



Action Prayer

THÉRÈSE'S LITTLE WAY IN THE MIDST OF THE MUNDANE

Action prayer is nonverbal communication to God, using our attitudes and our attempts to obey, which draws its energy from Christ's example and empowerment.

We are accustomed to thinking of prayer as verbal—an exchange of words—or at least mental, a centering-down of thoughts that allows stillness to grow in us as we make our way through the daily mill. With the Little Way, we intentionally press further, drawing the outer world inward as we intersect with it and respond to it. Our actions and reactions become the prayer. We are transformed into givers as we practice giving, into listeners because we listen, into champions as we defend the weak, into the image of Christ because we act like Christ (Col 3:10). Our lives themselves address God directly. Thérèse Martin,¹ a French nun, sought to practice this sort of embodied prayer.

Thérèse (1873–1897) was the youngest of nine. Her mother died when she was four years old, and the loss plunged her into a childhood of insecurity. When she was thirteen, however, she found in Jesus' birth the comfort of one who understood her vulnerability. At a Christmas Eve service, she tells that “the sweet infant Jesus, scarce yet an hour old, flooded with his glorious sunshine the darkness into which my soul was plunged. In becoming weak and little for love of me, he made me strong and brave.”² She never lost her sensitivity, but in Jesus she also found a child-like humility with which to engage the world.

At the age of fifteen, she sought to join the Carmelite religious order in Lisieux, a small town in Normandy. Initially the superior declined her application because of her age, but the girl's steady character eventually won out. She made her final vows two years later and was soon raised to assist the mistress of novices. Her abbess assigned her the job of writing an autobiography when she was twenty-two, and we have this work as *The Story of a Soul*.³ A year later, after her death from tuberculosis, the history circulated among the convents and eventually acquired a large following.

Declaring spiritual disciplines, even the rosary, too involved for her, Thérèse practiced what she called the Little Way. She read the Bible, and her verbal prayers were direct and personal—an unpretentious toddler telling her father what she wanted and trusting him to provide. Trivial actions done for God's glory became her nonverbal prayer. Life, she said, presented sufficient challenges and opportunities for grace without complicating the matter. Instead of adding special spiritual disciplines, she sought to do ordinary things with extraordinary love. “The smallest action, done with

¹ The following story of Thérèse Martin's life relies on Thomas Plassmann, *Lives of Saints with Excerpts from Their Writings* (New York: Crawley, 1954), n.p. [cited 12 Jan 2006]. Online: www.ewtn.com/therese/therese1.htm.

² Thérèse of Lisieux, *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: An Autobiography* (trans. Thomas N. Taylor; London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1927), 86.

³ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* (trans. John Beevers; New York: Image, 1989).

love, [was] more important than great deeds done for personal glory, gratification, or simply out of obedience.”⁴

As an example of her plan, Thérèse noted an instance that occurred one day during meditation. As the sisters waited in quiet contemplation, one of them fidgeted incessantly with her rosary beads until Thérèse felt crazed with irritation. She wanted to turn and glare the nun into silence. She became so frustrated that she began to sweat. At last, she writes, “instead of vainly attempting not to hear it, I set myself to listen attentively as though it were delightful music, and my meditation—which was not the prayer of ‘quiet’—was passed in offering this music to Our Lord.”⁵

In Thérèse’s Little Way, we too can find an open path to engagement with Jesus, even when verbal prayer is drowned out. We are accustomed to thinking of prayer as solely conversation, an exchange of words. God does make himself known through language (John 1:1); however, our relationship with him is not “just talk.” Though we could not know God if he did not speak to us through Scriptures and by his Son, God also reveals himself in nature and in his actions (Rom 1:19–20; Ps 98:2; Jer 33:6). In the same way, we reveal and yield our wills to God by our actions, as well as our speech (Jas 1:22–25).

As we respond to others, Jesus is the one who receives our replies (Mic 6:6–8). When we act instead of avoiding the work or the person, he is the one we obey. Even as we wait for the right service-projects, skills-fit, or timing, this formation prayer takes advantage of the incidents and interpersonal encounters that occur daily. We begin to see everyday actions and reactions as our communion with him. By allowing what we do to contribute to our conversation with God, we permit him to transform us in the areas of action and emotion, not just thought.

For those of us whose defaults already tend toward help and service, practicing the Little Way transforms both our acknowledged and our unknown motives into intentional choices for Jesus. Even when we fear that our kindnesses will not be reciprocated, we choose to trust our Father to enfold us and Jesus to satisfy our needs for belonging and welcome. Then we can participate without needing affirmation from our fellows because God himself receives and delights in our service. We look to please God, instead of depending on others to notice and respond to our giving (Matt 6:1–6). Without expectation of reward or thanks to refuel us, we act from Jesus’ strength and with his bravery. And in acting *from* his character, we are changed *into* his character.

Practice

1. As you pass through your day, yield to God the tasks that you do and the reactions that you feel.
2. Give him your irritation, your delight, or whatever emotion you feel because that is what you have to give. Offer him both your desire to respond unselfishly and your actual response. Do not waste energy pretending or attempting on your own to *feel* the way you “should.” Instead, ask Christ to receive your disgruntled feelings and to reshape them into something that you are pleased to give and that God is pleased to receive. Offer your attitude honestly. Then *act* as Jesus has asked. With

⁴ Society of the Little Flower, “Learn about Therese,” n.p. [cited 20 June 2008]. Online: www.littleflower.org/learn/faq.asp.

⁵ Thérèse, *Autobiography*, 186.

the incarnation, Jesus became weak, so that you could act from his strength. Offer your actions to God as your prayer.

3. If you mop vigorously, then let the vigor be your prayer and the mop be your tongue. Some actions allow our minds to multitask and it may be possible to think prayer words as well, but do not lose the language of action just because words are available. If you play the piano tentatively, then offer God the tentative music that you are able to make. Are you on the phone with clients all day? Then let the nature of your cooperation in work be your worship. If you are asked to photocopy, even when it is not really your job, then pray by your submission to God and your excellence in photocopying.

4. There is a difference between practicing the Little Way and enabling an abuser. If you are not safe because of another's actions or verbal attacks, it is right to remove yourself from the situation and seek help. The Little Way is a practice for the countless other times in the daily grind when accommodating the people around you would honor God as a yielded response to him.

5. The goal of this method of prayer is to conquer your pride in order to foster communion with Jesus, so it may take some practice. When you forget or fail, remember that you are only a toddler. Allow the Father to pick you up and comfort you. Know that Jesus, too, made himself vulnerable, and it is his brotherhood that enables you to follow in this Little Way. Consider his pleasure in your attempts to be like him. Hear his word of encouragement and appreciation. God does not "need" your success, but his heart swells with joy at your desire to be with him and to share in his work.

6. At the end of the day, record what you learned or received as you exercised this nonverbal communication with Jesus. How did he sustain you in the practice?

7. Return to the Scripture and perhaps to verbal prayer. Ask the Lord to feed your spirit with his Word.

Sample the Prayer

If committing a whole day to this sort of embodied prayer seems like a deterrent to ever getting started, consider designating 15 or 30 minutes to it. For example, if your workday begins at 9:00 a.m., give yourself a chance to get settled and then practice this prayer of action from 9:30 to 9:45. Use this timeframe every day for a week and then pick another 15-minute slot. Begin with a period that is likely to include few people. Move to one with more interaction or expand your timeframe as you grow confident in the practice.

Practice Together

There is something about teamwork that can be sweet to watch and exciting to participate in. When every member contributes to his full potential and each contribution benefits a goal in which all believe, when people pitch in and help as others are in need and no one holds back, a group can

work like a well-oiled machine. Even the interaction, not to mention the achievement of a goal, provides a thrill. Such clockwork from humans is rare, often only experienced during emergencies, but the results are deeply satisfying to the participants and uplifting to onlookers.

In the same way, small groups who defer to one another in service to others often find that they are lifted outside of themselves as individuals. Members discover the character of Christ in ways they could not have found alone. And outsiders, watching their work, are moved as much or more by the nature of the group's service as by the service itself.

Consider using this prayerful approach to govern your church committee, your volunteer work, or your ministry.

Or think about adding a service component to your small group or to your spiritual friendships. Once a month, instead of meeting for prayer, study, or fun, meet to cook for a soup kitchen, tutor children in a local school, repair or clean the home of someone in need, or some other project. Determine ahead of time that as you grow more accustomed to one another's quirks and weaknesses, you will yield to one another with intention instead of merely giving in to satisfy social norms about avoiding confrontation. As you work, allow your humility to be that of Christ (Phil 2:5–8).

After each service session, take a few moments to debrief, to discuss your difficulties, your attitudes, and your victories. Seek help from one another instead of harboring resentments and hurts (Lev 19:18; Eph 4:31). Be reconciled to one another quickly when you do fail to treat each other with humility and dignity (Matt 5:23–24). And before you leave, return your work and the nature of your work to God. With child-like faith remind yourselves that he receives your attempts to serve others as service to him and he rejoices over you (Isa 62:5).

Consider

1. What Scriptures can you think of that encourage this plan of “action as acceptable prayer”? Look at Micah 6:6–8, Matthew 6:1–6, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:17, and James 2:26 if you want a refresher. There are plenty of others. How do these verses nuance the way you think of embodying prayer in action.

2. Protestants of certain traditions may feel that action prayer is a recapitulation of an overly familiar “Protestant work ethic.” What characteristics do action prayer and this work ethic share? How are they different? In what ways can action prayer be practiced so that the burden pray-ers feel is the “easy yoke” of Jesus’ promise (Matt 11:30)?

3. Imagine or recall a disturbing incident or person you have encountered. Now think of Jesus as that person or disruption, and move your mind through the situation with him instead of the original actor. Do not attempt to picture Jesus as mean or hurtful. He is not. Simply see him in place of that person, his image within that person (Gen 1:26). What difficulties does such a swap pose for you? What advantage might there be to modifying your behavior or your actions as if Jesus were actually the recipient?

4. Consider the communication a visual artist attempts to achieve. By depicting the world in a particular way, the painter or sculptor makes his perspective known without using words. How is this nonverbal message like the exchange of words? How is it different? How does the analogy of communicating through art expand the way you understand communicating through humble action?

5. Think about the proverb “actions speak louder than words.” What do your actions reveal about you? What do they say to God? What do they say about God to those watching you?

Study Further

For the story of Thérèse Martin’s life, see www.ewtn.com/therese/therese1.htm.

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Thérèse of Lisieux. *The Story of a Soul*. Translated by John Beevers. New York: Image, 1989.

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