



ENTER INTO THE SPIRIT AND PRAYER OF SAINT THÉRÈSE!

Carmelite Online Advent Retreat 2024 with Saint Thérèse of Lisieux « Welcoming God Like Children »

Biographical Details

There isn't a church in France, or indeed anywhere else in the world, without a statue of the saint described by Pius X as "the greatest saint of modern times." As a result, she became, among other titles, the secondary patron saint of France (in 1944) and of the Church's universal missions (in 1927). And, not to mention, the title of Doctor of the Church was bestowed on her by Pope John Paul II on October 19, 1997, almost exactly one hundred years after her death. Yet the woman now known as the "Little Flower" died at the age of 24 in a little-known Carmelite monastery in Normandy, in the town of Lisieux. The entire Martin family had settled there after the untimely death of their mother, Zélie, in Alençon, the birthplace of Thérèse and her four sisters. Except for Léonie, who joined the Visitation nuns in Caen, all the sisters entered the same Carmelite monastery as Thérèse, who was the youngest in the family.



How can we explain such success, or rather, such a "storm of glory," as Pius XI called it, for this very young girl so determined to enter Carmel at age 15, and who succeeded despite all the objections she faced?

This online retreat cannot provide an exhaustive answer to such a question. Our sole aim is to help you **enter into the spirit and prayer of the youngest Doctor of the Church**, whose 150th birthday we celebrated last year. We'll approach this primarily through the saint's own writings, which offer a wealth of insight. But this alone doesn't explain everything. Thérèse's



extraordinary path can only be fully understood in light of the unfathomable Mystery to which her entire life bears witness: that of divine Mercy. **At the start of her autobiographical manuscripts, the saint herself declares her purpose in taking up her pen: “I’m going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: *The Mercies of the Lord*”** (Ms A, 2 r°).

For this youngest Doctor of the Church, then, it’s not about recounting her private life to satisfy the curiosity of her older sister Pauline, now her prioress, who asked her – under obedience – to write down memories of her childhood – stories she so charmingly tells when the opportunity arises. No, she says: “It is not then, my life, properly so-called, that I am going to write; it is my *thoughts* on the graces God deigned to grant me” (Ms A, 3 r°). She couldn’t be clearer. This is not the diary of a 19th-century society girl but the story of a soul so permeated by the presence of God that it will forever be a universal and vibrant testimony to the truth of Christ and His Gospel. “The flower about to tell her story,” she writes, “rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus. She knows that nothing in herself was capable of attracting the divine glances, and His mercy alone brought about everything that is good in her” (Ms A, 3 v°).

From an early age—for her memory was so keen that she remembered even the smallest details of her early childhood—Thérèse knew she was surrounded by the love not only of an extremely close-knit, warm-hearted, and deeply Christian family, but also of a God who never ceased to shower her with His graces. She freely confesses: “God granted me the favor of opening my intelligence at an early age and of imprinting childhood recollections so deeply on my memory that it seems the things I’m about to recount happened only yesterday” (Ms A, 4 v°). From her very first steps, the saint understood all the tenderness that God’s love wanted to lavish upon her soul. She grasped, almost by supernatural instinct, what traditional theology expresses as “grace.”

It was she, moreover, who coined this decisive phrase, which Georges Bernanos later put in the mouth of the priest in his masterpiece *Diary of a Country Priest*: “Everything is a grace” [cf. *Her Last Conversations*, Yellow Notebook, June 5, 1897]. In other words, **the gateway to divine life is not something to be forced, earned through merits, or acquired by any techniques or practices. No, salvation is, above all, a grace, a blessing, an unmerited gift** that we must receive with the simplicity, trust, and dependence of a child who receives everything necessary for growth and life from its parents. The way of spiritual childhood calls us first to recall the free initiative of a loving God so near to humanity that, in Christ, he chose to share in our condition to restore the dignity of our original divine calling, lost through the degradation of sin.

This is the very essence of Advent, this liturgical season that the Church offers us to re-discover God’s revelation of Himself in the Child in the manger. Who better to guide us spiritually than Saint Thérèse of *the Child Jesus*? She will surely help us understand what she herself understood during her short, yet profoundly intense life: *God’s tender care for her soul*.



The retreat outline

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux will lead us to the joy of Christmas through 5 steps:

- 1st Sunday: Praying like a child
- 2nd Sunday: Conversion through trust
- 3rd Sunday: With Christ, everything is a grace
- 4th Sunday: Mary, model of faith and consecration
- Christmas: The marvelous exchange between God and man!

Every Friday, an e-mail will be sent to you: you'll be able to download the text (in 3 formats: PDF, Word, and PDF mobile format) and watch an accompanying video from our friars. The content of the meditation will draw from the Sunday Gospel to help us learn from Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. An **Advent calendar** (with quotes and images) will also help nourish your prayer each day, from Monday to Saturday.

Fr. Jean-Gabriel Rueg
ocd (Toulouse)

