

Saints
by Our
Side

Thérèse of Lisieux



Susan Helen Wallace, FSP

Foreword by Donna-Marie Cooper O'Boyle

Saints by Our Side Series

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Foreword

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux left her earthly life at the young age of twenty four. We might tend to assume that a twenty-four-year-old couldn't possibly have had much worthwhile to offer the world before she closed her eyes on this life. Perhaps we might also imagine that she couldn't have accomplished much that could be considered noteworthy in her whisper of a life—just two dozen years.

Yet, our Church thinks otherwise, values her wisdom, and has even declared Saint Thérèse of Lisieux a doctor of the Church!

What can we learn from Saint Thérèse, the simple, young cloistered Carmelite nun? How can a young twenty-four-year-old help us to grow in holiness?

Saint Thérèse's life was a mix of joy and labor wrapped in the peace of Christ. The young Thérèse expressed, "My only

desire is to do the will of Jesus always!”¹ But, just because Thérèse possessed lovely desires and prayers, was raised in a loving family, and later entered a holy convent does not mean that she was free of struggles or pain. She once clued us in by remarking, “Do not believe I am swimming in consolations . . .”² Thérèse worked hard and prayed persistently. She loved Jesus very much and wanted to please him no matter what was happening in her life. She learned to trust him completely, realizing that the difficulties and challenges she was called to undergo greatly aided her spiritual growth. She once wrote:

I find that trials help very much in detaching us from this earth. They make us look higher than this world. Here below, nothing can satisfy us. We cannot enjoy a little rest except in being ready to do God’s will.³

Another time she wrote, “[I]n suffering we can save souls.”⁴

Knowing that the great saints have endured suffering and have discovered deep meaning in it indeed helps us modern-day pilgrims. Saint Thérèse’s words and example have deeply impacted my own life. Because of her loving example I view sufferings and challenges in an entirely new light, and I pray that souls can be saved by God’s grace and for the grace of patience and surrender to whatever it is that God is calling me to do.

Thérèse’s heart was full of love. This young saint in the making had endeavored to do everything with love—*everything*! She showered love upon her fellow sisters (even a persnickety one!) and offered many prayers and sacrifices for the salvation of souls. She possessed a deep desire to travel the world so that she could be a missionary for God.

But Thérèse soon discovered an essential and profound lesson that dramatically changed her life and that she has passed down to all of us.

A major turning point for Sister Thérèse was when she reflected on her vocation. She began to think about the vocation of others—of apostles, martyrs, crusaders, priests, saints, missionaries, prophets, doctors, and more. Because Thérèse loved Jesus very much she prayed from the deepest recesses of her heart and asked him to allow her to preach the Gospel on all five continents. But as she prayed Sister Thérèse was keenly aware of being “little” and “powerless.”

She decided to open her Bible and read the First Epistle to the Corinthians. As she read about all of the wide-ranging gifts given to a variety of people, Thérèse’s heart instantly felt very peaceful and satisfied. In reading the words, she discovered and intensely realized that it was love alone that caused all of Christ’s members to act. Love comprised all vocations—without love, apostles and prophets could not preach, martyrs could not die for their faith, and so on.

Thérèse was very deeply moved and cried out to Jesus with great emotion. Exuberantly she declared, “O Jesus, my Love . . . my vocation, at last I have found it . . . MY VOCATION IS LOVE! . . . [I]n the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be *Love*.”⁵

Thérèse’s life turned into an arresting testament of love. Nothing else but love mattered to Thérèse. Jesus’ love sustained Thérèse through every suffering she was called to endure. She knew without a doubt that Christ’s love was the remedy for everything.

Saint Thérèse's great love didn't stop when she left her earthy life. No, she deeply desired to labor even into eternity. She said, "I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making others love God as I love Him. . . . If God answers my requests, my heaven will be spent on earth up until the end of the world."⁶

Saint Thérèse is an exemplary example for us to follow today. Her simple life of love and devotion can teach us that our obedience to our own state of life is essential to our journey toward heaven. Saint Thérèse fully surrendered her life to God. Though she wanted to become a missionary, she accepted her life of prayer and work in the convent, knowing in her heart that God had chosen it for her. By living this way, her humble and brief life made an enormous impact on our world.

We can indeed realize that our own lives can make a huge difference, too, when we surrender our hearts fully to God's will—as Saint Thérèse did—trusting him with the joys and sorrows and allowing him to love through us.

This book is an exceptional and tender look into the life of a simple saint whose love for Jesus and souls has dramatically changed the world. With every turn of the page, Saint Thérèse will become more alive in your heart, inspiring you to strive for holiness.

Like Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, let us, too, endeavor to live a life of love! Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, please pray for us!

DONNA-MARIE COOPER O'BOYLE



Preface

Saints reflect the image of Jesus in their faces, and they bear the marks of his wounds on their souls. To imitate Christ in the time, location, and circumstance in which we find ourselves can easily seem beyond our reach.

How do you define the saints? As people who do great things? Oftentimes they are. But before they do great things for God, they love Jesus totally. Love transforms people into saints. God's love is infinite. It is the Holy Spirit alive in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. The love of the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's love in human beings is a transforming power. Only this love can transform people into saints. Love is the secret, the motivation. Through reflection and prayer, Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, a young Carmelite nun, found this secret: "Oh! How sweet is the way of Love! How I want to apply

myself to doing the will of God always with the greatest self-surrender!"¹

Thérèse was born in the Martin family home at 36 Saint Blaise Street, Alençon, France, on January 2, 1873. She died around 7:20 P.M., on Thursday, September 30, 1897, at the Carmel in Lisieux, France. She was not quite twenty-five. She lived almost a quarter of a century and was buried on October 4, 1897, in a quiet town cemetery in Lisieux. And that should have been all there was to it.

Of course, the Carmelite prioress would write about Sister Thérèse for their archives, and Masses would be said for the repose of her soul. But we may ask ourselves: What happened to spread this young woman's fame around the world? What is the story behind the nun and the power behind the story?

This is a biography of Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, also known as the "Little Flower." As we read her story and hear her own interpretation of the power of God in her life, we will be challenged to find a message for ourselves. Thérèse will demonstrate what can happen when people give themselves over to God. Thérèse's God is the loving Father who picks her up when she cannot climb the steep hill of perfection. Thérèse's God is the Crucified One whose scarred hands reach out to embrace her. Thérèse's God is infinite love, the Holy Spirit who fills her soul with himself. Her story is more than a biography. It is a divine takeover, a magnificent conquest on the part of God.

Thérèse invites us to let God do for us what he did for her. She will manifest to us the truth of Scripture: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). This book is offered as an introduction to Saint Thérèse and

includes excerpts from her own writings and conversations. Quotations are taken from her autobiography *Story of a Soul* (which she was asked to write by her superiors), *Last Conversations*, and *The Poetry of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*. Saint Thérèse has a word for everyone who comes in contact with her. Above all, she wants to bring us to her loving God. She wants to teach us how to love and let ourselves be loved.

CHAPTER ONE



Beginnings

Thursday, January 2, 1873 was cold and the sky a steel gray in Alençon, France. As night set in, the Martin family kept their vigil. Zelig's baby was born at 11:30 P.M. The family clustered around the big double bed, their eyes riveted on the infant in Zelig Martin's arms. Louis Martin leaned over and lightly stroked Zelig's hair. Her face was lined and tired-looking, but she was peaceful. Louis would be fifty years old that August; Zelig was forty-one. The little girl in her arms was to be their ninth and last child. Five of the Martin children lived. Three had died as infants; one, Helene, had died at the age of five.

Louis and Zelig decided on what to name the baby: Marie Françoise Thérèse Martin. And the family would call her Little Thérèse.

Marie, Pauline, Léonie, and Céline looked on and tried to be helpful. Their sister was robust, they thought, probably nearly

eight pounds. But Mama had more experience and she guessed six pounds. Marie would be thirteen on February 22; Pauline would be twelve on September 7; Léonie, ten on June 3; and Céline, four on April 28. In between Léonie and Céline, Helene, Joseph-Louis, and Joseph-Jean-Baptiste had been born but had not survived. Between Céline and Thérèse had come Melanie-Thérèse, who had also gone home to God.

Louis lifted the tiny child and secured the soft blanket around her. Thérèse rested easily against his chest, over his heart. She slept peacefully unaware of the admiring glances and the bonds of love that surrounded her. Louis Martin walked slowly, quietly around the room, rocking the baby. He was experienced at this, and the girls watched with admiration. Zélie Martin dozed off while Thérèse's sisters waited for their father to tire so that they could hold their new sister too.

Louis and Zélie Martin

Louis Martin had been born on August 22, 1823 at Bordeaux, France, and was from a military family. He was quiet, gentle, organized, and patient. He excelled at his watchmaking trade because of his diligence and patience. He excelled in business because of his integrity. When he was twenty-two and single, Louis considered a religious vocation. The life of a monk, honed by prayer, contemplation, and work, had appealed to him. Because he had no background in Latin, however, he was not accepted as a candidate for the monastery.

Alençon was a peaceful town, quiet for its population of 13,600. Despite its smallness, however, Louis Martin and Zélie

Guerin were not to meet for several years, nor marry until he was thirty-five and she twenty-seven. Both loved their Catholic faith and both felt at one time in their adult lives a call to follow a religious vocation. Each had been advised against it: Louis for lack of education; Zelie for lack of health.

Zelie's childhood had been lonely, as she once reminded her brother Isidore Guerin. Their mother had spoiled Isidore and treated Zelie harshly, something she lamented with sadness. Zelie and Isidore's sister Elise became a Visitation nun, Zelie a lace-maker, and Isidore a pharmacist.

The love and affection Zelie received from her sister and brother helped her to bear the stern treatment of her parents. When Zelie married Louis Martin in the Church of Notre-Dame on July 13, 1858, a joy she had never known unfolded for her. She and Louis had so much in common, and they were in love. For the first ten months they lived a celibate marriage by mutual consent. Then a priest helped them to reconsider, and the Martins began having children. The world can be grateful for the priest who successfully convinced the Martins to have their family. If he had not done so, we would have been deprived of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Zelie and Louis were warm and affectionate with each other and their children. Their home was joyful and their children were happy.

First Separation

Marie Françoise Thérèse was a beautiful addition to the Martin's loving family. She was baptized on Saturday, January 4, when she was two days old. The oldest Martin child, Marie, was

the baby's godmother. A few weeks later the baby developed intestinal difficulties. That situation leveled off, but when Thérèse was three months old, sickness struck again. Zélie wrote: "She is very bad and I have no hope whatsoever of saving her. The poor little thing suffers horribly since yesterday. It breaks your heart to see her."¹ Zélie Martin realized that Thérèse needed nourishment and fresh country air. The family doctor recommended that Thérèse be given into the care of a wet nurse for as long as necessary. And so a woman named Rose Taille was found to care for Thérèse.

Rose Taille was a hardy, healthy woman who lived on a farm eight miles outside of Alençon, in the village of Semalle. Little Thérèse shared the life of the Taille family from March 15 or 16, 1873, to April 2, 1874. The little girl grew and put on weight. Her curly hair, bleached by the sun, lent a healthy glow to her tanned complexion. Thérèse loved the flowers and animals. Zélie Martin wrote: "Her nurse brings her out to the fields in a wheelbarrow, seated on top of a load of hay; she hardly ever cries. Little Rose says that one could hardly find a better child."²

When Thérèse returned home over a year later, the Martins welcomed her with joy and genuine excitement. Their baby was lively and playful. She was alert and her eyes sparkled with delight. She missed the Taille family for a while, but the Martins showered so much affection on their fifteen-month-old that Thérèse was soon as contented as she had been on Rose's farm.

Céline and Thérèse through Mama's Eyes

While Thérèse got used to life at home, Marie and Pauline attended the Visitation boarding school, living there while

classes were in session. Zélie Martin's letters to her daughter, Pauline, give glimpses into the personality and temperament of her two youngest children. Thérèse quoted her mother's carefully preserved letters in her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*.

In the story of my soul, up until my entrance into Carmel, I distinguish three separate periods. The first is not least fruitful in memories in spite of its short duration. It extends from the dawn of my reason until our dear mother's departure for Heaven.³

The girls were three and a half years apart, and Thérèse would call Céline "the little companion of my childhood." From the time Thérèse returned from the Taille family, she and Céline were inseparable. The fifteen-month-old Thérèse looked up to Céline, and the two would laugh and play together.

On May 14, 1876, Mama wrote to Pauline:

My little Céline is drawn to the practice of virtue; it's part of her nature; she is candid and has a horror of evil. As for the little imp, one doesn't know how things will go, she is so small, so thoughtless! Her intelligence is superior to Céline's, but she's less gentle and has a stubborn streak in her that is almost invincible; when she says "no" nothing can make her give in.⁴

Zélie also noticed that Thérèse, though younger than Céline, insisted on having her own way. Zélie realized that Céline quickly gave in. In her December 5, 1875 letter to Pauline, Zélie wrote of Thérèse:

I am obliged to correct this poor little baby who gets into frightful tantrums; when things don't go just right and according to her way of thinking, she rolls on the floor in desperation like one without any hope. There are times when

it gets too much for her and she literally chokes. She is a nervous child, but she is very good, very intelligent, and remembers everything.⁵

Marie returned from boarding school while Pauline remained away from home. Since Céline was older than Thérèse, she had daily home classes with Marie. Little Thérèse felt left out and would begin to cry. That was more than Marie could bear so, Thérèse came into the room too. She was given a comfortable chair and some busy work, such as cloth to sew or beads to thread. While Céline learned her lessons, her little sister would get her needle tangled up in thread and the tears would start again. “Marie consoles her very quickly, threads the needle, and the poor little angel smiles through her tears,” Zélie wrote to Pauline.⁶

As the years passed, Thérèse’s love for Céline grew. “I remember that I really wasn’t able to be without Céline,” Thérèse wrote. When Thérèse was still too young to go to church on Sunday, Zélie would go to another Mass and stay behind with Thérèse. The spirited little girl would wait eagerly for sounds of the family returning from Mass. Céline would often bring home blessed bread and the two children would have a prayer service made solemn with a Hail Mary and a Sign of the Cross. Once, Céline could not bring home blessed bread. “Then make some,” Thérèse commanded. Céline got a loaf of bread out of the cupboard, cut off a piece, prayed over the bread, and then the two girls ate it.⁷

Zélie recorded one spiritual conversation of Thérèse and Céline. Céline asked Thérèse: “How is it that God can be present in a small host?” “That is not surprising, God is all powerful,”

Thérèse answered. “What does all powerful mean?” asked Céline. Thérèse’s answer was prompt and sure: “It means He can do what He wants!”⁸

“I Choose All!”

Zelie Martin documented many stories about Thérèse that help us to understand her developing personality. On May 10, 1877, just before Thérèse’s older sister Léonie’s fourteenth birthday, she wrote to Pauline that Léonie realized she was growing up. She gathered up her childhood treasures—doll clothes, fancy materials, and her doll—and placed them in a basket. Céline and Thérèse eagerly eyed the basket as Léonie set it on the floor:

“Here, my little sisters, choose,” Léonie said. “I’m giving you all this.” Thérèse wrote: Céline stretched out her hand and took a little ball of wool that pleased her. After a moment’s reflection, I stretched out mine saying: “I choose all!” and I took the basket without further ceremony.”⁹

Remembering the incident vividly as an adult religious, Thérèse was able to find in her reaction to that situation a response that would indicate how she would approach the whole of her life with God.

I understood . . . there were many degrees of perfection and each soul was free to respond to the advances of our Lord to do little or much for Him, in a word, to choose among the sacrifices He was asking. Then, as in the days of my childhood, I cried out: “My God, I choose all!” I don’t want to be a *saint by halves*, I’m not afraid to suffer for You, I fear only one thing: to keep my *own will*; so take it, for “*I choose all*” that You will!¹⁰

Thérèse and Her Father

Thérèse's trusting relationship with God the Father can be connected with her father's loving presence throughout her life. Louis Martin turned fifty the year Thérèse was born. His hair was graying and thinning, making him look continually more distinguished. Céline and Thérèse could have been his grandchildren. He enjoyed them so much, especially Thérèse. She would listen for the sound of her father's key in the front door at the end of the day. When she heard the click—and she always did no matter where she was in the house—she came running, leading the welcome committee. She would call "Papa, Papa," and hug her delighted father. Then she would sit on his foot, pony-fashion, and ride her father's shoe into the sitting room.

Zelie, busy about the house, would ask her husband in a light-hearted way why he spoiled Thérèse. Louis, shrugging his shoulders sheepishly, would reply, "Well, what do you expect? She's the queen!"¹¹

One time, however, Thérèse was in a different mood. She was having fun on the swing in the garden, swinging higher and higher and feeling very independent. Her father walked down the garden path. "Come and kiss me, little queen," he called gently. Thérèse's blond curls fluttered in the breeze as her swing kept pace with the rhythm in her ears. "Come and get it, Papa!" she called flippantly.¹² Louis was hurt and quietly refused, walking into the house. Marie, overhearing the incident, stopped her little sister's swing and helped her to understand that her behavior was not right. She had answered their father rudely and had hurt his feelings. The little girl was overcome with remorse. She began

to cry loudly. Her sobs filled the big house and she climbed the steps without waiting for help. She found her father and flooded him with affection. The little queen was quickly forgiven.

One thing stands out about Thérèse's earliest years: she was much wanted, much loved. She wrote: "All my life God was pleased to surround me with love, and my first memories are imprinted with the most tender smiles and caresses!"¹³