



WITH CHRIST
“EVERYTHING
IS A GRACE”

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

The Holy Gospel according to Luke (3:10-18)

And the crowds asked [John the Baptist], “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

What then should we do?

This is the central question that the crowd – tax collectors and soldiers alike – ask John the Baptist as they came to be baptized by him in the Jordan. The Prophet’s advice to them aligns with the noble tradition of Judaism, which establishes guidelines for living so that people treat their neighbors with the same kindness they show themselves. Even so, this baptism of conversion is not the same as the one Christ came to establish. John, his herald, proclaimed this baptism, saying he was *not worthy to untie the thong of Christ’s sandals*. Christ, who comes after John and is far greater than he, will baptize all those who desire it – not just with water, but “*with the Holy Spirit and fire*.” We might also describe this as “the fire of the Holy Spirit.” This is the Good News proclaimed by John the Baptist, and it forms the foundation of our joy on Gaudete Sunday, the “**Sunday of Joy**.” The entire Church tradition derives this name from the opening antiphon of today’s Mass: “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice*” (Phil 4:4).



The interior joy to which we are called springs from the Gospel—this “Good News” of a God who comes to purify our hearts himself. If our hearts are disposed to it by the one condition required: faith! In fact, when the Pharisees asked what they must do to carry out God’s work, Jesus answered: *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent”* (Jn 6:29). This is the Good News and the source of all our joy: the coming among us of the One whose birth we will soon celebrate, Christ the Lord. This is the Good News, and no news is more profound or incredible than this: God has chosen to dwell among us! What’s more, God has decided to live in each and every one of us, if we embrace him by faith.

Faith: A treasure to be welcomed

The God of Jesus Christ makes himself accessible to humanity, drawing near so they can freely choose to accept or reject him. Such is the tremendous power of human freedom. In Jesus, God offers himself to be either accepted or rejected by those he created. We welcome him when we are poor enough, little enough – in a word, childlike enough – to receive the Kingdom as God’s gracious gift of himself in the infant in the manger. Or we refuse, closing ourselves to his Love – preferring the darkness of pride and selfishness to the light of grace, which alone can deliver us from evil and grant us peace. *“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”* (Mk 10:15).

The Gospel is clear: it’s God who gives himself, and it’s up to us to receive him. It’s about consenting to welcome the Kingdom, which seeks to establish itself in the depths of our hearts through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As Thérèse constantly reminds us, this is the heart of the matter, and in this respect, she can, like Saint Augustine, be called the *Doctor of Grace*, because the gateway to the Life of the Kingdom can’t be forced, earned by prior merit or virtue, or acquired through any technique or practice. No: **salvation is a grace – a gift – and it’s an undeserved gift that we must accept with the same simplicity, trust, and dependence** with which a child receives everything necessary for growth and life from their parents. This necessary littleness is at the core of the spiritual childhood taught by the Church’s youngest Doctor.

Saint Paul, long before Thérèse, reminds us repeatedly in his apostolic letters: sinful human beings – carnal humanity – left to their own resources cannot, by their natural efforts, attain the justice of the Kingdom or the gift of eternal life. These gifts are what God desires to grant freely, but they always depend on the consent of a human will capable of refusing grace. **Faith is the “yes” to God’s graciously offered gift.** Through faith, we accept ourselves as a gift from God’s hands and surrender to the holy will that calls us. Faith is a gift, an act of welcome, a trusting self-offering, and thus it becomes “justification” and “salvation.” Thérèse is a disciple of the Apostle to the Nations and the entire apostolic tradition that followed him. As the renowned theologian Louis Bouyer remarked, the doctrine of the “way of spiritual childhood” perfectly illustrates the teaching on *justification by faith* so clearly defined by the Council of Trent.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, firmly rooted in the pure Catholic tradition and the conciliar acts that preceded it, explains what it means by this term: *“Justification is at the same time the acceptance of God’s righteousness [emphasis added] through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness (or*



justice) here means the rectitude of divine love. With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us” (§1991).

To put it another way: our righteousness is entirely a gift. Even when it involves our works, those works are not our own; they come from divine mercy, who freely gives us his grace to carry them out. The fundamental principle underlying any merit in our works lies in the original gift of divine grace – that is, the gift of God’s love within us. Our justification involves activity on our part, yet the only reason we are able to act in the divine order is because of this initial gift of grace.

That’s why St. Paul says we are by no means made righteous by our own works, which remain gifts, because their very source is grace, and grace comes from God alone. **While the activity of faith is certainly ours, the power by which it operates is given to us from above and requires the free and necessary action of the Holy Spirit.** The Third Person of the Trinity always has primacy over us. Our righteousness is both ours and a gift from Another. In other words, faith is both a personal, free, and voluntary assent and the work of the Creator Spirit, who is present and active in our hearts.

The Holy Spirit, the source of our faith, is essential throughout our Christian life to produce the works of faith. We are always dependent on this life-giving Spirit, who entered us through the gift of faith. To remain alive, faith must, as St. Paul says, be *“working through love”* (Gal 5:6), so that it bears fruit that is meritorious only because we remain united to the Spirit – just as a tree cannot bear fruit without the sap that gives it life.

“Everything is a grace”

This is how we should understand Thérèse of the Child Jesus’ well-known phrase, *“everything is a grace.”* One of her finest interpreters explains it while reflecting on her understanding of holiness: *“If ‘everything is a grace,’ then everything is the prevenient action of the God of love. [...] In the spiritual universe as Thérèse sees it, the initiative always belongs to God. The first step in the journey toward holiness can only be a ‘disposition of the heart’ – Thérèse’s own words from August 3, 1897, while she was in the infirmary – that allows us to embrace this divine initiative. And since there is never a moment when something could exist that is not the grace of God, the soul longing for holiness must never rely solely on its own efforts, organizing them as it pleases or placing its trust in them.”* (André Combes, *Introduction à la spiritualité de Sainte Thérèse de l’Enfant-Jésus*, Vrin, 1946).

Thérèse illustrates this key insight with the image of the elevator, which she introduces at the beginning of Manuscript C. During her pilgrimage to Rome with her father and sister Céline, she must have observed this new invention, which spares travelers the effort of climbing *“the rough stairway of perfection.”* Paradoxically, it was while climbing the stairs at her home in Les Buissonnets on Christmas Eve in 1886 to take off her hat and open her gifts that she heard the words of her beloved father, which *“pierced her heart”*: *“Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!...”* he said, likely more eager for sleep than to witness the childish antics of his youngest daughter. Knowing her sister’s sensitivity, Céline urged her, *“O Thérèse, don’t go downstairs; it would cause you too much grief to look at your slippers right now.”* But, as Thérèse later wrote, *“Thérèse was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart!”*



With Thérèse, the staircase of perfection, which had to be climbed, gives way to the elevator of the Holy Spirit. As she recounts, she longed to find a spiritual elevator to “raise her to Jesus,” knowing she was “too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection” (Ms C, 3 v°). Thérèse’s ultimate desire – holiness – is clear: it consists in “rising to Jesus,” not, as she told her sister Mother Agnès before her death, “in this or that practice” (*Last Conversations*, August 3, no. 2).

Holiness is found in an intimate, lasting union with Jesus, the one who alone is holy and sanctifies us. In other words, holiness is the heart of Jesus and his incandescent love for humanity. Thérèse often uses the word “descended” to describe the Incarnation of the Word: Jesus descended among us to take us with him into his glory. There’s no need to climb because Jesus came down! She shares her mystical “eureka,” a providential insight that continually renews our understanding of the Christian life: “*The elevator which must raise me to Heaven is your arms, O Jesus!*” (Ms A 3 r°). All we have to do is let ourselves be held by him. It seems simple enough. And yet, as Thérèse says, “*this is the difficulty,*” because to let it happen, we must become little, embracing the poverty of spirit that Jesus placed first in his Beatitudes. This gateway – the Beatitude of the “*poor in spirit*” – opens his kingdom to us here and now.

Thérèse warns us of this when she confesses that she “*had no need to grow up,*” but “*had to remain little and become this more and more*” (ibid.). Her “little way,” as it is commonly called, aligns with St. Paul’s theology and the Church’s Magisterium. It tells us that holiness is not about elevating ourselves to find Christ but about letting him descend in us. He dwells within us, transforming us through the action of his Spirit and the consent of our will. The necessary disposition is a constant attitude of humility – or as Thérèse calls it, “*littleness*” – allowing God to establish his dwelling within us and continue his work of transformation, like “*the fire that transforms everything into itself*” (*Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*).

Points of Reflection for the Week

Is my faith truly synonymous with inner joy? Is Christ genuinely the Good News in my life? Am I open to receiving God’s gift of himself? Or am I striving to make myself loved by him, rather than welcoming the Kingdom with the simplicity of a child’s heart? What does a quote like this inspire in me: “*Sanctity does not consist in this or that practice; it consists in a disposition of heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, conscious of our weakness, and confident to the point of audacity in the goodness of our Father*”? (This quote by Thérèse, recorded by Mother Agnès of Jesus in her yellow notebook on August 3, 1897, appears only as a note in *Last Conversations* of her complete works. It beautifully encapsulates the heart of the *little way*.)

Fr. Jean-Gabriel Rueg,
ocd (Toulouse)



Monday, 16 December: To Look Upon My Neighbor with Charity

„The oracle of one who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with eyes uncovered.“ (Num 24:4)

„I shall want no other look but that of Jesus.“ (LT 176)

I will learn to look at my neighbors with tenderness and love – to see them in the reality of their lives, becoming aware that they, too, are children of God.



Tuesday, 17 December: Contemplate God's Love

„An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.“ (Mt 1:1)

„Remember the Father's glory, remember the divine splendor You left in exiling Yourself on earth to redeem all the poor sinners.“ (PN 24, st. 1)

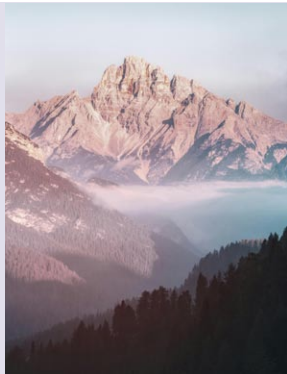
Driven by a crazy love, I will contemplate Jesus, who took on our human condition, wounded by sin, and give thanks.

Wednesday, 18 December: The Parents, Mary and Joseph

„Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.“ (Mt 1:20)

„When good Saint Joseph did not know of the miracle that you wanted to hide in your humility, you let him cry close by the Tabernacle veiling the Savior's divine beauty! Oh Mary! how I love your eloquent silence!“ (PN 54, st. 8)

With the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, I will learn to make room in my heart to receive the One who is coming.



Thursday, 19 December: Our Hearts' Desires

„When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son'“ (Lk 1:12–13)

„Ah! the Lord is so good to me that it is quite impossible for me to fear Him. He has always given me what I desire or rather He has made me desire what He wants to give me.“ (Ms C 31 r°)

Today, I will make the time to listen to the deepest desires of my heart, and I will ask Jesus to grant them for Christmas.

Friday, 20 December: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord"

„Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'“ (Lk 1:38).

„Oh! I love you, Mary, saying you are the servant of the God whom you charm by your humility. This hidden virtue makes you all-powerful; it attracts the Holy Trinity into your heart. Then the Spirit of Love, covering you with his shadow, caused the Son, equal to the Father, to become incarnate in you. There will be a great many of his sinner brothers, since he will be called Jesus, your first-born.“ (PN 54, st. 4)

I will take the time to do a favor for someone else, in a selfless act filled with kindness and solidarity.



Saturday, 21 December: Love in Our Actions, Both Great and Small

„In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.“ (Lk 1:39–40)

„Don't worry, Marie, about your daily duties. Your only task in this life is to love. And if someone criticizes you, saying your works are not visible, you can simply respond: 'I love greatly, and that is my wealth here below'“ (PN 13, sts. 15–16)

Today, I will do everything I have to do with all the love in my heart.