

## Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

### **St. Therese, How to Live Simply in Great Love** **Constance Hull**

Hello, and welcome to today's talk on St. Thérèse, and how she teaches us to live simply in great love. Before we get to talk, let's begin in prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your saints, and for all of these powerful men and women who go before us, blazing the trail ahead of us, so that we too may grow in holiness. We thank you for the gift of St. Thérèse's example, and we pray that she intercedes on our behalf, especially during this time of advent and waiting, and also as we progress in the holy life. We also ask that our Heavenly Mother walks with us always, pointing us towards her Son as we pray. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm really excited about this talk, because St. Thérèse is one of my all-time favorite saints. She's become a great friend of mine. Our friendship has been wholly unexpected for me. She's very different. In fact, she's almost the opposite of what I am. I tend to typically go for... My favorite saint is Saint Thomas Aquinas. I'm very intellectual. And so St. Thérèse has been a wonderful surprise, and she really started to impress herself upon me when I became a mother, and I had to learn how important it is to live simply in each moment. I'm still learning, I still struggle in that regard, but she really has helped me in understanding my vocation as a wife and mother, and as I walk the path to holiness. And so I am very grateful for her friendship, and I'm hoping that you will learn a great deal about her and begin to study her works. Her autobiography is quite beautiful.

So, we're just going to start with a little bit of biographical information about St. Thérèse. She is very well-known. There's been a great following, especially in our day and age for her. But just in case, I thought I'd got over a few basic biographical information about her life. She was born on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1873 in France. Her parents are Louis and Azélie Martin, which were... they were both canonized by Pope Francis last October. So, obviously she was raised in a very pious home, since her parents are also saints. They had 9 children, but only 5 survived to adulthood, all girls. And all of the girls grew up to become religious.

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So, every single one of them entered into religious life. Unfortunately, Azélie died of breast cancer when Thérèse was 4 years old, so she did spend the majority of her life with her mother in heaven, and her Father was charged with raising her, as well as her sisters.

And her Father, Louis, sacrificed a great deal to provide for his daughters and their spiritual and emotional needs. Thérèse was very close to her Father. She talks lovingly of him in her autobiography. She did struggle greatly after her mother died. She became very sensitive, she cried easily, and it was a great struggle for her for about 10 years, in which she tried to learn to trust in God, and to overcome that sensitivity. And she eventually did when she was 14 years old, and that was when she really sensed that she was called to the religious life. And she went full bore into it, as she seemed to be. She was the type of person who did everything 100%, and so she completely devoted herself to the pursuit of entering the Carmelite Monastery. But at that point she was too young, and so she had to seek a dispensation in order to enter.

And at one point, she ended up going to Rome on a pilgrimage with her father, and when she went to have her audience with the Holy Father, she burst out that she wanted to enter into the Carmelite Monastery, and she begged him to allow her to do so. And the Pope was very taken aback, but saw her great zeal and told her to rely on God's will, and if it was His will that she would enter. And so it was eventually God's will, and so she did enter the Carmelite Monastery, where she spent the rest of her days. And when she entered into religious life, it was somewhat of a transition. It's a transition for anyone; it's a very different life than most of us grow up in. So she had to discover the motions, the rhythms, and the temperaments of her fellow religious and sisters, and she started to learn obedience and charity through her mother prioress, who was prone to a short temper. And it was really then that she started to learn to love mother prioress regardless of this vice and difficulty on her side. And she really did learn sanctification through the ill treatment that she received at times from the mother prioress.

It was also during this time that Thérèse's Father became very ill, and he was coming close to his death. He had different medical issues, especially strokes, he was unable to function. And at that point in time, a lot of people who couldn't function were put in medical institutions, which he was, which was very difficult for Thérèse, and she struggled greatly with this. He was lucid at some points, and he was obviously very holy and spiritual, and said that his humiliation at the end of his life was because he had never fully experienced it. So he was really entering in into the mystery of the cross at the end of his life, and that's part of the reason that

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he has been canonized, obviously. He demonstrated profound holiness throughout his life and at the end of his life. But he was able to visit Thérèse one more time before he passed away. He was wheelchair bound, and it was difficult for Thérèse, and he told his daughter at that visit that they would not meet again until they were reunited in heaven, and he died in 1894.

However, St. Thérèse herself did not live into old age, and so their reunion was not spread along long years, since she herself died at the age of 24. St. Thérèse developed a very simple approach to the spiritual life that spoke of her great devotion to our Lord. She wanted to enter into holiness and spiritual life by looking at the simple part of every single day, every action that we do, and bringing it to God in great love. She didn't see herself, as she often said, as a great eagle, as one of the high saints writing amazing theological works, or doing profound acts of penance, or serving the poor and traveling. She herself was very drawn to missionary work, but she never ended up doing missionary work. She wanted to find a way to live holiness in every moment, and in helping others to come into a greater and deeper love of God.

So, her approach to the spiritual life is referred to as “The little way”, and that is because it is something that any of us can do, and because it has to do with the simple acts that we participate in, that we do each day. We do simple things throughout every day. We do... if you're a mother, you do laundry, you do dishes, you take care of your children, you feed them, you clothe them, you change diapers. For people who work, they go and work at their jobs, and sometimes they're doing very seemingly mundane and menial tasks, from writing a document in Excel, to chopping wood, to working on machinery, to business meetings. Whatever it is, we have small moments throughout our day, and we are able, if we consciously work at it and we make it habitual, we are able to offer up every single thing that we do in our daily lives to God in love, so that we can be further united in charity to him. Because, by living our lives focused on God, we're drawn deeper into communion with the most Holy Trinity, which of course is the meaning of our very existence. We are meant to enter deeper into communion with the most Holy Trinity, as well as into communion with the people around us, because we are all so united through our shared nature to one another. And that is precisely why God calls us to love God and our neighbor.

So, Thérèse's approach was that every single person can embrace this way, because it is meant to sanctify all of our actions and activity throughout the day. So anyone can do it, whether, like I said, whether you're a mother, whether you're a CEO, farmer, IT Tech. It doesn't matter what type of job you have, you're able to

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live this way. And in the book *Spiritual Treasures From St. Therese of Lisieux* by Cynthia Cavnar, she quotes St. Thérèse as saying “The most trivial work, the least action, when inspired by a love, is often of greater merit than the most outstanding achievement. It is not their face value that God judges our deeds, even when they bear the stamp of apparent holiness, but solely on the measure of love we put into them.”

So, what St. Thérèse is telling us is that God is not necessarily looking for these amazing grand gestures. Now yes, there are certain people who were called to be missionaries. People like St. Teresa of Calcutta who were called to go to the poorest of the poor, or St. John Paul II who was called to be our Holy Father for 26 years. It's important for us to understand that holiness is something that every single one of us is called to. It's not just for loftily, high souls. Every single person has been created in the image and likeness of God, and every single one of us is called to holiness. And the way we can all achieve holiness is if we live simply in great love. So when I go to do the dishes, I can offer that up in love to God. Or I can also offer it up for someone in need, or for the poor souls in purgatory, for an end to abortion, for the continued development and spiritual growth for my daughter. There are an endless amount of ways that we can turn our work, our simple actions, into prayer, and that deepens us in the spiritual life.

St. Thérèse says for us to live each moment of our day in service to God. And of course this is something that requires great habit, and it will take a long time for us to develop the habit of doing this in our daily life, because we get busy, we get overwhelmed, many of us are juggling a wide variety of tasks, as well as our family life. And so we have to learn to consciously stop and say “Lord, I'm offering up this task to you.” I could say “Lord, I'm offering up this retreat talk in great love of you, because I want to serve and minister to other people.” So, we're supposed to take every moment of our lives and give it to God, and St. Thérèse says “We have only the short moments of our life to love Jesus, and the devil knows this well. And so he tries to consume our life with useless works.” How often is it that we become overwhelmed because we have so many tasks to get done each day? And of course busyness is a normal part of human experience, but busyness gets in the way of the spiritual life. When we have too much going on we get distracted, our prayer life falls by the wayside, and we aren't centered on God.

So, St. Thérèse is telling us, first, not to allow busyness to get in the way of our spiritual development and our communion and relationship with God, but she's also telling us that in learning to offer up each task, we then are praying constantly through every activity. And then we aren't becoming burdened, and the devil isn't

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using our busyness to block us and keep us from deeper relationship with our Lord. So if we focus and center every aspect of our life on God, then we're truly centered where we need to be, and we can progress in holiness. So, this is one of the ways that we can keep the devil from blinding us to our true calling, which is holiness and communion with the most Holy Trinity.

And one of the other aspects that St. Thérèse talks about is, and I've alluded to this a little bit already, is that God calls each one of us differently. It's important that we not compare ourselves to our neighbor. We can easily get caught up in our neighbor is doing all of these great things, this person goes off and does missionary trips to Haiti, or Latin America, Africa, or wherever, and I don't have the ability to do that, and I'm here at home taking care of my children, or I'm going to work every day and doing what I need to do, but I'm active in my parish and I do other things. It's important that we remember that we're each called differently, and our calls may vary at different points in our lives. I am a mother, so my primary duty right now is to my husband and my daughter. That is where God has called me right now. I have the great and gigantic task of leading my daughter and my husband to heaven, so they have to be my priority right now.

Yes, God calls me to serve in other ministries; I serve in Pro-Life Ministry, that's where God has called me. I pray at Planned Parenthood, I do 40 Days for Life, I try to help women who are in crisis pregnancies, and that is where God has called me to serve. And he might call someone else to work at the local homeless shelter, he might call someone else to the soup kitchen, someone else is a catechist and an educator, and other people are working with different organizations. Habitat for Humanity is one of the areas my husband loves to work in, because he's very good at building. So it's important that we remember on the path to holiness that each of us has a different calling from God, and that we are not meant to compare ourselves and say "Well, I'm not St. Teresa of Avila." Well, I have a more intellectual bent, but I am certainly not St. Teresa of Avila, I am Constance Hull. And so we need to understand as we progress in the holy life, and St. Thérèse is brilliant at reminding us of this, that each of us has an individual calling from God.

So, what we can get from St. Thérèse in this very short introduction to an absolutely brilliant way of living the spiritual life, is that she is reminding us that God is not necessarily asking us to do these huge, great sacrifices and actions for Him, but instead He's calling us to love. And that is all over scripture. God wants us to learn to love Him when we have our... we're elbow deep in dishes, and when we're typing at a keyboard at work, when we're changing diapers, and when we are helping our neighbor who is struggling with illness. Just, God wants us to

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choose to do things in love and offer them up to him. And that is one of the wonderful blessings of the little way, is every activity, everything we do can be offered to God for our sanctification, for the conversion of the world, and for us to progress in the spiritual life. I highly encourage you to look more into the life of St. Thérèse and her little way, because I truly believe that it can help all of us, especially in our busy lives and in the different seasons of our lives, to truly give everything that we have to God. And may God bless you throughout this advent season, and may St. Thérèse continue to pray and intercede for all of us. Thank you very much.