

St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Lessons for daily life

The Example of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

After the languid days of summer, the school year pounces like a roaring lion, ready to devour your time and energy. Seemingly overnight, your calendar is jammed and your days are structured from dawn to dusk and beyond. No matter how many organizational tips you employ or how hard you try to keep your act together, you can't help but feel frazzled as the demands of family, school, work and church proliferate.

That's when the example of a cloistered Carmelite nun can become a lifesaver.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux exemplifies an approach to life that focuses not on crossing things off a list, but on being fully present in each moment and making everything we do into a gift of love.

We can begin to emulate her – and find some respite from the complexity in our lives – by realizing, as she did, that we can accomplish only so much on our own. When we try to do everything ourselves, we become enmeshed in an ever-increasing workload. But when we allow God to give us guidance, and when we rely on his strength and wisdom, we can see our priorities more clearly and do what really needs to be done each day.

Thérèse's priorities weren't exactly the same as ours, since she was a cloistered nun and we live in families, but since her "little way" was rooted in a simple, although not simplistic, life, we can adapt it to our own circumstances.

LEARN TO LOVE YOUR LIMITATIONS. One of the things the "Little Flower" understood is that we all have limits on our time and our ability. Instead of fighting against her limits, she

learned to work with them. For instance, she often fell asleep during prayer, but instead of berating herself (after all, most nuns stay awake during prayer), she understood that just as a parent loves a child when they are napping, so, too, God loved her when she was tired and unable to keep going. When our “credit cards” of time and energy are maxed out, this could translate into politely declining when we are asked to chair a committee, provide six dozen cupcakes for a bake sale or take the 3 a.m. Perpetual Adoration shift “just this month.” It may mean that we serve frozen pizza for dinner and not feel guilty. It could even mean watching a video with a toddler instead of cleaning the kitchen! Ceasing to compare our accomplishments to others and eliminating things we know we just don’t have the time or energy to do automatically creates a simpler life.

In Her Words: “You know well enough that Our Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our actions, nor even at their difficulty, but at the love with which we do them.”

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT. A second thing Thérèse shows us is that we don’t need to do big things to have a big impact on our family life. She said that she scattered “the little flowers of sacrifice” throughout her day. We can do the same. Instead of trying to prove how much we care about our spouse and children by doing more, we can show it by focusing on each thing as we do it, employing what is called “mindfulness” in the Easter tradition. As we talk with a child about his homework, help another with the dishes or have a cup of coffee with our husband or wife, we are “there,” not racing ahead mentally, adding more things to our “must be done” list. As Thérèse herself observed, doing these “simple” things is often much more difficult than making great sweeping gestures.

In Her Words: “I only love simplicity.”

PUT PEOPLE FIRST. A third lesson from this modern French saint that can bring a sense of peace and simplicity to our lives is

to center on making the person, not the task, paramount. Thérèse offered to help a particularly grumpy elderly sister to the refectory each day. This sister constantly criticized Thérèse's efforts, but instead of racing through the task to get it over, Thérèse concentrated on making the sister herself feel loved. So what if you don't get all 132 things crossed off your list. Even if you only get one or two accomplished, when you remember that behind every task is a person waiting to feel loved, the pressure to do-do-do will automatically be eased.

In Her Words: "I've got to take myself just as I am, with all my imperfections; but somehow I shall have to find out a little way, all of my own, which will be a direct shortcut to heaven."

REMEMBER THAT WE ARE ON GOD'S TIME. Finally, in her short life (she died of tuberculosis at age 24), Thérèse tried to be another Jesus in all she did. Jesus never hurried or rushed, even though he had only three short years to accomplish his mission. He let the little children come to him, he chatted with an outcast woman at the well, he even went to parties and weddings! One of the reasons we feel that our lives have become too complicated is because we dash through our days instead of allowing them to unfold in God's will. When we act like Jesus, we will have all the time we really need.

St. Thérèse knew that there never will be enough time or energy to do everything. But she also knew that when we place our days into God's hands, we will have the resources we need to do everything we are supposed to be do. Using her "little way" as our guide, we can coax the raging lion of complications that arrives each school year into becoming a purring house cat of simplicity.