

# St. Therese of Lisieux

**B**orn on January 2, 1873 to a middle-class French family, Therese was the youngest of nine children. When Therese was four, her mother died, and her father and sisters overwhelmed her with attention. She wanted for nothing in her life, and sought all she could. After her mother's death, her father Louis moved the family to Lisieux to be near his late wife's family. When Therese was eight, she enrolled in the Benedictine Abbey School as a day student. Therese did not flourish at the Benedictine Abbey School and was extremely unhappy there. She would later describe these years as "the saddest of her life." It was during these years that she had also lost her surrogate mother when her sister Pauline entered the Carmelite monastery in Lisieux in 1882. This proved to be an enormous psychological blow that made Therese physically ill for a time. Finally, she left the school in 1886 and study with a private tutor.

Therese lived with her family in a house called "les Buissonnets", until she herself was to enter the monastery some years later. Amidst the display of dolls, stuffed birds, miniature tea sets, games and picture books, there was a crucifix. Such a crucifix would play a key role in the realization of her "mission" in life: to pray for the souls and conversion of those far from the Lord. Her first experience came through her encounter with a notorious murderer, Pranzini, who through the power of Therese intercessory prayer was converted to the faith of Jesus Christ. As he was prepared for execution, Pranzini is remembered as having kissed the crucifix Therese held out to him, as a sure sign that his life had been given to the Lord.

Yet another reminder of the grace received through her intense faith, was experienced through the replica of the "Vierge du Souriere," the statute of Our Lady which had stood above her bed at home. It was the gentle smile of the Virgin bearing down on Therese that brought about the healing of her childhood illness.

In the garden of Les Buissonnets, a statue commemorates the famous moment when Therese asked her father for permission to enter the monastery at Carmel. Her father walked over to the wall of the garden and plucked from it a small white flower, roots and all; he knew well who his youngest daughter was, whatever the anguish involved in being parted from his "little queen."

At the age of 14 she had the opportunity to be part of a pilgrimage to Rome, accompanied by her father and sister Celine. Therese's description of her two-month journey through the holiest sites of Italy gave a vivid impression of the purpose and nature of a pilgrimage.

*Ab! What a trip it was! It taught me more than long years of studies; it showed me the vanity of everything that happens, and that everything is affliction of spirit under the sun (Ec2:11). However, I saw some very beautiful things; I contemplate all the marvels of art and religion; above all, I trod the same soil as did the holy apostles, the soil bedewed with the blood of martyrs. And my soul grew through contact with holy things.*

Her description of the trip can be found in *Story of a Soul*, the story of her life written in 1894 by Therese at the insistence of her sister, Pauline, then prioress of Carmel. Published after her death, when her earthly pilgrimage had come to an end, and her true work of sending "showers of roses" to all of us who dwell on the earth, had begun, this simple tale of Therese's extraordinary spiritual life found increased popularity over the years.

Therese's attitude had changed from caring only about herself, to loving other people after her fourteenth birthday. She wanted to give her entire life for God. April 9, 1888, at the age of fifteen, Therese entered Carmel.

Although Therese lived in a shrunken, constricted world, she longed for greatness. She wrote a verse play about the Venerable Joan of Arc, and took the title role herself. "I want to offer my neck to the sword of the executioner and like Joan of Arc, murmur the name of Jesus at the stake." She even dreamed of being a priest: "How lovingly I'd carry you in my hands when you came down from heaven at my call; how lovingly, I'd bestow you upon men's souls."



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In the end she learned to work within the limitations that life had given her. "I was delighted when a pretty little jug in my cell was replaced by a big chipped one. I also tried hard not to make excuses... Above all; I tried to do my small good deeds in secret. I loved folding up the mantles forgotten by the sisters and seized every possible opportunity of helping them." Thus Therese developed her "Little Way" of holiness, using the limited means at her disposal.

"I was made to understand that the glory I was to win would never be seen during my lifetime. My glory would consist of becoming a great saint!"

Monastic life did not assure perfect spiritual joy. Soon after her entrance she had lost all sense of consolation in prayer. She struggled with a tinge of scruples, probably caused by pessimistic Jansenist preaching at the monastery. Her confessor had advised her to banish these doubts and believe in Jesus' love. Her sister, Celine, entered the Carmel and brought with her a little notebook of scripture passages. In them Therese had found the inspiration for her "little way" to which she prescribed only two things:

1) She reminded us that God invites us to the banquet even when we are sinners. Therese told us that we must desire to grow in the love of God and then entrust ourselves to God's merciful care, for God is moved by reliance on the divine compassion.

2) Next she gave us a mandate for generosity, that is, for exercising a life of holiness in ordinary things. She wrote that she had no means of proving her love for God other than that of scattering flowers; not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look or even one word. In this way, she could profit from all the smallest things by doing them with love.

A year later she wrote reminiscences (Manuscript A) about her childhood and deals with her life in Carmel, introducing her "little way" and describing her obligation to merciful love, which she made in June of that year. We need to heed God's word both personally and spiritually through prayer, liturgical or meditation. It is to become our word for it is critical in the shaping of our own Christian identity.

By 1896 Therese's sister, now Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, asked for a "souvenir" of insights from Therese's most recent

retreat. Therese wrote this part of the document now known as Manuscript B in September. Later Sister Marie asked Therese to clarify some of her teachings. Therese complied, adding a new description of her "little way."

Saying that she needed more information for the obituary that she would send to the Order in 1897, Mother Marie de Gonzague asked Therese to write more about her Carmelite life. Therese started this text (Manuscript C) in June, but did not finish it before she died.

Therese first wrote about the great saints such as Teresa of Avila and then said "Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds of the sky and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by the passersby. Instead of becoming discouraged,"

she wrote, "...I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new... I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection." She also wrote in her text, "We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I want to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus." This is a metaphor of her little way.

On September 30, 1897, Therese died at the age of 24 of tuberculosis.

She promised to let flowers fall from heaven to people who are devoted to God, fulfilling the desire that her mission would begin after her death. Roses became the signature flower for Saint Therese.

Canonized a saint by Pope Pius XI on May 17, 1925, she was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1997 by Pope John Paul II.

#### References:

- Therese and Lisieux*, Pierre Descouvemont  
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## Prayer to St. Therese

O Little Therese of the Child Jesus,  
please pick for a rose from  
the heavenly gardens  
and send it to me as a message of love.  
O Little Flower of Jesus,  
ask God to grant the favors I now place  
with confidence in your hands...  
(mention specific requests)  
St. Therese, help me to always believe  
as you did in God's great love for me,  
so that I might imitate your "Little  
Way" each day.  
Amen.