

## St Thérèse of Lisieux: 'I just love Him'

### **Biography**

St Thérèse of Lisieux was born of well-to-do and devout parents, her early years were very protected. She lost her mother at 3 ½ years. She experienced a mysterious illness from which she was cured when the family statue of Our Lady smiled at her. She had a prolonged bout of scruples, and suffered from the departure of her two elder Sisters (who had become surrogate Mothers to her) into Carmel. She herself entered Carmel at the young age of 15, after a family trip to Rome to try to persuade the Pope to give her his special permission. Life in Carmel was challenging as the community had become rather relaxed, the way authority operated was trying, and many sisters had difficult personalities. Her biggest Cross was her father's mental incapacitation, which people said (in her hearing) was precipitated by the departure of his youngest, favourite daughter into Carmel. She died at 24 of tuberculosis after much suffering, valiantly accepted to save souls. She is now Patroness of the Missions and the youngest of the Doctors of the Church.

### **What is Prayer?**

St Thérèse writes:

‘For me prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and of love, embracing both trial and joy. It's a vast, supernatural force which opens out my heart, and unites me closely to Jesus’ (*Story of a Soul*, 11).

Gratitude plays a central part in Thérèse's doctrine. She explains:

‘It is the spirit of gratitude which draws down upon us the overflow of God's grace, for no sooner have we thanked him for one blessing than He hastens to send us ten additional favours in return. Then when we show gratitude for these gifts, He multiplies His benedictions to such a degree that there seems to be a constant stream of divine grace coming our way. This has been my own personal experience. Try it out for yourself and see. For all our Lord is constantly giving me, my gratitude is boundless, and I try to prove it to Him in a thousand different ways’ (Celine Martin, *My Sister, Thérèse*, ch. 4).

### **Dryness**

Thérèse experienced a lack of consolation in her life of prayer, and during the last 18 months of her life a total obscuring of her faith. In these circumstances she sometimes said an Our Father and a Hail Mary very slowly. She particularly asked Our Lady's help to prepare her to receive Holy Communion, perhaps unknowingly after the manner of St Louis de Montfort. Most books left her dry apart from *The Imitation of Christ*, and the Gospels:

‘It is especially the Gospels which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings’ (*Story of a Soul*, ch 8).

‘Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct our souls. He, the Teacher of Teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard Him speak, yet I know He is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in. This is not as a rule during my prayers, but in the midst of my daily duties’ (*Story of a Soul*, ch. 8).

In Letter 122 she writes,

‘O Lord, when I feel nothing, when I am incapable of praying or practising virtue, then is the moment to look for small occasions, nothings, to give You pleasure. For example, a smile, a friendly word, when I should much prefer to say nothing at all or look bored... When I find no occasions at least I want to keep telling You that I love You; it is not difficult and it keeps the fire of love going; even if that fire were to seem wholly out, I should throw little bits of straw on the ashes, little acts of virtue and of charity; and I am sure that, with Your help, the fire would be enkindled again.’

Thérèse taught her novices that when you know you’ve done your best to please Him by serving Him and your neighbour, you come to Him with greater confidence and closeness in the special hours of prayer.

### **Intercession**

Thérèse entered Carmel in order to save souls, and especially to do so by praying for priests. She believed in the power of prayer, which ‘like a queen’ ‘has access at all times to the Royal Presence and can get whatever it asks for’ (*Story of a Soul*). ‘It is only through prayer and sacrifice that we can be useful to the Church’. Thérèse prayed:

‘O Jesus, I beg You to draw me into the fire of Your love and to unite me so closely to You that You may live and act in me’ (MS C, *Story of a Soul*).

‘As I have two brothers [missionary priests she prayed for] and my little sisters, the novices, the days would be too short were I to ask in detail for the needs of each soul, and I fear I might forget something important. Simple souls cannot understand complicated methods, and, as I am one of their number, Our Lord has inspired me with a very simple way of fulfilling my obligations. One day, after Holy Communion, He made me understand these words of the Canticles: "Draw me: we will run after You to the fragrance of Your ointments." O my Jesus, there is no need to say: "In drawing me, draw also the souls that I love": these words, "Draw me," suffice. When a soul has let herself be taken captive by the inebriating odour of Your perfumes, she cannot run alone; as a natural consequence of her attraction towards You, the souls of all those she loves are drawn in her train’ (*Story of a Soul*, ch 11).

‘I tell God quite simply what I want, without any splendid turns of phrase and He always manages to understand me’ (*Story of a Soul*, ch 10).

### **‘I just love Him’**

St Thérèse’s sister Celine cared for her in her last stages of her illness. She writes:

‘I used to try to look in on her several times during the night. Once I found her with her hands joined and her eyes raised to heaven. ‘What are you doing?’ I asked. ‘You should try to get some sleep’. ‘I cannot’ she replied ‘for I am suffering too much, so I am praying’. ‘And what are you saying to Jesus?’ ‘I say nothing. I just love Him’ (*My Sister, Thérèse*).

She may have thought she was not praying, but in truth she is entering the ranks of those whom Pope Pius XII was to describe as a ‘no longer persons who pray but *living prayers*’ (Jan 17, 1943).

### **Sacrifice**

Thérèse understood that prayer must be backed up by sacrifice. This was her little way – to shower Jesus with a continuous stream of ‘little nothings’, smiles, hidden privations, work, pain and

humiliations cheerfully accepted, choosing the lowest, the worst, the least, the hardest – simply to please Him. ‘O Lord You have made me understand that it is through the Cross You will give me souls.’ She had sacrificed her longing to be a missionary believing she could achieve more for the Church in the cloister of Carmel, never seeing the fruit of her prayers:

‘My brothers labour in my stead while I ... stay close to the Throne and love Thee for all those who are in the strife. I love, that is I pray, suffer and sacrifice for them’ (*Story of a Soul*, ch 13).

Fr Gabriel expands this truth:

‘Christ has purchased our souls at the price of His precious Blood; and whoever wishes to collaborate with Him in the salvation of mankind, should be willing to unite to the most precious Blood of Christ some drops of his own blood. Souls cost dearly, and an apostle must pay with himself for those he wants to win. The apostolate is true and fruitful in the measure in which it is imbued with suffering, which is the fruit of immolation’ (*Divine Intimacy*, ch 326).

So, at the end of Thérèse’s life, when we see her stretched out on the Cross which was her sickbed, dying of asphyxiation like her Master, no longer able ‘*to pray*’ it can truly be said that like Jesus she has ‘*become prayer*’. The words of King David prophesying about Our Lord on the Cross become true of souls like Thérèse who choose to follow Him all the way:

‘In return for my friendship they accuse me,  
but *I am prayer*’ (Psalm 109.4)<sup>1</sup>

**by Dolgellau Carmel, Wales**

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<sup>1</sup> Retreat by Canon John Udris, 2016.