

Therese — 'Saint Of The Little Way'

By FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES

Final Installment THE 'LITTLE WAY'

When Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus had died, all the community knelt 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 alata 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.

There, in the midst of many tombstones, she lies in the Carmelite. It is a small square and walled about with mellow brick which is surrounded by a white picket. Each grave is outlined by a low, white wooden scallop, and from the graves themselves, white roses spring in sweet and rich profusion. The graves are marked by plain white crosses, with only a name and two dates printed on them in plain black letters.

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, and reveal to others, of whom they clearly indicate which they should take themselves and afterwards reveal.

The way of Therese of Avila and that of Therese of Lisieux are not the same. For instance, while both are beautiful, it is the "little way" of Therese of Lisieux that our own generation has most eagerly yearned to follow and that has seemed to open up most clearly and most comforting before the eyes of burdened men and women in this troubled world of today.

She had hardly died when it became evident that this was so. It was her book that first bore witness to it.

This book was printed, and sent—in lieu of the usual formal notice on the death of a nun—to every Carmelite convent in Christendom. Its reception was as different from that usually accorded to such an announcement as the vital story itself is different from a cold official document. Instead of being accepted with conventional courtesy and empty respect, devoid of any deep personal feeling, it was eagerly devoured, first in the cloisters to which it had penetrated and then by everyone who came into contact with these Carmelites. It is true, lead existences more secluded than the religious of almost any other order, but they are not entirely cut off from their families and friends.

BOOK SLIPPED OUT
They began to slip the book which had so enthralled them

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 1910 the Sacred Congregation authorized Monsignor Lemoine, Bishop of Bayeux and Lisieux, to institute 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 unforeseen when on the first of August, 1914, a great calamity of modern times descended upon a dumfounded world, or over four years, the First World War engulfed all the forces of mankind; but if any further proof were needed that a new saint had been proclaimed to the people, though Rome had not yet made this pronouncement, was quickly found in the trenches.

For Soeur Therese de l'Enfant-Jesus became supremely the soldiers' saint. Of course, we have Jeanne d'Arc; one of those 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 the 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, as you are!" Officers of artillery gave their beret to the name of the young Carmelite; pilots named 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 earth, it swept around the earth.

Even if Rome had been unwilling to act, it would 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 general and indescribable splendor and midst 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."

TRUMPET OF LOGIC
And in what, exactly, did the saintliness of Therese consist? She herself has described this quality in a general way by saying "Sanctity is not such and such a practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart, which renders us humble and pliant in the hands of God, conscious of our own weakness, but confident to the point of boldness in the goodness of our Heavenly Father." Someone has wisely said "A saint is a being whose personality is complete in every way." And someone else has still more wisely added, "Not only that, but they are the beings most wholly normal, since they have established in themselves the supreme triumph of logic, following this out to its ultimate consequences."

Both these definitions may be properly applied to her, but there are many others. Strangely enough, some of the most vivid and convincing consist in a recital less of what she was and did, than in a recital of what she was not and did not. "Her life needed to be simple in order that it might serve as a model for small souls," her sister Céline, now Soeur Genevieve de la Ste. Face, has said, and one of her best biographers has expressed the same thought differently: "It was to this multitude of small souls, faithful to the core, but endowed with no extraordinary powers, that she hoped to reveal a part of the richness of heaven. If she did not desire extraordinary grace for herself, on the contrary she desired a wholly simple life, it was by truth because she believed that in this way simple souls would have nothing to envy her."

What was it that the Saint of Lisieux had within her which was extraordinary? A brilliant secular writer, Maurice de Waleffe, has asked, "Her short and uneventful life was like that of a bird which opens in the morning and quietly closes at night. But what did she do? Very little. She wrote a book, or rather, she unburdened herself of certain intimate confidences which Carmel gathered together into a volume and edited after her death under the title, 'Histoire d'une Ame'—The Story of a Soul."

And this soul proved to be so exquisite, so delicate, so worthy of adoration, that the whole world fell on its knees. . . . I

went to Lisieux as a skeptic. I read this book, and I trembled in my turn with admiration, and with deep emotion. That is the real miracle. There are souls so powerful that they can really create the object of their desire.

And who knows whether the supreme secret of peace of mind, and supreme secret of peace of mind, arrogantly sought by many in creeds and philosophies, has not after all been found in this young girl's doctrine of loving God and man as little children love them?"

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 two 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 that goes without saying. She was chastely incarnate, and the fact that she has so often and so truly been called the "Soldiers' Saint" and the "Man's Saint" should be proof positive to modern women who are cynical on this paramount subject that men never have and never will lower their ideals of the essentiality of this quality in the women whom they really venerate. But I also mean that she had that 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 way, even before she entered the convent. She never had any special chance to develop her natural gifts or to reveal them. But the city where she lived became famous because of her. 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. But 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 and with abundant sympathy and with them she established those bonds of understanding which come from compassion. There was no more condescension than impatience 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 paragon of victory to 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 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 because 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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