

St. Therese
9/27/2020

REAL PEOPLE, REAL FAITH

We celebrate our patroness, St. Therese of Child Jesus and the Holy Face. Known for her absolute and childlike trust in God's goodness and that strong determination to do every act, no matter how small, for the love of God. That childlike trust and confidence is probably why we have this gospel reading for her feast. Jesus reminds us of accepting the Kingdom of Heaven with humility and trust. That strong determination to do all for the love of God is known as, *the little way*. She taught that no act is so small it can't be done for the love of God even just picking a pin up off the floor. She insisted that we can offer to God not just only sufferings but our joys as well. In the end we offer our all.

Unfortunately, this year we celebrate all this in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. And you may think it out of place because we remember a sweet girl who grew up in a sheltered home, and entered a cloistered convent at the age of 15 and remained there until she died at the age of 24 in 1897. And if you think of St. Therese as someone who didn't face real problems of life, think again and then think again after that. Her mother died of breast cancer when she was four. She worked through some difficult health and emotional issues after that for some time. Four siblings died as infants or young children before Therese was born.

She faced many challenges living religious life, particularly from some of the other sisters. At the end of her life she suffered from tuberculosis which was joined by an intense, pitch black, spiritual darkness. The suffering of her final illness was truly a passion made worse by some brutal medical practices. Toward the end she said she didn't think it was possible to suffer so much and that she didn't regret giving herself to love. St. Therese wasn't a china figure or a plastic statue. She was a real woman who faced many real problems of life with a very real and intentional faith in God's love and mercy.

And there was something else you may not hear much about—she lived through a worldwide pandemic. The last big pandemic of the nineteenth century was the Asiatic or Russian flu that killed about a million people. It started in 1889 and recurred a number of times into 1895. And it did not spare her own Carmel in Lisieux.

Communities where people live closely together, and where there are a number of the elderly, can be particularly vulnerable to disease. After Christmas 1891 the pandemic hit their Carmel and it hit hard. In a community of 25 nuns, three died in

six days. These nuns were the eldest of the community referred as “the good old sisters.” Part of their work as “the good old sisters” was to encourage the young sisters but now they were all taken away from them. With the exception of three sisters, including Therese who was not quite 19, the community fell ill including the prioress and all the sisters in community leadership.

These remaining three cared for the sick, the dead and communicated with those on the outside. Eventually the community began to recover but Therese gained a familiarity with death, speaking of the joy and peace she saw in the faces of deceased sisters. She didn’t fear it. She didn’t fear purgatory. She faced it in a matter of fact way that could be even joyous. She said that death was, *the gateway to eternal joy*. She later noted that her nineteenth birthday, January 2 was celebrated with a death. Of Sister St. Joseph’s passing she said, *Her death throes were a continual prayer, and it was sweet to be near her, one felt a soul worthy of going to unite with God*. She didn’t fear death saying it was the only way to reach God.

This real woman who faced the trauma of a real pandemic taking the lives of three people she loved in less than a week, is a model for us. Most of us have yet to face in this pandemic what she had to face. She did this with faith and confidence. She did this nourished by the Eucharist.

As strange as it sounds to us, it wasn’t the custom of the nuns at that time to receive daily Communion but during the pandemic, she was able to do so.

As we work our way through this pandemic, assisted by the prayers of St. Therese and inspired by her example may we bear our crosses patiently, lovingly care for one another and allow Jesus to nourish himself with us at the Eucharist. May we journey together with deep confidence and an absolute determination to do everything, even the smallest act for love of God. May we be real people who face real problems of life with a real, living and intentional faith in God and his love for us.