

# Emmanuel

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*EUCCHARISTIC  
SPIRITUALITY*

FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

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# Thérèse of Lisieux: Discovering the Mercy of God

by Colette Ackerman, OCD

*For Thérèse, the whole  
of life was a journey  
into God's mercy.*

**T**hérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face—these are some of the names we use for the young French Carmelite who died at the end of the nineteenth century and was called by Pope Pius XI “the greatest saint of modern times.” Thérèse is the woman who entered Carmel at 15 and died at 24, who said she would

spend her heaven doing good upon earth. She left the testament of her spiritual journey, *The Story of a Soul*, recorded in a few plain copybooks and some closely written pages of a letter to her sister.

The writings and life of Thérèse have been the focus of countless biographies and psychological studies. She is a model in literary works and numerous publications continue to interpret her spirituality. In Paris for World Youth Day August 24, Pope John Paul announced that he will proclaim her a doctor of the church. Her feast day is October 1.

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## Thérèse's Life and Message

During this very special time of celebration, we can ask again: Who is this woman, this saint, this Carmelite who is such a presence to us and an influence among us? This

woman who chiseled out the spiritual path which has become identified as "the little way," the way of "spiritual childhood."

What are we to make of this saint, the greatest of modern times, in our time which is more and more defining itself as the postmodern world? A world of immense progress and serious decline, a world grappling with issues of unity and peace, but often alienated from deep love and much that is human. What does the life of this Carmelite nun reveal to us as we stand on the threshold of another century and struggle for life and the values of life in a civilization tinged with darkness, a culture no longer in touch with its traditional images, and a society where violence and greed threaten not only the human person but our earth, our environment, as well? A society and culture which certainly do not suggest, as the Gospel does, as Thérèse does, that we become like little children (Mt 11: 25-27; Lk 18:15-17).

Thérèse grew up at the beginning of the Third Republic in France, just 80 years after the bloody days of the French Revolution. There were still restrictive laws against some Catholic institutions. And Catholics, particularly in Thérèse's home of Normandy, lived in tension with the republic and the memory of many martyrdoms throughout France's years of political turmoil.

Thérèse, nevertheless, was saturated in the Catholic imagination. Her life was guided in both its education and other pursuits by the seasons of the church year, the sacraments, the lives of the saints,

prayer, and pious practices. As children, Thérèse and her cousin Marie played a unique game; they pretended to be hermits. They imagined having only a poor hut and a little garden where they grew corn and vegetables. But for Thérèse in her growing up, this was more than a game. She longed for the desert of Carmel, and given her milieu, the hope for martyrdom—another of her desires—was not totally unrealistic.

Thérèse had only one ambition: to love God and to become a saint. Everything else was a means to this goal. Around the age of three, Thérèse was beginning to read and she says of this time, "From the age of three, when I was very little, I began to refuse God nothing" (SS 279).

Thérèse, like the ancient hermits on Mt. Carmel and Carmelites through the centuries, was a pilgrim of the absolute. "I began to refuse God nothing." And she had a careful strategy: belief and confidence in God's grace and mercy. A strategy that was discovered slowly, step by step, a strategy that required minute by minute faithfulness. A strategy to which she was so faithful, that at the end of her life, when the diminishments of illness prevented her from receiving holy Communion, Thérèse could say: "It is a great grace to receive the sacraments; but if God does not permit it, it is just the same; everything is a grace" (LC 57). Thérèse heard in her heart the words of God spoken through Isaiah the prophet: "I will carry you upon my knees. . . I will comfort you like a mother" (Is 66: 10-14). She carried these words in

her heart and learned to translate them into her actions.

Recently during a retreat I was reading the best-selling *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. It is a collection of myths and stories with analysis about the life of women—and men. It makes an attempt to focus on the rediscovery of woman's soul. One of the stories is about skeleton woman. Skeleton woman's bones lie in the depth of the sea for hundreds of years. One day a fisherman comes along and pulls up the bones in his net. He takes them home and a miraculous process of restoration begins to take place; the bones slowly knit together. One night, as skeleton woman lies near the sleeping fish-

erman, she sees a tear glistening on the edge of his eye. Skeleton woman is overcome with thirst and she goes to drink the tear; she drinks and drinks and slowly her thirst of centuries is subdued. This is the beginning of a sequence of events which enables her finally to be clothed again with flesh and hair and to become whole.

When I read this story, I was reminded of what Thérèse experienced at the death of Mother Genevieve, the foundress of the Lisieux Carmel. It is the first death Thérèse witnesses. All the sisters were taking some keepsake of this holy woman. After the body has been prepared, Thérèse observes a tear glistening in the corner of Mother Genevieve's eye. She takes a small square of linen, removes the tear, and keeps it as a relic with her vow formula. Several nights later Thérèse has a dream in which Mother Genevieve is making her last will and testament. In the dream Mother Genevieve says to her three times in a row: to you I leave my heart (SS 170-171).

The tradition which passes on the story of skeleton woman suggests that in fairy tales tears change a person, remind them of what is important, save their very souls. Tears can also be a prelude to the heart breaking open, open to limitless love.<sup>1</sup> Thérèse tells us in her autobiography that the year after her profession, when she was 18 and 19, she received great graces. She was



launched on her little way of confidence and love. Her heart was broken open to the extent that she who had once prayed for sinners now begins to see herself identified with them. This deep conversion eventually carried her along to the discovery of her vocation, her mission—to be love at the heart of the church.

I think these stories, whether lives of the saints or fairytales

about Thérèse or skeleton woman, remind us that we spend our lives getting our bones back together. Clothing our hearts in flesh is a lifetime pilgrimage, a journey into the mercy of God. It comprises learning to embrace others, to be identified with them, moving beyond our own self-importance, our self-preoccupation. For Thérèse it was within her desire for self-trans-

scendence that she found her true self, her purpose in life. She learned that her life was for others. When one has approached these living waters, there is no turning back, no other way.

At the end of her life, Thérèse suffered an incredibly debilitating and painful illness and an impenetrable darkness of soul. She told her sisters that she no longer believed in death for her, she only believed in suffering. She confessed to her prioress that when she sang of heaven and God she felt no joy. She sang



simply of what she wanted to be, wanted to believe. She said: the fog surrounds me, everything has disappeared. She told her sister, who cared for her, to be sure and keep all strong medications away from her because she feared in the powerlessness and darkness she might take her life (LC 162, 196).

We all have some of these feelings some of the time. We might even come to our prayer with these feelings—certainly Thérèse did. At the end of her autobiography, Thérèse

says that the saint she had come to imitate most closely was Mary Magdalene—because of her courage.

No matter what her weakness or darkness, Thérèse could always go to God on the wings of confidence and love, believing in mercy. This life of courage and love is what we hope to celebrate during the passing of this centenary year. It is the life with which we hope to be in communion during all the years to come.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a commentary on "tears" in the mystical life from another perspective, see the profound section from Catherine of Siena's *The Dialogue* (Suzanne Noffke, trans., New York: Paulist, 1980) entitled "Tears." Catherine

relates various stages of tears and the consequent impact on the soul. She considers tears "the messenger that lets you know whether life or death is in the heart" (175).

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