

3. Thérèse (Martin) of Lisieux *STORY OF A SOUL* (1895)

Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) was perhaps the most popular saint produced by nineteenth-century Catholicism. Though her life as a girl and young nun in and near the French town of Lisieux was outwardly unremarkable, the burning devotion described in her posthumously published autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, quickly made her into a cult figure, and she was canonized in 1925. In this excerpt, Thérèse conveys the intensity of the religious desires that had filled her since childhood. Joan of Arc, the medieval “maid of France” who also died at a young age, was a particular source of inspiration to her. At the age of fifteen, Thérèse joined three of her other sisters in the Carmelite convent at Lisieux, and she remained there until her premature death from tuberculosis nine years later. Her illness prevented her from participating in a mission to Viet Nam and also made her austere convent life even more uncomfortable. Her always pleasant and smiling demeanor generally concealed her suffering, though, as it did the passionate religious yearnings, which were only later revealed in her writing. Thérèse was not an innovative thinker nor was she prone to mystical experience. Her message, rather, was a simple one of total submission to the will of God. She is also known as the Little Flower or as Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

... One day, Léonie,¹⁶ thinking she was too big to be playing any longer with dolls, came to us with a basket filled with dresses and pretty pieces for making others; her doll was resting

on top. “Here, my little sisters, *choose*; I’m giving you all this.” Céline¹⁷ stretched out her hand and took a little ball of wool which pleased her. After a moment’s reflection, I

¹⁶Older sister of Thérèse.

¹⁷Younger sister of Thérèse.

stretched out mine saying: "I choose all!" and I took the basket without further ceremony. Those who witnessed the scene saw nothing wrong and even Céline herself didn't dream of complaining (besides, she had all sorts of toys, her godfather gave her lots of presents, and Louise found ways of getting her everything she desired).

This little incident of my childhood is a summary of my whole life; later on when perfection was set before me, I understood that to become a *saint* one had to suffer much, seek out always the most perfect thing to do, and forget self. I understood, too, there were many degrees of perfection and each soul was free to respond to the advances of Our Lord, to do little or much for Him, in a word, to *choose* among the sacrifices He was asking. Then, as in the days of my childhood, I cried out: "My God 'I choose all!' I don't want to be a *saint* by halves, I'm not afraid to suffer for You, I fear only one thing: to keep my *own will*; so take it, for 'I choose all' that You will!" . . .

I forgot several details of my childhood before your¹⁸ entrance into Carmel; for instance, I haven't spoken about my love for pictures and reading. And still, dear Mother, I owe to the beautiful pictures you gave me as rewards, one of the sweetest joys and strongest impressions which aided me in the practice of virtue. I was forgetting to say anything about the hours I spent looking at them. The *little flower* of the Divine Prisoner,¹⁹ for example, said so many things to me that I became deeply recollected. Seeing that the name of *Pauline* was written under the little flower, I wanted Thérèse's name to be written there also and I offered myself to Jesus as His *little flower*.

I wasn't too good at playing games, but I did love reading very much and would have spent my life at it. I had human *angels*, fortunately for

me, to guide me in the choice of the books which, while being entertaining, nourished both my heart and my mind. And I was not to go beyond a certain time in my reading, which was the cause of great sacrifices to me as I had to interrupt my reading very often at the most enticing passage. This attraction for reading lasted until my entrance into Carmel. To state the number of books that passed through my hands would be impossible, but never did God permit me to read a single one of them which was capable of doing me any harm. It is true that in reading certain tales of chivalry, I didn't always understand the *realities of life*; but soon God made me feel that true glory is that which will last eternally, and to reach it, it isn't necessary to perform striking works but to hide oneself and practice virtue in such a way that the left hand knows not what the right is doing [Mt 6:3].

When reading the accounts of the patriotic deeds of French heroines, especially the *Venerable* JOAN OF ARC, I had a great desire to imitate them; and it seemed I felt within me the same burning zeal with which they were animated, the same heavenly inspiration. Then I received a grace which I have always looked upon as one of the greatest in my life because at that age I wasn't receiving the *lights* I'm now receiving when I am flooded with them. I considered that I was born for *glory* and when I searched out the means of attaining it, God inspired in me the sentiments I have just described. He made me understand my own *glory* would not be evident to the eyes of mortals, that it would consist in becoming a great *saint*! This desire could certainly appear daring if one were to consider how weak and imperfect I was, and how, after seven years in the religious life, I still am weak and imperfect. I always feel, however, the same bold confidence of becoming a great saint because I don't count on my merits since I have *none*, but I trust in Him who is Virtue and Holiness. God alone, content with my weak efforts, will raise me to Himself and make me a *saint*, clothing me in His infinite merits. I didn't think then that one had to suffer very

¹⁸Mother Agnes, her older sister and prioress of the convent at Carmel from 1893 to 1896.

¹⁹A reference to Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Discalced Carmelite imprisoned for nine months in a monastery by a displeased Visitor General. St. John was a special source of inspiration for Thérèse.

much to reach sanctity, but God was not long in showing me this was so and in sending me the trials I have already mentioned. . . .

One evening, not knowing how to tell Jesus that I loved Him and how much I desired that He be loved and glorified everywhere, I was thinking He would never receive a single act of love from hell; then I said to God that to please Him I would consent to see myself plunged into hell so that He would be loved eternally in that place of blasphemy. I realized this could not give Him glory since He desires only our happiness, but when we love, we experience the need of saying a thousand foolish things; if I talked in this way, it wasn't because heaven did not excite my desire, but because at this time my heaven was none other than Love, and I felt, as did St. Paul, that nothing could separate us from the Divine Being who so ravished me! [Rom 8:39]. . . .

I feel in me the *vocation* of the PRIEST. With what love, O Jesus, I would carry You in my hands when, at my voice, You would come down from heaven. And with what love would I give You to souls! But alas! while desiring to be a *Priest*, I admire and envy the humility of St. Francis of Assisi and I feel the *vocation* of imitating him in refusing the sublime dignity of the *Priesthood*.

O Jesus, my Love, my Life, how can I combine these contrasts? How can I realize the desires of my poor *little soul*?

Ah! in spite of my littleness, I would like to enlighten souls as did the *Prophets* and the *Doctors*. I have the *vocation of the Apostle*. I would like to travel over the whole earth to preach Your Name and to plant Your glorious Cross on infidel soil. But *O my Beloved*, one mission alone would not be sufficient for me. I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages. But above all, O my Beloved Savior, I would shed my blood for You even to the very last drop.

Martyrdom was the dream of my youth and this dream has grown with me within Carmel's cloisters. But here again, I feel that my dream is a folly, for I cannot confine myself to desiring *one kind* of martyrdom. To satisfy me I need *all*. Like You, my Adorable Spouse, I would be scourged and crucified. I would die flayed like St. Bartholomew. I would be plunged into boiling oil like St. John; I would undergo all the tortures inflicted upon the martyrs. With St. Agnes and St. Cecelia, I would present my neck to the sword, and like Joan of Arc, my dear sister, I would whisper at the stake Your Name, O JESUS.²⁰ When thinking of the torments which will be the lot of Christians at the time of Anti-Christ, I feel my heart leap with joy and I would that these torments be reserved for me. Jesus, Jesus, if I wanted to write all my desires, I would have to borrow Your *Book of Life* [Rev 20:12], for in it are reported all the actions of all the saints, and I would accomplish all of them for You.

O my Jesus! what is your answer to all my follies? Is there a soul more *little*, more powerless than mine? Nevertheless even because of my weakness, it has pleased You, O Lord, to grant my *little childish desires* and You desire, today, to grant other desires that are *greater* than the universe.

During my meditation, my desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters 12 and 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that *all* cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, etc., that the Church is composed of different members, and that the eye cannot be the hand *at one and the same time* [1 Cor 12: 29, 21]. The answer was clear, but it did not fulfill my desires and gave me no peace. But just as Mary Magdalene found what she was seeking by always stooping down and looking into the empty tomb, so I, abasing myself to the very depths of my nothing-

²⁰All saints and martyrs of the faith; with the exception of Joan of Arc (d. 1329), all ancient figures.

ness, raised myself so high that I was able to attain my end. Without becoming discouraged, I continued my reading, and this sentence consoled me: "*Yet strive after THE BETTER GIFTS, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way*" [1 Cor 12:31, 13:1]. And the Apostle explains how all *the most PERFECT gifts* are nothing without LOVE. That *Charity is the EXCELLENT WAY* that leads most surely to God.

I finally had rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by St. Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them *all*. *Charity* gave me the key to my *vocation*. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church *had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE*. I understood it was *Love alone* that made the Church's members act, that if *Love* ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, 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!

Yes, I have found my place in the Church and it is You, O my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be *Love*. Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized. . . .

You know, Mother, I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when

I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by the passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new.

We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: "*Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me*" [Prov 9:4]. And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. But wanting to know, O my God, what You would do to *the very little one* who answered Your call, I continued my search and this is what I discovered: "*As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you*" [Isa 66:13, 12]. Ah! never did words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain *little* and become this more and more. . . .