

BORROWED FLAMES



Friedrich Wilhelm Schadow, The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. 1838-1842

Most of our modern day life operates on credit. We all borrow something from someone: A woman baking a cake who doesn't have enough flour borrows from a neighbor or a friend; if the government runs short on money, they borrow from you, the taxpayer, or from some other government or lending institution; you buy an automobile on an installment plan; if you own your house, chances are you bought it on credit; churches borrow money to build their facilities. Borrowing is good as long as we do not abuse it. The use of credit has its limits. In terms of money there is a limit on how much you can borrow and, in terms of life, there is a limit on the kinds of things that can be borrowed.

Jesus tells a parable of five young maidens who encountered that limit. There were ten maidens in all and Jesus said: "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise." (Matt 25:2) This distinction becomes apparent at the point of preparedness: Their role was to meet the bridegroom and escort him to the wedding.

It was a night wedding so each carried a flaming lamp. The groom was late for some reason and did not show up until midnight, so their lamps were running low on fuel. The five wise maidens brought along an extra supply of oil, while the five foolish ones did not. So the foolish tried to borrow from the wise, but their request was denied. The wise ones said: "Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." (Matt 25:9) That seems rather selfish and uncaring on their part, but it is true to life in the realm of the spirit.

When a crisis arises and our needs are urgent, we must depend on our own resources. Life allows us to borrow from each other in minor affairs, but when we face the most important issues we have only that which we brought with us. Jesus drew a line right down the middle of that wedding party and said: "Five of them were foolish, and five were wise."

The deepest differences between people lies in the realm of things that we cannot borrow. Clarence Darrow, a famous lawyer of years past, was a cynic who

believed that human life was utterly without meaning; it came into being without design, continued without purpose, and ended without hope. As an old man with most of his life behind him and nothing ahead but eternal death, he said: "The one thing no rational person can escape is the absurdity of it all."

On the other hand, we have the witness of St. Paul. He, too, lived a long and useful life. Most of it was hard, but it always had meaning for him; he kept his zest for living all the way to the end. As he thought of death and what was out there in the future, he wrote to his friends: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven ... then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord." (1 Thes 4:16 -17) The fundamental difference between those two views of life and death is a deep and personal faith in God. St.

Paul had it, the lawyer did not. In the critical hour of need it was nontransferable.

Yet there is a sense in which faith in God is always borrowed. After all, we didn't invent it for ourselves; we received it from God, through His prophets and apostles. The Church has preserved that Faith and handed it down to our generation today. William James of Harvard said, "Faith is always faith in someone else's Faith." But for that faith to become deep and personal, we must go beyond the witness of others and experience God for ourselves. The Psalmist sang: "O God, you are my God." (Psalm 63:1) The first part, "O God," can be borrowed. We have learned to say it from others. But the second part of that line is intimate and personal. In order to say, "You are my God," we must build a faith of our own

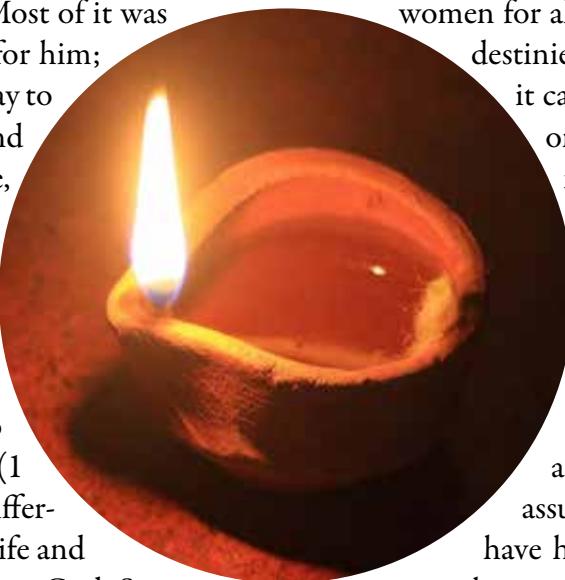
— one that can't be borrowed. This truth makes us individually responsible for the quality of our own lives, if we take it seriously. We can't blame others for what *we are* nor can we borrow from them what we would *like to be*. Your parents may have been the best people on earth, but it can't be taken for granted that you will automatically become decent and honorable men and women for all of that. We must shape our own destinies. Character is non-transferable; it cannot be borrowed, not even from one's own family. We have to build it for ourselves.

The same is true of a home. I have known people who lived in big cities with beautiful homes. Every relationship was guarded and guided by love. They kept a daily diet of patience, kindness, and understanding. Their children

assumed that someday they could have homes just like that. What a rude awakening awaited them when they discovered that homes can't be transferred from one generation to the next. Anyone who would have a beautiful home must build it, day by day, with patience, kindness and understanding.

No one can make my choices for me. I make them myself. And when the time comes for me to die, no one can take my place. No one can go with me; I must go by myself. In crucial times, life requires us to stand alone. Some things cannot be borrowed.

One final word: Even in the lonely experiences that we all have to face, we are never truly alone. When we have made our preparation and accepted our responsibility, there is One who walks beside us and lives within us. His promise is: "I am with you always, even until the end of time." (Matt 28:20) ♦♦

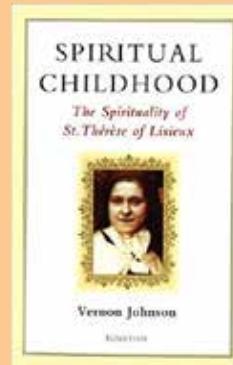


Living the Little Way of St. Thérèse

Most of us have heard of Saint Thérèse and her “Little Way” of spiritual childhood. The saint explained to her prioress, Mother Marie de Gonzague, how she discovered her doctrine: “You know, Mother, I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by.” So, searching the Scriptures for an answer to the mystery of how she could have such lofty desires yet be so incapable of fulfilling them, she writes that she came across the words, “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me.” (Prov. 9:4) This was the “elevator” she was looking for to raise her to Jesus (see *The Story of a Soul*, Manuscript C). Her breakthrough has since earned her the title of Doctor of the Church yet, for all that, it often helps to have someone explain it and show how it is lived.

The late Monsignor Vernon Johnson (1886-1969) does an excellent job of this in his book, *Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*. A truly invaluable tool in grasping the rich doctrine of St. Thérèse. In a section showing how we can live the Little Way in our day to day lives, he writes:

“How does the Little Way, with its invitation to become a victim of the Merciful Love of God, fit into our ordinary everyday lives? The answer is simple. Our Lord told his apostles that they must be converted and become as little children if they were to enter the kingdom of heaven. In the natural order how do little children show their love? Through little things. A little child, just because it is little, is utterly unable to show its love in any other way. At some time or other we have



all had evidence of that, if only we have had eyes to see it. The most superficial observation of human life shows us how very little children will continually offer little things to their mother — a toy, a picture, a flower — as evidence of their love. To show their love they relate everything to their mother, and the means they make use of are the insignificant details of their little world, the things that lie immediately to hand. We notice too that the mother, although she has no need of the toy, the picture, or the flower, loves the child to make these offerings, because she wants the love that lies behind them. In themselves they are nothing, but insofar as they express the love of her little child, those nothings become most precious.”

“The lesson is obvious. We who desire in the spirit of little children to offer our lives to God as one continual act of humble and confident love can do so only through the little ordinary details which lie around us in our daily life. Unless we love Our Lord through ‘the toys, the pictures, the flowers’ of everyday life, we shall never really love him at all. Again, as with the mother, so with our heavenly Father: he has no need of anything we offer him, but he wants us to go on offering things because he wants the love that lies behind them. For this reason the little things we do for him, in themselves apparently so insignificant, are to him infinitely precious. ‘You know well, Celine,’ says St. Thérèse in one of her letters, ‘that Our Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our actions, or even at their difficulty, as at the love with which we do them.’” (p.128)

Our Heavenly Father has, in His Divine Providence supplied us with all that we need to love Him. Every day, He fills our hands, so to speak, with the very gifts that we can give. May we do so with the love and confidence of a little child. ♣