

30 Days with SAINT THÉRÈSE

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Biography of St. Thérèse

FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 1

Devotion to St. Thérèse of Lisieux—popularly known as the Little Flower—is one of the religious phenomenon of the 20th century. Here was a young woman, scarcely known outside her circle of family and relatives, who died at age twenty-four in a Carmelite cloister, in an obscure French town; yet within a year or two of her death, her fame had spread around the Catholic world. Appeals for canonization were so insistent that the Holy See waived the traditional fifty-year waiting period. As a result, Thérèse was canonized in 1925, twentyeight years after her death—which, given the exacting rules required for beatification and canonization at the time, was considered a record.

It was Thérèse's spiritual autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, that brought her into the spotlight. At the heart of this brief memoir was a method

Thérèse called "the Little Way:" instead of striving for holiness through great acts of charity or penance, or even hoping for the grace of martyrdom, Thérèse urged her readers to perform every task during the day and bear every petty annoyance for no other purpose than the love of God. This was something anyone could do: mothers offered up the drudgery of cooking and cleaning; workers offered up the strain of their jobs; students the stress of their studies; children the scrapes and bruises they got while playing.

The Lisieux Carmel, where Thérèse had lived and died, released the first edition of *The Story of a Soul* on the first anniversary of her death—September 30, 1898. By 1910, it had sold 47,000 copies. By 1915, sales had soared to 150,000 copies. The simplicity and sweetness of Thérèse's book found a wide audience, but scholars of the great Catholic mystics observed that beneath the sentimental style of the book, Thérèse's ideas were rooted in the writings of St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, and Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.

Of course, it takes more than a popular book to make a saint; to be frank, it takes a miracle. In fact, in the early 20th century the Church required four miracles—two for beatification, two for canonization. As Thérèse's cause for sainthood advanced, literally thousands of people across the globe attributed miracles to her intercession. At one point, the nuns at the Lisieux Carmel were receiving 500 letters a day, most of them describing inexplicable events which the correspondents attributed to the prayers of Thérèse.

Thérèse's biographers have observed that it is not entirely unexpected that she would find a religious vocation: there was a touch of the cloister to her childhood home. Her parents, Louis Martin and Azelie-Marie Guerin, had both tried to enter religious orders, but both had been turned away. Louis and Zelie were intensely pious, so much so that on their wedding night, Louis suggested they forego a regular married life to live as chastely as the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph. At first, Zelie agreed. They lived chastely for 10 months until the advice of their spiritual director, combined with their desire to raise souls for heaven, changed their minds. Ultimately, the Martins would have nine children, five of whom survived to adulthood: Marie, Pauline, Leonie, Celine, and Thérèse.

Both Louis and Zelie operated their own businesses, and both did very well: she made Alençon lace, he was a watchmaker. In 1871, Louis received an offer for his business, which he accepted. The money he got from the sale combined with an inheritance and Zelie's earnings, enabled him to retire. Sadly, in 1878, Zelie died of breast cancer. His five daughters became Louis' chief comfort, Thérèse especially. He called her his "little queen," and he spoiled and pampered her, as did Thérèse's older sisters. As the older girls matured, one by one they announced their intention of entering the religious life. Pauline joined the Lisieux Carmel, and soon Marie joined her there. Leonie entered a convent of Poor Clares, but she found that she was unsuited to such an austere life; after two months, the superior of the Poor Clares sent Leonie home.

On the afternoon of Pentecost Sunday, 1887, Thérèse approached her father as he sat in the garden and asked his permission to enter the Lisieux Carmel. She was only fourteen, and it was against the rule of the Carmelites to accept such a young candidate, but Louis arranged an appointment with the superior of the Carmelite friars. The superior believed that Thérèse was indulging in some romantic fantasy about the religious life; barely concealing his irritation, he informed her that she was not eligible for admission until she was sixteen.

But Thérèse would not give up. She begged her father to make an appointment with the bishop of Bayeux, and once again Louis could not refuse anything to his "little queen." The bishop was kind, but he also insisted that Thérèse must wait. In frustration and disappointment, Thérèse burst into tears, crying so hard that the bishop put his arms around her and tried to comfort her.

To distract his unhappy child, Louis announced that he, Thérèse, and Celine were to make a pilgrimage to Rome. The churches and shrines of Rome thrilled Thérèse and Celine, but they took-

second place to what would be the highlight of the tour—attending a Mass celebrated by Pope Leo XIII in his private chapel, followed by a private audience with the Holy Father. The pilgrims' chaplain reminded everyone that they were not to speak to the pope, simply kneel and receive his blessing. Thérèse, however, was not about to let such an opportunity pass. As she knelt before Pope Leo, she asked him to let her enter the Carmel immediately. The chaplain assured the Holy Father that the bishop of Bayeux was considering the matter. "Very well, my child," Leo said, "do as your superiors tell you."

Thérèse would not let it end there. Grabbing the pope's knees, she tried to persuade him. When Thérèse would not let go, some papal guards stepped forward, pried her hands off the pope, and carried her out of the audience chamber.

On New Year's Day, 1888, the bishop of Bayeux granted Thérèse permission to enter the Carmel early. The prioress of the Carmel, Mother Marie de Gonzague, apparently was not pleased that an exception had been made, so she put Thérèse off until after Easter.

On April 9, 1888, Thérèse and her family attended Mass at the Carmel. Afterward, she embraced her father, then walked through the door of the grill that separated the public from the nuns. There the prioress and all the nuns—including Pauline and Marie—were waiting to welcome her.

The Carmelite superior who had suspected that Thérèse had a romantic notion of convent life was correct. For all her fervor-and it was intense-Thérèse was still a fifteen-year-old girl; the daily routine of prayer, work, penances, silence, of abbreviated hours of sleep and restricted meals, clashed with her adolescent impulses and desires. She loved God profoundly, she wanted nothing so much than to devote her life to serving him, nonetheless, she had to admit that initially she found "more thorns than roses" in the Carmel. As a postulant she was assigned housekeeping chores, including washing clothes and scrubbing floors. Thérèse had never done such work in her life-her parents had servants to do all the housework. She found such work pure drudgery, and to make matters worse, Thérèse was bad at it. So in addition to the tedium, she had to endure the humiliation of being told that she had not cleaned a floor thoroughly, or had failed to get a stain out of a habit, or had not scoured all the encrusted food from a pot or pan.

Her older sisters, Pauline and Marie, still treated Thérèse as the baby of the family; even in the Carmel they wanted to pamper her. They appealed to the prioress to give Thérèse more agreeable jobs. When winter came, they returned to the prioress to ask if their little sister could be dispensed from wearing sandals and given fur-lined boots instead. Mother Marie rejected these appeals. Worse, word of them spread in the convent, so that some of the

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nuns began to grumble that the Martin sisters were creating a family clique in the Carmel.

Then came unhappy news from home: Louis had suffered a stroke. In the months that followed, he suffered several more. By the time he died in 1894, he was an invalid, unable to walk, barely able to speak, his mind clouded by dementia. After Louis' death, Celine joined her sisters in the Carmel.

Before dawn on Good Friday, 1896, Thérèse awoke to feel her mouth filling up with blood. It was the first sign that she had contracted tuberculosis. The Carmelite rule required a nun to inform her superior that she was ill. Thérèse told Mother Marie what had happened, but assured her that she felt perfectly well, and did not want to be dispensed from attending the Good Friday service or from keeping the Good Friday fast. Over the next year, Thérèse's condition worsened, yet she never asked Mother Marie to mitigate the severe life of the Carmel, nor did Mother Marie ever offer to do so.

By spring, 1897, however, Thérèse was too ill to follow the routine of the Carmel. She was almost completely confined to her bed now, although on warm days she would be carried to a bed in the convent garden. She was often in pain; the attending physician offered to give Thérèse injections of morphine, but Mother Marie would not permit it.

Mother Marie de Ganzague's conduct during the final months of Thérèse's life has been a source of debate. Some biographers of St. Thérèse believe Mother Marie felt a strong animosity for Thérèse, while others argue that Mother Marie's actions were influenced by the spirit of self-sacrifice that lies at the heart of the Carmelite vocation.

In the final weeks of her life, Thérèse was in constant pain. "What is the good of writing beautifully about suffering," she said. "It means nothing, nothing!" On another occasion when she felt she was suffocating she gasped out an appeal to the Blessed Mother. "Holy Virgin," she said, "I can get no earthly air!" In her agony, Thérèse experienced a dark night of the soul, and almost despaired of God's mercy, but before the end came, she was reconciled to her sufferings.

On the evening of September 30, 1897, it was obvious that Thérèse was dying. The entire community gathered around her bed to recite the prayers for the dying. Thérèse looked at her crucifix and said, "O, I love him! My God, I love you!" A moment later she was dead. Thérèse Martin was 24 years old.





The Little Way

God would never inspire me with desires which cannot be realized; so, in spite of my littleness, I can hope to be a Saint. I could never grow up. I must put up with myself as I am, full of imperfections, but I will find a little way to Heaven, very short and direct, an entirely new way.

STORY OF A SOUL, CH. 9

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 18:3-4

TODAY'S MEDITATION

St. Thérèse's "little way" is remarkably simple, yet incredibly profound: every action, every duty, no matter how insignificant can help you grow in holiness if you resolve to do it for love of God. With that thought in mind, the drudgery of housework, your most boring assignment on the job, anything at all can become a way to draw closer to Almighty God.

Prayer

Almighty God, everything I do today I will do for love of you. Give me patience and persistence to perform all of my tasks well, always with you in mind, and quell in me any spirit of rebellion or self-pity.

St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, pray for me!



The Beloved's Garden

I saw that every flower He has created has a beauty of its own, that the splendor of the rose and the lily's whiteness do not deprive the violet of its scent nor make less ravishing the daisy's charm. I saw that if every little flower wished to be a rose, Nature would lose her spring adornments, and the fields would be no longer enameled with their varied flowers. So it is in the world of souls, the living garden of the Lord.

STORY OF A SOUL, CH. 1

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens. As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved.

SONG OF SONGS 2:1-3

TODAY'S MEDITATION

In the spiritual life, souls who are roses or lilies are rare. Most of us are daisies. But look on the bright side: daisies are lovely, they grow in abundance, and among garden flowers they are low-maintenance. Furthermore, better to be a daisy in Christ's garden than the most exotic lily outside it.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, I praise you and give you thanks for the talents and blessings you have showered upon me. Teach me to strive to do better where I can, to accept my limitations, and to recognize that these limitations are also gifts from you. And give me the grace of humility, Lord.

St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, pray for me!



God Knows Your Weakness

That I often fall asleep during meditation, or while making my thanksgiving, should appall me. Well, I am not appalled; I bear in mind that little children are just as pleasing to their parents asleep as awake.

STORY OF A SOUL, CH. 8

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

PSALM 103:13-14

TODAY'S MEDITATION

Sometimes, are you distracted at Mass? Are there days when you rush through your prayers? By all means, strive to improve, but if these failings creep up again, don't be too hard on yourself. We all fall far short of the ideal, but that does not trouble God. As long as we try, for love of him, to perform our religious obligations faithfully, he will overlook our weaknesses.

PRAYER

My God, I love you! I do not have the words to express that love. I do not have the skill to show my love. These things I accept as the result of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Yet I am truly sorry when I am at Mass or praying and my mind wanders away from you. You know that I love you. Send me your grace so I can do better.

St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, pray for me!