

Pope Benedict on St. Thérèse of Lisieux

On 6th April 2011, during his general audience in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI focussed on Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) as part of a series of catecheses on the Doctors of the Church.

(The abbreviations in brackets refer to Thérèse's various writings, including her autobiography *Story of a Soul*, her prayers, her poetry and her letters.)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak to you about St. Thérèse of Lisieux, also known as Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, who lived only 24 years in this world, at the end of the 19th century, leading a very simple and hidden life, but who after her death and the publication of her writings, became one of the best known and loved saints.

“Little Thérèse” has not failed to help the simplest souls, little ones, the poor, those who suffer and who pray to her, but she has also illumined the whole Church with her profound spiritual doctrine, to the point that, in 1997 the Venerable John Paul II wished to give her the title of *Doctor of the Church*, adding it to the title of *Patroness of the Missions* which Pius XI gave her in 1939. My beloved predecessor described her as an “expert in the *scientia amoris* [science of love]” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* §27).

Thérèse expresses this science, which sees the whole truth of the faith shine in love, primarily in the account of her life, published a year after her death with the title *Story of a Soul*. The book immediately had great success. It was translated into many languages and spread throughout the world. I would like to invite you to rediscover this little-great treasure, this luminous commentary on the Gospel fully lived! *Story of a Soul*, in fact, is a marvellous history of Love, recounted with such authenticity, simplicity and freshness, before which the reader cannot but be fascinated! But what was this Love that filled Thérèse's whole life, from her childhood to her death? Dear friends, this Love has a Face, it has a Name, it is Jesus! The saint spoke continually of Jesus. Let us review, therefore, the great stages of her life, to enter into the heart of her doctrine.

Thérèse was born on 2nd January 1873, in Alençon, a city of Normandy, in France. She was the youngest daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin, exemplary spouses and parents, both beatified on 19th October 2008. They had nine children, four of whom died at an early age. Five daughters remained, all of whom became religious. Thérèse, at 4, was profoundly affected by the death of her mother (*Story of a Soul*, Ms. A, 13r). The father, together with his daughters, then moved to the city of Lisieux, where the whole life of the saint unfolded. Later Thérèse, suffering from a serious nervous illness, was cured thanks to a divine grace, which she herself described as “the smile of the Virgin” (*ibid.*, 29v-30v). She received her First Communion, which she lived intensely (*ibid.*, 35r), and put the Eucharistic Jesus at the centre of her life.

The “Grace of Christmas” of 1886 marked the point of inflection, what she called her “complete conversion” (*ibid.*, 44v-45r). In fact, she was completely cured of her infantile hyper-sensitivity and began a “giant's race.” At the age of 14, Thérèse grew ever closer, with great faith, to Jesus Crucified, and took very seriously the case, apparently desperate, of a criminal condemned to death and impenitent (*ibid.*, 45v-46v). “I wanted at all costs to prevent his going to hell,” wrote the saint, with the certainty that her prayer would have put him in contact with the redeeming Blood of Jesus. It was her first and fundamental experience of spiritual maternity. “So much confidence I had in

Jesus' Infinite Mercy," she wrote. With Mary Most Holy, the young Thérèse loves, believes and hopes with "a mother's heart" (cf. Pr. 6/10r).

In November of 1887, Thérèse went on pilgrimage to Rome with her father and her sister Celine (*ibid.*, 55v-67r). The culminating moment for her was the audience with Pope Leo XIII, from whom she requested permission to enter the Carmel of Lisieux, though she was just 15 years old. A year later, her wish came true: She became a Carmelite, "to save souls and to pray for priests" (*ibid.*, 69v). At the same time, her father's painful and humiliating mental illness began. It was a great suffering that led Thérèse to the contemplation of Jesus' Face in his Passion (*ibid.*, 71rv).

In this way, her name in religion – Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face – expresses her whole life's program, in communion with the central mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Her religious profession, on the feast of the Nativity of Mary, 8th September 1890, was for her a real spiritual marriage in the "littleness" of the Gospel, characterized by the symbol of the flower. "What a beautiful feast is the Nativity of Mary to become the Bride of Jesus!" she wrote. "I was the little Holy Virgin of one day, who presented her little flower to the little Jesus" (*ibid.*, 77r). For Thérèse, to be a religious meant to be the bride of Jesus and mother of souls (cf. Ms. B, 2v). On the same day, the saint wrote a prayer that indicates the direction of her life: She asked Jesus for the gift of his infinite love, to be the littlest one, and above all she asked for the salvation of all humanity, "That no soul be condemned today" (Pr. 2). Of great importance is her *Offering to Merciful Love*, made on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity 1895 (Ms. A, 83v-84r; Pr. 6): an offering that Thérèse shares immediately with her sisters, being now Vice-Mistress of Novices.

Ten years after the "Grace of Christmas", in 1896 the "Grace of Easter" came which opened the last period of Thérèse's life, with the beginning of her passion profoundly united to the Passion of Jesus. It was the passion of the body, with the illness that led her to death through great sufferings, but above all it was the passion of her soul, with a very painful test of faith (Ms. C, 4v-7v). With Mary next to the cross of Jesus, Thérèse now lived the most heroic faith, as light in the darkness that invaded her soul. The Carmelite was aware of living this great trial for the salvation of all the atheists of the modern world, whom she called "brothers." Hence, she lived fraternal love more intensely (8r-33v): toward the sisters of her community, toward her two spiritual missionary brothers, toward priests and all humanity, especially the most alienated. She became a "universal sister!" Her kind and smiling charity was the expression of the profound joy whose secret she revealed to us: "Jesus, my joy is to love You" (P. 45/7). In this context of suffering, living the greatest love in the smallest things of daily life, the saint fulfilled completely her vocation to be Love in the heart of the Church (cf. Ms. B, 3v).

Thérèse died on the night of 30th September 1897, pronouncing the simple words "My God, I love You!", looking at the crucifix that she clasped in her hands. These last words of the saint are the key of her whole doctrine, of her interpretation of the Gospel. The act of love, expressed in her last breath, was like the continual breathing of her soul, like the beating of her heart. The simple words: "Jesus, I love you" are the centre of all her writings. The act of love for Jesus introduces her in the Most Holy Trinity. She wrote: "Ah, you know it, Divine Jesus, I love you. / The spirit of Love inflames me with its fire, / and loving You, I am attracted to the Father" (P. 17/2).

Dear friends, with St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus we also must be able to repeat each day to the Lord that we want to live of love for him and for others, to learn in the school of the saints to love in a genuine and total way. Thérèse is one of the "little ones" of the Gospel who allow themselves to be led by God in the profundity of his Mystery. She is a guide for all, above all for those who among the People of God carry out the ministry of theologian. With humility and charity, faith and hope, Thérèse entered continually into the heart of sacred Scripture, which contains the Mystery of Christ. And this reading of the Bible, nourished by the science of love, is not opposed to academic science.

The science of the saints, in fact, of which she speaks in the last page of the *Story of a Soul*, is the highest science: “All the saints have understood it and in particular, perhaps, those who filled the universe with the radiation of the evangelical doctrine. Is it not, perhaps, through prayer that Saints Paul, Augustine, John of the Cross, Thomas Aquinas, Francis, Dominic and so many other illustrious Friends of God obtained this divine science that fascinates the greatest geniuses” (Ms. C, 36r).

Inseparable from the Gospel, the Eucharist was for Thérèse the sacrament of Divine Love that descends to the extreme to lift us to him. In her last letter, the saint wrote these simple words on the image that the Child Jesus represents in the consecrated Host: “I cannot fear a God who for me has made himself so small! ... I love him! In fact, he is none other than Love and Mercy!” (Lt. 266).

In the Gospel, Thérèse discovered above all the mercy of Jesus, to the point of affirming: “He has given me his infinite Mercy, through it I contemplate and adore the other divine perfections! ... And then they all seem radiant with love, with Justice itself (and perhaps much more than any other), it seems to me covered with love” (Ms. A, 84r). She expressed herself also in this way in the last lines of the *Story of a Soul*: “No sooner I leaf through the Holy Gospel, I immediately breathe the perfume of Jesus’ life and I know where to run to ... It’s not the first place, but the last to which I go ... Yes, I feel it, even if I had on my conscience all the sins than can be committed, I would go with my heart broken by repentance, to throw myself into Jesus’ arms, because I know how much he loves the Prodigal Son who returns to Him” (Ms. C, 36v-37r).

“Trust and Love” are therefore the final period of the account of her life, two words that like beacons illumined the whole of her path of sanctity, to be able to lead others on her same “little way of trust and love” of spiritual childhood (cf. Ms. C, 2v-3r; Lt. 226). Trust like that of the child who abandons himself into the hands of God, inseparably because of the strong, radical commitment of true love, which is the total gift of self, for ever, as the saint said contemplating Mary: “To love is to give everything, and to give oneself” (*Why I Love You Mary*, P. 54/22). Thus Thérèse indicates to all of us that Christian life consists in living fully the grace of baptism in the total gift of self to the Love of the Father, to live like Christ, in the fire of the Holy Spirit, his very love for others.

[Translation from the original Italian based on that by ZENIT]