

WHY ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX IS A DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH

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PREFACE

It is a joy to be here with you all today, in honoring St. Thérèse on this her glorious feast. What a beautiful day this is, and a wonderful setting for these festivities, made more glorious by the sight of us all gathered. I understand we have pilgrims with us; a group from Puerto Rico; and of course, the friends and parishioners of the Shrine. I would like to extend my thanks to Silvia Aldredge for the invitation to speak; I'm honored to be here. Like many of you, I have had a devotion to St. Thérèse for many years, partly, because I was born on her feast day, and partly, because (among others) my grandmother Elaine encouraged me in this devotion from a young age. For me St. Thérèse has been a powerful and reliable intercessor, and I'm grateful to my grandmother for introducing me to her. Therefore I would like to dedicate this talk to my grandmother. In fact, the copy of the *Story of a Soul* that I used in preparing my talk, was a gift I received from her on the occasion of my eighteenth birthday.

LECTURE

In May 1925, fewer than thirty years after her death, Marie-Francoise-Thérèse Martin was declared a saint in the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XI, under the title St. Theresa of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. She is well-known to us as St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Although the news of her canonization was met with celebration worldwide, it did not come as a surprise. Tens of thousands of people had already become acquainted with the young Carmelite nun through her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, which shortly after its first publication in 1898, was widely circulated and translated into dozens of languages. Devotion to Thérèse had spread quickly, and

already it seemed that reports of her miracles were ubiquitous. And so, when Pope Pius 11th formally declared blessed Thérèse a saint, on May 17, 1925 before a large crowd at St. Peter's in Rome, there was a certain air of inevitability about it.

However, in October 1997, during the centenary of her death, St. Thérèse was elevated by Pope John Paul II and formally declared a Doctor of the Universal Church. This proclamation, like the one at her canonization, was a cause of great rejoicing, yet to many it felt far less inevitable; and to some, just a bit puzzling. Thérèse, it may be allowed, is the greatest saint in modern times. But, a great theologian? Did she write works of theology? It is not easy to associate the Little Flower with the Church's intellectual giants, such as St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas. These theologians were renowned scholars in their day; their books fill libraries, and their doctrines have inspired centuries of theological reflection. St. Thérèse, a young Carmelite, lived a private life, received no university education, with no particular theological training. When she died at the age of twenty-four, she left behind some letters, plays and poems, and only a single book, her autobiography, which is not obviously a work of theology. And yet, she is honored as a Doctor of the Church. Why is this? Why does the Church place St. Thérèse among its most distinguished theologians? What is it that she has to teach us?

In this talk, I will attempt to address this question, though without any intention of giving a comprehensive account of her writings or her life. This would be too much for an afternoon, let alone a lifetime. St. Thérèse is a spiritual master, and her wisdom has had an immense impact on the Church even in a short span of time. Today, I wish to look exclusively at her autobiography *Story of a Soul*, her principal work, in order to show its theological significance and to justify in some measure the high regard the Church has for her teaching.

My talk has three parts. First, I will discuss the general merits of her autobiography, while noting why one may suppose it falls short as theological work. Second, I will discuss what a Doctor of the Church is, and identify three defining features of such a doctor. Finally, I will show how all three of these features define St. Thérèse as the author of her autobiography, thus justifying her status as a Doctor of the Church in a full and legitimate sense.

In January 1895, at the age of twenty-two and only two years before her death, Thérèse began work on her autobiography at the request of her superior at the Lisieux Carmel, Reverend Mother Agnes of Jesus. In this work, Thérèse unfolds an account of her life, more or less chronologically, beginning with her early childhood and including the nine years she lived as a

discalced Carmelite nun following her entrance to Carmel at age fifteen. Although her fatal bout with tuberculosis prevented Thérèse from finishing her autobiography, this textual omission may be overlooked by her readers. The structure of the narrative is wonderfully coherent, and unfolds in vivid, if somewhat unsophisticated prose that many find easy to pick up and hard to put down.

It is no wonder the *Story of a Soul* has circulated widely and quickly, and not only among Christians. Since this work was written in confidence addressed to her mother superior, Thérèse lays bare some of the deepest secrets of her life. It is as though the reader stumbles upon a private confession of one confidant to another. With ingenuous candor, Thérèse unfolds the narrative from the standpoint of her interior life. Some of the experiences she relates are interestingly mysterious. She describes mystical encounters: private visions and locutions, special graces that she received at various moments. Yet some of the experiences she speaks of are common and familiar to us, and sometimes disarmingly so: for example, the recollections from her childhood—the charming conversations she recalls with her father, afternoons in the garden, her first communion, the joys of family life, and the miscellaneous adventures she shared with her older sisters. Yet it also includes the pain in losing her mother at the age of four, her struggles at school and the disappointments of early friendships, and the struggle with her own vices. The chapters of her life reveal a person formed very much by the same joys and sorrows, hopes and failures, that define every human existence. While her life was extraordinary in many ways, it's natural for a reader to identify with her story and see in it something of himself.

What is more, the autobiography presents the life of a canonized saint. As one would expect, it contains examples of heroic virtue and the sort of moral lessons as might inspire a Christian to live a holier life. And there is no question that men and women of all ages have so profited from the reading of this book. Yet, even granting the spiritual impact that the *Story of a Soul* has had on the Church worldwide, still I maintain, this is not sufficient to declare its author a Doctor of the Church. It is not even enough to declare her a theologian. If it is merely her life's story, then it would not be a work of theology but of history, as many other saint stories are.

Simply put, to be a Doctor of the Church one must have a doctrine to teach, and not just any doctrine, but a theological one preeminent enough to justify the endorsement of the Magisterium.

To understand this, we may first consider the word itself “doctor,” which from the Latin simply means *teacher*. Thus, it is a title the Church confers on a Catholic theologian on account

of some preeminent teaching they have written. It is not conferred on just any preeminent teacher. It is not given to a philosopher, for example, or a biologist or even a historian, at least not as such. This is because the Church is chiefly in the business of saving souls, and not advancing the sciences, however profitable these may be. The Church is entrusted by Christ with proclaiming the truths of the gospel. This is its primary mission. These truths of our faith, on which our salvation depends, such as the teaching on the Trinity and the Incarnation, are revealed in the sacred scriptures and concisely summarized in the creed. The Church is charged with teaching and clarifying and, when necessary, defending these truths against contrary errors. To do this effectively, requires teachers and scholars devoted to a serious study of the faith, and these men and women we call theologians.

Over the centuries the Church has authoritatively recognized certain theologians on account of the preeminence of their written teaching in some particular matter of the faith. For example, the Church has long recognized St. Augustine, the fourth century bishop of Hippo, for his writings especially concerning his doctrine of grace, for which he earned the honorary title “Doctor of Grace.” In declaring him to be a Doctor of the Church, the Magisterium recognizes his teaching as her own. This is a high commendation, and an authoritative one. It is tantamount to saying, careful study of St. Augustine’s teaching will yield a sound understanding of grace that is, in its essence and principles, perfectly consonant with Catholic teaching. For this, the Church is indebted to Augustine for bringing unprecedented clarity to a once obscure matter. To be sure, no theologian is distinguished for inventing the truth. His teaching is measured by its fidelity to the scripture and how effectively it is communicated.

Since the Church’s concern is with teaching the faith, and since this is also the prerogative of the theologian, therefore, one can see why a Doctor of the Church must be a preeminent theologian—and cannot be simply a historian.

Now, this is not to say that a theologian is unconcerned with history, or that history is excluded from his studies. This is certainly not the case. The theologian must be versed in historical matters to have any hope of faithfully interpreting the Old Testament narrative books, for example. But, even so, this does not make the theologian a historian. This is because the purpose and objective of his study is essentially different from a historian’s. The theologian, like the biblical authors themselves, treat histories *only* insofar as they reveal something about God: who he is, and what he has done in creation. The story of the Exodus, for example, is more than a

chronological historical account of events detailing Israel's escape from Egypt. It reveals, as the author presents it, a host of things about God, including the name of God, things about his cosmic power and divine authority, about his justice, and his mercy toward Israel, about his plan of salvation. The focus of the narrative is centered on God and his work in creation, and only considers historical matters insofar as they relate to God as their beginning or end. Even the people of Israel are considered in relation to God, portrayed as his only son.

Similarly, when the theologian engages in history, he does not thereby become a historian pure and simple; he does so precisely with an eye toward considering something about God through these things. The historical facts and the motivations behind human actions which are of primary interest to the historian, are secondary to the theologian. This is why, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, "Sacred doctrine does not treat of God and of creatures equally, but God principally, and creatures [only] insofar as they relate to God as their beginning or end."¹ In other words, we might distinguish the theologian from the historian, not so much by *what* he studies, but by his *mode of study*, the purpose for which he studies a thing. In a word, a theologian—and therefore, a Doctor of the Church—may discuss history but only for the purpose of revealing something about God.

In summary, therefore, we are able to distinguish a Doctor of the Church on the basis of three characteristics we have found to be the proper work of a theologian. First, the writing of a doctor of the Church must be a work of theology: this work must be chiefly about God, and if it should discuss historical matters, it will do so only insofar as the historical matters relate to God as their beginning and end. Second, this work of theology must be rooted in scripture and the Faith of the Church. Third, it must also contain a doctrine, and teach it with unusual clarity and effectiveness. For, as we said, a Doctor of the Church must have a doctrine to teach.

Returning to St. Thérèse's *Story of the Soul*, we may ask if this work satisfies these three criteria. Is her autobiography a work of theology, based on scripture, containing a theological doctrine of exceptional value? I wish to answer, yes, on all three accounts. Let's examine the question, point by point.

First of all, the *Story of a Soul* is undoubtedly a work of theology. Paradoxically, the autobiography of St. Thérèse is not chiefly about St. Thérèse, or the chronology of her life. This

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1.

is by her own admission at the outset of the work. It is primarily about God and the mercy he has shown her. She writes:

It is to you, dear Mother...that I come to confide the story of my soul. The day you asked me to do this, it seemed to me it would distract my heart by too much concentration on myself, but since then Jesus has made me feel that in obeying simply, I would be pleasing Him; besides, I'm going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: "*The Mercies of the Lord*" [Ps. 88:2].²

And then, a few paragraphs later, she adds:

Perhaps you are wondering, dear Mother, with some astonishment where I am going from here, for up till now I've said nothing that resembles the story of my life. But you asked me to write under no constraint whatever would come into my *mind*. It is not, then, my life, properly so-called, that I am going to write; it is my thoughts on the graces God deigned to grant me. I find myself at a period in my life when I can cast a glance on the past; my soul has matured in the crucible of exterior and interior trials.³

This story therefore is chiefly about the mercies of God; and about his grace, which comes to the same thing. As she says, "it is not my life properly so-called that I am going to write; it is my thoughts on the graces of God." We may take her initial reluctance to write as a further indication. What a distraction it would be to think of oneself for long hours, probably even repulsive to a saintly heart. By contrast, we see St. Thérèse unfolds the chapters of her life much like the biblical authors narrate the story of the Exodus or the story of Abraham. Throughout, Thérèse demonstrates the mercies of God which define the events of her life, identifying, where she can, the specific graces that shaped her growth. She is attentive to divine providence, and the good God has drawn from the events of her life, even her misfortunes. She exemplifies the power of prayer, and the wisdom and generosity of God. She displays what pain that sin and death can cause a soul, as well as the healing effects of the sacraments. Nor does the narrative omit her

² St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D., 3rd Ed. (ICS Publications, 1996), Ch. 1, p. 13.

³ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 1, p. 15.

own moral weaknesses and failures. By exposing her own faults, she reveals God as the true source of her spiritual advancement at every stage of her spiritual journey.

Thérèse herself puts this beautifully. She writes:

It seems to me that if a little flower could speak, it would tell simply what God has done for it without trying to hide its blessings. It would not say, under the pretext of a false humility, it is not beautiful or without perfume...when it knows all this is untrue. The flower about to tell her story rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus. She knows that nothing in herself was capable of attracting the divine glances, and His mercy alone brought about everything that is good in her.⁴

We may say, therefore, the *Story of a Soul* is primarily about the mercies God has brought about in the life of the Little Flower.

Second, the *Story of a Soul* is not only work of theology. It is based on scripture and the teachings of the Faith. We find in her autobiography well over one hundred explicit references to the scriptures, most to the New Testament and the Psalms, but not exclusively so. She draws on *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas A' Kempis, the works of St. John of the Cross, and other spiritual writers. These sources, woven into her narrative, reflect a synthetic grasp of the Faith and an intentional effort to understand everything through the gospel.

Finally, we turn to the third and perhaps most challenging point. Does the *Story of a Soul* contain a doctrine? We already said, it must. A Doctor of the Church must have a doctrine to teach. And yet, it is not obvious that her narrative contains a specific doctrine. The text is primarily in the form of a story, and not of a formal systematic instruction.

One proposal is that the autobiography does contain a doctrine, but that it is only implicit. On this view, the reader must reconstruct this teaching for himself, by meditating on the truths implied by her life and contained in her examples of virtue; just the way we might profit from reading well-told saint stories, which contain countless spiritual lessons. Scholars have, in fact, analyzed the stages of spiritual growth which St. Thérèse displays over the course of her life, and can explain it all according to the stages that St. John of the Cross calls the purgative stage, the

⁴ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 1, p. 15.

illuminative stage, and the unitive stage. On this view, it would be said that the *Story of a Soul* contains St. John's doctrine implicitly, by way of verifying it, but not actually mentioning it.

Still, I think one must say more than this. The *Story of a Soul* is like other saint histories, but it remains qualitatively different. Since the author of this book is the saint herself, her readers are privileged with a more complete and authoritative view of her life—indeed, of her soul: she herself discloses the thoughts, motives, and emotions that defined her life interiorly, and which shaped her actions exteriorly. In this respect, the *Story of a Soul* is of a single piece with Augustine's *Confessions*.

Besides, it is false to say St. Thérèse includes no explicit teachings. The autobiography occasions a surprisingly wide range of theological topics which Thérèse actually addresses, for example, the doctrine of predestination, the doctrine of grace, the purpose of human suffering, prayer, the sacraments, the theological virtue of charity, and not to mention scores of biblical passages which elicit her theological judgments in the form of commentary.

Yet, of all of the teachings found in her text, the one that emerges as the most explicit and as the most preeminent, is unquestionably her doctrine on charity. So unique is her discussion of charity, and so profound, that if she not had included it in her writings, I am inclined to say that St. Thérèse would never have become a Doctor of the Church. St. Thérèse presents her treatise on charity, such as we have it, in the last three chapters of the *Story of the Soul*, beginning in chapter 9. While most of the autobiography is in narrative form, these final chapters stand apart stylistically. Here she proceeds a little more systematically, with a pronounced theological focus. Here also, her engagement with biblical texts is more sustained than we find in the other chapters. Allow me to present a brief sketch of St. Thérèse's teaching on charity, so we can consider its general form and assess its significance as a theological doctrine.

At the beginning of chapter 9, Thérèse introduces her doctrine of charity under the name the "science of love."⁵ She writes:

Do not believe I am swimming in consolations: oh, no, my consolation is to have none on earth. Without showing himself, without making his voice heard, Jesus teaches me in secret: it is not by means of books, for I do not understand what I am reading. Sometimes

⁵ The term "science of love" comes from Christ's words to St. Margaret Mary, found in the *Little Breviary of the Sacred Heart* (*Story of a Soul*, p. 187).

a word comes to console me, such as this one which I received at the end of prayer...: “*Here is the teacher whom I am giving you; he will teach you everything that you must do. I want to make you read in the book of life, wherein is contained the science of LOVE.*” The science of love, ah, yes, this word resounds sweetly in the ear of my soul, and I desire only this science. ... I understand so well that it is only love that makes us acceptable to God, that this love is the only good I ambition. Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to this Divine Furnace, and this road is the *surrender* of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arm.⁶

In this passage just quoted, contains the entirety of St. Thérèse’s doctrine in seed form. The science of love, as she calls it, rests on an understanding that charity is the chief of the theological virtues and the key to Christian perfection. It is due to charity, as a supernatural gift of God, that transforms our hearts making us to be pleasing to God. It is what unites us to God, enabling us to draw closer to him and, in turn, to our holiness. At the same time, charity is what binds us together as members of the mystical body of Christ. Hence, Thérèse emphasizes that charity is *the* preeminent sign of discipleship, and on this point she quotes John 13:35: “By this, will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁷ Again, above she said “it is only love that makes us pleasing to God.”

What is extraordinary in St. Thérèse’s account, however, is what she says about the manner of charity’s growth within us. A life of holiness such as God has called us to is, indeed, a lofty height immensely difficult to reach. Yet, what one might regard as scarcely possible, St. Thérèse claims to be as simple as *surrendering* to the impulses of charity already contained within us. She writes, “Jesus deigned to show me the road that leads to this Divine Furnace, and this road is the *surrender* of the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arm.” God has not left us orphaned, but has placed in our hearts a guide for the soul’s ascent in holiness. If we are docile to this, if we surrender to its impulses, this love will naturally grow up to spiritual maturity. St. Thérèse writes:

⁶ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 9, pp. 187–8.

⁷ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 10, p. 219.

there is nothing to do but to be silent and to weep with gratitude and love. Ah! If all weak and imperfect souls felt what the least of souls feels, that is the soul of your little Thérèse, no one would despair of reaching the summit of the mount of love. Jesus does not demand great actions from us but simply surrender and gratitude. ... [S]ee, then, all that Jesus lays claim to from us; He has no need of our works but only of our love....⁸

We ascend to holiness, therefore, through surrendering our wills to God and trusting in his mercy.

Moreover, for Thérèse, love is chiefly filial. The surrender of love is that of “the little child who sleeps without fear in its Father’s arm.” In recognizing oneself as a child, that is, recognizing oneself as little—spiritually little—the full power of this love can open and grow. Hence, she draws on Proverbs 9:4, “Whoever is a little one, let him come to me.”⁹ Thérèse identifies as a little one. It is in diminutive terms that she describes her whole life. She is the “little flower,” “little soul,” “little doctor,” with a “little doctrine,” and we speak of her “little way.” More than signaling humility, this defines the disposition of mind proper to a child *vis-à-vis* his father. We are small and helpless in the sight of God; without him we can do nothing. Therefore, when we surrender ourselves to love, we are in reality entrusting our souls to our own heavenly Father. The same God who begets his children and sustains them, will respond eagerly in their hour of need, if only we ask.

It is evident, therefore, that the *Story of a Soul* is a work of theology with an explicit theological doctrine. Its teaching is clear and profound, and stands right at the heart of Church’s mission of salvation. For, what it teaches is the way to holiness by manifesting the hidden nature of charity, the “science of love.” This charity, which unites us to God in a filial bond, breaks forth into the heights of spiritual perfection if only we surrender to God as our loving Father.

Before closing, I wish to read one more passage from her autobiography that, I think, highlights the unique contribution St. Thérèse has made to the Catholic intellectual tradition. Near the end of her last chapter, she brilliantly illustrates the power of prayer with the image of an Archimedean lever. She writes:

⁸ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 9, p. 188, 208.

⁹ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 9, p. 15.

All the saints have understood this [doctrine], and more especially those who filled the world with the light of the Gospel teachings. Was it not in prayer that St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis, St. Dominic, and so many other famous Friends of God have drawn out this divine science which delights the greatest geniuses? A scholar has said: “Give me a lever and a fulcrum and I will lift the world.” What Archimedes was not able to obtain, for his request was not directed by God and was only made from a material viewpoint, the saints have obtained in all its fullness. The Almighty has given them as *fulcrum*: HIMSELF ALONE; as *lever*: PRAYER which burns with a fire of love. And it is in this way that they have *lifted the world*; it is in this way that the saints still militant lift it, and that, until the end of time, the saints to come will lift it.¹⁰

Here St. Thérèse acknowledges that the essence of her doctrine has already been taught by the great saints and doctors of the Church. We may say her doctrine of charity, implicit in her “little way,” is not new, but as old as the gospels themselves. Nor does her little autobiography possess anything of the grand stature of St. Thomas Aquinas’s celebrated *Summa theologiae*, or possess the rigor of those theology books that teach with systematic precision. But, I say, the small stature of her autobiography is precisely its virtue. While the *Summa* is one of the greatest works of theology ever written, it is also a massive work, set in abstract, technical language which relatively few people today are equipped to understand. Who of us has the leisure or training to pick up such an abstruse text? By contrast, the *Story of a Soul* is eminently readable. It succeeds in condensing the wisdom of Catholic spirituality, by presenting it in a concise form, both profound and accessible. Through her metaphors and vivid imagery, through the examples taken from her heroic life, through her pithy language and at times, precocious interpretations, the *Story of a Soul* succeeds in inspiring us toward holiness as much as it shows us how to attain it. By presenting the essentials for Christian perfection, her doctrine is truly of *universal* importance. By presenting it with depth and clarity, it is truly of *universal* accessibility. In a word, this is why St. Thérèse is a Doctor of the Universal Church.

¹⁰ St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Ch. 11, p. 258.