

The story of Thérèse of Lisieux is disarmingly simple.

Born Thérèse Martin in Alençon, France, in 1873, she was the youngest of five sisters, all of whom became nuns. She was only fifteen when she entered the Carmel at Lisieux where she was known as Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. Nine anonymous years later she was dead. There is no indication that her reputation for holiness had spread beyond the cloister walls, and except for a few missionaries with whom she exchanged letters, certainly no one but her immediate family and her Carmelite sisters knew of her existence.

But within a very few more years she was a household name, the object of an extraordinary worldwide cult. Soeur Thérèse of Lisieux had become “The Little Flower.” She was keeping her deathbed promise to spend her heaven doing good on earth. In 1925, less than thirty years after her death, she was a canonized saint of the universal Church, without question the most popular and best-loved saint of the twentieth century, and just as certainly an extraordinarily influential force in the spiritual lives of millions of ordinary people.

What shattered her anonymity was the publication of her autobiography, written in several stages under obedience to her religious superiors. What gave it its enormous impact was the extraordinary spiritual

insight she brought to a life that was by any standard ordinary. Her story was met with the shock of recognition and its companion, the awareness of possibility. "I may not be a contemplative nun," millions could and would say, "but I do, like her, feel the pull of God. I am just one of the 'little people,' but reading Thérèse's story I know it's OK for me to contemplate being a saint . . . a little saint."

All over the world ordinary readers came to recognize, accept, and develop their potential for sanctity by adopting what Thérèse called her "little way." At its heart this "little" way of Thérèse's spirituality is driven by a powerful metaphor. *In our relationship with God we are very small children. We always will be. There is no need to be anything else. On the contrary it is essential that we never try to be anything else.*

In every other aspect of our life, self-reliance, control, worthiness will become the hallmarks of our growth. But not in our relationship with God. "The children of God as they advance in grace," Pius XII wrote fifty years after Thérèse's death, "realize ever more clearly that they will never be able to provide for themselves."

This powerful image is not some sweet bypath of Western spirituality. It is an insight that puts Thérèse of Lisieux at the very heart of Western mysticism because of its insistence that surrender, not achievement, is what the soul's life is all about.

It is a message that is always hard to understand and accept in the light of everything we have been taught to

consider valuable. But in the case of Thérèse, it is made even harder for many because it is phrased in language and imagery that can be at best sentimental, and at worst mawkish.

But it would be a great mistake to let the sentimental language of the autobiography mask the steely strength of her soul and the demands of her “way.” Thérèse’s life and way do not consist of a sunny walk down flower-strewn paths.

Not only did she live most of her convent years in unremitting physical pain, she lived them—until the end of her life—without spiritual consolation. She could neither see nor hear the Father whom she so loved. In one of the most poignant passages in spiritual literature she confesses: “If you were to judge by the poems I write, you might think that I have been inundated with spiritual consolation, that I am a child for whom the veil of faith is almost rent asunder. But it is not a veil. It is a wall that reaches to the very heavens, shutting out the starry skies. I feel no joy, I sing only of what I wish to believe.”

The little way is a hard way, but a way that is easily recognized by most of us who know that we are not among the great souls of history, and who are more used to gray days than hours spent bathed in blazing spiritual light.

Thérèse’s little way appeals to us because it passes our every reality check, because it offers us spiritual ideals that are within our grasp.