

CHAPTER 24 – CARMEL AND THE DEATH OF THERESE

Monday, April 9, 1888, was the day fixed for Therese to enter Carmel.

The evening before, there was a family gathering at "Les Buissonnets," and, as if to make the separation harder, it seemed to her that everyone was kinder than ever that night.

The next morning, after saying a last good-bye to the dear home of her childhood, Therese, accompanied by her relations, set out for the convent. She herself was the only one who did not shed a tear, but as she led the way to the cloister door, her heart beat so violently that she wondered if she were going to die. After kissing her beloved Celine, she knelt down for her father's blessing and then the convent gates closed upon her. The nuns never forgot the impression made them that day when they saw Therese come in, with such a heavenly expression on her face that she seemed like an angel in visible form.

Everything in the convent delighted her, especially her little bare cell with its rough furniture and whitewashed walls. The joy she found in poverty was so great that she felt amply rewarded for all she had given up.

While she was still a postulant she had the happiness of assisting at the Profession of her sister Marie, now Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart. Being the youngest of the Community, Therese was chosen to place the crown of white roses on her sister's head, according to Carmelite custom. It was fitting that she should render this honor to Marie, her godmother, who had shared with Pauline the duty of bringing her up, and to whom she owed so much.

A little later, on January 10, 1889, there was another ceremony, and Therese received the habit of Carmel. Sanctuary, saw through the large grille the "Little Queen" of a few moments before. She was much changed. Her hair had been cut off, and she wore a coarse robe of serge and a white veil. Her face was radiant with joy. She was a Carmelite at last.

Eighteen months later, September 8, 1890, she made her vows and gave herself to Our Lord for ever. But that day her father was not there; he was too ill to come, and his absence was a bitter trial. She never saw him again, for he had to bear the cross of a painful illness for six long years before his death. Celine nursed him all the time with the utmost devotion. When her mission was finished, she, too, became a Carmelite, and was instructed in her new life by Therese.

A year later, Marie Guerin, the "little hermit," joined her playmate in the "desert," and the game of their childhood became a reality. There is little to tell of the life of Therese in Carmel; its secrets are known to God alone. But this we can say—that she suffered much, because Our Lord gave her a large share in His Cross as He always does to His best friends. She had accustomed herself from babyhood to do God's Will rather than her own, so it is not difficult to imagine what she was like in the convent. The spirit in which she served God is best shown in her own words.

"Oh, my dear Jesus," she said to Our Lord, "I can only prove my love for You by strewing flowers—that is, by never letting slip an opportunity of prayer, of self denial, of raising my heart to You. I wish to do my smallest actions for Your love. For Your sake, I wish to suffer and to rejoice: so shall I strew my flowers. I will sing though I have to gather my roses in the midst of thorns, and the longer and sharper the thorns, the sweeter shall grow my

song."

We have seen how Therese loved her father. She loved God in the same childlike way, never refusing Him anything, always trying to please Him. She thanked Him just as much for her sorrows as for her joys, because she was sure that whatever He sent was the best. She offered her heart to Him to receive the love which had been despised and rejected by sinners.

"Dearest Jesus," she would say, "men do not love You, but I want to love You for them. Give me the love which they refuse, and thus You will be consoled for their ingratitude."

Our Lord is never outdone in generosity, and has paid in glory all she gave Him in love. The reward was not long delayed. After eight years of religious life, Therese fell ill of consumption. It was a painful illness, but she bore her long sufferings with heroic patience. She received the Last Sacraments full of joy at the thought that her life on earth was drawing to a close, and that death was about to open to her the gates of eternal life, and realize her desire of making God better known and loved to the end of time.

The happy day came at last. It was Thursday, September 30, 1897. As the Convent bell rang the evening Angelus, she fixed her eyes lovingly on the miraculous statue, which had been placed at the foot of her bed. Our Lady surely came again to smile on her, for Therese had so often said:

"O thou who cam'st to smile on me in the morning of my life, Her last words were: "My God, I love Thee!" They were the faithful echo of her life of twenty-four years.

As soon as she was dead, several wonderful things were said to have happened in the convent. A sick nun was cured by kissing her feet; others saw in the sky a ray of light and a luminous crown; the whole house was filled with mysterious perfumes. And all remarked that the face of their holy sister was lit up with a radiant smile, as if she already saw the myriad roses which she would rain on the earth, and the countless "little souls" who would follow her to Heaven, after having imitated her virtues.

You may ask, children, why such power has been given to one whose life was so short and so simple. But when you hear the marvellous words which we have from her own lips—that "from the age of three" she "never refused God anything"—you will understand something of the extraordinary fidelity which God has crowned in the life of Saint Therese of Lisieux.