

## The Writings of St Thérèse and the 'Little Way'

Thérèse died unknown by the world; it was by her writings that she became an inspiration and a source of help to countless people across the globe. The accounts of her life that she had written were collected together and sent to other Carmelite communities on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1898, exactly a year after her death. It quickly became apparent that demand to read her extraordinary writings would be very high, and within 35 years three million copies of the work had been produced.



In 1997 – a century after Thérèse's death – Pope John Paul II declared her a 'Doctor of the Church'. In this she joins the ranks of some of the Church's greatest thinkers: St Jerome, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas... they are not names with which we would immediately associate Thérèse. The title 'Doctor of the Church' signifies that a saint's message has a particular importance and universal relevance. In a sense, the people of the Church had decided this long before it was officially proclaimed by the Holy Father. Thérèse has a message for us all.

### Thérèse and Vatican II

Thérèse's message is for all because, at its heart, it contains a simple but profound truth: holiness is for all. This conviction is at the heart of Thérèse's famous 'Little Way'. In proclaiming this message Thérèse prepared the ground for a teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which spoke of the universal call to holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, nn. 39-42). The genius of Thérèse's message is that it teaches us how we can each achieve holiness in our lives. We cannot all be heroes; we cannot all be famous saints, martyrs, people who stand out; but we can become holy: this is the purpose of the 'Little Way'.

### The Little Way

When asked what she meant by the 'little way', she answered, "It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and absolute surrender." At the centre of this way is the willingness to make small sacrifices to God. Most people do not have the opportunity to do great acts in their lives, but each of us can offer small daily sacrifices of love to God. In this way, Thérèse teaches that each of us can achieve holiness, simply by willingly offering each act of love to God. "There is only one thing to do here below", she wrote, "to offer Our Lord the flowers of little sacrifices". Love is at the centre of her writings: love for God expressed in acts of love to the people we encounter.

Thérèse did not only speak of this Little Way: she lived it. In Carmel she had much basic and simple work to do. She did it willingly and offered it to God. Thérèse tried to treat all the other sisters equally, even going out of her way to be kindest to those whom she did not like. She wrote prayers and poems; she devised plays for the enjoyment of the sisters. All of this she did with a spirit of love for God.

### Spiritual Childhood

Thérèse knew what it meant to be a child before God. She understood the meaning of Jesus' words, "Unless you become like little children you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mark 10:15). She had absolute confidence in God, complete trust in His goodness. She often used images of childhood to express our relationship with God: "to keep little means not to lose courage at the sight of our faults. Little children often tumble, but they are too small to suffer grievous injury" or "little children do not know what is best. Everything is right in their eyes. Let us imitate them." Thérèse certainly knew her faults, but – thanks to her path of spiritual childhood – remained untroubled by them: "I suppose I ought to be distressed that I so often fall asleep during meditation and thanksgiving after Holy Communion, but I reflect that little children, asleep or awake, are equally dear to their parents." When asked what it means to remain a child, Thérèse answered, "to acknowledge one's own nothingness, to expect everything from God and not to be upset by one's failures."

*"You ask me for a method of attaining perfection. I know of Love – and Love only! Our hearts are made for it alone."* St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897)



28 - 30 September 2009