The Quarry Workers[1]

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THE GRAVE of Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963)—dead forty-three years this year—occupies a plot in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, Headington Quarry. This Gothic Revival structure dates from the mid-nineteenth century, and was built to accommodate the quarry workers and others living in Quarry Field. From the start of the nineteenth century, this section of ancient Headington had become separated both physically and socially from "old" Headington. The original Headington parish dates to the reigns of the later Anglo-Saxon kings. Ethelred the Unready (968–1016) is said to have been baptized there. . . .[2] In any event, St. Andrew's, Headington, enjoys a more prestigious history than does its nineteenth-century neighbor, Holy Trinity.

Earlier this year I visited Lewis's grave as part of a spiritual preparation for delivering this homily. By a timely coincidence, I had the opportunity to speak with an assistant curate of the parish church, the Reverend Linda Greene. She explained that Holy Trinity Parish was established so that the working-class quarrymen would not find it necessary to join the congregants at the principal Church of England parish in Headington. In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century, the people dwelling around the Quarry were not attending church services, and so it is suspected that even mere Christianity no longer informed their daily lives.

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[1] Sermon preached at the Sunday worship service, C. S. Lewis Summer Institute, in Thompson Memorial Chapel, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, July 9, 2006.

[2] According to William of Malmesbury, Ethelred defecated in the baptismal font as a child, which led St. Dunstan to prophesy that the English monarchy would be overthrown during his reign. This story is, however, almost certainly a fabrication.

From 1930 until his death, C. S. Lewis found himself living in what, at a certain point in time, had been the unfashionable section of town. His beloved parish church was intended to serve the ordinary man, the manual laborer and his family. I consider this circumstance providential. The great apologist wrote from within the boundaries of a Church of England parish that was established to stave off the de-Christianization of a region where the sacraments of Christian initiation had been administered for more than a thousand years.

I find that Headington Quarry provides the ideal spiritual setting from which to read what St. Paul says today in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me" (2 Cor 12: 9).

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A Jesuit friend of mine likes to observe that the Christian Gospel places us under the sign of the diminutive. We find ourselves confronted with mustard seeds, widows' mites, small boats, a few loaves and fishes, the tiny pearl of great price. . . . Little things. All of them. These diminutive Gospel images prepare us to embrace the grace of the Incarnation. We discover that God uses little things to draw us into the mystery of his Son.

Another great Christian apologist, the second-century Church Father St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–c. 200), explains the divine purpose behind the Incarnation, when God uses the little thing we call human nature to achieve the huge results that the Incarnation of the Son of God brings to this world: "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God."[3] Divinization holds out a huge promise. This Sunday St. Paul teaches us that God grants this big grace to those who accept their littleness—"a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated" (2 Cor 12: 7). The identity of the thorn matters not; all save tainted nature's solitary boast experience one or another.

"Love Among the Ruins. On the Renewal of Character & Culture." How do we achieve the objective that the theme of this summer institute sets before us, not only for our reflection but also for our accomplishment? Allow me to introduce a Roman Catholic figure.

The year before C. S. Lewis was born in November 1898, a young French woman died in a Norman Carmelite convent. She was Thérèse

[3] *Adversus haereses*, 3, 19, 1 (*PG* 7/1, 939) cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §460.

Martin, who succumbed to tuberculosis on September 30, 1897. Thérèse had embraced the austere life of Carmel with the purpose of saving souls, especially those of Roman Catholic priests. When I was a seminarian in the late 1960s, a holy priest first introduced me to the spiritual doctrine of Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Since that moment, I have observed that those who follow her Little Way discover the full significance of the Gospel's preference for the diminutive. It seems to me that C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and Thérèse Martin's *Story of a Soul* complement each other.

Thérèse of Lisieux provides the instruction required by our contemporaries to live the Christian Gospel that C. S. Lewis holds up in so many different ways as indispensable for human flourishing. Thérèse has been named a Doctor of the Church. She is called the Doctor of Love. Her instruction serves as a prolonged commentary on the phrase that St. Paul sets before us today: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12: 9). Consider three graces that Thérèse teaches us about with—what the late Pope John Paul II has called—"feminine genius." They are as follows: first, the grace of confidence: we learn that God loves us not because we are good but because he is. The modern afflictions of guilt, alienation, and loneliness dissolve before the God whose only demand is love. Secondly, the grace of humility, or spiritual childhood: we discover that submission to divine authority makes us strong, not weak. The modern penchant to grasp power through bureaucratic domination gives way to the charity of ecclesial communion. Thirdly, the grace of littleness: we see that heroic love can flow from the accomplishment of even little things. The modern preoccupation with gigantism is replaced with an appreciation for the concrete and everyday. These Theresian graces place us squarely under the New Testament sign of the diminutive.

I take C. S. Lewis of Headington Quarry and Thérèse of Lisieux to be companions of a sort. For one thing, their writings continue to attract Christians and others. Of course, C. S. Lewis embodies a man of learning and style. But why should a late nineteenth-century French provincial girl, who was neither learned nor a woman of letters—her French grammar required correction—still capture the attention of the Christian Church? What explains Thérèse's powerful draw on so many persons throughout the world? How can someone who found study burdensome exemplify the excellence in the bestowal of divine truth that is characteristic of both an apologist and, as Pope John Paul II declared, a Doctor of the Church? The answers to these questions will not be found in books about Thérèse. To discover the answers to these questions, one needs to become acquainted with the person of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus

and of the Holy Face. In terms familiar to end-of-the-twentieth-century Roman Catholics, it is the mission of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus—the Little Flower, as she is known in English devotional parlance—to announce the universal call to holiness.

The sixteenth-century reform of Carmel had made loving God a matter of great seriousness. Saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross remain household names for students of Christian spirituality. Thérèse entered the monastery when the fashions of spiritual theology imposed what she called the practices of the "big souls." These included prayer, mortification, including using instruments of penance, and other ascetical practices, especially the observance of strict enclosure and of a detailed, even minuscule, obedience. Such proportions hardly suited the temperament of a young French girl who had lost her mother when she was very young and whose sensitivity frequently got the best of her. But Thérèse knew that God had a way for her, and she waited patiently for the moment when it pleased divine providence to reveal it to her. Thérèse's way, of course, has become known as the "Little Way," the way of divine love. "My grace is sufficient for you."

Thérèse's little way of spiritual childhood is really quite simple to grasp. Her basic conviction is that of the basic New Testament message: God loves us. And because God loves us, we can trust that he will make it possible for us to love him in return. Thérèse's way, then, is a road built on confidence in the divine goodness. If we trust that God wants to make us saints, he will. Thérèse's own life affords a parable of how the divine love works: her autobiography—her *Story of a Soul*—instructs us that nothing can block, in those who have confidence in God, the fulfillment of his plan for their divinization. Not even one's sins. Does this mean that Thérèse encourages a nonchalant attitude toward character formation? By no means. She believes in sanctification, in personal holiness. What she does not trust are her own energies to achieve it. "The thought *nourishes me*," she once said, "that Sister X finds me without virtue, and I am happy that I seem so to myself also."[4] For a person to grow spiritually, Thérèse encourages a continual turning back to the source of all forgiveness and grace.

Thérèse makes it plain that her Little Way serves everybody. The analogy is simple, and makes her spiritual doctrine appealing, especially to believers of our generation. Just as little children can always find refuge in the arms of their fathers or mothers, so little souls can always run to the Heavenly Father in order to receive consolation and strength. They can

[4] *L'Esprit de la Bienheureuse Thérèse de L'Enfant Jésus. D'après ses écrits et les témoins oculaires de sa vie* (Lisieux: n.d.; before 1913), 135.

also turn to him for forgiveness. According to the practice of the day, Thérèse manifested her conscience to her confessor, and he declared that she had never committed a mortal sin. What was her response? Even if I had committed many mortal sins, I would still run to the arms of the Heavenly Father. Her theological argument is simple: where else would one go? This act of abandonment to the divine Goodness is not just for those already on the high road to ethical or spiritual advancement. It applies also to the quarrymen. They represent all of us. Thérèse's own blood sister, whom she helped as a novice in Carmel, once complained that she did not experience the great aspirations to holiness that Thérèse expressed frequently. The Little Flower explained gently that Marie (her blood sister) had missed the whole point of the Little Way: not even desires are important, just confidence and love. "My grace is sufficient for you."

Thérèse's vocation was to embrace and to proclaim God's love. Though she never left the confines of her cloister in Normandy, Thérèse still united herself to the work of the worldwide Church. It is significant that when the French Carmelite nuns were considering making foundations in Viet Nam, Thérèse was ready to offer herself for the monasteries to be constructed in Hanoi and Saigon.[5] Thérèse's missionary zeal is not to be distinguished from her Little Way: both express her utter abandonment to the unfolding of the divine Goodness.

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"Love among the ruins. How to build character?" The answer is simple. We are all spiritual quarrymen. C. S. Lewis recognized the fragility of his generation. He warned against the wiles of the devil and wrote about the uniqueness of divine charity. The 1942 *Screwtape Letters* and the 1960 *The Four Loves* express Lewis's profound insights into the divinization that Christ alone brings and the need of every human creature to discover it. Divinization brings with it charity. With charity, all the other virtues flourish; without charity, the other virtues, as St. Paul elsewhere reminds us, "gain nothing" (1 Cor 13: 3). "My grace is sufficient for you." There is no other way to renew moral character than by living in Jesus Christ.

Thérèse Martin, with the flair of feminine genius, addressed the same spiritual themes that Lewis would later expound. Shortly before her death, Saint Thérèse accepted the orphan seminarian Maurice Barthélemy-Bellière as a spiritual brother. In one of his last letters to the saint, Maurice expressed embarrassment about the fact that in heaven

[5] So the city was then known and, so I recently learned, is today by inhabitants of Viet Nam; for example, airlines still mark baggage destined for Ho Chi Minh City "SGN."

Thérèse would know his sins and so be drawn away from him. From her deathbed, the Doctor of Love taught this young priest an important lesson about spiritual things that applies to every Christian believer:

> Little Brother, we do not understand heaven in the same way. It seems to you that sharing in the justice, in the holiness of God, I would be unable as on earth to excuse your faults. Are you forgetting, then, that I shall be sharing also in the infinite mercy of the Lord? I believe the Blessed have great compassion on our miseries, they remember, being weak and mortal like us, [that] they committed the same faults, sustained the same combats, and [so] their fraternal tenderness becomes greater than it was when they were on earth, and for this reason, they never cease protecting us and praying for us.[6]

This is the blessed communion that C. S. Lewis, we pray, and Thérèse Martin now share. It is the goal to which every human person is called, and a point of rest that is reached only by those who discover the secret that St. Paul confides to all Christians: "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12: 10). One would like to believe that the men of Headington Quarry discovered this saving Gospel truth once Holy Trinity Church restored the proclamation of the Christian Gospel and the administration of Baptism to ancient Catholic Headington. There can be no doubt, however, that C. S. Lewis of Headington Quarry has made this message known to those who read his books and essays. He speaks with special effect to those who, like those present in Thompson Memorial Chapel this sunny New England Sunday morning, cherish his memory and spirit. NV

[6] *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux*, vol. 2, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1988), 1133.