

## SAINT THÉRÈSE OF THE CHILD JESUS (1873-1897)

Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon, France, on January 2, 1873, to Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin, who were canonized together in 2015. After the death of her mother on August 28, 1877, Thérèse moved with her family to the city of Lisieux. Some extraordinary graces accompanied Thérèse's human and spiritual maturation and allowed her to grow in her awareness of the infinite Mercy of God that is offered to every person. On the day of Pentecost in 1883, she had the unique grace of being healed from a serious illness; through the intercession of Our Lady of Victories. In 1884, she received her First Communion and at that time experienced the grace of intimate union with Christ.

Thérèse had a great desire to follow her sisters, Pauline and Marie, into the Carmel of Lisieux to live a contemplative life. While on a pilgrimage to Italy, during an audience that Pope Leo XIII granted to the faithful of the Diocese of Lisieux, she boldly implored the Holy Father to obtain permission to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen. Having obtained his permission, Thérèse entered the monastery in 1888 and professed her vows on September 8, 1890.

Her journey of holiness was strengthened by trusting God during moments of great trial, to which she gave witness in her writings, letters, and prayers. Her teaching is also evident in poems and small theatrical performances written for recreation with the sisters. As a collaborator in the formation of novices, she undertook transmitting her spiritual experiences condensed into *The Little Way of Spiritual Childhood*. She also received the task of accompanying two "missionary brothers" through her sacrifice and

prayer, an opportunity to live out the apostolic and missionary vocation that drove her to bring as many people as she could to encounter the Lord who is so thirsty for souls.

On April 3, 1896, during the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, Thérèse experienced a first manifestation of the illness that would eventually lead to her death. During this period, she focused definitively on her vocation to be a beating heart within the Church that is loved, loves, and generates love. As her state of health deteriorated, she was transferred to the infirmary. Earlier, during her dark night of faith she would affirm that “I am not dying, but entering into life” And so on September 30, 1897, at the tender age of 24, she expired saying, “My God...I love you.”

Canonized by Pius XI on May 17, 1925, she was proclaimed the universal patroness of the missions two years later, together with Saint Francis Xavier. On October 19, 1997, St. John Paul II proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church. Her liturgical feast is celebrated on October 1.

In St. Thérèse’s autobiographical writing, *The Story of a Soul: Manuscript C*, she describes the force with which God attracted her into the vortex of union with Himself: “I understand, Lord, that when a soul allows herself to be captivated by the odor of your ointments, she cannot run alone, all the souls whom she loves follow in her train; this is done without constraint, without effort, it is a natural consequence of her attraction for You. 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” (*Story of a Soul: Manuscript C*, 334-335).

The ardor of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face was lit and nourished by a life of union with her Lord through incessant prayer, meditation on his Word, the sacramental life, and the community of her

sisters in the monastery. Contemplation was a way to develop a deeper compassion for all realities. Those who make themselves an absolute possession of God also become God's gift to everyone, and their existence, entirely and freely given to the service of divine praise, proclaims and diffuses the primacy of God and the transcendence of the human person created in his image and likeness. The ardor of this great little saint is expressed by her total trust in God and in her desire to share her experience of encounter with God with everyone else, in a universal embrace of communion. She saw that trust in God was a powerful means of conversion; living to respond to Jesus' desire to be loved, she wanted to love him and make him loved, to offer him love for Love. Thérèse's greatest desire, holiness, is inseparable from her desire for the salvation of all people, with particular attention to the poorest. The special apostolate that a contemplative lives within the four walls of her monastery mark out a space reserved exclusively for the Lord and is linked to the heart of the mystical body of Christ, a heart that loves and transmits love, allowing each one to live their specific charism, mission, identity, in service of the Kingdom.

A life offered to God in union with the sacrifice of Calvary obtains the grace to be able to serve Him with fidelity, creativity, and energy spent on behalf of all – this is the fundamental truth in which pastoral care of souls and missionary work are rooted. It is a fusion of active and contemplative life that takes place in the heart of one who responds to the Lord's call and develops in the mystical body of Christ, in which the various members harmonize their specific mission, sustaining and mutually enriching each other. This is how even a place reserved exclusively for praise of the Lord, the cloistered monastery, becomes suitable for missionary work, as a place of intercession and of prayerful and fraternal participation in missionary efforts.

“I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not

for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages. But above all, O my Beloved Savior, I would shed my blood for You even to the very last drop...Martyrdom was the dream of my youth [...], but I cannot confine myself to desiring one kind of martyrdom. To satisfy me I need all [...] Jesus, if I wanted to write all my desires, I would have to borrow Your Book of Life, for in it are reported all the actions of all the saints, and I would accomplish all of them for You” (*Story of a Soul: Manuscript B*, 251-252).

Thérèse willingly offered her sufferings to support the vocations and works of missionaries, and she gave explanations to her sisters who observed her efforts without understanding the strong motivations that led her to them. Thérèse exhausted herself in life, but her great zeal led her to express the desire not to rest even after death. She desired to continue living her mission to help her brothers and sisters and to bring them to Love, with even more determination once her soul was united to her Lord.

In the exchanging of letters with her spiritual missionary brothers, she underlined how the apostolic weapons given to them by the Lord Jesus would be used with greater ease by virtue of the prayer and love made available to them by her. She insisted on the beauty of the Little Way and had traveled to get to the Heart of the Lord, bringing with her all the missionaries and souls entrusted to them. In a prayer that was particularly rich in scriptural references, Thérèse addressed God:

“O my Jesus! I thank you for having fulfilled one of my greatest desires, that of having a brother, a priest, an apostle [...] You know, Lord, that my only ambition is to make you known and loved. Now my desire will be realized. I can only pray and suffer, but the soul to whom you unite me by the sweet bonds of charity will go and fight in the plain to win hearts for you, while on the mountain of Carmel I will pray that you give him victory.

“Divine Jesus, hear the prayer I offer you for him who wants to be your Missionary. Keep him safe amid the dangers of the world. Make

him feel increasingly the nothingness and vanity of passing things and the happiness of being able to despise them for your love. May he carry out his sublime apostolate with those around him. May he be an apostle worthy of your Sacred Heart” (*Prayer of 1895*).

