



The Little Flower

Marie Françoise-Therese Martin

Carmelite , Mystic, Doctor of the Church

Born: 1873

Died: 1897

Canonized: May 17, 1925 by Pope Pius XI

The Story of a Soul

St. Therese is known today because of her autobiography, The Story of a Soul. Let us look at her life through her words. She begins with her childhood in a middle class family in Alencon, France. She was the youngest of 5 daughters. She was spoiled, full of herself and had a strong will.



Childhood

“All my life it pleased the Good Lord to surround me with love. My earliest memories are imprinted with smiles and the most tender of embraces! . . . I loved Papa and Mama very much, and showed them my tenderness in a thousand ways, because I was very expansive”

Her mother noted in a letter, “She’s a child who gets easily emotional. As soon as some bad little thing happens to her, the whole world has to know about it”

“One day Léonie, thinking she was now too big to play with dolls, came and found us both with a basket full of dresses and pretty little pieces of cloth intended to make others; on top was sitting her doll. “Here, little sisters,” she said, “you choose, I’m giving you all this.” Céline stuck out her hand and took a little ball of yarn that she liked. After thinking about it for a moment, I in turn stuck in my hand and said, ‘I choose all!’ And I took the basket without further ceremony.”

Therese’s happy life ended at five with the death of her mother. Though her father doted on her and her sisters mothered her, she was unhappy, withdrawn, and vulnerable. At the age of 13 she had a conversion experience that matured her in an instant. She had heard her beloved father criticizing her saying she needed to grow up. Therese took it to heart.



“In an instant, the work that I hadn’t been able to do in ten years—Jesus did it. . . . On that night of light the third period of my life began, the most beautiful of them all, the most filled with graces from heaven. . . . I felt a great desire to work for the conversion of sinners, a desire that I had never felt so strongly. . . . In a word, I felt charity enter into my heart, the need to forget myself in order to please others, and ever afterward I was happy!”

Therese wanted to do many things in her life, but she found her calling in praying for others. She found a sign of what her life should be in the story of a murderer, Henri Pranzini. Therese had prayed for his soul and before he was to be executed, he kissed a crucifix. That was her sign for her life’s vocation, at the age of 13.

“I had obtained ‘the sign’ that I had asked for, and that sign was the faithful reproduction of the graces that Jesus had granted in order to draw me to pray for sinners. Wasn’t it when I was facing Jesus’ wounds, seeing his Divine blood flow, that the thirst for souls had entered into my heart? I wanted to give them to drink this immaculate blood that must cleanse them from their stains, and the lips of ‘my first child’ were pressed upon the sacred wounds!!!”

At the age of 15, Therese decided that she wanted to follow her two older sisters to Carmel. To do so she asked the pope for a dispensation. Therese begged her father to take her to Rome and she confronted Pope Leo XIII.



Therese: I have a great grace to ask of you! . . . Most Holy Father, in honor of your jubilee, allow me to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen.”

Pope: “Well, my child, do what your superiors tell you...”

Therese: “Oh! Most Holy Father, if you were to say yes, everyone would be willing!”. . . He looked at me fixedly and pronounced these words, emphasizing each syllable: ‘All right .All right . . . You will enter if it is God’s will.’”

Therese entered the convent at 15. There is a childlike quality to her writings that does not resemble a modern woman. But her love of God and her compassion for others make her a model for today. She found her everyday life a challenge but also found it the opportunity to grow in Christ.



“For some time I had offered myself to the Child Jesus to be His little toy . . . a little ball of no value that He could throw on the ground, kick around, pierce, leave in a corner or press to His heart if that pleased Him. . . . In Rome Jesus pierced His little toy. He wanted to see what was inside it, and then, having seen it, content with His discovery, He dropped His little ball and went to sleep.”

In the Carmelite convent Therese' love of Jesus became a mystical marriage of spirits.



“No doubt, those three privileges are my vocation—Carmelite, Bride, and Mother—but I feel within myself other vocations. I feel the vocation of Warrior, Priest, Apostle, Teacher, and Martyr. In short, I feel the need and the desire to accomplish for You, Jesus, all the most heroic works. . . . I feel in my soul the courage of a Crusader, of a soldier in the papal army; I would like to die on a field of battle in defense of the Church. . . . But above all, my Beloved Savior, I would like to shed my blood for You until the last drop... Later, when perfection made its appearance to me, I understood that in order to become a saint you have to suffer a lot, always be in search of what is most perfect, and forget yourself.”

What sets Therese apart is her spirituality, “The Little Way.” Joseph Schmidt’s books on St. Therese summarize “The Little Way”: God loves each of us and is the source of our love; we should trust in God, live poor in spirit, love other people and search for truth.



“But I want to seek the means of going to heaven by a little way that is very straight, very short, a completely new little way... When I say mortified, this is not to make you believe that I was always doing penances. Alas! I never did a single one. . . . My mortifications consisted in breaking my will, which was always ready to impose itself; in holding my tongue instead of answering back; in doing little things for others without hoping to get anything in return; in not slumping back when I was sitting down... Later, when perfection made its appearance to me, I understood that in order to become a saint you have to suffer a lot, always be in search of what is most perfect, and forget yourself.”

Therese suffered from tuberculosis during the last two years of her life. It was a dark time for but she remained faithful. Therese died at the age of 24 in Lisieux, France. As she promised she “showered the earth with roses” – sending love and miracles for the many who prayed to her.

Therese’s autobiography was edited and circulated by her oldest sister, Pauline, who had years earlier, asked her to write down her life. The book spread quickly through the Carmelite community and into the world. Because of it, Pope Paul II named Therese a Doctor of the Church.

“Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face is the youngest of all the ‘Doctors of the Church’, but her ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters.” – Pope John Paul II