

PRAYER WEEK 1

ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, WHO SHOWS US HOW TO LOVE GOD THROUGH A LITTLE WAY

If a little flower could speak, it seems to me that it would tell us quite simply all that God has done for it, without hiding any of its gifts. It would not, under the pretext of humility, say that it was not pretty, or that it had not a sweet scent, that the sun had withered its petals, or the storm bruised its stem, if it knew that such were not the case.

— *Story of a Soul*¹

This saint, the youngest Doctor of the Church, is known worldwide as the “Little Flower.” She chose this simple image as the metaphor for her life. This metaphor speaks to what we know of her interior life: beauty, simplicity, humility, love. Most of us will never live in circumstances similar to hers, but we certainly can read her life as a story told for our benefit.

Week 1, Saturday

WHO WAS THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX?

Marie Francois Thérèse Martin was born to very devout parents in 1873, the youngest of five surviving children. Her family life was filled with church activity and daily devotions, but Thérèse showed extraordinary spiritual aptitude even in that rich religious atmosphere. When Thérèse was four, her mother died, and Thérèse was cared for by her eldest sister, who eventually left home for the convent; the same happened with the next-eldest sister. By age fifteen, Thérèse felt called by God to enter the Carmelite order, but she was too young according to the convent rules. Thérèse appealed to the local bishop, who denied her. When she, her father, and remaining sister at home did pilgrimage in Rome, Thérèse then appealed to the pope. The girl was so insistent that she was allowed to enter the local convent after Lent—her sisters who were already nuns feared that the harsh fasting during Lent would be too hard on a fifteen-year-old.

Young Thérèse participated fully in the daily life of the Carmelite order. Many hours of prayer, times of solitude and contemplation, and physical work formed their days. Thérèse found it difficult to pray in community but took well to “mental” prayer—contemplation in silence and solitude. It was here that she encountered the God she had always longed after. It was to this God she brought her mundane trials and tribulations. As the somewhat spoiled baby of a family that had insulated her from the secular world, she was quite sensitive in nature. This tenderness of mind, emotion, and spirit was deepened by the multiple losses she had suffered so early in life: her mother to death and her two sister-mothers to their own vocations. Now, as the youngest in the convent, she had to deal with the hardships of an austere lifestyle as well as the undercurrents of emotional conflict that can develop in a closed and tightknit community of people who did not grow up together.

But Thérèse turned every form of suffering, small or great, into an opportunity to be unified even more with her “husband,” Jesus. Carmelites consider themselves brides of Christ, and Thérèse’s energy was focused

on knowing Jesus better and loving him more. She also determined that, because she was so young and untrained in holiness, she would never be a great person of God. In the Lord's vast garden, all she could be was a "little flower." With such a limitation placed upon ambition, she was free to grow fully into who she was. Apparently, this was enough, because her spiritual maturity became evident to those around her.

When she contracted tuberculosis at age twenty-three, she accepted her fate as yet another way to be in communion with the God who loved her. In completing Christ's sufferings, she could further participate in the world's salvation.

During her dying months, Thérèse completed her life story, at the request of her Mother Superior. Today, we would consider it her memoir, and many people would scoff at the idea that a twenty-three-year-old would have lived long enough to have anything important to say. But in her few years, Thérèse had developed a depth of faith and love that few people attain over many decades. Her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, had traveled the world within a few years of her death. By 1923, she had been beatified, and she was made a saint in 1925. Pope John Paul II declared her a Doctor of the Church in 1997, with these words:

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!’” (*Mss B*, 3v^o). 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).

Thérèse of Lisieux did not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the center 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.²

On Thérèse’s feast day in 2016, Pope Francis got to the heart of her life:

I would like to summarize these thoughts with some words from Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, whom we commemorate today. She shows her “little way” to God, “the trust of a little child who falls asleep without fear in his Father’s arms”, because “Jesus does not demand great actions from us, but simply surrender and gratitude” (*Autobiography*, Manuscript B, 1). Unfortunately, however, as she wrote then, and which still holds true today, God finds “few hearts who surrender to him without reservations, who understand the real tenderness of his infinite Love” (*ibid*). The young saint and Doctor of the Church, rather, was an expert in the “science of love” (*ibid*), and teaches us that “perfect charity consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice”; she reminds also that “charity cannot remain hidden in the depths our hearts” (*Autobiography*, Manuscript C, 12). Together let us all implore today the grace of a simple heart, of a heart that believes and lives in the gentle strength of love; let us ask to live in peaceful and complete trust in God’s mercy.³

As we embark on this first week of prayer, we begin with a saint whose message bears much simplicity. Thérèse was religiously educated from early

years but she did not have a scholastic education that would prepare her to write in esoteric theological terms. She speaks of daily events, personal struggles, the power of scripture, and the depth of her own desires. We can relate to her because of her honesty and directness. We can hope that those qualities in her will motivate us toward similar goals.

Get Ready

Here are some suggestions to prepare for the week:

- Go online to do some research of your own on Thérèse of Lisieux. For instance, Fr. Robert Barron, “Saint Thérèse of Lisieux,” July 6, 2015, YouTube video, 5:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03czgO8XUTg>.
- Compose three or four questions about your own life of prayer and activity. You can refer to these questions throughout the week as you read and pray.

Week 1, Sunday

PREPARATION

What do you find intriguing about St. Thérèse of Lisieux so far? What do you hope to learn from her?

Read the following gospel passage several times, noting words or phrases that stand out for you. Try to summarize in your own words what Jesus is doing. Imagine your reactions to him as if you were one of those traveling and ministering along with him.

Gospel for the Week: John 12:1-8

Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there, and Martha served, while Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him. Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then Judas the Iscariot, one [of] his disciples, and the one who would betray him, said, "Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days' wages and given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and held the money bag and used to steal the contributions. So Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Let her keep this for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Inspiration from St. Thérèse

Just as the sun shines simultaneously on the tall cedars and on each little flower as though it were alone on the earth, so Our Lord is occupied particularly with each soul as though there were no others like it.

And just as in nature all the seasons are arranged in such a way as to make the humblest daisy bloom on a set day, in the same way, everything works out for the good of each soul.⁴

Prayer for the Week

Almighty God, Thérèse was able to receive your fatherly/motherly love. May I come to that same willingness. Lord Jesus, our dear St. Thérèse centered on her love for you. May I develop more focus and intention in my relationship with you. Holy Spirit, you worked great holiness in St. Thérèse because she truly desired God and had a humble perception of herself. Teach me to discern my true desires and to assess myself with truth and humility. Amen.

Week 1, Monday

THE WAY OF PRAYER

Morning Prayer

Scripture: Psalm 141:2

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
And the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Thérèse entered the Carmelites quite young: age fifteen. The lifestyle was demanding enough for older women—silence, daily manual labor, the isolation of the cloister, and the endless cycles of prayer. Thérèse struggled to focus when doing traditionally spoken prayer such as the Rosary or even the Our Father. Given that the Carmelites followed the prayers of the Divine Hours, Thérèse must have been frustrated on a regular basis, trying to repeat the prayers meaningfully. She was naturally drawn to mental prayer, which was more interior and free-flowing. It's not surprising that she came to the following conclusion.

From St. Thérèse

For me, prayer is an upward rising of the heart, it's a simple glance toward heaven, it's a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trials as much as in the midst of joys. In short, it's something big, something great, something supernatural that expands my heart and unites me to Jesus.⁵

Read this quote of Thérèse's and note any word or image that stands out for you. I've always loved the phrase "simple glance toward heaven" because it presents prayer as something that comes naturally, that isn't hard work. What image or word appeals to you, and why?

Read the prayer a second time. Is there any part of it you sense God is speaking to you personally right now? Write it down and speak it aloud a few times.

Read it a third time. How do you sense yourself responding to this prayer? To the part God is speaking to you?

Ask Some Questions

1. What kind of prayer comes most easily to you?

As a writer—a word person—I pray quite naturally with words, especially those beautifully written, such as a psalm or poem. I have also found singing to be a natural form of prayer because I've sung since early childhood. What comes naturally to you as you approach communion with God?

What has made prayer comfortable for you in the past? What attracts you to prayer now?

2. When am I most likely to feel a comfortable flow to my prayer?

Some people just don't do well sitting still—they pray much more easily while walking, for instance. In my work as a spiritual director, I try to help people understand what feels right to them as they approach prayer. Some people need to kneel or stand up with hands raised. Others need a quiet and very private place. What about you?

3. In what ways does my heart “rise” during a typical day?

Can I identify such a time recently?

Don't assume that a rising heart happens only in moments of calm or contentment. My heart rises most naturally when I am in deep sorrow and crying out for help. You will most likely find your heart rising to God when you understand that God is not judging you or being angry with you. Our rising to God signals an expectation of acceptance and love. When are you most inclined to expect God's generosity and care?

A Practice

Today, pray in a way that flows well for you: a memorized prayer such as the Our Father, an imagined conversation with Jesus, some quiet time to notice God's presence, journaling about what you're grateful for—whatever form of prayer that works best.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you helped Thérèse recognize what prayer truly was for her. Open my eyes and my heart to the forms of prayer that are your gifts to me. Amen.

Evening Prayer

- I take a few deep, slow breaths and invite the Holy Spirit to help me pray.
- To do with my body what I hope to do with my spirit, I sit up (or stand), lift my face to the sky, and open my arms. And I pray: Loving God, I lift my heart, my mind, my soul—my whole self to you. You know my every hope and fear, pain and pleasure, dream and burden. I lift all of it into your shining love and grace. Amen.