

FOREWORD

by Bishop Robert Barron



Outside the little French town of Lisieux, there stands an enormous and elaborately decorated basilica dedicated to a very simple woman who is also one of the most extraordinary saints of the Church. Thérèse was a cloistered Carmelite nun who died at the age of twenty-four and who at her death was known only to her family and her fellow sisters in the convent. One of her sisters, in fact, wondered what they could possibly write about her in the obituary that would circulate among the other French Carmelites. Yet within a few years of her death, Thérèse had a worldwide reputation, and within decades of her passing, she was declared a saint and eventually a Doctor of the Church. How do we begin to explain this? We have to start with the book you hold in your hands: her spiritual autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, which Thérèse wrote at the prompting of her superior in the last years of her life.

I will confess that when I first read *Story of a Soul*, I was not particularly impressed. Like many others, I found it overly sentimental, and as a post-Freudian, I was only too willing to see in its girlish spiritual enthusiasms evidence of neuroses and repressions. But then I noticed that a number of great intellectuals loved Thérèse. Among her cultivated admirers were Dorothy Day, Edith Stein, Thomas Merton, John Paul II, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. When I was a doctoral student in Paris, I attended a seminar conducted by my thesis director, Fr. Michel Corbin, a brilliant Jesuit specialist in medieval thought. Corbin commented that the French do not refer to Thérèse of Lisieux as “the Little Flower,” as Anglophones do, but rather as *la petite Thérèse* (the little

Thérèse), in order to distinguish her from *la grande Thérèse* (the great Thérèse—that is, Teresa of Avila). But then he added, “After many years of reading both saints, I realize that Thérèse of Lisieux is really *la grande Thérèse*.” I knew then that I had to take a second look.

Thérèse was born on January 2, 1873, the youngest child of Louis and Zélie Martin, two extremely devout members of the French middle class. By her own admission, Thérèse’s early childhood was arcadian. A beautiful girl, she was doted on by everyone, especially her father. He was her *petit roi* (little king) and she was his *petite reine* (little queen). She entered happily into the intensely religious rhythms and practices of the Martin household, and from a very early age, she had the intuition that she would enter the Carmelite convent and become a nun. The idyll of her childhood came to an abrupt end with the death of her mother in 1877, when Thérèse was only four. In the wake of this trauma, the little Thérèse became moody and withdrawn, “sensitive to an excessive degree.” The full effect of her mother’s death on Thérèse would become clear when Pauline, her older sister and substitute mother, decided to enter religious life. After Pauline disappeared behind the walls of the convent, Thérèse experienced a strange malady, with both physical and psychological symptoms, some of them frightening. Here is Thérèse’s own simple description of this awful period: “I was absolutely terrified by everything.” She came, in time, to see this period of her life as a testing and a purging. What was being purged, she concluded, were precisely her narcissism and her fussy self-absorption.

What finally saved her from this suffering was a manifestation of grace. On May 13, 1883, Thérèse was bedridden, utterly debilitated physically and psychologically. She noticed a statue of the Blessed Mother, which had recently been placed in her room. She was struck by the ravishing beauty of Mary, especially by the Virgin’s smile. Somehow, as she registered that smile and allowed it to permeate her being, all of her physical and psychological symptoms left her, and she was healed. How does one explain this extraordinary incident? I suppose it could be examined under any number of rubrics, but what matters is

that Thérèse appreciated it as a manifestation of God's grace—which is to say, God's unmerited love. Without any prompting from us, not as a reward for our efforts, even while we are helpless, God breaks into our hearts and changes us. After she had come of age, Thérèse emerged as one of the great “doctors of grace” in the Catholic tradition, once comparing herself to a little child who, knowing her deep incapacity to please the Lord by her own exertions, stands before him and simply lifts up her arms, hoping to be raised up.

The next major step in Thérèse's spiritual journey was, again, a small, private affair, nothing to which a conventional biographer would think of drawing attention. It took place on Christmas Day 1886. There was a custom in the Martin household that just after Midnight Mass, on Christmas morning, the children would draw from their shoes little gifts that their father had placed in them. Thérèse loved this ritual and was especially delighted by her father's active participation in it. But on this particular Christmas morning, just before the commencement of the ritual, Thérèse went upstairs to fetch something, and when she was presumably thought to be out of earshot, her father said, “Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!” Normally, such a comment coming from her father would have broken Thérèse's heart, but something quietly miraculous happened: Thérèse calmly decided not to take offense and to respond in love. Suppressing her feelings of disappointment, she calmly descended the stairs and, with unfeigned sincerity and enthusiasm, entered into the family ritual. Certainly a simple scene, but when read through spiritual eyes, it was momentous precisely because it represented the breakthrough of God's love into Thérèse's heart—suddenly, unbidden, changing her in an instant.

In the wake of this Christmas conversion, Thérèse resolved with renewed intensity to enter Carmel. Her early desire to be a religious now became a burning conviction. For nine years, until her death at twenty-four, she never left the confines of that simple place and lived the austere life of a Carmelite religious. In the course of those years, she cultivated a spiritual path that she came to call “the little way.” It was

not the path of her great Carmelite forebears Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, not the method suited for spiritual athletes, but a way that any simple believer could follow. It had a good deal to do with spiritual childhood, becoming little in the presence of God the Father: dependent, hopeful, waiting to receive gifts. It also involved a willingness to do simple and ordinary things out of great love: little acts of kindness, small sacrifices graciously accepted, putting up with annoying people. One of the most entertaining and spiritually illuminating sections of *Story of a Soul* is Thérèse's account of her infinitely patient dealings with a cranky old nun to whom she had been assigned as a helper. Every kindness of Thérèse was met with correction and signs of displeasure on the part of the old lady, but still the younger nun persisted in love. "O Jesus, my Love," Thérèse writes in another pivotal entry. "My *vocation*, at last I have found it. . . . MY VOCATION IS LOVE! . . . In the heart of the Church . . . I shall be *Love*." That is the little way, which continues to beguile millions around the world.

As I said, like many others, I first reacted negatively to the overly emotional, sentimental style of Thérèse of Lisieux, but even the most skeptical readers are usually won over by the account of her terrible struggle with unbelief at the very end of her life. This intense spiritual suffering coincided almost exactly with the onset of the tuberculosis that would eventually take her life. What began to plague Thérèse were terrible doubts concerning the existence of heaven. Like Hamlet, she began to wonder whether anything followed "the sleep of death." And this was no passing bout of intellectual scrupulosity; it lasted up until the moment of her death. What is especially interesting is that Thérèse interpreted this struggle not as dumb suffering but as a participation in the pain experienced by many of her contemporaries who did not believe in God: "During those very joyful days of the Easter season, Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who have no faith. . . . He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness."

Before she died at age twenty-four on September 30, 1897, Thérèse remarked, "I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth." Her

intercessory power has been manifested in the lives of many, including my own. The Little Flower has been a personal friend for a long time, and we adopted her very early as the patroness of Word on Fire. Whenever we found ourselves in a difficult situation—with money, delays, permissions, practical problems—we would call upon her, and a staggering number of times, solutions would more or less present themselves. In time, every member of our team would start to notice these “Little Flower moments.” We dedicated the *CATHOLICISM* film series to her, and we launched the Word on Fire Institute on her feast day. We continue to rely on her heavenly help to this day.

As you read this classic of the Catholic spiritual tradition—whether for the first time or the hundredth—may you be opened to the great love of the little way, and seek the intercession of the Little Flower, *la grande Thérèse*.