

May 2004

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Recommended Citation

Guarnere, Sarah (2004) "St. Terese of Lisieux: a Taste of Heaven on Earth," *Verbum*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol1/iss2/4>

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Upon my death I will let fall a shower of roses; I wish to spend my heaven in doing good upon the earth." This is the famous promise made by St Thérèse which, she fulfilled. Reading these words from my daily prayer book, this well known quotation is part of what *initially* intrigued me about the life of this heroic saint."

St. Terese of Lisieux: a Taste of Heaven on Earth

by

Sarah Guarnere

“Upon my death I will let fall a shower of roses; I wish to spend my heaven in doing good upon the earth.” This is the famous promise made by St Thérèse which, she fulfilled. Reading these words from my daily prayer book, this well known quotation is part of what *initially* intrigued me about the life of this heroic saint.

Francoise-Marie Therese was born January 2, 1873 in Normandy, France. She was the youngest of nine children, though only five of them (only daughters) survived past infancy. She had loving parents, Louis and Zélie Martin, both of whom are awaiting canonization now. In the early years, Louis owned a watch business, while her mother owned a lace business.

When Thérèse was only four years of age, her mother died of breast cancer. After her death, Louis sold his watch business to take over the lace business because it was more profitable. Zélie’s death was devastating to the family, especially Thérèse at such a young age. In her autobiography, Thérèse describes how her personality changed after her mother’s death. Until her death she displayed excitement like a child, while following Zélie’s death she became withdrawn and shy. Though Thérèse developed a very serious attitude, she did not become depressed.

After her mother’s death, the Martin family moved to Lisieux where they would be near their aunt, Madame Guérin. Despite being close to their aunt, the older Martin sisters primarily raised Thérèse. Pauline taught her the importance of religion, while Marie was in charge of running the household. Although, Thérèse was at a loss again when five years later, Pauline entered the convent. Shortly after Pauline’s admittance, Thérèse became very ill with a high fever; people thought she was dying. Through her

sufferings, she eventually felt God's consolation through Mary. According to Thérèse, the Blessed Virgin smiled at her and she was healed!

Another significant moment in Thérèse's life occurred on Christmas day, 1886. Thérèse was an overly sensitive individual who would cry very easily. On numerous occasions, she asked God to heal her from this weakness of hers. Her prayer was answered Dec. 25, 1886. She describes this as her conversion experience. In further detail she explains, "By becoming weak and little, for love of me, He made me strong and brave; he put His own weapons into my hands so that I went from strength to strength, beginning, if I may say so, 'to run as a giant (Bulfinch 268).'" With her conversion experience, she felt that God was preparing her to live out her vocation better.

By 1886, all of Thérèse's sisters had entered the convent except Celine. Shortly after her conversion, she expressed to her father her desire to enter the convent also. At first her father expressed some hesitation. In the video about Thérèse's life, she tries to set the stage by asking him how he felt when her sisters entered the convent. He said that it was an honor. Then when she asks him he says, "are you bored with me?" Thérèse answered "No, I'm in love with Christ." After a discussion, her father agreed to help her with the process. Though since she was only fifteen, there was no assurance that she would be admitted. This was a *very* long process, which included St Thérèse going before Pope Leo XIII in Rome to ask for permission. The pope's response was "You shall enter if it be God's will." At the end of 1888, God's will was done; Thérèse was granted permission to enter by the bishop. The majority of her life in the convent was focused on prayer and suffering. Thérèse preferred offering small daily sacrifices instead of performing great deeds.

In 1896 she became ill; she began coughing up a lot of blood. She endured it as a cross, refusing to tell anyone. Though because it grew so serious, people inevitably found out. It was at this time, that her sister Pauline ordered her to write down her memories of life, which later became known as *The Story of a Soul*. In 1897, she died of tuberculosis at the age of 24. Before she died she commented, “I will return. My heaven will be spent on earth.”

Thérèse’s most famous work by far is her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*. Thérèse provided a lot of insight to spirituality. Many times she used flowers as imagery. For instance, one question she struggled with during her life, then answered in her autobiography, dealt with why everyone is not given the same amount of gifts and talents. She writes:

For a long time I had been asking myself why souls did not all receive the same amount of grace. Jesus deigned to instruct me about this mystery. Before my eyes He placed the book of nature and I understood that all the flowers created by Him are beautiful . . . that, if all the little flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime garb. This is true of the world of souls, the Lord’s living garden. Perfection consists in doing His will.

(*Story of a Soul*)

In another section of her autobiography, she discussed her mental turmoil over her desire to become a martyr. She stated that the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the first epistle to the Corinthians provided some insight. Here is the biblical equivalence to the previous

imagery of the flowers and the world of souls. Not everyone can be an apostle, prophet or teacher but a variety of members make up the church. For instance, 1 Corinthians 12:14-15 states: “For the body itself is not made up of only one part, but of many parts. If the foot were to say because I am not a hand, I don’t belong to the body, that would not keep it from being a part of the body.” Many parts to the one body are needed for it to function properly. Therefore, if all souls were roses or daises, we would not have a complete body.

Thérèse is also quite well known for her work, *An Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*. Here, she describes how important it is for her to Love God and live her life accordingly. “In order to live in one single act of perfect Love, I offer myself as a victim of holocaust to your merciful love” (Act of Oblation 2). She uses a very poignant comparison: herself as victim of the holocaust. It is evident that words can’t describe the extent of her feelings. Therefore, she uses the closest images that the human mind might possibly understand. Thérèse is saying that she is willing to sacrifice anything, including her life and being torture to live God’s law of Love. Thérèse wrote this composition on June 9, 1895, Feast of the Most Holy Trinity. This was just two years before her death. On that day, Thérèse received a special grace at Mass, and felt that she should write about her experience. Though this is included in her *Story of a Soul*, the Act of Oblation to Merciful Love is a significant part of her autobiography.

The process of beatification began immediately after Thérèse’s death. Her promise of letting a shower of roses fall was confirmed; many miracles were attributed to her intercession. The Pope agreed to waive the 50 years usually needed in order to start the process. Therefore, in 1923 Pope Pius XI beatified her; two years later, he also

declared her a saint. In 1927, she was officially named the patroness of foreign missions (in conjunction with St Francis Xavier), and of the needs of Russia. Her connection with missions comes from her great love for them, though she was never a missionary because she lived in the cloistered Carmel convent once she entered. She prayed constantly in support of them, though. In 1997, Pope John Paul II officially declared her a Doctor of the Church. She is the third female Doctor of the Church.

Though Thérèse lived only reaching the age of 24, she has many themes in her life. Suffering is a prominent theme in her life. Thérèse first knew suffering at the young age of four when her mother died. This was only the beginning of what would become both spiritual and physical suffering. Thérèse longed to enter the convent at an early age though she was denied many times. How her soul was tossed! She also experienced a significant amount of physical pain. She was sick on many accounts, including coughing up blood sometimes.

Despite these circumstances, she refused to see a doctor. It was only until the very end of her life, when her sickness severely worsened, that she permitted a doctor to examine her. Thérèse didn't like to attract attention to her condition. Despite her immense pain, she maintained a pleasant disposition. Because of this, people sometimes thought that she was faking being sick.

Her numerous sufferings caused her to offer many sacrifices to God. She willfully offered the pain up to God, instead of dwelling on the pain that her body experienced. She believed that by offering up her sufferings as sacrifices to God, she would be closer to sanctity. In an excerpt from *Prayers and Meditations of Therese of Lisieux*, she describes sanctity by saying, "Sanctity lies not in saying beautiful things, or

even in thinking them, or feeling them; it lies in truly being willing to suffer. I suffer much but do I suffer well? That is the important thing” (catholic-forum.com). In this way, Thérèse believed that suffering brought us closer to God.

Love is also a theme that embodied her whole life; it was seen in every aspect of her life; as a child, through her sufferings, and the end of her life. For instance, according to her autobiography, she says “From the age of three years, I have refused nothing to the good God” (Combes 7). Though, before entering Carmel, she worried about her vocation. Desperately seeking to do the will of God, she had many questions that were left unanswered. Through God’s help, eight years after she entered the convent, she was able to discern her vocation. She describes it in the following way:

I feel in me the vocation of the Priest. I have the vocation of an Apostle. Martyrdom was the dream of my youth and this dream has grown with me. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I desired to see myself in them all. Charity gave me the key to now understand that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with love. I understood that Love comprised all vocations, that Love was everything; it embraced all times and places . . . in a way it was eternal! Then in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: o Jesus, my Love . . . my vocation I have found it . . . my vocation is Love!

(catholic.org 3)

In this way, Thérèse understood that though she had deep desires to become a priest and a martyr, neither was directly what God had in mind for her. She wanted to be a priest to serve God wholeheartedly, but she realized that it didn't take a priest to serve God intensely, with all your heart. In a similar way, she wrote how she wanted to be a martyr (where she would die for her faith), but God knew the desires of her heart better than she. Jean Lafrance makes an excellent point in analyzing these words Thérèse spoke, within his book, *My Vocation is Love*: "Her role was not to evangelize, nor teach, nor undergo martyrdom, but to interiorize Love in the heart of the Church in order to sanctify it from within, just as the heart propels the blood throughout the whole body" (Lafrance 170). God gave her a specific role in His plan: a simple yet profound vocation, love. She interiorized love in ways such as her sufferings that others could not visibly see at the time. In effect, she had a "behind the scenes" role in the Church, yet a just as important if not more essential vocation.

So the question remains: how did she love? She, herself explains the details, "Well, the little child will throw flowers . . . I have no other means of showing my love but by throwing flowers, that is I will not let one little sacrifice escape, not one look, not one word, I will profit from all the little things and do them out of love" (Lafrance 172). In this way, she showed her love through the eyes of a child in every present moment. It was the "*little* things," the "*simple* things" that she emphasized and concentrated on. She realized that she was, in effect, a little child who could offer a lot of little sacrifices, but who depended solely on her Father. She felt she was so little that she told God, "I feel that if it were possible for you to find a soul weaker than mine, littler than mine, you

would be pleased to grant it still greater graces, if it abandoned itself with absolute confidence to your infinite mercy” (Lafrance 172).

Thus, her “Little Way” came about. It was a life style that was based on trust and total abandonment to God. Her thoughts are in accordance with the teachings in the Bible regarding child-like faith. Matthew 18:2 says, “Amen, I say to you, unless you are like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” Another reference is in Proverbs 9:4, where it says, “Whosoever is a little one, let him come to Me.” Thérèse certainly lived the essence of these verses.

Is Thérèse’s vocation of love so unlike our own vocation? I recall God’s two greatest commandments, both embody love. Jesus explains further in Matthew 22:37-40: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two.” What sets Thérèse so apart from others? She responded to her vocation with her whole mind, heart, body and soul.

Prayer is also a major theme seen all throughout her life. Thérèse describes prayer best when she says: “For me, prayer is an uplifting of the heart, a simple glance directed towards heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and of love in the midst of trial as well as joy, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus” (Lafrance 104). For Thérèse, prayer came directly from the heart. She noted that though written prayers are definitely worthy of merit, she preferred to talk to God through her heart. She told God that she simply would not be able to pray all the beautiful prayers that she

would find if she searched for them. She again compared herself to a child by saying, “I do like children who do not know how to read” (*Story of a Soul*).

The most significant attribute I learned from St. Thérèse is how to trust in God. Before reading about St Thérèse, I never knew what trust *truly* meant. I would say the words, but not truly mean it from my heart. Or, I would trust God *partly*. In addition to praying to St Thérèse, there is a prayer not written by her, but reminds me so much of her idea of being a child, trusting to rely on her father. It says:

Dear Jesus, teach me to trust only in the power of You, Your Father,
and the Holy Spirit. I surrender my will to You. In this surrender I
accept that Your grace controls the future. I understand that You
love me and want only my good-my salvation. I resolve to live in
the present and await whatever You may plan for me in the future.

I will trust in Your plans and Divine Will for me. Amen.

(Sweeney-Kyle 18)

Basically, it says Jesus, I am your servant and I am listening to You. Help me do Your will; I trust in You always. It is acknowledging that God is in charge and surrendering yourself to Him. That is how St Thérèse lived her whole life. She acknowledged that he is in charge and trusted in Him like a child needing his Daddy. I heard somebody call their journey in life, “the Jesus trust walk.” I believe this is what Thérèse did, and what I try to do. It is *not* knowing, but having *faith* that God will direct you on your journey.

I also admire how she is one of the three female Doctors of the Church. Thérèse herself writes that she didn't found any orders or start any mission; she says that she did no GREAT works. In the eyes of God, that didn't matter because all of her little acts she did, she did them out of love for God. Though few people knew her during her lifetime, because she was a cloistered nun, this extraordinary person reached millions of people through her autobiography and canonization process.

One question I wonder is why God picked her to live in Normandy, France during the 1880s instead of an earlier point in history or possibly later? You may say why not? Sometimes I wonder why or how God decided for me to live at this point in history. I love my parents and sisters and would not consider switching, even if given the chance, but it would be neat to look at God's plan through *His* eyes to see why He put us on Earth, when He did, and at the location that He created us at. God's plan is probably so complex for my mind to even understand a parcel of it, but it does not keep me from thinking about it.

In thanksgiving for the many petitions that God has answered through the intercession of my patron saint, Thérèse of Lisieux, I write this poem in her honor.

The Rose

Crimson petals licking the interior of my nose;
What a scent—that sweet-smelling, heavenly perfume!
Who shall send such sanctity?
A little girl plucked from this world;
Elevated to her destiny
Love envelopes her soul
Love emancipates mine.

St. Thérèse intercede for us.

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