

# A Doctor for the Third Millennium

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*Letter from  
the O.Carm and O.C.D. Superiors  
on the occasion of the Doctorate of Saint Therese of Lisieux*

## **A Doctor for the Third Millennium**

Dear brothers and sisters in Carmel:

1. Little over a year ago we wrote to you to reflect upon the message of our sister Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, on the occasion of the Centenary of her death. We had no idea then that we would be writing another circular letter about her so soon. This time it is to consider the meaning and significance of the title Doctor of the Church which, as Pope John Paul II announced recently in Paris at the International Gathering of Youth, he will officially bestow on her in Rome, on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1997, International Mission Sunday.

2. On the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> August, at the closure in Paris of the International Gathering of Youth, the Pope described the character and doctrine of our sister, and the motives for declaring her a Doctor, after a "careful study" and many petitions received from the Universal Church. He called Therese of Lisieux a young Carmelite who was filled with the love of God, who offered herself completely to this love, and who knew how to practice love of neighbor in the ordinary things of daily life. She imitated Jesus as she sat at the table of sinners, his brothers and sisters, so that they would be purified by love, since her ardent desire was to see everyone enlightened by faith. She discovered, the Pope continued, that her vocation was to be love in the heart of the Church, and walked the "little way" of children who take refuge in God with bold confidence. The core of her message is her child-like attitude, which can be proposed to all the faithful. "Her teachings, a veritable science of love", are the radiant expression of her knowledge

of the mystery of Christ, and her personal experience of grace. She will continue to assist the people of today and the future to understand better the gifts of God and to spread the Good News of infinite love.

3. The Pope called her: "a Carmelite and an apostle, a teacher of spiritual wisdom for numerous consecrated and lay persons, patroness of the missions". He mentioned that she "occupies a place of primary importance in the Church, and that her doctrine merits to find a place among the most effective." He concluded by stating that he wished to announce the Doctorate of Therese of Lisieux during the gathering of the youth since she, a young saint, so close to our times, has a message particularly suitable for them. In the school of the Gospel she leads the way towards Christian maturity for young people, "calling them to unlimited generosity and inviting them in the heart of the Church to be apostles and ardent witnesses of Christ's love". He prayed, along with the young people, to Therese of Lisieux that she may lead the people of this age along the way of Truth and Life. He ended his discourse with these words: "with Therese of the Child Jesus, let us turn to the Virgin Mary, whom she honored and prayed to with child-like confidence during her life".

## **I. A Long Road Towards the Doctorate**

### **First steps**

4. Already from the time of her canonization, there was no lack of bishops, preachers, theologians, and faithful from different countries who sought to have our sister Therese of Lisieux declared a doctor of the Church. This flow of petitions in favor of the doctorate became official in 1932 on the occasion of the inauguration of the crypt of the Basilica at Lisieux, which was accompanied by a Congress at which five cardinals, fifty bishops and a great number of faithful participated. On 30<sup>th</sup> June, Fr. Gustave Desbuquois, S.J., with clear and precise theological argument, spoke of Therese of Lisieux as Doctor of the Church. Surprisingly, his proposal had the support of many of the participants, bishops and theologians. This positive reaction to the suggestion of Fr Desbuquois spread universally. Mons. Clouthier, bishop of Trois Rivières (Canada), wrote to all the bishops of the world in order to prepare a petition to the Holy See. By 1933 he had already received 342 positive replies from bishops who supported the proposal to have Therese of Lisieux declared a Doctor of the Church.

### **The obstacle of being a woman**

5. The petition of Fr. Desbuquois was presented to Pope Pius XI, along with a letter of Mother Agnes of Jesus, sister of Therese, and Prioress of the Lisieux Carmel. She informed the Pope about the great success of the Teresian Congress. On 31<sup>st</sup> August 1932, Card. Pacelli, Secretary of State, replied to Mother Agnes' letter on behalf of the Pope. He was very pleased about the positive results of the Congress, but added that it would be better not to speak of Therese's doctorate yet, even though "*her doctrine never ceased to be for him a sure light for souls searching to know the spirit of the Gospel*".

However the time was not yet ripe for a woman to be declared a Doctor of the Church. In fact, Pope Pius XI had already replied negatively to the Carmelites' petition to have Saint Teresa of Jesus, "Mother of spiritual people" declared Doctor. The petition was turned down because she was a woman. "Obstat sexus" ("her sex is an obstacle"), the Pope replied, adding that he would leave the decision to his successor. After the Vatican's negative response, and by its order, the gathering of signatures in favor of Therese of Lisieux's Doctorate was interrupted.

### **Circumstances change**

6. Teresa of Jesus and Catherine of Siena's declaration as Doctors of the Church in 1970, eliminated completely any obstacle to name a woman Doctor. As a result, the proposal for the Doctorate of Therese of Lisieux was taken up again.

In 1973, the centenary of her birth, Mgr. Garrone stated the question anew: "*Could Saint Therese of Lisieux become some day a Doctor of the Church?* I respond affirmatively, without hesitation, encouraged by what has happened to the great Saint Teresa and Saint Catherine of Siena". On subsequent occasions the Carmelites proposed the possibility of the Doctorate. In 1981, Card. Roger Etchegaray, following up a petition from the Teresian Carmel, and after consulting the Permanent Council of the French Episcopate, sent an official letter to Pope John Paul II asking

him to declare Therese of Lisieux Doctor of the Church. On different occasions the Discalced Postulator General and the Bishop of Lisieux, Mgr. Pierre Pican, wrote official letters to this effect. The General Chapters of the Teresian Carmel in 1991 and the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance in 1995 also sent petitions. In addition, more than 30 Episcopal Conferences and thousands of Christians, priests, religious and lay people of 107 countries pronounced themselves in favor of the Doctorate.

## **Examination and Approval of the *Positio***

7. In the first months of this year 1997, the Teresian Carmel was asked to prepare the "*Positio*", i.e., the presentation of proof required by the Church to demonstrate a person's suitability to be declared Doctor of the Church. Because the time allowed was limited, collaboration was necessary. At the beginning of May, a 965 page volume was printed. It was divided into four parts and thirteen chapters which presented the facts of Therese's life, her doctrine and the prominence, influence and present day impact of her message. It contains a brief history of the Causes for beatification and canonization (ch. 1), and the process of the Doctorate (ch. 2), followed by a small but compact biography of Therese of Lisieux (ch. 3), an analysis of her personality (ch. 4), a chronology (ch. 5), and a presentation of her writings (ch. 6). From the doctrinal point of view, it offers a general view of Therese's doctrine (ch. 7), a synthesis of her theology (ch. 8), and a study of the sources of her teachings (ch. 9). The impact of Therese of Lisieux is examined from three different perspectives: the acceptance and presentation of her doctrine by the Magisterium of the Church (ch. 10), its spread and influence (ch. 11), and finally the importance of her doctrine for the Church and world of today (ch. 12). The final chapter of the *Positio* highlights the "eminence" of the doctrine of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face (ch. 13). It concludes with the transcripts of the Letters proposing the Doctorate from Episcopal Conferences and ecclesiastical and lay personages. A selected bibliography (130 pages) is also included, as well as the opinions of the five theologians chosen by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the two by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. There is also an Iconographic Appendix which shows Therese as Teacher and Doctor.

After studying the *Positio*, the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith and for the Causes of Saints, along with the Consistory of Cardinals, gave their approval that our sister could be declared Doctor of the Church. Pope John Paul II, as we said, agreed to the proposal, announcing it to the Universal Church at the end of the International Gathering of Youth in Paris.

## **II. Therese of Lisieux, Doctor for the Third Millennium**

8. To speak of the third millennium is to speak, in the first place, of time and the action of God. He manifests himself and works within human events. Teresa of Jesus told us that "it is always a suitable time for God to grant great favors" (F 4,5). Two thousand years of Christian history are about to conclude. In celebrating this historical event "it is certainly not a matter of indulging in a new millenarianism, as occurred in some quarters at the end of the first millennium; rather, it is aimed at an increased sensitivity to all that the Spirit is saying to the Church and to the Churches (cf. Rev 2:7 ff.), as well as to individuals through charisms meant to serve the whole community.... Despite appearances, humanity continues to await the revelation of the children of God, and lives by this hope...."<sup>1</sup> God calls us today, as he did yesterday and will always, to construct our personal and community existence through a reply that is free and responsible.

9. With regard to the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, God has awakened in the Church the awareness of a need for a **new evangelization** in order to respond to this special time of grace, and to renew faith, hope and love, by centering them on Jesus, who is the only Saviour and centre of history. He reveals to us the true face of God, and helps us discover the presence and action of the Spirit in people and in the world.

History, our world, is the place where the saving presence of God is at work and the place where the responsibility of persons lie. "The Church emphasizes the importance of history as the place in which God manifests himself... But it is precise to say as well that the Church understands that time, liberty and history are the place in which mankind constructs human existence. Both need to be present, not in an incommunicable parallel, rather in a

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<sup>1</sup> Tertio Millennio Advieniente 23

dialogue which, on God's part, is gratuitous and initiates and, on the part of mankind, is open to transcendental meaning".<sup>2</sup>

The time of **new** evangelization is also a time of great trials and challenges for the world. We cannot separate these two things. The Gospel of Jesus, confided to the Church to be proclaimed and realized in the world around us, challenges us by its content and all that is in contrast with it. The Gospel throws its light on these challenges, claiming our total attention. Leaving aside the constancy of it let us direct our words solely to the demands presented to us directly in the field of evangelization itself.

## **A) Demands of the New Evangelization**

10. To make the proclamation of the Gospel ring out requires following in the direction pointed out by the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: witness, proclamation, communion, and service.<sup>3</sup> It is handy to keep these in mind in order to understand the heart and relevance of the message of Therese of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church.

### **Witness**

11. To evangelize is not to transmit a doctrine, but an experience transformed into life. This experience is precisely what is shared: "Something which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands.... We are declaring to you .... so that you too may share our life" (1 Jn 1:1-3). At the threshold of the Third Millennium the world to which we must give witness, is largely one of unbelief and injustice. Christians are called to "always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pt. 3:15). The question is how to make this hope and witness clearly intelligible. It must lead the faithful to revise their personal life and the way they participate in the Church because "people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories".<sup>4</sup> "The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who suffer",<sup>5</sup> along with a commitment to peace, justice and human rights.<sup>6</sup>

### **Proclamation**

12. As well as witnessing by their lives, Christians fulfill their evangelical mission by proclaiming the Good News of salvation: Christ has died and is risen, and He has transformed us into sons and daughters of God; He has set us free from the slavery of evil, sin and death. We must proclaim the love of God, our Father, who calls us to union with Him. The Good News is addressed to all. There are some areas which need our particular attention in our day: big cities tend to foster individualism, anonymity, cultural disintegration, pluralism and indifference. Young people in particular need to be evangelized. They are the future of the world. There is also urgent need to proclaim the Gospel among the masses of non-practicing Christians. Of perennial importance is the need for a first proclamation to those who have never heard the Gospel or who do not know Christ.

### **Communion**

13. "God, however, does not make men and women holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring mankind together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness".<sup>7</sup> With these words the Second Vatican Council stressed that faith is lived in community, that the fruit of evangelization and the action of the Spirit is the creation of fraternal communities forming the new family of God. The coming of Christ manifests itself in this communion. "By this we

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<sup>2</sup> a. olival junior, Uma reflexão sobre o tempo; sentido do tempo milenar, in: AA.VV. Rumo ao Terceiro Milênio (São Paulo, 1997), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> RM Cf. nos. 41-60

<sup>4</sup> Ib. 42

<sup>5</sup> RM. 42

<sup>6</sup> Ib.

<sup>7</sup> LG: 9.

know that we have passed from death to life (cf. 1 Jn 3:14) and from communion emanates a source of great apostolic energy".<sup>8</sup> Communion comes about as a result of faith and the sacraments of faith which lead us to a *koinonía* "open to all, especially to those who believe in Christ, through an ecumenism that is active and in solidarity. Communion demands a sincere and fraternal dialogue.

## Service

14. Faith needs to be expressed in deeds because in Christ Jesus "only faith working through love" (Gal 5:6) has value. To serve God and people is the best proof of love. Christian *diakonía* is nothing else than following Jesus who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28), and who lived among us "as one who serves" (Lk 22:27). From the beginning Christian service has been notable towards the poor, the outcasts and the suffering. For this reason, at the threshold of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, did not hesitate to state: "Indeed, it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee".<sup>9</sup>

## B) Therese of the Child Jesus, Doctor for the Third Millennium

15. We should begin by first saying a word in connection with the tradition or spiritual patrimony which nourished the experience and doctrine of Therese of Lisieux. Carmel -- the "desert" where she wanted to go with her sister Pauline -- is the soil in which she sank her roots from early years. It must be said she "lived" Carmelite spirituality with the precocity that marks all her "career as a giant" a long time before she read it formulated by Teresa and, above all, by St John of the Cross. We see a profound harmony in the vocation of Therese which cannot be explained simply by her reading their writings. It is much more the fruit of the Spirit, which along with her vocation to Carmel, makes her a true daughter of Teresa and John and helped her to live a similar yet clearly defined spiritual experience, which would find its confirmation and enrichment in contact with the experience and doctrine of Teresa and John.

16. By examining Therese of Lisieux's experience and delving deeper into her teachings which have a universal and timely quality, we are able to understand that aspect of her experience and doctrine which makes her a teacher and doctor in the Church which contemplates its evangelical role for the Third Millennium. Her doctrine can be summarized in the words: **God's paternal and maternal love.**

Guided by the Spirit, she was led to understand the revelation of God's merciful love which summarizes the whole of the Gospel. God is love who reveals himself to the poor and humble. God who is love invites us to live in communion with Him and with others, and to serve our brothers and sisters as Jesus did in order to bear witness to the Good News and proclaim it.

## Doctor of the experience of a God both merciful and near to us

17. The rediscovery of the paternal-maternal face of God was the starting point of a new path to holiness which our sister trod especially from 1894, experiencing more and more her own weakness. Jesus showed her, as she says, that the road to follow is that of surrender to God with the confidence of a child sleeping fearlessly in it's Father's arms:

"Whoever is a little one, let him come to me. So speaks the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Solomon. This same Spirit of Love also says: For to him that is little, mercy will be shown. The Prophet Isaiah reveals in His name that on the last day... As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees they will caress you... Jesus does not demand great actions from us but simply surrender and gratitude".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> PC: 15.

<sup>9</sup> TMA: 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Manuscript B* 1r-v. (John Clarke translation Ch. IX, p. 188)

This experience of Therese of Lisieux is one of a God who is both Father-Mother, who has love even for the unjust and evil (cf. Lk 6:35); who knows what we need before we ask; who forgives our sins and asks us to forgive; who protects and looks after us (cf. Mt 6:8-9, 14-15, 26). Here we see the change from fear to confidence. We stand before God as sons and daughters before a father and a mother. God makes everything work together for our good, even our deficiencies and faults. Getting to know a God who is both Father and Mother requires a child's heart which chooses to remain small:

"What pleases Him (Jesus) is that He sees me loving my littleness and my poverty, the blind hope that I have in His mercy.... It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love".<sup>11</sup>

God's initiative is at the root of every Christian vocation. Responding to God's invitation, those who are called trust in God's love and give their life unconditionally, consecrating everything, present and future, to God, abandoning it all confidently into his hands. All this is of capital importance in Christian spirituality for the Third Millennium.

### **Doctor of the experience of God's love expressed in communion and service**

18. Experience is the key in a technical and scientific world. Everything must be experienced, seen in some way. Christian spirituality is no exception to this trend. Experience and testimony are fundamental in the Christian life, being particularly important today when we see a reaction against an exaggerated intellectualism in the matter faith and religion. Despite the danger of subjectivity and a certain spiritual infantilism, this search for experience cannot be rejected out-of-hand. Spiritual experiences are a source of knowledge and deepening in the revelation of God.

Therese of Lisieux is a teacher of an authentic experience of God which contains within it a commitment to following Jesus. She teaches us about the experience of contact with the Word of God, the meaning of the community which Christ communicates to us, and the necessity of giving a real response guided by love.

19. The ecclesial trend in spirituality today speaks of the communion of all in Christ and in the Spirit. We need to place all the gifts we have at the service of the community of believers. Traces of the experience and doctrine of St. Therese, can be clearly seen in this dimension of today's spirituality of evangelization. She lived for the Church, the Body of Christ. She desired to live in it all possible vocations in order to bear witness to the Gospel and proclaim it to the most distant places on earth, until, while meditating on chapters 12 and 13 of the first letter to the Corinthians, she discovered her vocation and mission in the Church: "O Jesus, my Love.... my vocation, at last I have found it... my vocation is love! Yes, I have found my place in the Church and it is You, O my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love. Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized".<sup>12</sup>

20. Therese, who lived strongly centered in God as the sole absolute, conversed with him in prayer that took into account the needs of her brothers and sisters. Inspired by this encounter, she devoted herself to others, and lived her vocation for the salvation of the world. In Manuscript C Therese gives a precious direction for an authentic spirituality committed to the new evangelization:

"Just as a torrent, throwing itself with impetuosity into the ocean, drags after it everything it encounters in its passage, in the same way, O Jesus, the soul who plunges into the shoreless ocean of Your Love, draws with her all the treasures she possesses. Lord, You know it, I have no other treasures than the souls it has pleased You to unite to mine".<sup>13</sup>

This conviction Therese had that the authenticity of our love for God is demonstrated in the quality of our love for others has truly influenced the spirituality of our century, particularly in the area of commitment to evangelization. Her experience and doctrine have taught Christians that like concentric circles, the dimension of fraternal love opens us to ever new and wider horizons, all this set in motion by the impact of the love of God. The first circle reaches

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<sup>11</sup> Letter 197, to Sr Marie of the Sacred Heart 17/9/1896 (John Clarke translation Volume 2, pp. 999, 1000)

<sup>12</sup> Manuscript B: 3v (Ch. IX, p. 194)

<sup>13</sup> Manuscript C: 34r (Ch. XI, p. 254).

those nearest us; the wider ones embrace the whole of humanity. Confidence and surrender to God, our Father-Mother, are in Therese of Lisieux the source of fraternal charity and the apostolate, an expression of love for all by seeking to share with them the good news of salvation.

Therese of Lisieux translated into life the gospel demand for service to those of least importance in the world's eyes and those who are poorest, in whom we discover the face of Christ (cf. Mt 25:31-45). God reveals Himself to them in a special way (cf. Mt 11:25-27). In the service of God, we must be ready to give our lives for others, like Christ, who asked the Father if it were possible to take away the chalice of suffering, but who nevertheless clearly accepted his Father's will and desired to fulfill it.

## **Doctor of the evangelical path to holiness**

21. In the conclusion of the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, which seeks to explain the permanent validity of Christ's missionary mandate, John Paul II states: "The call to mission derives, of its nature, from the call to holiness... The universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission. Every member of the faithful is called to holiness and to mission. The missionary spirituality of the Church is a journey towards holiness".<sup>14</sup> Therese of Lisieux transformed this doctrine into a lived experience. As a result she was proclaimed Universal Patroness of the Missions together with the great apostle Saint Francis Xavier. Her experiential doctrine is of great relevance to the new evangelization. She entered Carmel to reach holiness by means of a contemplative life: God "made me understand my own glory would not be evident to the eyes of mortals, that it would consist in becoming a great saint".<sup>15</sup> From the beginning she was convinced that she entered Carmel not to flee from the world, but to enter it more profoundly. Her spiritual experience was not a search for refuge from a hostile world, but a conscious offering of herself as a martyr.

22. "Today a renewed commitment to holiness.... is more necessary than ever.... It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with ones neighbor, especially the most needy".<sup>16</sup> Therese of Lisieux admirably unites holiness and mission, authentic contemplation resulting in commitment, within her own personal vocation to evangelization. Thus, without equivocation, she proposes a gospel way to give witness to the Good News and proclaim it confronted by the challenges of modern times.

By emphasizing the centrality of love in holiness, Therese helps to close the gap between contemplation and action, because love unites both. She entered the contemplative life to become more effective in her apostolic life. She revolutionized in this way the relationship between asceticism and mysticism, emphasizing the asceticism that demands evangelical self-denial lived one day at a time. Hence more than corporal mortification, she preferred service to others, such as being welcoming, understanding, forgiving, helpful and standing in solidarity with others, all great lessons for putting into practice the spirituality of the new evangelization.

## **Doctor of personal wholeness**

23. Therese of Lisieux, like anyone else, was subject to the human condition. She experienced a liberating process from a psychological point of view which led her to an acceptance of herself, thereby enabling her to welcome her own limitations with maturity.

Strongly in evidence in today's world are internal tensions, spiritual wounds, and all sorts of other influences which hinder people from personal realization. Therese of Lisieux learned to accept herself with her limitations, imperfections, as conditioned by her family, social and religious environment. In this way she liberated herself from them to become, with God's grace, a free person who discovered the God of Jesus Christ, one who is faithful and merciful. She teaches us to profit from everything so that we may grow and mature, both as human beings and as Christians.

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<sup>14</sup> RM: 90

<sup>15</sup> *Manuscript A 32r.* (Ch. 4, p. 32)

<sup>16</sup> VC: 39

24. Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face struggled to overcome all that hindered her from being herself. On the way to human maturity she experienced the trauma of her mother's death which affected her badly.<sup>17</sup> Her love for God and friendship with him awakened in her a liberating process which enabled her to use all these influences to achieve personal wholeness.

From the age of four to fourteen was a painful period in her life. She faced difficulties at school, which seemed aggressive to her. Then her sister and second mother, Pauline, entered Carmel. As a result of this separation she became seriously ill. It was a psychosomatic illness. Later on she was tormented by scruples.<sup>18</sup>

All these sufferings were due to her hypersensitivity: "when I began to cheer up, I'd begin to cry again for having cried".<sup>19</sup> She lived trapped in a vicious circle not knowing how to get out of it.

Only when she began to tread the path of love and surrender to Jesus was she completely healed of her hypersensitivity on Christmas Eve 1886. After that she was set free of these interior bonds. She was then able to enjoy life fully: studies, contacts, nature, travels...

25. For the men and women of today, tormented by so many negative experiences within the family and social environment, which lead to anguish and insecurity about the future, Therese of Lisieux demonstrates that the fear caused by the uncertainty of each day can be resolved by being receptive to the love of God and to others. Thus we attain peace and joy, knowing there is a God who is a merciful Father and who surrounds all of us with his love and providence. Therese presents to a world sick with fear and anguish the therapy of love and confidence in God, and of service and commitment to others. She has discovered and passed on to us the profound truth of a merciful God who wants to give Himself fully to all those who open themselves to Him.

## **Doctor of faith for an unbelieving world**

26. The relevance of the doctrine of Therese of Lisieux appears very clearly in regards to atheism and unbelief. The Second Vatican Council in analyzing contemporary atheism, indicated that this word covers quite different realities: "For while God is expressly denied by some, others believe that people can assert absolutely nothing about God. Still others use such a method to scrutinize the question of God as to make it seem devoid of meaning. Again some form for themselves such a fallacious idea of God that when they repudiate this figment they are by no means rejecting the God of the Gospel. Moreover, atheism results not rarely from a violent protest against the evil in this world."<sup>20</sup>

God, through Therese of Lisieux's spiritual experience, desired to speak tangibly to the world of unbelief. She struggled with her faith in the midst of a world which, in the name of science and rationalism, denied the existence of God and led to atheism.

27. In today's world non-believers are different from those in the time of Therese. After having experienced the collapse of atheistic and materialistic systems and the frustration of modern life, agnostics and those who are simply indifferent are searching for something which will give meaning to life. They experience vaguely a call to the absolute which can fill their existential emptiness and satisfy their aspirations.

Therese of Lisieux confronts the problem of anguish in the face of death which was basically also one of atheism which questioned the existence of God and the after-life. She was all of a sudden submerged in the abyss of anguish, and experienced in the trial of faith the distress of nothingness. She was deprived of what she calls "the joy of faith" or "to enjoy this beautiful heaven on earth".<sup>21</sup> She entered a place of deep darkness which surrounded her and

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Manuscript A*: 13r (Ch. 2, p. 34).

<sup>18</sup> *Ib.* 39r. (Ch. 4, p. 84).

<sup>19</sup> *Ib.* 44v. (Ch. 5, p. 97)

<sup>20</sup> GS 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Manuscript C* 7r (Ch. X, pp 215, 226).



threatened to overwhelm her. She seemed to hear the darkness say: "You believe that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness".<sup>22</sup>

28. In the midst of this situation Therese of Lisieux was able to keep alive her faith and love. Her experience of the dark night of purification transformed her so that she was in a real and fruitful solidarity with those who live submerged in unbelief. Before the trial of faith she stated that she could not accept that there were people who did not believe: "I was unable to believe that there were really impious people who had no faith. I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven". After her painful experience she was convinced of the opposite: "During those very joyful days of the Easter season, Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who have no faith".<sup>23</sup>

Submerged in the most profound darkness, Therese did not stop loving the One in whom she trusted. Her drama sprang from the fact of living at the same time in the light of faith and the darkness of unbelievers. It was then she understood that God wanted her to offer lovingly for unbelievers her own sufferings, seated at the table of sinners and eating the bread of affliction with them.<sup>24</sup>

There are some eloquent testimonies of conversions to the faith after reading of Therese's experience. Many have discovered in her writings the true face of God and also a light which has helped them in their search for God in the midst of darkness and in the temptation to unbelief. This makes her message relevant for those who are estranged, who disbelieve or are indifferent.

### **Therese of Lisieux the Woman, Doctor of the Church**

29. The experience and doctrine of Therese of Lisieux become especially significant in our day when new horizons are opening up for the presence and action of women in society and in the Church. Women are called to be "signs of God's tender love towards the human race",<sup>25</sup> and to enrich humanity with their "feminine genius". The young Carmelite of Lisieux accomplished both things in her life and we can see this clearly in her writings.

Therese of the Child Jesus transmits her spiritual experience with her evident feminine style which is direct and intimate. Despite being conditioned by her times, she manifested her Gospel conviction on the equality of men and women, and the importance of mutual collaboration as disciples of Jesus. We can see this especially in her letters to her missionary brothers where she shares her human and spiritual experiences, not hesitating to express her point of view on theological issues and Christian experience: her concept of God's justice, the way of spiritual childhood, trust in divine mercy.

30. Her femininity, like that of Teresa of Jesus, resulted in greater commitment to the Gospel, overcoming all the prejudices which emarginated women of her times. Therese of Lisieux experienced the situation of woman in society and the Church at the end of the XIXth century. In manuscript A, she tells us clearly and humorously what she felt during her trip to Rome, before entering Carmel:

"I still cannot understand why women are so easily excommunicated in Italy, for every minute someone was saying: 'Don't enter here. Don't enter there, you will be excommunicated!' Ah! poor women, how they are misunderstood! And yet they love God in much larger numbers than men do and during the Passion of Our Lord, women had more courage than the apostles since they braved the insults of the soldiers and dared to dry the adorable Face of Jesus".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ib. 6v. (Ch. X, p. 211)

<sup>23</sup> *Manuscript C*: 5v. (Ch. X, p. 211).

<sup>24</sup> Ib. 6r. (Ch.X, p. 212).

<sup>25</sup> VC: 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Manuscript A*: 66v. (Ch VI, p. 140)

Her womanhood, which she expressed with the freshness and sincerity of a free person, led her to a reflection on the Gospel: the emargination of women makes them participate more closely in the mystery of Christ who was despised at his passion. "It is undoubtedly because of this that He allows misunderstanding to be their lot on earth, since he chose it for himself.... In heaven, He will show that His thoughts are not men's thoughts, for then the *last* will be *first*".<sup>27</sup> Jesus made women the first witnesses of His resurrection.

31. Today women find areas of greater participation in society and Church opening up for them and they can find encouragement in Therese of Lisieux to live as John Paul II said, "a culture of equality between men and women". Again Hans Urs von Balthasar noted on the occasion of the celebrations for the first centenary of Therese of Lisieux's birth, that she opened the whole field of theology to feminine reflection: "The theology of women has never been taken seriously nor integrated by the establishment. However, after the message of Lisieux, it must finally consider it in the present reconstruction of Dogmatic Theology".<sup>28</sup>

This corresponds to what the postsynodal document *Vita consecrata* presents as new perspectives for women in the Church: "in the field of theological, cultural, and spiritual studies, much can be expected from the genius of women, not only in relation to specific aspects of feminine consecrated life, but also in understanding the faith in all its expressions".<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

32. God surprises us anew with this sister of ours in whom so many patterns of human logic are broken in order to emphasize God's gratuitous initiative in choosing those he wants and seeking to realize his works and manifest the greatness of his power and action in those who open themselves confidently to his merciful love in order to accomplish his will.

With the proclamation of the doctorate of St. Therese, the Lord confirms what the Old Testament states and the New Testament presents in its fullness: that God communicates Himself to the simple, giving them His wisdom and revealing to them the secrets of His life and workings throughout history. In effect, the book of *Wisdom* stated, at the threshold of Christ's coming: "*Length of days is not what makes age honorable, nor number of years the true measure of life; understanding, this is grey hairs, untarnished life, this is ripe old age. Having won God's favor, he has been loved.... Having come to perfection so soon, he has lived long*" (Wis. 4:8-10, 13). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus, full of joy in the Holy Spirit, proclaims divine logic so very different from ours: "*I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children. Yes, Father, for that is what it has pleased you to do*" (Lk 10:21-22).

33. The Lord, Father of all light, from whom comes all that is good, all that is perfect (Cf. Jm 1:17), has given Carmel yet another gift with Therese of Lisieux's Doctorate. It is a free gift which demands a response of love and generous commitment to our vocation and mission in the Church and in the world. May our sister Therese of Lisieux obtain for us from the Lord the grace to be His collaborators in bearing witness and proclaiming the Good News to our brothers and sisters of the Third Millennium. May we be authentic followers of Jesus, in communion with Mary, the first one to receive the joyful news of salvation and who proclaimed it with the joy of one who has discovered that God gives Himself freely to the poor, humble, and simple.

Rome, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1997

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<sup>27</sup> *Ib.*

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by G. Gaucher, *Actualité de sainte Thérèse de Lisieux*, in *Thérèse de Lisieux et les missions. Mission et contemplation* (Kinshasa, 1996) p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> VC: 58.

