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BALANCING THE BOOKS

SCRUTINY OF THERESE

Ida Friederike Goerres has spent years studying St. Therese of Lisieux. A massive book entitled *The Hidden Face* (Pantheon. \$4.95) is the fruit of her long labors. The English version is a translation, by Richard and Clara Winston, of the eighth revised edition of the German original. Even the person who thinks that he knows all about the saint has a surprise in store for him in these pages. For Mrs. Goerres has sifted every available particular about Therese, her family, the Carmel of Lisieux, and come up with some fresh discoveries and some novel theories.

Her approach to the subject is objectively critical. She is not starry-eyed and sentimental, no more is she hostile or patronizing. Her purpose is to see what is there, to see it clearly, to see it in its context, and to interpret it intelligently and conscientiously. Since she is highly competent, a hard worker, and willing to review her materials repeatedly and revise her findings minutely, the result is a book commanding respect and sustaining interest through more than 400 pages of small print.

Her conclusion is highly favorable to the saint. And since this is coolly reached, with fastidious avoidance of mawkishness and refusal to exaggerate, it is the more impressive. One feels that, perhaps for the first time, one is aware of the true stature of Therese, as well as of the full extent of her imitability. For this volume gives us not merely a candid likeness of the saint, but also an analysis of her spirituality which can serve anyone as a roadmap for his own use.

Therese was not, the author holds, an original. That is her doctrine and her way were not newly minted by her and without antecedents. It goes without saying that they owed much to the Gospel. They also were based, wittingly or

unwittingly, on an established tradition in French spiritual thought. And they drew heavily on the example and teaching in her own home.

This last point is of special moment. It is well known that the Martins of Alençon and Lisieux were a close knit family. It is not nearly so well known how much the others contributed to the forming of the saint. To make her authentic glory shine the more splendidly, her sisters rigorously hid the extent of their parents' and their own sharing in qualities and experiences which, by such editing, make Therese stand forth as unique. Mrs Goerres makes point after point in support of this thesis.

She also stresses crucial factors in Therese's childhood. One, for example, is the love with which she was surrounded from her earliest days. It was a love pure, disinterested in the best sense, and supernaturally orientated. It was sheerly and sublimely Christian. It was not soft, it did not preclude discipline. Indeed, it was in itself the best of all disciplines. It set high standards, called attention to faults calmly and constructively, showed the right way and gave every incentive and help in following it. In this love can be seen the seeds of the love of God which is first and last in Therese's doctrine.

Another point is the sensitive and correct conscience which Therese, with the assistance of her family, formed from the beginning. Her conscience was firmly set on what is good, and she learned to obey out of love, the strongest and surest of motives.

Central to Therese's way is awareness of God, the realization of His love, and the assurance that He, through His grace, can do anything. Her spirituality, therefore, was God-centered.

One may say, "What is singular about that? Isn't all true spirituality God-centered?" The fact of the matter is that much spirituality, at least as we practice it is self-centered. That is, we concentrate worriedly on self, watching ourselves minutely, charting our progress as if the soul were a stock on a broker's board. Even our penances are directed not to pleasing God but to our own perfection ("spiritual beauty-culture", the author calls the latter).

Therese's way is to forget self, to submit entirely to God, to look to Him for everything, to give self into His hands to do with as He will, to accept everything as from Him, to do all for Him, and never to fret. This requires simplicity and strength; it also is tremendously practical.

It precludes fussiness and waste. We wonder, for example, what our special cross is to be. Or we go looking for crosses to bear. In Therese's case, the author observes, "her life itself was her cross, not one or another event in

it". The ordinary, everyday routine, made up of so many insignificant, little things, she regarded as her cross, and what made it of such powerful spiritual effect was her embracing and enduring it with love. "Every day's evils sufficed unto themselves If the day's assignments were carried out. by the hour and minute, with honesty and thoroughness . . . Daily bread is given by God's hand—to them who understand how to receive it."

Mrs. Goerres reminds us that Therese "once spoke of herself as a sprig of moss in the bouquet among showy flowers. This winsome image captures, over and beyond what she intended, with astonishing precision her place in the Church. For never does a single moss plant occur by itself in nature ... it is in the nature of this kind of plant to appear in colonies In the landscape of the Church there is also 'moss'—that modest ground-cover of quiet, little Christians who are, as individuals, inconspicuous and unimportant, but who, as a vast united body which remains constant through the centuries, form the protective carpet around the roots of life, conserving for these the nutritive moisture."

It is the chief distinction of this book that it persuasively demonstrates the possibility and the means for each of us to be moss in the Theresian sense. When the reader has forgotten the almost prodigious massing and scrutiny of details which pack Mrs. Goerres' lengthy chapters, and the boldness and delicacy with which she plucks away layer after layer of the veils in which the mystery of Therese is swathed, he is likely to remember—and to be trying to put in practice—the principles of the little way.

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