

- This past week we celebrated the feast of one of our most popular saints: St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whom many of us know as the Little Flower. Perhaps Thérèse is so popular because her spirituality of the Little Way shows us that holiness of life is possible for anyone.
- Yet while holiness is possible for any of us, that doesn't mean it's easily obtained. Certainly, becoming a saint wasn't an easy process for St. Thérèse. While often characterized as a sweet and almost fragile young lady, the Little Flower was actually pretty tough!
- In fact, her last 18 months of life were filled with very intense suffering. Not only did she suffer and eventually die from tuberculosis (without any pain meds), St. Thérèse also endured a dark night of the soul – a spiritual suffering that deprived her of any sense of God.
- When a person goes through a dark night of the soul, they experience great desolation. It's the worst kind of suffering in which one thirsts for God but cannot seem to find Him. Yet it's a contemplative experience that heals us, not a human suffering like depression.
- Through a dark night of the soul, God cuts away the roots of our spiritual maladies. It's extremely painful because it goes to the deepest levels of our persons. Ultimately, it is a process of purification that helps us become detached from all earthly things.
- And when a person endures them, dark nights of the soul greatly increase love, humility, patience and all the virtues, and they prepare one for deeper prayer. In fact, dark nights of the soul like what St. Thérèse went through make a person a saint.
- Though she stayed faithful to prayer, during the last 18 months of her life St. Thérèse received no consolations in prayer, no sense that God was listening to her. In addition, the painful process of the dark night of the soul, she was also tempted to sins against Faith.
- St. Thérèse was tempted to disbelieve in God's existence, in His goodness and love, and she was tempted to blaspheme God. She was even tempted at times to commit suicide. Yet by a very strong act of the will, St. Thérèse held firm in faith, hope, and charity as she suffered.
- And she was rewarded with a very beautiful death, and apparently as well a very high place in Heaven, which we can deduce from the fact that she is so powerful in answering prayers.
- To be sure, suffering with faith, hope, and love never goes unnoticed by our Lord. He rewards it richly. God rejoices when He sees His creatures making an act of the will to trust Him, to hope in Him, and to love Him – most especially in the midst of suffering.
- When suffering comes into our lives it can feel like an ambush. But we have a decision to make with suffering: will we handle it with virtue, or will we give in to our vices?
- This is exactly why St. Paul encourages us in our epistle to “Stir into flame the gift of God,” reminding us that God “did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.” It's why he encourages us to bear our share of hardship for the Gospel.
- In the Gospel today the apostles say to the Lord: “Increase our faith.” How many times have we all prayed this ourselves? How many times have we asked, “Lord, give me more faith or “Lord, please strengthen my faith”? And we say the same with charity, too, don't we?
- And yet how many times have we really done our part to increase the faith, hope, and charity that God has given us? Have we ever made a firm act of the will to be confident in our Lord and to really trust him as St. Thérèse did?
- What we have to remember about faith, hope, and charity is that they're virtues. They're divine gifts infused in us by God, gifts nurtured by the sacraments and by participation in the liturgy. They're also increased through prayer and the good examples of others.

- However, the virtues require tending to, for they are the muscles of our soul. And if we want these virtues to grow strong within us, we have to exercise these muscles of our soul.
- But here's the rub: the virtues are often best exercised through adversity. Truly, it's when we encounter those difficult moments in life – and we all have them from time to time – that our faith, our hope, and our charity are most likely to increase!
- In fact, many saints speak of suffering as a great gift precisely because suffering affords an opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and charity.
- The problem is that our sufferings are often exacerbated by the feeling that God isn't listening to our prayers. Sometimes when we ask God to take away a suffering, He tells us no. But He tells us no because He loves us and wants us to persevere through our suffering.
- In our weakness, we have a tendency to esteem ourselves too much and want everything to go our way, and we esteem God too little and fail to trust Him as we should.
- Nobody likes to suffer; no one likes to feel abandoned by God. Yet it's when we feel most abandoned by God that we must choose to love and trust Him.
- You see, suffering – in whatever form it comes to us – is always an invitation to trust God more deeply. It's not a sign that He's ignoring us or necessarily punishing us. No, suffering is God's way of gracing us with an opportunity to become holier.
- The great thing is that God is here to help us in our time of trial. Think again about the words of the second reading we heard today: "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control."
- You see, God never abandons us! Even in the most difficult and trying times of our life – when we feel the most alone and isolated – God is giving us the grace and courage we need to persevere in whatever dark night we may find ourselves.
- And when we trust in this, when we choose to believe that God loves us more than we can imagine, our faith increases – as do our hope and our charity.
- My brothers and sisters, being a holy person is not an easy task, for it requires a willingness to embrace sufferings.
- But take heart, God has given us a spirit of power and love and self-control, not a spirit of cowardice. He wants us to respond heroically to the sufferings of our lives, and He gives us the grace to do so.
- If you're suffering in some way now, trust in God's grace and exercise your faith, hope, and charity with great confidence, knowing that these virtues will increase within you and eventually lead you to eternal life.
- St. Thérèse of Lisieux, pray for us!