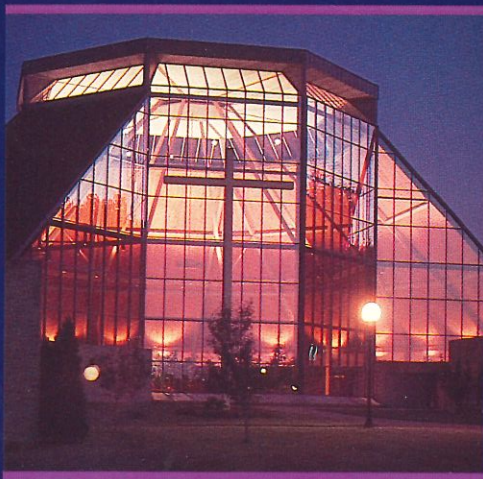


Emmanuel

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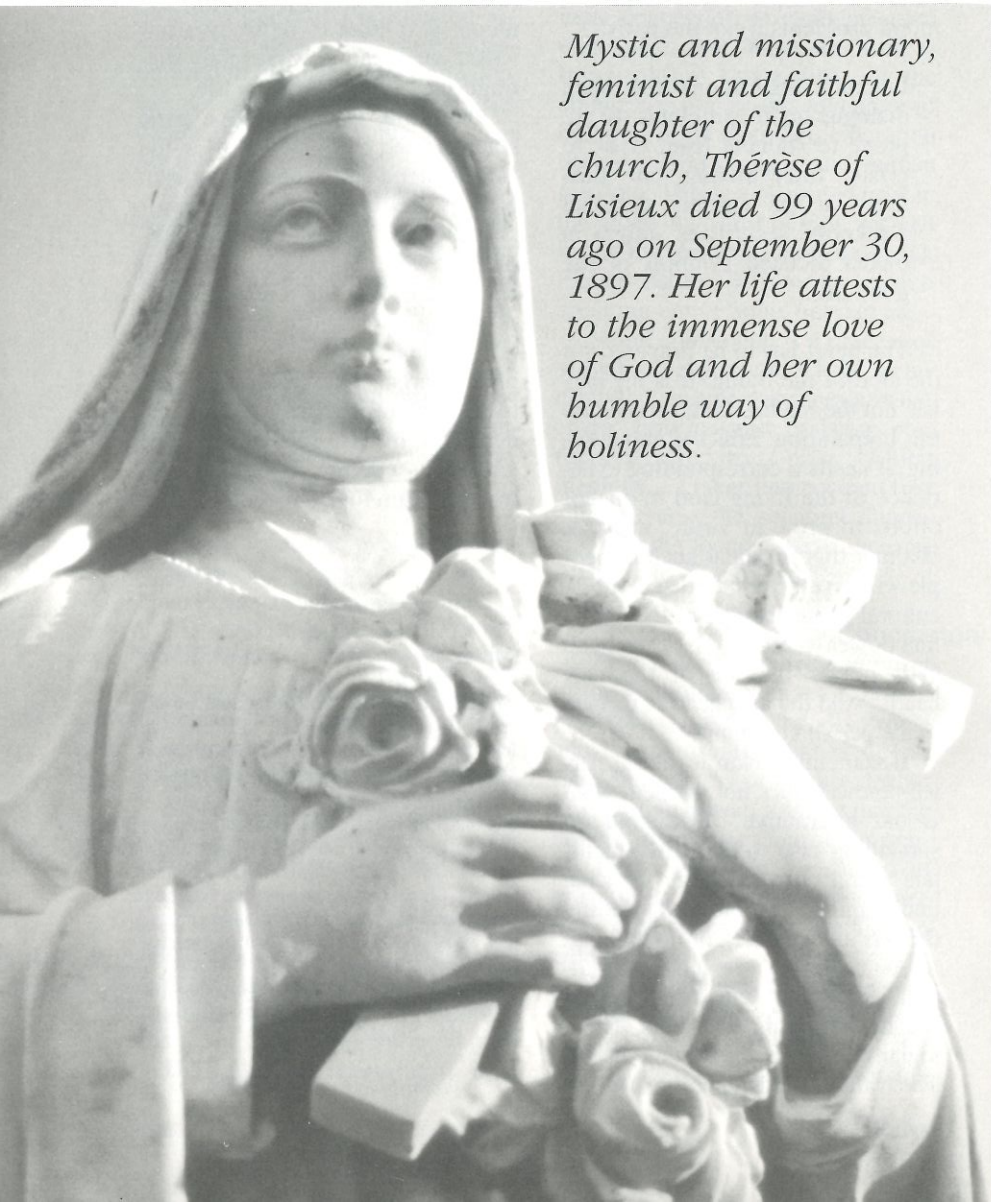


*EUCCHARISTIC
SPIRITUALITY*

Thérèse of Lisieux;

One Hundred Years of Grace

by Colette Ackerman, OCD



Mystic and missionary, feminist and faithful daughter of the church, Thérèse of Lisieux died 99 years ago on September 30, 1897. Her life attests to the immense love of God and her own humble way of holiness.

Ninety-nine years ago on September 30, 1897, Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, died of tuberculosis at the monastery in Lisieux, France, after nine years of Carmelite life. She was 24 years old, and known to hardly anyone beyond her small circle of family and friends. Thérèse left behind a spiritual autobiography, some poems and plays, and many letters. Her three blood sisters, members of the same Carmelite community, had recorded in notebooks the words she spoke during the last months of her life.

Her autobiography, published the year after her death, was titled *The Story of a Soul*—words taken from the first sentence of her manuscript. This text is perhaps the most significant spiritual testimony of the twentieth century and it continues to sell thousands of copies every year. As we come to the feast of Thérèse, October 1, events are scheduled throughout the world to commemorate the centenary of her

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death. This year will be a celebration of her life and her mission—her vocation—to be love at the heart of the church.

Why, we might ask, after one hundred years, do the writings of this Carmelite nun continue to have meaning for our life? Why, in a world often enslaving, diminishing, and violent, is her hidden life of prayer an abiding source of influence and inspiration? As we come to the end of our own century, what do the life and writings of Thérèse suggest to us who live as displaced people yearning for the mercy of God? What message is there for us who long for our true home and yet desire to make a difference on this earth?

I had the opportunity of making a pilgrimage to Lisieux during the summer of 1995; in France only Lourdes attracts more pilgrims than Lisieux. Thousands of people from all over Europe and all over the world come here because they love Thérèse. Not just sightseers, but those seeking to learn more about the life of this young nun. Pilgrims leave bouquets of flowers at her tomb in the Carmelite chapel; they pray, and I'm sure some go home with the gaudy religious souvenirs that are for sale in the surrounding shops. But there is an awareness of holiness in the place and simplicity. And so much more. . . .

Awareness of God's Love

Thérèse describes in her autobiography the story which she claims summarizes her entire life: One day her sister, Leonie, now past the age of playing with dolls, offered Thérèse (age three) and Celine (four years older) a basket of doll clothes, colorful fabric scraps, and sewing supplies. Celine chose a

small ball of wool that pleased her, but Thérèse stretched out her hand and said dramatically, "I choose all," and, without ceremony, walked off with the entire basket.

At the very end of her manuscript, written shortly before her death, that earlier childhood voice is echoed when she rejoices in the absolute love she has for God and God for her:

Just as a torrent, throwing itself with impetuosity into the ocean, drags after it everything it encounters in its passage, in the same way, O Jesus, the soul who plunges into the shoreless ocean of your love, draws with her all the treasures she possesses. . . . You know, O my God, I have never desired anything but to love you, and I am ambitious for no other glory. Your love has gone before me, and it has grown within me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot fathom. (SS 254, 256)

Thérèse spent a lifetime focused on the primacy of God and gave herself over to the absolute love of God. This saint is also a woman with a rich, multi-faceted personality, who recorded her spiritual journey and her love for God in words that have proved genuinely durable. The paradox of Thérèse, who is truly our sister, is that she lived and wrote about the ultimate richness of the mystical life, union with God, and made it understandable. Not only that, but she has told everyone—all of us—that it is attainable! We can know communion with God and with one another here and now.

Thérèse is part of our history; we know a great deal about her. She

was a precocious, high-spirited child: reading at the age of four and cleverly amusing her parents and sisters. Also forming her own opinions: when her mother dressed her in a sky-blue outfit but suggested that she cover her arms to protect them from the sun, Thérèse obeyed. But she thought to herself: How much prettier I would look with bare arms! When sent away to school, she did well in her studies but found it hard to make friends. She wanted to enter Carmel at the age of 15 (and in the spirit of Teresa of Avila) pulled every string that she could—even speaking to the pope in person when she had been repeatedly warned against it—by the bishop!

When Thérèse was 20 and had been in the monastery for five years, the prioress described her in a letter to a friend:

She is tall . . . with a childlike face, and with a tone of voice and expression that hide a wisdom, a perfection and discernment of a woman of fifty. . . . She is innocent . . . but her head is filled with tricks to be played on anyone she pleases. A mystic, a comedienne, she is everything! She can make you shed tears of devotion, and she can as easily make you split your sides with laughter during recreation. (LC 16)

Thérèse lived her short life of 24 years in a very circumscribed area of geography, yet, in her writings, she expresses a vitality, a sense of discovery, a continuing maturity. She searched for new ideas, new ways. In the Carmelite family of saints, she is certainly the inventor. "I want to seek out a means of

going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new" (SS 207). She felt that since elevators now served instead of stairways, she would find an elevator to God.

The New Way

Thérèse begins her *Story of a Soul*, which is really the story of her experience of God, by saying that all she desires is to sing the mercies of the Lord. At some point Thérèse gave up on the law (the old way) and knew herself embraced by the mercy of God. Her entire life is a testimony to God's unmeasured mercy. Dare we call this "the new way?"

Thérèse, theologian that she was, always put together plenty of evidence to support her way of interpreting God. The liturgical readings for her feast reflect this. She used Isaiah to describe her own experience of God: "As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you" (Is 66: 13). She was launched on her way of confidence and love because she believed in and was consoled by the text from Matthew which tells us that it has pleased God to "hide these things from the learned and the clever and reveal them to mere children" (Mt 11: 25-26). Jesus is the great eagle who raises her up and supports her always in the shadow of his wings.

Thérèse, in her wisdom, was never afraid of putting aside the possessions she knew might unravel the fabric of her relationship with God. "I understood that without love all works are nothing, even the most dazzling, such as raising the dead to life and converting peo-

ples" [SS 175]. From her earliest days Thérèse was focused on a single, passionate relationship. She was in love with God and she was graced in her development with the gradual intensification of that love.

Her story is a love story. She wanted to embrace many different vocations. She wanted to be a martyr like her dearest sister, Joan of Arc; she wanted to be an apostle; she wanted to be a priest—but then her breakthrough, her discovery—

I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and all places . . . in a word that it was eternal! Then I cried out, "My vocation, at last I have found it. . . ." My vocation is love! . . . in the heart of the church I shall be love. . . . Thus I shall be everything and my dream will be realized. (SS 192, 194)

Thérèse sought God in prayer and was faithful throughout a lifetime. She was faithful even in the midst of a darkness which veiled her belief in God during the final two years of her life. Thérèse had the sanctuary of her soul invaded by a suffocating darkness and anguish of spirit which was mirrored in her physical suffering of pulmonary tuberculosis. To her sister she said:

Do not believe I am swimming in consolations; oh no, my consolation is to have none on earth. . . . Jesus teaches me in secret. . . . Sometimes a word comes to console me at the end of prayer. . . . I understand so well that it is only love which makes us acceptable to God that this love is

the only good I ambition. . . . This road is the surrender of the little child who sleeps without fear in its parent's arms. Whoever is a little one, let them come to me. (SS 187-188)

To this wisdom Thérèse was faithful; she held on and she held out.

The brilliant, contemporary native American author Leslie Marmon Silko has a very tender scene in her novel *Ceremony*. An old man, the wisdom figure in the story, speaks to his young friend, an ex-GI, whose adopted brother was mortally wounded walking beside him during a march through Vietnam. The old man tells him: the mountains have outdistanced their destruction just as love has outdistanced death. As long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of the story we have together (219).

Thérèse is part of our story. Her centennial is a time to reflect deeply on her life, to perhaps read or read again her *Story of a Soul*. Let us believe more intensely in the graces of contemplative prayer, contemplative wisdom. Thérèse was a mystic and a revolutionary; she challenges us to follow closely in her steps during this special year of grace.



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⁸See Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984) 123-124.

⁹Other references to Psalm 22 can be found in Mark 15:24 (see 22:19) and Mk 15:29 (see Ps 22:8).

¹⁰For the other Aramaic terms and phrases in Mark, see above, note 5.

¹¹See John Paul Heil, "The Progressive Narrative Pattern of Mark 14, 53-16, 8," *Biblica* 73 (3, '92) 348-349.

¹²The perfect participle of the verb *paristemi* ("to stand by") has two forms, the one used here (*paristos*) and the one used for "one of the bystanders" (*parestekos*) when Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane (14:47).

¹³I base this conclusion on the literary viewpoint of Mark's Gospel, not on what the historical bystanders might have understood.

¹⁴See, for example, D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Pelican Gospel Commentaries (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963) 429, and Josef Schmid, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Regensburg New Testament, translated by Kevin Condon (New York: Alba House, 1963) 296.

¹⁵Like Psalm 22, Psalm 69 is a psalm of lamentation to which the early Christians frequently referred in telling the story of Jesus' passion.



(continued from page 433)

⁷Pinckaers, 12-13.

⁸*ibid.*, 12.

⁹Mt 5:36.

¹⁰Pinckaers, 8.

¹¹John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 89.

¹²*ibid.*, n. 87.

¹³Mk 9:29.

¹⁴John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 88.

¹⁵*ibid.*, n. 22.

¹⁶*ibid.*, n. 42.

¹⁷*ibid.*, n. 43.

¹⁸*ibid.*, n. 82.

¹⁹*ibid.*, n. 85.

²⁰*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1783-1785.

²¹CCC, n. 1783. Also, Karl Rahner, "Formal Existential Ethic" in *Theological Investigations*, n. 2 (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1963), pp. 229-233.

²²*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 58.

²³CCC, nn. 47-8.

²⁴*ibid.*, n. 48.

²⁵*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 103. This is a vital paragraph for understanding the pope's vision of the reality of moral conversion. We can become good because in baptism our selfishness is conquered in the grace of Christ.

²⁶Hervé Carrier, "Evangelization," *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. Rene Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 287ff.

²⁷*ibid.*, 287.

²⁸*ibid.*, 289.

²⁹Pope John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds*, (March 1992), nn. 7, 8.

³⁰*CCC*, n. 2057.

³¹*ibid.*, n. 2234.

³²*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 112.

³³Gary L. Sapp, ed. *Handbook of Moral Development: Models, Processes, Techniques and Research* (Birmingham, AL: Religion Education Press, 1986), 179.

³⁴*CCC*, 2697.



Tongues of Fire

Homiletics

The Sundays of October run from the Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time through the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time inclusive.

During these weeks we read from the conclusion of chapter 21 of Matthew and then continuously for three Sundays from chapter 22. Included are two parables—the evil tenants (Twenty-Seventh Sunday) and the ungrateful guests (Twenty-Eighth Sunday)—and two collections of sayings of Jesus about the believer's relationship to God.

The parables can be viewed within their historical context as an object lesson for Jesus' listeners, especially for the leaders of the chosen people. But they apply equally to us, and remind us of the necessity of making a faith-filled response to God's invitation to share the life and joy of the kingdom. Both the vineyard and the banquet appear frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures and elsewhere as images of the reign of God.

The same urgency is found in Jesus' sayings regarding the primacy of one's relationship with God (Twenty-Ninth Sunday) and the command to love God and neighbor (Thirtieth Sunday).

As the end of the church year approaches, and as each of us nears the moment of accounting for the way we have lived, we must weigh our lives on the scales of Jesus' words.

by Anthony Schueller, SSS