

WOMAN OF LOVE

As Thérèse lay dying in the Carmel at Lisieux, she overheard a conversation between two of her fellow Carmelites outside her window. They were discussing her obituary, which was to be sent to all of the other Carmels, as was the custom when one of the nuns died. They were wondering aloud what could be said of Thérèse, who was so completely unremarkable. With this, Thérèse smiled to herself because she had been successful in keeping a low profile, which she had long desired.

Truly, her life did seem quite boring. She never traveled, except for a brief trip to Rome when she was fourteen years old. At the age of fifteen she entered the Carmelite cloister, a short walk across town from her home, and she died there nine years later. While she was growing up, Thérèse “played checkers, had a cocker spaniel named Tom whom she loved to take for walks and a favorite blue hat which she thought was ravishing. She wondered how she could love God so deeply and at the same time love that hat so much.”¹ In other words, hers was not the life of high adventure. “But in the framework of that life she became a great saint. Therein lies the genius of her message: [Thérèse] teaches us to become holy in the framework of *our* lives, however ordinary they may seem to be.”² She well understood that “God is in the center of every person’s present moment; therefore, no human being is ordinary.”³

At the time of her death, Thérèse was known only to her family, a few friends, and two dozen nuns with whom she had shared her life in the convent. In fact, fewer than thirty people attended her funeral.⁴ Yet today:

She is known all over the world. She is the only western saint besides St. Francis of Assisi who was popularly revered in Russia during the heyday of communism. Not

even the iron curtain could shut her out of a country avowedly atheistic. People of all races and cultures, of every religion and of none, those with little education and scholars of renown have been fascinated by her. She has been the subject of nine hundred biographies, almost one a month on average, in the [more than] hundred years since her death.⁵

Thérèse has received accolades from every pope in the twentieth century. Pope Pius X, who opened her cause for canonization, called her “the greatest saint of modern times.”⁶ Pope Benedict XV said of her message: “There is a call to the faithful of every nation, no matter what may be their age, sex or state of life, to enter wholeheartedly upon this way which led Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus to the summit of heroic virtue . . . therein lies the secret of sanctity for all of the faithful scattered over the world.”⁷ Pope Pius XI canonized her, calling her “the star of my pontificate”⁸ and saying, “She gives us an example that everyone can and ought to follow.”⁹ Pope Saint John XXIII, who made five pilgrimages to her tomb in France, said: “I shall never cease exalting the Great Little Saint.”¹⁰ And on Sunday, October 19, 1997, from the balcony overlooking St. Peter’s Square, Pope Saint John Paul II proclaimed Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face a Doctor of the Universal Church, saying: “Thérèse is a Teacher for our time, which thirsts for living and essential words, for heroic and credible acts of witness.”¹¹

So, what is to account for this incredible blaze of glory? According to Monsignor Vernon Johnson, a former Anglican priest, now a Catholic priest through the intercession of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, “It is her littleness and her simplicity. What is most extraordinary about this soul is precisely her extreme simplicity.”¹² At the same time, “none of it would have happened if a little fifteen-year-old girl hadn’t walked down that street one day and into

...the Carmelite convent, full of hope and wonder.