

perfect fulfilment of the divine will in response to a vision of God's burning love. Thérèse stretched towards this directly and absolutely, without distraction or delay.

The secrets of her life have come down to us in her famous 'Story of a Soul' (L' Histoire d' une Ame) which Thérèse wrote at the request of her superiors, as well as in her poems and letters. Her outward life appeared unremarkable but her inner trials were costly indeed. At the age of twenty four she died of tuberculosis. The sacrifice was complete.

But Thérèse had made a promise - after her death she would rain down roses on earth, symbol of the graces that would be received from God in response to her prayers from heaven. Many can vouch that this promise has been kept, yet what of our own day?

In one major respect at least Thérèse speaks with a modern voice. Is there a latent feminism in her comments about the treatment of women in Italy? There is humour certainly:

I still can't understand why it is so easy for a woman to get excommunicated in Italy! All the time people seemed to be saying: "No, you mustn't go here, you mustn't go there, you'll be excommunicated." There is no respect for us poor wretched women anywhere. And yet you'll find the love of God much more common among women than among men, and the women during the Passion showed much more courage than the Apostles. . . I suppose our Lord lets us share the neglect he himself chose for his lot on earth. In heaven, where the last shall be first, we shall know more about what God thinks.

It was on heaven of course that Thérèse set her sights. Her love for her Lord was boundless so that she ardently desired to fulfil all vocations at once. Even Carmel itself didn't seem enough sometimes:

I seem to have so many other vocations as well! I feel as if I were called to be a fighter, a priest, an apostle, a doctor, a martyr . . .

This could almost be the voice of modern women searching for recognition and fulfilment. But Thérèse doesn't rest there, she breaks through the male/female divide to the realm of divine love - the vocation which includes and transcends all others and is open to all. Perhaps here especially Thérèse, the Carmelite nun at prayer at the heart of the church, will rain down a copious shower of roses - the grace of discernment.

A Raining of Roses

Thérèse of Lisieux a hundred years on.

September 30th 1997 marks the centenary of the death of St Theresa of the Child Jesus, the humble young Carmelite nun from Lisieux, France, known affectionately to English-speaking people as the Little Flower.

Times have changed drastically in the intervening years and religious feeling, where it holds any sway at all, tends to be robustly extrovert with little sympathy for the sugary or sentimental.

It would be a grave injustice, however, to dismiss either St Thérèse herself or all aspects of the spontaneous devotion to her that grew up so quickly after her death as mere sentimentality. Her concept of 'the little way of spiritual childhood' is in itself easy enough to grasp but living it out in actual practice is another story. After all St Thérèse attained a high level of sanctity in a few short years and that could hardly have been without cost. A constant forgetfulness of self and attention to the needs and wishes of others is heroic indeed. With the lapse of time we are now better able to assess the steel-like quality of this amazing young girl, as we stand back a little from some of the extravagances of popular piety to see her as she really is.

In many ways Marie - Françoise Thérèse Martin (1873-1897) could seem to be the spoilt child. She was the youngest daughter in a family of nine, five of whom, all girls, survived early childhood. Her mother died when she was four years old and Thérèse was specially cherished by her father and her older sisters, but her lively personality was not eclipsed by them or the circumstances of her life.

At the age of fourteen she had an ardent desire to enter the local Carmel at Lisieux there and then. Marie and Pauline, two of her sisters, had already done so, but this was not the reason for Thérèse to make her request. Only a direct call from God could have given her the courage to break the news to her father, apply to her local bishop and then travel to Rome to ask Pope Leo XIII himself to fulfil her wishes. She won the day, and on April 19th 1886 Thérèse did indeed enter Carmel when only fifteen years old.

She had already received many graces but in her humility saw herself as least of all, a mere toy for the Child Jesus to play with, a little insignificant flower by comparison with God's saints, the lilies and roses. But in her simplicity and innocence she was granted an immediate perception of the essence of sanctity - the