

THE PATH OF SIMPLICITY: ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

“Opposites attract,” they say, though I myself have never bought into that sentiment. I’ll be blunt— I have very, very little in common with **Thérèse of Lisieux**. Known as the Little Flower, Thérèse entered religious life at just 15 years of age, not all together uncommon in those days, just as boys entered seminaries in high school. But much beyond that, it is difficult to find anything **typical** about her life. Born in Normandy France in 1873, she spent most of her first year with a nurse because her mother had breast cancer. Last week, I noted that Teresa of Avila’s mother died when she was 14. Thérèse experienced the same sadness, but at the **age of four!** Later, when her older sister entered a convent, Thérèse was crushed for she had been like a mother to her. She even suffered what we today might call a breakdown for a period of two months.

Still, according to Carmelite **Fr. John Russell’s** respected biography of her life, Thérèse had a powerful experience on Christmas Eve 1886 that would change her life. And it happened during the quiet thanksgiving prayer after Holy Communion. “I felt **charity enter my soul,**” she wrote. Her intense sensitivity to criticism waned and she became spiritually and emotionally strong. Less than one month before the Diocese of St. Paul became an Archdiocese, she entered religious life at the Carmel to join her sister who had joined six years earlier. She made her vows on the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, Sep. 8, 1890. She volunteered to work in the **convent’s laundry** when no one else did. She agreed to personally assist an elderly nun who was, to be frank, **perpetually grumpy**. All small things, but in doing them cheerfully and with great love, they become the “stuff” of sanctity. These things came out during the process for her canonization. Priests testified about her incredible grasp of scripture.

During Holy Week of 1896, she received the first indication that she had contracted tuberculosis— there was no cure then. She suffered for the next year-and-a-half before succumbing on September 30, 1897 at the age of just 24. Russell describes her spirituality as both theocentric and Christocentric. Jesus was her everything. Since she felt her natural gifts were somewhat lacking and she was unable to perform the bodily mortifications in vogue with some, she discerned that what she **could do** was her own “little way.” She could do the small things: a smile, a chore, a word of encouragement. And herein lies her **genius**. Holiness consists more in doing ordinary things with extraordinary love than it does in doing extraordinary things. Yes, some saints and mystics recorded incredible visions and authored valuable treatises on the spiritual life. But that is not the totality of holiness and Thérèse arrived at the perfect moment to point this out.

Her approach to the spiritual life was not the common one. In her day, emphasis centered upon Divine Justice and bodily mortification. It led to a heretical movement. **Jansenism** was a dangerous heresy in France, carrying with it an unfettered moral rigorism. Prevalent in the 17th-18th centuries, it stubbornly clung to life long after it was condemned. Ironically, it is named after a theology professor (and later bishop) at the renowned Louvain University in Belgium who himself was doctrinally orthodox. What happened **after he died** gave rise to the heresy. Imagine if a heresy were named after you due to how later generations interpreted your works! Jansenism was a **complicated set** of teachings that got into the weeds about how God’s grace works in our souls and whether we can resist it.

This is one of the most complex areas of Catholic theology – the interaction between free will and grace. Oxford professor Msgr. Ronald Knox’s tome, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (1950) brilliantly captures the movement. The English convert and later Catholic priest paid a hefty price for his conversion— his father cut him out of his will. In our seminary course on the theology of grace, from a list of a half-dozen books, we were to select one and write a comprehensive report. My **classmates** all chose the **shortest** book on the list. Me? Feeling adventuresome, I chose the longest, 622 pages of **small print!** I guess that’s my “simple way.” But I couldn’t resist, and I was rewarded with a fascinating account, the product of **thirty years** of his research. The corollaries of Jansenism included stern asceticism and moral rigorism, a dangerous combo plate for the soul. It swept across Europe, especially in convents and monasteries.

Thankfully, Thérèse viewed God in a **refreshingly different** manner as chronicled in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*. “How could anyone be afraid of a God who became a child?” It is that incredible trust, a simple

and enduring trust that so many, like me, struggle to obtain. She didn't get bogged down in the footnotes of life, but remained perpetually child-like and **joyous**, even in her suffering. This may just be her lasting legacy. Have you become bogged down with worry, exasperation and the weight of society's ills on your shoulders? If so, St. Thérèse of Lisieux has a **simple message** for you and me—approach God in humble simplicity and trust. Allow his love to fill you with joy. It is only love that will transform our hearts. If we heed their wisdom, the Church and society will be in a much different, and better place. This concludes my five-part series on the female doctors of the Church. It has been a joy to honor them.

- **Pope Francis** addressed our nation's civil unrest in his weekly General Audience: "My friends, we cannot tolerate or turn a **blind eye to racism** and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life. At the same time, we have to recognize that the **violence of recent nights** is self-destructive and self-defeating. Nothing is gained by violence and so much is lost."
- From the "If I were pope for a day" desk—bring back the **Octave of Pentecost**. It is a shame that the Octave was abolished at Vatican II. The entire week focused on **themes related to the Holy Spirit** in the life of the Church. Yes, technically, we are allowed to read the Pentecost readings now on Monday and Tuesday, but no one does. Pentecost must not be seen as an end, but as a beginning.
- Our protocols worked very well for our first weekend of public Masses and I thank you for observing the seating map. It works. By allowing larger (4+) households to sit in **RED** sections, pew space is maximized, while ensuring proper distancing. We did turn people away (250 max) at the 10:00 Mass, but not at any others.
- I'm the polar opposite of a night owl, but when glancing out the rectory window last Sunday morning at **1:30 a.m.** it was **reassuring** to see six police cars in our parking lot. While that may have been a convenient staging area, I know that they were also looking out for our Cathedral and for this I am truly grateful. I would have thanked them in person, but it would have broken curfew!
- Finally, after **more than two months** (due to Covid-19 restrictions), I was able to **visit my mother** in her senior apartment. In the **very first** cribbage deal, I drew a **24 hand**. (4-4-5-5-6). She immediately advised me that my next visit would take place in August! Sore loser!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector