

# Therese — 'Saint Of The Little Way'

By FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES

## THE LITTLE WAY

When Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus had died, all the community melted about her and gazed upon her face. It was soft and lovely like a lily, with every trace of suffering smoothed away from it, and her form was flowerlike, too. Her sisters wrapped her in her long white mantle and placed a wreath of white blossoms upon her brow and a sheaf of palm in her hand—the wreath like the crown of a queen, the palm like a scepter, and both symbols of victory.

Afterwards, she lay in the choir of the chapel, and many people came to look at her and none forbade them, for such is the custom of Carmel with its daughters when they have left it for heaven. And there was no feeling that death was in the place. Instead, it seemed to those who came that there was perfume sweeter than any incense in the air and a great beauty and profound peace.

And when Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus had lain at rest in the chapel for some time and all who would had seen her, those who loved her most took their leave of her, and she was carried away from them to the green hillside above the city of Lisieux.

To choose which they will take into the deep drawer which moves back and forth between the dividing line of a parlor; no grille were strong enough to enclose it, no veil were dark enough to hide it. The relatives who had been entrusted with this treasure read the book with the same absorption, the same sense of rapture, as the nuns themselves. They lent it in their turn here, there, and everywhere. Why, so rose the popular outcry should this masterpiece remain in the possession of a favored few? Carmel at Lisieux was inundated with demands for it. It had no choice but to meet these. L'Histoire Gene Amé was put into general circulation, and it swept the world.

The consequences were manifold. That Carmel of Lisieux, having first been besieged by would-be readers, should next become besieged by would-be postulants, was natural. They came flocking to the doors from every part of France, from Spain and Portugal, from Italy and Argentina, and many other countries. It was impossible to admit more than a modicum in Lisieux itself, but those who manifestly had true vocations, and were not merely swept away by momentary excitement, were prayerfully placed elsewhere. In every case they proved worthy of their profession, and in many instances they revealed such gifts and graces that it was evident the mantle of Soeur Therese had indeed fallen upon them.

That there should also be many converts to the faith which Soeur Therese not only professed but also embodied was likewise natural. People of all colors and creeds can follow a modern model confidently and comprehendingly when distant doctrines only confuse them. Everywhere the mission field in Africa and Asia became enriched by new adherents to the Church. Anglicans and Presbyterians began to find new beauties, new meanings, in Catholicism. Many of them embraced it, several clergymen misinterpreted it. A better feeling began to spring up between groups whose strain and dissension had long prevailed. They found a common interest, a common inspiration, in the story of Therese of Lisieux. Their little differences, their little antagonisms, seemed petty and unimportant in the presence of so serene and strong a spirit.

Many supernatural events began to occur, also the sick were healed, the lame walked, the blind recovered their sight. And with one accord they acclaimed Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus as their benefactress. The cynical statement that no more saints would be heralded by the people was disproved on every hand. The popular pressure was such that Rome felt it was time to act.

For though it is not the function of Rome to create saints, it is the function of Rome to consider very searching qualifications for sainthood which seem

to have been made manifest and eventually to pronounce judgment upon them, soberly, discreetly, advisedly, and in the fear of God.

### SAINTHOOD

It was because such an undertaking had been so urgently indicated that early in 1919 the Sacred Congregation authorized Monsiegnor Lemmonier, Bishop of Bayeux, and Lisieux, to initiate proceedings which would make a thorough research and report of the writings of Soeur Therese in August of the same year, the process began in Bayeux. Exhaustive from every point of view, it was not until December 1911 that it came to an end.

A year later the Sacred Congregation issued a decree officially approving the writings of Soeur Therese; and two and a half years later—June 1914—Pius X, the successor of Leo XIII, signed the decree introducing the "cause" which would lead to beatification and canonization.

The most critical could not possibly call this a hasty process, and it was drawn out to lengthen still unbroken when on the first of August, 1914 a great calamity of modern times descended upon a dumfounded world. For over four years the First World War engulfed all the forces of mankind but if any further proof was needed that a new saint had been proclaimed by the people though Rome had not yet made this pronouncement it was quickly found in the frenzied hours of the war. For Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus became supremely the soldiers' saint. Of course we have Jeanne d'Arc, one of these said with a simple directness which voiced the feeling of millions, "but the little Sister is nearer to us." The cry which came straight from the souls of thousands of others was, if possible, even more touching, "Sister Therese, protect us, in the place of our mothers who cannot be here with us today, as you are!" Officers of artillery gave their batteries the name of the young Carmelite, pilots baptized their planes Avion Soeur Therese; entire regiments were dedicated to her. This was the feeling, this was the faith uplifting a great modern army, and from the army, it swept around the earth.

Even if Rome had been unwilling to act it could not, in wisdom have refused to do so. But Rome was not unwilling; it gladly gave to its faithful daughter the honor which was her due in August, 1921. "The heroism of the virtues" of Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus was officially proclaimed by Benedict XV. In February, 1923, his successor Pius XI handed down a decree approving her miracles. On April 29th, in the same year the ceremony took place in St. Peter's, among scenes of indescribable splendor and amidst demonstrations of popular rejoicing of which only those who participated in it can visualize the feeling and the fervor.

Two years afterwards, in the supreme ceremony of canonization, Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus took her place in the calendar of saints and on the altars of churches as she had long since taken it in the hearts of faithful followers in every part of the world. Furthermore, in an Apostolic Letter sent out in 1944, His Holiness Pope Pius XII declared "St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Virgin, Carmelite of Lisieux, the secondary patroness of all France, with all the liturgical privileges granted national patroness." She was thus given a rank equal to that of St. Joan of Arc who was made secondary patroness of France soon after canonization, the first patroness of France having, for centuries, been "Mary, the Blessed Mother of God."

At the end of this story which I have tried to tell for those others who like myself are only average women I want to say what I believe Therese of Lisieux stands for primarily in their lives and in mine.

I believe first of all, that she stands for purpose. From earliest childhood she knew what she wanted to do what she could do and what she ought to do. There was never anything indecisive about her. She stood squarely on her feet and faced the world. Even when all the world seemed against her she was still steadfast. She fought the good fight, she finished the course, she kept the faith.

### WHAT SHE STANDS FOR

She stands for purity. By this, I do not mean merely the purity of the flesh that she had this goes without saying. She was chaste in heart and the fact that she has so often and so truly been called the "Soldiers' Saint" and the "Mama Saint" should be proof positive to modern women who are cynical on this paramount subject that men never have and never will lower their ideas of the essentially of this quality in the women whom they really venerate. But purity of thought and vision which is the highest form of sincerity which sweeps away confusion and establishes clarity, which makes for single-mindedness and single-heartedness.

She stands for resourcefulness. She was after all a girl of rather limited opportunities, brought up in a small provincial city without great riches or powerful contacts or brilliant openings. She did not live very long, and she lived in a secluded convent. She never had any special chance to develop her natural gifts or to reveal these. But the city where she lived has become famous because it was her home and the book she wrote has become a byword throughout the world.

She stands for wisdom. By this, I do not mean that she was a learned woman as the term is generally understood. She did not have an advanced education, though she had an adequate one. She read a great deal, and she read the best books that were available, and afterwards she pondered on what she had read. Besides, she thought things over generally. She did not act impetuously or inconsiderately, because she reflected on her course of action before she committed herself to it. It is always the wisest way.

She stands for loving kindness. Little children turned toward her trustfully and were never deceived. The poor, the weak, the old, the helpless, the sick, the suffering—for all these she had abundant sympathy, and with them she established those bonds of understanding which come from compassion. There was no more condescension than in patience in her attitude toward them. And it is only of noble elements that true charity can be made up.

She stands for courage. There was nothing that could defeat her. Even her own death could not defeat her. She prevailed. Her life was a psalm of victory of the very end, and the echoes of it will ring down through the ages.

She stands for faith. Not the faith that is beyond our comprehension, which never wavers and which never fails. But the faith that, in spite of all doubts and all anguish, triumphs in the end, because it stays fresh enough to enrich desert places, strong enough to move mountains, bright enough to illumine deep darkness—even the darkness of the Valley of the Shadow.

She stands for sublime and supreme simplicity and beauty of this, we who are average persons, can pattern our lives after hers, at least in some small degree. Her basic principles are applicable to every walk in life. If we worship God as she did, in spirit and in truth, we shall find that we are not very far from her after all. The "little way" which she reveals to us is not an intricate one. It is not beyond our skill and our strength, it opens up to human beings everywhere.

I believe that, with God's help, we can follow it.

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That was all there was for her at first. A little later, the text of words that she had spoken herself was written on her cross: "Je vous aimerai mon ciel j'ai été béatifié en terre." "I wish to spend my heaven doing good on earth."

Some skeptic has said—was it perhaps Renan? "There will still be saints made in Rome. It is Rome's function to make saints, is it not? But there will be no more made by the people."

Before making cynical statements, it is well to be sure of one's facts. Renan was a poor prophet.

### DIFFERENT WAYS

For, in the first place, it is not Rome's function to make saints; it is God's function, and through His grace, the function of diverse human beings, who in their persons fulfill His purpose. They do not all achieve sainthood in the same way. There are many different roads to heaven, and He leaves His children free

to choose which they will take into the deep drawer which moves back and forth between the dividing line of a parlor; no grille were strong enough to enclose it, no veil were dark enough to hide it. The relatives who had been entrusted with this treasure read the book with the same absorption, the same sense of rapture, as the nuns themselves. They lent it in their turn here, there, and everywhere. Why, so rose the popular outcry should this masterpiece remain in the possession of a favored few? Carmel at Lisieux was inundated with demands for it. It had no choice but to meet these. L'Histoire Gene Amé was put into general circulation, and it swept the world.

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