

The Greatest Saint of Modern Times

St. Therese of the Child Jesus

“I feel that my mission is about to begin: Making people love our good Lord as I love Him, showing my little way to souls.”

These are the words of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, spoken a few short months before her death at the age of 24 on September 30, 1897.

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St. Therese had a great love for the Church. “The Church has a heart—a heart on fire with love. I saw that love alone imparts life to all the members so that should love ever fail, apostles would no longer preach the Gospel and martyrs would refuse to shed their blood.”

“Finally, I realized that love included every vocation, that love is all things, that love is eternal, reaching down through all the ages and stretching to the uttermost limits of earth.”

“Beside myself with joy, I cried out: ‘O Jesus, my love, my vocation is found at last—my vocation in love.’ I have found my place, in the bosom of the Church, and this place, O my God, Thou hast given me: in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love.”

This then was and is St. Therese: love. Her great love for Jesus, her love for the Church, her love for others—all filled her life, every moment.

She was a nun from the age of 15 to her death at age 24. When she entered the convent, she stated her desire: “I have come to save souls and especially to pray for priests.”

Four of the Martin girls became nuns at the same Carmelite convent in Lisieux, the little town nestled among the rolling hills of Normandy in western France. One girl became a Visitation nun.

St. Therese’s mother and father were both deeply religious. Her father had wanted to become a monk, but was turned away by St. Bernard’s monastery. Her mother had wanted to become a nun and she too was turned away.

With humility, she then prayed constantly to God, “I beseech Thee to make me the mother of many children and to grant that all of them may be consecrated to Thee.”

In 1858, Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin were married. She bore nine children. Both boys and two of the girls died at an early age. Of the five surviving girls, the last to be born was the future St. Therese, baptized Marie Françoise Therese. She was born January 2, 1873 and baptized in the church of Notre Dame where her parents were married.

At the age of ten, Therese was cured by the Virgin Mary. The inexplicable malady carried with it chills, fevers, convulsions, hallucinations and a great deal of crying. On one desperate occasion, Leonie and Marie, joined by Therese, knelt before a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and implored her intercession. Therese described later what happened. "Suddenly the statue became animated and radiantly beautiful—with a divine beauty that no words of mine can ever convey. The look upon Our Lady's face was unspeakably kind and sweet and compassionate, but what penetrated to the depth of my soul was her gracious smile. Instantly, all my pain vanished, my eyes filled and big tears fell silently, tears of purest heavenly joy."

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Zelie Martin said.

This illness and cure, together with her first Holy Communion, helped the spiritual growth of Therese.

At the age of 15, she appealed to the Pope personally, on a pilgrimage with her father, saying to Pope Leo XIII, "Holy Father, in honor of your jubilee, allow me to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen." The Pope told her that she would enter "if it be God's will." She entered within six months with the expressed hope that "like the face of Jesus, mine should be as it were hidden and despised, so that no one on earth should esteem me: I thirsted to suffer and be forgotten."

Suffer she did. A month later, her father was removed from Lisieux and put into a private mental home. She wrote, showing her spiritual growth, "How sweet and precious was the bitter chalice, since from each stricken heart there came only sighs of grateful love. We no longer walked—we ran, we flew along the road to perfection."

On September 8, 1890, Therese pronounced her vows. Next to her heart she bore a letter in which part read: "Take me from this world rather than allow me to stain my soul by committing the least willful fault. May I never seek or find anything but Thee alone."

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For nine years in the Lisieux Carmel convent, she lived the doctrine of sanctity—devoting all her prayers to loving God, totally, in absolutely everything she did.

In her "little way" everything was most ordinary for "all I do must be within their (ordinary souls) reach in the same way."

She started her autobiography at the request of her sister Pauline, who was then the prioress.

One remarkable feature was that there was no crossing out or alteration on the text which Therese wrote. Later again, another prioress urged her to continue the story of her life, which Therese had ended upon admission to the convent. Chapters nine and ten dealt with her life at the convent, while in the final chapter she described her own special way of life, spirituality and prayer, which she referred to as her "little way".

The writing was completed shortly before her death, and called “The Story of a Soul.” In a conversation with her sister, Mother Agnes (Pauline), she said, “I feel that my mission is soon to begin—to make others love God as I love Him—to teach souls my little way. I will spend my Heaven in doing good on earth.”

The disease she had, tuberculosis, riddled her lungs. She had terrible attacks of suffocation, exhausting sweating spells and coughing up blood several times daily. This began in April 1896 and she died September 30, 1897.

Therese’s spiritual trials during the time were more intense than the physical. She wrote, “God allowed my soul to be enveloped in complete darkness.”

“I realized that to become a Saint, one must suffer much, one must always choose the most perfect path. I understood that there are many degrees of holiness, each soul being free to respond to the calls of Our Lord, and to do much or little for His love—in a word, to select amongst the sacrifices He asks. Then also, as in the days of my childhood, I cried out: “My God, I choose everything—I will not be a Saint by halves, I am not afraid of suffering for Thee. One thing only do I fear, and that is to follow my own will. Accept then the offering I make of it. I choose all that Thou willest.”

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A realist in her illness, Therese faced death with joyful anticipation. She consoled her sisters, joked about her condition and cheered those who helped her.

Her last words in extreme agony were spoken as she looked at the crucifix, “Oh, I love Him! My God... I love... Thee.”

Four days after her death, the Carmel doors were opened and her body was accompanied to the Lisieux hillside cemetery by her sister Leonie.

All four of her sisters lived to see Therese become St. Therese of the Child Jesus. Her autobiography, “The Story of a Soul”, is famous throughout the world.

Moreover, St. Therese has kept her promise to “let fall from Heaven a shower of roses” and to “spend my Heaven in doing good on earth.” So many miracles have been worked through her intercession that Pope Pius XI called her “the Star of my Pontificate.”

She is still busy working miracles for those who ask for her intercession. Her remains now lie in the Carmel church on the grounds where she lived.

A giant basilica, begun in 1929, was built by three generations of the Cordonnier family, overlooking the town of Lisieux.

Many thousands of pilgrims are drawn to Lisieux each year to spend time with and pray to St. Therese of the Child Jesus.