

St. Therese of Lisieux, Patroness of the Missions

September 1997 marks the 100th anniversary of the death of St. Therese of Lisieux. We take this opportunity to recall that Therese is patroness of missionaries and missions. How did it come about that this young woman, who entered a monastery at age 15 and spent the last years of her short life there, became so significant to the missions?

She was born Marie Francoise Martin in Alencon, France in 1873, and was the youngest of nine children. Only Marie Francoise and four others lived past infancy. Her father was a watchmaker. Her mother died when she was five and the family moved to Lisieux, where she was raised by her elder sisters and an aunt. Two of her sisters became Carmelite nuns. Marie Francoise wanted to become a nun, too. At first she was refused but later joined the Carmelites at age fifteen and made her vows in 1890. She was given a new name as a sign of her new life, Therese of the Child Jesus.

Periods of illness followed. Therese lived a spirit of patience and prayer. She was asked to write the story of her childhood and, later, of her life in the convent. Finally, just seven years after making her vows, Therese died of tuberculosis.

Throughout her life as a Carmelite, Therese wanted to be a missionary. She hoped to be sent to Vietnam, where there were two Carmelite monasteries that had a connection with Lisieux. The monastery in Saigon began with nuns from Lisieux, and the monastery in Hanoi was an off-shoot of the one in Saigon. The prioress recognized Therese's missionary vocation, but hesitated to send her because of her poor health.

So Therese found a way to be a missionary right where she was. She wrote letters. A young man studying to be a priest wrote to the monastery and asked that a sister devote herself especially to helping him through her prayers and sacrifices. A year later, another seminarian asked that someone of the monastery be chosen to pray for him and his future mission. The prioress asked Therese to take charge of the spiritual interests of these future missionaries. One of them went to China and the other to what we now know as the African country of Malawi.

She prayed for the missions. She offered her hardships for the missions. She made sacrifices for the missions. She wrote in a poem: "... in God's eyes there is no distance. For God the whole universe is one speck. My weak love, my little sufferings, blessed by God make God loved far and wide."

As her death approached, she asked that instead of purchasing flowers after her death, the money should be contributed to the missions to baptize and support little girls who were found abandoned. Therese also spoke of being in heaven and what she would do from there: "I feel especially that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love God, of giving my little way to souls. If God answers my desires, my heaven will be spent on earth ... I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth." She was convinced that this great desire was of God and that it would be so, for God could have given her another kind of desire.

Therese died on September 30th, 1887 at the age of twenty-four. In 1925, just 28 years later, she was declared a saint of the church. Two years later she was named as a patron of all missionaries and all missions, along with St. Francis Xavier.

Therese spoke of her life as "a little flower gathered by Jesus." In her life story she compared the human spirit to flowers in a field. Not all can be great like the rose or lily. God created smaller blossoms, like the daisy or violet, that also give joy to God who glances about and sees our wondrous variety and beauty and colors.

Minion Awareness Lesson Guide:

St Therese of Lisieux, Patroness of the Missions

Goal: To educate toward a consciousness of the Church's missionary efforts, of our call to participate in the mission of the Church, and of our unity in the Spirit with people around the earth.

Materials needed: This lesson guide and the accompanying story; map of the world; materials for optional follow up activity.

Objectives:

1. To assist students in developing the understanding that God's people are called to help one another as did Jesus
2. To help students respond appropriately to the question: What is a missionary? (one who loves and respects all in God's family, who witnesses to others about Jesus; who lives like Jesus. We are all missionaries. Some missionaries leave their home country and go to another to share the message of Jesus and to live and work among the people there.)
3. To provide students with a missionary model, St. Therese of Lisieux.
4. To celebrate the life of St. Therese on her feast, October 1. [September 30, 1997 is the 100th anniversary of her death.]

Procedure:

1. Introduce the following in a way appropriate to your grade level.

Vocabulary

Patroness
Missions and missionaries
Monastery
Vows
Tuberculosis

Geography

Lisieux, France
Saigon and Hanoi, Vietnam

2. Remind the children of our responsibility to give witness to Jesus: Before Jesus returned to the Father, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples. The Spirit would help them to be witnesses for Jesus right there and also to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1: 18)

What does it mean to be a "witness" for Jesus? (We share the good news that God deeply loves all people. Jesus showed us this love in his words and care while on earth, especially to people in need and people who believed in him. We also must show God's love to others and let our faith grow strong.)

Some people share the message of Jesus right where they are. The love and care of parents expresses the message of Jesus. Our respect and care for others, especially when they are in need, gives witness to the good news of Jesus. (Discuss other specific examples: personal acquaintances or people in the news can be examples.)

Some people leave their own home and go to far away places to share the message and care of Jesus. These people are called "missionaries" because their whole life and work are about being a witness for Jesus. (Use the world map to demonstrate that some people might leave California and go to Bolivia, to Nigeria, to the Philippines, to Korea. And some people might leave Mexico and come to Texas, or some might come from the Philippines to California. They come here to share their faith and to help the people.)

Whether we stay in our own home area or travel to a distant country, we are all missionaries if we share our faith (how do we do that?) and if our actions show we care about people near and far (and how do we do that?).

3. Introduce the story of St. Therese:
This year we celebrate a very special person. This person is thought of as a missionary. But like most of us, she never left her home to share the message of Jesus. She did this right where she was.

Read the short biographical story of St. Therese. Adapt the information as may be needed for your grade level.

Follow-up questions:

- How do we know that Therese's early life at home was difficult? (As students recall the deaths in her family and having to move, add that there was a great spirit of love and care in the Martin family.)
- Why do you think Therese wanted to be a missionary? (Responses will vary; she felt a great love for God, and also felt God's love for her. She wanted others to experience that love.)
- What can we do to be a missionary right where we are?
- Therese felt herself to be "small".and ordinary as a daisy compared to a larger or more elegant flower. But she also knew she could do something to help others, and that that something would be pleasing to God. What Gospel stories tell us this is very true-that our small actions or ordinary life are important to God? (Widow's mite; Jesus' friendship with Zaccheus, or with fisherman and lepers; Jesus' interest in the children; Jesus used 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed many; and many others ...)
- How are we and all the peoples of the earth like a garden of flowers? (God created us all, all different in size and color and shape, but all give joy to God.)

Follow up activities:

- Therese thought of herself as a "little flower" in God's earthly garden. Invite students to create some wonderful flowers. (Approaches will vary with your grade level-use bright paper strips to bend and curl, or "snowflake" cut-outs, draw-paint-cut-out, Try to arrange them at your prayer center or on the bulletin board.)
- Invite students to write a poem, perhaps a haiku, about their unique color or shape. (Encourage them to use creative color descriptions-like ... eyes the color of strong coffee or cinnamon; skin the color of crisp fallen leaves; straight hair, black and shiny like polished enamel on a fancy car ...)
- Invite older students to learn more about monastic and contemplative life. Invite a vowed religious to share something of her/his life.

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