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First Steps on the Little Way of St. Therese of Lisieux

by

Father Peter John Cameron, O.P.

General Editor
John A. Farren, O.P.
Director of the Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Francis J. McAree, S.T.D., Censor Librorum

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† Robert A. Brucato, D.D.

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Catholic Information Service
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St. Therese 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 Therese’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. Therese 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*. St. Therese is a Doctor of the Church because what Jesus, the “Doctor of Doctors,” inspires Therese to say and do enhances the beauty and the life of the Church. What Therese says and does sheds new light on the mysteries of the faith, and provides a deeper understanding of Christ’s mystery.

In fact, St. Therese possessed a graced premonition of October 19, 1997, when Pope John Paul II declared Saint Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face to be a Doctor of the Universal Church. Therese 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, Therese 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 Therese (*Story of a Soul*, p. 81).

But perhaps the greatest clue to why Therese 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 Therese, 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, Therese is a new kind of Doctor, a type that even Therese didn't conceive of. Pope John Paul II confirms this when he states:

Therese 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

