

Between Friends

A publication for the Friends of the Society of

the Little Flower, Darien, Illinois, and Canada

God's Unconditional Mercy

Living the “Little Way” Today

Every day brings reminders of how much our world needs mercy. We often see division instead of understanding, judgment instead of compassion, and discouragement instead of hope. Yet St. Thérèse offers us a simple remedy that remains as powerful today as it was more than a century ago. She teaches us to trust completely in God’s merciful love.



Father Tom Schrader, O. Carm.
Director, Society
of the Little Flower

St. Thérèse never imagined that holiness depended on extraordinary accomplishments. She knew that God does not measure us by our achievements but by our willingness to open our hearts to His grace. When we recognize our dependence on Him, we discover the freedom to love more generously, forgive more readily, and serve more faithfully.

That is the mission we share through the Society of the Little Flower. Through your prayers, sacrifices, and generosity, even in difficult times, you become instruments of God’s mercy in the lives of countless people. Together, we bear witness to the hope that God’s grace is still at work in our world, quietly transforming hearts, one soul at a time.

Thank you for being part of this beautiful mission. May St. Thérèse continue to lead us along her Little Way, where every act of love, no matter how small, becomes a reflection of God’s limitless mercy.

Father Tom Schrader, O. Carm. 🌹

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Empty Hands, Open Hearts

At times, it seems like we live in a world that constantly measures our worth by what we accomplish, earn, or deserve. We are taught to strive, achieve, and prove ourselves. Even our relationship with God can become tangled in this way of thinking, as though His love must somehow be earned through our successes or good works.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux offers us a profoundly different vision.

Near the end of her life, she wrote that she would come before God "with empty hands." She knew that everything she possessed, including every grace, every virtue, and every opportunity to love, had first been given by God. Nothing was the result of her own achievement. Everything was grace.

This was not false humility. It was the freedom that comes from trusting completely in God's mercy.

Thérèse understood that God's mercy is infinite. It is not a reward reserved for the perfect but a gift offered to those who recognize their need for Him. She trusted that the Father delights not in our accomplishments but in our willingness to allow Him to work within us. The holiness she desired was never something she could produce on her own. Rather, it was God's life dwelling within her and transforming her day by day.

This message is especially important in our own time.

The Little Way is not to accomplish more but to trust more deeply. St. Thérèse teaches us that holiness is found in allowing God to work through the ordinary moments of our lives. Every hidden act of love, every quiet sacrifice, and every faithful response to His promptings becomes an opportunity for His grace to bear fruit within us. Our task is not to earn His love but to receive it with humility and to let that love transform our hearts.

Perhaps this is why the Little Way continues to resonate with so many people today. It invites us to stop measuring ourselves by worldly standards or comparing ourselves with others. Instead, we are called to entrust ourselves completely to God's loving care. We can live with confidence, knowing that His mercy is greater than our weaknesses and that His grace is sufficient for every need.

May we have the courage to approach the Lord as St. Thérèse did. Let us come before Him with empty hands and trusting hearts, not relying on a record of accomplishments but on His infinite mercy. When we embrace our dependence on Him with humility, we discover the immeasurable richness of His unconditional love and the transforming power of His grace. 🌹



Mary Therese Lambert
Editor of *Between Friends*



Carmelite Provincial Chapter

June 15-19, the Carmelites of the Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary celebrated our triennial Provincial Chapter. Every three years our members gather to reflect on our common life, make or modify legislation, and elect leadership for the next three years. Men came from all six countries where members of the Carmelite province live and minister: Canada, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and the United States of America. Our gathering was a real blessing and an enriching experience, especially as we listened to and respected the diversity of cultures and languages we come from.

This Provincial Chapter was held at the Mount Carmel Spiritual Centre in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Centered on the theme Legacy of Hope, the gathering brought together over 70 friars from the U.S., Canada, Peru, Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras to work on legislation, finances, and provincial priorities.

About 70 members were able to attend -- age and disability limited some, but border restrictions in

both Canada and the USA prevented others from attending, although some were able to listen and join in to the discussions by internet. It is not strictly a business meeting or a voting session; rather, it was a communal discernment process to determine how the order will live out its charism of prayer, community, and service to the Church in the coming years. It was a time of hope for us amid a transition of the generations and a time of celebrating

our unity in the spirit of Elijah and Our Lady of Mount Carmel amongst the diverse cultures of our brothers.

There were many highlights of the week – good liturgies, prayer services, reflections, presentations, a memorial service for our deceased brothers, and small group sharings. We all met our new Prior General, Very Rev. Desiderio García Martínez, O. Carm., who hails from Spain. Virginia Parisi was made a Member of the Order of Carmelites in light of her 40+ years of service to the Society of the Little Flower in Canada.

Our new Provincial and Council were elected. Very Rev. Carl Markelz, who was elected to a third term to guide us through our changing demographics. We experienced the prayers of so many of the Friends of St. Thérèse praying for us.

It was a Legacy of Hope as we celebrated – grateful for all God has done in and through us. 

Carmelite Youth Gathering in Faith



Young people are enthusiastic about our Catholic faith and are making a difference in the world, in the best Carmelite traditions. Our Carmelite Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary has been involved in secondary Catholic education for many years. Our Province annually hosts and supports a student gathering from our six Carmelite high schools in North America. Held on July 6-8, the purpose was to study Carmelite Spirituality, deepen their relationship in Christ and connect with other students from different Carmelites schools.

Reflecting on our understanding of the Carmelite "Listen to God's Voice in silence. Act on God's Voice in the world," this year the focus was on Silence and Action. Held at the Carmelite Spiritual Center in Darien, IL, four students and two faculty members came from Carmel Catholic High School in Mundelein, IL, Crespi Carmelite High School, Encino, CA, DeSales High School, Louisville, KY, Joliet Catholic Academy, Joliet, IL, Mount Carmel High School, Chicago, IL, and Salpointe Catholic High School, Tucson, AZ. Student leaders are chosen to help reinforce their religious education and programs at their schools.

More than 40 students and adults from each of the six high schools spent these days deepening their understanding

of Carmelite Spirituality in order to share the Carmelite charism with their respective school communities. This retreat combined talks, storytelling, small group discussions, time for individual reflection, prayer experiences, and celebrations of the Eucharist. It was planned considering that the space to reflect, listen and slow down is rare in our culture! Students shared programs of listening and actions they have promoted at their schools, how effective they were and what they intend to add and deepen. It was a rich sharing of ideas and hopes.

Organized by Kammie French of Carmel Catholic in Mundelein and Father Michael Joyce, O. Carm. and several others, the Silence and Action Retreat is a unique and special opportunity for

individuals from each of the Carmelite High Schools to cultivate bonds of spiritual friendship, and to learn about how we share a charism that is beautifully and uniquely expressed in our different communities. It is a source of great hope. "The enthusiasm, engagement and wisdom of these students is truly inspiring," explained one of the faculty members. "They gave up almost a week of their summer vacation to participate."

Reflecting on this retreat experience, Ella Koewler, a Senior at Carmel Catholic High School, said, "The Silence and Action retreat was a wonderful experience for me, as it allowed me to learn more about the history of the Carmelites and the values that are important to us. Listening to the talks gave me perspectives on listening to God's voice in my life. Being there with the other Carmelite high schools allowed me to make many new friends and see how our values go beyond just my school, and the whole experience provided ideas that we can bring back to our classmates to help us all grow in faith." 🌹

BY: FATHER BOB COLARESI, O. CARM., SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Where Have You Been?

As the years pass, most of us will find ourselves thinking about "that day" – the day we will stand before the Lord.



Dan Pritchard
Special
Gifts
Officer

We hope to hear Him say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." At the same time, we know ourselves all too well. It's almost harder to recall the times we followed the Lord faithfully than it is to remember the times when we have stumbled. Looking back over our lives, it is only natural to wonder if we have done enough.

People often say, "You can't take it with you." In one sense, that is true. At that time, we will leave behind all of our material possessions, but we will not leave behind the story of our lives. Like an athlete whose career is measured by a record, we will stand before the Lord with the record of how we have loved and served Him, as well as the times in which we have failed.

That thought might make some of us uneasy, but it doesn't have to be.

Thankfully, we do not have to approach the Lord sporting the spiritual equivalent of a Most Valuable Player award. We come before the One whose mercy is greater than our failures, whose grace is stronger than our weakness, and who is never outdone in mercy.

But how can we be sure?

Of course, it starts with faith. We also have the assurances of many saints. Again and again, they remind us that our hope rests not in our own perfection, but in God's unfailing love.

St. Thérèse told us that the key to abundant mercy is having childlike trust and confidence in God's merciful

love. St. Faustina encouraged us to pray with abandon, "Jesus, I trust in you." St. John Paul II wrote about God being "Rich in Mercy." Even Servant of God Don Dolindo Ruotolo, whom Padre Pio knew and referred to as a saint, spoke of abandonment to God with this simple prayer, "O Jesus, I surrender myself to you, take care of everything"

Perhaps the greatest assurance of God's mercy can be found in the confessional. Jesus waits for us there. Can there be any words more comforting than hearing the priest reassure us with these words: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven."

Many of us avoid the Sacrament of Reconciliation out of embarrassment, fear, or simple inconvenience. Yet the courage it takes to walk through that door is small in comparison to the peace that awaits us on the other side. Every confession reminds us that the Lord is always ready to forgive.

Perhaps that is also a glimpse of what awaits us on that day. Instead of finding a Savior eager to condemn, we will meet the Savior who walked with us throughout our lives, pursuing us with His mercy. We can almost imagine the Lord welcoming us with the words, "Where have you been? I have been waiting for you."

We may even discover that the One we feared disappointing is the very One who had been waiting for us all along with open arms and a loving smile, welcoming us home at last. 🌹

God's Mercy Is Always and Forever Endless

Recently, I had the privilege of visiting with Alice, one of St. Thérèse's dear friends and a devoted supporter of the Society of the Little Flower. During our time together, our conversation naturally turned to the beautiful gift of God's mercy.

Alice shared how deeply she has experienced God's mercy throughout her life. Her story is one of honesty, healing, and hope. It is a testament to the transforming power of God's love.

In her own words:

"I believe God's mercy is real. It is present in all of us and available to us when we are in touch and in communion with God personally.

I've made some terrible mistakes along life's journey that affected my personal life. I knew God was present, although I didn't always feel His presence or believe myself worthy of His mercy. I came to realize that it was up to me to reach out to Him and accept the mercy He was always offering.

I am blessed to have a great friend in St. Thérèse, who has taught me that Jesus is continually knocking on the door of my soul, asking to dwell within me.

During the healing that followed those painful mistakes, God, in His infinite mercy and love, helped me recognize and understand where I had gone wrong. Most importantly, that season of healing became transformative. His mercy, love, compassion, and forgiveness inspired me to seek a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him.

More recently, I have come to realize that the true love I searched for throughout my life was already within me through God's presence. For so long, I looked outward to the world and made choices that led me away from Him. Through God's mercy and my openness to His grace, I now know that my deepest love is found in His presence within me.

Once I invited Him into an intimate relationship with my heart, I discovered the truth that St. Thérèse often lived: All is grace. And God's mercy is always and forever endless."

Alice's witness is a gentle reminder that none of us is beyond the reach of God's mercy. Like St. Thérèse, she has discovered that when we open our hearts to the Lord, He meets us not with condemnation but with boundless love, healing, and grace. May her story encourage each of us to trust more deeply in the infinite mercy of God and to remember that His invitation to a closer relationship is always waiting for our yes. 🌹



Mary Zacharias
Special Gifts Officer

BY MARY ZACHARIAS

Bright Ideas

FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

Although we live in uncertain times, and budgets seem to be stretched to the limit, for those who have an IRA, there are tax-wise ways to support the Society of the Little Flower while also offering some significant benefits to you. Here are two ideas to consider.

BRIGHT IDEA #1

If you are age 73 or older and own an IRA, you must take a Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) each year. Because your RMD is taxed as ordinary income, it could increase your taxable income and potentially move you into a higher tax bracket.

One way to reduce that tax impact is through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). As a generous supporter of the Society of the Little Flower, you can direct all or part of your IRA distribution to us. While you won't receive a charitable deduction, you also won't pay income tax on the amount transferred. In 2026, you can give up to \$111,000 through a QCD, provided the gift is sent directly from your IRA administrator to us.

If you are age 70½ or older, you can make a QCD even before RMDs begin at age 73, which may be a tax-smart strategy for some.

BRIGHT IDEA #2

Creating a Society of the Little Flower charitable gift annuity can provide dependable lifetime income for you and/or a loved one. Current payout rates are as high as 11.7%, depending on your age, and a portion of your payments may be tax-free. If you itemize on your tax return, you may also qualify for a charitable income tax deduction.

The minimum gift is \$1,000. Your gift would be irrevocable, and we will make fixed payments to you for life. Afterward, any remaining funds will support our mission of spreading devotion to St. Thérèse as well as further our Carmelite ministries.

You may also use a Qualified Charitable Distribution to fund a gift annuity. In 2026, up to \$55,000 may be used in this way. Because special rules apply, please call our Special Gifts Office at 888-996-1212 for the details. 🌸

“*In the evening of
life, I shall appear
before You with
empty hands.*”

ST. THÉRÈSE, OBLATION
TO MERCIFUL LOVE

God's Unconditional Mercy

Our beloved heavenly friend, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whom we refer to as “The Little Flower,” lived an active life of longings and hope. Amid a time when Jansenism had permeated the Church and much of popular piety with legalistic rigidity, she absorbed that she had to be perfect and work for her salvation to please a disappointed and angry God.

BY FATHER BOB COLARESI, O. CARM. | SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR



GETTY IMAGES/SEDWAK

Her strong personality wanted it all – she thrived on attention and being noticed and seen. She drew her value on being noticed and affirmed, especially for what she was doing.

She stretched herself and embraced doing good deeds and practicing virtues. Remember that when she was young, Leonie, one of her older sisters, wanted to live a simpler life and offered all her toys, dolls, books and girly stuff to her younger sisters: they both reached out to get something of the “treasures,” but Thérèse, the youngest, surprised them and took the whole basket for herself saying: “I choose all” – they were really not surprised – she collected things she liked and felt entitled to.

In both her mother’s letters and her autobiography, young Thérèse’s long discussions in the garden with Celine, her closest sister in age, are highlighted. They both, but especially Thérèse, shared about her good deeds, her prayers, etc. recounting how they must please God and would earn her salvation in heaven,

They believed these actions would merit and earn salvation. In fact the piety of her day, reinforced by her parents, encouraged her to do good works and say certain indulgenced prayers and write them down to share. Earning, meriting and deserving salvation was paramount. It is a very self-centered faith. It is much like our self-reverential culture that asks: “what am I getting from this?” She and we seem more focused on ourselves and what benefits and blessings we get, instead of focusing with gratitude on what God is doing in and through us.

Her first mystical experience occurred when she was around 6 years old. After her mother died, Louis moved his family from Alençon to Lisieux to be closer to his brother-in-law and his family so they could help him with his five daughters. Her papa always had special affection for his youngest, Thérèse, calling her ‘My Little Queen!’ He loved fishing for relaxation and often took his “Little Queen” with him. She got bored after a while while he was fishing and walked off the pathway of the park where the lake was. Suddenly, hidden off the path she came upon a beautiful flowering bush. Like her family, she appreciated beauty. As she beheld and enjoyed this flower’s beauty, her mind started saying this is such a waste. No one would ever see it in its hidden place, and therefore it had no value. She pondered whether she should cut it and take it home and put in a vase so others could enjoy it and give it value. But her emerging Carmelite soul kicked in; and she stayed with the beautiful flower with a listening heart until it taught her that it gave glory to God by just being, not by being seen or by anything it did. It was a great spiritual lesson she learned, and one we need to learn. Our very being gives glory to God because nature is God’s first revelation, and God always dwells within and among us. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and the human soul is the divine spark. God is the source and center of all goodness, love and life. We have to empty ourselves of false thinking that life is all about us, what we do, and what we have. We have to empty ourselves of our nonnegotiables and other things we deify, like our ego, and our needs.

In our own self-centered and referential way, we think that God will love us when we are good when in fact the revelation is that God loves us because God is good. We don't control and limit God's unconditional love and mercy. We may ignore it, but it is always freely present and offered to us. Somehow, like Adam and Eve, we want to be god, not just like God in whose image and likeness we have been created.

It is very interesting that Thérèse's Christmas conversion, which was half way through her young life, was about promising the Baby Jesus that she would be wholehearted in loving Him. As she came home after the Midnight Mass, she reverted to her childlike, self-centered attitude wondering aloud "I can't wait to see what gifts I get in my shoes!"

She was stunned when her frustrated dad said: "when will she grow up and learn it is about what we give, not what we get." As Thérèse began crying, as she so often did while making her way upstairs to her room, she recalled the wholehearted surrender she had promised Jesus only hours before. In that moment, she experienced what could best be described as Jesus speaking to her heart: "Thérèse, get over yourself—it is not about you." While these are not meant to be Jesus' literal words, they capture the essence of the invitation she received: to move beyond self-focus and embrace a more complete self-giving love.

Reflecting on her conversion experience she explained: "I was no longer the same. Jesus had changed my heart. Forcing back tears I descended the stairs rapidly, controlling the poundings of my heart, picked up the gifts in my shoes, and joyfully thanked him for everything he had given me. Papa's happiness returned." "The work I had been unable to do in the last ten years was done by Jesus in one instant." Jesus is the source of all awakening and transformation.

Thérèse had to empty herself and rediscover once again the strength of soul and faith, which she had lost at the age of four and a half when her mother died, triggering several years of suffering mother abandonment issues. She would persevere in this Jesus-given strength forever, despite times when the abandonment feelings re-emerged. She emptied herself and allowed God to work, and dwell within her.

Finally joining the Carmelite convent, to be with her older sisters, Marie and Pauline, after long negotiations with the Mother Superior, the Carmelite chaplain, and the local bishop – even appealing to the Pope, she was allowed to enter a bit earlier than normal because of her tenacity and calling. Because she had romanticized the Carmelite Convent, the experience was a bit disappointing. It was not as easy and peaceful as she expected. Some of the cloistered Carmelite Nuns did not like or respect her because they had seen and heard her childish behaviors years earlier when she had visited Pauline and Marie. She had to learn to live where she was planted and empty herself of the expectations she had imagined. She tried her best but for some of them it was not good enough – they imagined her as too simple. Her childlike simplicity seemed childish and actually threatened their righteous hearts.

As she pursued the inner journey into the Divine

Indwelling of God's Love as the source and center of her life, she came to the humble awareness of what her initial childhood mystical experience had taught her: "You, Lord, will descend into my nothingness and transform that nothingness into living fire." After many experiences in the convent and some intimate moments of union with Christ, she was blessed to understand the challenge and grace it was to be a disciple, and live in the following of Christ, which the Carmelite Rule defines as our mission.

Thérèse awakened to and understood her vocation, writing, "I understood that it was love alone that made Church members act I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything ... in a word that it was eternal. In the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: "Oh Jesus, my love ... my vocation at last I have found it – my vocation is love."

She came to realize that God was the source of everything she was and did – and God is Love. She could not take credit – or use it to earn, deserve, merit or feel entitled for her salvation – it was all gift, all grace, even in the dark nights she experienced along her 24 years. She realized the simple and profound revelation and truth that her calling was love – because God is love!

At the darkest moments of her life, when she had already experienced 16 months of dark nights when God did not feel present or close, and she was suffering abandonment and felt empty as tuberculosis was killing her, she shared her greatest teaching. She was isolated in the infirmary because TB was contagious. The priest came three times a week to give her Holy Communion. In the third week she vomited out the consecrated Host. The priest said; "No More!" Sometimes we don't think God wants to get involved in the messiness of the human experience, even though Jesus experienced the frustrating messiness of the human experience in his incarnation.

The last sign she had that God was still reaching out to her was taken away. A sense of despair and disappointment emerged, but as her Carmelite contemplative soul silently awakened, she explained: "It is a grace to receive the Sacrament because I know You are with me. It is grace not to receive the Sacrament because now my longing for you is even more, because Everything is grace!" Grace is God's presence.

So when she died a few weeks later, after much suffering and struggling to breathe, she was able to say: "I'm not dying, I'm going to Life" and "In the evening of life I shall appear before You with empty hands." Life was and is all about God's mercy – not earned, deserved, entitled or merited but freely given by the God of Love and mercy Who made us for Himself and wants us to live in and with him forever.

We will all stand before God with empty hands, not with a list of everything we did, were, prayed, struggled with or experienced to earn, deserve, merit or are entitled to but aware that it is all God and God's gift and presence. It is not about us but about God's mercy and love!! 



A JOURNEY

OUT OF TRANSACTIONAL LIVING TO RELATIONAL LOVING

Growing up in the 1970s, I witnessed the advent of home video games. One of my brother's friends owned one of the first, an Atari 2600, and we were invited to his house to play. I would later find myself going over to his house to play without my brother; he would graciously welcome me. One time, however, I went over to find that he was not home. I looked dejected, but his mother replied, "Would you like to come in and play video games?" His mom knew the real reason I was there; I should have just asked if the Atari was home! However, there came the day when my parents bought me my own Atari 2600, and my bike rides to my brother's friend's house abruptly ended.

This relationship was based solely on a specific good this young man could give me. It was a purely transactional relationship; it was so transactional that I have referred to this man as "he" because I cannot even recall his name. "He" could have been anyone. The only reason I was his friend was the fact that he had a good I wanted – access to video games – and once I had my own, he was no longer necessary. To me, his value was dependent on what he could give to me. This is the heart of

transactional living: I will do something for you, and you will do something for me in return (NB: What I gave him in return is beyond me because I cannot see what my transactional value was to him).

The temptation of transactional relating can cause us to see God in a transactional way. If God favors me, I will respond in kind. The stereotypical prayer of transaction unfolds thusly: "God, if you cure my cancer, I will donate to the Church ... or become a monk ...

or pray to you every day ..." The list of transactional promises could go on. Such a prayer is based on the worldly idea of quid pro quo – you scratch my back, and I will scratch yours. Relationships become reduced to an impersonal exchange of goods.

Conversely, the transactional life view can color how we think of salvation (If I please God, God will respond in kind). If we do enough good deeds, then surely God will return the favor with entrance into heaven. When I was teaching high school morality as a seminarian, I was speaking of the joy of the spiritual life when a student raised his hand excitedly. After calling on him, he gasped, "You mean we have to be good all the time!" It was at that moment that I configured in my mind the "Good Enough" transactional way of Salvation. Imagine if God had a counter of all of our good works and a counter of all of our sins (perhaps weighted accordingly for degree of holiness or evil respectively). Would it be that we would earn entrance into heaven if the good was greater than

the evil, by either 1 point or 1000 points? This is one way to imagine transactional salvation.

Given a transactional perspective, we can fall prey to the worldly delusion that we have some enticing video game, some desirable quality, some cache of good works that will make God love us and save us. The story of Zacchaeus is one gospel account that can jolt us out of the transactional view of God. Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus's life. He had no good to give Jesus; indeed, probably every other person following Jesus that day was far worthier than Zacchaeus. And yet Zacchaeus was given the gift with no expectation of a return in kind.

Thérèse also offers us the spiritual vision to draw us away from the transactional into the purely relational. In her Oblation to Merciful Love, she writes to God: "I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for Your Love alone." Thérèse points us to the truest spiritual motivation for our behavior: The love of God. Why be good? Why do anything at all? Because one loves God and always wants to express that love from the greatest action to the smallest. And although good works of love are good in themselves, Thérèse would not think that these acts of love had any part to play in her salvation.

She continues in her Oblation: "In the evening of life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works." Thérèse is not looking for any credit, here. Unlike the "Good Enough" vision of salvation, in which the good of one's life would have to outweigh the bad to earn entrance into heaven, Thérèse's Little Way places salvation in the merciful love of God, a gift to be received with open hands, not a prize to earned. Our job is to empty our hearts and hands in order to receive so great a gift.

The spiritual task of such self-emptying is really another way to look at Thérèse's Little Way. Once I empty my hands to receive God's love, I cannot hold onto it. It is always a gift to be shared through "the little acts done with great love," as we often describe the Little Way. It is a gift, however, with a

hidden power; although it is given freely, it can radically change the soul. Look at the response of Zacchaeus; just one divine word of welcome and he changed for the better. He wanted to share this gift and reform his life.

This sharing is best done in altruistic relationality rather than in transactional expectation. What might altruistic relationality look like? One good example of this behavior can be seen in the dynamics between a husband and wife. The stereotypical spousal drama depicts a wife who caters to her husband in the hopes of a favor (or the husband showering his wife with gifts to get some good). The suspicious transactional thought soon emerges, "You are being nice to me. What do you want?" Imagine a different spousal dynamic, one in which spouses do small acts of love for each other out of that mysterious sacramental love that binds them together, a relational dynamic with no strings attached. Spouses express their love freely and without expectation of any return because they are simply captivated by the awesome mystery of the relational gift of love they share. Such a household would truly be heaven on earth.

In my life, I have known that humble awe of merciful relational love given to me. I recall how I once endangered my friend, Peggy, by getting into a car accident. I really felt bad about my negligence; and I cannot even say how good my apology was, but I apologized. Part of me felt, however, that Peg really could never forgive me. When I mentioned this doubt years later, she said clearly, "I forgave you, Chris," and I changed in that moment. I believed her. What I felt was not really possible was actually not only possible but very real. I learned that I had to trust in the experience of merciful love. Her forgiveness was not something I could

ever earn but one I had to believe in and accept; it remains a gift that still engenders a humble awe in my soul.

The gift of truly relational love has been my friendship with Susan since my days in college band. Susan has become the sister I never had growing up, and I have been blessed to baptize her children and bless her marriage to Peter in the intervening years. Somewhere through the decades, I have come to realize that there is nothing I can ever give to Susan to earn her friendship; and there is nothing she ever needs to give to me. It is simply the gift of the presence of friends that is the only thing necessary; the only "thing" we have to give to each other are those empty hands that the other will fill just by being there.

As I think back to that anonymous friend of my brother's of decades past, I do see a hidden gift I was oblivious to at the time. I may have been guilty of a superficial transactional friendship, but he strikes me as one who conveyed a loving God who will accept us for who we are. I had nothing to give him, yet he shared his material gift with me. I have come to believe that God's grace is a far greater gift than any cutting-edge human technology. And if that awesome grace of God draws us into deep relationship with Him, how much better our world would be if we all committed to living that Little Way of not just accepting but sharing mercy and love. The inexplicable love of God will be all that exists at the end of time, just as Thérèse expressed her deepest hope in her Oblation: "May my soul take its flight into the eternal embrace of Your Merciful Love."

As our Carmelite tradition has emphasized for centuries, may we experience some taste of the relational, merciful, blissfully unconditional love of God on our journey to the heavenly Kingdom. 

“
*I do not want to lay up merits for heaven.
I want to work for Your Love alone.*”

EMPTY HANDS *for* GOD'S MERCY



Father Gerard Power,
O. Carm. *Director in*
Canada of the Society
of the Little Flower.

*Dear God,
I come before you with empty hands.
Fill me with what I need.
There is nothing I can do
to earn your love and mercy.
It is total gift.
Help me to always be merciful to others.*

When we hold out empty hands to God, we approach God with complete humility and surrender. St. Thérèse did that par excellence.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Heb. 4:16) God always provides, but we need to be receptive. This can certainly describe St. Thérèse's experience. She leaned on God's mercy with open hands, empty hands, until death. Did she not say that "a God who became so small can only be love and mercy?"

When asked to write her childhood memories in January 1895, Thérèse didn't want to put too much emphasis on herself. In the opening chapter of *Story of a Soul*, she wrote, "I'm going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally, The Mercies of the Lord." What a profound introduction to her life story. God's mercy!

I'm sure all of us have stories of mercy in our lives. I have many. One jumps out immediately. I remember this story as a 12-year-old boy in the spring of 1976. We had a big fish plant in our community on the southeast coast of Newfoundland. This plant was closed during the winter, and the fishery would start up again in the spring.

It was a place where idle boys and girls would pick the locks and go in and hang out at night. I was there several times with my sister and friends. One night, I went there with my brother and several other boys in the community. And wouldn't you know it, at some point that night, there was a lot of damage done to the interior of the fish plant. Once it was discovered a few days later, there was a big investigation. The RCMP started asking questions to all the kids. Before long, seven of us were accused! We had to deal with the justice system. I knew absolutely nothing about damages or vandalism; but, because I was there that night, I was considered just as guilty as the rest. No mercy.

My parents and grandparents were devastated. The parents of all the children were upset. Well, we had to go to court. It's a day I'll never forget. Imagine a 12-year-old boy with his 14-year-old brother and five others on the stand before a judge. I'll never forget the tears and sobs from the parents in the courtroom. The judge made us turn around and apologize publicly to them. Although I

had to plead guilty, I knew nothing about damages or who did it. That was the truth.

Long story short, we were each fined \$2.23. I guess everything else was covered under insurance. A lesson was learned. I thought I was going to end up in Her Majesty's Penitentiary. I felt ashamed. I felt like a criminal. I knew I could easily come up with \$2.23 because I sold the newspaper, *The Evening Telegram*, every Saturday evening in our community.

I felt sheepish going into the 75 houses on our shore because of what happened. One of the grandmothers whose grandson was among the seven convicts met me in her kitchen. She had a stern look. She stared at me in silence. And I'll never forget what she said as she pointed her finger at me. "Now young Gerard, I have every right to be angry with you, but I won't. Because I know you can do better than that! Now go and be a good boy. And don't get in trouble again."

Mrs. Nonie McEvoy, a powerful lady, gave me the money for the newspaper, and a little tip; and off I went, feeling so relieved. To me, that was mercy. While my parents and everyone else were upset and angry, this woman gave me hope, consolation, and confidence. It was a merciful love, a very godly thing to do for a young boy. That was 50 years ago! Every time I hear the word mercy, I think of this experience and the gift that Mrs. Nonie gave to me. I can say that I learned to give mercy!

I can only imagine the experience of St. Thérèse. Mercy was everything. By acknowledging her littleness, St. Thérèse, with empty hands, was able to experience Divine Mercy. She surrendered totally to the love and will of God. She knew she couldn't earn her salvation or merit God's love. She knew she could do nothing on her own. Jesus was her anchor, her center, her all. Yes, things were not always easy in the convent. She was often misunderstood, scorned, and poorly treated; but this became an opportunity to deepen her relationship with Jesus by showing mercy to others.

In 1895 Thérèse wrote The Act of Oblation to Merciful Love. In this prayer, she offers herself as a victim of holocaust to God's merciful love. It expresses a desire for perfect love, a total reliance on Divine Mercy. She wrote, "In the evening of this life, I shall appear before You with empty hands, for I do not ask You, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is stained in Your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in Your own Justice and to receive from Your Love the eternal possession of Yourself. I want no other Throne, no other Crown but You, my Beloved!"

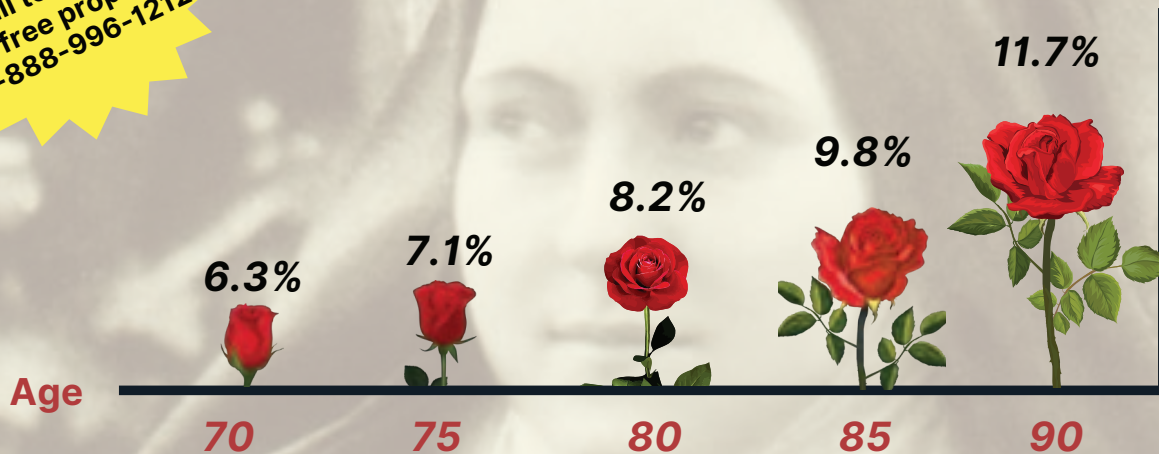
My prayer for all of us is that we will stand before God with empty hands, open to his merciful love, forgiveness and compassion. Moved by the example of St. Thérèse, may we always reach out to those who need mercy and compassion. If Mrs. Nonie McEvoy could show mercy and compassion, and raise the spirits of this once 12-year-old boy, how much more can we receive from our loving God? 🌸

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