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The Little Flower at School

Memories of St. Thérèse Patroness of Missions, as a Pupil of the
Benedictine Nuns in Lisieux . . .

The First in a Series of Articles Written for *The Far East*

by One of Her Teachers

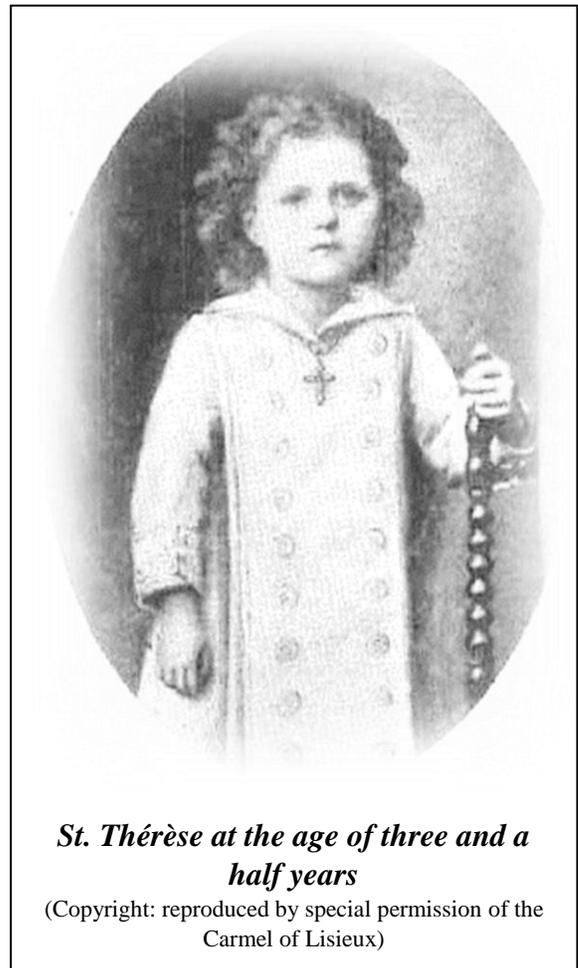
I

Thérèse Martin – St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, now known by the whole world, which loves, admires and invokes her with such confidence – entered the boarding school of the Abbey of Notre Dame du Pré as a day-boarder [a day student], when classes were resumed in October, 1881. She was then eight and a half years old.

She was not an entire stranger there, her sisters Léonie and Céline having come two years earlier. When feast days were being celebrated at the school – the feast day of Mother Prioress, for instance, or of Mother Directress, Prize Day, and so on, - little Thérèse would be invited. And how pleased the two older girls were to bring their beloved young sister, whose charming ways arrested attention immediately. Thus this little girl found an opportunity to become somewhat acquainted with her future teachers and companions; happily this was to help in simplifying her first steps in school life – naturally rather different from what the dear child, who was quite timid, had known in the bosom of her family at *Les Buissonets*.

First Impressions

At that age what a beautiful, winsome child our Thérèse was! A real little angel, with her long, fair, golden curls, framing such a sweet face; her pure brow, her clear eyes, her



*St. Thérèse at the age of three and a
half years*

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indescribable smile . . . With all that, a calmness – one might almost say, gravity – of manner was joined in her to a childlike grace, in perfect harmony.

This last note is very characteristic of Thérèse. It struck you at once, so much so that I, who now write these lines, find this first impression still remaining with me, though more than fifty years have since passed. It has only become stronger with the lapse of time, for, a senior pupil then, I was later on to be her teacher as a Benedictine nun . . . At home, moreover, was she not called “Little Queen”?

The Abbey School

But let us not anticipate. Is it not more fitting to give here a very brief account of the monastery of the Benedictines of Notre Dame du Pré and of their school? We shall then return to our illustrious pupil.

In the early years of the eleventh century, the Countess Lesceline, widow of Count William of Exmes, has the unfinished tassel of Epinay, begun by her husband, changed into a monastery. The church was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin in 1011. Some thirty years later the community, harassed by the people of a neighboring town, had to leave. The Countess brought them to the estate of St. Désir, which her relative Duke William of Normandy [William the Conqueror of England] rented to her.

We shall not follow the history of the abbey through the centuries. Let us say only this: that it was a shining center of piety, where life was lived in peace and joy of soul; where – as even now – the praise of God, the *Opus Dei*, was sung with fervor; where heart expanded in charity, under the rule of the great abbesses who followed one upon another up to the Revolution. When that terrible storm broke, the abbey was being governed by one of the most famous of these, Madame de Créqui. By her zeal and piety this wonderful woman succeeded in keeping the community together and it is thanks to her devotion and truly maternal care that it still exists. In 1808 the Sisters succeeded in restoring part of their monastery, in the greatest poverty . . .

Frequenting this hallowed cloister, saturated with age-old memories, was an experience that assuredly did not fail to impress Thérèse as a child. This mystic, inquisitive little soul, so fond of medieval tales and already dreaming of giving herself to God, must have been affected by the thought that so many holy nuns had lived in the shadow of these walls, to which, for her, some mystery clung. For there was mystery in this old cloister with its high vaulted roof, worn by time: in the long history that lost itself in the mist of ages. Then there was the spell of the great abbesses whose distinguished names she caught occasionally from the lips of her teachers: Madame de Matignon, Madame de Valanglart, Madame de Créqui . . .

But it is time to pass on and speak of the boarding school. The pupils did not usually come to the monastic section. They were allowed there only on certain occasions, all the more notable because they were rare.

From the very beginning the monastery was concerned with education.

For the early periods there are no records. It is only in 1686 that there is mention of a boarding school properly so called. Many young ladies of high rank were educated in the abbey during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Some details of the elaborate accessories that they brought to their boarding-school life would perhaps make us smile. It was the era of Louis XVI, of the curled and powdered coiffure, and the customs of the time were reflected in the school.

The Revolution did not keep the nuns from secretly continuing this work of education. Although dispersed, like so many others, they were able to assemble in little groups on the outskirts of Lisieux . . .

When the storm had passed, the Abbess and the Sisters bought back the monastery buildings, at the cost of immense sacrifice and re-opened the school.

The present building had been begun by Madame de Créqui in 1786. Thanks to the generosity of Louis XVI, of Queen Marie Antoinette and of Madame Elizabeth, the large structure with its imposing outline had risen pretty rapidly. Today the work interrupted by the Revolution remains unfinished.

One can see, however, from the photograph what a fine appearance the building has, though it is somewhat austere-looking. Within, there is nothing sombre, however. Air and sunlight stream in

through the many high windows opening out on the fields surrounding the monastery and on Mount Cassin, the pleasant hill which is its property.

Inside the School

On the ground floor are the rectory and the recreation room for wintertime, the portress' office and the cloak rooms, separated by a large carriage entrance. On the mezzanine floor are the parlors and the oratory of the Children of Mary; the latter, since the beatification of St. Thérèse, has become of oratory of her Souvenirs, which pilgrims are so fond of visiting.



Where the Little Flower went to school
The Abbey of Notre Dame Du Pré, on Rue Gustave David, Lisieux

On the second floor are the large classrooms where the professors had their classes, the office of the Directress and the small classrooms where the teaching Sisters gave special tuition; the music and drawing room. An amply proportioned corridor, at the end of which, in a large niche, a statue of the Blessed Virgin stands on a pedestal, gives access to these various rooms. How often little Thérèse knelt there to pray to her loving Mother!

On the third floor, running the whole length of the building, are the dormitories where the boarders' white beds are ranged in line.

The two playgrounds are extensive. In the center of one of them stands an immense chestnut-tree, surrounded by two rows of lime-trees, of which we shall have occasion to speak.



Study hall, Benedictine Abbey School, Lisieux

*Through the open door is seen the statue of the Blessed Virgin in the corridor.
When St. Thérèse studied here, the desks were arranged lengthways.*

Now, you know enough about the setting, so that we can place our Thérèse therein . . . Abbé Domin, our devoted chaplain and spiritual director of our children, said to me once: "In time to come you will surely be asked to tell about Thérèse. Remember that nothing will portray her, during her stay in

school, better than the violet. Quite hidden, as is this lowly flower of our woodlands, she breathes a fragrance like its own." And we have followed this advice, so full of truth.

Starting the Day

The day-boarders had to come between eight and half-past eight in the morning. [If they arrived] after that hour, they had to give what were called in the school *exemptions* [excuses]. Thérèse, as we shall see, took the greatest care to have good marks constantly, everywhere and in everything. Accordingly, she used to come at the proper time, with her sister Céline and her cousins, Jeanne and Marie Guérin. Such punctuality was meritorious enough for these pupils of ours, especially in winter, for from *Les Buissonets* to the Abbey, the Martin girls had to come a distance of nearly a mile (1,500 meters). True, the route is of the pleasantest in summertime: main streets, skirting the green meadows of the celebrated Auge valley; the public garden with

its fine walks fringed by chestnut-trees; the former residence of the bishops; then the Cathedral of St. Pierre. Close at hand now is M. Guérin's pharmacy; here the girls stop to take along their cousins, who are waiting, ready. Their way goes on through the most central street of the town; after crossing the Touques river by the Barre bridge, the schoolgirls take the long sidewalk which leads directly from the Church of St. Désir to the Abbey.

Some of the townspeople still pride themselves--for they do glory in it--on having seen little Thérèse passing by, gay and bright, her school satchel under her arm, walking between her father and sister. Who would have suspected that, within some forty years, the remains of this charming child would pass again through these same streets, in a triumphal car, drawn by white caparisoned horses, in a midst of a magnificent procession, before a crowd gripped by intense fervor. Has not God, ever wonderful in His saints, surpassed Himself, as it were, in our little Thérèse?

(I am referring here to the translation of the remains of the saint when she was still only Venerable, on March 26, 1923. In fact, through a very thoughtful courtesy of the ecclesiastical authorities, the car halted for a minute before the Abbey and thus came to touch the edge of the sidewalk so often trod by Thérèse. What a joy this was for the nuns who, because of the exceptional nature of the event, had permission to view the relics of their saintly pupil from behind their grilles!)

After school

But let us come back to our schoolgirls. The maid of the Guérin family, a trusted person who later on entered the religious life, accompanied the girls nearly always. Sometimes M Guérin himself came. Most often, M. Martin. The same held for their going home at six in the evening.

Reaching the cloakroom, Thérèse would hasten to ask the portress: "Is it Papa who is there this evening?" When the answer was affirmative, the child would quickly change from her uniform, catch up her coat and hat and run to throw herself in the arms of her dear Papa, whom she would embrace even before she had finished getting herself ready. He, on his part, on glimpsing her through the wicket, would say: "Let's start. Come quickly, little queen!" Such was the exquisite affection uniting father and child.

We have already described the exterior charms of little Thérèse. Now that she is one of our charges, we must acquaint ourselves more fully with this child of benediction, showing her inner personality, her character, her lovable qualities, the real virtues that she already possessed, and the first impression of the teaching Sisters and the pupils.

"Did You Guess . . . ?"

Thérèse Martin at eight and a half was true to her years; she was simple, naïve, frank. There was nothing studied about her; nothing extraordinary met the eye; above all, nothing that might make one guess that this lovable little youngster would be raised to the altars. Moreover, is it not very rare for the Church to canonize someone before fifty years have elapsed from his death?

This question is constantly repeated by pilgrims who seek interviews with us: “Did you suspect,” they say “that she would be canonized?”

And the reply is always the same. “Certainly not. That never entered our heads.” Neither her companions, nor her teachers, not even the worthy and very pious chaplain of the monastery, Abbé Domin, who had honor of preparing her for her First Communion and of being her spiritual director, guessed at the time to what a degree of heroic sanctity this “Little Spring Flower,” as winsome as she was retiring, was to rise.

We had her when she was a budding flower, and that in itself was a singular grace and a supreme honor. The complete unfolding was only to take place in the Carmel. Undoubtedly Providence permitted this obscuring of her greatness in order to shelter this young soul, admirably endowed with gifts of nature and grace, from the dangers of vanity and pride. If the future had been unveiled, everyone would assuredly have surrounded her with a due but perhaps dangerous veneration. How many times since then have we not said: “Ah, if we had known . . .” The Lord was watching over this treasure of His, and He kept her hidden in the secret of His Face.

Thérèse was perfectly obedient, meticulously faithful to the smallest details of the rules, taking alarm at even the appearance of a fault, going so far as to give the impression of scrupulosity.

St Thérèse, Schoolgirl

“I have never found her diverging from the line of duty; and even that is saying too little, for I could see in this child of scarcely nine years a watchfulness so strict and unrelenting that at first sight it appeared excessive.” So Mother Prioress deposed at the Process of Beatification. (Mother Prioress had entered the boarding school as a substitute teacher in January 1882. Thérèse had come only three months earlier). “I admired,” she stated again, “her faithful, prompt obedience to the signal of the bell and how strictly she kept silence, at a time when other less conscientious companions were inciting her, by their example, to disregard the rule.”

Let us hasten to add that Thérèse was not scrupulous at the time. This faithfulness to duty at such an early age had its origin in the high motives which were continually influencing this little soul, already so great in the eyes of God.

She was habitually calm, peaceful, and recollected--too much so for her years, it was thought. Sometimes a little shade of sadness would show itself on her features; she seemed preoccupied. This will surprise no one who has read *The Story of a Soul*. There we have seen that little Thérèse became acquainted with interior suffering very early.

We shall have occasion often to speak of the piety of our dear child. Her recollection in the chapel was admirable, but it had not the least trace of affectation.

The later parts of our account will complete this portrayal of the spiritual life of Thérèse, and we shall see the steady growth of her virtues. But we shall observe at the same time that this

dear child came and went among us without noise and without creating any stir, quite hidden, just as the Child Jesus, Whose Name she was to bear, came and went in Nazareth.

The Home Background

A few words about the home surroundings in which the Lord had placed Thérèse Martin will bring this first article of ours to a conclusion, and will show that this environment was in every way helpful to the workings of grace. Let us hear what a nun of the Abbey, one who as a young girl was welcomed in the family circle, has written on the subject.

“I beheld there was an unusual union of good qualities; piety that was both solid and tender; deep respect for parents and older members of the family; simplicity, openness, tactful charity without any pushing forward of self; and all this, united with gaiety and even playfulness, made life more pleasant than words can express. Prayers were said together, each one leading in turn. Then they stayed up to read from selected works, devotional or entertaining, and all retired in a spirit of recollection after wishing an affectionate good night to everybody.”

Passing from this nest of happiness to school life, Thérèse must, one fancies, experienced a sense of change. The training given by the Sisters, permeated by the Benedictine spirit, was very motherly, and it softened the initial hardships for the newcomer. Céline, moreover, was unremitting in her affectionate attention to her young sister.

“So Thérèse had no defects?” you may say to yourself after reading these pages. To that we will reply later.

(Editor’s Note: The second article in this series will appear next month.)

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