

## **Lecture 7. Therese de Lisieux's Autobiography: The Story of a Soul**

**Overview:** Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) is one of the most popular saints in the Catholic calendar. What accounts for her particular piety, popularity, and range of influence? In this topic, we will explore these aspects of her sainthood largely through the lens of autobiography. First, we will look at the facts of her life before exploring her famous work, *The Story of a Soul*.

**1. The Martin Family and Therese's Childhood:** *The Story of the Soul* of one Sister Therese de Lisieux originates as an autobiography commissioned by the Prioress of the Carmel at Lisieux and became a spiritual classic. "I am now at a time of life when I can look back on my past, for my soul has been refined in the crucible of interior and exterior trials. Now, like a flower after the storm, I can raise my head and see that the words of the psalm are realized in me: 'The Lord is my Shepherd and there is nothing that I shall want' " (*The Story of a Soul* by St. Therese of Lisieux, trans. T.N. Taylor, 1912, chapter 1).

One of nine daughters born to Louis and Azelie Martin (both of whom have been beatified) - five of whom would become nuns, four of them Carmelites and the remaining four failing to survive infancy - Therese was the "little queen" who took the name of Sister Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face.

From the outset the family was impressed by Therese's precocity: "I should have liked at this time to practice mental prayer, but Marie, finding me sufficiently devout, only let me say my vocal prayers. A mistress at the Abbey asked me once what I did on holidays, when I stayed at home. I answered timidly: "I often hide myself in a corner of my room where I can shut myself in with the bed curtains, and then I think:" "But what do you think about?" said the good nun, laughing. I think about the Good God, about the shortness of life, and about eternity: in a word, I think' " (*The Story of a Soul* by St. Therese of Lisieux. trans. T.N. Taylor. 1912, chapter 2).

**II. The "Little Way":** But she did more than ponder the mysteries of God and existence. She saw every moment, every ordinary task, each emotion surfacing during the day, each insult or injury borne, every misunderstanding accepted, as a way of loving God. This approach became known as the "Little Way" and is the defining feature of her spirituality.

In an article exploring the connection between Dorothy Day and St. Therese, writer and publisher Robert Ellsberg nicely condenses the appealing uniqueness of the

Theresian method: "Therese had devised a spirituality that consisted of performing all the small deeds and obligations of our daily life in a spirit of love and in the presence of God. In this way, our everyday life, with its constant opportunities to practice patience, forgiveness, and compassion, could become an arena for holiness. Therese furthermore believed strongly in the spiritual connections that bind all members of the mystical body. There was no telling what affect our prayers and small sacrifices could have around the globe on people we might never meet" (Robert Ellsberg, "Dorothy Day and the Little Way," Liguorian, September 2014).

### **III. Holiness in Littleness:** Therese was

- Persistent: She implored Pope Leo XIII directly to overrule the restrictions for entry into a Carmel.
- Resilient: Although she longed to be a priest and preside at the Eucharist, she chose freely to live as a cloistered Bride of Christ
- Passionate for holiness: "You know it has ever been my desire to become a Saint, but I have always felt, in comparing myself with the saints, that I am as far removed from them as a grain of sand, which the passerby tramples underfoot, is remote from the mountain whose summit is in the clouds. Instead of being discouraged, however, I concluded that God would not inspire desires which could not be realized, and that I may aspire to holiness in spite of my littleness" (The Story of a Soul, chapter IX).

But it is precisely that littleness that is at the heart of her heroic greatness.

### **Review Questions**

1. How is Therese like that other great Carmelite, Teresa of Avila?
2. Therese's "little way" is egalitarian in a way most spiritual traditions as mediated by religious orders are not. Explain.
3. Why is the voice in the Story of a Soul so appealing to multitudes?