



*St. Thérèse:  
Patroness of  
the Missions*



*A Presentation by  
Most Reverend Patrick V. Ahern, D.D.*



The Society for

**THE PROPAGATION OF THE FAITH**

*...all of us committed to the worldwide mission of Jesus*

## Foreword

Bishop Patrick Ahern is widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on the spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux — a spirituality that is decidedly missionary. In fact, he is firmly committed to making the lesson of St. Thérèse's life known and embraced by Catholics today. For that reason, the Propagation of the Faith asked him to prepare this presentation on the missionary spirituality of this Saint and Doctor of the Church.

In the conclusion of this booklet, Bishop Ahern encourages us to study further the writings and the life of this co-patron, with St. Francis Xavier, of the Church's worldwide missionary work. "She will make of you a missionary who wants to share your faith with others," he observes. Through God's grace, we pray this may be true for each of us.

*Most Reverend William J. McCormack, D.D.  
National Director  
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*This presentation was originally a keynote address delivered by Bishop Patrick V. Ahern at the Jubilee Year 2000 National Meeting of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and Holy Childhood Association (April 12, 2000, Cincinnati, Ohio).*



Recently a Polish priest from Cracow named Gietrych, who teaches theology in Rome, published an interesting article comparing and contrasting St. Thérèse and St. Thomas Aquinas — an interesting subject which he began with an interesting question: Why is it, he asked, that Thérèse makes saints and Thomas does not? By this he meant no criticism of St. Thomas, whom he greatly admires and who is the shining light of Father Gietrych's own Dominican order.

Thérèse is dead only 102 years, and look at the astonishing number of canonizations and near canonizations among those in her entourage: Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein, Titus Brandsma, Theodore Bakavja, Dorothy Day, Father Marie-Eugene, Mother Teresa, her own mother and father (who hopefully will be declared saints soon), and who knows how many more to come as the influence of Thérèse spreads across the world. That influence grows stronger every day. Nearly fifty religious communities have taken her as their foundress.

\*Louis and Zélic Martin were canonized on October 18, 2015.

We find no comparable blossoming of sanctity among the followers of St. Thomas. Father Gietrych's point implies no criticism, I say, of Thomas. He simply notes that the two saints have different charisms and a different mission in the Church.

Each one to his own graces, as the saying goes.

Thomas is an intellectual, whose passion is the defense of truth. He is always objective. He never speaks of himself. One can pore over every word of the hundreds of thousands he wrote and find not a single one revealing what he was like. He never confides his secret self to the reader. You might say that Thomas is, in a sense, a private man, that he is almost shy.

Thérèse on the other hand is subjective. She never stops talking about herself: her anxieties, her longings, her incredibly passionate love of Jesus, her struggles with faith, the trouble her nerves gave

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her, her mortal combat with temptation, even the temptation to suicide.

Whereas Thomas was a Philosopher, Thérèse is an Apostle, an Evangelist — in a word, a *Missionary*. She was consumed with the desire to convert others. "To love Jesus and to make others love Him" was the motto of her life and its whole purpose. "*Aimez Jesus et Le faire aimer.*" How often she said it. She could not abide the thought that souls be lost, and she wanted to travel the whole world to proclaim the Gospel to everyone, the Gospel, the Good News of God's merciful Love. It *grieved* her that so many people did not know of God's Love for them. It grieved her that there were actually atheists who denied His very existence and scoffed at the notion of life after death. For the last eighteen months of her life their disbelief entered into her own heart and became her final temptation. Her mind was obsessed with it. "You think that when you die you will see the face of Jesus Whom you love, but when you die you will see nothing, for after death there *is* nothing." The temptation began on Easter Sunday of 1896, right after her first tubercular hemorrhage on Good Friday, and lasted without letup until the moment she died on September 30, 1897. "I am glad," she said, "to sit at the table of the atheists and eat their food, and I offer my frightening darkness that they may see the light."



She was a missionary par excellence, who never thought of herself but only of others. She wanted to proclaim the Gospel in the farthest corners of the world. One mission, she said, would never be enough for her. She wanted to labor in every mission until the last soul was saved. She spoke of that desire as a folly, but it was no folly at all. The same desire obsessed the heart of Jesus, Who shed His blood on the Cross for the salvation of everyone. "This is My Blood which shall be shed for you and for *all* for the remission of sins." Thérèse was one with Jesus, Whom she wanted to love as He had never been loved before, and she would labor side by side with Him, until the last soul was saved. Heart and soul she is the Church's world-class missionary, the number one missionary of the modern age.

"Go into the whole world and make disciples of everyone," Jesus said. Thérèse took Him at His word. She has gone into the whole world. She is known and loved everywhere. And this happened in a single century. Her autobiography (*The Story of a Soul*) is read in sixty languages. You can buy it anywhere. It is at the top of the list for spiritual reading. It is simple and at the same time profound. It is read by highly educated people and by those of little learning, and everyone who reads it understands it, for it speaks to all. And what it teaches is the love of God that is

found in Jesus. "Christ yesterday, today and the same forever."

It is most significant that her relics are now traveling on a missionary journey. Everywhere they go they are received with joy and prayerful enthusiasm. I was among a hundred people who welcomed them at Kennedy Airport in New York when they arrived from Argentina. I was there in the morning when the American Airlines plane landed.

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It would do your heart good to feel the emotion in the crowd, to see tears in people's eyes, to watch six Port Authority Policemen proudly bear the reliquary in a torchlight procession across the tarmac of JFK, and witness the reverence they displayed for a saint who died unknown a century ago. I have had the joy of welcoming these relics in nearly a dozen places all over the United States. The reaction is the same everywhere,

immense crowds with incredible emotion. In Arlington, Texas, the Carmelite nuns rented the City Convention Center and fourteen thousand people filled it to capacity for the Mass. She stayed for two days in the Carmel Chapel. (They never say the relics, but *she*.) Day and night people came from long distances to pray to her, many of them not Catholic. You would be deeply moved to see them bringing their little children to touch the reliquary and ask for her blessing. When she left and the "Thérèsemobile" drew slowly away, they wept. The Mother Prioress, not a woman given to tears, had them streaming down her face and she was *laughing*, laughing at herself for crying. She could not believe she was crying! The scene was *Biblical*.

*Read Thérèse, re-read Thérèse, and read her again. She will make you know that your religion is the most exciting experience of your life, and she will therefore make of you a missionary who wants to share your faith with others.*

Like the one in the Acts of the Apostles where the people took St. Paul to the ship that would take him away and never bring him back. They wept and kissed him, knowing they would never

see him again. Biblical indeed, like the crowds who came out to see Jesus and to ask Him for miracles of healing. They ask them also from Thérèse. They believe she can perform them and she sometimes does.

**T**his is the beautiful woman whom the Church has made Patroness of the Missions and Patroness of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. I *summon* you to pay attention to her. She will lead you on a great adventure. She will speak to the mystic that is in every one of you. Being a Catholic is not simply a matter of subscribing to a list of tenets. Being a Catholic means giving your whole heart to Jesus Christ. It means believing very deeply and praying very much. Thérèse knows that the joy which comes from this is not just for monks and nuns in a convent. It is for everyone. Jacques Maritain, that great philosopher and admirer of Thomas Aquinas, used an expression that sticks in my mind. He said: "Thérèse of Lisieux has put contemplation on the streets." It is for all of us, the delight of our lives. Thérèse will fill our hearts with the love of God that surpasses all understanding.

**M**ay I finish with a brief anecdote. Three years ago I was in the Bronx to minister the Sacrament of Confirmation. Whenever I confirm, I speak to the young people about Thérèse's autobiography and urge them to read it. I ask

their sponsors to buy a copy for them as a Confirmation present. A man who was sponsor for one of the boys on this particular day reached over after I had anointed his candidate and shook my hand. He said: "Bishop, the book you spoke about, I have read it seven times." He was, I would say, in his late fifties, well dressed and well spoken. I shall never forget his words: "The book you spoke about I have read it seven times." That was three years ago. I imagine he has read it again. It is a book you never get to the bottom of — you never exhaust the wisdom of St. Thérèse nor the love of God and others that fills her heart.

May I suggest that you get a copy and read it, slowly and with eager eyes. Read it with sensitivity. She will open your eyes to something which you should not go through a long lifetime without coming to realize. She will teach you what God is — "Nothing but mercy and love" — and to fear Him is an offense against Him. Love, after all, can be answered only by love.

**R**ead Thérèse, re-read Thérèse, and read her again. She will make you know that your religion is the most exciting experience of your life, and she will therefore make of you a missionary who wants to share your faith with others.

*"Bishop, I've read that book seven times."*



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