

# Therese — 'Saint Of The Little Way'

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— PROLOGUE —

— Installment II —

## THE CRUCIFIX OF ST. DESIR

When I went to Lisieux to write the life of little Saint Therese, I regarded the assignment as an isolated one. I had never done any writing of a religious character before and I did not expect to again. Nevertheless, when I said good-bye to my new-found friends, both in the cloister and in the world, I somehow did not feel the farewell was final. So I was not astonished—nor were they—when I returned the following year.

It is hazardous to return to a place which has furnished complete contentment and unique inspiration; such a return often results in disillusionment. But this was not my experience in Lisieux. It seemed natural to spend part of every summer at the Abbaye.

Eventually, on the feast day of St. Louis of France, 1939, the little chapel of blessed memory was the scene of my own reception into the Church.

I left Lisieux the following morning, headed for Nevers and Bourges, to write a biography of Bernadette. It was the same day that France began mobilizing for the Second World War. I remained in France until the source material was gathered and the new book fully outlined. Finally I came home. For a short time thereafter, I continued to have tidings of my friends in France, none alarming. Afterwards, the occupation brought with it a long, long silence. Then came terrible news: Lisieux had been attacked by three squadrons of airplanes and almost destroyed . . . by the English the night of June 7th, by the Americans the following afternoon.

Through some miracle Carmel was spared; the wind changed as the first swept down the street. But the Abbaye des Benedictines was totally demolished. The Prioresse and twenty nuns were killed.

Gradually, more news filtered through. I learned that several nuns, badly wounded, had been taken to the Municipal Hospital. When this was also hit and ignited, they were removed into neighboring chateaux which had been transformed into makeshift hospitals. The other nuns had



The crucifix still stands, unscathed, before the demolished parish church of St. Desir, originally the chapel of the Benedictine Abbey at Lisieux. In this chapel St. Therese received her first Holy Communion.

of the ruins of their Abbaye they found that the fire had destroyed almost everything. In one tragic night they had lost not only their Prioresse and twenty of their fellow nuns, but their saintly relics, their holy vessels, their artistic treasures and their priceless archives. Notre Dame du Pro had become Notre Dame of Bethlehem.

Bombs Bring Death  
The days in the stable were laborious. The nights harassed. Air raids continued. The aged chaplain was standing nearby. The shock proved too great for his strength to sustain. Coming as it did after so many others, he suffered a paralytic stroke. The nuns watched over him prayerfully and cared for him as best they could. But they had

and they returned to their stable. Then as the tide of battle came closer and closer they fled again—this time to Paris.

Soon after they were established in temporary quarters there, I began to hear from them again not indirectly and in snatches but through long letters which they wrote me themselves, telling me every thing I have set down here and much besides. They were all homesick for Normandy and eventually, with the help of a small French society, Amis de Notre Dame du Pro, they were able to secure title to a property known as La Montaigne, only a few kilometers from Lisieux. Though ill-adapted to Lisieux requirements it would serve as an experiment. With my interest and with the aid of American Army trucks, the Benedictines took up residence at the Montaigne.

Return To Lisieux  
Shortly thereafter I went back to them to the former library of the chateau, destined to serve me as a combination bedroom, dining room, reception room and study. It was pretty crowded and lacked the blessed serenity of the Abbaye. But it would answer the purpose not only in establishing my office, I needed an administrative area, more or less, as a salvage point from which to visit the stricken people whose sad condition had fascinated my first novel in Lisieux. The Nuns had lost everything and were living in one room, a devastated La Roche. Lisieux had perished miserably in a concentration camp. The widow who had escaped in the night when the fire broke out, had found refuge at a tiny house in the side. I wanted to get to Lisieux and to Madame Carmel and Carmel and elsewhere, as soon as possible. But my first obligation was to the Benedictines.

I had brought with me for contributions many of the necessities for creature comfort and civilized living as I found them. I unpacked the boxes with a sense of delight. I had come home with the treasures of the old days. These good things had meant more to them. Yet they had been so long in coming that they had been forgotten. When I took a walk with my bag and parcel in the Prioresse.

I have thought back to the silver and brass, the medals of St. Bernadette, the medals of St. Therese, the medals of the other nuns. The story of the crucifix in the house are a safe in the closet at home. "Some treasures have been completely destroyed after a fashion by the explosion of the bomb. My approach to Lisieux had been from Lisieux. The past was a shadow. The intervening months, since the grazing cattle and the green fields of Lisieux, the old half-brother and sister, the sweet little girl, and until I went into Lisieux that day, began to see that had happened in the course of the Liberation and to see the full impact of disaster. Many of the streets were gone entirely. It was almost impossible to see where they had been because of the endless rubble piles.

Crucifix Stands  
The nun who had formerly been the Mère, Marie, and was now the Mère, Marie, was with me. She made no comment as we went along and I could not have asked of her a word. But as we approached the place where the Abbaye had been I suddenly started out. "Mère, the crucifix. The great crucifix in the courtyard. St. Desir. That is the crucifix." It loomed ahead of us huge and black beyond all the ruins of St. Desir and of Notre Dame du Pro. Behind it the sun was setting and through the usual soft haze of a late evening but in a flaming glow.

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