



# The Holy See

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PROCLAMATION OF ST THÉRÈSE OF THE CHILD JESUS

AND THE HOLY FACE

AS A "DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH"

**HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II**

*Sunday, 19 October 1997*

1. "*Nations shall come to your light*" (Is 60: 3). The echo of Epiphany already resounds in the words of the prophet Isaiah as a fervent expectation and luminous hope. It is precisely the connection with this solemnity that enables us to perceive more clearly *this Sunday's missionary character*. Isaiah's prophecy, in fact, broadens the perspective of salvation to all humanity, and thus anticipates the prophetic act of the Magi who, coming from the East to adore the divine Child born in Bethlehem (cf. Mt 2: 1-12), proclaim and inaugurate the adherence of the nations to Christ's message. All men are called to accept in faith the saving Gospel. The Church is sent to all peoples, all lands and cultures: "Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28: 19-20). These words, spoken by Christ before ascending into heaven, together with the promise he made to the Apostles and their successors that he would be with them until the end of the world (cf. Mt 28: 20), are the essence of the missionary mandate: in the person of his ministers, it is Christ himself who goes *ad gentes*, to those who have not yet received the proclamation of the faith.<sup>2</sup> Thérèse Martin, a discaled Carmelite of Lisieux, ardently desired to be a missionary. She was one, to the point that she could be proclaimed *patroness of the missions*. Jesus himself showed her how she could live this vocation: by fully practising the commandment of love, she would be immersed in the very heart of the Church's mission, supporting those who proclaim the Gospel with the mysterious power of prayer and communion. Thus she achieved what the Second Vatican Council emphasized in teaching that the Church is missionary by nature (cf. *Ad gentes*, n. 2). Not only those who choose the missionary life but all the baptized are in some way sent *ad gentes*. This is why I chose this missionary Sunday to proclaim St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face *a doctor of the universal Church: a woman, a young person, a contemplative*.<sup>3</sup> Everyone thus realizes that today something surprising is happening. St Thérèse of Lisieux was unable to attend a university or engage in systematic study. She died young: nevertheless, from this day forward she will be honoured as a doctor of the Church, an outstanding recognition which raises her in the esteem of the entire Christian community far beyond any academic title. Indeed, when the Magisterium proclaims someone a doctor of the Church, it intends to point out to all the faithful, particularly to those who perform in the Church the fundamental service of preaching or who undertake the delicate task of theological teaching and research, that the doctrine professed and proclaimed by a certain person can be a reference point, not only because it conforms to revealed truth, but also because it sheds new light on the mysteries of

the faith, a deeper understanding of Christ's mystery. The Council reminded us that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, understanding of the "depositum fidei" continually grows in the Church, and not only does the richly contemplative study to which theologians are called, not only does the Magisterium of pastors, endowed with the "sure charism of truth", contribute to this growth process, but also that "*profound understanding of spiritual things*" which is given *through experience*, with the wealth and diversity of gifts, to all those who let themselves be docilely led by God's Spirit (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 8). *Lumen gentium*, for its part, teaches that God himself "speaks to us" (n. 50) in his saints. It is for this reason that the spiritual experience of the saints has a special value for deepening our knowledge of the divine mysteries, which remain ever greater than our thoughts, and not by chance does the Church choose only saints to be distinguished with the title of "doctor".<sup>4</sup> Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face is the youngest of all the "doctors of the Church", but her ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters. In the *Apostolic Letter* which I wrote for this occasion, I stressed several salient aspects of her doctrine. But how can we fail to recall here what can be considered its high point, starting with the account of the moving discovery of her special vocation in the Church? "Charity", she wrote, "gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church had a heart and that this heart was burning with love. I understood that it was love alone that made the Church's members act, that if love were ever extinguished, apostles would not proclaim the Gospel and martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. I understood that love includes all vocations.... Then in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: "O Jesus, my Love ... at last I have found my vocation; my vocation is Love!" (*Ms B*, 3v<sup>o</sup>). This is a wonderful passage which suffices itself to show that one can apply to St Thérèse the Gospel passage we heard in the Liturgy of the Word: "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (Mt 11: 25).<sup>5</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux did not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the centre and heart of the Church, but in her short life she lived it intensely. It is precisely this *convergence of doctrine and concrete experience*, of truth and life, of teaching and practice, which shines with particular brightness in this saint, and which makes her an attractive model especially for young people and for those who are seeking true meaning for their life. Before the emptiness of so many words, Thérèse offers another solution, the one Word of salvation which, understood and lived in silence, becomes a source of renewed life. She counters a rational culture, so often overcome by practical materialism, with the disarming simplicity of the "little way" which, by returning to the essentials, leads to the secret of all life: the divine Love that surrounds and penetrates every human venture. In a time like ours, so frequently marked by an ephemeral and hedonistic culture, this new doctor of the Church proves to be remarkably effective in enlightening the mind and heart of those who hunger and thirst for truth and love.<sup>6</sup> St Thérèse is presented as a doctor of the Church on the day we are celebrating World Mission Sunday. She had the ardent desire to dedicate herself to proclaiming the Gospel, and she would have liked to have crowned her witness with the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom (cf. *Ms B*, 3r<sup>o</sup>). Moreover, her intense personal commitment supporting the apostolic work of Fr Maurice Bellière and Fr Adolphe Rulland, missionaries respectively in Africa and China, is well-known. In her zealous love for evangelization, Thérèse had one ideal, as she herself says: "What we ask of him is to work for his glory, to love him and to make him loved" (*Letter 220*). The way she took to reach this ideal of life is not that of the great undertakings reserved for the few, but on the contrary, a way within everyone's reach, the "little way", a path of trust and total self-abandonment to the Lord's grace. It is not a prosaic way, as if it were less demanding. It is in fact a demanding reality, as the Gospel always is. But it is a way in which one is imbued with a sense of trusting abandonment to divine mercy, which makes even the most rigorous spiritual commitment light. Because of this way in which she receives everything as "grace", because she puts her relationship with Christ and

her choice of love at the centre of everything, because of the place she gives to the ardent impulses of the heart on her spiritual journey, Thérèse of Lisieux is a saint who remains young despite the passing years, and she is held up as an eminent model and guide on the path of Christians, as we approach the third millennium.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the Church's joy is great on this day that crowns the expectations and prayers of so many who have understood, in requesting the title of doctor, this special gift of God and have supported its recognition and acceptance. We would all like to give thanks to the Lord together, particularly with the professors and students of Rome's ecclesiastical universities, who in recent days have begun the new academic year. Yes, O Father, we bless you, together with Jesus (cf. Mt 11: 25), because you have "hidden your secrets from the wise and understanding" and have revealed them to this "little one" whom today you hold up again for our attention and imitation. Thank you for the wisdom you gave her, making her an exceptional witness and teacher of life for the whole Church! Thank you for the love you poured out upon her and which continues to illumine and warm hearts, spurring them to holiness. The desire Thérèse expressed to "spend her heaven doing good on earth" (*Opere Complete*, p. 1050), continues to be fulfilled in a marvellous way. Thank you Father, for making her close to us today with a new title, to the praise and glory of your name for ever and ever. Amen! © Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana