

The Life of St Thérèse of Lisieux

Thérèse was born on 2nd January 1873 at Alençon in Normandy. She was fortunate to be born into a loving and comfortable family. Of nine children born, five girls survived infancy. Thérèse was the youngest. When she was four years old her mother Zélie died from breast cancer. The loss hit Thérèse very hard, and the initial happiness of her childhood gave way to much more troubled years. The family moved to Lisieux to be near relatives. They lived at Les Buissonnets, a fine house close to the city centre.



Thérèse chose her elder sister Pauline to be her 'second mother', but this new guardian entered Carmel when Thérèse was just nine years old. From this time the two sisters could only talk briefly and occasionally, through the grille which divided the Carmel from the outside world. The loss of contact with Pauline hit Thérèse hard and she became very ill. After many prayers for her recovery, Thérèse one day noticed that a statue of Our Lady in her room "appeared to smile" to her; at this time she recovered from her illness.

Thérèse found it hard to control her emotions and would cry at the slightest disappointment. After Christmas Midnight Mass in 1886 she overheard her father make a cutting remark about her. For once she held back the tears. This was to be a turning point for her: she called it her 'complete conversion' and felt that Jesus had given her the help she needed to overcome her great sensitivity.

Thérèse felt a growing desire to enter Carmel, and sought permission from her father. He agreed, but she was too young. She asked the Bishop for permission, and on a visit to Rome even asked the Pope; finally she entered the Carmel at Lisieux at the age of 15, having been granted special permission to enter at this young age.

In Carmel she lived a life of prayer and service. The community is enclosed, so from the day she entered until her death nine years later she never left the convent. Despite this she desired to be a missionary, and had thoughts of travelling to spread the Gospel in Vietnam. She prayed for missionary priests, and wrote to two priests whom she supported by her prayers. She took the name 'Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face'; in this way she was invited to meditate on the meaning of spiritual childhood and on the image of the suffering face of Christ.



Her sister Pauline, by now the superior of the community and using the name 'Mother Agnes of Jesus', asked her to write some childhood memories. This she did, and further writings would follow. After her death they were collected and became a sort of autobiography. The writings were published with the title "The Story of a Soul."

Thérèse coughed up blood on Good Friday 1896. It was the first sign of the disease which would lead to her death eighteen months later. She endured great suffering during this time, and a sort of spiritual darkness enclosed around her. She found it hard to feel the presence of God and felt that heaven 'seemed closed' to her. Through this trial of faith she never lost confidence in God. She died professing her love of God on the evening of 30th September 1897.



Only a small number of people attended Thérèse's funeral, but when her autobiography was published her fame spread quickly. Many millions of copies have now been printed and the work is translated into many languages. Thérèse was canonised in 1925; a million people gathered in Rome for the event. In 1997 Pope John Paul II declared her a 'Doctor of the Church', signifying that her message has a universal relevance. Since 1997 her relics have toured the world, making her in death the missionary she desired to be in life. Many people have been helped by her prayers: she has been true to her promise: "I will spend my heaven doing good on earth."

St Thérèse
at Lancaster
Cathedral



28 - 30 September 2009