



The Fruits of Conversion in the Life of St. Therese of Lisieux



Leaving Childhood to Grow in the Science of Love

Br. Joseph Schmidt, FSC^[1], details seven fruits which Therese experienced from her conversion and which were foundational to her growth in the science of love and in the development of her Little Way. Some of these fruits were immediately obtained while others developed slowly over time. We will briefly look at the fruits Br. Schmidt described to see how each contributed as Therese welcomed and cooperated with the inflow of grace. Each heading relates the words used by Br. Schmidt in his description of the fruits.

(1) **“The grace of personal enlightenment or self-awareness”:** When Therese overheard a comment about herself made in frustration by her father, her emotions reacted but, because of the grace of her conversion, she became aware of her internal emotional dynamics and was empowered to respond rather than to react. She experienced a new freedom to not be held captive to her capricious emotions but to be their master. This grace of this self-awareness and empowerment bore fruit to become the beginning of her approach to staying on the path of love in difficult situations.

(2) **“Understanding that her conversion was a free gift of God and that she needed only ‘good will’ to receive it”:** The immediacy of her conversion was evidence to Therese that God had done in an instant what her own diligent efforts through the years had failed to accomplish. The emotional hypersensitivity she had experienced after her mother’s death but had not been able to conquer was gone in a moment. The part Therese was responsible for was to accept the gift of God and to offer her willing cooperation with this grace. In her developing science of love, her Little Way, Therese emphasized the vital importance of offering one’s good will in cooperation with grace. Therese taught that God would lift up to sanctify all those who embraced their littleness if they would just respond in good will to God’s initiatives.

(3) **“Freeing her from the path of violence to herself”:** After the death of her mother when Therese was four, Therese developed strong emotional needs to be loved and accepted and became highly over-sensitive. If she perceived that others were unhappy with her for any cause, she simply could not bear it. She experienced strong negative and self-condemning thoughts and emotionally fell apart if she failed in any way or received correction. Therese learned to see that little children are still loved even when they fail. Her conversion allowed Therese to develop patience with herself and to love her own littleness which became prominent components of her science of love.

(4) **“Enabling her to respond to her father on her father’s terms”:** When Therese overheard her father’s hurtful chance remark, the fruit of her conversion allowed her to see the situation from his perspective rather than exclusively from her own. She did not show violence to herself or to him as she considered the situation. Rather, Therese showed compassion to her father by accepting that he was also susceptible to frailties and allowed herself to react with love and creativity instead of criticism or defensiveness. Her response then allowed her father to recover his best self and the situation was resolved in a spirit of peace. Later in life, Therese used this grace as she interacted with her sisters in the convent who were often difficult to deal with.

(5) **“A new understanding of the path of authentic love”:** At her conversion, Therese said that she felt two things which caused her to experience happiness: she felt charity enter her soul and also felt a need to authentically forget herself in order to please others. She discovered a call to self-sacrifice for the purpose of love. Therese abandoned her self-absorption and instead abandoned herself into the hands of God. She became free from concern about her degree of spiritual progress and resolved to let God be God in her, confident that he would perform his own work in her as she cooperated with his grace. Her motivations were purified as she developed the ability to authentically please others for their good. Put aside were the selfish satisfactions of feeling good about herself, needing to be seen, or making a good impression. Therese came to understand the integrity inherent in authentic love.

(6) **“A new understanding of the path of authentic zeal”:** Along with new grace comes new vision. As Therese matured in her faith, she came to a new vision of authentic zeal. The grace of charity in her soul brought with it the fruit of desiring to love for others for their ultimate good and thirsting for the salvation of sinners. Meditating on an image of Jesus on the cross, Therese desired to gather the “divine dew^[2]” of the blood of Jesus, which was falling unnoticed to the ground, in order to pour it upon souls. The words of Jesus on the cross, “I thirst!” found echo in her own heart. Now, Therese herself thirsted with Jesus’ own thirst in an authentic zeal to save souls of great sinners from the eternal flames^[3]. Therese longed to sacrifice herself so that she might share the love of God with the whole world.

(7) **“A new inner strength and courage”:** Perfectionism, scrupulosity, fear of failure, discouragement, self-contempt, self-violence, self-reliance, striving in self-will...all these fled as God worked the miracle of conversion within Therese. She found in their place a new charity, compassion, gratitude, emotional stability, personal integrity, zeal, deeper faith, hope, trust, self-respect, courage, inner strength and the freedom of abandonment to God. All these graces and their fruits became hers because she prayed in her littleness with a fervent desire for God to set her free from her imperfections and then cooperated with his initiatives. All of her self-willed efforts had proven to Therese her own powerlessness to be different. Now, “Jesus made me strong and courageous^[4].” Without the weighty baggage of her emotional frailties and imperfections, Therese could walk the path of authentic love more surely. Therese became strong in the strength of weakness, much like the St. Paul she so admired. The fruits her conversion allowed her to embrace the work and will of God in her life and led her to the formulation of the Little Way of spirituality, a legacy which she has bestowed upon the whole world.

Conclusion

One might ask which of these graces, these fruits, enumerated by Br. Schmidt was the most important for Therese’s ability to develop her Little Way. Perhaps that question is a bit like asking which piece of a puzzle is most important. Without each piece, the resulting picture would be incomplete, the work would remain unfinished and unable to accurately convey the entire message.

Might we propose, however, that the first step of receiving personal enlightenment and self-awareness should receive honor of place in the discussion. Self-awareness frees one from captivity to self-absorbed hypersensitivity and leaves one free for the intervention of the active grace of God. This self-awareness was the first step in Therese developing a personal process for staying on the path of authentic love, her science of love, in interacting with others. The process of this path, such an important component of her Little Way, can be summarized by Six P’s:

- (1) **Perception:** stopping and becoming aware of the spontaneous natural repulsive or hostile reactions to a situation
- (2) **Patience:** trying to be as patient as possible with oneself and avoiding self-violence
- (3) **Prayer:** moving into prayer with God about what one is experiencing and asking for help
- (4) **Prudence:** responding to the situation as prudently as possible in the wisdom of God
- (5) **Practice:** keep faithfully practicing the process of staying on the path of love
- (6) **Perseverance:** never give up

Let us end with a quote from the wisdom of Br. Joseph Schmidt:

“It took Therese the remaining years of her life to understand all the meanings and challenges of her complete conversion, and to accept and appreciate all its fruits. But this ‘day of graces among all days’ revealed all the blessings that Therese needed to comprehend and live her Little Way of Spirituality. She knew with certainty that it was God’s path for her.^[5]”

All the good work of God in the life of Therese was not completed in a day. It took Therese the rest of her short life to fulfill her complete transformation. It will take us a lifetime, as well, but if we follow the example of Therese and give ourselves in abandonment and trust to God, all things are possible. So, let us begin.

^[1] Schmidt, Joseph F. Course notes on St Therese of Lisieux, Carmelite Institute of Britain and Ireland, 2014.

^[2] Story of a Soul, page 99.

^[3] Story of a Soul, page 99.

^[4] Story of a Soul, page 97.

^[5] Schmidt, Joseph course notes unit 16

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