



St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus (St. Thérèse of Lisieux)



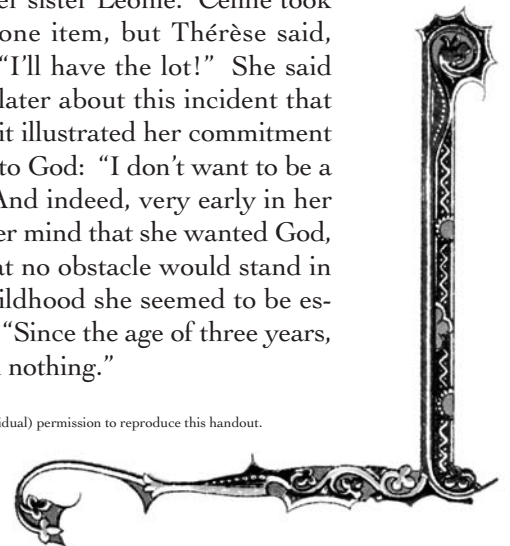
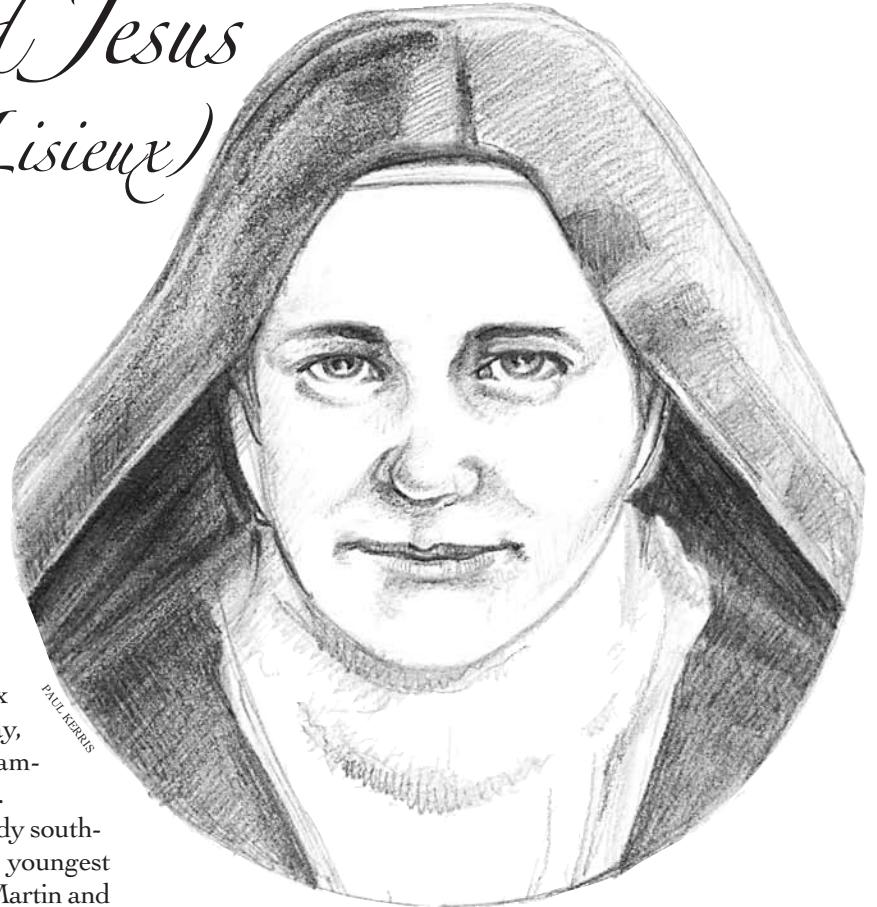
BORN 1873; DIED 1897
VIRGIN, RELIGIOUS, AND DOCTOR
OF THE CHURCH
FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 1

ONCE when Jesus' disciples asked him who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus replied: *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven"* (Mt 18:3-4). St. Thérèse of Lisieux exemplified this in an extraordinary way, and in so doing has become an unexampled spiritual teacher to all Christians.

Born at Alençon, a town in Normandy southwest of Paris, France, Thérèse was the youngest of nine children of watchmaker Louis Martin and lacemaker Zélie Guérin, deeply Catholic parents who created a family known for its holiness and their intense love for one another (both of her parents and several of her sisters may be declared saints by the Catholic Church in the future). They taught their surviving five daughters to love God with simple and heartfelt devotion. Thérèse nearly died twice in her first three months of life, and her family sent her to live in a more rural environment, which had a wonderful effect upon her health although it was also her first of many experiences of loss. At fifteen months, she was returned to her family, full of life and joy. The spoiled favorite of her entire extended family, she was intelligent, impressionable, lively, and beau-

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tiful, with a sparkling personality. She was also vain, stubborn, strong-willed, and given to tantrums. When little, she and her next-older sister Céline were once offered some outgrown playthings by their older sister Léonie. Céline took one item, but Thérèse said, "I'll have the lot!" She said later about this incident that it illustrated her commitment to God: "I don't want to be a saint by halves." And indeed, very early in her life, she made up her mind that she wanted God, God alone, and that no obstacle would stand in her way. From childhood she seemed to be established in grace: "Since the age of three years, I have refused God nothing."



Thérèse was not even five when her mother died. This loss resulted in the family's move north to Lisieux so that the Guérins could help raising the children. Thérèse's personality changed overnight. She became listless, and for ten years she was shy, quiet, oversensitive, teary, and a loner except within the family. She drew close to her father, himself by temperament a loner. She was enrolled at a Benedictine school at eight but, although an excellent student and already better educated than her classmates, she avoided everyone. She later called the five years she spent there as the saddest of her life. Subsequently, her education was entrusted to a private tutor.

Thérèse's sister Pauline, who had become her second mother, entered the Carmelite convent of Lisieux when Thérèse was nine, driving her further inside herself. Several weeks later, she began having constant headaches, and the following Easter, she fell ill. After seven weeks, her older sister Marie knelt before a statue of the Blessed Mother in Thérèse's sickroom and frantically begged the Blessed Mother to save her littlest sister. Thérèse joined her sister in prayer, saw a vision of the Blessed Mother whose smile was breathtakingly radiant, and immediately began recuperating.

Following her ecstatic First Communion at age eleven (then the usual age), Thérèse's spiritual life underwent two changes. First, instead

of merely accepting suffering, she now began to desire it. Second, she began to suffer from self-doubt and scruples (an exaggerated sense of sinfulness), which lasted in its most serious form for a year but continued to be a problem for the rest of her life. Sanctity became a struggle. However, she had already begun her detachment from earthly things, reminding herself that "life is your barque and not your home." This detachment was strengthened when Marie followed Pauline into the Carmelite convent when Thérèse was thirteen. On Christmas Eve shortly before her fourteenth birthday, she experienced a conversion and felt that the helpless newborn Jesus had restored her childhood strength that she had before her mother's death. One consequence was the blossoming of an ardent charity. Hearing about a unrepentant condemned man, she decided to pray for him, and later read of his remorse just before his head was put in the noose. This greatly strengthened her desire to save souls.

Several months after Thérèse's fourteenth birthday, she told her father that she felt called to enter the Carmelite convent at Lisieux. Her youth and a general rule of the order that no more than two members of a family be allowed in the same convent were barriers that she could not surmount for many months. The priest responsible for the convent, however, allowed her to appeal to her bishop, and Thérèse, who put her hair up to make herself seem older,



Little Flower, by Timothy Schmalz

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at least did not receive from him an immediate response. While she waited for his answer, her father took her and Céline on a group pilgrimage to Rome. Her stubborn determination led her to disobey the order to pilgrims not to speak to the Pope during their audience (he had by then become very tired in his old age), and as she knelt for his blessing, she tearfully pleaded for permission to enter the convent. Pope Leo XIII instructed her to obey her bishop, and added, "You will enter if God wills it." The day before her fifteenth birthday, she received the bishop's permission, and three months later she entered the convent, joining her two sisters and twenty-four other nuns and taking as her name in religion Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face.

Thérèse lived the remaining nine and a half years of her life as a Carmelite nun. Although she adapted to convent life as though she had been born to it, she experienced severe treatment from her first prioress and the usual difficulties of living in a small community. It was in this environment that she perfected her "little way," which she developed after reflecting: "The good God would not inspire unattainable desires. I may then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. I cannot make myself greater; I must bear with myself just as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek a way to Heaven, a new way, very short, very straight, a little path.... I am too little to go up the steep steps of perfection." This perfection she found in doing the everyday duties and tasks of her life with great love. She lived the austere Carmelite rule exactly. She was socia-

ble even when she didn't want to be, and was especially kind and charitable to the nuns she didn't want to be near. She bore in silence the cold winters. She was distracted by the clacking rosary of another nun until she decided to listen to it as music and then offer this music to God. She withdrew from close contact with her big sisters. Still highly sensitive, she was often hurt, and silently offered these hurts to Jesus for the conversion of sinners, for priests, and for the missions. She constantly sought to efface herself and told none of the other nuns of her "little way," yet, by example alone, she reformed and restored her community to a stricter observance of the rule.

At twenty, Thérèse was appointed assistant mistress of novices. She had a dream of undertaking missionary work and even yearned for martyrdom, but when invited to a Carmelite convent

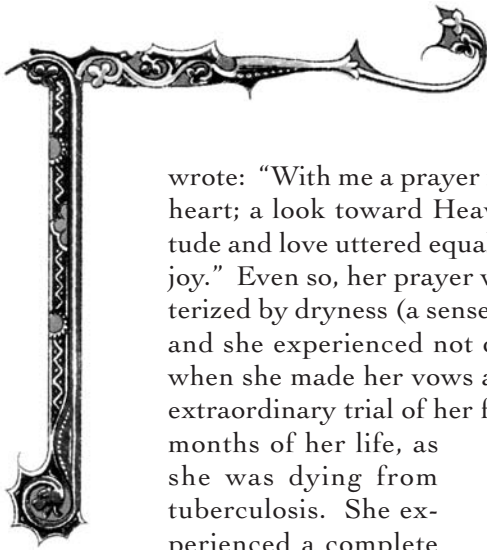
in Hanoi, French Indochina (modern Vietnam), she had already fallen ill with tuberculosis. By then, however, she had discovered her true vocation: "O Jesus, my Love, my vocation, at last I have found it. MY VOCATION IS LOVE!" This had followed some months after the only mystical experience of her life, when she had offered herself as a "holocaust of love." In this act of perfect love, she completely abandoned herself to God's infinite mercy, in utterly simple and radically humble self-surrender.

Thérèse read Scripture deeply and loved liturgical prayer, but simple, spontaneous prayer was an important element in her relationship with God. She



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St. Thérèse as a teenager before entering the Carmelite convent



wrote: "With me a prayer is a lifting up of the heart; a look toward Heaven; a cry of gratitude and love uttered equally in sorrow and in joy." Even so, her prayer was usually characterized by dryness (a sense of God's absence), and she experienced not only severe doubts when she made her vows at seventeen but an extraordinary trial of her faith also in the last months of her life, as she was dying from tuberculosis. She experienced a complete spiritual darkness and feared that she had lived for nothing and thrown away her life on a delusion. She clung desperately to faith, revealing to her sisters only a cheerful face and silly jokes even in the last stages of her illness, when she was constantly vomiting, suffering from gangrene and bedsores, and gasping for breath. In fact, throughout her life, her pursuit of sanctity never quenched her joy or sense of fun.

Thérèse's spiritual masterpiece, *Story of a Soul*, exists because she was a wonderful storyteller and because her sister Pauline as prioress

instructed her, in obedience, to set down the story of her childhood. This was followed by the story of her life in the convent, written at the instruction of Pauline's successor shortly before Thérèse's death. *Story of a Soul* gave Thérèse's "little way" to the world.

Thérèse did not believe in mediocrity. Once she determined to be a saint, to love God with all she had, she held nothing back. But she also knew "that to do good without God's help is as impossible as to make the sun shine at night." She had such absolute confidence in God's love for her that she accepted being a child in his arms, loving him totally in return. She has

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become known as the "Little Flower," because she saw herself as just a tiny flower in God's garden. She wrote, "He willed to create great souls comparable to lilies and roses, but he has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God's glances when he looks down at his feet. Perfection consists in doing his will, in being what he wills us to be."

