
ST THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX AND HER MESSAGE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE WORLD TODAY



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Imagine the main association many of us here in Britain have with St Thérèse is the visit of her relics to this country in 2009. I was twelve at the time but can remember well going to Nottingham to venerate them. My parents have a photo of this moment in pride of place in their house; we never figured out who took it or even posted it to us but I always glance at it on my way out after visiting them. I can't remember what I thought or said to St Thérèse in that moment but, as for a great many people, she has been an important figure in my life and it left a deep impression. In this article I wish to explore in a more general way, but speaking from my own experience as well, the relevance of St Thérèse of Lisieux for young people today.

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At first glance St Thérèse's life may seem to have little relevance for young people living in 2023, indeed, in my mid-teens I can remember reading *Story of a Soul* and being lost as to how to relate to this incredibly holy nun who lived over a hundred years ago. And, as I was a bit of a tomboy, looking at her photos also made me inclined to think we could have nothing in common at all as I couldn't quite imagine her climbing a tree with me in her dresses! However, since I joined the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham and began to re-explore her life, I have started to realise just how much I can learn from her, and that her life and message have a great power to speak to young people in the world today.

A Life Lived to the Full

There is something quite special about the energy of youth, that desire to experience everything, to do everything, to live a life that is "full". A desire which is not bad in and of itself but has been distorted by the ills which plague modern society such as narcissism, individualism and materialism. Here we see in Thérèse of Lisieux a model of how this drive can be directed towards a great good, the greatest good: God himself. On a surface level, nothing about her life was particularly remarkable; to the eyes of the world, it may even appear as a waste in some respects, a beautiful young woman from a well-off family, living in a time when the world was becoming increasingly accessible, and yet she voluntarily consigns herself to a convent, and an austere, enclosed one at that. However, when one begins to enter into her writings and her life, one encounters a burning vitality and a steely determination. It is important to remember the historical context of the time in which she was living: spreading atheism, agnosticism and a government which was increasingly opposed to religion, to name just a few of the ills which plagued the society in which she lived. Thérèse lived each

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moment of her life fully; then, when asked as she lay dying, "What would you do if you could begin your religious life over again?" she simply responded: "I think I should do as I have already done."¹ What a gift it would be for each one of us to end our days with this certainty! The witness of this is quite remarkable and when we can imitate this ability to live each moment fully it will be a sign of hope and wonder to the young.

One of the stories Thérèse is probably most famous for was choosing ALL when presented with a choice of items by her sister as a little girl.² She goes on to transform this attitude of wanting everything, which was initially in quite a selfish way, into an outpouring of love for God and others in an act of total self-giving. Thérèse created within herself this space to receive God in all his fullness, all of him in exchange for all of herself. Thérèse's life and words teach us that when living this fullness of life, this "all" remains possible in spite of external circumstances. From a secular perspective, what is a fulfilled life? Travelling would be top of the list, seeing and experiencing things which are new, going out with friends, parties, experiencing life in its diversity, having a good time... none of these things are bad in and of themselves, the issue is they have become ends in themselves. It becomes this desperate and futile attempt to find that sense of "fullness" in these things which end up just leaving one with a greater sense of emptiness. Thérèse grasped with great clarity early on in life that to be fulfilled is to recognise God present at all times, to recognise his love in every circumstance, and to return that love which enriches each moment with a remarkable depth

1. Ida Friederike Görres, *The Hidden Face* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2003), pp. 382-83.

2. Cf. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), p. 27.

of meaning and wonderment, transforming the mundane into something extraordinary. This is very much part of her “little way”, and if this understanding of the beauty in the minutiae of life could be presented in such a way to young people it would help to develop a deeper appreciation of the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary and counteract the emptiness experienced by so many.

Dealing with Feelings

This is arguably one of the more important and pressing subject matters for young people today: What do we do about feelings? Mental health is becoming very much at the forefront of major issues of our time, particularly after lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is noticeable that many young people struggle with mental health, partly just because it is rapidly becoming less “taboo” to speak about this matter. It is a large and complex subject area, but in her simplicity Thérèse speaks with great power about this. She was ahead of her time, in some respects, in grasping with an amazing clarity and wisdom the way in which God can bring about a transformation of our affective life. Not in ridding us of our feelings, but in changing the way we see them and use them. A key problem I have certainly seen plaguing today’s culture and particularly impacting young people is the encouragement, coming from a plethora of different contexts, to follow one’s feelings, to do what “feels” right or “is good for you”; we then end up just following our feelings wherever they lead us, a perilous way to live one’s life where they become one’s “god” in a sense. I don’t think it is fair to blame young people for thinking this way; it can be said that, in one sense, they are victims of this hedonistic culture where it can be hard to find alternative ways of thinking and being in spite of our hyper-connectivity.

Thérèse discovered not only how to move through and beyond the strong and difficult feelings she experienced, but also how to turn them towards her own salvation and, singing a song of praise to God, she recognised that “Only by being patient with herself, befriending her feelings, and not letting them become the enemy inside could she respond with love.”³ What wisdom lies therein! The world, on the contrary, seems to encourage two extremes: either to run away and hide from our feelings; or to be led indiscriminately by them. There are many distractions clamouring around us in today’s world which prevent us from being attuned to the workings and movements within ourselves and, consciously or unconsciously, we become reluctant to face these oftentimes difficult feelings and thoughts residing within. But Thérèse teaches us a better way; she shows us that *via media*, that middle path on which we can strike out where we need not be afraid of these difficult emotions, nor become victims of them, but instead learn to “befriend” them in order to develop this inner freedom. Whilst this is important for all ages, to instil this within the young so that good habits and patterns of thinking and behaving can be formed early on would be of immense benefit. To have young people making decisions with greater freedom and, therefore, greater discernment – what a gift this would be!

“We don’t have enemies in Carmel, but there are feelings,”⁴ this young woman stated. What an amazing observation for someone who was just past her teenage years! Whilst this can apply to the difficult characters we encounter in our daily walks of life, we can also interpret this statement as referring to feelings themselves, not seeing them as an

3. Joseph Schmidt, *Walking the Little Way of Thérèse of Lisieux* (Maryland: The Word Among Us Press, 2012), p. 206.

4. Görres, *The Hidden Face: A Study of St Thérèse of Lisieux*, p. 242.

“enemy” but as things which are just there and need to be held and understood in the right light. This is where it is essential to learn how to meet people where they are, just as God does; to be witnesses first of all, letting our lives stand as a sign of this transformation of heart and mind in, with and through him.

A final point worth making, regarding Thérèse and the incredible way she managed her feelings, can be seen in the final few months of her life. This is something which can only be discovered when reading other sources of information outside *Story of a Soul*. It was a bleak and empty time where all sense of God and eternity deserted her, heaven seemed closed to her, non-existent, and in her pain and agony, physical but also spiritual and emotional, she even had temptations to commit suicide, feelings of being “abandoned, completely alone. She...felt suspended above nothingness.”⁵ Does this not describe quite well the way in which our culture is moving, particularly for the younger generations? As Thérèse stated, regarding this time of suffering: “It’s the reasoning of the worst materialists which is imposed upon my mind... I never cease making acts of faith.”⁶ The despair, hopelessness, futility of existence. It is interesting to note how popular dystopian novels and films, such as the *Hunger Games*, were a few years ago indicative of this underlying attitude in society. And yet, Thérèse did not succumb to despair; she endured, she persevered. Presenting this can be incredibly eye-opening for young people and, interestingly, can restore in them a sense of hope, as I experienced when sharing some of Thérèse’s experiences towards the end of her life with a confirmation group. They were left uplifted that even a great

5. Schmidt, *Walking the Little Way of Thérèse of Lisieux*, p. 206.

6. *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1977), pp. 257-58.

saint like Thérèse could experience such immense doubt and darkness. There is a reassurance that the saints were indeed people like ourselves, experiencing the full spectrum of human feeling and emotion, yet not living out of this, but out of a deeply-rooted faith in God.

A Courage to Choose and Say ‘Yes’ by Rooting One’s Life in Love of God

Another noticeable difficulty young people have is the ability (or lack thereof) to choose and commit, particularly to long-term commitments such as relationships. It is a reluctance I have experienced myself and took a good deal of effort to overcome in joining my community! Thérèse’s life stands as a sublime witness to how committing oneself, and in a total, complete way, is not something to dread or fear but ought to be grasped and embraced. It never ceases to strike me as remarkable that a fifteen-year-old could possess such a singular determination and drive to commit the rest of her life to being a Carmelite, knowing full well what this would entail, willing even to hold her beloved sisters, already in the Carmel, at a gentle distance so that each of their hearts would be God’s alone.

A great deal of the reluctance from undertaking commitments is the underlying fear that “I won’t be happy” or “I am happy now but may not be later”. Of course, there can be a multitude of other reasons, but this is the one on which I wish to focus. It is the desire all of us have really, to be happy. And yet, is not happiness something quite transient and fleeting? In several years of working with young people I always tried to encourage them to seek something more: fulfillment and joy. This is the antidote to such fears, as joy is more than a feeling, it is a gift of God which endures through all trials and sufferings, and is rooted in the certainty of his *unconditional* love

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for us. This remedies the need so many have to chase after things to get a fleeting sensation of pleasure and happiness. Since joining my community I do quite often get the question from various people I bump into: “Are you happy?” or, even worse, “As long as you are happy.” I smile nicely and give an affirmative in response but it leaves me a little saddened, as it feeds into this mentality that being happy is the be all and end all and the deciding factor of our life choices. Thérèse understood that the way to true peace was indeed through a life rooted in love and imitation of Christ. This gave her a deeply-rooted knowledge that she was loved unconditionally by God, and in which this unshakable joy was rooted; as she declared in her Act of Oblation: “[God’s] Love penetrates and surrounds me.” This is what sustained and nourished Thérèse in Carmel and throughout her life.

Thérèse had every opportunity in the year or two before she entered Carmel to chase after various worldly pleasures for their own sake. A good example of this would be on her travels with her father, rubbing shoulders with the upper echelons of society who were left quite impressed by her. And yet Thérèse did not pursue such a path which began to be open to her. With a single-minded determination and focus she pursued the path she knew, deep down, led to true joy, even though it was won by great suffering, such as leaving her beloved father behind. Her life remains a powerful witness, even over a hundred years later, to pursuing a life rooted in Christ who can be our joy and fulfillment, and acknowledging that though there are many pleasures in the world which can lead to happiness, they should not be clung onto or become ends in themselves, as this only leads to further emptiness. As Thérèse declared whilst on her deathbed, seized by horrendous agonies: “transitory feelings

7. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, p. 276.

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scarcely ruffle the surface of my soul; a peace that nothing can mar reigns in its depth.”⁸

So let us imitate St Thérèse of Lisieux in all these attitudes, that it may be a witness to the younger generations of a life that can be rich with meaning and fulfillment, driven not by passing feelings, but firmly rooted in the peace and love of God “which surpasses all understanding.”⁹

8. Görres, *The Hidden Face*, p. 383.

9. Philipians 4:6.