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**THE HIDDEN FACE: A Study of St. Therese of Lisieux, by Ida Friederike Goerres. Trans, by Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Pantheon, 1959. \$4.95. Reviewed by Elisabeth Rogers.**

This is by far the finest biography of the Little Flower, a translation of the German work by a woman who is one of the most distinguished of living Catholic writers. It is, to begin with, beautifully written and translated, in a style of ease and brilliance. It has warmth, objectivity, and, above all, great theological and psychological learning and evidence of fruitful meditation on the life of the saint.

The book poses the question, to begin with, of Therese's fantastic rise to fame, unprecedented among modern saints, the extraordinary number of miracles associated with her, and her enormous popularity with the most varied kinds of people: the ordinary, everyday person, the rather sentimental type of individual whom today many people term "pious" seems strangest of all—the intellectual. She discusses, first, the repugnance which many people have felt on first reading the saint's autobiography and at their first sight of the prettified pictures of her put out by the Carmel at Lisieux (30,500,000 of them by 1925, the year of her canonization!). Then it discusses Therese's life and character, and finally offers an interpretation.

As Ida Goerres points out, there is a recent school of biographers which, revolting from what can only be called the saccharine aspect under which Therese was first presented to the world, have, while accusing their predecessors of distorting the saint's character, actually committed as grave a fault in the opposite direction. They drew a picture of her which was in as sharp contrast to the earlier one as possible; she became "a psychological problem, a misunderstood woman of great importance, a repressed artistic nature, and so on ... So there arose the image of a modern Therese, a philosophical, conscious reformer, even a revolutionary; a tormented, defiant fighter; and finally a Titanic figure beset by demonic impulses."

With regard to the celebrated controversy over the changes in the original manuscript of **The Story of a Soul**, which has even brought charges of a plot

on the part of the Lisieux Carmel and the ecclesiastical authorities to falsify a revolutionary message, Ida Goerres argues that the changes made had, in fact, no such effect, and did not alter the picture of the saint in any essential way. Many of the cuts in the manuscript were necessary because the people mentioned therein were still living when the book appeared, and furthermore most of them were in the close-knit Carmel of some twenty nuns. It would have been wrong not to eliminate some things or soften others. Furthermore, Therese expressly told Mother Agnes, to whom she entrusted the manuscript, to change it as she saw fit.

Although the net effect of the editorial work done by the sisters was to present to the world a picture corresponding to the currently popular conception of sanctity, Ida Goerres feels that anyone who knows the period and reads the sources with attention cannot be very far misled.

### **A Great Biography**

For me, **The Hidden Face** is a model of biography. The writer takes a mass of sometimes apparently contradictory, and certainly difficult material, treats it with humility and objectivity, and emerges with a rounded and satisfying portrait. Where various interpretations are possible, she turns to Therese's own writings and accepts the saint's own testimony for things as being at least as valuable as that of others. She takes one by one the mysteries and controversies that have long occupied Therese's biographers: the illness, the scruples, the character of the Prioress, Mother Marie de Gonzague, who has been made the villain in most biographies. She explores these issues with clarity and insight, and illuminates them every one. Of the Prioress, for example, without minimizing her difficult nature, she offers the possibility that Mother Marie de Gonzague's was an extraordinarily gifted nature spoiled by bad training, and that her severity with Therese was due to her realization of Therese's spiritual gifts and her determination that the same thing should not happen to her. The treatment of the members of the Martin family and of the nuns in the Lisieux Carmel is equally compelling and honest, and a gallery of first-rate portraits emerges.

### **The Nineteenth Century**

Ida Goerres places Therese squarely in her time—and place—late nineteenth-century France, where the Church seemed moribund and the lives of many Catholics were a scandal, and where nevertheless the seed of Christian renewal was waiting to burst into life a generation later. Her strictures on the nineteenth century are severe. Secularism had triumphed, and devout Catholics retreated into a life which was a pale imitation of the

monastery. They had no conception of a life of perfection in the world, and tended to view marriage as a state of life inferior to that of the monastery. The separation of everyday life from religion led also to blindness in the realm of social justice, and many people (though the Martins were not among them) who attended faithfully to their religious duties mistreated employees scandalously. Ida Goerres points out how this separation of the two spheres of life, secular and religious, led Therese's parents to see nothing contradictory in severely condemning worldly amusements, and at the same time earning their living by making and selling laces and jewelry.

In a curious way, too, the devout succumbed to the prevailing secularism they were trying so hard to flee. Catholics demonstrated their loyalty to the Church mainly by means of banners, pilgrimages, or badges of this and that society, so that their spirituality became directed outward, concerned for its effect on other men, rather than inward toward God.

At the other end of the scale, the undevout simply left religion to the specialists and were content with the minimum of religious practices.

### **The Doctrine**

Therese's doctrine of spiritual childhood is linked with the quality of the saint's own actual childhood. Because she was so loved, she knew from babyhood what most people learn much later if at all: "that we can be loved without having deserved it: that grace comes first."

This, then, is the first element in her teaching: that sanctity is pure grace, given by God in the sense that parents give their love to their children. The children do not love first; the parents do.

Therese recognized quite early, also, her inability by her own powers, to overcome the scruples and excessive sensitivity which tormented her for years as a child, both of which were removed by God as by a miracle. She never forgot that our own efforts in and of themselves avail nothing in the spiritual life. She rejected the idea, which keeps cropping up in Catholic piety, that numbers of prayers said, numbers of "acts of virtue" have any real significance. The popular piety of her own time, in particular, was full of this kind of thinking. On all of this Therese turned her back instinctively as she matured, and in this she prefigures the greater balance that modern spirituality is beginning to achieve. Later, Therese began actively to rejoice in her helplessness and to see in it the pledge that God would do everything, for "what is empty can be filled." This became the second mark of her spirituality.

Lest all this seem like quietism, let us note the corollary. Celine once asked about St. Paul's doctrine of justification by grace alone. Therese replied, "We must do everything we are obliged to do ... In a word we must produce all the good works that lie within our strength—out of love for God. But it is in truth indispensable to place our whole trust in Him who alone sanctifies our works and who can sanctify us without works for He can even raise children to Abraham out of stones. Yes, It is needful, when we have done everything that we believe we have to do, to confess 'ourselves unprofitable servants, at the same time hoping that God out of grace will give us everything we need. This is the little way of childhood," [sic]

Therese's doctrine actually was not new, although she and her sisters apparently did not realize this, but re-established a link with earlier schools of spirituality. Leonie, the sister who had entered the Visitation Order, said that the doctrine of spiritual childhood came as nothing new to her convent; the Visitandines have had it since the time of St. Francis de Sales; he had been influenced by one of his penitents, Cardinal Berulle, who developed the doctrine very highly. Both Marie and Pauline, the elder sisters who gave Therese her early education, attended the Visitation convent as schoolgirls, but they seemed to be as unconscious, as Therese of any influence from there.

### **Therese's Significance for Us**

The question remains of the treatment of the "little way" by writers. Ida Goerres insists that it is truly "little" and that the temptation must be avoided to distort it in such a way as to make it "great." Therese's deeds were not great ones, but those open to everyone in ordinary circumstances. Her life was the ordinary life of the Carmelite nun, pursued, to be sure, with the greatest fidelity. But we must not be misled even by that fact. A Carmelite prioress and she was not the only one said that by the standards of **The Story of a Soul** her whole convent would deserve to be canonized.

Precisely herein lies Therese's significance for us. She was "no precocious genius, no frustrated Cleopatra, no Carmelite Simone Weil, no repressed Titan, but a very sweet provincial girl with all the qualities resulting from her origins and environment. She was considerably gifted, but somewhat inadequately educated, and had certain inborn weaknesses. Her attitude to the world was narrow, her taste poor. Therese was a typical 'little soul.' And as such she became the great saint whose light shines over the world . . . Therese was, as St. Bridget of Sweden said of herself, a messenger with a letter from a mighty Lord. The letter contains for us, in the language of her time, the age-old message that the good tidings are for the poor. How fitting it is that it is

brought to us by one of those poor upon whom are heaped such immeasurable gifts. ... In her glorification there is revealed, as though through a rent in the curtain ... a gleam of that which awaits the lowliest in our Father's House."

Therese speaks of "little souls" in various senses. Ida Goerres distinguishes three meanings. First, they are the great body of believers, "all those who are not led by 'extraordinary ways'." Second, they are those who are not called to do great deeds. And finally, they are the minority who "have recognized their nothingness before God, who joyfully consent to it and in spite of it, indeed because of it, expect great graces from God. These, then, are souls who are capable of and called to the absolute devotion of sacrificial victims"—as Therese herself was. Ida Goerres remarks that perhaps Therese would say that the first group are those who "ought to and could walk the Little Way, the third those who really pursue It to the end."

It is this great group of people who form the body of the ordinary, quiet, yet profound sanctity of the Church, out of whom spring from time to time the giants of Christianity. It is because Therese could voice and express this spirituality, which had been forgotten by Christians, that the multitude have realized that their life can be a way to sanctity. Therese is thus "the sole saint who has become a symbol to modern times . . . In (her) quiet life there was revived the ancient, original. Gospel concept of sanctity, of the baptized Christian whose whole life reflects Christ in all its elements, who is saintly not because he does or says special things which set him off from others, but because he is a tiny member of Christ present in the world and because he endeavours to walk worthily in the path of his vocation."

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