CHAPTER – 7

PRACTICE OF VIRTUES

A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person to give the best of one. The virtues which are acquired by education, by deliberate acts and perseverance are purified and elevated by divine grace.¹ The virtues contribute to Christian perfection and holiness. St. Teresa emphasises the practice of three virtues, namely humility, detachment and charity for a beginner. “It is essential that we understand how important they are in helping us preserve our inward and outward peace. One of these is love for each other, the second is detachment from all created things and the third, true humility which is the most important of these and embracing all the rest.”²

1. Humility

St. Teresa of Avila says: “Humility is the principal virtue that people who pray must practise.”³ Humility is considered as the knowledge of the truth about oneself as one stands in the sight of God who sees through and through, and fidelity to act according to that knowledge.⁴ St Teresa of Avila gives great importance for self knowledge for entering into interior mansions. She insists that one has to continue to cultivate it even if one reaches the heavens. “It is absurd to think that we can enter heaven without first entering our own souls, without getting to know ourselves, and reflecting upon the wretchedness of our own nature and what we owe to God and continually imploring His mercy.”⁵ A true sign of having the virtue of humility is that even if God never grants any favours, He will give the soul peace and resignation to His will with which the soul will be more contend than others with favours. She considered humility as the ointment for the soul’s wounds. Lack of humility prevents the progress in the spiritual journey.⁶

¹ CCC, 341, 342.
³ St. Teresa of Avila, The Way of Perfection, 64.
⁴ Alban Goodier, An Introduction to the Study of Ascetical and Mystical Theology, Milwaukee: (The Bruce Publishing Com.), 184.
⁵ St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, 53.
⁶ St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, 62, 65, 66.
1.1 Mariam Thresia – The Humble Servant

Thresia practised the virtue of humility in a supreme manner. She followed the footsteps of her beloved Master, Jesus, who took the form of a servant, humbled himself, and became obedient unto death (Phil, 2:8). St. Teresa of Avila opines: “God is the sovereign truth and to be humble is to walk in truth.”\textsuperscript{7} The more one approaches God, the more one sees one’s own littleness and limitations with reference to the infinite perfection of God. Thresia regarded herself as a ‘sinner’ even though she was receiving the special graces. Child Thresia had an extraordinary awareness about sinfulness. At the age of six Thresia knew what sin was and started making confession once a month.\textsuperscript{8} She hated sin and even what was considered as venial sins, she wanted to confess as early as possible.\textsuperscript{9} Apart from sacramental confession, she was humble enough to share openly her imperfections and faults with others. In a letter to her spiritual father she wrote: “I find it very hard to move about since the evil in me grows stronger. Hence at least now please have mercy on me and point out the faults in me and make me practise necessary penance.”\textsuperscript{10} In letter 51 she wrote: “What shall be done? I have gone wrong, gone wrong! Please forgive me, forgive me! Please pray to God that at least in future I may be able to lead a virtuous life keeping myself away from all such shortcomings.”\textsuperscript{11} In letter 24 she expresses her unworthiness even to pray. “I have the fear to ask with my tongue and pray with my mind because of my unworthiness.”\textsuperscript{12} In letter 3, she is expressing urgency to meet spiritual father because of an unwelcome thought toward a person.\textsuperscript{13} Self-disclosure is an act of great humility.\textsuperscript{14}

Thresia’s close union with God made her perceive the infinite abyss between God, the creator and her, the creature. Out of the 55 letters in more than 25 she has addressed herself as a ‘sinner’, ‘unworthy sinner’, ‘miserable sinner’ or ‘wretched sinner’. In each of the letters 13, 11, 18, and 39, she has repeated it more than once. To consider oneself in all sincerity as the lowest of men is a degree of humility rarely

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{7}{St. Teresa of Avila, \textit{Interior Castle}, 196.}
\footnote{8}{M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 29, 30,}
\footnote{9}{Vithayathil, \textit{Diary}, 126.}
\footnote{10}{M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 65.}
\footnote{11}{M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 93.}
\footnote{12}{M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 68.}
\footnote{13}{M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 49.}
\footnote{14}{Tanquerey, \textit{The Spiritual Life}, 533.}
\end{footnotes}
found. Thresia considered herself as the lowest of all people. In one of her letters she confessed: “I do not find anything to be proud of in this world. For me, as a miserable sinner, there is nobody like me among the children of God; of poverty it is very severe; as a poor person, I am the worst; as an ill person, my ailments are manifold. Can such people feel proud? God has given me all these because of the evil in me. I have no complaints whatsoever. Praise be to God.”

1.2 Mariam Thresia – Higher Degree of Humility

The three degrees of humility proposed by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his spiritual exercises will explain better Thresia’s humility.

1.2.1 The First Degree of Humility

It consists in the perfect submission to the law of God. This degree is essential for every Christian who wants to remain in the state of grace. Thresia was fervent in living every minute detail of the laws. In fact she was over enthusiastic in obeying the laws and instructing others to do the same. Mr. Mathai Valiaveetil, who helped Thresia in many ways, testifies: “She was extremely zealous and fervent in her observance of her religious duties. She was constant in them and never took exemptions. For example, during the flood time on a Sunday all the other people found it necessary to harvest the crops since the water was threatening them, the Servant of God did not permit her workers to work on Sunday saying that the sacredness of the day had to be kept up in spite of the possibility of even losing the crop. She took extreme care not to make journeys on Sundays.”

Thresia wrote in the autobiography how she abided by the laws while she was at home. Her parents were happy about the household work she did, the interest she took in praying and in teaching children. She did everything according to the personal guidance of her spiritual father. She used to go to church everyday and make confession and receive Holy Communion regularly.

15 Tanquerey, The Spiritual Life, 533.
18 Positio, ‘Summarium’, 68.
1.2.2 The Second Degree of Humility

It is more perfect. It consists in the indifference of the soul towards riches or poverty, honour or shame, health or sickness provided the glory of God and the salvation of souls are equally ensured. This is a disposition already implying great perfection, and only a few souls attain it.

Thresia in her writings many times has expressed that she desires only the glory of God. She never wished for the esteem of the world. A few examples: in the catechism class the priest asked young Thresia to teach prayers to other children who were not able to study well. When her family members and many others ridiculed her for this, Thresia’s response was “I would offer all these for the glory of God.”

She never complained about physical illness. In one letter she praises God for her illness. “Last night my ailments became worse than usual. Praise be to God for that.” On another occasion, as her illness was getting worse she was at the point of complaining. So she asked the spiritual father permission to do more penance, to use pillow stuffed with gravel and to use coarse jacket to overcome the temptation.

In letter 38, Thresia praises God for the miseries of sin, poverty and illness. She feels that no one in this world suffers like her on grounds of sinfulness. In the same letter about the worldly fame she wrote: “I don’t care for worldly fame. I desire so much to enjoy the glory of heaven. I do pray very earnestly that all of God’s creatures must hate me and forsake me.” In letter 48 she wrote: “My nature is to be indifferent to pain … I want only the strength to suffer. I never had an illness like this. Please pray for me.”

Thresia was indifferent to positions and honours. Very often she used to plead with her spiritual father for removing her from the position of the superior of the community. Whatever the reason, when there arise in the community some problem of dislike or misunderstanding or murmurs; Mother Mariam Thresia, the superior, with deep humility would ask the Sisters for a pardon.

25 Vithayathil, Diary, 187.
26 Vithayathil, Diary, 187.
Thresia enjoyed doing humble services to her subordinates and the downtrodden. Mr. M.J. Varkey testifies: “She was always willing to render the most humble services not only to her equals but also to the subordinates and the downtrodden. She used to go to nurse the sick and the poor in their huts. She had real pleasure in rendering humble services to them.”

Another witness, Mr. George Ambooken also noted: “I have seen her doing menial work, such as cleaning the floor. She took delight in moving with the low caste people, the poor and the miserable.”

1.2.3 The Third Degree of Humility

It is the most perfect one. This is the degree of the perfect souls. Because of exclusive love for Jesus and the desire to share His cross and get united to Him, the soul prefers to enjoy poverty to riches, shame to honour, and humiliations to the glory of God and salvation of souls. When a soul has reached that far, it is already on the high road to sanctity.

There are many instances in Thresia’s life were she expresses her desire to be humiliated, and her great joy when publicly humiliated and dishonoured. The following account by her spiritual father helps to substantiate her response to humiliations:

Bishop John Menachery, suspected the extraordinary experiences of Thresia as tricks played by the devils. He wrote an order of exorcism and directed that it be posted in her bedroom and forbade her to receive Holy Communion everyday only once a week. As Thresia heard her spiritual father read it out, she took that order and kissed it very gladly, saying: “This is my fortunate reward”. Then it was pasted on the wall near to her bed. Those who read it heaped ridicule on her. Hearing these criticisms she was overjoyed with inner happiness. She even requested her spiritual father to let the order be read publicly and to paste a copy on the church door. But he did not heed to it. After one year, the order pasted on the wall was damaged by cockroaches. Then Thresia begged the Bishop to give another one to which he disagreed.

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27 Positio, ‘Summarium’, 43.
28 Positio, ‘Summarium’, 84.
29 Tanqueray, The Spiritual Life, 534, 535.
30 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 87.
Fr. Vithayathil acknowledges how Thresia sought to run away from public attention and praises “When people praise her she feels greatly grieved and distressed. She used to speak about this with great anguish. She kept telling her spiritual father that she wanted to get away from her house to a place of solitude.” While helping the sinners to turn away from their sins, they used to scorn, laugh at and shower abuses on Thresia. For the love of the Lord and for the salvation of the souls and with great humility and patience she continued to counsel them and pray for them until they turned to the right path. In the ministry of visiting the families, Thresia risked her reputation. Chevalier K.C. Chacko has recorded:

> The scandals and scathing criticisms that could be and actually were hurled at a youthful girl of marriageable age, going about the neighbouring areas to help the sick and the destitute, would have been exceedingly vituperative. The finer sentiments of reserve or modesty and not necessarily pride, would have deterred many a girl from such ventures. For a young girl to expose herself to such damaging, vituperative criticism is perhaps the most heroic expression of humility one could imagine.

Thresia’s desire for public humiliation is revealed from the exhortation given to the Sisters:

> “Humility does not consist in the cleaning the latrines. There is no benefit in simply reciting the rosaries and prayers. What a great blessing and treasure to get a correction publicly in the community. Through whom do we get such a great treasure? May God give me such treasures. You must desire and pray to God that you be given occasions for humiliations. Didn’t our Lord get all these? When we get such occasions rejoice for having a share in the suffering of our God.”

Thresia taught nothing that she did not practise. She considered public humiliation a treasure in as much as through them one can have a share in the humiliations of Christ. She prayed earnestly for them and even desired that ‘all God’s creatures must hate me and forsake me’. And when she got them she rejoiced for the love for ‘my Lord’ and for the salvation of the souls.

31 Vithayathil, *Diary*, 76.
32 Vithayathil, *Diary*, 124, 125.
33 Chacko, *Mother Mariam Thresia*, 185.
2. Detachment

St. Teresa of Avila says: “We must practise detachment, for if we perform it perfectly it includes everything else. If we do not concern ourselves with created things, but embrace the Creator alone, God will infuse the virtues into us in such a way that we do not have to wage war much longer. The Lord will defend us from the devils and the whole world.”\(^{35}\) Detachment thus becomes an expression of mystical experience. A soul desiring for mystical union can never find satisfaction in the created things. It strives to transcend them and go beyond. The detachment of the soul must include mainly three things, first, from the external matters like riches, comforts, sensual gratifications etc., secondly, from inordinate affection to relatives and friends, and thirdly, from the self. Detachment from the self is more difficult than the other two. To be detached from the self includes detachment from self-will, good name and reputation, self indulgence and self love, joys and consolations from spiritual endeavours, wickedness and evil ways of living etc. If the soul does not renounce its love for the self, it cannot enjoy the freedom of the spirit which allows it to soar high to its Maker. Total detachment leads one to true freedom and gives true security in the spiritual progress.\(^{36}\)

2.1 Detachment in Mariam Thresia

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field ... a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Mt.13:44-46). When Mariam Thresia found the valuable pearl in the love of God, she could detach herself from every other joys of this world and consider it as refuse (Phil, 3:8). Thresia’s detachment in the various areas of life is discussed below:

2.1.1 Detachment from Material and Temporal Things.

From childhood Thresia had unusual awareness of the vanity of temporal or worldly enjoyments. Fr. Vithayathil says:


She disliked special clothes, ornaments and other embellishments. Her beauty and splendour was in the modesty of her dress and demeanour. She would run away from bad companions and feel sad on seeing them do anything wrong. She gave up games and enjoyments in order to maintain the memory of the presence of God. When her mother compelled her to take part in marriage celebrations, she would make excuses not to go. This child, who had dedicated herself to God even when she was three years and a half old, sacrificed her sleep and prayed for long at night.37

There is an amazing incident recorded by her spiritual father to verify her detachment from temporal things. Thanda, Thresia’s mother wanted her to wear gold ornaments according to the custom of the Thomas Christians. So she had Thresia’s earlobes pierced to make her wear earrings made of gold. Thresia had made up her mind to dedicate herself to God and live as a virgin. Hence she tore off her ear lobes twice so as to fail her mother’s repeated efforts to make her wear earrings.38 Thresia’s attitude of detachment from money and worldly affairs is very vividly articulated in her letter 16.

I too believe that the life in this world is just a sojourn. If so, isn’t not madness to worry much about worldly affairs? Even if we hoard much money at the end we will have to renounce everything and go. If our heart is like a mirror nobody can take it away from us. We will shine like a lamp in the presence of God at the end. Is there any other great treasure like this? 39

2.1.2 Detachment from Sense Satisfaction

When her mother gave her better quality food, she would accept it readily but would give it to someone else with no one noticing it.40 Love and concern for others was her overriding drive. From the age of five she used to abstain from meat and eat curries adding bitter stuff to it.41 She remained detached from the care and comforts of

37 Vithayathil, Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia, 16.
38 Vithayathil, Diary, 3.
the body. She objected to treatments for improving health; instead, she kept her trust in God. She was aware of the benefits when body got weakened. She wrote: “Whenever I got sick, I used to keep quiet about it and would keep on helping my mother in every possible way.” Thresia exhorted Sisters: “Don’t give much importance to your body! It will some day be decomposed. It is to be controlled as much as possible, and the soul is to be nourished. Try to enrich it.”

2.1.3 Detachment from Creatures.

Thresia loved everyone but she loved them in God. In one of her letters she has confessed that she has nobody to share her difficulties with except her spiritual father: “I should come to you Father, for getting peace of mind. There is no other way out… God will reward you for all the troubles.” Though she had only the spiritual father who could understand her fully and support her, she had a detached relationship with him. She acknowledges: “I love the Father only on account of God.” In her trials and difficulties she never desired for sympathy from others. In fact she wanted them to hate her. She wrote: “I do pray very earnestly that all of God’s creatures must hate me and forsake me.” When people spoke ill of her she said: “May be it is God’s will … I do resign myself to it totally.”

2.1.4 Detachment from Self

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk.8: 34, 35). The demand of Jesus to follow Him or to get united to His love is the detachment from one’s own self. In St. John’s terms, by hating one’s own self one will keep it for eternal life (Jn. 12:25). Thresia not only detached herself from external things and creatures, but denying her will from all that are related to her self, she practised the virtue of detachment in its perfection. In the midst of great suffering she said “If this be God’s will, I accept it joyfully and with great satisfaction. I do strongly believe that God will not ask us to suffer anything beyond our capacity.” Thresia’s detachment from self is clearly proved in her conformity to the will of God.

In her exhortations she asked the Sisters to practise detachment. “What is most needed for Sisters is mortification of self-will. I do specially remind that you should practise self denial in everything.” 50 “All honours and high positions are transitory. Don’t wish for worldly honours.” 51 “Sometimes Superiors will find fault with you for the mistakes that you have not made. Then you must keep silence without bringing in any excuses.” 52

To attain spiritual perfection she taught them: “I have no permission even to possess a piece of paper lying down on the floor which I like to have, my hands are tied up. I have no eyes to see it, no hands to take it, no ears to hear about the worldly things, no legs to walk with, no capacity to eat or drink and to talk, and no intelligence to reason out. Do you ever say ‘Let my body suffer, let my body die to this world, let my soul ever live’. Work always for the greater glory of God.” 53

The benefits derived from the practice of the virtue of detachment as enumerated by St. John of the Cross are as follows: the soul acquires liberty of the spirit, tranquillity, humility, recollection of the senses, angelic likeness to God; body becomes the worthy temple of the spirit, easily conquers the temptations and grow in virtues. 54 Thresia had practised the virtue of detachment in a heroic way. Hence she could enjoy the above mentioned benefits which helped her soar high to attain union with God.

3. Charity

Mutual love or charity is a “theological virtue infused by God into the will, by which we love God for Himself above all things, and ourselves and neighbour for God.” 55 St. Teresa of Avila says “True perfection consists in the love of God and love of neighbour, and the more nearly perfect is our observance of these two commandments, the nearer to perfection we shall be.” 56 In another place in the same book she makes it very clear that perfection consists not in consolations but in the

56 St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, 42.
practice of charity.\textsuperscript{57} Though charity is the core of Christian living, the soul in this stage may not be perfect in charity. Its love is governed by reason. Controlled by mortifications and penances, and performing acts of charity, the soul in this stage acquires prudence and discretion and an order in life.\textsuperscript{58} As the soul progresses in this virtue, the following effects are visible: great detachment from the created things, total submission to God’s will, spirit of sacrifice, readiness to accept trials and sufferings for the love of Jesus crucified, great zeal for the service of others, interior peace and spiritual joy of living in God’s grace.\textsuperscript{59}

Mariam Thresia practised the virtue of charity in the most heroic way. Her charity can be viewed in two dimensions, love of God and love of neighbour.

### 3.1 Love of God

Thresia loved God for Himself above all things. The opening words of her autobiography reveal the intensity of love she had for God as a child. In the original manuscript of the book, the expression is, Thresia experienced a deep agony in her soul from her childhood thanks to her intense desire to love God. The translation of her mystical expression \textit{ente atmavu klesiccirinnu} (had deep agony in her soul) is missing in the \textit{Writings} published. Actually the whole of her life she was exerting her maximum to quench the extreme thirst she felt in her soul to love her Beloved in the most passionate way.

At the age of three or four she offered herself to the Lord.\textsuperscript{60} From that tender age she exhibited great enthusiasm to study religious matters and yearning for meditating on the passion of the Lord.\textsuperscript{61} It was that intense love which impelled her to bypass sleep and pray in the nights, practise severe penance, detach herself from worldly enjoyments, forgo tasty food, take risks to receive the sacraments, neglect her companion’s ridicules against her religious fervour.\textsuperscript{62} She based her whole life on total trust and self - abandonment to the holy will of God and found the essence of her life in a pure intense love of God. At the age of nine she committed totally to God

\textsuperscript{57} St. Teresa of Avila, \textit{Interior Castle}, 67.  
\textsuperscript{58} St. Teresa of Avila, \textit{Interior Castle}, 12.  
\textsuperscript{59} Aumann, \textit{Spiritual Theology}, 270.  
\textsuperscript{60} Vithayathil, \textit{Diary}, 2  
\textsuperscript{61} Vithayathil, \textit{Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia}, 15.  
taking the vow of perpetual virginity, and chose Jesus as her bridegroom.\textsuperscript{63} It was her deep love to be alone with Him that gave her idea of sneaking away to the wooded hills, or join a convent or work there as a maid. As she was always vigilant to fulfil His holy will, she could very easily say ‘yes’ to His plan of her staying at home.\textsuperscript{64}

Thresia’s love of God is her ardent love for the crucified Jesus. The picture of a God dying on the cross in atonement of the sins of the world was deeply imprinted on her imagination.\textsuperscript{65} Fr. Anselm testifies her love of God:

She was especially struck by the love of God shown to mankind through His sufferings. This helped her to grow in the passion of our Lord ... this devotion to the passion of our Lord grew with her age until her death. This in fact gave her the courage to endure everything patiently and to take up sufferings generously for the love of God.\textsuperscript{66}

Thresia’s heart ached when she saw others offend her Beloved. Thresia with deep humility but with great boldness asked her spiritual father to give an exhortation before he would begin the Holy Mass, to people that they should not sadden the Sacred Heart of Jesus.\textsuperscript{67} Thresia insisted on her followers offering their heart to God: “My children, in order to become good, first offer your heart to the Lord. Then pray hard that God may give you His heart. See! I have given my Lord my whole heart. I don’t need anything in the world but the Lord.”\textsuperscript{68} That intense love for God haunted her like a hunting dog all through her life.

3.2 Love for Neighbour

“This is the commandment that He has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother” (1Jn. 4:21). St. Teresa of Avila says that the true perfection consists in love of God and love of neighbour.\textsuperscript{69} The powerful love that Thresia experienced for God impelled her to go out of herself to the suffering humanity. From the younger days Thresia’s love and concern for others was very

\textsuperscript{63} Vithayathil, \textit{Biography of Rev. Mother Mariam Thresia}, 16.
\textsuperscript{64} M. Thresia, ‘Autobiography’, 31, 32.
\textsuperscript{65} Chacko, \textit{Mother Mariam Thresia}, 45.
\textsuperscript{66} Positio, ‘Summarium’, 210.
\textsuperscript{67} M. Thresia, ‘Letters’, 60.
\textsuperscript{68} M. Thresia, ‘Exhortations’, 135.
\textsuperscript{69} St. Teresa of Avila, \textit{Interior Castle}, 42.
visible in her sharing of food with the poor children. As she grew up, the words of Jesus “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40) echoed in her. With fire in the heart and wings on the legs, Thresia rushed to serve Jesus in the suffering neighbours, the socially downcast, the depressed, dying patients and sinners. In the letters to the spiritual father she has expressed her great hope about the reward to those who help the destitute and convert the sinners to the right path. In pursuit of winning souls for Christ Thresia took up great challenges. She could envisage a new mission, ‘family apostolate’, of which the Church could think only after Vatican II. Almost a century ago Thresia had the foresight to see the dire need of family apostolate in the society.

Mr. Joseph Vithayathil, a witness to her charitable deeds appreciates her selfless love for the neighbour:

A burning love of neighbour is manifested in the eagerness shown by her in rendering service to the poor, sick and sinners. Social inhibitions of the time did not prevent her from going to the homes of the poor, sick and dying, particularly among the low caste people, giving succour, relief and instruction. In fact, her special mission in life was to bear witness to Christ by these acts of charity. This poor illiterate woman went about doing good to others as our Lord did during His life on earth.

Fr. Anselm emphasizes that Thresia did the challenging mission in the face of strong criticism. Thresia’s self sacrificing charity took several forms. It was the divine love that impelled her for the service of humanity. A detailed study on her contribution to the society is done in the third part of this thesis.

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71 Positio, ‘Summarium’, 528.