



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 6 April 2011

[\[Video\]](#)

Saint Theresa of Lisieux

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to talk to you about St Thérèse of Lisieux, Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, who lived in this world for only 24 years, 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 best-loved saints. “Little Thérèse” has never stopped helping the simplest souls, the little, the poor and the suffering who pray to her. However, she has also illumined the whole Church with her profound spiritual doctrine to the point that [Venerable Pope John Paul II](#) chose, in 1997, to give her the title “Doctor of the Church”, in addition to that of Patroness of Missions, which [Pius XI](#) had already attributed to her in 1939. My beloved Predecessor described her as an “expert in the *scientia amoris*” ([Novo Millennio Ineunte](#), n. 42). Thérèse expressed this science, in which she saw the whole truth of the faith shine out in love, mainly in the *story of her life*, published a year after her death with the title *The Story of a Soul*. The book immediately met with enormous success, it was translated into many languages and disseminated throughout the world.

I would like to invite you to rediscover this small-great treasure, this luminous comment on the Gospel lived to the full! *The Story of a Soul*, in fact, is a marvellous *story of Love*, told with such authenticity, simplicity and freshness that the reader cannot but be fascinated by it! But what was

this Love that filled Thérèse's whole life, from childhood to death? Dear friends, this Love has a Face, it has a Name, it is Jesus! The Saint speaks continuously of Jesus. Let us therefore review the important stages of her life, to enter into the heart of her teaching.

Thérèse was born on 2 January 1873 in Alençon, a city in Normandy, in France. She was the last daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin, a married couple and exemplary parents, who were beatified together on 19 October 2008. They had nine children, four of whom died at a tender age. Five daughters were left, who all became religious. Thérèse, at the age of four, was deeply upset by the death of her mother (Ms A 13r). Her father then moved with his daughters to the town of Lisieux, where the Saint was to spend her whole life. Later Thérèse, affected by a serious nervous disorder, was healed by a divine grace which she herself described as the "smile of Our Lady" (*ibid.*, 29v-30v). She then received her First Communion, which was an intense experience (*ibid.*, 35r), and made Jesus in the Eucharist the centre of her life.

The "Grace of Christmas" of 1886 marked the important turning-point, which she called her "complete conversion" (*ibid.*, 44v-45r). In fact she recovered totally, from her childhood hypersensitivity and began a "to run as a giant". At the age of 14, Thérèse became ever closer, with great faith, to the Crucified Jesus. She took to heart the apparently desperate case of a criminal sentenced to death who was impenitent. "I wanted at all costs to prevent him from going to hell", the Saint wrote, convinced that her prayers would put him in touch with the redeeming Blood of Jesus. It was her first and fundamental experience of *spiritual motherhood*: "I had such great trust in the Infinite Mercy of Jesus", she wrote. Together with Mary Most Holy, young Thérèse loved, believed and hoped with "a mother's heart" (cf. Pr 6/ior).

In November 1887, Thérèse went on pilgrimage to Rome with her father and her sister Céline (*ibid.*, 55v-67r). The culminating moment for her was the Audience with [Pope Leo XIII](#), whom she asked for permission to enter the Carmel of Lisieux when she was only just 15. A year later her wish was granted. She became a Carmelite, "to save souls and to pray for priests" (*ibid.*, 69v).

At the same time, her father began to suffer from a painful and humiliating mental illness. It caused Thérèse great suffering which led her to contemplation of the Face of Jesus in his Passion (*ibid.*, 71rc). Thus, her name as a religious — *Sr Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face* — expresses the programme of her whole life in communion with the central Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Her religious profession, on the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, 8 September 1890, was a true spiritual espousal in evangelical "littleness", characterized by the symbol of the flower: "It was the Nativity of Mary. What a beautiful feast on which to become the Spouse of Jesus! It was the *little* new-born Holy Virgin who presented her *little* Flower to the *little* Jesus" (*ibid.*, 77r).

For Thérèse, being a religious meant being a *bride of Jesus and a mother of souls* (cf. Ms B, 2v). On the same day, the Saint wrote a prayer which expressed the entire orientation of her life: she

asked Jesus for the gift of his infinite Love, to be the smallest, and above all she asked for the salvation of all human being: “That no soul may be damned today” (Pr 2).

Of great importance is her *Offering to Merciful Love*, made on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity in 1895 (Ms A, 83v-84r; Pr 6). It was an offering that Thérèse immediately shared with her sisters, since she was already acting novice mistress.

Ten years after the “Grace of Christmas” in 1896, came the “Grace of Easter”, which opened the last period of Thérèse’s life with the beginning of her passion in profound union with the Passion of Jesus. It was the passion of her body, with the illness that led to her death through great suffering, but it was especially the passion of the soul, with a very painful *trial of faith* (Ms C, 4v-7v). With Mary beside the Cross of Jesus, Thérèse then lived the most heroic faith, as a light in the darkness that invaded her soul. The Carmelite was aware that she was living this great trial for the salvation of all the atheists of the modern world, whom she called “brothers”.

She then lived fraternal love even more intensely (8r-33v): for the sisters of her community, for her two spiritual missionary brothers, for the priests and for all people, especially the most distant. She truly became a “universal sister”! Her lovable, smiling charity was the expression of the profound joy whose secret she reveals: “Jesus, my joy is loving you” (P 45/7). In this context of suffering, living the greatest love in the smallest things of daily life, the Saint brought to fulfilment her vocation to be Love in the heart of the Church (cf. Ms B, 3v).

Thérèse died on the evening of 30 September 1897, saying the simple words, “My God, I love you!”, looking at the Crucifix she held tightly in her hands. These last words of the Saint are the key to her whole doctrine, to her interpretation of the Gospel the act of love, expressed in her last breath was as it were the continuous breathing of her soul, the beating of her heart. The simple words “*Jesus I love you*”, are at the heart of all her writings. The act of love for Jesus immersed her in the Most Holy Trinity. She wrote: “Ah, you know, Divine Jesus I love you / The spirit of Love enflames me with his fire, / It is in loving you that I attract the Father” (P 17/2).

Dear friends, we too, with St Thérèse of the Child Jesus must be able to repeat to the Lord every day that we want to live of love for him and for others, to learn at the school of the saints to love authentically and totally. Thérèse is one of the “little” ones of the Gospel who let themselves be led by God to the depths of his Mystery. A guide for all, especially those who, in the People of God, carry out their ministry as theologians. With humility and charity, faith and hope, Thérèse continually entered the heart of Sacred Scripture which contains the Mystery of Christ. And this interpretation of the Bible, nourished by the *science of love*, is not in opposition to academic knowledge. The *science of the saints*, in fact, of which she herself speaks on the last page of her *The Story of a Soul*, is the loftiest science.

“All the saints have understood and in a special way perhaps those who fill the universe with the

radiance of the evangelical doctrine. Was it not from prayer that St Paul, St Augustine, St John of the Cross, St Thomas Aquinas, Francis, Dominic, and so many other friends of God drew that *wonderful science* which has enthralled the loftiest minds?" (cf. Ms C 36r). Inseparable from the Gospel, for Thérèse the Eucharist was the sacrament of Divine Love that stoops to the extreme to raise us to him. In her last *Letter*, on an image that represents Jesus the Child in the consecrated Host, the Saint wrote these simple words: "I cannot fear a God who made himself so small for me! [...] I love him! In fact, he is nothing but Love and Mercy!" (LT 266).

In the Gospel Thérèse discovered above all the Mercy of Jesus, to the point that she said: "To me, He has given his Infinite Mercy, and it is in this ineffable mirror that I contemplate his other divine attributes. Therein all appear to me radiant with Love. His Justice, even more perhaps than the rest, seems to me to be clothed with Love" (Ms A, 84r).

In these words she expresses herself in the last lines of *The Story of a Soul*: "I have only to open the Holy Gospels and at once I breathe the perfume of Jesus' life, and then I know which way to run; and it is not to the first place, but to the last, that I hasten.... I feel that even had I on my conscience every crime one could commit... my heart broken with sorrow, I would throw myself into the arms of my Saviour Jesus, because I know that he loves the Prodigal Son" who returns to him. (Ms C, 36v-37r).

"Trust and Love" are therefore the final point of the account of her life, two words, like beacons, that illumined the whole of her journey to holiness, to be able to guide others on the 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 in God's hands, inseparable from the strong, radical commitment of true love, which is the total gift of self for ever, as the Saint says, contemplating Mary: "Loving is giving all, and giving oneself" (*Why I love thee, Mary*, P 54/22). Thus Thérèse points out to us all that Christian life consists in living to the full the grace of Baptism in the total gift of self to the Love of the Father, in order to live like Christ, in the fire of the Holy Spirit, his same love for all the others.

APPEAL

I am continuing to follow with great apprehension the dramatic events which the beloved peoples of Côte d'Ivoire and Libya are living through in these days. I am hoping that Cardinal Turkson, whom I have charged to go to Côte d'Ivoire to express my solidarity will be able to enter the country soon. I pray for the victims and I am close to all those who are suffering. Violence and hatred are always a defeat! I therefore address a new heartfelt appeal to all the parties concerned, that the work of peace-making and dialogue be initiated so that further bloodshed may be avoided.

I offer a warm greeting to the members of the Conference on Parkinson's Disease sponsored by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. I also greet the group from the NATO Defense College, with prayerful good wishes for their important work in the service of peace. I also welcome the priests of the Institute for Continuing Theological Education of the North American College. To the choirs I express my gratitude for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from the Channel Islands, England, Scotland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, South Korea and the United States, I cordially invoke the Lord's blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly my greeting goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, meeting you is always a cause of comfort and hope to me, because your age is the springtime of life. May you be able to respond to the love God has for you. Dear *sick people*, let yourselves be enlightened by the Cross of the Lord to be strong in trial. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you be grateful to God for the gift of the family: counting always on his help, make your existence a mission of faithful and generous love.

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