



Thérèse at age 8

# Story of a life

My  
God,  
I love  
you!

Thérèse of Lisieux

## Childhood in Alençon (1837-1877)

Of farming and army stock, the Martin family had solid roots in Normandy and Mayenne. Brought up in a series of military camps, Louis Martin (1823-1894) thought seriously of entering a monastery. But this was not to be, and he turned to clock and watchmaking instead. Zélie Guérin (1831-1877) was also unsuccessful in her attempt to enter the religious order of the sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu. She learned the Alençon lace-making technique and soon mastered this painstaking craft. They married in 1858 but determined they would be celibate until a priest told them that was not how God wanted a marriage to work! They must have followed his advice very well because they had nine children. Four, including two boys, died in infancy. The five children who lived were all daughters who were close to each other all their lives.

Thérèse, the youngest, was born on 2 January 1873. She was put out to nurse for a year and became a lively, mischievous and self-confident child; she thrived on the love that surrounded her in this

Christian household, where prayer, the liturgy, and practical good works formed the basis of her own ardent love of Jesus—her desire to please Him and the Virgin Mary. But disaster struck early in her life when her mother died of breast cancer in the summer of 1877. Thérèse was four and a half years old. Her sixteen-year-old sister, Pauline, became her second mother.

## Lisieux— Les Buissonnets

Her father was left to raise the five girls, ranging from four to seventeen. His brother-in-law, Isidore Guérin, a chemist in Lisieux, invited them all to go and live with him in this small town, with its population of just 18,600 people. They moved on 15 November 1877.

Thérèse spent eleven years at Les Buissonnets, a fine house with a quiet garden, some way from the centre of the town. Her sisters, Marie and Pauline, took care of her education. "Poor Léonie" was a difficult child. Céline, nearly four years older, was her favorite playmate. Louis Martin was both father and mother to his children. He called Thérèse his "little queen" and often took

her walking or fishing in the surrounding countryside. The shock of her mother's death had changed her from a lively, self-confident child into an introverted, shy, and self-effacing one. Her entry into the Benedictine Abbey school of Notre-Dame du Pré was a trial for her: "The five years (1881-1886) I spent there were the saddest of my life." She worked hard, and loved catechism, history, and science, but had trouble with spelling and mathematics.

At the age of ten, she was deeply distressed when Pauline, her favorite sister whom she had chosen as a substitute mother, left to become a Carmelite (2 October 1882). This new emotional shock went so deep that she fell seriously ill with a fever and people thought she was dying. For a whole month, her family were at their wits' end; even doctors could find no explanation for the hallucinations, tossings, turnings and anorexia that afflicted her. The worst part of it for Thérèse was all the people sitting around her bed staring at her like, she said, "a string of onions." Family and Carmelites alike prayed to Our Lady of Victories. When Thérèse saw



her sisters praying to a statue of Mary in her room, Thérèse also prayed. And, on 13 May 1883, when it seemed that she would either die or lose her sanity, she saw the family's statue of the Virgin smile at her, and she was cured. She tried to keep the grace of the cure secret but people found out and badgered her with questions about what Mary was wearing, what she looked like. When she refused to give in to their curiosity, they passed the story that she had made the whole thing up.



Thérèse at age 15

Without realizing it, by the time she was eleven years old Thérèse had developed the habit of mental prayer. She would find a place between her bed and the wall and in that solitude think about God, life, eternity.

But "spiritual torment" was to be her lot for years to come, slackening only when she started preparing for her long-awaited First Communion. At the age of eleven, on 8 May 1884, she received her first "kiss of love," a sense of being united with Jesus, of His giving Himself to her, as she gave herself to Him. Her eucharistic hunger made her long for daily communion. Confirmation, "the sacrament of Love," which she received on 14 June 1884, filled her with ecstasy. Holidays in Trouville and Saint-Ouen-le-Pin were followed, however, by a retreat that triggered a crisis of scruples, lasting seventeen months.

Her sister, Marie, helped her to overcome it. But Marie in her turn entered the Lisieux Carmel on 15 October 1886. This was too much for the adolescent Thérèse, who had now lost a third mother. She was nearly fourteen and already strikingly good-looking, 1.62 meters tall, with magnificent eyes and long hair. She attracted notice on the beach in Trouville, where people nicknamed her "the tall English girl." But she was tormented by an inner anguish that found relief only when, in November 1886, she appealed to her four brothers and sisters in heaven to intercede for her. Even then, she remained hypersensitive, weak-willed, "crying at having cried."

Every time Thérèse even imagined that someone was criticizing her or didn't appreciate her, she burst into tears. Then she would cry because she had cried! Any inner wall she built to contain her wild emotions crumpled immediately before the tiniest comment.

How could she possibly enter the Carmel—something she had dreamed of since the age of nine as a way of living with Jesus—in this pitiful state?

Thérèse wanted to enter the Carmelite convent to join Pauline and Marie but how could she convince others that she could handle the rigors of Carmelite life, if she couldn't handle her own emotional outbursts? She had prayed that Jesus would help her but there was no sign of an answer.

**The Christmas Conversion**

Grace intervened to change her life. On Christmas Day in 1886, the fourteen-year-old hurried home from Midnight Mass at Saint Peter's Cathedral. In France, young children left their shoes by the hearth at Christmas, and then parents would fill them with gifts. By fourteen, most children outgrew this custom. But her sister Céline didn't want Thérèse to grow up. So they continued to leave presents in "baby" Thérèse's shoes.

**The Christmas Conversion**

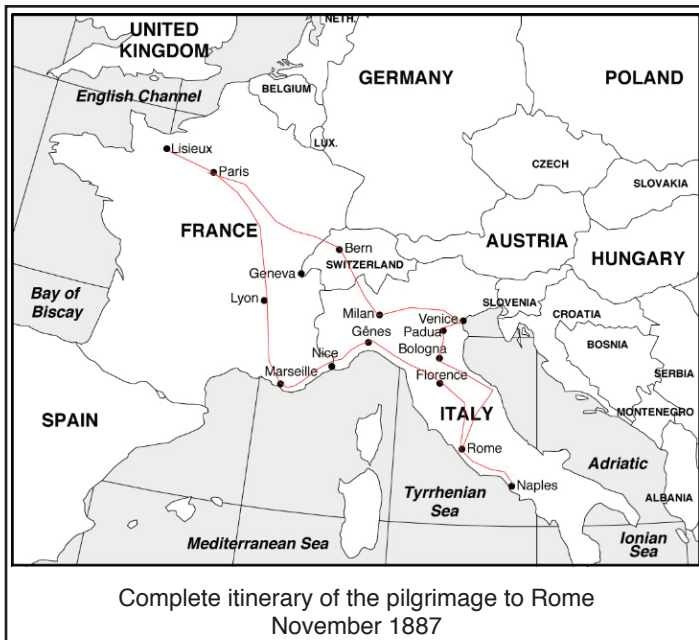
As she and Céline climbed the stairs to take off their hats, their father's voice rose up from the parlor below. Standing over the shoes, he sighed, "Thank goodness that's the last time we shall have this kind of thing!" Thérèse froze, and her sister looked at her helplessly. Céline knew that in a few minutes Thérèse would be in tears over what her father had said.

But the tantrum never came. Something incredible had happened to Thérèse. Jesus had come into her heart and done what she could not do herself. He had made her more sensitive to her father's feelings than her own.

She swallowed her tears, walked slowly down the stairs, and exclaimed over the gifts in the shoes, as if she had never heard a word her father said. The following year she entered the convent. In her autobiography she referred to this Christmas as her "conversion."

The holy Child's strength supplanted her weakness. The strong character she had had at the age of four and a half was suddenly restored to her. A ten-year struggle had ended. Her tears had dried up. Freed at last from herself, she embarked on her "Giant's Race."

How powerless I am to express in human language the secrets of heaven.



“My heart was filled with charity. I forgot myself to please others and, in doing so, became happy myself.” Now, she could fulfill her dream of entering the Carmel as soon as possible to love Jesus and pray for sinners.

Grace received at Mass in the Summer of 1887 left her with a vision of standing at the foot of the Cross, collecting the blood of Jesus and giving it to souls. Having heard people speak of the three murders committed by a certain Pranzini, she decided to save him from hell through prayer and sacrifice. On 1 September 1887, she wept for joy: just before being guillotined, the prisoner kissed the crucifix. For Thérèse, her “first child” had obtained God’s mercy. She hoped that many others would follow once she was in the Carmel.

For Thérèse, 1887 was a year of global development—physical, intellectual, artistic, and especially spiritual. With the stubbornness of a woman in love, she fought to enter the Carmel at the age of fifteen. She had to overcome the opposition of her father (easily persuaded), her uncle Guérin, the bursar of the Carmel, and Monseigneur Hugonin, the Bishop of Bayeux... So, she decided to approach Pope Leo XIII himself.

## WHAT IS CARMEL?

*On Mount Carmel in the Holy Land, near the present-day Haifa, one can still see caves where hermits once lived in accordance with the spiritual tradition founded by the Prophet Elijah.*

*In the 13th century, the hermit brethren came together under a common rule as the “Brothers of the Virgin Mary.” The Carmel was born.*

*In sixteenth-century Spain, **Teresa of Avila** and **John of the Cross** reformed the Carmel radically, simplifying its way of life, emphasizing contemplative prayer, solitary work in a strictly enclosed setting and a life of brotherhood, to create small “islands” to pray for the world’s salvation. The **Lisieux Carmel** was founded in 1838. When Thérèse Martin entered in 1888, it had 26 sisters (average age 47). They spent six and a half hours praying in the nuns’ choir every day (including two hours of communal prayer), worked to earn a meager living and had two hours’ daily recreation.*

*There was severe fasting. All the sisters rose at 5:45 a.m., even in winter, and went to bed around 11 p.m.*

*There are more than 800 Carmelite convents in the world, including 110 in France.*

Her father and sister, Céline, took her on a pilgrimage to Rome to try to get her mind off this crazy idea. Thérèse loved it. It was the one time when being little worked to her advantage! Because she was young and small she could run everywhere, touch relics and tombs without being yelled at. This month of November 1887, when she discovered Switzerland, Florence, Venice, Assisi and above all Rome, marked a turning point in her life. She looked and listened eagerly, now realizing that priests were not angels, but “weak and fragile human beings,” greatly in need of prayer. She understood better just what it meant to be a Carmelite. But the aim of her pilgrimage never wavered: to ask the Pope’s permission to enter the Carmel at fifteen.

Finally they went for an audience with the Pope. According to Céline, the audience, which took place on Sunday 20 November 1887, was a disaster. They had been forbidden to speak to him but that didn’t stop Thérèse. As soon as she got near him, she begged that he let her enter the Carmelite convent.

She had been forbidden to speak to the Pope, but that didn’t stop Thérèse. As soon as she got near him, she begged that he let her enter the Carmelite convent. Leo XIII answered Thérèse’s entreaties evasively. The young girl was extremely distraught and had to be carried out—in tears—by the papal guards! Now she only had Jesus to turn to.

Back in Lisieux, the Vicar General, who had seen her courage, was impressed and soon Thérèse was admitted to the Carmelite convent that her sisters Pauline and Marie had already joined. But she still had to be patient a while longer. On Monday, 9 April 1888, an emotional and tearful but determined Thérèse Martin said goodbye to Les Buissonnets and her family. She was going to live “for ever and ever” in the desert with Jesus and twenty-four enclosed companions; she was fifteen years and three months old.

### In the Carmel (1888-1897)

Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus was happy with her lot, but everyday life in the Carmel had its problems too: the clashes of communal life, the cold, the new diet, and the difficulties of prayer (two hours’ prayer and four and a half of liturgy). First a postulant and then a novice, she took the Carmelite habit on 10 January 1889, after a retreat marked by a deep sense of inner barrenness.



She had her own good reasons for adding “of the Holy Face” to her name in religion.<sup>§</sup>

In the meantime, a further shock came on the family front when her beloved father developed cerebral arteriosclerosis and sud-

denly disappeared from Les Buissonnets in June 1888. Céline and her uncle Guérin found him at Le Havre four days later.

His health continued to deteriorate and he suffered a series of strokes that left him affected not only physically but mentally. On 12 February 1889, he began hallucinating and grabbed for a gun as if going into battle. Because of this and related incidents, the “Patriarch” was soon taken to the Bon-Sauveur hospital in Caen, an asylum for the insane. Horrified, Thérèse learned of the humiliation of the father she adored and admired and of the gossip and pity of their so-called friends. As a cloistered nun she couldn’t even visit her father.

“Oh, I do not think I could have suffered more than I did on that

day!!!” Seeing her father’s humiliation hurt Thérèse deeply. She began to understand the sufferings of the mocked Christ, the Suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah.

This began a horrible time of suffering when she experienced such dryness in prayer that she stated “Jesus isn’t doing much to keep the conversation going.” She was so grief-stricken that she often fell asleep in prayer. She consoled herself by saying that mothers loved children when they lie asleep in their arms so that God must love her when she slept during prayer.

She was also affected by the spiritual atmosphere in the community, which was still tainted by Jansenism\* and the vision of an avenging God. Some of the sisters feared divine justice and suffered badly from scruples. Even after her general confession in May 1888 to Father Pichon, her Jesuit spiritual director, Thérèse was still uneasy. But a great peace came over her when she at last made her profession on 8 September 1890—although taking the black veil (a public ceremony) on 24 September was a day “veiled in tears.”

It was the reading of St. John of the Cross, an unusual choice at the time, that brought her



I do  
not  
regret  
having  
surrendered  
myself  
to  
Love.

From a notebook containing Thérèse’s last words.

relief. In the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*, she discovered “the true Saint of Love.” This, she felt, was the path she was meant to follow. During a community retreat (October 1891), a Franciscan, Father Alexis Prou, launched her on those “waves of confidence and love,” on which she had previously been afraid to venture.

The harsh winter of 1890-1891 and a severe influenza epidemic killed three of the sisters, as well as Mother Geneviève, the Lisieux Carmel’s founder and “Saint.” Thérèse was spared, and her true energy and strength began to show themselves. She felt immense relief when her father, his mind now that of a child, returned to the Guérin household in May 1892 (the lease on Les Buissonnets had expired at Christmas 1889). Céline stayed at home to look after him, although she, too, was thinking of becoming a Carmelite.

Thérèse was delighted when her sister, Agnès of Jesus (Pauline), was elected prioress in succession to Mother Marie de Gonzague (20 February 1893). But when Pauline was elected prioress, she asked Thérèse for the ultimate sacrifice. Because of politics in the convent, many of the sisters feared that the Martin family would take over the convent. Therefore Pauline asked Thérèse to remain a novice, in order to allay the fears of the others that the three sisters would push everyone else around. This meant she would never be a fully professed nun, that she would always have to ask permission for everything she did.

Louis Martin’s death at the Château de la Musse, the Guérin’s home, freed Céline to enter the Lisieux Carmel in September 1894, something she and Thérèse both wanted. She brought her camera with her, using it to enliven recreation periods and incidentally leaving her sister’s picture to posterity. Four of the sisters were now together again.

Asked by Pauline to write verses and theatrical entertainments for liturgical and community festivals, Thérèse wrote two plays about Saint Joan of Arc, “her beloved sister,” performing

them herself with great feeling and conviction (1894-95).

A turning point in Thérèse’s spiritual development came in late 1894/early 1895, when two Old Testament texts, found in one of Céline’s notebooks, brought years of searching to an end. Aspiring to sanctity but aware of her weakness, she felt unworthy to “climb the steep ladder of holiness.” But the arm of Jesus was to lift her instead. While she remained small and “became even smaller,” God would take her and turn her into a saint. Inspired by this revelation, her spirit unfolded and soared throughout the year 1895. Having discovered the treasures of God’s “Merciful Love,” she gave herself to Him at the Mass of the Trinity on 9 June 1895. Without her companions’ being aware of it, she reached new mystical heights.

Pauline had recently ordered her to put down her “childhood memories” in writing for her family. Thérèse obeyed and began, in her few spare moments, to “sing God’s mercies” to her in her own short life. She saw herself as a “little white flower” that had grown under the rays of the divine sun. In January 1896, she gave her prioress an 86-page notebook (Manuscript A) in which she reinterpreted her life in the light of God’s Merciful Love.

The re-election of Mother Marie de Gonzague (21 March 1896), after seven ballots, divided the community. Although Thérèse was herself the youngest novice, the new prioress entrusted the other five novices to her care. In the circumstances, the task was not an easy one, but she performed it with amazing maturity and skill. Two missionary priests, destined for China and Africa, were also entrusted to her. She revealed to these seven people the secrets of the “Little Way of Spiritual Childhood” (see page 7), which had already done so much for her.

Afflicted for months by a sore throat that stubbornly resisted treatment, Thérèse suffered two hemorrhages during Holy Week of 1896. Far from panicking, she saw this as a summons from her Spouse and looked forward to joining Him soon. She kept working without telling anyone until she became so sick a year later everyone knew it. Worst of all she had lost her joy and confidence and felt she would die young without leaving anything behind. This sudden anguish overwhelmed her at Easter and she fell into a dark night of the soul, an “underground labyrinth,” a “fog.” Heaven seemed to have shut its gates against her. This trial of faith and hope, which made her participate in Christ’s Passion, was to last, with a few brief periods of respite, to the end of her life. But she turned the test into a redemptive one, agreeing to remain alone in the darkness so that atheists might receive the Light.

While she was praying in the church that summer, strange and powerful desires started to torment her; she wanted to become a priest, a prophet, a Doctor of the Church, a missionary, a martyr... Chancing on a passage in Saint Paul, she discovered her true vocation at the age of twenty-two:



*On August 30, 1877 Thérèse’s bed was pushed out to the cloister walk, next to the entrance to the choir which she saw for the last time. Her sister, Sister Geneviève, took advantage of the situation and made a last photo of her sister. In this picture we see Thérèse unpertaining roses over her crucifix, which is always in her hands. She looks emaciated and tries her best to smile.*

I am  
not  
dying;  
I am  
enter-  
ing  
into  
life!

In a letter to Father Bellière, written from the infirmary on June 9, 1897. Thérèse died four months later.

Charity gave me  
the key to my vocation.  
I understood that  
the Church had a Heart  
and that this Heart  
was burning with love.  
I understood that Love  
comprised all vocations,  
that Love was every-  
thing, that it embraced  
all times and places...in a  
word, that it was eternal!  
Then in the excess of my  
delirious joy, I cried out:  
O Jesus, my Love...  
my vocation,  
at last I have found it...  
My vocation is Love!"

"In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love. This way, I shall be everything." Writing down these confidences for her sister and god-mother, Marie of the Sacred Heart, in September 1896, she gave the world a spiritual masterpiece (Manuscript B). The wish to "save souls" never left her, and she was seriously thinking of leaving for the Carmel founded in Saigon by the Lisieux sisters.

But tuberculosis was gaining ground undetected. Her pain was so great that she said that if she had not had faith she would have taken her own life without hesitation. But she tried to remain smiling and cheerful—and succeeded so well that some thought she was only pretending to be ill. Early in 1897, Thérèse began to feel that "her course would not be a long one." In April, worn out, she was forced to abandon community life, remaining either in her cell or in the garden. In June, Pauline realized that her death was imminent. In a panic, she implored Mother Marie de Gonzague to let Thérèse finish putting down her recollections. Burning with fever, Thérèse wrote a further 36 pages in a little black notebook. Exhausted, she went to the infirmary on 8 July. For a month, she coughed blood, slept little and was unable to eat, while the tuberculosis began to affect her intestines. Doctor de Cornières treated her with the methods of the time, but they could do nothing to help her.

Her sisters took turns keeping vigil at her bedside. Since April, Pauline had been writing down everything she said. more than 850 recorded utterances were later to be published as the *Last Conversations*. In this short work, Thérèse suf-

fers, prays, weeps, makes jokes to distract her sisters and speaks of her own short life.

A prey to constant darkness, she came to understand the temptations of suicide, but lived in trust and love until the very end. She identified herself with the suffering Jesus and offered everything "for sinners." She felt an overwhelming desire "to do good after her death." "I will return," she said. "My heaven will be spent on earth." With great difficulty, she wrote last letters to her spiritual brothers, Fathers Bellière and Roulland.

The appalling pain she suffered wore her out, but she never lost her smile or her deep-seated serenity. A brief remission was followed by a 48-hour agony. She died at the age of 24 years, on Thursday, 30 September 1897, whispering: "My God, I love You!" Her face was radiant.

She herself felt it was a blessing that God allowed her to die at exactly that age. She had always felt that she had a vocation to be a priest and felt God let her die at the age she would have been ordained if she had been a man so that she wouldn't have to suffer.

She died unknown, just as she had lived unknown in a provincial Carmel—of tuberculosis, but also of "Love," as she herself had wanted. She wrote to Father Bellière: "I am not dying, I am entering into Life." This was just the beginning...

After she died, everything at the convent went back to normal. One nun commented that there was nothing to say about Thérèse. But Pauline put together Thérèse's writings (and heavily edited them, unfortunately) and sent 2,000

copies to other convents. Within two years, the Martin family had to move because her notoriety was so great and by 1903 she had been canonized.

Thérèse of Lisieux is one of the patron saints of the missions, not because she ever went anywhere, but because of her special love of the missions, and the prayers and letters she gave in support of missionaries. This is reminder to all of us who feel we can do nothing, that it is the little things that keep God's kingdom growing.



## The ♦ Little ♦ Way



She knew as a Carmelite nun she would never be able to perform great deeds. “Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.” She took every chance to sacrifice, no matter how small it would seem. She smiled at the sisters she didn't like. She ate everything she was given without complaining—so that she was often given the worst leftovers. One time she was accused of breaking a vase when she was not at fault. Instead of arguing she sank to her knees and begged forgiveness. These little sacrifices cost her more than bigger ones, for these went unrecognized by others. No one told her how wonderful she was for these little secret humiliations and good deeds.

---

§Devotion to the Holy Face sprang up in the 19th century, following certain revelations made to Sister Marie of St. Pierre in the Tours Carmel. Thérèse was introduced to the devotion by Sister Agnes of Jesus. She studied it in a very personal way, using the texts of the prophet Isaiah. She signed her name for the first time as “Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the holy Face” the day she received the habit, 10 January 1889.

---

\*Jansenism was a heresy during the late 16th and 17th centuries. Beliefs included predestination, loss of free will, and limited atonement. Cornelis Jansen, for whom it was named, maintained that freedom of the will is nonexistent and that the redemption of mankind through the death of Jesus Christ is limited to only a part of mankind. Jansen died in 1638 and his teachings were declared heresy.

Thérèse continued to worry about how she could achieve holiness in the life she led. She didn't want to just be good, she wanted to be a saint. She thought there must be a way for people living hidden, little lives like hers. “I have always wanted to become a saint. Unfortunately when I have compared myself with the saints, I have always found that there is the same difference between the saints and me as there is between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and a humble grain of sand trodden underfoot by passers-by. Instead of being discouraged, I told myself: God would not make me wish for something

I will look  
for some  
means of  
going to  
heaven by  
a little way  
which is  
very short  
and very  
straight.

impossible and so, in spite of my littleness, I can aim at being a saint. It is impossible for me to grow bigger, so I put up with myself as I am, with all my countless faults. But I will look for some means of going to heaven by a little way which is very short and very straight, a little way that is quite new.

“We live in an age of inventions. We need no longer climb laboriously up flights of stairs; in well-to-do houses there are lifts. And I was determined to find a lift to carry me to Jesus, for I was far too small to climb the steep stairs of perfection. So I sought in holy Scripture some idea of what this life I wanted would be, and I read these words:

“Whosoever is a little one, come to me.” It is your arms, Jesus, that are the lift to carry me to heaven. And so there is no need for me to grow up: I must stay little and become less and less.”

Thérèse’s “little way” of trusting in Jesus to make her holy and relying on small daily sacrifices instead of great deeds appeals to the thousands of Catholics and others who were trying to find holiness in ordinary lives.



“There was...a little flower called corn-cockle which I had never found since our stay at Lisieux; I wanted very much to see it again, that flower of my childhood which I had picked in the fields of Alençon. And at Carmel it came to smile at me again and show me that in the smallest things as well as the greatest, God gives the hundredfold in this life to those souls who leave everything for love of Him.”

—Thérèse of Lisieux