

Besides having to be careful when I watch ‘infomercials’ on TV (I always want to buy everything I see!) I love to look at catalogues of all kinds. And when one lives in a rectory there is a constant bombardment of catalogues of every kind to look at and study, most especially, religious goods catalogues. I was amazed this week to see in one of my favourite catalogues something that St. Thérèse of Lisieux used to use in her prayer life as a young girl. It’s a rather interesting tale.

In the catalogue was a set of ‘penance beads’ for sale. And the catalogue correctly said that these beads were used by St. Thérèse as a way to pray and do penance. And the advertisement was correct insofar as it went. But not really. Let me explain. By the way, if you are wondering why I am discussing St. Thérèse, well, part of the reason is that Monday last, that is, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, was Her feast day. Also, I’m going to tie in this lesson with our Holy Gospel of today.

Anyway, about the ‘penance beads.’ The beads that St. Thérèse used was a set of ten or twelve beads on a string that could be slid from left to right or right to left depending on the owner’s preference. Each time a person did an act of virtue or penance he or she would slide a bead over to the left or right, thus keeping track each day of how many good deeds he did. If, on the other hand, the man or woman committed a sin, then one would go back and slide the ‘good deed bead’ back to the other side. At the end of the day, one would tally up the results and, with a firm heart, give one’s deeds to the Lord. Not a bad custom, really. And, as the catalogue stated, it was a custom that St. Thérèse, our newest Doctor of the Church, used Herself.

However, there’s a catch. If one takes time to read the autobiography of St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, which has been a ‘best seller’ since the very day of St. Thérèse’s death, you will find that the saint *gave up the use of the ‘penance beads’ while still a young girl!* In fact, when St. Thérèse became assistant Mistress of Novices, she found one of Her novices using the same sort of ‘penance beads’ She had once used so many years ago, and counseled the young religious against its use.

Well, you know me. I became my usual obsessive/compulsive self and tried to find the exact passage in St. Thérèse’s book where she was advising Her novice. Not being able to find it, I went to the internet, thinking I could find the passage easily there. No. No way. Not at all. But what I found to my astonishment was page after page of advertisements for the ‘penance beads!’

And the advertisements were written in such a way as to make one think that the use of these beads would be a thing that would using the spirit of St. Thérèse – which is, in fact, quite the opposite of the Saint’s thought.

So what does St. Thérèse say about her prayers and penances? She sounds amazingly like Jesus in the Gospel today. Why should we be surprised? She is, after all, His Spouse. Listen to Her words to Her sister, Celine, when they were discussing a passage from the Book of Ecclesiasticus: *“Mercy will assign to each his place according to his works.”* (*Ecclesiasticus [Sirach] 16.14*)

We must do everything we are obliged to do: give without reckoning, practice virtue whenever opportunity offers, constantly overcome ourselves, prove our love by all the little acts of

tenderness and consideration we can muster... 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 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. (1)

When we think about St. Thérèse, her very title of ‘saint’ can get in the way, I think. We expect the saints to live heroic lives of virtue – that’s their job, isn’t it? But what about us? Aren’t we supposed to live ‘ordinary lives?’ But what is an ‘ordinary life’ for a Christian? And, St. Thérèse, as I mentioned above, is a Doctor of the Church, which means that Her teaching, Her life, is put before all of us in the Church as an example, as an inspiration *for all of us to follow!* *Hmmm.* Where do we go from here? Well, let’s go to the Gospel.

In today’s Gospel, the Apostles say to Jesus: *“Increase our faith!”* Now that sounds like a beautiful, indeed, an innocent child-like prayer. And the Lord’s answer to them, at least on the surface, seems rather harsh. *“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you!”* (*St. Luke 17. 6*) The Lord can’t be serious, can He? (Please forgive me; I do not mean to be blasphemous; I am trying to enter into a frank discussion.)

Is it not true that each and every one of us has been at a point in our life that we have gone to the Lord to ask the impossible? And we have asked with the greatest faith. Or, perhaps in the spirit of St. Thérèse, we have asked with the spirit of a little child. *“And calling to Him a child, He put him in the midst of them and said: ‘Truly I say unto you, unless you turn and become like a little child, you shall never enter the kingdom of God!’”* (*St. Matthew 16. 3*) The problem with this kind of prayer – and I do mean the problem – is that when we go to our Heavenly Father like this, our hands must be in one of two ways. Our hands must be tightly clasped and pleading, or they must be fully open and empty, with nothing in them but our hearts. That is to say, when we are truly in a desperate situation, it is then that we realize how ridiculous, even obscene it is, to bargain with the Lord with our good works. Why do I say this?

If you look at the place where this Gospel fits, you will see what I mean. Jesus has been battling the Pharisees, trying to get them to understand that, while good works are indeed necessary in our lives, they are not the most important thing. Nor is one’s appearance to be trusted either. Thus last week we heard about the rich man who was *“clothed in purple and dined sumptuously each day.”* (*St. Luke 16. 19*) The man’s gut was full but his heart was empty and his eyes, though physically working fine, were blind as a bat. People then and even people today still have it in their minds (and in their empty hearts?) that life can go on as normal as long as they are not disturbed? Or, if they do have a ‘religious bent’ to themselves, they start gathering up ‘good deeds’ on their ‘penance beads,’ (please, I mean no disrespect; but St. Thérèse, herself, spoke against these!). to go to the Lord and ‘bargain’ with Him in times of need. No! Can you not see that this is entirely too much like someone else in the Gospel who said: *“O God, I thank Thee that I am not like the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”* This ‘just man’ then begins to give a list of all of

his wonderful qualities to the Lord God – as if the Lord God didn't know? And, by the way, that remark about 'tax collectors,' must have rather stung poor St. Matthew who had been a tax collector in his earlier life. Where would we be without St. Matthew and how much poorer would our Scriptures be without Him?! On the other hand, the 'tax collector,' too meek to even look up to Heaven to God, simply keeps repeating the sinner's prayer: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" What is the verdict of the Lord Christ?

*I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. (St. Luke 18. 14)*

Again let me emphasize, deeds are important! But let me emphasize even more emphatically that the grace to do the good deeds comes from God alone! That is why St. Thérèse says above that it is God "Who alone sanctifies our works and Who can sanctify us without works. For He can even raise children to Abraham out of stones." And this is why She goes on to say, quoting today's Gospel, that, after confessing that we are unprofitable servants, we should hope that "God out of grace will give us everything we need." (2) In fact, these words rather remind me of the words of Our Divine Lord, when He is told to silence the crowds as He approaches Jerusalem: "I tell you, if these men were silent, the very stones would cry out!" (St. Luke 19. 40)

Of course, an objection arises at this point. To be good people, do we just sit back and let God do everything? No, of course not! What we are simply emphasizing is the fact that we cannot rely on the works we do to prove our faith. It is the Lord that gives us the grace to do the works – so, the works we do ought rather be the out-pouring of our love and faith. And the more deeply we look into this reality, the more we will realize our poverty – that it is the Lord, Himself, that gives us everything that we have, everything that we are, everything that we do, Without Him we are nothing. Two passages from the *Imitation of Christ* are very helpful here:

This, indeed, I may truly think and say, Lord; I am nothing, I can do nothing, I have nothing of myself that is good; but I fail and am defective in all things, and ever tend to nothing. (3)

and

*Follow Me – St. John 21. 19: I am the way, the truth, and the life. – St. John 14. 6 Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living. (4)*

And so, Our Lord teaches His Apostles to become servants. "When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.'" (St. Luke 17. 10) Right now, at this point in the Gospel of St. Luke we are at the beginning of chapter seventeen. In five short chapters we shall move from Our Lord's rather strange words to His Apostles in today's Gospel to the Last Supper, to His saving Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension.

At the Last Supper, Jesus will say these words to His Apostles:

*The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves. (St. Luke 22. 24-27)*

Christ comes as "One Who serves!" He is Saviour; He is Lord; but He is also Suffering Servant.

*He was despised and rejected of men, a Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief. (Isaiah 53. 3)*

Christ alone is the God Who is great enough, large enough, big enough, to become weak and suffering for us. And He does this for us out of love. How can we even begin to grasp this truth?

Beads are all very well; especially if those beads are the Rosary wherein we meditate on the life and death and resurrection of Our beloved Saviour. But if we use beads to greedily count up our good deeds – shan't we look like fools, and ungrateful fools, at that, crying into the wind, saying: 'Look what I've done for You, Lord!' rather than crying out, like the poor tax collector, 'Have mercy on me, a poor sinner!' How can anyone parcel out the Blood of Christ? If we do not cry out for joy at this, I do believe "even the very stones would cry out!" (St. Luke 19. 40) Please God, when I go to Heaven, I shan't go to Him with hands full of good deeds – oh no! Like my good Sister, St. Thérèse, my trophy shall be to go to Him with empty hands, with complete trust, to the Poor Man Who is my Saviour!

1. Ida Friederike Goerres, *The Hidden Face, A Study of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, Pantheon, 1959, pgs. 281-282
2. Ibid.
3. Thomas à Kempis, *My Imitation of Christ*, Revised Translation, Confraternity of the Precious Blood, Brooklyn, New York, 1954, Book 3, chapter 40
4. Ibid., Book 3, chapter 56