



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

## The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Saint Luke (21:25-28, 34-36)

Jesus said to his disciples: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

*Rorate cæli desuper, et nubes pluant iustum.*

*Ne irascaris Domine, ne ultra memineris iniquitatis: ecce civitas Sancti facta est deserta: Sion deserta facta est: Ierusalem desolata est: domus sanctificationis tuæ et gloriæ tuæ, ubi laudaverunt te patres nostri.*

**[Drop down dew, heavens above, let skies rain down the Just One.**

Do not be angry with us, Lord; do not remember our iniquities. Behold, your holy city has become a wasteland. Zion has become a desert, Jerusalem has become desolate, your holy house and your glory where our ancestors praised you.]

Advent is the perfect time for waiting: first, for the coming of the Word of God into our world – Christ, whose birth in human flesh we celebrate on Christmas Day. But it is also a time of expectation for His final coming in glory at the end of time, as expressed in the Church’s Creed: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.”

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “coming.” During Advent, the whole Church enters into a spirit of prayerful expectation for this coming, a central event of our faith and the entire history of salvation. This waiting invites us to deepen our desire for Christ’s presence among us. He is the Just One, the only One who can „adjust“ us to the merciful will of God,



helping us align our hearts with His love. The *Rorate Caeli* is a Gregorian chant inspired by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 45:8), which beautifully captures this longing for the fulfillment of God's promises: *Rorate Caeli desuper et nubes pluant Justum* (Drop down dew, O heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One). The Just One is Christ – the Word – who, through the Holy Spirit, descends into the womb of Mary to take on our human flesh.

This hymn is deeply tied to the season of Advent. It is often sung during Sunday Masses in Advent, as well as during the Liturgy of the Hours, especially at Morning and Evening Prayer. There's also a tradition of *Rorate* Masses, going back to the Middle Ages in Germany, celebrated early in the morning by candlelight. <sup>1</sup> These Masses are a powerful reminder that, during Advent, Christians are called to stay awake and pray, as Jesus teaches us on this First Sunday of Advent: "Be on guard... and pray at all times, so that you may stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36).

## Watching and praying like Thérèse

Let's not forget that Thérèse was a Carmelite. We cannot separate her from the Carmelite tradition, which gives pride of place to prayer and contemplation. Thérèse is so aware of this that she is not afraid to end her *Manuscripts* with a kind of *defense of mental prayer, which is the privileged form of prayer in Carmel*: A scholar has said: "Give me a lever and a fulcrum and I will lift the world." What Archimedes was not able to obtain, for his request was not directed by God and was only made from a material viewpoint, the saints have obtained in all its fullness. The Almighty has given them as fulcrum: HIMSELF ALONE; as lever: PRAYER which burns with a fire of love. And it is in this way that they have lifted the world; it is in this way that the saints still militant lift it, and that, until the end of time, the saints to come will lift it (Manuscript C, Folio 36 v<sup>o</sup>). <sup>2</sup>

This text serves as a kind of testament, underscoring that **Thérèse drew her "science of love" from that intimate heart-to-heart with God that is the life of mental prayer**, to which both Carmelite friars and nuns are obliged to devote two hours each day. Prayer is therefore inseparable from her life as a Carmelite, just as it should be for any Christian life. Why? Because it is a hidden source from which we are continually invited to drink. Even more, it is a vital relationship with the God who desires to be our Father. "When you pray, say: 'Our Father,'" Jesus taught His apostles when they asked Him to teach them how to pray (Lk 11:2). Thus, prayer is first and foremost a filial relationship with the God whose children we are.

We also know, as the Gospels testify, how much Jesus himself cultivated prayer as an intimate relationship with his Heavenly Father, for it was the deepest expression of his filial nature. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger expressed this well during the Lenten retreat he preached at the Vatican before Pope John Paul II: "The entire personality of Jesus is contained in his prayer."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> „What is a Rorate Caeli Mass?“ National Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://championshrine.org/rorate-caeli-mass/>

<sup>2</sup> Wherever possible, all quotes from St. Thérèse of Lisieux are taken from the translations published by ICS Publications.

Any other unpublished translations provided during the retreat will be the work of the English translator.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Journey Towards Easter: Retreat Given in the Vatican in the Presence of Pope John Paul II*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 92.



*“The highest dignity of Jesus, the one that points to his divinity, is not in some power he wielded but in his orientation toward the Other: God, the Father”* (ibid.). In other words, Jesus revealed his Sonship throughout his life, always directed toward the Father. **His prayer is the ultimate expression of this filial relationship.** Jesus is the first to walk the path of spiritual childhood, receiving everything from the Heavenly Father. This is the path we too must follow.

Thérèse’s prayer, like her life, is marked by the simplicity of a filial relationship. She herself defines it beautifully: *“Prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus”* (Ms C 25 v°). This gaze and act of faith are the soul of filial prayer – a gaze of love fixed on its divine object, even when He seems to hide from view.

In *Manuscript B*, Thérèse compares herself to a weak little bird with downy feathers that, despite its smallness, dares to gaze at its divine Sun. Nothing can turn it away from Him: *“nothing will frighten it, neither wind nor rain, and if dark clouds come and hide the Star of Love, the little bird will not change its place because it knows that beyond the clouds, its bright Sun still shines”* ... Such is the gaze of faith that Thérèse casts on the Beloved of her soul. In weakness, dryness, consolation, distraction, and sleep – “in the midst of trial as well as joy” – Thérèse kept her gaze boldly fixed on Him, never losing heart.

Her sisters tell us that the little Carmelite of Lisieux “spent her time chasing sleep,” especially during the summer when the community’s schedule cut short the night’s sleep. Thérèse, who had a definite “horror of any pretense whatsoever” and “never looked for anything but the truth,” admits openly: *“I should be desolate for having slept (for seven years) during my hours of prayer and my thanksgivings after Holy Communion”* (Ms A, 75 v°). Instead, she confidently states that *“little children are as pleasing to their parents when they are asleep as well as when they are awake.”* Thérèse remains faithful to her little way of spiritual childhood: **sleeping during mental prayer, instead of worrying her, offers her an opportunity to abandon herself more fully to God, acknowledging her nothingness before Him:** *“Finally, I remember that ‘the Lord knows our weakness, that he is mindful that we are but dust and ashes.’”*

This also reveals the simplicity of contemplation for the soul who benefits from it. Blessed Father Marie-Eugène emphasizes this in *I Want to See God*, where he affirms that Thérèse confirms St. Thomas Aquinas’ definition of contemplation as “a simple glance at the truth under the influence of love” (*simplex intuitus veritatis sub influxu amoris*).

For the Angelic Doctor, the essential element of contemplation is this simple glance at God, the Sun that continues to shine despite the clouds of our human weaknesses or distractions. Thérèse’s experience is highly contemplative, as it consists in receiving from God, through a pure gaze of faith, His *influx of love*, which penetrates her despite the dryness and sleep she encounters. Thérèse herself testifies that this divine influence is felt more during her day:

*“Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment; He is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. I find just when I need them certain lights that I had not seen until then, and it isn’t most frequently during my hours of prayer that these are most abundant but rather in the midst of my daily occupations.”* (Ms A, 83 v°). The dryness





Thérèse experienced in her prayer life is thus the fruit of God's secret action in the depths of her soul, which must be respected with flexibility and absolute fidelity. In fact, the saint of Lisieux teaches us, following all the great mystics of Carmel, the reverence for receptivity to God's action within us. **The soul who prays must learn to become docile to divine action and cultivate a true asceticism of receptivity**, so that, through the general and loving knowledge of contemplation, of which the Mystical Doctor speaks, God may infuse His divine wisdom: *"tranquil, solitary, peaceful, mild, and an inebriator of the spirit"* (*Living Flame of Love*, 3:38).<sup>4</sup>

We find the same abandonment in the Mystical Doctor as in Thérèse. For both, God is less a prize to be seized than a guest to be welcomed. *"In Theresian prayer, the emphasis is placed above all on the initiative of God and His love for us, which is simply to be received,"* confirms Fr. Guido Stinissen (*Comment faire oraison? : un itinéraire sur les traces de Thérèse d'Avila*, Cerf, 1997).<sup>5</sup> And Blessed Father Marie-Eugène, one of the first admirers and readers of the saint of Lisieux, does not hesitate to use Theresian images to illustrate God's action in prayer: *"An attitude of trust,"* he summarizes in an article: *"What does Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus tell us? Nothing more than this: her little way, her elevator – what is it? 'It is Your arms, O Jesus'"* (Ms C, 3 r°). *It is the grace of God. What is the spiritual life? It is standing at the bottom of the stairs, lifting one's little foot, unable to climb the first step, and calling on the good God: this is the attitude for prayer. Make an effort by calling on God, knowing full well that as long as we are alone, we will accomplish nothing; our effort will be ineffective"* (*L'oraison du pauvre*, *Revue Carmel*, 1989, n° 53).

Thérèse's spiritual path lies primarily in God's pure capacity, which is invoked by a powerless but willing human heart. This heart cries out to Him with trust, never discouraged, because it knows it is unfailingly loved.

## Points of Reflection for the Week

Am I truly setting aside a specific amount of time for this intimate conversation with God, which is the essence of prayer? Praying means taking the time to do it.

I will make a commitment to dedicate time to mental prayer. During this Advent season, my prayer will be this "lever" that Thérèse says "ignites with a fire of love and lifts the world."

Fr. Jean-Gabriel Rueg  
ocd (Toulouse)



<sup>4</sup> John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, with introductions by Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973), 1st paperback ed.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this retreat, we are providing simplified citations for French works. Full citations are available upon request.

## Monday, 2 December: The heart of a child

„That he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.“ (Is 2:3)

„Jesus has no need of books or doctors to instruct souls; He, the Doctor of doctors, teaches without the noise of words.... Never have I heard Him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment; He is guiding and inspirit me with what I must say and do.“ (Ms A, 84 rº)

Let's ask for the grace of docility of heart, to be led by Jesus along the path He chooses for us throughout this Advent, to guide us to Christmas.



## Tuesday, 3 December: A lowly soul

„I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.“ (Lk 10:21)

„He, who cried out in His mortal life: 'I thank thee, Father, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them to babes,' willed to have His mercy shine out in me. Because I was little and weak He lowered Himself to me, and He instructed me secretly in the things of His love.“ (Ms A, 49 rº)

Let's ask God to reveal to us the depth of His mercy, which He desires to give, not to elite souls, but to humble and lowly souls.

## Wednesday, 4 December: Hope in God

„Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.“ (Is 25:9)

„One day I hope that You, the Adorable Eagle, will come to fetch me, Your little bird; and ascending with it to the Furnace of Love, You will plunge it for all eternity into the burning Abyss of this Love to which it has offered itself as a victim.“ (Ms B, 5 vº)

Let's ask God for the grace to anchor ourselves in ever-deeper hope, so that our hearts may stay constantly turned toward Him, no matter the difficulties that arise on our path.



## Thursday, 5 December: The grace of trust

„Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.“ (Is 26:4)

„Love is the name of this ineffable Tree, and its delectable fruit is called Abandonment.... Abandonment alone brings me into your arms, O Jesus. It alone makes me live the life of the Elect.“ (PN 52:3,7)

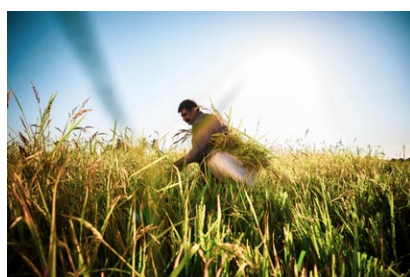
Let's pray for those going through trials, and let's ask that they may have the grace of trust.

## Friday, 6 December: Drawn by Christ

„The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?“ (Ps 27:1)

„I cannot fear a God who made himself so small for me ... I love him! ... because he is only love and mercy!“ (Lt 266)

Let's pray for those who hesitate to approach God. May they allow themselves to be drawn by His light.



## Saturday, 7 December: Engaged in the Church's Mission

„The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest“ (Mt 9:37-38)

„Why, then, does Jesus say: 'Ask the Lord of the harvest that he send some workers'? Why? ... Ah! it is because Jesus has so incomprehensible a love for us that He wills that we have a share with Him in the salvation of souls. He wills to do nothing without us.“ (Lt 135)

Let's pray that everyone may find their place in the Church, and let's pray for priestly and religious vocations.