

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today (Sunday, October 1) is the Memorial of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, known as the Little Flower. While we do not celebrate her feast in the liturgical calendar today (since the Sunday in Ordinary Time takes precedence), we can still remember her and what she has taught us.

A brief overview of her life. St. Thérèse was born in 1873 in Alençon, France, the youngest of nine children of Saints Louis and Zélie Martin. Four of Thérèse's older siblings had died by the time she was born, and so she was left with her four older sisters. When Thérèse was four years old, her mother died of breast cancer, leaving a deep scar in her soul. She grew up deeply in love with Jesus, knowing His tender love as witnessed through the love of her father, older sisters and extended family. Eventually, after two of her older sisters (Pauline and Marie) joined the Carmelite Monastery of Lisieux, Thérèse, too, felt the calling. At fourteen, after a miraculous healing of her soul on Christmas, she determined that she was going to enter Carmel. After hitting several roadblocks, she finally entered when she was fifteen years old.

She lived the Carmelite life very well, doing little things with great love (it was from St. Thérèse that St. Teresa of Calcutta took her name and her spirituality of doing everything with great love). She was ever real (entertaining her sisters during recreation with her ability to tell stories and mimic others), but ever seeking after the love of God, seeking to console His Heart. At 24, on September 30, 1897, she died from tuberculosis.

I was drawn to St. Thérèse through Archbishop Fulton Sheen – from a retreat he preached in 1973 (which I still listen to every once in a while). His description of her drew me to her. After reading her autobiography, I truly fell in love with this little saint. And this is her secret: she *is* little. Many of the saints have done incredibly big things, things which we marvel at, but could never imitate. When St. Thérèse died, one of the Carmelites, in trying to figure out what to write about her, commented, “What are we to write? She never did anything!” Yet, she really did something great: she loved God in everything she did, she did everything with love.

When asked about her little way, she said:

It is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father; it is to be disquieted about nothing, and not to be set on gaining our living. Even among the poor, they give the child what is necessary, but as soon as he grows up, his father no longer wants to feed him and says: “Work now, you can take care of yourself.”

It was so as not to hear this that I never wanted to grow up, feeling that I was incapable of making my living, the eternal life of heaven. I've always remained little, therefore, having no other occupation but to gather flowers, the flowers of love and sacrifice, and of offering them to God in order to please Him.

To be little is not attributing to oneself the virtues that one practices, believing oneself capable of anything, but to recognize that God places this treasure in the hands of His little child to be used when necessary; but it remains always God's treasure. Finally, it is not to become discouraged over one's faults, for children fall often, but they are too little to hurt themselves very much. (St. Thérèse of Lisieux, “The Yellow Notebook, 6 August 1897” *St. Therese of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*)

She also had a beautiful understanding of what being perfect means – as opposed to the “perfectionism” I have often wrestled with over the year:

I find perfection very easy to practise, because I have realised that all we have to do is take Jesus by the heart. Consider a child who has upset his mother by losing his temper or disobeying her. If he goes and hides in a corner with a sullen look on his face and cries because he is afraid of being punished, his mother will certainly not pardon his fault. But if he comes to her and holds out his arms to her and smiles at her and says, “Give me a hug, I'll never do it again,” how can his mother resist taking him fondly and pressing him to her heart, forgetting his childish wickedness? Yet she knows perfectly well that her dear child will do it again as soon as the occasion arises, but that makes no difference; if he takes her by the heart again, he will never be punished. (St. Thérèse in Letter to Léonie, July 12, 1896, LT 191)

I pray that the example and teaching of little Thérèse – Saint and Doctor of the Church – may help you to run into the arms of the God who loves us so much!