

CONVERSION WITH TRUST



Carmelite Online Advent Retreat 2024 with Saint Thérèse of Lisieux « Welcoming God Like Children »

The Holy Gospel according to Luke (3:1-6)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.
 Every valley shall be filled,
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
 and the crooked shall be made straight,
 and the rough ways made smooth;
 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

The Call to Conversion

The figure of the prophet John the Baptist appears on this second Sunday of Advent, regardless of the liturgical year (A, B, or C). His call to conversion is clear: *“Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!”* To repent means rediscovering the path to a kingdom once lost, now **“near”** because Christ is the key and comes to restore it by His incarnation. Conversion, therefore, first involves directing one’s life in the right direction – not toward the illusory self-emancipation of the first Adam, for we cannot even give ourselves life, the first gift God bestows on us. Rather, **the right direction is the one that opens us to God, that is, a movement of faith that turns to Him** and surrenders to the One who alone is good for us, enabling us to align our lives with His divine will.



This means moving from a life centered on ourselves to the very Life of Christ *within us*. “*It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20). Thinking that we could accomplish our conversion by our own natural strength would inevitably lead us astray, as only the One who is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life* can bring about this redirection in us, allowing us to participate in His Spirit of love.

Conversion is the fruit of Christ’s mercy, which, throughout our lives and with the consent of our faith, renews us in Him through the gift of His grace. John the Baptist expresses this well when he speaks of the One who will baptize, not in the water of penance, but in the fire of the Holy Spirit, which purifies us from sin and leads us into a new life.

We must cooperate with the Spirit’s action, which is the very source of our conversion, as well as our spiritual and moral growth. Letting Christ live in us isn’t reserved for the elite; it’s the vocation of every baptized person – a call to activate the sanctifying grace received at our baptism.

At the School of Thérèse: Conversion to the Love That Awaits Us

Conversion resides in life-giving grace. The Gospels and the entire theological tradition that follows proclaim that **the turning of the heart has its source in God alone** and is in no way dependent on any prior merits man could claim before Him. Saint Paul is unequivocal: “***For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us***” (Eph 2:8–10).

Thus, it would be more accurate to say that a person is converted rather than that they convert themselves. However, each individual remains free to fully embrace the grace that calls them. It would be even more accurate to say that a person allows themselves to be converted, or to be saved. Conversion is just as much the work of the grace that justifies as it is the work of the one who consents to „being justified.“ Thus, **to convert is to enter into a loving dependence on a God who is passionately eager to save us.** This is what Thérèse and her little way of spiritual childhood teach us: we must convert to a love that precedes us and invites us to behave spiritually like a little child who can do nothing without the help of their father or mother. This is the very condition for entering the Kingdom, as Jesus clearly proclaims: “***Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven***” (Mt 18:3). This change to which Jesus invites us is one of turning toward the Father’s first Love, who waits for us and asks us to freely accept the filial grace that the Savior Christ wishes to communicate to us. Nothing could be simpler, and yet nothing is more difficult at the same time, for since the first sin, we are trapped in the illusion of being self-sufficient. This is why the way of childhood is simple, but at the same time so difficult – not because it is hard to understand, but because our hearts are complicated and sick!

Trust and Abandonment

Yet the path to God consists of entering, through trust, into His plan of salvation: “*It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love*” (LT 197, September 17, 1897), declares Thérèse.



And if we feel unworthy of such trust because we are too aware of our misery, Thérèse immediately reassures us: *“Ah! if all weak and imperfect souls felt what the least of all souls feels [she refers to herself], not one would despair of reaching the summit of the mountain of love. Jesus does not demand great actions from us but simply surrender and gratitude”* (Manuscript B, 1v^o).

Abandonment: this is the other key to understanding the way of spiritual childhood. It is, she explains, like that of *“the little child who sleeps without fear in its father’s arms”* (Manuscript B, 1r^o).

The Lord knows we are small and fragile, but He never reproaches us for this. Instead, we are the ones who have difficulty accepting our fragility, even though it isn’t an obstacle to God’s overwhelming love, which is entirely a matter of grace. The Lord wants us to reach the full maturity of love, which consists in recognizing our proper place while giving God His rightful place – the first place: *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* (Jn 3:30), declares John the Baptist at the heart of his prophetic mission. We are invited to adopt the same attitude. When we humbly accept ourselves as we are – without bitterness – we regain a kind of innocence. We cease trying to elevate ourselves in our own eyes or the eyes of others. We are freed from the weight of our insecurities and become capable of embracing the newness and paradoxes of the Spirit. When we run to the Lord with contrite hearts, acknowledging our sin, we bear witness by our whole attitude that He is *“only Love and Mercy”* and that apart from Him, *“we can do nothing”* (Jn 15:5).

This is the path of trust and abandonment; the destination is love. Together with humility, these are the four fundamental, interconnected virtues of the way of spiritual childhood. **Trust is indeed based on an awareness of one’s limitations, just as love for God is based on the desire to please Him.** It relies on that goodwill which, as Thérèse asserts, never failed her, because it’s the guarantor of that disposition of heart where the perfection of love received and immediately given is found. Failures, imperfections, defects, and shortcomings cease to be obstacles, as long as the soul remains animated by the great desire to love God and to make Him loved. If goodwill never ceases to „lift its little foot,“ as Thérèse would say, that is, if the soul always keeps the disposition to unite with God, *“the soul obtains from God all that she hopes for from him”*, according to an expression by Saint John of the Cross that Thérèse liked to repeat.¹ **Thérèse’s faith is thus confident and bold, resting essentially on the love and prevenient goodness God shows her, along with His infinite mercy.** At the same time, this faith requires our consent for God to work the power of His love in us. Once again, let us hold firm to the belief that **God doesn’t desire to impose Himself on us: Love freely offers itself and invites us to respond willingly,** just as in human love, which necessarily involves reciprocity. In Scripture, this reciprocity is called the Covenant, which so beautifully defines the relationship of love that Our Heavenly Father desires to maintain with each of us. And it doesn’t matter if we are little, poor, and sinful, for our wretched dust, offered to the power of divine mercy, can be transformed by its virtue into gold dust! Even more so – this is one of the great consolations that Thérèse brings to the Church and the world – this misery is a springboard that God uses to leap toward us and transform us into Himself: *“The weaker one is, without desires or virtues, the more suited one is for the workings of this consuming and transforming Love...”* (LT 197).

This is the paradox of Thérèse’s littleness. **It isn’t based on merits but solely on the grace that we can receive from God’s mercy,** if we allow it. The spiritual battle, according to our Doctor, mainly consists of fighting against pride, which is always ready to resurface.

¹ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. and ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 2.21.8.



Thérèse understood that the path leading to holiness consists less in a surrender of one's own pretensions and powers, and more in a descent into the depths of oneself to discover the misery from which only the "elevator" of divine mercy can save us. Thérèse then sings her Magnificat, which, like that of the Blessed Virgin, consists in recognizing that the Lord has done great things for her, and the greatest thing, she says, "*is to have shown her her littleness*" and powerlessness to do any good. This is a realization far removed from any illusory perfectionism! Thérèse experienced in her life the pure love of a God whose infinite mercy she never ceased to magnify, as evidenced by the conclusion of her brief life story: "*It is not because God, in His anticipating Mercy, has preserved my soul from mortal sin that I go to Him with confidence and love*" (Manuscript C 37r°).

However, we must guard against a reductionist or relativistic interpretation of Thérèse's little doctrine and the conversion it implies. It does not absolve us from the responsibility for the choices and actions we make in life, nor is it a full insurance policy from a kindly father who would disregard us and save us without our cooperation, as if he waved a magic wand ... Divine mercy is sometimes presented in this way, without taking into account the reality of our true condition. Yet, mercy is the heart of God, who longs to give himself to misery ... our own! Even though the Lord can prepare us to appear before Him "*in one instant,*" as Thérèse declares in her Act of Oblation, **conversion remains a necessity**. As Jesus says, "*Unless you change ... you will never enter*" (Mt 18:3). The life and destiny of every person thus hang suspended over two abysses: that of our own will and hardness of heart, and that of humility, which abandons itself like a child to the will of the Heavenly Father. This is true Christian conversion. It is a path of agony, for we learn to renounce our self-reliance, that is, to give up our self-sufficiency, in order to fully respond to our vocation as children of God.

Points of Reflection for the Week

Am I fully willing to abandon myself to God's will? Do I trust this God who wants to save me without placing constraints on my freedom? Am I ready to embark on this journey of spiritual childhood, which is more about relying on God's power than my own? Do I have a clear understanding of God's fatherhood? Am I weighed down by false images of God that I have built up, which distort His true Face? Am I aware that He truly loves me and desires my true good, which is my salvation – eternal life with Him forever?

Am I willing to remain „poor in spirit,“ as Thérèse invites us? “The truly poor in spirit, where do we find him? You must look for him from afar” (LT 197 to Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, September 17, 1896).

Fr. Jean-Gabriel Rueg,
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Monday, 9 December: Walking with Mary

„Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.“ (Lk 1:28)

„You make me feel that it's not impossible to follow in your footsteps, O Queen of the elect. You made visible the narrow road to Heaven while always practicing the humblest virtues.“ (PN 54, stanza 6, lines 1–4)²

Let's pray for mothers, that, like the Virgin Mary, they'll show their children the way to Heaven.



Tuesday, 10 December: Falling and rising again with trust

„So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.“ (Mt 18:14).

„But if I fall with each passing hour, you come to my aid, lifting me up. At each moment you give me your grace.“ (PN 17, stanza 7, lines 5–7)

Let's pray that in this jubilee year, we all may allow ourselves to be touched by the Father's merciful gaze.

Wednesday, 11 December: Is my heart ready to welcome him?

„Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.“ (Mt 11:29)

„I, too, want to remain always very little and very humble, so that I will be like Jesus, and He will dwell in me.“ (RP1 12v°)³

Today, let's prepare our hearts so Jesus can make His dwelling there.



Thursday, 12 December: Our Father ... who is present

„Do not fear. I will help you.“ (Is 41:13)

„[I]f you are nothing, you must not forget that Jesus is All so you must lose your little nothingness in His infinite All.“ (LT 109)

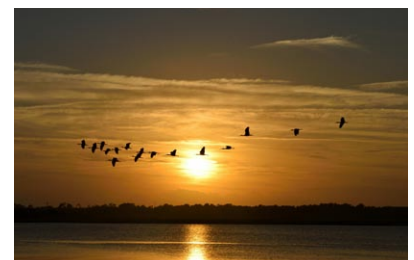
Today, let's say an Our Father with the intention of entrusting everything to God.

Friday, 13 December: Trust and nothing but trust

„I am the Lord your God, who teaches you for your own good, who leads you in the way you should go.“ (Is 48:17)

„[T]he little bird ... wishes to remain gazing upon its Divine Sun ... if dark clouds come and hide the Star of Love ... it knows that beyond the clouds its bright Sun still shines.“ (Ms B 5r°)

Today, let's renew acts of trust throughout the day.



Saturday, 14 December: Your Word is Truth

„Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.“ (Jn 17:11,17)

„Yes, it seems to me I never sought anything but the truth; yes, I have understood humility of heart ... “ (Her Last Conversations, September 30, 1897)

Let's pray for theologians and seekers of God. May their search for God help them grow in humility.

² PN refers to Poetry, indicating the numbering of Thérèse of Lisieux's poems.

³ RP refers to Récréations Pieuses, a collection of Thérèse of Lisieux's plays.