

DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH: THE WISDOM OF THE LITTLE FLOWER

I'll never forget my experience twenty summers ago this weekend. It was at **World Youth Day in Paris** in 1997. First, it was the warmest August on record in the City of Lights. It was both exhilarating and exhausting, as much of the time we searched for shade and places to fill our water bottles. At the closing Mass on August 25, Pope John Paul II announced his intention to declare **St. Thérèse of Lisieux** (1873-1897 AD) a Doctor of the Church, making her at the time only the 33rd figure in history to receive that title. It was quite an ending to a transformative, even if grueling, experience for me. In the minds of many, this title was reserved for prolific theologians who penned well-known tomes on theology or spirituality. So why St. Thérèse? Certainly, Pope John Paul II was not anti-intellectual. St. Thérèse had once written in her *Little Way*: "Sometimes, when I read spiritual treatises... my poor little mind soon grows weary, I close the learned book, which leaves my head splitting and my heart parched, and I take the Holy Scriptures. Then all seems luminous, a single word opens up infinite horizons to my soul, perfection seems easy; I see that it is enough to realize one's nothingness, and give oneself wholly, like a child, into the arms of the good God."

Unlike nearly all previous Doctors of the Church, the Little Flower published very little. Her autobiography and letters are the main source of our knowledge of her teaching. She lived just twenty-four years and wrote her *Story of a Soul* under obedience to her Carmelite superiors. But because of her great sanctity, she was able to grasp spiritual truths in a manner not possible even to great intellectuals; some knowledge is far beyond books. She died at age 24, and is **by far the youngest** Doctor of the Church. Pope John Paul II remarked that though youthful, "...her ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters." Her most prominent contribution is in giving the Church a clear and deep understanding of spiritual childhood.

She was without guile, without cunning of any kind—truly innocent. We need to recover this sense of spiritual childhood amidst a culture that has **lost its respect for innocence**, a quality that has sadly taken on a negative connotation, when in reality it is a beautiful gift. We speak of simplicity, of pulling back from the complicated methodologies of prayer, which while motivated by sincerity, often obscure the simple truths of the divine life of the soul. Spiritual theology can be complicated, but not of necessity. While proclaiming the latest Doctor of the Church, Pope John Paul II noted three special reasons why his act was significant: "first, she was a *woman*, grasping the Gospel's hidden wealth 'with that practicality and deep resonance of life and wisdom...'; second, she was a *contemplative* totally dedicated to Christ; third, she was a *young person*, a teacher of the evangelical life, illuminating the path for the young."

Thérèse exhibited a great spirit of self-denial, while firmly avoiding the extreme penances of some of the saints. She concentrated her desire for penance in the mortification of her self-love, which, as she put it, "did me more good than bodily penance." Young children often grasp the profound spiritual truths better than do we, because we are tempted to let cynicism creep into our vision. Noted 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal observed: "Reason's supreme act is in recognizing that there are an infinite number of things that surpass it." We mustn't become enslaved to an understanding of reason that only enslaves us, cutting itself off from any revelation from above. As **Pope Pius XI** noted in his canonization homily in 1925 **spiritual childhood**: "It consists in thinking and acting under the influence of grace as a child thinks and acts." As one of the Carmelite novices later wrote: "Sister Thérèse knew how to transform all her actions into acts of love—even the most indifferent ones."

The secret of her great success is summed up in one sentence she spoke shortly before her death: "I have never given God anything but love!" This "little way" is a path of complete abandonment to God, and is not meant to be an "easy" way, as if it were less demanding. When we completely trust in divine mercy and abandon ourselves to it, our relationship with Christ becomes everything to us, and nothing can even come close. When God rewards the "little ones," he means all those who remain faithful to their daily duties in simplicity of heart, and love God for Himself, never taking themselves so seriously as to think that they know better than God. Our young people have much to teach us—parents, priests and all adults. The desire Thérèse expressed to "spend her heaven doing good on earth" continues to be fulfilled in marvelous ways today through her example

and the important lessons of Scripture. While she does not fit the traditional bill as a “Doctor,” it was a bold move by Pope John Paul II. It has since been followed by Pope Benedict XVI’s naming of St. Hildegard of Bingen in 2012 and Pope Francis in his adding 10th century Armenian St. Gregory of Narek (little known in the West) to the roll in 2015.

- Did you “see” the **Total Solar Eclipse** last Monday? Sure, it piqued my curiosity, but I’ll admit that geographical oddities, such as Hopkinsville, KY (pop. 31,577) being “Point of Greatest Eclipse,” are as interesting to me. Go figure! The vast universe of outer space is so overwhelming– it beggars the imagination. The Psalmist agreed: “When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him?”
- Perhaps I’m not so crazy–Brother Guy Consolmagno, SJ, Director of the **Vatican Observatory**, traveled from Rome to Hopkinsville, to write about the eclipse, lecturing in the local parish as well.
- “Come to the Water,” indeed! **Fr. Giorgio Pontiggia** is one busy Salesian missionary. Stationed for years in the vicinity of Gambela, in western Ethiopia, the priest has baptized over 7,500 individuals. His parish also includes eleven mud and sheet-metal chapels scattered around the remote area.
- When they met last week in Moscow, Vatican Secretary of State **Cardinal Pietro Parolin** was not expected to discuss a possible papal visit to Moscow with Russian Orthodox **Patriarch Kirill**. Thankfully, they did discuss the situation in Ukraine. Though theologically close to us Catholics, disputes over the status of the Eastern-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church must be resolved before the Pope would be welcome. Parolin also had a private meeting with Russian **President Vladimir Putin**. Oh, to be a fly on that wall!
- I have been invited to join a group of area faith leaders at the **State Capitol** this week to discuss ways to improve relations between law enforcement and citizens. I have great respect for law enforcement, and am intentional in introducing myself when I see an officer, or at least to wave and acknowledge their presence. They face tremendous pressure, and anything we can do to encourage community engagement leading to better relations will be worth the effort.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector