without any further identification. I'm sure some persons who know me only from the book have vastly exaggerated notions about me. But fortunately, once they meet me, they quickly come back to reality.



To show the really horrible menace of spiritual pride, however, You know, Lord, what happened when I was working on *Everyone's Way of the Cross*. I began this as a true labor of love for You. I wanted to make it the finest piece of writing of my life. If the total time given to the preparation and writing of the fourteen stations could be added up, I believe it would average out to many hours per word.

Again I felt sure that *Everyone's Way of the Cross* would become extraordinarily popular. Well, You know how it is with me, Lord, in my spiritual writings. Things go along famously for a while, then everything seems to come to a dead stop; sometimes for months on end, not another word is written. This is what happened with *Everyone's Way of the Cross*, as it had also with *My Other Self*. As I lay in the doldrums of my spiritual writing, an anxiety, then a worry, and finally a fear grew in me that someone else would come out with a modern



*Way of the Cross* before mine. Truly I became quite excited, quite upset, at this possibility.

Imagine, Lord, here was a work that I had begun for You and now it had become so much *my* work that I was no longer nearly as concerned about producing something that would lead others to love You as I was about being first with a work that would bring credit to me.

I'm sure it was only because of Your great love and mercy and because, being human, too, and having been tempted also by the sight of the world at Your feet that You did not withdraw from me further insights that would have made that little pamphlet impossible.

I cringe with shame when I think of how I betrayed Your trust in thus misusing Your gift. I know You have long since forgiven me, Lord, but again I beg Your pardon.

Yet even that lesson was not enough. When *In the Presence of God* was published, far from debating whether or not my name should appear as its author, I wrote in my own hand the boastful blurb on the flyleaf. Worse, I took pride in it. How far I had fallen from that earlier state in which You were my only interest in writing!

Again, Lord, I ask You to forgive me for making myself better than I am, for claiming for myself gifts that belong only to You.

As I compare *My Other Self* with *In the Presence of God*, I have no doubt that the latter is far more profound. You know, Lord, the years I spent in writing the short section on the Trinity, the thousands of pages I read and pondered, the hours of meditation involved. And You know also the somewhat

shorter time, but years nevertheless, that went into the sections on the Incarnation and the Eucharist. Yet, *In the Presence of God* has proved attractive to only a small fraction of the number who have read and who continue to read *My Other Self*. Could it be, Lord, that this is Your way of telling me that what I did for You in the first book, because it was done for You, is more important in Your sight, and therefore You have made it more important in Your work than the second book that was done for You, yes, but also all too much for me?

Well, what of this present work that I am now putting on tape? For whom am I doing this? Dear Lord, I hope You know that it is for You alone. I believe I can say with total truth at this moment that I care not the slightest whether anyone shall ever see what I am now doing. Please, Lord, let it stay that way. Do not let me fall prey again to pride, and if it should happen that I do give way and begin to work more for myself than for You, quickly call me back. If it is Your will, I am perfectly resigned that whatever I do should be destroyed or, if not, that it be used by You to show others the trap that pride is always setting for the unwary.

How easy it is to fall. We are indeed weakest when we think we are strongest, and strongest when we realize that we are the weakest of the weak. Only when we begin to understand like Thérèse the glory of being Your weak one, Your insignificant one, Your fledging bird as she expressed it, only then do we begin to be like the little children You have warned us we must become.