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MARY'S MISSION AT CHAMPION

BY FR. EDWARD LOONEY, S.T.L.

On the Monday following Pentecost Sunday, the Church celebrates a special feast day of Our Lady, Mother of the Church. From the very early days, as the mother of the Savior and entrusted to the care of St. John, the Blessed Virgin remained close to the early Church as the apostles carried out the mandate of Jesus to "Go and make disciples" (Mt 28:19). She persevered in prayer with them in those early days as they awaited the promised Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:13-14). Her prayer continued after the descent of the Spirit. As Thomas went to India and James to Spain, and all the apostles dispersed throughout the nations, Mary prayed for the success of their mission, because when they gained converts to the faith, people came to know her Son. His memory was carried on through their teaching and preaching. He became present in the Eucharistic celebrations when the apostles heeded the mandate to "do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19).

According to legend, when St. James became discouraged in his apostolic work and by the lack of converts, the Blessed Virgin, in what is called her first apparition but better described as a bilocation, appeared to St. James to encourage him and exhorted him not to give up. This event is remembered as Our Lady of the Pillar, and a shrine is contained within the cathedral of Zaragoza, Spain.

At the end of Mary's life, as taught by the dogma of the Assumption, she was taken body and soul into heaven. Now, from her place in heaven, she remains as our advocate and intercessor. As the mother of the Church, she prays for us sinners in the immediacy of this moment (now) and at the hour of death, so that we might be made worthy of the promises of Christ. Innumerable testimonies could be given by the faithful who have turned to her intercession and received from Almighty God the grace for which they asked. This is expressed in various cultures in different ways. Whether it is plaques on the wall given in thanksgiving for a grace received, or, in some cultures, little medals left as *milagros* offerings, story after story emphasizes the efficacy of Mary's intercession.

In the Diocese of Green Bay, this has taken on special meaning since 1859, when it is believed that the Queen of Heaven chose Adele Brice, a Belgian immigrant, to be the recipient of a message and a mission to convert souls and educate youth. Just as Mary intervened in the life of St. James—or at Tepeyac Hill (Guadalupe), La Salette, Lourdes, and Fatima—she came with a heavenly concern for the immigrant Church that was falling away from the faith. Through these apparitions, Mary has exercised her maternal care over the Church and her concern for the salvation of souls. And just as people have called upon her intercession in ages past, those prayers continue today at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion, which commemorates the three heavenly visits received by Adele, and where countless prayers have been answered, graces received, and alleged healings reported.

Mary's appearance at Champion is best understood not simply as a moment of private devotion, but as a continuation of her maternal involvement in the life of the Church. Just as she strengthened the apostles and encouraged the earliest missionaries, she likewise entrusted Adele with a mission directed toward the conversion of souls and the formation of faith. To appreciate the significance of Champion, it is necessary to examine the historical setting of the apparitions, the nature of Mary's message, and the faithful response of Adele, all of which offer insight for the Church's missionary calling today.

Adele's Early Formation

The person of Mary is often presented as a model and example for the people of God. We seek to imitate her in varied ways, such as her willing response to the angel or her service to Elizabeth. Mary's example inspires us, and parallels can be seen in our own lives, too.

A 2025 teaching from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, contained in *Mater Populi Fidelis*, says the Holy Spirit "prepared the heart of the young woman of Nazareth to respond at the Annunciation and throughout her life of communion with her Son."¹ For Mary, this preparation began at the moment of her conception, celebrated as the Immaculate Conception (on December 8), when God foresaw the merits of the cross and applied them to Mary at the very moment of her conception in the womb of St. Anne, sparing her from Original Sin. God prepared Mary for her role as mother of the Redeemer from the very beginning of her life. That preparation continued throughout her life, and as the liturgical feast of Mary's presentation in the temple on November 21 suggests, she was prepared by her time serving and learning in the temple from a young age until the time of her betrothal to St. Joseph. God the Father and the Holy Spirit prepared the Blessed Virgin for the moment of her *fiat*, her yes, to God at the Annunciation.

Just as Mary was prepared for her role in salvation history, Adele, the visionary of the Champion apparition, also was prepared from childhood onward for the special visitor she would receive and the mission she would be given. It is reported that from a young age, Adele was a devout child.² Surely her family had influence over her, but the grace of God was operative, too. When she was a young girl, on the occasion of her first Holy Communion, she and a few other friends had resolved to become missionaries and work in the foreign missions.³ As a young girl, she must have had a mature faith to resolve such a thing, something she would be reminded of when Mary would impart her message on October 9, 1859.

In the 1850s, the Brice family decided to immigrate to the United States, like so many of their neighbors and friends. This caused Adele some angst because of her childhood promise. Interestingly, at this time she was in her early 20s and had not yet entered a convent. As her parents prepared for the oceanic voyage, Adele sought out a trusted priest and asked for counsel: should she go to America or stay and become a religious?⁴ The priest advised her to go with her family and allow God's plan to unfold in America.⁴ Adele's discernment and obedience to her spiritual director continued to allow the story of the Champion apparition to unfold and take shape as we know it today.

In these two simple life experiences, it can be seen how God prepared Adele and her heart for the 1859 apparition. Her devotion and love of God from childhood would guide her during those early days in Wisconsin, when some immigrants had fallen out of the practice of their faith.⁵ Her willingness to discern, bringing questions to prayer and seeking the direction of a priest, paved the way for her to immigrate with her family and to allow God's will to be known in the years to come. Adele's life story inspires the missionary church today to know that the immediate moment may seem uncertain, but God has a long game, and in time, one will understand his will, purposes, and designs.

¹*Mater Populi Fidelis*, 15. ²Sr. Dominica Shallow, *Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help (now Champion), A History*, 2014:17. Hereafter, *Shrine History*. ³*Shrine History*, 22-23. ⁴*Shrine History*, 16-17. ⁵*Shrine History*, 14-15.

God prepared Mary for her mission, and Adele too. He also prepared and equipped each Christian believer for mission. Certainly, this is evident in chosen souls who have a great love for God, but it is true for every person. God prepares individual souls through Baptism, infusing within them the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Each Baptism fulfills the call of Jesus to go and baptize. Then, each of the baptized must respond by being formed and becoming a disciple. God has called you and has prepared you for the mission of evangelization. Like Mary and Adele, will you give your yes to this call of Christ and the Church today?

The Message for Adele and Its Meaning

God's work of preparing Adele for the apparitions would continue even after the Queen of Heaven imparted her message. Adele was properly disposed from childhood to the autumn of 1859 for the mysterious woman who appeared twice before giving a message at the third apparition. At the age of 28, this farm woman, assisting her family's work on an autumn day in early October, was carrying a sack of wheat to the local grist mill when, along the trail she walked, a woman appeared. The woman said nothing and quickly vanished. As any person would be, Adele was startled by the experience. Think also of Mary, to whom the angel said, "Do not be afraid" (Lk 1:30). It is not every day someone sees a person for a moment, only to have the person disappear the next moment. According to the historical account, Adele informed her family that evening of what had happened,⁶ to which the Catholic ethos of the family suggested it was a poor soul from Purgatory.

The following Sunday, Adele sought to fulfill her Sunday obligation by walking the trail once again, now to the parish church. As she approached the spot where she had seen the woman before, between the maple and hemlock trees, the woman appeared again. This time, Adele was not alone but had two companions, neither of whom saw the woman. Like before, the woman vanished, and following Mass, Adele brought the situation to the priest for advice. He counseled her that if she saw the woman again, she should ask her, "In God's name, who are you and what do you want of me?"⁷

It would not be long, because on the path home that day, in the same spot, the Virgin appeared, and when asked the question, she responded, "I am the Queen of Heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners, and I wish you to do the same." The message went on, "You received Holy Communion this morning, and that is well, but you must do more. Make a general confession, and offer your Holy Communion for the conversion of sinners."⁸ The opening remarks of the Queen of Heaven told us who she is, what she does in heaven, and what Adele must do. Mary prays for the conversion of sinners, and now Adele has been asked to do likewise. And not only was she to offer a simple petition, but to join it to her Holy Communion, and to be converted herself by confessing her sins.

The next statement from Mary bewildered Adele: "What are you doing here in idleness while your companions are working in the vineyard of my Son?" This question hearkened back to that First Communion and the promise she and her friends had made. Adele had not yet made good on that promise, and Our Lady now was bringing that to her attention. Adele responded, "What more can I do, dear Lady?" Mary replied, "Gather the children in this wild country and teach them what they should know for salvation." Adele did not feel qualified for the task at hand because she responded, "But how shall I teach them who know so little myself?" The final instructions Mary gave Adele were to teach them the catechism and what they needed to know for salvation, how to make the Sign of the Cross, and how to approach the sacraments.⁹

⁶Shrine History, 19-20. ⁷Shrine History, 20. ⁸Shrine History, 21. ⁹Shrine History, 21.

Mary appeared three times in Champion. In other places, she appeared more frequently: a little more than half a dozen times in Fatima, 18 times in Lourdes, 33 times in Beaurailing, and in other modern apparitions, hundreds—if not thousands—of times. The message to Adele was brief but profound. The apparition seemed more personal, meaning it was a message for Adele, giving her a mission of prayer and catechesis and offering her a vocational path. Today, the message to Adele is celebrated and remembered by Catholics who visit the Champion shrine. The message and mission to Adele becomes their own. A personal apparition now gives purpose to Christians in carrying out the mission of the Church, and from the message, Our Lady's mission of converting sinners.

Mary identified herself as the Queen of Heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners, and she invited Adele to share in that mission: "And I wish you to do the same." The first part of Mary's message was spiritual. The second part of the message was an active missionary work of catechizing children. Mary prepared Adele for her active mission by first inviting her into prayer. By praying for the conversion of sinners, she would already be praying for those whom she would catechize and convert. Additionally, Mary encouraged Adele in her reception of Holy Communion and to make a general confession. Adele turned to the sacraments and the grace offered by them before carrying out the second request of Our Lady to teach.

Another element of the message was Mary's question, "Why are you standing here in idleness while your companions are working in the vineyard of my Son?" This question sorrowed Adele as it was a reminder of her promise at her First Holy Communion. Adele did not have the opportunity yet to carry out that promise of becoming a religious. It is an interesting situation. She immigrated to the United States in her mid-20s. Typical of the 1850s would have been to enter religious life while still in her teens. What was the cause of her delay? What Our Lady tells Adele is that her companions, her friends from the day of First Communion, were already working in the vineyard of the Lord. Mary's question recalls Adele's past while moving her from idleness to action to mission. Similarly, after some personal reflection, we can probably identify moments when we have been idle or even failed to take action. Lethargy can overcome a person, causing idleness. We might delay because there is always tomorrow. There is a lack of urgency. When we recognize that idleness has occurred, it is important to repent of the past and take steps to move out of it with courage and action.

Finally, Adele's response to Our Lady, when told to gather the children and teach them, was, "What am I to teach them, for I know so little myself?" Adele did not believe she was qualified to do what Our Lady had asked. She had a very meager education, and she had a childhood accident with lye, leaving her face disfigured and without the use of an eye.¹⁰ Despite her education or appearance, heaven chose Adele for a special mission. Even if she did not feel qualified, Our Lady's invitation tells Adele that if she is willing, she is capable. Heaven had a plan that required her cooperation. Like Adele, we may not feel qualified to evangelize. By our Baptism, we are. And like Adele, it begins first with our spiritual preparation, prayer, and participation in the sacraments, followed by action. The mission given to Adele in 1859 continues today.

The Mission Today

The word "go" is important in the missionary life of the Church. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he said to his apostles, "Go and make disciples" (Mt 28:19). They were to go out to all the parts of the world and bring his teachings to them.

¹⁰Shrine History, 17.

At the end of Mass, the deacon or priest dismisses the people, saying, "Go forth, the Mass has ended," or in some other variation, e.g., "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life" or "... announcing the Gospel." The Church is sent and mobilized at every Mass. After receiving Holy Communion and being strengthened for their journey, the people of God are sent back into the world to bring the Good News to all they meet.

At the conclusion of the third apparition, Mary told Adele, "Go and fear nothing, for I will help you." Like the apostles and all of us, Adele was being sent. This apparition received by Adele, mentioned earlier, seems to have been of a more personal nature, as it first spoke to Adele of her personal life and then gave her a mission to carry out. She gathered the children and taught them. Other apparitions have a more global message, like Fatima and its call to pray the Rosary for peace in the world. This apparition had a specific mission and purpose for the seer, allowing her to respond to God's call in her life. Yet the message and mission given to Adele are given to a new generation. Mary spoke to Adele, but she speaks to all her devotees and pilgrims, inviting them to live the same message and mission. Adele's mission becomes today's mission, echoing the missionary mandate of Matthew 28: "Go and make disciples."

Adele and her family immigrated from Belgium. During this time of American history, as a wave of European immigration was taking place, immigrants faced challenges such as acquiring land, finding work, and, spiritually, remaining faithful to their religious practices. One parish priest, Fr. John C. Perrodin, wrote a letter to another priest in Europe, which indicated the spiritual challenges of the Belgian immigrants: "They end up neglecting their duties of religion and live as unbelievers. The children are not instructed and grow up without knowing God ... Would there be any priests in Belgium zealous enough to accompany their flocks?"¹¹ Fr. Perrodin also stated that the acquisition of land was often distant from a church, making religious practice more difficult. This seems to be testified by Adele, who walked miles along that wooded trail to Mass.

In the history of Marian apparitions, Our Lady appears in a place for a reason. In this case, it appears evident that it was to renew the faith of the Belgian immigrant community. Could it be that Our Lady appeared to a Belgian immigrant so that she could bring the faith into the homes of those who had become distant? The 2010 approval of the apparitions elevated their story and profile. What Fr. Perrodin wrote in the 1850s seems appropriate for the current time of the Church: children grow up not knowing God. The influx of adult Baptisms reflects a period of faith development in which parents left their child or children unbaptized, allowing them to choose a faith tradition later in life. There is a generation of individuals who consider themselves "nones," meaning they have no religious affiliation. The message and mission given to Adele are as pertinent today as they were when first given to her by the Queen of Heaven.

In this springtime of evangelization and period of missionary discipleship, all the members of the Church are called to participate in Our Lady's mission of converting souls and discipling people. Whether you are clergy, consecrated, or lay, each person has a mission field that is ready for the harvest. The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few (cf. Mt 9:37). This passage, often associated with vocation recruitment, could also apply to each of us. The laborers willing to engage in evangelization are few, because many feel like Adele, unqualified for the work. By God's grace and the prayers of Mary, you are able and capable of living out Adele's mission.

¹¹Shrine History, 14.

Adele was told to first pray for the conversion of sinners. We are all sinners. When we pray for the conversion of sinners, we first pray for our own conversion. When we spend time in prayer, especially before the Blessed Sacrament, the Lord's working on our heart leads us to a change of heart or mind, and to a deeper conformity to Christ. We begin to sense the gentle nudges of God, who invites us to leave sin behind and to follow him more closely. This process of personal conversion leads to following Mary's request of Adele to make a general confession. When we become more aware of our sinfulness, it leads us to the confessional, where we confess our sins and leave the weight of the past at the foot of the cross. To be an effective evangelizer, one must witness and believe that one's life has been touched by the One in whom one believes. As Pope St. Paul VI once wrote, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."¹²

Secondly, Our Lady's key to evangelization was to pray for the conversion of sinners. This was requested through the offering of Adele's Holy Communion for that intention. How do you pray after you receive Holy Communion? You might pray a prayer written by a saint from centuries ago, like St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Bonaventure, or you might pray from your heart a prayer of gratitude or petition, as you realize how close Jesus is to you in that moment of communion you share with him. In response to the request of Our Lady to Adele, consider making a special prayer for the conversion of sinners.¹³ This might be a group of people or an individual. Your prayer for them will be powerful. One of the most common prayer requests of individuals is for the conversion of those away from the Church.¹⁴ They pray for their sons or daughters who no longer go to Mass. For a child in an irregular marriage or who is entrenched in a sinful lifestyle. You might pray for the conversion of politicians or a coworker whose behavior unsettles you. There are people around us whose conversions we can pray for, and pray we must before engaging in catechesis and evangelization. Additionally, Our Lady stated in her message to Adele that "If they do not convert and do penance, my Son will be obliged to punish them." Once the conversion we pray for takes place, the requisite penance needs to be done for our past sins.

Third, Our Lady told Adele to gather the children and teach them what they need to know for salvation, their catechism, how to make the Sign of the Cross, and how to approach the sacraments. It might be easy to reduce Our Lady's message to, "I need to be a catechist." Still, as St. Paul reminds us, each person has a special charism (cf. Eph 4:11-12), and being a catechist may not be your gift, or the availability of time might prevent you.

¹²*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

¹³I penned a prayer for this purpose, which many have found helpful to teach the language of prayer: Eternal Father, I kneel before you this day with a grateful heart because you have allowed me to receive the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus in Holy Communion.

Thank you for sending the Queen of Heaven to Earth with a message calling us to conversion and emphasizing the sacraments. For when she appeared to Adele Brice in 1859, she asked her to offer her Holy Communion for the conversion of sinners. Just as Adele did long ago, I wish to do likewise this day.

I offer to you, Eternal Father, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of your Son, for the conversion of sinners, including my own conversion, in reparation for sin, and the salvation of souls. Through Our Lady's maternal solitude, may the hearts of hardened sinners return to the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist, especially to Sunday Mass, and to daily prayer.

As I go forward from this Holy Mass, help me to fear nothing, knowing that you are with me and are always guiding me and that Our Lady constantly intercedes for me. Make me aware of your presence this day and always. Amen.

¹⁴In my book, *Our Lady of Champion: Prayer Book for Pilgrims* (Tan Books, 2025), 209-217, I include a nine-day novena of praying for the conversions of different groups of people.

You have a mission field, and evangelizing and laboring for conversion will look different for each person. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you when you should teach or evangelize. By praying to be ready, you will know when you should share your faith or admonish the sinner. If you hear the name of God taken in vain, offer a private prayer of reparation such as, "Jesus, have mercy." And if the moment is right, invite that person to a greater respect for God's name. In an apparition of Mary dating back to the 1600s in Laus, France, the seer, Benoîte Rencurel, was told by Our Lady to tell a bystander, "Tell her not to curse with the name of Jesus, because if she keeps it up, there will be no paradise for her. Her conscience is in a very bad state; she should do penance." As laborers in the Lord's vineyard, our role is to invite people to a change of heart and life. As you become more attentive to the need for conversion around you, the moments to invite will become clearer. Your home and workplace, the gym or grocery store, and anywhere else are your mission field.

Mary Will Help You!

Our Lady promised help to Adele. "Go and fear nothing, I will help you." Fear befalls all of us. But we have nothing to fear, God is with us, and Our Lady is praying for us. After the apparition, Adele fearlessly went home and shared what had happened and what she had been told. In response, her father, Lambert Brice, built a chapel commemorating the apparitions.¹⁵ Adele responded to Our Lady's invitation by traveling the peninsula and knocking on the doors of strangers, requesting to teach their children.¹⁶ She took her invitation seriously. Later, she founded a tertiary group of sisters and established a school. She dedicated her whole life to fulfilling what Our Lady asked of her.¹⁷

Adele knew Mary's help the night of October 8, 1871, at age 40,¹⁸ when the Peshtigo Fire ravaged the area, and people converged on the chapel, praying the Rosary and processing around the grounds. The fire passed over the property, sparing the lives of all present.¹⁹ Mary came to the help of Adele in times of financial distress, when unsure where the next meal would come from. God provided through the generosity of others. Adele prayed her Hail Marys and sang her hymns in honor of the Blessed Virgin.²⁰ She experienced the help of her Heavenly Queen and intercessor.

Today, the Church relies on the prayers of Mary. The need for conversion is still ever-present in the world today. As she identified herself as the Queen of Heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners, we know she intercedes for all of us before the throne of her Son. Mary has invited us into her mission of prayer for the conversion of sinners, and she exhorts us today as she did Adele on that fateful day in 1859. The desire of Mary is that all people would know the love of her Son, Jesus, who died on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. She wants all God's children to receive their heavenly inheritance. Let us cooperate with her in this work by praying and laboring for the conversion of sinners, knowing that she is helping us at every moment along the way. *Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.*

Further Reading

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- Looney, Edward. "Called to Evangelize: The Story of Adele Brise and the Mariophany that Changed her Life," *Marian Studies* 62, 119-138.
- Looney, Edward. "Adele Brise: A Student in the School of Our Lady." *Chicago Studies* 55 (2016): 89-100.

¹⁵Shrine History, 21-22. ¹⁶Shrine History, 23-25. ¹⁷Shrine History, 25-28. ¹⁸Note that this date is the eve of the 12th anniversary of the apparition. ¹⁹Shrine History, 30-33. ²⁰Sr. Pauline recounted: "As a young girl, I knelt in the clear little Chapel and sang with Adele her favorite hymn in French, *Chantons le nom admirable de la Reine des Cieux*." Shrine History, 22.

ST. FRANCIS XAVIER: A SAINT FOR OUR TIMES

PATRON OF THE DIOCESE OF GREEN BAY

BY FR. MICHAEL W. MAHER, S.J.

Introduction and Purpose

Throughout the Diocese of Green Bay, you will find statues of a tall, bearded man, usually holding a crucifix, gazing to heaven, and perhaps covered with dust. The statue represents St. Francis Xavier, patron of the Diocese of Green Bay and, along with St. Thérèse of Lisieux, co-patron of the missionary work of the Catholic Church. The purpose of this essay is to dust off the statue, bring St. Francis Xavier to life, and by doing so, identify how a man of Basque heritage born in the early 16th century in the eastern part of Spain became one of the most famous missionaries of the Catholic faith and then later, the patron of the Diocese of Green Bay. And perhaps, despite being born over 500 years ago, by learning more about his life, he may still have something to say to us today.

Why Saints and Models Matter

Every society lifts up models—men and women whose lives embody its deepest values. We often call them heroes. The Catholic Church, as a society of faith, raises up saints: people whose lives manifest extraordinary holiness in ways the rest of us can imitate. Canonization is the Church's careful process of recognizing such models so that the faithful have safe and reliable guides for living the Gospel. St. Francis Xavier is one of these guides. Although he lived over five centuries ago, the truths he served are timeless, and his example remains instructive for our own time. So, to understand how St. Francis Xavier may be a model for us today, we need to get to know the man. And the search for that knowledge takes us back centuries, to a castle in eastern Spain. This investigation into the life of St. Francis Xavier may provide an opportunity to examine who we have identified as our "saints" and "heroes." Remember that a saint or a hero embodies both the means to a value and the value itself. Show me your heroes and your saints, and I will understand your values.

Historical Setting

St. Francis Xavier (born April 7, 1506) came from a prominent Navarrese family rooted in the castle near the village of Javier, east of Pamplona. His youth unfolded amid Europe's move toward centralized monarchies and expanding global horizons. Spain's consolidation under Ferdinand and Isabella eventually absorbed Navarre (1515), triggering conflicts like the Battle of Pamplona (1521), where a cannonball shattered the leg of St. Ignatius of Loyola—a wound that would reshape the future of Catholic spirituality and, indirectly, St. Francis Xavier's life.

Aspiring to success through learning, St. Francis Xavier left home for Paris in 1525. The University of Paris trained students to think, remember, and communicate with precision—often without textbooks—by articulating main ideas, supporting reasons, and evidence. Instruction occurred in Latin, the scholarly *lingua franca*, and featured rigorous engagement with Aristotle. This formation honed St. Francis Xavier's memory, argumentation, and cross-cultural communication—skills crucial for his future missionary work.

St. Ignatius of Loyola: Conversion and the *Spiritual Exercises*

St. Ignatius, a noble courtier whose leg was shattered at Pamplona, experienced a profound conversion while convalescing, reading "Life of Christ" and of lives of the saints.

He discerned that thoughts of worldly glory left him restless, while meditating on Christ drew enduring peace and purpose. From this insight, he developed the *Spiritual Exercises*, a practical school of prayer and discernment designed to help men and women recognize how God moves them toward union with him, and to choose creatures only insofar as they lead to God. Although there are many excellent commentaries on the *Exercises*, we can turn to St. Ignatius himself and see how he described them.

According to St. Ignatius, the *Spiritual Exercises* were a means by which the person making them would come to a knowledge of the love of God and identify those things that moved him or her towards God or away from God. Within the *Exercises*, he wrote a short paragraph which he referred to as the First Principle and Foundation. Now, when somebody identifies something as first, a principle, and a foundation, you can presume it is important. This First Principle identified the basic direction of every human person and the means to attain that direction, and so it is no surprise that St. Ignatius considered it important.

According to the First Principle, men and women are created by God and are to live in that same love and act considering this relationship so that they will be happy in this life, but more importantly, enjoy eternal happiness in the next. For St. Ignatius, the goal or fundamental value was clear: union with God. The means to attain this goal, St. Ignatius identified as the correct use of creation, that is, the world around us. To achieve our goal, St. Ignatius held that we need to make choices concerning the world and human relationships. Those choices need to be made considering how they either take us towards or away from God. Therefore, St. Ignatius stated, our project in life is to make good choices, a good choice being a decision insofar as it takes us closer to God. The process that men and women go through to make a good choice, considering various options, St. Ignatius referred to as discernment.

Now we need to recall the times of St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier. This was a time of tremendous change caused by new information, technology, and exploration. Previously, people could refer to lists or manuals as to what was right or wrong, but now, with the explosion of information, these manuals were out of date more quickly than when they were published. St. Ignatius realized that the anchor for good decision-making was not in memorizing lists, but in grounding oneself in a love of Jesus, and that the more one grew in that love, the better one would make decisions about oneself and others. However, St. Ignatius realized that we cannot make good decisions unless we understand creation. The First Principle and Foundation then presents two challenges. The first is the recognition that our purpose in life is union with God and that we need to grow in love and knowledge of that same loving God. The second is that we need to understand creation and its various potentials and actions so that by knowing creation, we can make better decisions about how to grow in a love of God and help others grow in that same love. This second challenge was particularly important for Jesuits, like St. Francis Xavier, who were in foreign cultures because this First Principle encouraged them to get to know the world in which they lived so they could evangelize in a manner that would be understood by others.

From Paris to the Society of Jesus

Arriving in Paris in 1528, St. Ignatius resumed studies alongside younger students, befriending Pierre Favre and St. Francis Xavier. St. Ignatius chose education as a perfecting human talent to help others come to a knowledge of God. But first and foremost, he saw that all decisions had to be aligned with a knowledge and love of God and a desire to serve that same God.

St. Ignatius, literally exploding with the idea that one's life is better if it is aligned with Jesus, shared the insights of his *Spiritual Exercises* with his two roommates. St. Francis Xavier and Favre caught the fire in St. Ignatius' heart, and they became adherents to the idea that promoting the goal of the *Exercises* could give themselves and others a direction in life that would fill their deepest desires. St. Ignatius gave these *Exercises* to other students, and soon a group of six young men led by St. Ignatius became known as "friends in the Lord."

On August 15, 1534, they vowed poverty and chastity and placed themselves at the disposal of the Church under the Roman pontiff. After their ordinations and service in Venice, they sought papal approval as a body. On September 27, 1540, Pope Paul III approved the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), mission-ready to serve "wherever the need is greater."

A Missionary Vocation: "You Go Instead."

When the King of Portugal requested Jesuits for missions spanning India, Japan, and beyond, St. Ignatius designated two men to depart with the ambassador's entourage. On the eve of departure, one fell ill. Turning to St. Francis Xavier, St. Ignatius said, "You go instead." St. Francis Xavier embraced the call. He left Rome in March 1540 for Lisbon, sailed on his 35th birthday (April 7, 1541), and reached Goa in May 1542 after arduous travel through Mozambique.

What occurred prior to March 1540, when he departed Rome for Lisbon, provided tremendous preparation for his future work in India and East Asia. Looking back at that formation, we can see that he was formed in a deep love of the person of Jesus, thanks to the *Spiritual Exercises*. His formation also included an education that enabled him to use human wisdom in support of the Catholic faith. It was a new beginning for St. Francis Xavier, but one with a firm foundation, and we can look to that formation as the principal cause of his success.

In mid-March 1540, the Portuguese ambassador to the Holy See left Rome for Lisbon, and among the group was St. Francis Xavier. In his letters, he wrote soon after his departure that he doubted he would ever see his companions in this life. His departure was not an easy one, and no doubt he looked back to his student years and the companionship of St. Ignatius and his followers with some sense of loss. The formation he received from St. Ignatius and his schooling encouraged him to move beyond his fond memories and begin a career that would inspire men and women seeking to bring others to the heart of Christ in distant lands.

St. Francis Xavier arrived in Lisbon and set immediately to work learning Portuguese, the common language of merchants in India and Asia. In addition, he practiced his Portuguese in preaching and hearing confessions, and bringing the Word of God and the sacraments of the Church to the people of Lisbon. On April 7, 1541, his 35th birthday, St. Francis Xavier sailed out of the harbor of Lisbon, looking back on a city, country, and way of life that he would never see again. What perhaps lifted his heart and excited his spirit was the idea that he was missioned with the task of bringing to others what he loved most, a knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. Perhaps that same sense of adventure, not seen since he was a 19-year-old leaving for college, was rekindled again in his soul.

Travel was risky business, and what we consider inconveniences in travel are a mere insignificance of what occurred on boats that traveled from one continent to another.

Food shortages, sea sickness, cramped quarters, and endless weeks caught in a windless ocean while being baked by the sun were a few of the trials endured by anyone making a sea voyage in the 16th century. Almost half the ships never saw their destinations. Travel then was not for someone who lacked resolve and courage.

In Goa, St. Francis Xavier preached, heard confessions, and drafted a simple catechism to ground evangelization in essentials. On India's Fishery Coast, he catechized newly baptized communities, prioritizing the formation of children, learning local languages, and collaborating with lay interpreters. His letters, over a hundred in all, served as early missionary reports, stirring Europe with vivid accounts of faraway cultures and the urgent need for workers in the harvest.

St. Francis Xavier's work in India provided him with a challenging mix of administrative duties and evangelization. At times, St. Francis Xavier could be heard on the shore preaching with his limited knowledge of the Tamil language, and at other times, he carried out administrative duties from his desk. In spreading the faith, St. Francis Xavier quickly realized that devotion and fervor had to be channeled with organization and commitment. However, what came through the loudest in his letters was an unwavering belief that bringing souls to Christ and helping these same souls understand and live as Christians was the singular goal that focused all his efforts. In a famous letter written on January 15, 1544, we hear both his frustration with those who did not understand this fundamental task and the challenge he presented to those who lived and studied in Paris. In a letter meant to be read by Jesuits throughout Europe, he stated the following:

"Many fail to become Christians in these regions because they have no one who is concerned with such pious and holy matters. Many times I am seized with the thought of going to the schools in your lands and of crying out there, like a man who has lost his mind, and especially at the University of Paris, telling those in the Sorbonne who have a greater regard for learning than desire to prepare themselves to produce fruit with it: 'How many souls fail to go to glory and go instead to hell because of their neglect?'"

In this letter, St. Francis Xavier identifies the need for missionaries, but he also calls attention to the fundamental purpose of human action. In this, he echoed St. Ignatius' First Principle and Foundation: We are made by God, for God, and that we view creation insofar as it will either help us or keep us from union with that same loving God. This was the fundamental mission of each Jesuit and each Christian. St. Francis Xavier realized that his job was to imitate Christ, who came to reconcile men and women to God the Father, and the education needed to support this fundamental relationship.

These letters had an explosive effect on Catholics living in Europe and were read with some envy by others. The only way we can truly understand their impact is to imagine we are reading reports from a civilization on a different planet. In the past, people read stories about fantastic lands and exotic creations, based more on imagination than fact. Now, accurate information about distant lands informed and amazed those who heard and read the descriptions from India and East Asia. St. Francis Xavier's 16th-century letters were the equivalent of a 21st-century podcast or social media. These letters also helped reshape people's image of the world and of those who lived in it. It is no wonder that the letters were quickly translated into various languages and read throughout Europe. St. Francis Xavier, even when he was living, became a great hero of Christian missionaries.

For your reflection: "How many souls fail to reach glory and go instead to perdition for lack of laborers?" -St. Francis Xavier, Letter of January 15, 1544

Japan: Language, Culture, and Adaptation

St. Francis Xavier entered Japan in 1549 with his interpreter, Paul of the Holy Faith, the first Japanese Christian. There he learned two enduring lessons: first, serious evangelization demands learning the local language; second, the Gospel's unchanging truths must be presented in culturally intelligible ways. He quickly realized that in a sophisticated country such as Japan, learning the language and the culture and customs it expressed was a crucial step in evangelization. Just as he had learned Latin in Paris, St. Francis Xavier now had to learn another language so that his ideas could be expressed in a way others could understand. The second important idea was that understanding culture and how similar values can be expressed in different ways convinced him that he had to modify his approach. This did not mean that he had to change the truths of the Catholic faith; rather, that these truths had to be presented in a manner that could be understood. In Japan, humility in dress signaled insignificance, so St. Francis Xavier adopted dignified attire to gain a hearing, echoing St. Paul's willingness to become "all things to all" (1 Cor 9:22) without compromising the essentials of faith.

China and Xavier's Final Hope

Recognizing China's cultural primacy in East Asia, St. Francis Xavier judged that a Christian foothold there would radiate across the region. In 1552, he reached the traders' island of Sancian, off the Chinese coast, hoping to gain entry to the mainland. He fell ill and died there on December 3, 1552, gazing toward a land he never entered but whose future evangelization would draw strength from his vision and sacrifice. His body now rests in Goa. He no doubt looked down from heaven with great approval at those Jesuits and their converts who rescued the dream he voiced in his dying breath, working to spread the Catholic faith in China. And no doubt the many Jesuits and their flock who suffered martyrdom and imprisonment under the Communist regime took inspiration from a man who saw sufferings as insignificant in the face of the effort of bringing souls to Christ. For current Catholics suffering under any number of repressive regimes, the stories of St. Francis Xavier's heroism and dedication continue to inspire. And like St. Francis Xavier, they wisely weigh temporal sufferings against the benefits of eternal life. Thanks to his letters, his name became so intertwined with the Catholic missions that any description of missionary life saw itself referencing the letters and the life of St. Francis Xavier.

Mission Principles: Love, Church, and Cultural Respect

St. Francis Xavier's experience crystallized principles foundational to Catholic missions: (1) a deep love of Jesus nourished by prayer, as missionaries cannot give what they do not possess; (2) living the faith in union with the Church's sacramental life and teaching; and (3) presenting the faith in ways that make sense within local cultures, adapting methods without altering essentials. St. Francis Xavier realized that he needed to adapt his presentation, not the essentials, and this recognition of adaptation became one of the hallmarks of sound missionary theory.

This approach was later affirmed in a 1659 instruction of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*): "Do not seek to change their rites, customs, or usages, unless they are manifestly contrary to religion and morality. What could be more absurd than to carry France, Spain, or Italy to the Chinese? Bring them not our countries, but the Faith, which neither rejects nor harms their rites and usages—provided they are not evil—but rather preserves and protects them."

From Xavier to Green Bay: A Local Legacy

Jesuit missionaries in the Great Lakes region—names like Marquette, Allouez, and Ménard—carried St. Francis Xavier’s missionary spirit to Indigenous communities, laying the foundations for the Church along the St. Lawrence Seaway and in what is now Wisconsin. It is fitting that the Diocese of Green Bay honors St. Francis Xavier as its patron: his singleness of purpose, intellectual preparation, pastoral zeal, and cultural attentiveness remain models for evangelization and discipleship today. The Society of Jesus supports curricula that emphasize Ignatian principles, such as *Christ Our Life* and *Finding God*, both published by Loyola Press and in conformity with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ approach to evangelizing catechesis.

Practical Applications for Evangelization Today

- Center everything on a personal love of Jesus Christ (prayer, Scripture, sacraments)
- Form missionary disciples intellectually, affectively and behaviorally: teach essentials clearly, use concise catechesis, carry out acts of service
- Learn the “language” of those we serve, literally and culturally (stories, symbols, values)
- Collaborate with lay leaders and youth and empower local evangelizers and support them with strong Ignatian principles of prayer, discernment and formation
- Adapt methods without diluting doctrine and remove cultural rather than theological obstacles
- Engage children and adults with an Ignatian pedagogy through formation, resources, and curriculum such as *Christ Our Life* and *Finding God*, published by Loyola Press, an official publishing ministry of the Society of Jesus, whose aim is to provide transformative encounters with Jesus Christ through the spirit of St. Ignatius of Loyola
- Communicate urgently yet charitably about the need for laborers in the mission field
- Provide formation regarding discernment and the “apostolic preferences” of the Society of Jesus, which include accompanying lay leaders and forming youth and young adults

Reflection Questions

- Who are your saints and heroes today, and what values do they model?
- Where do you sense God inviting you, through small inner movements, to greater service?
- What cultural “languages” in our communities need to be learned to share the Gospel effectively?
- How can our parishes better form children and young people as missionary disciples?
- What Ignatian principles can be incorporated into our outreach to youth, young adults and families in particular?

For Further Reading

- Francis Xavier, *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, trans. and ed. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (St. Louis, 1992).
- Georg Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times*, 3 vols.
- James Brodrick, *St. Francis Xavier*.

ST. THÉRÈSE: PATRONESS OF THE MISSIONS

BY FR. MICHAEL-JOSEPH PARIS, O.C.D.

Between November 15-18, 2025, over 20,000 people came to an out-of-the-way church in Hubertus, Wisconsin, to venerate the relics of a young woman who lived in the 19th century in a small town in France, cloistered in an obscure Carmelite convent, and who died at the age of just 24. What would compel so many people to make the long trek to the Basilica of Holy Hill—during particularly blustery November days, at times waiting in line for over two hours—to encounter the relics of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face?

St. Thérèse, largely unknown in her lifetime—even by many in her convent—allowed herself to be so completely transformed by divine love that she has become a missionary of that love to all who encounter her, even after her death. Her missionary power did not arise from activity, travel, or public preaching, but from a life wholly surrendered to God. St. Thérèse hoped, against all hope, that her love for Jesus would endure beyond the grave and be of benefit to the Church she loved so deeply—to future generations who, like her, would need the quiet balm of confidence to light their way along the path God had set before them. Moments like the visit of her relics allow us to glimpse what the Church celebrates at every Eucharist: heaven touching earth, Christ drawing his people into communion with himself so that his love may be carried into the world.

Her entire life gives flesh to Jesus' words in the Gospel: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30).

St. Thérèse's missionary hope that she would bring many souls to God was fulfilled in a way beyond what anyone could have expected. Through her writings, her life story, and even the recent pilgrimages inspired by her relics, millions of people have been drawn into a deeper relationship with God and with the Church. Her impact was so extraordinary that Pope St. Pius X, even before her beatification, called her "the greatest saint of modern times." Pope Benedict XV described her as "a storm of glory unleashed upon the world." And Pope Pius XI, who canonized her in 1925, took the striking step just two years later of naming her patroness of the missions, placing her on equal footing with St. Francis Xavier—the great apostle who traveled to the far reaches of Asia and baptized tens of thousands.

This young woman's love for Jesus and desire to make him known is shown to be just as important as the hard labor and martyrdom of the great missionary priests.

This is good news for us. We, too, want to bring souls to God, whether they are our children, grandchildren, spouses, friends, or co-workers. Those of us who go to Mass and make prayer a priority often pray for people's conversions and seek little ways to help bring it about. In this, we are not so different from St. Thérèse, and our opportunities to make a difference in Christ's Church are also similar to hers. We can learn from her how to be missionaries in our homes and how our lives can be transformed by love, becoming a source of missionary fruitfulness for others.

Early Life and the Formation of a Missionary Heart

St. Thérèse was born Marie-Françoise Thérèse Martin on January 2, 1873, to Louis and Zélie Martin. In 2015, they made history as the first married couple ever canonized together. She was the youngest of nine children, four of whom died in childhood or infancy. The Martin couple themselves had a fascinating trajectory: they both previously sought a religious vocation but found closed doors and ultimately opted for marriage. Yet their desire for union with God and to bring glory to his Kingdom never waned in their choice for a life in the world, with careers, responsibilities, social commitments, etc.

St. Zélie Martin discovered her passion for raising children, and she had one goal: that they would all become great saints. One of her desires was to have a missionary priest son. She had two sons, both of whom she felt were destined for the priesthood. She even began working on the lace for their first Mass albs! But tragedy struck, and both died as infants. When she was pregnant with her last child, St. Thérèse, she was sure this would be her priest missionary son, as she perceived the child to be stronger than all the rest. Ultimately, she was happy to have another daughter but perhaps had a touch of melancholy knowing that her dream would not be realized. How little she could have imagined that this youngest daughter would be destined to become the patroness of the missions and model for all missionaries in the Church!

While St. Thérèse's health was fragile as a baby, she became a lively and precocious child, showing great intelligence from an early age. She had a deep sense of the reality of God, inculcated in her by her parents and older sisters. She says that from the age of 3, she had refused nothing to God, and the mystery of God was constantly an object of her thoughts. This faith was also nourished by the loving, strong, yet gentle presence of her father, St. Louis Martin. St. Thérèse would later say that watching her father pray taught her what it meant for a saint to pray. In an era often shaped by fear-based religious instruction, St. Louis embodied for her the tenderness and goodness of God the Father.

The death of her mother when St. Thérèse was only 4 years old marked a profound rupture. The child who had once been open and joyful became withdrawn, anxious, and emotionally fragile. Her grief expressed itself in scrupulosity, hypersensitivity, and a deep fear of displeasing others. School proved a lonely trial; her rowdy classmates were unlike her gentle, loving, older siblings, and she felt misunderstood and isolated.

This vulnerability was intensified when her beloved sister Pauline—who had become a second mother to her—entered the Carmel of Lisieux. The separation precipitated a severe emotional and physical crisis, leaving St. Thérèse gravely ill. In the midst of desperate prayer, the family entrusted her to the Virgin Mary, who answered them through the grace St. Thérèse would later describe as the *"smile of Our Lady."* The healing was decisive, restoring her peace and stability.

At around age 11, St. Thérèse finally achieved her greatest dream to that point: First Holy Communion. It was a tremendous moment where it seemed that full union with Jesus was achieved. She was totally at peace in his love for her; nothing was lacking.

Yet even this grace did not remove all struggle. Emotional sensitivity and scrupulosity returned and could have reached a breaking point when another sister, Marie, entered Carmel. Relief came only when St. Thérèse abandoned her obsessive fears into the hands of her siblings, who were already saints in heaven, trusting that they would intercede where other earthly support was now lacking.

St. Thérèse's decisive interior transformation came on Christmas night when she was 14. After a small but painful remark from her father—one that previously would have reduced her to tears—she experienced a sudden and lasting grace: the freedom to love without being enslaved by her own sensitivity. Divine charity flooded her heart, enabling her to master what had once mastered her. She would later call this moment her "conversion," writing that it set her firmly on a *giant's course*.

The Awakening of a Missionary Vocation

From the moment of her Christmas conversion, St. Thérèse's heart began to expand beyond herself. The charity she had received demanded an outlet; love sought to give itself. It was at this point that her explicitly missionary desires emerged with surprising clarity.

A small holy card depicting St. Mary Magdalene at the foot of the Cross collecting the Precious Blood made a deep impression on her. St. Thérèse recognized in this image the vocation God was placing before her: to gather the Blood of Christ spiritually and pour it out upon souls in need of mercy.

When she heard about a murderer, Henri Pranzini, who was soon to be executed, she confidently trusted that Jesus would save him. She begged God for his conversion, offered sacrifices, and had Masses said for him. She placed absolute confidence, not in her own efforts, but in God's mercy. On the day of Pranzini's execution, St. Thérèse read in the newspaper that this hardened man who refused repentance or an admission of his guilt had, at the last minute, asked for the crucifix and kissed it three times. By this sign, St. Thérèse knew her prayers had been answered and that Pranzini was saved. This was the first fruit of her missionary calling.

Carmel: A Missionary Vocation Lived in Hiddenness

This desire to offer her entire life for the salvation of souls drew St. Thérèse to the Discalced Carmelites. Founded in the Holy Land with spiritual roots reaching back to the prophet Elijah, Carmel eventually took on a distinct form in Western Europe as an order of friars and nuns devoted to contemplative prayer, spiritual battle, and total consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In the 16th century, this charism was renewed through the great reform undertaken by St. Teresa of Ávila, whose profound mystical encounters with Christ compelled her to found new communities ordered entirely toward intimacy with God. Yet St. Teresa never understood contemplation as withdrawal for its own sake. Her reform was explicitly ecclesial and missionary. The Church, wounded by division and stretched by global evangelization, needed hidden hearts whose prayer would sustain its outward mission.

All the prayer, sacrifice and communal life of St. Teresa's nuns was to be aimed toward the purpose of saving souls and strengthening the ministers of the Church, especially missionaries. St. Teresa can be said to have founded a missionary order of contemplative women. They did not leave the enclosure, but their prayer and life were the lifeblood behind all the Church's missionary endeavors. Later, through her collaboration with St. John of the Cross, this vision was extended to the friars as well, grounding Carmelite spirituality in radical love, self-emptying, and total surrender to God. St. John of the Cross's writings would become very instrumental in St. Thérèse discovering her path of missionary fruitfulness in the Church.

The Carmel of Lisieux, to which St. Thérèse felt called, had a missionary identity firmly embedded in its life. Two of her sisters—Pauline and Marie—had already entered this Carmel, and a third, Céline, would later follow. Another sister, Léonie, entered the Visitation Order, itself marked by a hidden, prayerful offering for the Church. St. Thérèse's vocation unfolded within a family entirely given over to God and to the missionary needs of the Church.

St. Thérèse sought entrance to Carmel not to escape the world, but to embrace it in prayer. She believed that through a life of love, sacrifice, and hidden fidelity, she could bring sinners to God and strengthen the ministers of the Church. Her desire was bold, uncompromising, and unmistakably missionary.

Obstacles and Perseverance

St. Thérèse's path into Carmel was not without resistance. Members of her own family initially opposed her decision, concerned for her youth and the current political situation. When their objections were overcome, a greater obstacle arose: the ecclesiastical superiors themselves hesitated to admit her at such a young age.

Appeals to the local bishop proved unsuccessful. Undeterred, St. Thérèse resolved to take her request directly to the Holy Father. This became possible through a pilgrimage to Rome undertaken with her father and sister, Céline. Many priests from around Normandy participated in the pilgrimage, and St. Thérèse encountered firsthand the sacred character, but also the human weaknesses, of those ordained for ministry. Through this experience, her missionary desire deepened, taking on a distinctly priestly focus. She would later understand that her vocation was not only to pray for sinners, but also to intercede for priests—those most intimately involved in the saving work of Christ.

Her brief audience with Pope Leo XIII did not bring the immediate permission she sought. He encouraged her to trust God's will and be obedient to the superiors. Though disappointed, St. Thérèse continued to trust. In time, her obedience bore fruit. Permission was granted, and in the spring of 1888, at the age of 15, she entered the Carmel of Lisieux.

Life in Carmel: Hidden Suffering and the School of Love

When St. Thérèse entered Carmel, she found things to be both exactly as she expected and also very difficult on an affective level. She was embraced by the community with love, yet she also encountered misunderstanding, correction, and at times, humiliation. Her inexperience and artistic temperament made her ill-suited for certain manual tasks, and she was often reproached for her slowness or perceived ineptitude. The very cloister where she came to offer love became the place where love would be purified. Here, in the small abrasions of daily life, Christ was fashioning her heart.

St. Thérèse was graced with the firm conviction that this was all a part of the process of her becoming more and more united to Christ, her spouse. The sufferings of monastic life—so easily dismissed as insignificant—became for St. Thérèse the raw material of her missionary vocation. United to the Eucharistic offering, they could bring down graces on those she most wanted to help: great sinners and the ministers of the Church.

The rhythm of Carmelite life centered on prayer: two hours of silent mental prayer each day, along with the hours of chanting the Divine Office, spiritual reading, and solitude in one's cell. Though St. Thérèse often experienced dryness, distraction, and fatigue in prayer, she was nevertheless drawn early into contemplation. This was not the product of technique or effort, but the fruit of receptivity.

St. John of the Cross describes contemplation as “a secret, peaceful, and loving inflow of God into the soul, which, if not hindered, enkindles it with the spirit of love.” St. Thérèse learned—often painfully—not to hinder this inflow by excessive striving or self-scrutiny, but to open herself to God by trust. God himself would teach her how to love, how to give herself entirely, and how her hidden life could serve the Church more powerfully than visible achievements.

Scripture, Spiritual Formation, and the Discovery of the Little Way

St. Thérèse’s primary nourishment was Sacred Scripture. When other books left her dry or stagnant, she returned unflinchingly to the Gospels, where she encountered Jesus directly. She also cherished *The Imitation of Christ*. However, it was in the writings of St. John of the Cross that she found the language capable of articulating her deepest intuitions. One passage in particular confirmed her growing conviction: “For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all other works put together.” This insight freed St. Thérèse from measuring fruitfulness by activity. Love alone would be her criterion. She became convinced that a total surrender to love would accomplish more for the salvation of souls than the most heroic external labors.

The combination of her contemplative prayer, her reflection on the Scripture, and her spiritual formation under the tutelage of St. John of the Cross helped St. Thérèse discover a fundamental truth: God is Merciful Love who seeks above all else to pour himself into souls. That is who he is. He is the Good that seeks to diffuse itself, to spread itself. All he seeks are hearts that will open themselves to his love. In a decisive act of self-offering, St. Thérèse consecrated herself as a *victim to Merciful Love*. This offering did not consist in presenting many deeds and sacrifices to God, but in opening herself fully to receive the love God longs to pour into souls.

She wrote: “I understood more than ever before how much Jesus desires to be loved ... On every side this love is unknown, rejected; those hearts upon whom You would lavish it turn to creatures, seeking happiness from them with their miserable affection; they do this instead of throwing themselves into Your arms and of accepting Your infinite Love. O my God! Is Your disdained Love going to remain closed up within Your Heart? It seems to me that if You were to find souls offering themselves as victims of holocaust to Your Love, You would consume them rapidly; it seems to me, too, that You would be happy not to hold back the waves of infinite tenderness within You.”

This biblically based conviction of God being one great desire to pour himself out, and our main duty being to receive, would become the basis for St. Thérèse’s spiritual path, or the Little Way. This means that God is Merciful Love. This is the lens through which to see every other aspect of God, even his justice, which, in the religious climate of her time, could cause a servile fear in those around her. She writes: “To me He has granted His infinite Mercy, and through it I contemplate and adore the other divine perfections! All of these perfections appear to be resplendent with love; even His Justice (and perhaps this even more so than the others) seems to me clothed in love. What a sweet joy it is to think that God is Just, i.e., that He takes into account our weakness, that He is perfectly aware of our fragile nature.”

The other aspect of St. Thérèse’s understanding of the Little Way is that she was not able to make herself holy. She was completely dependent on God’s mercy to make her who she was supposed to be.

She writes: "I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections. But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new."

Unable to climb the steep stairway of perfection, St. Thérèse sought another means—a spiritual *elevator*. In Scripture, she found it: "Whoever is a little one, let him come to me." The elevator that would raise her to heaven, she realized, was the merciful arms of Jesus himself: "The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more."

St. Thérèse's Little Way is a total confidence in God's mercy, a refusal to get discouraged by our faults, but to trust that the more we see our weakness, the more we can trust that God himself will take us in his arms and bring us up the mountain of love, to total union with him and to total fruitfulness for the Church.

And the third element of the Little Way is to express our love, our desire for God, through the duties of our state in life, through the small things of each day that are presented on our path. St. Thérèse called this "strewing flowers," meaning doing the simplest tasks, things that seem like little nothings, but doing them for love, trusting that God can make them infinitely valuable for the Church and for all the souls that need it. In this way, daily life itself became the altar upon which St. Thérèse offered her missionary sacrifice. United to the Eucharist, her little works of love took on immeasurable value.

Things like caring for your children, grandchildren, and elderly parents; going to school or work; picking up around the house; bearing illness or trials—all these things can become ways to express our love and desire for God. Our life with others is where real charity can be activated, especially when we are kind and loving to someone who may inspire negative emotions in us at the moment, who might really bother us, but who we still choose to love. This will be more pleasing to God, unite us more to him, and bring more grace to souls than many of the things we might imagine for ourselves and think would be valuable.

Creative Fulfillment of Her Missionary Desires—Spiritual Motherhood

Despite her contentment in Carmel, St. Thérèse's desire to be a missionary never faded. The Lisieux Carmel had been the first to send sisters to establish Carmelite life in present-day Vietnam, and St. Thérèse eagerly volunteered for such a foundation. She longed to give her life for the sake of these fledgling Christian communities.

Providence, however, had other plans. Illness overtook her, gradually revealing itself as tuberculosis. Weakness and suffering confined her to the infirmary, seemingly extinguishing any remaining hope of active mission. Yet here, paradoxically, her mission reached its fullness.

St. Thérèse understood that love does not depend upon strength. As her body failed, her offering intensified. She embraced suffering as another way of allowing love to flow outward to the Church.

One day in 1895, St. Thérèse received a call to the prioress's office that would change her life forever. She describes it thus: "One day Mother Agnes of Jesus took me aside and read a letter she had just received. It was from a young seminarian, inspired, he said, by St. Teresa of Ávila. He was asking for a Sister who would devote herself especially to the salvation of his soul and aid him through her prayers and sacrifices when he was a missionary so that he could save many souls. He promised to remember the one who would become his sister at the Holy Sacrifice each day after he was ordained ... It would be impossible for me to express my happiness ... I felt my soul was renewed; it was as if someone had struck for the first time musical strings left forgotten until then."

Her joy confirms that St. Thérèse was made for this task. She would be a spiritual sister for two missionaries in her earthly life and thousands after her death. Her letters to her missionary brothers are precious windows into her path in the Church. She writes: "All I ask Jesus for myself, I ask also for you; when I offer my weak love to the Beloved, I allow myself to offer yours at the same time. Like Joshua, you are fighting on the plain, and I am your little Moses, and incessantly my heart is lifted to heaven to obtain the victory."

St. Thérèse does not just promise prayers, but also her loving presence after her death: "I do not know the future; however, if Jesus realizes my presentiments, I promise to remain your little sister up above. Our union, far from being broken, will become more intimate. Then there will no longer be any cloister and grilles, and my soul will be able to fly with you into distant missions. Our roles will remain the same: yours, apostolic weapons, mine, prayer and love."

When St. Thérèse contracted her last illness in 1896, she only had about 18 months left to live. But she did not waste any time. She would do the little in her power to help the missions, like walking across the courtyard when she was exhausted, offering it for a missionary who might be tired and discouraged. In her last months, which were filled with physical and spiritual agonies, including a trial of faith where she was tempted to doubt the existence of heaven, she frequently made mention of her premonition that she would help the Church after her death and bring many souls to Christ. She said: "I can't think very much about the happiness of heaven; only one expectation makes my heart beat, and it is the love I shall receive and I shall be able to give. And then I think of all the good I would like to do after my death: have little children baptized, help priests, missionaries, the whole Church. ... I feel that I'm about to enter into my rest. But I feel especially that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love Him, of giving my little way to souls. If God answers my desires, my heaven will be spent on earth until the end of the world. Yes, I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth."

When St. Thérèse died on September 30, 1897, her last words were, "My God I love you." This perfectly summarizes St. Thérèse's life and fruitfulness for souls. As St. John of the Cross writes: "For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all other works put together."

Mission Beyond Death

Very soon, St. Thérèse's autobiographical writings were compiled by her sister, Pauline (Mother Agnes), and edited into the book of her life, *Story of a Soul*. The first print flew off the shelf, and letters began pouring in, declaring the great good worked in the souls of those who read the book.

Little copies and leaflets about St. Thérèse's spirituality went all through the missions and were translated into many languages. One curious thing also happened. The places where St. Thérèse's missionary brothers were stationed, Asia and Africa, to which she was particularly devoted, started to explode in fruitfulness. The year after St. Thérèse's death, administrators of the missions noted an exponential increase in Baptisms and adult conversions. Significant obstacles impeding missionary efforts seemed to be removed in an instant. Some even wondered if a new saint was mysteriously helping them. This was surely due to the presence of St. Thérèse, who desired so ardently to share in their labors: "I have the vocation of the Apostle. I would like to travel over the whole earth to preach Your Name and to plant Your glorious Cross on infidel soil. But O my Beloved, one mission alone would not be sufficient for me, I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages."

Almost 130 years after her death, the number of people St. Thérèse has influenced and drawn closer to God, to conversion, to following their vocation, now numbers in the millions. St. Thérèse's traveling reliquary also makes her missionary wishes come to birth again and again. Through her relics, she has visited all the continents and continues to bless people. God has truly fulfilled her great desires.

This influence became so evident that only two years after her canonization, St. Thérèse was named the patroness of the missions along with St. Francis Xavier. It was the Church's seal on the truth that a life of being receptive to Divine Love, of total trust in the midst of weakness, and of devotion to doing all the duties of one's state in life with love, is the most effective way to help people on their path to God.

A Mission for Us

One of the exciting things about living in the Diocese of Green Bay is that we have the presence of St. Thérèse's fellow Carmelite nuns in our midst. In Denmark, Wisconsin, at the Carmelite Monastery of the Holy Name of Jesus, a group of Carmelite nuns, just like St. Thérèse, pray, love, and sacrifice themselves for the needs of the Church. I am convinced that their prayers are what helped bring me to become a Carmelite friar. I have seen the power of these Consecrated Women's prayers. The chapel remains open for a visit, or to ring the bell at the turn and request prayers from the nuns.

May St. Thérèse, patroness of the missions, be a model for us. By living out her Little Way, we too can share in her fruitfulness. In the call to worship Jesus more deeply in the Eucharist, St. Thérèse shows us what that worship becomes when it is offered without reserve: a quiet but real missionary passion in ordinary life.

It is not a complicated path. Believe that God is Merciful Love, and that what he wants most of all is that you let him love you. Trust that Jesus will make you a great saint even when all you may see in yourself is weakness. Finally, do everything placed before you each day for love of him, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem.

I think particularly of the elderly and shut-ins who may read this. In many ways, they are just as hidden as a Carmelite nun, and they may be tempted to think that their lives do not amount to much. St. Thérèse would say, "*pas du tout!*" Not at all. You can be a powerhouse of prayer and love, drawing people in a mysterious way into the love of the Heart of Jesus. He has pent-up waves of Merciful Love waiting to pour themselves out into any soul that is open to him.

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