



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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June 3, 1999

Life is Worth Giving

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST. THERESE, THE LITTLE FLOWER

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Within 15 years of the death of St. Therese of Lisieux, better known as "The Little Flower," Pope Pius X called her "the greatest saint of modern times." But how could an obscure Carmelite nun who lived in a cloistered convent in a remote part of France and died at the age of 24, become worthy of such a title and be venerated throughout the Christian world and beyond?

To find the answer, this writer visited the Rev. John Malley, O.Carm., former prior general of the Carmelites and now director of the Carmelite Missions, in Darien, Ill.

Question: How do you explain the worldwide devotion to St. Therese?

Answer: I call this experience the "mystery" of the Little Flower. As St. Paul said in his Letter to the Corinthians, "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chose the world's low-born and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something; so that mankind can do no boasting before God."

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In addition, this young Carmelite, who had only five years of formal schooling, anticipated by 70 years some of the major teachings of Vatican II: her emphasis on the centrality of Sacred Scripture; her understanding of the Church; her insights on Mary as the Woman of Faith; and, her message of love and trust to a world alienated from God are certainly from the Holy Spirit.

But to truly understand the "mystery" of St. Therese and the popular devotion to her today, we must acknowledge God's loving plan. It was His choice that made St. Therese a channel of grace to our world at a special moment in history.

Question: Are there other factors which might help to explain devotion to St. Therese, on a human level?

Answer: On a human level, God used two other factors. The memory of St. Therese would surely have passed from history had it not been for two events immediately following her death: first, the publication of her autobiography "The Story of a Soul"; and, the outpouring of miraculous assistance to thousands of people who asked for her intercession.

Her autobiography first appeared in a limited printing of 2,000 copies a year after her death in 1897, and is now published in some 50 languages.

In addition, St. Therese strongly believed that her mission in heaven would be to make God loved by all as she herself had loved Him on earth. As she said to her sisters: "I feel that I'm about to enter into my rest. But I feel especially that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved

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as I love Him, of giving my little way to souls. If God answers my desires, my heaven will be spent on earth until the end of the world. Yes, I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth.... God would not have given me the desire of doing good on earth after my death, if He didn't wish to realize it."

Question: What would you consider to be the real "essence" of St. Therese's spirituality?

Answer: It is difficult to estimate St. Therese's intense and exclusive love for God, but her spirituality begins with this truth. Her sister Pauline once said of her: "She breathed the love of God just as I breathe air." St. Therese couldn't imagine what more she could enjoy after her death than she already enjoyed in life. She didn't experience God in any extraordinary way, but she was with Him in the sense that she completely believed and trusted in the beautiful words of St. John: "God is love, and whoever remains in love, remains in God and God in him."

For further information on St. Therese, write: Carmelite Missions, 1317 Frontage Rd., Darien, IL 60561.