

St. Therese of Lisieux Doctor of The Church Greatest Saint of Modern Times

On Tuesday, October 1, the Church celebrates the feast of St. Therese, the Little Flower of God. St. Therese was born in Normandy, France on January 2, 1873, became a Carmelite nun at age 15, died at 24 of tuberculosis and was canonized in 1925. St. Therese was made a Doctor of The Church by Pope John Paul II in 1997. Even before her canonization, Therese Martin was regarded by many Catholics as a saint and was venerated worldwide. Her hidden life became widely known through St. Therese's autobiography *Story of A Soul* which she wrote under obedience to her mother superior. St. Therese gave the Church 'The Little Way', a path to spiritual growth and perfection she speaks of in her autobiography.

Before she died, St. Therese made a promise that she would spend her Heaven doing good on earth and that she would let fall from Heaven a shower of roses. Soon after her death, those who sought her intercession began to tell of great miracles they had experienced in response to their prayers. The Church has described St. Therese as a "Prodigy of Miracles" because so many have been attributed to her intercession.

What is it about St. Therese that draws so many souls to her, and through her, to God?

Following are quotes from St. Therese's writings taken from the book *Saint Therese of Lisieux; In My Own Words* compiled by Judith A Bauer. As we reflect upon these quotes we are given insight into the heart of The Greatest Saint of Modern Times. In this insight we are brought closer to understanding the great love of God for us.

"I begin the story of my soul by singing what must be my eternal song: 'The mercies of the Lord.' "

Throughout her life, Therese Martin experienced frequent suffering and loss. Soon after her baptism on January 4, 1873, Therese "contracted an illness

that prevented her from eating and she was sent away to receive special nursing care." She was separated from her mother for a year. Therese's mother died of breast cancer in August 1877 and Therese was greatly affected by her death. Therese described herself as "timid and retiring, sensitive to an excessive degree" as a result.

At age ten, Therese "fell into a deep depression when her sister Pauline left the household to become a Carmelite." Pauline had become Therese's 'second mother' and when Pauline left Therese suffered from "severe headaches, hallucinations and insomnia." Therese became so ill she was near death when Mary appeared to her through a family statue and she was miraculously cured.

After these events, St. Therese was afflicted with severe scruples, or the fear of seriously offending God and being condemned by Him. "She lived in constant fear of sinning and cried so much that" others wondered if she would have any more tears to shed. After becoming a Carmelite nun, the first symptoms of tuberculosis appeared in Therese in 1896. She succumbed to the disease on Thursday, September 30, 1897.

Despite all this suffering, St. Therese believed deeply that God had shown her great mercy and love.

"In my helplessness, the Holy Scriptures...are of the greatest assistance; I find in them a hidden manna, pure and genuine. It is from the Gospels, however, that I derive the most help in time of prayers; I find in their pages all that my poor soul needs, and I am always discovering there new lights and hidden, mysterious meanings."

A cornerstone of St. Therese's life was devotion to the Word of God. In her reading and study of Holy Scripture, St. Therese discovered she breathed in "the perfume exhaled by the life of Jesus, and I know which way to run. It is not the highest place but to the lowest that I hasten." Through the Word of God, Christ spoke to Therese, directed her, comforted her and strengthened her.

“I was six or seven when I saw the sea for the first time. I could not turn my eyes away; its majesty, the roaring of the waves, the whole vast spectacle impressed me deeply and spoke to my soul of God’s power and greatness.”

Throughout her life, St. Therese encountered God in ‘The Book of Nature’, the natural world He had created. In her study of nature, St. Therese found herself. She saw herself as the smallest flower in God’s garden which would “tell quite simply what God had done for it, without hiding any of its gifts.” In nature, God surrounded St. Therese in His majesty, beauty and profound love.

“I am like the poor who hold out their hands for the necessities of life and who if refused are not surprised, because no one owes them anything. To soar above all natural sentiment brings the deepest peace, nor is there any joy equal to that which is felt by the truly poor in spirit.”

St. Therese accepted the vow of poverty when she joined the Carmelite religious community. The above quote shows how she viewed this vow, which she lived well, in her life. Importantly present in this quote is St. Therese’s dependence on God for everything.

“For me, prayer is an uplifting of the heart, a glance towards Heaven, a cry of gratitude and love in times of sorrow as well as of joy. It is something noble, something supernatural, which expands the soul and unites it to God.”

St. Therese was raised in a Catholic family by parents who loved God and are now declared saints of the Church. She learned from an early age who God was and how one served Him in faith, hope and love. The life of prayer was nurtured in Therese’s life as she grew and it brought to recognize her vocation to Religious Life. Therese died prayerfully, trusting in God and believing in Him.

“This is all Our Lord claims of us. He needs our love...He (is) asking for the love of His creatures. He thirsted, indeed, but He thirsted for love.”

“I cried out ‘O Jesus, my love, my vocation is found at last...my vocation is love. I have found my place in the bosom of the Church, and this place, O my God, you have Yourself given to me: in the heart of the Church, I will be love!”

St. Therese became a Doctor of The Church because she profoundly understood the nature of God's love. This she grasped through receiving supernatural graces. Our study of St. Therese's spiritual doctrines can help us to understand God's love similarly. St. Therese had confidence that God's love upheld her and would not forsake her, yet, she endured a 'dark night of the soul' just before her death where she doubted Heaven. Yet, God's grace lifted her out of this darkness, which was purification, and restored her hope.