

C'est la confiance: Confidence must lead us to love

‘It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love’. With these words of St Therese of Lisieux, Pope Francis opens his Apostolic Exhortation *C'est la confiance*, ‘On confidence in the merciful love of God’, published on 15th October for the 150th anniversary of the birth of St Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face.

We recall her life: born on 2nd January 1873 in Alençon, Normandy, France, she obtained special permission to enter the cloistered Carmelites of Lisieux aged 15; her four sisters also became nuns. Therese had hoped to be sent to the foreign missions, but came to realise her calling was to be ‘love in the heart of the Church’. (Yet she would be named Patroness of the Missions (1927): evangelisation depends above all on the spiritual power of prayer and love.)

Having struggled with various anxieties in the spiritual life, she developed her approach of the ‘little way’, the way of spiritual childhood – growing in holiness through childlike and humble confidence in God’s love and mercy. After a period of intense physical and spiritual suffering, including temptations to even doubt God’s existence, she died from tuberculosis on 30th September 1897, aged 24. Her last words were ‘My God, I love you.’

The spread of her spiritual teaching grew through her memoirs, written by order of her superiors and published in 1898 as the *Story of a Soul*. Pius XI beatified her in 1923 and canonised her in 1925; in 1997 St John Paul II proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church. In 2015, Pope Francis canonised her parents, Saints Louis & Zélie Martin.

‘In the *Story of a Soul*’, Pope Francis writes, ‘Therese tells how she discovered the little way: “I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am, with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new”.’ (15)

Her complete confidence, Pope Francis says, ‘that becomes an abandonment in Love sets us free from obsessive calculations, constant worry about the future and fears that take away our peace. In her final days, Therese insisted on this: “We who run in the way of love shouldn’t be thinking of suffering that can take place in the future; it’s a lack of confidence”.’ (24)

‘Therese possessed complete certainty’, the Pope writes, ‘that Jesus loved her and knew her personally at the time of his Passion: “He loved me and gave himself for me” (*Gal* 2:20). As she contemplated Jesus in his agony, she told him: “You saw me” ...At the beginning of the *Story of a Soul*, she contemplated the love of Jesus for all humanity and for each individual, as if he or she were the only one in the world.’ (33) ‘The act of love – repeating the words, “Jesus I love you” – which became as natural to Therese as breathing, is the key to her understanding of the Gospel.’ (34) ‘Thérèse practised charity in littleness, in the simplest things of daily life.’ (36)

The Pope quotes the great passage in which she discovers her special calling: “‘Charity gave me the key to my *vocation*. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that *the Church had a Heart, and that this Heart was burning with love. I*

understood it was love alone that made the Church's members act...In the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love... my *vocation*, at last I have found it...*my vocation is Love!* Yes, I have found my place in the Church, and it is you, O my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be *Love*.” (39)

‘Therese always stresses’, the Pope writes, ‘the primacy of God’s work, his gift of grace. As a result, she could say: “I always feel, however, the same bold confidence of becoming a great saint, because I don’t count on my merits, since I have *none*, but I trust in him who is Virtue and Holiness. God alone, content with my weak efforts, will raise me to himself and make me a *saint*, clothing me in his infinite merits.”’ (17)

‘This way of speaking’, the Holy Father clarifies, ‘is in no way opposed to the traditional Catholic teaching on the increase of grace, namely, that once gratuitously justified by sanctifying grace, we are changed and enabled to cooperate by our good works in a process of growth in holiness. Through this “elevation”, we can possess real merits by virtue of the development of the grace received.’ (18) ‘The *Catechism*’, he says, ‘chose to quote the words that Saint Therese addressed to the Lord: “I will appear before you with empty hands”, in order to express that “the saints have always had a lively awareness that their merits were pure grace” (*Catechism* n. 2011).’ (19)

‘Therese experienced faith most powerfully and surely’, the Pope writes, ‘in the midst of the dark night and especially amid the darkness of Calvary’, culminating ‘in the final months of her life, in the great “trial against the faith” ...When she wrote that Jesus allowed her soul “to be invaded by the thickest darkness”, she was evoking the darkness of atheism and the rejection of the Christian faith’ that presented itself to her soul. (25)

‘Yet darkness’, the Holy Father declares, ‘cannot overcome the light...Her account reveals the heroic nature of her faith, her triumph in spiritual combat with the most powerful temptations. She felt herself a sister to atheists, seated with them at table, like Jesus who sat with sinners. She interceded for them, ever renewing her own act of faith, in constant loving communion with the Lord: “I run toward my Jesus. I tell him I am ready to shed my blood to the last drop to profess faith in the existence of *heaven*. I tell him, too, that I am happy not to enjoy this beautiful heaven on this earth so that he will open it for all eternity to poor unbelievers”.’ (26)

St Therese’s focus, Pope Francis emphasises, was not simply her own salvation, but the salvation of others. ‘She wrote that she entered Carmel “to save souls”.’ (9) And he quotes her words: “Jesus, allow me to save very many souls; let no soul be lost today...Jesus, pardon me if I say anything I should not say. I only want to give you joy and to console you”.’ (29) This culminated, he says, ‘in her dream of continuing in heaven her mission of loving Jesus and making him loved... “My heaven will be spent on earth until the end of the world. Yes, I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth” ... “It will be like a shower of roses”.’ (43-44)

‘A century and a half after her birth’, Pope Francis declares, ‘Therese is more alive than ever in the pilgrim Church, in the heart of God’s people. She accompanies us on our pilgrim way, doing good on earth, as she had so greatly desired.’ (53) And the Holy Father prays: ‘Dear Saint Therese, the Church needs to radiate the brightness, the fragrance and the joy of the Gospel. Send us your roses! Help us to be, like yourself, ever confident in God’s immense love for us, so that we may imitate each day your “little way” of holiness.’