
Pope Francis: St. Therese is “the breath of fresh air” for the Church

“From heaven to earth, the timely witness of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face endures in all the grandeur of her little way”, writes **Pope Francis** in the apostolic exhortation [“C’est la confiance”](#), in which he defines Saint Therese Lisieux “a breath of fresh air” for the Church, a treasure yet to be fully discovered. “In an age that urges us to focus on our ourselves and our own interests, Therese shows us the beauty of making our lives a gift”, Francis writes, almost in the form of a prayer: “At a time when the most superficial needs and desires are glorified, she testifies to the radicalism of the Gospel. In an age of individualism, she makes us discover the value of a love that becomes intercession for others. At a time when human beings are obsessed with grandeur and new forms of power, she points out to us the little way. In an age that casts aside so many of our brothers and sisters, she teaches us the beauty of concern and responsibility for one another. At a time of great complexity, she can help us rediscover the importance of simplicity, the absolute primacy of love, trust and abandonment, and thus move beyond a legalistic or moralistic mindset that would fill the Christian life with rules and regulations, and cause the joy of the Gospel to grow cold. In an age of indifference and self-absorption, Therese inspires us to be missionary disciples, captivated by the attractiveness of Jesus and the Gospel.”

“It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love”.

For the Pope, these words from one of the world's most famous saints, beloved by non-Christians and non-believers alike, and recognised by UNESCO as one of the most significant figures for contemporary humanity, “say it all. They sum up the genius of her spirituality and would suffice to justify the fact that she has been named a Doctor of the Church” in 1997 by Saint John Paul II. Hers was a brief life, a mere twenty-four years, “and completely ordinary, first in her family and then in the Carmel of Lisieux”, Francis remarks, but whose extraordinary spiritual fruits, with the publication of her writings and the innumerable graces obtained by the faithful who invoked her, were promptly recognised by the Church immediately after her death. The name of Jesus “was constantly on her lips, even to her last breath.” “Jesus is my one love”: her interpretation of the supreme statement of the New Testament: “God is love.” The final pages of her *Story of a Soul* are a “missionary testament”, for “they express her appreciation of the fact that evangelization takes place by attraction, not by pressure or proselytism.” Saint Therese, the Patroness of the Missions, frees us from self-absorption, for – she writes - “a soul that is burning with love cannot remain inactive.” Her “**little way**”, the path of trust and love, also known as *the way of spiritual childhood*, writes the Pope, is “one of the most important insights of Therese”, which the Saint describes as follows: ““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”. This is the “sweet way of love”, paved by Jesus for the small and the poor, for all. “In place of a Pelagian notion of holiness, individualistic and elitist, more ascetic than mystical, that primarily emphasizes human effort – explains the Pope - Therese always stresses the primacy of God’s work, his gift of grace. It is most fitting, then, that we should place heartfelt trust not in ourselves but in the infinite mercy of a God who loves us unconditionally and has already given us everything in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Jesus does not demand great actions from us, but simply surrender and gratitude”.

The confidence that Therese proposes embraces the totality of concrete existence and finds application in our daily lives, “where we are often assailed by fears, the desire for human security, the need to have everything under control”: “The complete confidence that becomes an abandonment in Love sets us free from obsessive calculations, constant worry about the future and

fears that take away our peace. If we are in the hands of a Father who loves us without limits, this will be the case come what may; we will be able to move beyond whatever may happen to us and, in one way or another, his plan of love and fullness will come to fulfilment in our lives. Not even in the great “trial against the faith” that began at Easter of 1896, in the final months of her life, did the total and faithful abandonment in Love abandon Therese, and in fact it enables her to triumph in spiritual combat, which in the face of the “darkness of atheism” led to experience “despair and sheer emptiness.” Before entering the Carmel, Therese had felt a remarkable spiritual closeness to one of the most unfortunate of men, the criminal Henri Pranzini: “By having Masses offered for him and praying with complete confidence for his salvation, she was convinced that she was drawing him ever closer to the blood of Jesus, and she told God that she was sure that at the last moment he would pardon him “even if he went to his death without any signs of repentance.” “Jesus I love you”, the act of love which became as natural to Therese as breathing, is the key to her understanding of the Gospel.

the message of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus is “a breath of fresh air for the Church”, the Pope concludes. “I shall be love” is Saint Therese's radical preference for a Church that is not triumphalist but a “loving, humble and merciful Church”: “a great source of light for us today. It preserves us from being scandalized by the limitations and weaknesses of the ecclesiastical institution with its shadows and sins”

M.Michela Nicolais