

Reflection on St. Thérèse by Cynthia Judge

Imagine...Mother's Day, 2025. Our son Evan was home and at gift opening time, he handed me a book, knowing I love to read. The book is called *Everything Is Tuberculosis* by John Green. Evan said to me, "Mom...*Thérèse*." That was gift, knowing my son was thoughtful enough to bring a book that connects to the Saint we celebrate tonight.

Imagine...the disease of tuberculosis. Saint Thérèse died from this painful and highly contagious disease of the lungs at the age of 24.

But medicine and science and time have eradicated this now curable disease, right? No, in 2023, tuberculosis killed 1,250,000 world-wide, mostly in low- and middle-income countries where there's no access to an advanced health care system.

Imagine being asked to speak about St. Thérèse of Lisieux when our government has shut down, wars ravage our planet, and the world seems bleak AND to speak on how this Saint brings us Hope.

So, we will focus on St. Thérèse' Little Way with the premise that if we commit to following it, we may moment by moment turn this broken world around by our individual acts of radical love.

LET'S TALK ABOUT CELEBRATION

I'd like to share some details about the canonization itself of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face on May 17, 1925 --

Huge crowds gathered: nearly 60,000 inside the church and another 200,000 in the square. Representatives of Europe's royal houses, high officials and statesmen were present. Although they had been invited to attend, Thérèse's four surviving sisters chose not to leave their cloistered vocations to do so. Garlands of roses decorated the altars, pillars, and ceiling. 25,000 electric

light bulbs illuminated the inside of St. Peter's Basilica and loudspeakers were installed for the first time so that everyone could hear.

The canonization banner depicted the new Carmelite saint dressed in her habit scattering roses. The procession alone lasted an hour; the ceremony for six hours. It was a huge event!

May 17, 2025, marked the centenary of St. Thérèse' canonization. It was one day before Pope Leo XIV was formally installed as our new Pope. Here's what he said about the Little Flower: *"Our world needs her...she 'breathed' the name of Jesus at every moment of her life, with spontaneity and freshness."*

His predecessor Pope Francis spoke often of his devotion to St. Thérèse. In 2015, he said, *When I have a problem, I ask the saint -- not that she resolve the problem, but that she take it in her hands and help me to accept it. And as a sign, I almost always receive a white rose."*

A few days after Pope Francis' discharge from his last stay at Gemelli Hospital on March 23rd, Francis received a white rose from Lisieux. He kept it at his home on a nightstand next to his bed.

There was a white rose placed on his tomb on the day of his burial. And so, it's no surprise that on Pope Leo XIV's first trip outside the Vatican, he stopped at Francis' tomb. There, he placed a white rose. Our Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face said before her death: *"I will send down a shower of roses from the heavens; I will spend my heaven doing good upon earth."*

And indeed, she has.

LET'S MAKE SURE WE ALL KNOW ABOUT ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX, THE LITTLE FLOWER

Born January 2nd, 1873, and baptized two days later. The youngest of 5 girls, all of whom joined religious orders.

Her mother Zélie died when Thérèse was 4 and a half years old.

As a young teen, Thérèse had a passionate desire to become a Carmelite – a cloistered nun. She wanted to enter at the age of 15 – she asked the Mother Superior of the order, her local priest, and her bishop who all said no. She finally begged her beloved father to take her to Rome to meet Pope Leo XIII. And though she was given strict orders NOT to say anything at the papal audience, she begged the Pope to grant her the opportunity to enter Carmel. He said, “*you will enter if it is God’s will.*”

With a fierce determination, she knew exactly what she wanted and went about attaining her goals with single-mindedness. The French have a saying, “*Woman’s will, God’s will.*” Therese entered Carmel at the age of 15.

At 21, she began to write the memoirs of her childhood.

In 1896, she contracted tuberculosis and on September 30th, 1897, she died at the age of 24.

Those are the facts. A “little” life. Cloistered in the northwest corner of France in the late 1800’s, Thérèse became a Saint 28 years after her death and was named a Doctor of the Church in 1997, known today as the most popular Saint of modern times.

Each year we wonder how this young, cloistered nun became a sensation on a massive scale shortly after her death with the publication of her memoir *The Story of a Soul*, in which she laid forth her spiritual treatise called The Little Way. The Little Way is a brilliant roadmap to living a spiritual life, one that people all over the world embraced. They thought – we think – “I can do that.”

However, I found a variety of naysayers to our beloved St. Thérèse. Numerous writers said that at first glance they found *The Story of a Soul* to be cloying, sentimental, with overly flowery words and a “little way” that seemed simplistic.

Let me tell you There is nothing soft in the flowery words of Thérèse. Her life was not ‘easy’ nor is her Little Way. St. Thérèse experienced life as all of us do,

facing moments of joy, but also moments of profound crisis and pain. This is precisely why she is such a faithful witness to the Good News of God's mercy and grace manifested in Jesus Christ.

Popular Jesuit author James Martin describes in his book *My Life with the Saints*:

Thérèse Martin was a product of her times...So it is hardly surprising that some of her words and actions occasionally baffle us. But shining through the nineteenth-century piety, like a pale green shoot bursting through dark soil, is a stunningly original personality, a person who, despite the difficulties of life, holds out to us her Little Way and says to us one thing: Love.

LOVE. The explosive force that can transform our lives and the life of the world, once put into effect.

My friends, we need an explosive force of LOVE in our world, and we need to embrace the Little Way. Thérèse was a radical and we must be radical in our LOVE. This is our HOPE.

Let's hear from Thérèse words about The Little Way found in her memoir:

- *I applied myself to practicing little virtues, not having the capability of practicing the great.*
- *Because I was little and weak GOD lowered Himself to me, and instructed me secretly in the things of God's love.*
- *It is love alone that attracts me.*

Thérèse's struggled to find her vocation before God. What was she to do for God given her limited talents and capabilities? The answer she discovered was love. Her vocation was to BE love.

I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES...IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love...my *vocation*, at last I have found it....MY VOCATION IS LOVE!

Finally, she writes:

- *Charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised by their weakness.*
- *I want to always be charitable in my thoughts toward others. I told myself that charity must not consist in feelings but in works.*

She talks about learning from Jesus "*the science of LOVE.*" and how it relates to her Little Way:

"The science of Love, ah, yes, this word resounds sweetly in the ear of my soul, and I desire only this science...I understand so well that it is only love that makes us acceptable to God, that this love is the only good ambition...Jesus does not demand great actions from us but simply surrender and gratitude."

LOVE is the key to the Little Way. Expressing love to everyone in the ebb and flow of life's encounters with others.

Saint Thérèse' spirituality is founded upon doing little things with great love. I've heard that so many times, and yet I realized that I've missed the point. Oh, I'm pretty good at doing little things – give me a "to do" list, please – but it's the WITH GREAT LOVE that I've missed.

Case in point: I was walking home recently, and I encountered a dog walker with two dogs coming towards me. She was glued to her phone, not aware that I was coming and that the dogs were taking up the whole sidewalk. I went over on the grass to not run into said dogs when the movement startled her. She looked up and said, "Oh, sorry." And went on her way.

I didn't say anything, just kept on walking. I was proud that I didn't say anything nasty like "Watch out" or "Pay attention to what you're doing." And then I thought – WAIT A MINUTE. Where did I offer her GREAT LOVE there? So, then my creative brain took over and I thought, maybe she was reading a text saying her rent was overdue, or her sick child needed to be picked up right now from daycare. Compassion filled my heart, shame hit me – I should have said something nice like "That's ok, have a good day, isn't this weather beautiful?" And THEN I thought...what if there *was* no dramatic story, if she was just bored with her job and watching a Tik-Tok video to pass the time? I STILL should have taken the moment and said, "That's ok, have a good day, isn't this weather beautiful?"

That might have changed something in her heart, big or small. With the Little Way, we often don't get the "satisfaction" of knowing if we made a difference or not. But we do it, anyway, believing in the love of God and the power it can bring to each and every soul. There is our HOPE.

In every single way, we must begin showing over the top radical love. We are living in times like never before. Or else these are times the world has seen and we're not learning from the past.

I know the temptation is to not look at our world right now. Friend after friend proudly say, "Oh I don't watch the news anymore" or "I only allow myself to read one bad thing a day" – and truly, each person needs to care for their own mental health, I support that. BUT – I confess that I'm still looking at the news – though Brad often must gently remind me that the television can't hear when I'm talking back to it. I carry the burden of some knowledge, *and* I truly believe that St. Thérèse can lead me, can lead us all on a path to live in this world and make it better. That is my hope. Insisting on radical LOVE

Saint Thérèse wrote, “I feel the need and the desire of carrying out the most heroic deeds for *You*, God.” She wanted to do something radical. We, too, may wonder, like Thérèse wondered, “Is God asking something more of me? Is God content with me?”

This is the great appeal of Thérèse's Little Way. It is a heroic path toward sainthood - the "democratization of holiness" as Thomas Merton called it - that everyone can travel. No matter how humble your talents or situation. There is a radicalness that can infuse each day. The Little Way is to become love incarnate in your day-to-day existence with others. Simply becoming love. Right here. Right now.

This requires a hard discipline, to make every act of sacrifice during the day, every look, and every word flow from love. We believe Jesus is present in each person we encounter. Can we respond with that same love as St. Thérèse did? She is said to have struggled deeply with one fellow Carmelite, but she acted so kindly that the sister thought she was Therese's favorite!

The Little Way isn't, when put into practice, very little at all. It's often hard to do and living by it requires courage. Yes, each little flower--each loving word, act, or look you give today--is a little thing. But cumulatively? It's the love of God incarnate. In you. For this world.

May we learn from these words of St. Thérèse from her beautiful poem entitled *To Live On Love*

To live on love is to navigate without ceasing,

Sowing joy and peace in hearts,

Beloved Pilot! Charity is pressing me,

For I see You in other souls, my sisters.

Charity, that is my only star;

By its light, I sail without detour

I have my motto written on my sail: To live for love!

Amen.