

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Mt 18:1) At the age of 14, Therese of Lisieux had her eyes set on the neighborhood convent. She felt a deep calling to enter religious life and wanted to dedicate her life to God through prayer as a Carmelite religious sister.

It is the rare individual who knows at a young age what they truly desire in life and so it is not surprising that almost everyone thought Therese was too immature to make such an important vocational decision. Little did they realize in this child was a young lady deeply in love with God and driven by his love to respond with all of her heart, mind, and soul.

That longing for God began long before the age of 14. Her devout parents made the home a dwelling place for God. Sacred space was set aside in the home so that the family could gather in prayer around a home altar. When those who were hungry came to the door, little Therese was given the responsibility for answering the door and helping to share the family’s food with those who were in greater need. With limited opportunities for education outside the home, her family shared in the responsibility of teaching her the faith. As young as 5 she had a growing sense of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and she longed to receive him in Holy Communion. She waited 6 long years before she could finally do that. At the age of 9,ⁱ still two years before receiving her First Communion, the desire to become a Carmelite nun began to well up in her.

Therese was only able to attend school part time and received no formal education above the 3rd grade. Through her love of God, through prayer, and meditation on Sacred Scripture, she learned from the Master. With childlike trust, she believed that all things were possible with the help of God and God did not let her down.

In her desire to become a Carmelite Sister, she trusted that this was truly God’s will and nothing stood in her way. Her mother having passed, she began by asking her father, her sisters, her uncle, those in authority at the convent, her local bishop and finally the pope during a pilgrimage to Rome. She met Pope Leo XIII during the Jubilee Year of the 50th Anniversary of his ordination and asked him for permission to enter the convent. Instead of saying no, he reassured her that it would happen if it was God’s will. It was God’s will and during the season of Easter in 1888 she began religious life in the same convent that her two older sisters had already joined. In time a 4th sister would enter the Carmelite convent and a 5th would become Visitation sister.

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” The kingdom in its fullness is in heaven, but in the present the kingdom begins here and now on earth although only partially. If we take that question and apply it to the religious life of Therese, one may rightly ask, “who is greatest in the Carmel of Lisieux?”

While she lived, none of the sisters would have said it was Therese. In a convent where there was a premium on silent prayer, no one save God truly understood the depth of her love for God. As part of the spiritual discipline in the convent, Mother Agnes of Jesus, her own older sister Pauline, asked her to write about her life. When Therese died of tuberculosis at the age of 24, her spiritual autobiography, the Story of A Soul was circulated among other Carmelite convents and soon became so popular it was widely distributed outside of the Carmelite inner circle.

Through this spiritual masterpiece, others came to know of her deep love for God and learned from her simple yet profound ways of how they might grow in holiness as well. Doing the simple things of ordinary life, with a prayerful intention to do it for our Lord, was the key to teaching others the Little Way of Therese of Lisieux.

August 8, 1910,ⁱⁱ Pope Pius X lowered the age for receiving Holy Communion in the Roman Catholic Church to the age of reason having been convinced by the writings of Therese of Lisieux. “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Mt 19:14).

August 24, 1997, at the conclusion of World Youth Day in Paris, France, Pope John Paul II announced to the delight of everyone that he would name Therese a Doctor of the Church: Therese's teaching, a true science of love, is the luminous expression of her knowledge of the mystery of Christ and of her personal experience of grace; she helps the men and women of today, and she will help those of tomorrow, to be more aware of the gifts of God and spread the Good News of his infinite love... Saint Therese has a privileged place in the Church. Her eminent teaching deserves to be considered among the most fruitful. In response to many requests, and after attentive study, I have the joy to announce that on Mission Sunday... in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, I will proclaim Saint Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face a Doctor of the Church.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ saint-therese.org/life-of-st-therese/god-wills-st-thereses-audience-pope/

ⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican-prefect-says-todays-world-merits-lower-age-for-first-communicants

ⁱⁱⁱ littleflower.org/therese/doctor-of-the-church/pope-john-paul-ii-statement/