



## **THE LIFE AND SPIRITUALITY OF ST. THÉRÈSE**

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Before I begin to share about the life and spirituality of St. Therese, I want to take a moment to look at a fascinating question that I call the mystery of Therese Martin. How is it possible that a young woman who lived only 24 years, over a hundred years ago, is so widely known and loved? The first 15 years of her life were spent in two small towns, Alencon and Lisieux, in Normandy, France. For the last 9 years of her life Therese lived in a Carmelite monastery in almost complete obscurity, having little contact with the people outside. She had no tangible achievements during these 24 years. She performed no great apostolic work, founded no new religious community, engaged in no missionary activity, nor was she known during her life for any miracles or spectacular happenings. Except for her immediate family and her community of 24 nuns, she died virtually unknown on 30 September 1897.

Yet within 15 years of her death, Pope Pius X called her "the greatest Saint of modern times." In 1925 Therese was canonized by Pope Pius XI, and he called her "the jewel of my pontificate." Two years later he made her Patroness of the universal missions of the Church, on the same level as the great Jesuit missionary, Saint Francis Xavier. In the years that followed, many other honors and titles were given to Therese, culminating in her being declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II in October 1997. She is only the third woman to be so honored in the 2,000 year history of the Catholic Church.

How do we explain the mystery of St. Therese? How do we account for the love and popular devotion that is shown to her everywhere, by simple people and scholarly theologians, by men as well as women?

Surely as an explanation, the words of St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians come to mind: "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chose the world's lowborn and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something; so that humankind can do no boasting before God" (1 Cor 1:27). The good Lord certainly sent his Holy

Spirit most abundantly into the heart of St. Therese. This young woman, who only had five years of schooling, anticipated by 70 years some of the major teachings of the Second Vatican Council. To understand the mystery of St. Therese and the popular devotion to her today in the Church, we must begin with God's loving plan. It was his choice that made Therese a channel of grace to our world at a special moment in history.

On the human level, God used two other factors. The memory of Therese would surely have passed from history had it not been for two events immediately following her death that gave rise to her immense popularity; first, the publication of her own life story, *The Story of a Soul*, and second, the outpouring of miraculous assistance to thousands of people who asked for her intercession.

### ***The Story of a Life and Her Entrance into Carmel***

Therese Martin was born on 2 January 1873 in the Normandy town of Alencon. Her parents were Louis Martin and Zelie Guerin who had married in 1858 and had nine children. Four of these, including two boys, had died very early in life. Therese was the youngest of five girls who survived. At the time of her birth, her mother was very weak, and it was necessary to send Therese to a foster mother in the country for the first fourteen months of her life. She was truly a happy, lively and mischievous child, and she thrived on the love which surrounded her in a family where prayer, frequent attendance at Mass, and practical examples of good works were an ordinary part of daily living. When Therese was only four, however, tragedy and sadness suddenly struck in the Martin home. Her mother died of breast cancer in the summer of 1877.

After the death of his wife, Louis Martin became both father and mother to his children. He moved his family to Lisieux, at the invitation of his brother-in-law, Isidore Guerin. The shock of her mother's death turned Therese from an outgoing and happy child to a sensitive and shy one.

When she was ten, Therese suffered another agony when Pauline, her favorite sister whom she had chosen as a substitute mother, left the family to become a Carmelite in the monastery at Lisieux. This new emotional shock went so deep that Therese fell seriously ill. Doctors could find no explanation for her sickness. Finally on 13 May 1883, when it seemed that Therese would either die or lose her sanity, she tells us that the family statue of Our Lady of Victories "smiled at me," and she was cured.

Since childhood, Therese's heart had long been set on entering Carmel. This desire crystallized when she determined to seek admission at the very early age of fifteen. Obviously, there was much opposition, but early on she won her father's approval. She later approached the local bishop but did not succeed too well with him because of her young age and because her two sisters, Pauline and Marie, were already in that monastery. On a pilgrimage to Rome in 1887, she even dared to speak to Pope Leo XIII at an audience about her hopes. He was kind and gentle-but told her that she would enter "if it was God's will." Saddened but undeterred, Therese continued her campaign and succeeded in entering the Carmelite monastery in Lisieux on 9 April 1888, at the age of fifteen!

The Carmel in Lisieux had been founded fifty years before in 1838, during a period of time when France was slowly beginning to recover from the ravages done to the Catholic Church and religious life during the French Revolution and the years of Napoleon. There were 26 sisters in the monastery when Therese entered, and their average age was 47 years. The monastery followed the reform of St. Teresa of Avila, striving to be "a small island of contemplative prayer, where each sister might be a friend of God and of one another."

Therese found sufficient challenges as she followed the difficult schedule of a 19th century Carmelite monastery in France. The same basic routine that St. Teresa of Avila had established for her own community in the 16th century was still observed in Lisieux. Before entering Carmel, Therese had been spoiled at home, and so initially she found it difficult to adjust to the daily schedule, the customary periods of fasting, and the minimal time given for rest and sleep. At fifteen years of age, she found herself rising at 4:30 AM, and except for a brief siesta, she did not rest again until 9:30 PM. Six hours each day were spent in chapel attending Mass and praying the Divine Office, and two more hours were to be set aside for personal meditation. The two principal meals at 10:00 AM and 6:00 PM were without meat, and five hours each day were spent in manual labor. Except for two recreation periods after the meals, Therese's day was spent in silence and solitude. With such a taxing schedule, it is not surprising that a young girl like Therese would often fall asleep during her meditations and her thanksgiving after Mass.

The greatest physical suffering that Therese endured in Carmel, before the onset of tuberculosis, came from the cold. The monastery in Lisieux, which is situated close to a running stream, was very damp and during the winter months bitterly cold. Of course, there was no central heating, and the only heat in the convent was a single fireplace in the recreation room.

Therese spent nine years in this Carmel, and humanly speaking, it would appear that these years were uneventful. Her fellow sisters recognized her as a good nun, nothing more. She was given the role of an assistant sacristan and novice mistress, but because she was the third member of her family to join the community, she could never hold an official position in the monastery, nor did she have the right to vote in any elections. During the final two years of her life, she had a long and painful illness, suffering with remarkable fortitude but conscious to the end. She died on 30 September 1897 when she was twenty-four years old.

### ***Therese's Spirituality and the Primacy of Love***

Even though Therese died unknown, her new mission on earth was soon to begin. She had once written: "I am not dying; I am entering into life .... After my death I will let fall a shower of roses." She would be an instrument in the Lord's hands, encouraging others to do what she had done so well during her entire life-loving God with all her heart, all her mind, and all her strength, and expressing that love in a concrete way by her care and concern for the sisters with whom she lived.

It is difficult to estimate Therese's intense and exclusive love for God, but her spirituality begins with this truth. Her sister Pauline once said of her: "She breathed the love of God just as I breathe air." Therese couldn't imagine what more she could enjoy after her death than she already enjoyed in life: "I know that I shall see the good Lord, but as far as being totally with Him, I am already with Him here on earth." She didn't experience Him in any extraordinary way, but she was with God in the sense that she completely believed and trusted the beautiful words of St. John: "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him" (I John 4:16). Therese insisted that her vocation in Carmel-to encourage others to love God-would not end with her physical death but would continue for all eternity. As a young sister, she wanted to be everything for the Lord, but she realized that such desires would be impossible to fulfill unless she found some basic trust and direction for her life. In her *Story of a Soul* she tells of her search:

***To be your Spouse, O Jesus, to be a Carmelite, and by my union with You to be the Mother of souls, should not this suffice for me? And yet it is not so. No doubt these three privileges sum up my true vocation: Carmelite, Spouse, Mother, and yet I feel within me other vocations. I feel the vocation of the warrior, the priest, the apostle, the doctor, the martyr ....***

***During my meditation, my desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters 12 and 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that all cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, etc., that the Church is composed of different members .... Without becoming discouraged, I continued my reading, and this sentence consoled me: "Yet strive after the better gifts, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way." And the Apostle explains how all the most perfect gifts are nothing without Love. That charity is the excellent way that leads most surely to God.***

***I finally had rest .... I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and places ...in a word, that it was eternal .... Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O, Jesus my love ...my vocation, at last I have found it ...my vocation is love!***

These words about *love*, which were written to her sister Marie in the second part of her life story (manuscript B) strongly indicate to us what Therese thought would be her mission in Carmel and in the Church. In the third part of her life story (manuscript C), she tells us how much she had to struggle on a human level to put her love for God into practice as she reached out to the other 26 sisters in her community.

Kindness and goodness have been so identified with Therese that one easily forgets that her life in Carmel was an intense experience in the challenge of daily living. Difficult personalities and petty problems were literally inescapable within the restricted confines of the cloister. Therese tackled the gospel command of loving her neighbor with her customary determination. "Without love all that we do is worthless," she wrote simply. To dispel any illusion about the cost that was involved, she added: "The only thing that can be called love is the complete sacrifice of oneself."

The third part of Therese's autobiography shares about her life in Carmel, and it tells us many other fascinating examples of her attempts to express her love for the other sisters in the ordinary incidents of daily living: her acceptance of nuns who often splashed water over her while washing clothes; her patience with a sister who was constantly fidgeting with her rosary or something else in chapel; her understanding for other sisters who frequently interrupted her as she was trying to rest or to write the story of her life during her final illness.

Therese herself summed up her attitude quite simply when she wrote: "Dear Lord, you never tell us to do what is impossible, and yet You can see more clearly than I do how weak and imperfect I am. If, then, You tell me to love my sisters as You love them, that must mean that You Yourself must go on loving them in and through me. You know it wouldn't be possible any other way.... The closer my union with You, the greater my love for all the sisters without distinction."

### ***The Little Way of Trust and Confidence***

In the gospel there is a constant refrain: "Do not fear, do not be afraid." These words are first encountered in stories related at the time of Jesus' birth. Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds—all heard these comforting words as they questioned, wondered, doubted, or feared something new that was about to happen in their lives.

During his own public life, Jesus was very sensitive to the emotion of fear that human beings experience. With his apostles, he was constantly encouraging them to have faith, not to lose confidence. With the people, he sought an attitude of trust, reminding them that such trust was *the* necessary element for his healing ministry to be effective. His words at the Last Supper beautifully sum up his teaching: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith in me" (John 14:1).

During her life in Carmel, Therese often meditated upon Jesus' story in the gospel about the birds of the sky that do not worry about what they are to eat and the wild flowers in the field that are not concerned about how they are to be clothed. She realized from the care given to them that God would also provide for all of us.

Therese's favorite symbol, both in describing her life journey and in writing about her Little Way of Trust and Confidence was the image of *flowers*. At the very beginning of her autobiography, she reminds her sister Pauline: "It is for you alone that I am writing the story of the *little flower* gathered by Jesus .... It seems to me that if a little flower could speak, it would tell simply what God has done for it without trying to hide its blessings .... The flower who is about to tell her story rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus."

Therese sees all of nature resplendent with God's love. For her the beauty of creation was a sign of his Divine Providence. Since this was so with everything in nature, how much more did God share his infinite kindness and goodness with human beings like herself. She saw her life, then, as an opportunity "to sing of the mercies of the Lord." Her sole desire and mission was to make God's love known. Toward the end of her life she was once asked if she looked forward to heaven in order to enjoy God. "It is not that which attracts me," she answered. "What, then?" "Oh, it's Love! To love, to be loved, and to return to the earth to make Love loved."

When Therese entered Carmel, she had many goals, and the most important of these was to be a saint. As she was writing the story of her soul, she reminisced often about this desire. She realized that her life was in God's loving hands and that his mercy permeated all her experiences. Yet most of Therese's contemporaries understood holiness to consist in avoiding sins, eliminating faults, developing heroic virtues, enduring severe sacrifices, and attaining spiritual excellence. The emphasis was on the individual's personal efforts. Therese grew to understand that seeking holiness was an entirely different thing. It was primarily God's doing: "I always feel the same bold confidence of becoming a great saint because I don't count on any merits since I have *none*, but I trust in Him who is Virtue and

Holiness. God alone, content with my weak efforts, will raise me to Himself and make me a *saint*, clothing me in His infinite merits."

For Therese, God's providence is always present with us. All events are guided by his loving hands. One of her favorite passages from Scripture was this consoling thought from the prophet Isaiah: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name." These words gave her the confidence to write toward the end of her life: "Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to God, and this road is the surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father's arms .... How is the story of my life going to end? I can't tell but I know that the mercy of God will always go with me."

### ***Therese's approach to prayer***

The universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins its fourth and final part on Christian Prayer, quoting St. Therese. The question is posed: What is Prayer? The response is given in her words: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and love, embracing both trial and joy."

As a child Therese learned to pray in her own way. Her father took her fishing, and Therese remembered that while he fished, "sometimes I would try to fish with my little line, but I preferred to go alone and sit down on the grass bedecked with flowers, and then my thoughts became very profound indeed! Without knowing what it was to meditate, my soul was absorbed in real prayer."

Later as a nun, although Therese loved prayer very much, she encountered some difficulties. She tells us that she frequently grew distracted, found prayer difficult, and often fell asleep during meditation time and during thanksgiving after Mass. Her sister Celine once said that she didn't think a soul ever received less consolation in prayer than Therese, but she still remained very faithful to it.

Therese's conviction that she was always in the presence of a loving Father calls to mind the wonderful story from the life of St. John Vianney, the Cure of Ars, about an old peasant in his parish. The man sat in church for a long time every day, and John Vianney asked him what he said as he sat there. "I don't say anything. I look at Him," the man answered, "and He looks at me, and we are happy to be together."

Therese would have approved of this man's simple, heartfelt approach to prayer. We might find prayer challenging as Therese did, or calming as the peasant did. The important thing is that like both of them we take time for prayer, recognizing that prayer is not an end in itself but an opportunity to meet God in a personal and loving relationship.

Therese, of course, was schooled in the Carmelite tradition of prayer where great emphasis is placed on the Scriptures. The heart of the Carmelite Rule of Saint Albert is contained in chapter seven where each member of the Order is encouraged to meditate day and night on the Word of the Lord, remaining faithful in prayer. The Word of God truly permeated Therese's life, and this is evident in her autobiography which she wrote by hand late at night in a series of common notebooks. These notebooks are fascinating to look at, as there is almost no erasing or writing over. It is obvious that she had much of the Scriptures memorized by heart, and the words of the Bible flowed so naturally and so frequently into her life story. This is even more amazing when we realize that the convent at Lisieux during Therese's lifetime did not have a complete copy of the Old Testament.

Therese tells us of her great dependence during her formation upon the works of St. John of the Cross. Later though, when she was sick, she wrote that "it is especially the Gospels which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings. I understand and I know from experience that the 'kingdom of God is within you.' Jesus has no need of books or teachers to instruct souls .... Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment. He is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. I find certain lights just when I need them that I had not seen until then, and it isn't most frequently during my hours of prayer that these are most abundant but rather in the midst of my daily occupations." Prayer was not so much her saying or doing anything; it was letting God do something for her.

Therese's approach to prayer grew instinctively from her great desire to love God. She knew that the desire to love is love, and the desire to be totally available to God is prayer.

### ***Her missionary spirit***

Ordinarily when we think of the missions and missionaries, we think of apostolic men and women going to distant lands, preaching, baptizing, teaching in schools, and gathering new members into the Church. We think of people risking their lives for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. Therese had similar thoughts when she entered the Carmel of Lisieux at fifteen. She strongly desired to be a nun in a missionary land, hoping to be sent on mission to Vietnam, where there were two Carmelite monasteries historically connected with Lisieux. The Carmelite monastery in Saigon had been founded from Lisieux in 1861. The Carmelite monastery in Hanoi was founded from Saigon in October 1895.

Therese's superiors recognized her desire to be a missionary in either of these monasteries, but they hesitated to send her because of her poor health. From April 1896 it was clear that she had tuberculosis, and her health and strength slowly began to fail. As a result, she would never fulfill her vocation to be a missionary in Vietnam, but she was determined to contribute to the missionary call of the Church in every way possible in her own convent in Lisieux.

Therese prayed for the missions and made sacrifices for the missionaries. She offered her suffering and her very life for the spread of the Gospel. She realized that her call to be a missionary and to be an apostle of the Good News was being fulfilled as she lived out her vocation in Carmel, a vocation of love at the heart of the Church. As a contemplative sister in Carmel, she would be at the heart of the Church's missionary work by the prayers and sacrifices that she offered in a spirit of love.

We meet Therese the missionary in her *Story of a Soul*, in her poetry, and in the records of her last conversations, but we see her zeal for the missions most extensively in her correspondence with two missionaries, Father Maurice Belliere (1874-1907) and Father Adolphe Roulland (1870-1934). She considered these two priests to be her missionary brothers, her partners in the missionary apostolate.

Therese wrote ten letters to Maurice Belliere, beginning while he was in the seminary. In her first letter she encouraged him in his missionary vocation and also witnessed to her own missionary zeal: "I am asking Jesus that you be not only a good missionary but a saint all on fire with the love of God and souls. I beg you to obtain also for me this love so that I may help you in your apostolic work. You know that a Carmelite who would not be an apostle would separate herself from the goal of her vocation and would cease to be a daughter of the Seraphic Saint Teresa, who desired to give a thousand lives to save a single soul."

In her last letter to Father Belliere, dated 10 August 1897, only seven weeks before her death, she wrote: "I am now all ready to leave; I received my passport for heaven." The letter concludes with an affectionate and humble goodbye: "*A Dieu*, dear little Brother. May He give us the grace to love Him and save souls for Him. This is the wish that your unworthy little Sister Therese of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face has." Father Belliere, a member of the Missionaries of Africa, the White Fathers, was eventually sent as a missionary to Nyasa (now the African country of Malawi).

In May 1896, Therese was asked to correspond with Father Adolphe Roulland, who was going to be part of the Paris Foreign Mission in China. In her last letter to him, 14 July 1897, she told of her approaching death. Father Roulland had previously described to her his efforts to learn Chinese: "You tell me in your last letter (which pleased me very much), 'I am a *baby* who is learning to talk' (29 April 1897). Well, I, for the last five or six weeks, am a baby too, for I am living only on milk, but soon I shall sit down at the heavenly banquet, I shall quench my thirst at the waters of eternal life! When you receive this letter, no doubt I shall have left this earth."

For Therese, however, going to heaven did not mean that her mission was over. She would pursue her mission more directly from there: "Ah, Brother, I shall be more useful to you in heaven than on earth, and it is with joy that I come to announce to you my coming entrance into that blessed city, sure that you will share my joy and thank the Lord for giving me the means of helping you more effectively in your apostolic works."

Like St. Teresa of Avila, Therese wanted to be a "daughter of the Church," and in her last conversations recorded by her sisters, she kept speaking of what she would do from heaven for the missions and for missionaries: "I can't think very much about the happiness of heaven. Only one expectation makes my heart beat, and it is the love I shall receive and I shall be able to give. And then I think of the good I would like to do after my death: have little children baptized, help priests, missionaries, the whole Church."

When Pope John Paul II made St. Therese a Doctor of the Church, it was most appropriate that he chose the third Sunday in October 1997, Mission Sunday for the Universal Church. The missionary heart of Therese must have been rejoicing in heaven.

