



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 7 June 2023

[Multimedia]

Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer. 16. Witnesses: Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, patron of the missions

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Here before us are the relics of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, universal patroness of missions. It is good that this is happening as we reflect on the passion for evangelization, on apostolic zeal. Today, then, let us allow the witness of Saint Thérèse to help us. She was born 150 years ago, and I plan to dedicate an Apostolic Letter to her on this anniversary.

She is patroness of the missions, but she never went on mission. How do we explain this? She was a Carmelite nun who lived her life according to the way of littleness and weakness: she defined herself as “a small grain of sand”. Having poor health, she died at the age of only 24. But though her body was sickly, her heart was vibrant, it was missionary. She recounts in her “diary” that her desire was to be a missionary, and that she wanted to be one, not just for a few years, but for the rest of her life, even until the end of the world. Thérèse was a “spiritual sister” to several missionaries. She accompanied them from her monastery with her letters, with her prayer, and by offering continuous sacrifices for them. Without being visible, she interceded for the missions, like an engine that, although hidden, gives a vehicle the power to move forward. However, she was often not understood by her fellow nuns: she received “more thorns than roses” from them, but she accepted everything lovingly, patiently, offering even these judgments and misunderstandings

together with her illness. And she did this joyfully, for the needs of the Church, so that, as she said, “roses might fall on everyone”, especially the most distant.

But now, I ask myself, we can ask ourselves, where did all this zeal, this missionary strength, and this joy of interceding come from? Two episodes that occurred before Thérèse entered the monastery help us to understand this.

The first concerns the day that changed her life, Christmas 1886, when God worked a miracle in her heart. Shortly after that, Thérèse would turn 14 years old. As the youngest child, she was pampered by everyone at home, but she was not raised badly. After returning from midnight Mass, however, her very tired father did not feel like being there when his daughter opened her gifts, and said, “Good thing it’s the last year!” Thérèse, who was very sensitive and easily moved to tears, was hurt, and went up to her room and cried. But she quickly suppressed her tears, went downstairs and, full of joy, she was the one who cheered her father. What had happened? On that night, when Jesus had made himself weak out of love, she had become strong in spirit: in just a few moments, she had come out of the prison of her selfishness and self-pity; she began to feel that “charity entered her heart, with the need to forget herself” (cf. *Manuscript A*, 133-134). From then on, she directed her zeal toward others, so that they might find God, and, instead of seeking consolations for herself, she set out to “console Jesus, [to] make him loved by souls”, because, as Thérèse, noted, “Jesus is sick with love and [...] the sickness of love cannot be cured except by love” (*Letter to Marie Guérin*, July 1890). This then was her daily resolution: to “make Jesus loved” (*Letter to Céline*, 15 October 1889), to intercede so that others would love him. She wrote, “I want to save souls and forget myself for them: I want to save them even after my death” (*Letter to Fr. Roullan*, 19 March 1897). Several times she said, “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth”. This is the first episode that changed her life at 14.

And her zeal was directed especially to sinners, to the “distant ones”. This is revealed in the second episode. Thérèse heard about a criminal, who had been sentenced to death for horrible crimes — his name was Enrico Pranzini, she writes down his name. He had been found guilty of the brutal murder of three people, and was destined for the guillotine; but he did not want to receive the consolations of the faith. Thérèse took him to heart and did all she could: she prayed in every way for his conversion, so that he, who with brotherly compassion she called “poor wretched Pranzini,” might demonstrate a small sign of repentance and make room for God’s mercy in which Thérèse trusted blindly. The execution took place. The next day, Thérèse read in the newspaper that just before laying his head on the block, Pranzini, “all of a sudden, seized by a sudden inspiration, turned around, grabbed a Crucifix that the priest handed to him and kissed three times the sacred wounds” of Jesus. The saint remarked, “Then his soul went to receive the merciful sentence of the One who declared that in Heaven there will be more joy for a single sinner who repents than for the ninety-nine righteous who have no need of repentance!” (*Manuscript A*, 135).

Brothers and sisters, such is the power of intercession moved by charity; such is the engine of

mission! Missionaries, in fact — of whom Thérèse is patroness — are not only those who travel long distances, learn new languages, do good works, and are good at proclamation; no, a missionary is also anyone who lives as an instrument of God's love where they are. Missionaries are those who do everything so that, through their witness, their prayer, their intercession, *Jesus might pass by*.

This is the apostolic zeal that, let us always remember, never works by proselytism — never — or constraint, — never — but *by attraction*. Faith is born by attraction. One does not become Christian because they are forced by someone, but because they have been touched by love. More than having many available means, methods, and structures, which sometimes distract from what is essential, the Church needs hearts like Thérèse's, hearts that draw people to love and bring people closer to God. And let us ask the saint — we have her relics here — let us ask the saint for the grace to overcome our selfishness and let us ask for the passion to intercede so that this attraction can be greater in people and so that Jesus might be known and loved.

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from Scotland, Indonesia and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you all!

Inspired by the approaching Feast of Corpus Domini, which celebrates the Eucharist, core and source of life, I now turn my thoughts to young people, to the sick, to the elderly and to newlyweds. Draw near often and with devotion to Jesus, Bread of Life who brings strength, light and joy, and he will become the wellspring of your choices and your actions.

Catholic Action International invites believers of different denominations and religions to gather in prayer, tomorrow at 1:00 pm, dedicating "One minute for Peace". Let us accept this invitation, praying for the end to wars in the world, especially for our dear and tormented Ukraine.

I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on apostolic zeal, we now turn to Saint Therese of Lisieux, the universal patroness of the missions; happily, today her relics are here in our midst. At an early age, Therese discerned a vocation to enter the Carmel and to devote her life

to prayer for the Church's work of evangelization. She adopted several foreign missionaries as a "spiritual sister", writing them letters of encouragement and supporting them by her prayers and daily sacrifices. Saint Therese longed for all people to open their hearts to the saving love of Jesus. She interceded fervently for the conversion of sinners, even those most hardened. In her final illness, she promised to continue that intercession even after her death. Saint Therese reminds us that charity and intercessory prayer, even more than projects and programmes, are essential to the spread of the Gospel. Let us ask her to intercede for an outpouring of missionary zeal upon the Church in our day, so that the name of Jesus may everywhere be known and loved.