



**First Steps on the
Little Way of
Saint Thérèse of Lisieux**

Father Peter John Cameron, O.P.

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First Steps on the Little Way of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

by

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Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

Doctor of the Church

Why did the Church in 1997 bestow the title of “Doctor of the Church” on one so deeply esteemed as “the Little Flower?”

In Thérèse’s own writings, which are not many, the saint makes reference to the Doctors of the Church no fewer than eleven times. But one entry seems to question whether Church Doctors are really necessary. Thérèse wrote:

Jesus has no need of books or doctors to instruct souls. He who is himself the Doctor of Doctors teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard him speak, but I feel he is within me at each moment; he is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do (*Story of a Soul*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976, p. 179).

Doctors of the Church

Then why does the Church distinguish certain saints as Doctors of the Church? Pope John Paul II explains it clearly:

When the Magisterium proclaims someone a Doctor of the Church, it intends to point out to all the faithful particularly to those who perform in the Church the fundamental service of preaching – or who undertake the delicate task of theological

teaching and research – that the doctrine professed and proclaimed by a certain person can be a reference point, not only because it conforms to revealed truth, but also because it sheds new light on the mysteries of the faith – a deeper understanding of Christ’s mystery (*L’Osservatore Romano* n. 43 (1513) 22 October 1997).

Normally, the decision to declare a saint a Doctor is based on three conditions: the eminent learning of the candidate, his or her high degree of sanctity, and proclamation by the Church.

However, this declaration is not in any way an *ex cathedra* decision – nor does it even claim that the teaching of the Doctor is absolutely without error. In other words, to proclaim a saint a Doctor of the Church is not essential to the Church’s life, *but rather it is an enhancement of the beauty of the Church*. Saint Thérèse is a Doctor of the Church because what Jesus, the “Doctor of Doctors,” inspires Thérèse to say and do enhances the beauty and the life of the Church. What Thérèse says and does sheds new light on the mysteries of the faith, and provides a deeper understanding of Christ’s mystery.

In fact, Saint Thérèse possessed a graced premonition of October 19, 1997, when Pope John Paul II declared Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face to be a Doctor of the Universal Church. Thérèse wrote in her autobiography:

I feel within me other vocations... I feel the vocation of the doctor.... Ah! in spite of my littleness, I would like to enlighten souls as did the Prophets and Doctors (*Story of a Soul*, p. 192).

Not only that, others recognized this vocation in her. About her grade-school days, Thérèse wrote:

I grasped easily the meaning of the things I was learning, but I had trouble learning things word for word. As far as the catechism was concerned, my efforts were crowned with success and I was always first. Father Domin was very much pleased with me and used to call me his little doctor because of my name Thérèse (*Story of a Soul*, p. 81).

But perhaps the greatest clue to why Thérèse deserves to be a Doctor of the Church can be found in a passage that to some may seem contradictory:

Our Lord's love is revealed as perfectly in the most simple soul that resists his grace in nothing as in the most excellent soul; in fact, since the nature of love is to humble oneself, if all souls resembled those of the holy Doctors who illumined the Church with the clarity of their teachings, it seems God would not descend so low when coming to their heart. But he created the child who knows only how to make his feeble cries heard. It is to their hearts that God deigns to lower himself. When coming down in this way, God manifests his infinite grandeur (*Story of a Soul*, p. 14).

The Church has never proclaimed a martyr a Doctor of the Church. But in Thérèse, perhaps for the first time, the Church declares as a Doctor one who is also a simple, childlike soul, one who truly illumines the Church precisely in the way that she humbly invites God to lower himself to her. In one and the same little soul, God both reveals his love perfectly and gives us a teacher to instruct us how to understand the infinite grandeur of his love.

Clearly, then, Thérèse is a new kind of Doctor, a type that even Thérèse didn't conceive of. Pope John Paul II confirms this when he states:

Thérèse of Lisieux did not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the center and heart of the Church, but in her short life she lived it intensely. It is precisely this *convergence of doctrine and concrete experience*, of truth and life, of teaching and practice which shines with particular brightness in this saint and which makes her an attractive model especially for young people and for those who are seeking true meaning for their life (*ibid.*).

God has raised up Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, to enable us to grasp and live the profound truth of divine Love with the *same intensity* as she lived it. Or to put it another way, the Church has

proclaimed Saint Thérèse a Doctor of the Church in order to help God's people *love the love that is mercy*.

Yet, the question remains: Why do we need a Doctor of the Church to teach us to love the love that is mercy? And the answer is that, over and over again in this regard, we falter and fail.

Loving the Love that is Mercy

One of the truly diabolical influences at work in the world is the attempt to destroy and dismiss God's mercy. This evil influence has created serious spiritual tensions in the Church from the very first moments of her history.

And Thérèse experienced these serious spiritual tensions in her own little Carmel in Lisieux, one that was not even fifty years old. The central problem was that these spiritual tensions made a stranger out of God. By overstressing God's transcendence – his eternal majesty and supremacy – and by selling short the dynamism of divine justice, the god that many people revered was not the true God of Christianity.

In fact, the attempt on the part of many Christian witnesses to protect the Lord's almighty sovereignty forced God into a kind of *witness-protection program*: people couldn't have known God if they wanted to. Their attitude made God unrecognizable, impersonal, faceless, formidable, unapproachable, almost anonymous.

This defective approach to God was very much caused by the 17th century heresy called Jansenism. Bishop Guy Gaucher writes about this in his book *The Story of a Life*:

Some Carmels had been diverted towards indiscreet ascetical practices, sometimes towards a narrow moralism. The Lisieux Carmel had not escaped these tendencies which the general climate of French Christianity – with its Jansenist leanings – encouraged. The spirit of penance and mortification was in danger of taking precedence over the dynamism of love. More than one Carmelite was terrified of God the Judge. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, pp. 88-89)

Of course, the mixed up way that people *thought* of God in turn marred the way that people *related* to God. Piety was reduced to

appeasement. People dutifully did what the Church prescribed in order to stave off punishment. The Jansenist thinking went something like this: “If I just take care of my end of the deal with God, then God will take care of me.”

Pierre Descouvemont refers to this in his magnificent book *Thérèse and Lisieux* when he writes:

To save the world, consecrated souls were in fact encouraged to offer themselves as victims to God’s justice in order to take upon themselves the anger of the thrice holy God which was ready to strike sinners. In accepting God’s thunderbolts, they were happy to act in some way like a beneficial lightning rod (Toronto: Novalis, 1996, p. 234)

And this was the world into which stepped the young Carmelite, Thérèse Martin.

That same book tells the story of how Sister Thérèse was disturbed upon reading the obituary of a Carmelite nun from another part of France. The obituary said that the sister made a habit of offering herself “as a victim to divine justice.” In her agony, the dying nun was heard to cry out in anguish, “I bear the rigors of divine Justice! Divine Justice! I do not have enough merits, I must earn more!” That was what Jansenism did to well-intentioned religious (*ibid.*, p. 235).

Another example. The prayer on the back of one popular holy card of the day read: “Holy Father, look at your only Son, the object of your eternal benevolence and, for love of him, save us despite our crimes. Look at Jesus and Mary...and the thunderbolt will fall from your divine hands” (*ibid.*, p. 235).

But the sad thing is that Thérèse didn’t have to look to other Carmels to experience such ghastly disorder. Unfortunately, it had crept into her own monastery and contaminated it. This is clear in the story of Sister Saint John the Baptist who wanted to acquire sanctity by the strength of her own efforts, by multiplying prayers and penances. She accused Thérèse of relying too much on God’s mercy in a way that neglected divine justice. And this is why Thérèse regarded Sister Saint John the Baptist as, in her own words, “the image of God’s severity” (*ibid.*, p. 236).

And the infection didn't end there! Even the sub-prioress of the community, Sister Febronie, thought that Thérèse over-emphasized God's mercy and forgot his justice; and they debated back and forth in a friendly way about this. But Sister Febronie wouldn't listen to reason, and Sister Thérèse finally had to say to her: "Sister, you want the justice of God and so you will have the justice of God. For the soul receives from God exactly what it expects" (*ibid.*, p. 186).

What do *we* expect from God? Do we expect *enough*? For God does not define himself as "justice"; he defines himself as love. That's what he expects us to expect from him. And Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, raises our expectations by teaching us to love the love that is mercy.

Sadly, the curse of these misguided Jansenist notions translated into tragic, practical hardships. For example, at the end of the 1800s, the Church began to encourage Catholics to receive Holy Communion frequently and the chaplain of the Carmel wanted to offer frequent Communion to the nuns there. But the Jansenist practice restricted reception of Communion to very rare occasions. And so the Mother Prioress of the community, Mother Marie de Gonzague, would not listen to the chaplain when he pleaded to make frequent Communion available to the sisters. For Mother Gonzague would have nothing to do with what she considered to be a newfangled custom.

In this, Thérèse disagreed with her Mother Superior. And Sister Thérèse respectfully let her know. Thérèse wrote: "Jesus does not descend from Heaven daily in order to remain in a golden ciborium, but to find another heaven, the heaven of our souls, in which he takes his delight" (*Story of a Soul*, p. 104).

Ironically, it was during the deadly influenza epidemic of 1891, when the entire Carmelite community was nearly wiped out, that Sister Thérèse got her wish. As one of the few able-bodied sisters up-and-about during the outbreak, Thérèse cared for the sick, buried the dead, and also took advantage of receiving Holy Communion daily.

Even with all that, Mother Gonzague would not give in to the petition of Thérèse for more frequent Holy Communion. And so Thérèse looked at her, and said with resolve: "Mother Gonzague, when I am

dead, I will make you change your mind” (*The Hidden Face*, Ida Friederike Gorres, New York: Pantheon, pp. 234-35).

And that is precisely what she did! The great revision of liturgical practices undertaken by Pope Pius X was attributed largely to the intercession of Saint Thérèse. A wonderful story: a few days after Thérèse’s death, a newly-ordained priest came to the Lisieux Carmel where he preached his first sermon on the words, “Come and eat my bread.” Soon after that, with the Prioress’s blessing, the chaplain introduced daily Communion to the Carmel.

Thérèse was so convinced about how much we need to love the love that is mercy – instead of some twisted, inept infatuation with justice – that she made it the theme of a little Christmas play she wrote and performed for the community in 1894.

In the play, the Angel of Judgment approaches the infant Jesus in the manger and says this:

Have you forgotten, Jesus, O Beauty supreme, that the sinner must at last be punished? I will chastise the crime in judgment; I want to exterminate all the ungrateful. My sword is ready! Jesus, sweet victim! My sword is ready!! I am set to avenge you!!! (*Theatre au Carmel*, Paris: Cerf DDB, 1985, p. 108, author’s translation)

And the baby Jesus replies:

O beautiful angel! Put down your sword.

It is not for you to judge the nature that I raise up and that I wish to redeem.

The one who will judge the world is myself, the one named Jesus!

The life-giving dew of my Blood will purify all my chosen ones. Don’t you know that faithful souls always give me consolation in the face of the blasphemies of the unfaithful by a simple look of love? (*ibid.*)

This little dramatic scene proved to be prophetic. In it we see prefigured the very model for Thérèse to be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. We hear a little child...speaking with the authoritative voice of God...correcting a destructive concept of divine justice...offering a new

way to grasp God's love...and transforming the world through a graced teaching on God's mercy.

Justice and Mercy

Thérèse, Doctor of the Church, teaches us to love the love that is mercy in a way that foreshadows Pope John Paul II's magisterial teaching on the theology of justice and mercy in his 1980 encyclical, *Dives in misericordia*. In that encyclical, the Holy Father teaches that mercy is love's second name, its nickname, if you will. And all justice must be based on this love. Authentic justice flows from this love and tends towards it. To put it another way, mercy is the source of justice. As a result, mercy conditions justice so that justice serves love.

Why does the world so dearly need this mercy – and a Doctor of the Church to teach us this mercy? Because, as the Holy Father makes clear, a world without mercy and forgiveness would become a world of cold and unfeeling justice. Selfishness would corrupt society into a system of oppression of the weak by the strong, a world of division, segregation, and unending strife. Unfortunately, we understand all too well just how impotent mere justice is to transform the world.

That's why we need God's mercy! For mercy confers on justice a new content – a content expressed in forgiveness. When mercy reigns, then compassion, pity, generosity, and tenderheartedness serve it in attendance.

Only the love that is mercy is capable of restoring men and women to themselves. That is why God reveals himself to us as mercy, and nothing less. For mercy is the content of our intimacy and of our dialogue with God. Mercy is what our friendship with the Lord is all about. Mercy is the air that Christians breathe and the language we speak. If we are not fluent in mercy, then we have nothing to say to God.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, teaches us how to speak the language of mercy. For God wants the world to remember him in precisely the way that he reveals himself to the world. This moves Thérèse to cry out:

On every side God's love is unknown, rejected; those hearts upon whom you lavish [love] turn to creatures seeking

happiness from them with their miserable affection; they do this instead of throwing themselves into your arms and of accepting your infinite love.... Among his own disciples, Jesus finds few hearts who surrender to him without reservation, who understand the real tenderness of his infinite love (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 180, 189).

It is this ignorance on the part of so many that led Saint Thérèse on her deathbed to testify:

I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved 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 doing good on earth (*St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, Tr. John Clarke, O.C.D., Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1977, p. 102).

Of course, some may argue that the Church of today is no longer vexed by Jansenist paranoia. But we seem to have gone over to the other extreme in the way we take God's mercy for granted and confuse it with justice, acting as if we have a right to it.

Many of us harbor a feeling of "entitlement" – as if God owed us something. Most of the questions we ask God that begin with the word "why" presume that God owes us something and that he is shirking his end of the bargain. Questions like: "Why aren't my prayers answered when and in the way I want?" "Why do good people suffer?" "Why is my neighbor so much better off than I am?"

Justice alone can't adequately answer these questions. Only that love which is mercy can satisfy. Perhaps more than ever, the Church needs Thérèse's radically new way of believing in God's love for us, and of responding to that love.

- How many people are obsessed with trying to prove to God their worthiness?
- How many people think of God's grace like the "merit raise" they strive for at work?
- How many people equate holiness with "just trying harder?"

- How many people think they can do something “good” and deserving of heaven apart from God’s grace?

These people do not understand Gospel mercy. And this ignorance is a malignancy in the Church that cries out for a Doctor. And God has given us one in Saint Thérèse of Lisieux who teaches us to love rightly the love that is mercy.

Saint Thérèse heals us as she educates us. She once wrote:

I cannot conceive of a greater immensity of love than the one which it has pleased you[, Lord,] to give me freely, without any merit on my part...If your justice loves to release itself – this justice which extends only over the earth – how much more does your merciful love desire to set souls on fire since your mercy reaches to the heavens...It is only love which makes us acceptable to God...It is no longer a question of loving one’s neighbor as oneself but of loving him as he – Jesus – has loved him, and will love him to the consummation of the ages (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 256, 181, 188, 220).

But let us be clear: Thérèse’s doctrine does not do away with divine justice. Rather, her teaching purifies false notions and it elevates divine justice to its rightful place in the spiritual life.

Thérèse helps us to see that the justice of God consists in God’s giving us what we need to satisfy God. Justice, then, means receiving from God what we cannot offer him on our own without him. Christian justice means seeking God first in Jesus. Christian justice means seeking God in Jesus especially when we’re tempted to rest on our own strengths, on our own accomplishments – on a false sense of entitlement. Because when we seek God first in Jesus Christ, then *God gives us whatever we need to please him*. And that is what authentic Gospel justice is all about – letting God give us what we need to please him.

This beautiful truth moves Thérèse to exclaim:

Ah! Lord, you know very well that never would I be able to love my sisters as you love them, unless you, O my Jesus, loved them in me. Your will is to love in me all those you command me to love... For me to love you as you love me, I would have to borrow your love (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 221, 256).

To say it again, authentic Christian justice is the work of God's merciful love by which he makes his children just by *giving them what they need to please him*. That is the love that Thérèse, Doctor of the Church, teaches us to love and to make our own.

Father Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, who has been called one of "the most important disciples of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux in the twentieth century" and whose own cause for canonization has been introduced, summarizes all of this for us when he writes that mercy

is the love of God which gives itself beyond all demands and rights...What glorifies God and "delights him" is to be able to give himself, and give himself freely. This was Thérèse's discovery: what gives God joy is the power to give more than what is required by strict justice, freely, based on our needs and the exigencies of his nature which is love and not on our merits.... In the plan of redemption all things find their meaning and reason for being in the mercy which governs the economy of the Christian world. The discovery of this truth of divine faith in so simple and pure a light seems to me the highest and most important contemplative grace given to Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus (*Under the Torrent of His Love*, New York: Alba House, 1995, pp. 23, 242, 104).

As Thérèse herself says so simply: "Merit does not consist in doing or in giving much, but rather in receiving, in loving much. To please Jesus, to delight his heart, one has only to love him, without looking at one's self" (*Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Volume II*, Tr. John Clarke, O.C.D., Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1988, pp. 794-95).

So then how do we receive much and love much? How do we please Jesus without, on the one hand, falling into the trap of that poor, dying nun who felt she needed to earn more merits in order to appease God's justice or, on the other hand, becoming smug, cavalier, self-satisfied, and presumptuous about God's mercy – acting as if we were entitled to it?

And Doctor Thérèse's sublime answer is her doctrine of spiritual childhood in the Little Way. As she wrote to missionary Father Roulland: "Perfection seems simple to me. I see it is sufficient to recognize one's

nothingness and to abandon oneself as a child into God's arms" (*ibid.*, p. 1094).

Thérèse once gave this counsel to one of her novices, Sister Marie of the Trinity:

If God wants you to be as weak and powerless as a child, do you think your merit will be any less for that? Resign yourself, then, to stumbling at every step, to falling even, and to being weak in carrying your cross. Love your powerlessness, and your soul will benefit more from it than if, aided by grace, you were to behave with enthusiastic heroism and fill your soul with self-satisfaction (*St. Thérèse of Lisieux by Those Who Knew Her*, Christopher O'Mahony, Dublin: Veritas, 1975, p. 250).

Unfortunately, some of those who object to Thérèse's being declared a Doctor of the Church do so because they refuse Christ's command to change and become like little children. Rather, they prefer to live under the delusion of their own self-made excellence – their expertise, their extraordinariness – thus giving free reign to ambition, arrogance, egotism, and apathy.

The Little Way

We must be realistic! The world does not live the Little Way. If we were truly living the Little Way:

- we would be delighted to take the last place in line
- we would recoil from flattery
- we would rejoice in the success of our neighbors
- we would make no excuses for our sins
- we would be quick to admit our weaknesses
- we would prefer hiddenness to acclaim
- we would be grateful when others criticized us and pointed out our shortcomings
- we would not be undone by the injury and injustice we suffer
- we would be unmoved by worldly status, fame, and prestige
- we would experience peace in the midst of the world's conflict, turmoil, and strife.

The Church needs Saint Thérèse of Lisieux to be the Doctor of the New Evangelization to teach us to understand, to revere, and to love the love that is mercy. Her magisterial authority especially reaches out:

- to those who feel worthless
- to those who are undeserving
- to those who lack ability, or education, or advantage
- to those who are blackmailed by their sinfulness
- to those who live in spiritual conflict and turmoil, yearning for peace
- to all those aching to know the meaning of life and the way to make a difference in a hostile world
- to those who feel oppressed by their littleness and insignificance
- to those who feel like nothing but losers.

As Thérèse was so fond of saying, “The loser always wins!” (*Memoir of My Sister St. Thérèse*, Sister Genevieve of the Holy Face, Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1959, p. 31)

The teaching of Thérèse is not some heady, abstract, speculative ideology. Rather, Thérèse lived everything that she taught. As she wrote in her autobiography:

I expect each day to discover new imperfections in myself... I am simply resigned to see myself always imperfect – and in this I find my joy.... My own folly is this: to trust that your love will accept me. I am only a child, powerless and weak, and yet it is my weakness that gives me the boldness of offering myself as a victim of your love, O Jesus! (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 224, 158, 200, 195).

But we resist this doctrine – thinking it to be too easy, too simplistic, or naïve, or illusory. How viciously the ways and the wiles of the world seduce us.

The Holy Father pointed this out on the day that he declared Saint Thérèse to be a Doctor of the Church. The Pope said:

Before the emptiness of so many words, Thérèse offers another solution, the one Word of salvation which, understood and lived in silence, becomes a source of renewed life. She counters a rational culture, so often overcome by practical materialism,

with the disarming simplicity of the “little way” which, by returning to the essentials, leads to the secret of all life: the divine Love that surrounds and penetrates every human venture. In a time like ours, so frequently marked by an ephemeral and hedonistic culture, this new Doctor of the Church proves to be remarkably effective in enlightening the mind and heart of those who hunger and thirst for truth and love (*L’Osservatore Romano*, n. 43 (1513) 22 October 1997).

And Thérèse, Doctor of the Church, enlightens our minds and hearts by reminding us that divine mercy moves us to revere suffering as a redemptive, God-given privilege.

Living on Love is not setting up one’s tent
At the top of Tabor.
It’s climbing Calvary with Jesus,
It’s looking at the Cross *as a treasure!*

Saint Thérèse, Doctor of the Church, teaches us to love the love that is mercy by reinforcing the crucial role of sacrifice. Thérèse wrote that “love is nourished only by sacrifices.... To love is to offer oneself to suffering, because love lives only on sacrifice; so, if one is completely dedicated to loving, one must expect to be sacrificed unreservedly” (*Story of a Soul*, p. 237, O’Mahony, p. 236).

Thérèse goes on to confess in her writings: “I have no other means of proving my love for you, [O Lord,] other than not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all the smallest things, and doing them through love...In suffering and combat one can enjoy a moment of happiness that surpasses all the joys of this earth” (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 196, 249).

And Thérèse was sacrificed! She proved how much she lived this Truth in the way she approached her tortuous death, a death from tuberculosis that destroyed all but one small part of one lung so that she literally suffocated on her deathbed, an agony in which the inner organs of her body began to putrefy with gangrene inside her even while she was still alive.

The July before she died, in a letter to missionary Father Roulland, Thérèse wrote: “What attracts me to the homeland of heaven is the

Lord's call, the hope of loving him finally as I have so much desired to love him, and the thought that I shall be able to make him loved by a multitude of souls who will bless him eternally."

Thérèse, Doctor of the Church

The Holy Father has declared that "Thérèse's ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity – and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound, that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, n. 43 (1513) 22 October 1997).

In her autobiography, Thérèse recalls a small but poignant moment in that "ardent spiritual journey," a story about a night when she was walking home with her saintly father Louis. Thérèse wrote:

When we were on the way home, I would gaze upon the stars which were twinkling ever so peacefully in the skies – and the sight carried me away. There was especially one cluster of golden pearls which attracted my attention – and gave me great joy because they were in the form of a "T." I pointed them out to Papa and told him my name was written in heaven. Then desiring to look no longer upon this dull earth – I asked him to guide my steps; and not looking where I placed my feet – I threw back my head, giving myself over completely to the contemplation of the star-studded firmament (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 42-43).

The *Benedictus* antiphon for the Common of Doctors of the Church proclaims: "Those who are learned will be as radiant as the sky in all its beauty; those who instruct the people in goodness will shine like the stars for all eternity." Now it is Saint Thérèse, Doctor of the Church, who takes our hand as the spiritual children she has taught us to be, and who leads us unerringly – so that we can take our eyes off the world, and fix our gaze upon heaven – contemplating the radiant Truth of Thérèse's doctrine in all its Gospel beauty.

The future Doctor of the Church wrote in a letter to the missionary seminarian, Maurice Belliere, making this request:

I would be very happy if each day you would consent to offer this prayer for [your sister Thérèse] which contains all her

desires: “Merciful Father, in the name of our gentle Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, I beg you to enkindle my sister with your Spirit of Love and to grant her the favor of making you loved very much” (*Letters: Volume II*, p. 1060).

The proclamation of Saint Thérèse as Doctor of the Church in some way fulfills this prayer. For the magisterial force of Thérèse’s teaching does make God loved very much – in the way that God wants to be loved! and in a way that the world so drastically needs.

In the apostolic letter, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II addresses the “crisis of civilization” (52) we are suffering. The Holy Father decries the fact that civilization is “impoverished by its tendency to forget God, to keep him at a distance.” It is supremely fitting for Saint Thérèse of Lisieux to be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church because Thérèse teaches us how to remember God and how to keep him close.

We might conclude with a little story that Thérèse herself tells in her autobiography about the same catechism class already mentioned – the one taught by Father Domin. Thérèse writes:

Once, a student who followed me did not know the catechism question to ask of her companion. Father Domin, having made the rounds of all the students in vain, came back to me, and said he was going to see if I deserved my place as first. In my profound humility, this was what I was waiting for; and rising with great assurance I said everything that was asked of me, to the great astonishment of everybody (*Story of a Soul*, pp. 81-82).

Perhaps after all is said and done, this is the real reason why Saint Thérèse of Lisieux has been proclaimed Doctor of the Church: because – even though there are much smarter, more learned people in the history of the Church, Thérèse is the one who remembers the Truth and rises to speak it at the very moment we most need to hear it, with great assurance, to the great astonishment of all who hear her. This is why she deserves her place as Doctor of the Church. It is this that the Church, in her profound humility, *has been waiting for*.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, Doctor of the Church – *pray for us!*