

# CONTINUED...

## Flower

Continued from page 1

son's spiritual director."

By naming her a doctor, the church would also be signaling to people that she is a saint worthy of emulation, noted Father John Healy, O.Carm, spiritual advisor for the some 120 Rochester-area lay Carmelites.

"The church certifies that what these people (doctors) present is true to the church's faith and the church's morals, and they provide a sure guide to living the Christian life," Father Healy explained. "Her doctrine has born a lot of fruit in the life of the church."

Such claims would likely have sounded strange to St. Thérèse's fellow Carmelites at the time of her death. Sister Anne of the Sacred Heart, who knew her in the Carmel (convent) for some seven years, said after her death, "There was nothing to say about her. She was very kind and very retiring, there was nothing conspicuous about her."

But Thérèse Martin showed signs that she was to be different from an early age.

Born Jan. 2, 1873, in Alençon, France, she was the ninth and last child of Louis and Zélie-Marie Martin. Of the children, four died in childhood; St. Thérèse and her four surviving sisters all became religious.

Their father was a watchmaker and jeweler who had considered becoming a monk. Their mother was a lace maker who considered becoming a nun. On March 26, 1994, Pope John Paul II declared the two "venerable," a step toward possible beatification.

As the youngest child, Thérèse led a pampered life, said Father Robert E. Colaresi, O.Carm, national director of the Society of the Little Flower in Darien, Ill. This became even more so after her mother died in 1877, and through a series of illnesses she herself suffered. But that upbringing helped to set the direction for her spiritual struggles.

"I think you've got a very spoiled girl who

had to wrestle with herself to make not herself the center of the world, but Jesus," Father Colaresi said.

She began to express an interest in religious life when she was just 3. That interest in religious life became more pronounced when she was 9 and her sister Pauline (Mother Agnes of Jesus) entered the Carmelites.

She set her sights on the Carmelites. But her attempts to enter at age 14 were thwarted — at first by her father, then by the priest in charge of the convent at Lisieux. St. Thérèse refused to be deterred, Father Colaresi noted. She appealed to the bishop, and then to the pope, on a visit to Rome. There, she had to be physically removed from his presence.

But one by one obstacles fell away, and she entered the Carmel April 9, 1888, at age 15. There she found a Catholic culture based on the idea of mortification, or suffering, Father Healy observed.

"In the Carmels of the day, and even to the present day, it was understood that the sisters, in addition to prayer and fasting, would undertake suffering for the sake of the church," Father Healy said.

The church at that time was tainted by Jansenism, Bishop Ahern explained. Jansenism emphasized human depravity and unworthiness, and called for severe penances in order to appease God, who was seen as a stern judge.

But St. Thérèse saw God as a loving father in the model of her own father.

Bishop Ahern said that for her, God was "not the God of justice. He is the God of mercy. He is not concerned at all to punish us, he is horrified when we suffer. He is the God of all tenderness and compassion."

Moreover, because of her frail health, St. Thérèse she was unable to take on all the penances some of the other sisters took upon themselves. So she developed her own kind of penances.

"One nun that nobody liked, she asked to

take care of her," Father Healy said. "There was one nun nobody would recreate with because she was so obnoxious, so she went out of her way to be with her."

Such actions — little sacrifices undertaken with love — became the basis of her "little way of spiritual childhood."

The "Little Way" is commonly misunderstood, as is St. Thérèse, in part because of the way in which she wrote and the spirituality of the time, Father Healy pointed out.

"At the turn of the century, the spirituality in France was kind of saccharine," he said. "So she is seen as a sweet little cherub, a sweet little darling of the holy set."

But, if one reads her writings carefully, it becomes clear this image is false, noted Jeanne Sweeney, a member of Rochester's St. Thomas the Apostle Parish.

"She's really not a little, child-like saint," Sweeney said. "She's really profound."

"Everything to her was a grace," Sweeney continued. "There was nothing in her life that she couldn't offer to God. To me, that is profound theology."

"The core and center of the 'Little Way' is accepting our littleness, accepting our weakness, our sinfulness, our poverty, our fragility, our inconstancy — it's the human condition," Bishop Ahern explained.

She understood spiritual childhood not in terms of childishness, but in the sense of complete trust in God, he said. This trust allows one to accept whatever comes in life — both the joys and sufferings — believing that God will supply whatever strength is needed.

The Little Way can find ready application beyond convent walls, Father Healy noted.

"No matter what you do, in whatever walk of life you are, in the little things that come your way come great occasions for grace," Father Healy said. "She's a beautiful example of doing ordinary things with extraordinary love. Most of us don't do extraordinary things. We do ordinary things."

At the prompting of her sister, Sister

Marie of the Sacred Heart, St. Thérèse wrote about her "Little Way." That document became part of her autobiography.

"It's considered to be ... one of the absolutely greatest spiritual documents ever penned," Bishop Ahern said of that section of *The Story of a Soul*.

Still, the older, "sweet" image of her lingers. Farther Colaresi acknowledged, for example, that he was not pleased when his superiors assigned him to oversee the Society of the Little Flower in 1991.

"When I was asked to take over the society, I didn't have great devotion to her," Father Colaresi said. "In fact, I was skeptical."

But then he began to read her writings carefully — and to study the people's testimonies of her intervention in their lives.

"I've absolutely been awed by it," he said. "I can't dismiss that much experience in people's lives."

In her writings, Father Colaresi also discovered that she was not just intent on making herself suffer for the sake of suffering.

"She was able to turn human suffering not into masochistic martyrdom, but into something that refined her and became life-giving for us," he said. The secret to her sense of vocation was love, Father Healy noted, adding, "She said the heart of the church was love."

As for people who still cling to the older "sweet child" image of her, Father Colaresi said, "You have to read her, not just listen to popular piety."

"Those who read it seriously and attentively will all say, you can't go wrong by absorbing her understanding of the mystery of God, which is: He is merciful love," Bishop Ahern noted.

Grossi, for one, would like to see people follow her example.

"I think so much could be accomplished if we could have love for those who seem unlovable," she said. "Today's world should have a little more of that 'sugary sweetness.'"

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