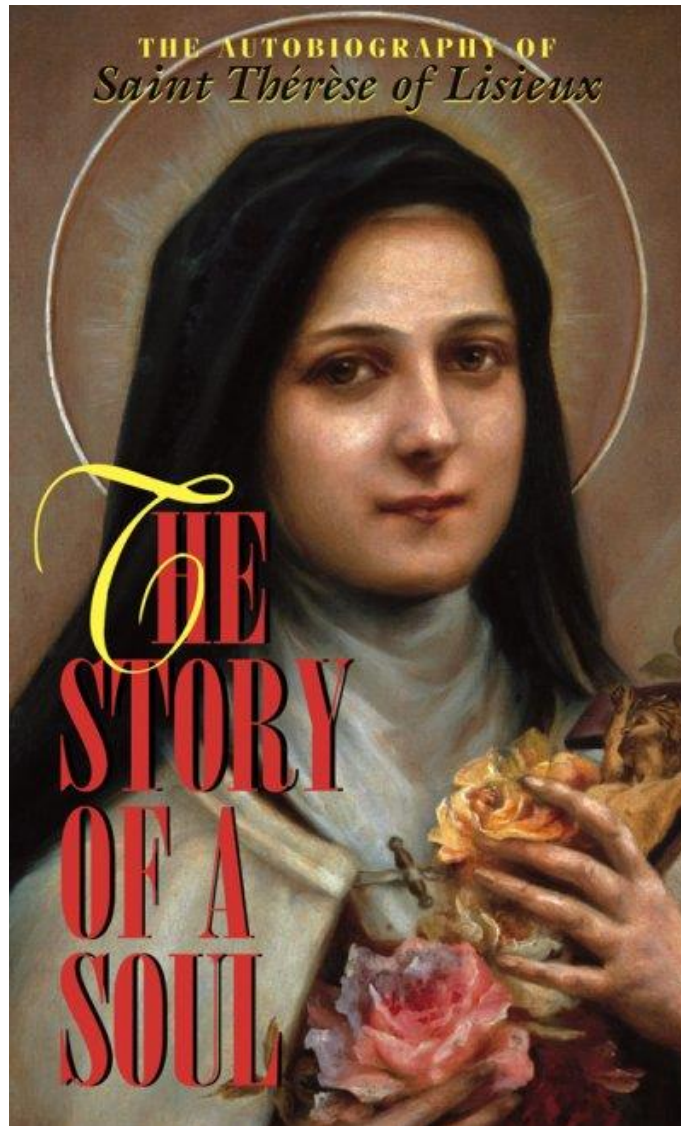


## A Summary of *The Story of a Soul* by Saint Therese of Lisieux



## A Summary of *The Story of a Soul* by Saint Therese of Lisieux

I C S Publications, 1996

ISBN: 978-0935216585

Summary by Cara Whitaker, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd

[You can purchase the full text at Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

## About the Author

St. Therese of Lisieux was proclaimed, by St. Pius X, as “the greatest saint of modern times.” She is also co-patron of the missions. Born in 1873, Therese was the youngest of five daughters. Her parents, the Martins, prosperous in their own right, were very successful in maintaining a devout household. The first sorrow of St. Therese’s short life of twenty five years was the death of her mother when she was four. Following this tragedy, her father relocated the family to Lisieux where his late wife’s brother and sister-in-law would help to care for Therese and her sisters. When Therese was nine, her sister, Pauline, left home to enter the nearby convent. Four years later, another sister, Marie, entered the same cloister. Both of Therese’s ‘little mothers’ had become sisters in another right. Shortly after Marie joined, Therese, at the age of fifteen, received the same calling to religious life. Her father agreed with her and gave her his consent. However, both of the Carmelite superiors and the bishop said that she was too young. The bishop changed his mind and Therese was given permission a few months later. It was there that she would live out her childhood goal – “I want to be a saint.”

## General Overview

The ‘Story of a Soul’ is St. Therese’s autobiography. Beginning with her first memory, it traces her life, ending with her blissful death in the convent. There are three segments: the first segment of her life was from her very early time of reason to the death of her mother when she was four and a half, the second segment of her life continued after the death of her mother until she was fourteen, and the third segment of her life began with her entrance to the convent until her death at twenty-five.

## Chapters One-Three

The *Story of a Soul* is addressed to Therese’s mother, and her natural sister, in the convent. The work opens; “I am going to entrust the story of my soul to you, my darling mother, to you who are doubly my mother.” Before beginning her autobiography, Therese said prayers before the statue of Mary. An examination of her life unfolds. The first question that Therese ponders, something to which God alone knows all the answers, is why do some souls receive more grace than others? God has showered an extraordinary amount of grace on some souls, such as St. Paul and St. Augustine, almost, according to Therese, forcing those souls to accept His graces. Jesus, however, had enlightened Therese on this mystery, “He set the book of nature before me and I saw that all the flowers he created are lovely. The splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not rob the little violet of its scent or the daisy of its simple charm. I realized that if every tiny flower wanted to be a rose, spring would lose its loveliness and there would be no wild flowers to make the meadows gay.” It is the same in the garden of souls. God does show His love to the simplest souls, which show no resistance, as well as to the loftiest souls. God is love.

Therese shares her realization that it was God’s mercy alone that has created whatever good there is in her. It began when she was a child. There are three distinct periods of Therese’s soul. The first period is from when she first began to reason until the death of her mother. God had favored her, “by awakening my intelligence very early and by imprinting the happenings of my childhood so sharply on my memory that the things I am going to write about seem as if they took place yesterday.” Through St. Therese’s whole life she had been graced with the love that she received from her family. She was surrounded by love in such a great degree. Her first memories were of smiles and loving caresses. She was surrounded by her four older sisters, her mother, and her father in a very loving and devout household. Therese was raised to seek first the ways of the Lord.

Therese’s parents, at an early age, reared her in such a way as to eradicate all bad habits or inclinations. The first bad habit that her mother attempted to rid her of was that of great self-love. In one attempt, her mother offered her a half-penny if she would kiss the ground. Although this was a great fortune to little Therese, her pride revolted against this and she declined this fortune. However, as she was blessed with such good parents,

“He (Jesus) watched over me. He drew good from my faults, for, checked in good time, they served to make me grow in perfection.” Therese’s parents helped her to grow in virtue and eradicate her bad habits.

Therese, in this time of her life, had a dream that would remain with her for the remainder of her life. One night she was walking through the garden by herself. She saw two little devils. They were astonishingly lively, yet scared of little Therese. After glaring at her they ran away and hid. When she beheld how cowardly the devils actually were, she went to investigate. They sought only to run away from her gaze, crazy with despair. Through this dream God taught her a lesson: “A soul in a state of grace need fear nothing from devils, for they are so cowardly that they flee from the gaze of a child.”

Therese was to be refined at an early age for her vocation. The first tragedy that struck the young Therese was the death of her mother. Every detail of it would remain with St. Therese for the remainder of her life. In her autobiography she does not give us many details about the death of her mother. However, there was one: the ceremony of extreme unction impressed Therese profoundly. The moment her mother died, everything about her changed. This began the second period of her life.

The second period of her life began when she was four and a half and continued until she was fourteen. It was the unhappiest of her three lifetime periods. Her old and happy self became, “a timid and quiet bundle of nerves.” It was during this time that she was only cheerful around her family. She was also extremely sensitive to everything around her. One day, during her families’ daily visits to the different chapels containing the Blessed Sacrament, six year old Therese made her first visit to the Carmel that was to be her home nine years later. It was at this time that she grew significantly closer to her father. It was her father who taught her numerous lessons, especially the importance of frequent almsgiving. Her father set a holy spiritual example for Therese.

Little Therese grew spiritually. She made her first reconciliation during that time. She was extremely grateful for how carefully God had prepared her. She was very excited that she was able to talk to Christ through a person here on earth. She also greatly enjoyed feast days. To Therese they seemed like, “days spent in heaven.” Her favorite part of the feast day was the Eucharistic profession. It gave her such joy to spread the flowers underneath the procession. The best day for Therese was Sunday. She relished this day above all else. She felt “like an exile on earth and yearned for the peace of heaven and the eternal Sabbath of the Fatherland.”

At the age of eight and a half, Therese replaced her sister Leonie in school. Due to Therese’s great intelligence she advanced in school rather quickly. Although she was the youngest of all the pupils she was at the top of her class. This caused resentment on the behalf of the other students and hardship for Therese’s sensitive nature. Little Therese was not like the other children. She did not know how to play with them and could not imitate them. However, she made the best of her time at school with her cousin Marie. Together they formed a small religious club. Therese continued to grow in sanctity in preparation for her religious vocation.

When the Carmel was properly explained to Therese at the age of nine, immediately, she knew that, “Carmel was the desert where God wanted me to hide myself too.” At the age of nine, Therese went to visit the prioress to tell her of her promptings. Mother Marie de Gonzaga believed that Therese’s promptings were genuine, but that the convent did not accept nine year old postulants. Therese would have to wait until she was sixteen to enter Carmel.

Therese saw her sister Pauline behind the grate in Carmel. This meeting began a course of great suffering. Every Thursday Therese they would visit Pauline and every Thursday Therese would leave heartbroken and in tears. She had lost Pauline. It was not long before this emotional anguish caused Therese physical illness. Therese, herself, says that the illness was undoubtedly caused by the devil. The devil was angry at the harm that her family was doing to him. However, because of the guardianship of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Therese overcame her illness before it became too severe.

Shortly after this, though, she was struck with another illness, a continual headache. It began ever so slightly but progressively worsened. Her uncle believed her to be too sensitive and proscribed for her to be taken out of herself. He decided to keep her thoroughly entertained during the Easter Holidays. Just prior to Pauline's taking the veil, Therese had a particularly bad spell. She did receive a small respite and was able to be there when Pauline took the veil, but shortly after that her condition considerably worsened. She believed that the devil was given physical power over her. She needed a miracle. She was given a cure and a vision from Our Lady of Victories. All this she would soon recount at Caramel on her next visit with Mother Marie of Gonzaga.

## Chapters Four-Seven

It was this visit to Caramel, her next visit subsequent to Pauline's taking of the veil, where Therese knew what name she would take upon entering. For according to Therese, "On the morning of that day I thought of what name I should have in Caramel. I knew there was a Sister Therese of Jesus, but I was determined that my own lovely name of Therese should not be taken from me. Suddenly I thought of the little Jesus to whom I was so devoted and exclaimed: "How happy should I be to be called Therese of the Child Jesus!" After this the prioress asked the sisters what name Therese should be given. They came up with the same name for little Therese as Therese had for herself.

Therese was a voracious reader. As she was not good at games she would have been happy to spend all of her time reading. This, however, was not permitted. She was guided in both the time she could allot and the books that she was permitted to read. It was through the example of heroic deeds that, according to Therese, "God made me realize that the true glory is that which is eternal and that, to achieve it, there is no need to perform outstanding deeds. Instead, one must remain hidden and perform one's good deeds so that the right hand knows not what the left hand does." It was through the great examples of French saints found in literature that Therese found the aim of her life. Her goal was now to become a great saint. That was where her glory would lie.

Therese proceeds to describe the joy that accompanied her First Communion. She was sent away on retreat to school to prepare for this momentous event in her life. She did not like being away from her family in this manner. The nuns, however, showed her so much tender affection that she came to really enjoy the preparation. The culmination found in First Holy Communion was everything to little Therese. Her joy was so great that she wept. The absence of her much beloved mother did not affect her. According to Therese, "Heaven dwelt in my soul and Mummy had been there for a long time, and when Jesus visited me so did my beloved mother. She blessed me as she rejoiced at my happiness. Nor did I weep at your absence. On that day nothing but joy filled my heart, and I united myself with you who were giving yourself for ever to Him who gave Himself so lovingly to me." Henceforth, nothing else for Therese could approach the joy that she received in most Holy Communion.

Therese believed that she did not deserve the graces that God had showered upon her. In her childhood she did possess many faults; because of her older sisters, she never did any housework and she was extremely sensitive, weeping quite often at the slightest provocation. She herself said, "No amount of reasoning with me did any good and I couldn't cure myself of this wretched fault. I don't know how I dreamt of entering Caramel while I behaved as childish as this." She knew she needed a small miracle to overcome her childishness. She received this miracle on Christmas Day 1886. According to Therese, "He flooded the darkness of my soul with torrents of light. By becoming weak and frail for me, He gave me strength and courage. He clothed me with His weapons, and from that blessed night I was unconquerable." It was on this night that the third period of her life began.

Next would come Therese's thirst for the salvation of souls. One Sunday, while beholding the Cross, she was struck by the blood coming from one of the hands of Christ. There was no one there to catch the blood. Therese was determined to stay continually at the Cross and receive that blood. She would then have to spread

the blood, which had won us a Savior, to other souls. The cry of Christ on the cross, “I am thirsty,” also rang through her mind. She too was thirsty for other souls, not with just the souls of priests, but with the souls of sinners who she wanted to save from eternal damnation. Because Therese had been delivered from her scruples and excessive sensitiveness, she was able to handle this new commission. Therese elaborates further to describe what God had done for her as similar to what Ezekiel recounts, “Passing by me, Jesus saw that I was ripe for love. He plighted His troth to me and I became His. He threw his cloak about me, washed me with water and anointed me with oil, clothed me in fine linen and silk, and decked me with bracelets and priceless gems. He fed me on wheat and honey and oil and I had matchless beauty and He made me a great queen.”

Therese did not tell people about her vocation. There was only one person who encouraged Therese personally in her vocation, her sister Pauline. She was always reminded of her age. If her vocation had not been genuine it would have been killed at birth because of all the obstacles she met after responding to the call of Jesus. Therese did not know how to inform her father of her vocation. The day she chose to tell him was the Feast of Pentecost. In tears that day after Vespers, Therese informed her father of her decision to enter Caramel. His tears mingled with hers as he said nothing to deter her from her vocation but cautioned her that she was still too young to make such an important decision. Her father, however, because she had pleaded her case so well was convinced that Therese’s desire came from God.

With her Father’s consent Therese presumed that she could, “fly to Caramel without hindrance;” however, due to her young age, there were still many trials yet ahead. Therese was still only fifteen. Her uncle, showering with love and affection, refused consent and forbade her to even speak of her vocation until she was seventeen. After some time Therese approached her uncle about her vocation once again. Her unhappiness concerning her vocation had greatly influenced him. He had changed his mind, “for he had prayed to God to dispose his heart aright and his prayer was answered.” The next obstacle that Therese encountered was far greater. The superior at Caramel would not let her enter before she was twenty-one. Therese and her father went to meet with the priest but he would not cede to her wishes. After a very decided *no* he added, “I’m only the Bishop’s deputy. If he allows you to enter, I shall say nothing more.”

Before her entrance into Caramel, Therese grew more spiritually. She carried on with her studies and grew in the love of God, sometimes experiencing true transports of ecstasy. It was during this time that God gave Therese insight into the souls of children. She spent a lot of time with two girls while their mother was ill. The children soaked up everything that she told them about God. Therese realized, “those innocent souls were like soft wax on which any imprint could be stamped – of evil, alas, as well as of good.” In addition to that, she realized that many more souls would become most holy if they had been properly guided from the start. She came to appreciate her own upbringing and God’s hand in that upbringing even more.

In an effort to pursue her vocation, Therese and her Father set out to visit the bishop. Therese had to overcome her shyness when approaching the Bishop. She told him of her desire to enter Caramel and her longing to give herself to God from the age of three. Therese and her father also informed the Bishop that they “intended to go to Rome with the diocesan pilgrimage and that Therese would not hesitate to speak to the Holy Father if she did not get permission beforehand.” Before reaching any conclusion the Bishop insisted on discussing the matter with the Superior of Caramel. Nothing could have upset Therese for she knew how determined the Superior’s opposition was. At this Therese began to cry. The Bishop’s response to Therese was one of kindness, “All is not lost my child. I am delighted you are going to Rome with your father. Your vocation will be strengthened. You should rejoice instead of weeping. Besides, I am going to Lisieux next week and I shall have a talk about you with the Superior. You will have my decision while you are in Italy.” Three days later, Therese and her father would journey to Rome.

The journey to Rome showed Therese the emptiness of all temporal things. She witnessed the emptiness that is contained merely in a title. She also came to a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind praying for priests, which is the charism of the Carmelites. She loved praying for sinners, but why priests? Were not their souls without blemish? During her month in Italy she met many holy priests, but saw that priests are still men,

weak and subject to human frailty. If prayers are needed for holy priests, how much more are they needed for the lukewarm? It was during her pilgrimage to Rome that Therese came to a deeper realization of the duties that came with her vocation.

Therese saw many sights on her journey to Rome that began in Paris. In Paris she saw Our Lady of Victory. From Paris they took a train crossing through Switzerland. The beauty that Therese beheld on the train to Rome she described as a foretaste of heaven. They stopped at Milan, Venice, Padua, Bologna, and Loreto before ending in Rome. It was in Rome that they beheld the Catacombs, the basilicas, and Vatican itself. Therese also acquired a devotion to St. Cecelia. On the seventh day that Therese was in Rome they were able to attend Mass with the Holy Father, Leo XIII. The Gospel for the day contained the words, "Do not be afraid, you, my little flock. Your Father has determined to give you His kingdom." This filled Therese with confidence for her audience with the Holy Father. She directly asked the Holy Father if she could enter Caramel at fifteen. The only answer he gave her was thus: "If God wills."

When she returned home Therese received an answer about her entrance into Caramel. Mother Marie of Gonzaga wrote to say that she had had the Bishop's reply since December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, and that it authorized Therese's immediate entry. Mother, however, had decided to make Therese wait until after Easter. For Therese, her entrance was not soon enough.

The day that Therese would enter was the Feast of the Annunciation, April 9, 1888. She said farewell to all of her relatives and received her Father's blessing. Walking through the doors of Caramel she said goodbye to her family that lived in the world and was welcomed both by those beloved sisters who had been like mothers to Therese and by a whole new family of Carmelites. At last her longing was fulfilled. She was overcome by a serene and indescribable peace.

Cloistered life was everything that Therese had imagined that it would be. She found solace but was heavily reprimanded by her superiors. She was always grateful for this spiritual training. Father Pichon, a confessor and Therese's spiritual director, was astonished at God's dealings with her soul. He commented to her, "Before God, the Blessed Virgin, the angels, and all the saints, I declare that you have never committed a single mortal sin; thank Our Lord for what He has freely done for you without any merit on your part." Therese's soul was described by one of the nuns as very simple. It is the simple soul that is close to God. The simpler one becomes the closer one comes to God. Therese also entered a time of spiritual dryness. She felt no comfort in heaven or on earth, yet she was as happy as she could be. Her profession was set for September 8, 1890.

## Chapters Eight-Eleven

Prior to her final profession, Therese was still experiencing a complete spiritual dryness, almost as if she were forsaken. However, she was very at peace with this dryness, blaming it on her own lack of faith and fervor. An hour or two before her final profession she received the blessing of the Holy Father. This blessing, Therese says, "enabled me to weather the most furious storm of my life." That storm was brought on by the devil.

The storm that Therese was experiencing was an attack from the devil. He was trying to persuade her that she did not have a religious vocation and needed to reenter the world. What was she to do? At once Therese informed the novice mistress of this temptation. The novice mistress merely laughed at Therese's fears and reassured her that she had a religious vocation. Immediately the devil was driven off and Therese no longer had doubts concerning her vocation.

On the morning of September 8, 1890, Therese of Lisieux made her final profession in that, "peace which surpasseth all understanding." Next to her heart, Therese carried this letter which said what she wanted for herself, "O Jesus, let my baptismal robe remain forever white. Take me, rather than let me stain my soul by the slightest deliberate fault. Let me neither look for nor find anyone but You alone. Let all creatures be as nothing

to me and me nothing to them. Let no earthly things disturb my peace. O Jesus, I ask only for peace – peace and above all *love* that is without measure of limits. May I die as a martyr for You. Give me martyrdom of soul or body. Ah! Rather give me both! Enable me to fulfill all my duties perfectly and let me be ignored, trodden underfoot, and forgotten like a grain of sand. To You, my Beloved, I offer myself so that You may fulfill in me Your holy Will without a single creature placing any obstacle in the way.” On September 24, Therese took the veil. Her father could not come, due to illness, along with numerous others who were expected. That absence cast a veil of sadness over everything, yet Therese found solace at the bottom of the chalice.

Shortly after Therese’s profession, death struck the convent. Mother Genevieve was its first victim. A month later an influenza epidemic struck claiming numerous victims. Therese, along with the rest of the healthy sisters, was very busy tending to the sick. A great consolation for everyone at this time was the daily reception of most Holy Communion. Therese always knew how to maintain a positive outlook and make the best of things.

Therese confessed that in the convent that, “God has shown the same mercy to me as to King Solomon. All my desires have been fulfilled. I don’t mean only my desires for perfection, but also for those things that I knew were worthless, even though I hadn’t experienced them.” One of the examples that Therese uses for this was flowers. She had always adored flowers. Coming to Caramel she, “had renounced for good the joy of wandering through fields gay with spring flowers.” Yet, in entering Caramel Therese had never had more flowers. To adorn the altar she received mass quantities of her favorite flowers. This is just one example of how God fulfills all man’s desires. The one thing that Therese really wanted was for her cousin Celine to enter Caramel and for this wish she prayed ceaselessly. This happened and Therese was left with one desire: to love Jesus even into folly. It was love alone that attracted Therese.

It was to the love of Jesus that Therese devoted the remainder of her life. She herself says, “O Jesus, let me be Your eager victim and consume Your little sacrifice in the fire of divine love.” She always sought to be a saint and it was this love that would lead her to sanctity. For Therese says that complete love requires complete surrender. It was in this love that Therese embraced her illness. She had abandoned herself a long time ago to Jesus and He was free to do with Therese what he would. It is through her illness that God allowed her to explore the hidden depths of charity. One of the ways she did this was to use prayer. She defined prayer as, “an upward leap of the heart, and untroubled glance towards heaven, a cry of gratitude and love which I utter from the depths of sorrow as well as from the heights of joy.” It was in a spirit of prayer that she embraced and rejoiced in her sufferings. It was in spirit of love and prayer that she met her Beloved when her illness finally consumed her. Her final words in her autobiography were addressed to Christ, “I beseech You to cast Your divine glance upon a vast number of little souls. I beg you to choose in this world a multitude of little victims worthy of Your LOVE!!!”