

Discussion Question and Answers for St. Therese, a Treasured Love Story by Archbishop Fulton Sheen

It is recommended that the size of a book club discussion group not be less than 6 persons nor more than 12 persons to allow everyone to take part.

It is recommended that you treat the introduction and summary of the lives of Sheen and St. Therese as a chapter along with the 11 chapters in the book. This divides the book into 12 parts that can be reasonably discussed in six weeks by treating two chapters per session.

The discussion questions for each chapter are in normal text. The suggested answers are marked in bold text. Individual groups may come up with different answers to the suggested discussion questions. Group leaders may benefit from having the questions with answers, while participants are encouraged to read only the questions and develop their own answers.

Introduction including the Biography of St. Thérèse and Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

List some of the details that make the lives of St. Therese different from Archbishop Sheen.

In spite of their many differences, list some things that St. Therese and Archbishop Sheen share in common.

In particular, how were St. Therese and Archbishop Sheen connected to the missions?

How were St. Therese and Archbishop Sheen both dedicated to prayer?

What differentiates the Chinese girl, mentioned in footnote A, who made 32 Holy Hours and Sheen who made over 20,000 Holy Hours in life (one daily for 60 years of priesthood).

Sheen was a man and a priest; Therese was a woman and a religious nun. Sheen lived a very public life, speaking and traveling; Therese lived a very hidden life in Carmel. Sheen lived a long life, 84 years; Therese lived a short life, 26 years. Sheen was extremely well educated; Therese had no formal advanced education.

Sheen was a third Order Carmelite, the same order as Therese. Both knew Scripture and had deep spiritual insights into Jesus and the Gospel. Both were intensely dedicated to prayer.

Therese prayed for missionaries and desired to be a missionary, though this was not possible as she was cloistered in Carmel. She was named the patroness of the missions. Sheen served the missions through the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and his travels. Sheen raised money for the missions and traveled to several missions.

Therese was dedicated to prayer in her contemplative life. She saw the immense value of prayer and the graces that could be obtained through prayer. Sheen was dedicated to a personal Eucharistic Holy Hour, having been inspired by the example of a Chinese girl who died because she prayed before the Blessed Sacrament.

From the the Chinese girl had to sneak in the middle of the night into a locked and guarded church under threat of death to pray; Sheen never had to risk life and limb to pray and could easily enter an open church to pray when it is convenient. I believe Sheen would say that the Chinese girl had more graces from her prayer than he had for this reason.

Chapter 1: St. Therese, the saint for troubled times

Sheen describes St. Therese's path to sainthood as simple, but not easy. What are the important characteristics that define St. Therese's path to holiness?

Why could another person, or St. Therese, be a thousand times closer to the Good Lord than Sheen?

What are two examples given to demonstrate St. Therese's life of loving sacrifice?

Sheen points to St. Therese and not himself, but what are some examples of sufferings in his own life that Sheen bore with love?

Deny yourself and do everything for love of God.

Sheen had deep insights, but others, including St. Therese may have followed this rule of life more carefully than Sheen.

St. Therese loved sacrificially in the way she treated the difficult Sister Peter in her convent, and in the way she offered up her sufferings and sicknesses.

Sheen suffered in silence when he encountered resistance from Cardinal Spellman in New York and in his service as Bishop of Rochester. As any public figure, Sheen had his share of critics.

Chapter 2: St. Therese and real saints (and how you can be one, too)

What characteristics of St. Therese (and Archbishop Sheen) make them relatable to the ordinary Catholic?

St. Therese wrote the story of her life under obedience. How is her humility evident in her biography of her life? Sheen wrote his autobiography at his own initiative, but did he also show signs of humility?

What were St. Therese's spiritual resources to protect her?

St. Therese taught spiritual childhood. How can an older person (like Sheen) practice the same virtue at an older age?

What examples of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Moses can give encouragement to the sinner?

When St. Therese was presented with a basket of dolls, she said, "I'll take everything." How did this incident become a model of spiritual perfection for St. Therese (and Sheen)?

Answers will vary. St. Therese dealt with ordinary challenges of life. Archbishop Sheen was an extraordinary man, though he made himself relatable and often spoke of the ordinary details of his life.

Answers will vary. St. Therese credits God for the graces that she received. If she told her life at her own initiative, she might be tempted to brag; but because she told her life at the command of another, she gave credit to God for her piety. Sheen's autobiography was not written out of obedience, but he did give constant credit to God's grace for his successes but pointed to his own shortcomings.

Scripture and the Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis. Both are recommended resources to anyone building their spiritual life.

Sheen made himself dependent on the Lord. Sheen didn't settle for mediocrity, but continued to strive for holiness and struggle for perfection throughout life. He sought union with Christ with greater love, greater intensity, and greater charity.

Noah became drunk; Abraham lied about Sarah; Jacob cheated Esau; Moses killed an Egyptian. Yet, each of these became a model of holiness in spite of a sin.

In the spiritual sense, St. Therese wanted every grace the Lord would give her, and she was ready to accept the call to extraordinary perfection. Her desire for everything became a desire to receive Our Lord's love totally and completely. Sheen wanted to belong totally to Jesus, accepting every cross the Lord asked him to carry in his life.

Chapter 3: St. Therese and the virtues of faith, hope, and perseverance

List all the people St. Therese had to ask for permission to enter Carmel at 15.

How did St. Therese react when she was delayed until she was 16? Did Sheen also experience rejection and misunderstanding?

Explain some of the examples from Scripture that Sheen gives of Love's delay.

Explain St. Therese's spiritual insight about being a toy ball before the child Jesus.

Why does Sheen say that it is not good if God answers all our prayers right away?

St. Therese had to win over in succession her father, her pastor, the mother superior of Carmel, the vicar general, the bishop, and Pope Leo XIII.

St. Therese was exasperated at the refusals, but she was also bold and headstrong in not giving up. Later, she saw this as an example of "love's delay" in Sheen's words, as the Lord asks her to be patient. Sheen himself also encountered misunderstandings within academia at Catholic University of America, jealousy for his success on radio and television, misunderstandings among the hierarchy in his missionary work and his visits to the Popes, and criticism from Cardinal Spellman.

Noah had to be patient in waiting for the flood; Abraham had to wait to have a child; Martha had to wait for Jesus to come to Lazarus; the Syrophenician woman didn't get her requested healing right away; the widow had to be persistent in the parable of the unjust judge.

St. Therese was content to give joy to the child Jesus who could do with the toy ball as he wished, even if he wanted to throw it away and ignore it.

If God says "yes" always, we may become proud or selfish. Rather, God may say "no" if we pray for something that may harm us. God may say "not yet" so we can grow in patience and our dependence on Him.

Chapter 4: St. Therese and the power of intercession

Why did St. Therese believe she would not go to purgatory?

How does Sheen describe purgatory as a state of being caught between two desires?

The souls in purgatory and the saints in Heaven can pray for us. How did St. Therese want to spend her time in Heaven?

What does Sheen mean when he says we have two intercessors: Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit?

At what age and on what day did Sheen want to die? Did he get his wish?

St. Therese burned herself out for Jesus during life, so there would be nothing to burn in purgatory.

Sheen says we pull away from God in shame because of the guilt of our sin that makes us unworthy, but we also are pulled toward God in a desire to be with Him. The tension

between these desires is purgatory. We feel this tension until we are purged of our unworthiness.

St. Therese said she would spend Heaven doing good on earth. We should pray for the souls of purgatory and ask them and the saints in Heaven to pray for us.

Sheen said that Jesus would stand in front of us and show his scars to the Father since he suffered for us. The Holy Spirit intercedes within us by teaching us how to pray. We should invoke Jesus as our mediator and the Holy Spirit to strengthen our prayer.

Sheen wanted to die when he was 80 years old on a Saturday or a feast of Our Lady. Sheen died at 84 on Sunday, December 9th, the day after the Immaculate Conception. We should entrust ourselves to Mary with equal devotion.

Chapter 5: St. Therese and the value of suffering

According to St. Therese, should we seek to be consoled or to console? What did Jesus thirst for? How does Sheen explain this contradiction: Jesus can no longer suffer in his body, but Jesus continues to suffer in his body?

What is the difference between making reparation to Jesus and offering Jesus consolation? Which did St. Therese prefer? Which did Sheen prefer?

What are examples of suffering that can save souls? What sufferings did Sheen endure?

Many look for consolation from Jesus, but St. Therese didn't want consolation, but rather to console Jesus. Jesus thirsts for our love, not our works.

Jesus can no longer suffer in his resurrected and glorified body which experiences no more pain, but he can suffer in his mystical body through the sufferings experienced by us who are members of his body. St. Therese wanted to offer up her sufferings to the Father in union with Jesus.

We make reparation for sin to God's Justice, but we offer consolation to Jesus in order to invoke his Mercy. St. Therese preferred to offer Jesus consolation. Sheen mentioned in his autobiography that he was not good at doing harsh mortifications, but he loved Our Lord intensely and wanted to offer him his love and consolation.

Sheen gives several examples (Christians persecuted by Saul, Paul VI, the woman in the iron lung, the poor in Calcutta, the prisoners in Auschwitz, prisoners under communism). Sheen suffered during heart surgery, but also from judgments by priests, bishops, and Cardinal Spellman.

Chapter 6: St. Therese and the sword

Why is life not about what we acquire but what we lose?

Though St. Therese appeared frail, what bold desires did she have in her soul?

What is the secret to missionary work and evangelization?

Why does Jesus bring not peace but the sword? Why was Carmel not meant to be a place of peace and tranquility for St. Therese?

Why is the world often tired and exhausted? Is this true today as in the time of St. Therese?

What do you believe kept Sheen's zeal strong?

As Jesus emptied himself, we are most like Christ when we give ourselves away and when we lose ourselves. The sword cuts away what is unnecessary.

St. Therese wanted to be a soldier like St. Joan of Arc and a missionary to bring the Gospel to distant lands.

Missionary work and evangelization require that we make Christ the center of our life. Everything else is secondary.

St. Therese brought the sword and fire into Carmel which is to be a place of genuine spiritual combat. In the quest for holiness, we need to be pierced by Christ and our vices cut away.

St. Therese learned that the convent should not be for her a passive place of mere peace and joy in the quiet service of the Lord. Love urged her to fight for perfection which called for violence against any selfishness.

The world is tired and exhausted when it has ceased to love. When we love Christ, we are ready to fight for him with zeal and we desire to be pierced for him. Answers will vary, but the world continues to struggle to love Christ, and still remains frustrated by exhaustion.

Answers will vary. Sheen's love of Our Lord, expressed in prayer, meant that he never gave up the desire to grow in perfection. Jesus' own passionate love sustained Sheen's energy and vitality.

Chapter 7: St. Therese, God, and our relationship with Him

What spiritual lesson is taught by the image of the pencil in the hand of the Lord?

Though St. Therese embraced the vow of chastity, how did she see herself as married?

What does Sheen say to those who say a person who chooses priesthood or Carmel is "wasting his/her life"?

How can it be that hoarding a thing is a negative, but wasting a thing is a positive? How did Sheen remain detached from worldly goods?

Sometimes people say they don't have time to pray because, "I have too much to do and I can't afford to waste the time." How would Sheen respond?

We are meant to be instruments in the hand of God. We do best when we surrender ourselves in total and complete obedience to God and act according to his will. Any self will thwart God's plan.

St. Therese described her spiritual marriage as a bride of Jesus Christ in which she gave herself to Jesus in a total act of love. Her spiritual betrothal was both a great act of love, and also an expression of her voluntarily acceptance of sufferings and the cross.

In God's wisdom, some things have to be wasted, like the ointment used to anoint him before his crucifixion. St. Therese was called to "waste" her short life from a worldly point of view, though her life was of great worth from God's point of view.

Hoarding gold makes one a miser. Hoarding knowledge makes one proud. Hoarding flesh turns to lust. Hoarding grain turns to rot, but feeds hunger if given away. Our gifts were meant to be used and spent so they may do good. we are given are meant to be spent. Our life is judged not on what we acquire but on how we spend ourselves. Sheen gave away all the money he received in his career for the sake of the missions.

The footnote at the end of the chapter emphasizes that prayer is never a waste. More good is done in the holy hour than in all the catechetical programs. Sheen lived this

commitment in his daily Eucharistic Holy Hour. Those who think prayer is a waste are thinking in human and not divine terms.

Chapter 8: St. Therese and fighting Satan

St. Therese loved Our Lord and turned her back on the devil. In this, she was not tempted by many of the sins that we may find commonplace today. However, how was St. Therese tempted (perhaps in a surprising way)? Why?

What does Sheen say theologians are not doing that poets and literary experts are doing?

From a psychological perspective, in what three ways does the devil try to tear us apart?

Although St. Peter recognized that Christ is the Son of God, why did Jesus call him Satan?

How does Sheen interpret the three temptations of Christ in the desert?

Describe how, during a temptation, Jesus appears to be an obstacle and the devil appears as our friend? After a sin, describe how Jesus becomes our friend and the devil becomes our accuser?

St. Therese was tempted to doubt the faith. St. Therese loved Our Lord and desired earnestly to look on his face. Our Lord may have permitted this temptation by hiding his face from her in order to help her grown in perseverance. The devil may have tested her faith since her holiness consisted in her great love of God, and the devil always wants to take us away from God and weaken us where we are most strong. The devil fears holiness.

Theologians are not writing about Satan. Poets and literary experts write about the spiritual conflict within the soul, so they are writing about Satan and his influence. Theologians need to catch up to the reality of this struggle.

The devil uses immorality to substitute lust and the erotic for real love. The devil uses violence to tear us apart from one another. The devil uses mental anguish, schizophrenia and the like, to lead us to war with ourselves.

St. Peter was willing to have a divine Christ, but not a suffering one. The devil always wants to bring us salvation without a cross. Jesus came to save us through the cross.

The temptations all seek to deny the cross. First, satisfy your instincts (hunger, sex, power) without the cross. Second, seek wonder and novelty, but not the cross. Third, theology is political, and salvation can be accomplished in the political order without a cross.

When we are tempted, Jesus is the one telling us not to satisfy our desires, while the devil makes excuses for us and entices us with all the benefits of choosing sin. After we sin, Jesus is our friend who offers hope for forgiveness, while the devil tries to drive us to despair by convincing us that we are lost.

Chapter 9: St. Therese and suffering for the sake of Love

Give some examples of what Sheen means by transference.

How did Jesus transfer 1) our physical sufferings, 2) our emotional sufferings, and 3) our guilt and spiritual sufferings?

How did St. Therese take on the 1) physical, 2) mental, and 3) moral ills of the world?

How did her experience with the criminal Pranzini convince her of the power of prayer? Did Sheen have similar experiences?

How does Sheen identify himself as a priest-victim, as St. Therese identifies herself as a victim soul?

Sheen gives examples of a parson who pays the debt of another, or a man who carries his crippled brother. Other examples are possible.

Jesus' transference. 1) Jesus suffered with the sick and felt their illness. 2) He bore the sorrows of the people, being moved with emotion and weeping for them. 3) He assumed the guilt of our sin by taking on our punishment and cancelling it in the resurrection. Jesus did more than absorb our guilt; he destroyed it.

St. Therese's transference. 1) St. Therese offered herself as a victim, embracing a life of penance, surrendering herself to sacrifice. She did not choose for herself very arduous penances, but accepted those that the Lord chose for her. 2) St. Therese suffered mental darkness, suffering for those who have no faith or who lost their faith. 3) St. Therese prayed for the conversion of the morally guilty, especially praying for the criminal Pranzini. Her prayers were answered when he showed final repentance by kissing the crucifix.

St. Therese experienced a tangible sign of the power of her prayer in the sign of repentance of Pranzini who kissed the crucifix before he was executed. After this, she would need no further external reinforcement. She accepted and believed in the power of prayer without any further sign, trusting that her sacrifices, offered to Our Lord, won souls for Christ. Sheen won many converts, talking with them, but also praying for them, so he also recognized the power of prayer to convert souls.

Sheen recognized that a priest is an alter Christus, "another Christ," and must necessarily offer himself as a priest-victim with Our Lord. St. Therese offered herself as a victim soul to Our Lord as the bride of Christ. Sheen said that we need religious to transfer to themselves the penances that others ought to do to save souls.

Chapter 10: St. Therese and humility, the way of the child

How does Sheen describe true humility?

Sheen uses the Philippians canticle (Phil 2:6-11) to indicate that Jesus Christ did not grasp at equality with God, but emptied himself. How is this different from Adam?

How does Sheen describe Jesus emptying himself?

What is the difference between sterile emptiness and St. Therese's emptiness that is fruitful?

How did God preserve humility in King David and in others like Sheen?

What signs of humility do you see in Sheen?

Sheen says humility is not found in falsehood, in claiming not to have talent. Rather humility is found in remaining little, in recognizing our nothingness before God.

In the garden of Eden, Adam grasped at the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in order to make himself like God. In Adam, man tried to make himself God. In Christ, God empties himself to become man.

Sheen compared God becoming man to the analogy of a man becoming a dog. Jesus is the inexpressible Word who bound himself by using limited human language to teach men who were very stupid.

St. Therese had the fruitful emptiness of a flute that could be filled by God so he can work in us. Humility is recognizing our dependence on God so he can fill us.

God allowed David to be humiliated by Shimei. God allowed Sheen to suffer opposition and humiliation in his ministry to keep him humble. Only the humble soul has room for God and the oil of his grace. The selfish soul has no room for God.

Because of Sheen's successes, many may have thought him to be a proud and vain man. However, he trusted Our Lady and had a deep appreciation for the graces that were given to him by Our Lord. Rather than taking credit for his successes, he gives credit to God and boasts of his shortcomings. His humor was often self-deprecating.

Chapter 11: St. Therese, sin, and mercy

How does the world deny guilt and sin? How true are these observations in our culture today?

What examples does Sheen give from the Old Testament of redemption from sin after the shedding of blood?

Sheen points to three essential elements (God's action, the use of a substitute, and the shedding of blood). How are these elements present when John the Baptist points to Christ? How are these elements present in the crucifixion?

Explain the relationship between the blood of the animal sprinkled on the Day of Atonement on the veil in the temple with the veil in the temple on Good Friday.

How did St. Therese incorporate this spiritual insight in her life? How did Sheen?

The world says, "I am not guilty, not responsible for sin," and we fall into psychosis by losing touch with reality or neurosis by becoming anxious because of repressed guilt. Alternatively, the world tries to rationalize our sins and talk them to death, talking us out of our guilt. Answers will vary, but our modern culture also denies or tries to rationalize sin.

Examples include: God clothes the nakedness of Adam and Eve with skins of sacrificed animals. Cain is marked with the blood of Abel to protect him. A ram is offered in place of the blood of Isaac who was spared. A lamb is offered in place of the blood of the first born sacrificed in Egypt. The scapegoat was killed and his blood sprinkled on the goat over whom the sins of Israel were confessed. The brass serpent does not represent the shedding of blood, but the brass serpent does have the appearance of a poisonous animal, but without any poison. Similarly, Jesus on the Cross has the appearance of being guilty of sin, but without the poison of sin. The Cross offers redemption.

As the Passover lambs are being sacrificed in their blood, John the Baptist points to Jesus, who will be the substitute, calling him the lamb of God. On the Cross, God acts by substituting Christ to pay the penalty for our sins by the shedding of his blood.

When the priest sprinkled the blood of the animal on the veil in the temple on the Day of Atonement, the priest could enter the Holy of Holies. On Good Friday, Jesus' blood opened the veil entirely, allowing us to enter into Heaven. The veil ripped from the top down, signifying a divine action, not a human action.

St. Therese had a great devotion to the Eucharist, including the Precious Blood, and to the Holy Face of Jesus bruised for our offenses. She adored the Lord who took on our sin. Sheen recognized the importance of a sacrifice to take on the guilt of sin and identified with Jesus Christ the priest-victim, recognizing that priests are called to share in a personal way in the self-offering of Jesus.