

# The Heart of a Saint

## Ten Ways to Grow Closer to God

Bert Ghezzi

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The Word Among Us Press  
9639 Doctor Perry Road, Ijamsville, Maryland 21754  
www.wordamongus.org  
11 10 09 08 07 1 2 3 4 5  
ISBN: 978-1-59325-108-6

Cover design by DesignWorks Group

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Made and printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ghezzi, Bert.

The heart of a saint : ten ways to grow closer to God / Bert Ghezzi.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59325-108-6 (alk. paper)

1. Christian saints. 2. Spiritual life--Catholic Church. I. Title.

BX4655.3.G44 2007

282.092'2--dc22

[B]

2007021092

## Books by Bert Ghezzi

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*Introduction*

## MATTERS OF THE HEART

Wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be too.

—MATTHEW 6:21

In the past ten years, I have written about hundreds of saints and read about hundreds of others. I like to study their lives because I learn so much from their differences. For example, in *The Heart of a Saint*, you will meet St. Thérèse of Lisieux and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, two young saints whose lives were polar opposites. Thérèse, sick for the last few years of her life, lived a sheltered, reserved life in a convent, devoted to prayer and doing little things for others out of love. On the other hand, Pier Giorgio, vigorously healthy, lived an active life, expressing his love for Jesus in serving the poor while engaging in politics and enjoying his friends and sports. Thérèse taught me to always ask, “What is the loving thing to do now?” Pier Giorgio showed me how to live a faithful Christian life in the world with gusto. You will make similar comparisons as you read this book.

But I also like studying about saints because I learn so much from their similarities. Amid their vast diversity, one commonality stands out: they share the same heart—a heart set on loving God above all. The heart is that deep place at the core of our being where we make the choices that direct and orient our lives. At some point every one of the saints made a heartfelt decision to put God first in his or her life. St. Thérèse said it well: “I care about one thing only—to love You my Jesus!”

This book is about drawing closer to God, and it is more about you and me than it is about the saints whose lives I describe. Holiness is not the narrowly guarded privilege of a few, but rather an abundantly available opportunity for all. Here's the point: we can become saints if we want. All we must do is choose to be holy, and the Holy Spirit will make it happen. And because making us saints is God's work, we don't have to be without problems, faults, or even sins. All of the saints, including the apostles, were sinners, just like you and me. For example, speaking about the apostles' difficulties, Pope Benedict XVI said, "I find this very comforting, because we see that the saints have not 'fallen from Heaven.' They are people like us, who also have complicated problems."<sup>1</sup>

In *The Heart of a Saint*, you will read about ten ways of giving your heart more fully to God. St. Thérèse models for us the love of God, and St. Aelred, the love of others. We can advance in holiness by imitating St. Francis' ongoing conversion and by responding to God's call, as St. Katharine Drexel did. Four saints illustrate for us the key means of Christian growth: from Dorothy Day, we learn about prayer and study; from St. Angela Merici, fellowship with other Christians; from St. Roque González, social action; and from Pope John Paul II, evangelization. St. Jane de Chantal and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati show us how to persevere joyfully through life's challenges. We will look at the lives of these women and men to see how we might respond to God's grace more willingly and generously.

You will find a set of interactive questions at the end of each chapter, titled "Think, Pray, and Act." I designed them to help you reflect on the message of the saint's life and decide how you might apply it to your own. These can prove helpful or they can be frustrating to you. Although an action is suggested in each chapter, you will

become discouraged quickly if you attempt to add too many new practices to your routine. Better to select just one easy-to-implement but significant activity. I suggest that you consider starting with the questions in the chapters “Loving God” (p. 11) or “Prayer and Study” (p. 67), either of which is a good place to begin advancing further on the road to holiness.

So please don't let my book get in the way of your spiritual growth by giving you too many things to do. Holiness does not come from staying busy with Christian activities. It is a matter of the heart, a matter of falling in love with God. “Let yourselves be charmed by Christ the Infinite,” said Pope John Paul II,

who appeared among you in visible and imitable form. Let yourselves be attracted by his example, which has changed the history of the world and directed it toward an exhilarating goal. Let yourselves be loved by the love of the Holy Spirit, who wishes to turn you away from worldly things to begin in you the life of the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and true holiness. (cf. Ephesians 4:24) Fall in love with Jesus Christ, to live his very life, so that our world may have life in the light of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

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Chapter One

# LOVING GOD

## Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897)

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You shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

—DEUTERONOMY 6:5 (NAB)

*If you are like me, you have great aspirations, expecting to achieve the best life has to offer. But these expectations seem to get buried beneath the barrage of our daily, mundane obligations. Urgent matters always displace the important ones. However, if we set our hearts on our goals, our everyday activities can become the means of attaining them.*

*St. Thérèse of Lisieux claimed that at age three she had declared her life goal: “I want to be a saint!” Perhaps her adult memory adjusted the facts of her childhood, but there’s no question that by the time she was a teen, she had decided on holiness. So throughout her short life she put loving God above all, and her commitment to holiness transformed all of her daily activities into means to that end.*

*In nine years as a Carmelite nun, Thérèse loved God in the pursuit of her ordinary duties. With God first in her thoughts, she swept the choir loft, washed clothes, folded altar linens, escorted elderly nuns about the convent, and cut up food for a sister who had difficulty eating. Unlike other great saints, she did nothing noteworthy. She did not found an order, build a hospital, or convert an aboriginal*

tribe. “Though the little Sister is very good,” said one of her sisters, “she has never done anything worth speaking about.”<sup>1</sup> But doing everything with love was enough to make her a saint—and a great one at that.

What does a nineteenth-century saintly nun who lived a sheltered life have to do with you and me? We live in a very different world that seems to spin faster every day. While juggling the duties of family, work, or school, navigating the freeways, and keeping up with the electronic world of e-mail and blogs, we don’t really have time for pursuing holiness, do we? But that’s where Thérèse sets the example for us. Holiness is for everyone, not just cloistered religious. In a letter to a cousin who was about to marry, Thérèse wrote, “We all take a different road, but each one leads to the same goal. You and I must have a single aim—to grow in holiness while following the way God in his goodness has laid down for us.”<sup>2</sup>

If we set our sights on loving God above all, then every action in the cascade of our daily activities can be an effective means to holiness. With St. Thérèse of Lisieux we should all decide to become saints and let the love of God make it happen.

When I first read an early translation of St. Thérèse’s autobiography I didn’t like it very much. Her prose ran thick with overspiritual expressions that seemed too syrupy for my taste, and as a result I found it hard to relate to her. However, a few years ago I found a more contemporary version by John Beevers,<sup>3</sup> which appealed to me. He had stripped the book of its cloying sweetness, letting Thérèse speak in a simpler and more direct way. Beevers claims that Pauline, her older sister, ruined the original manuscript by adding adjectives, adverbs, and phrases that obscured the forcefulness of Thérèse’s writing. He says that Pauline made about

seven thousand such changes,<sup>4</sup> many of which he fixed and so made the book more accessible to twenty-first-century readers.

Thérèse's popularity has not waned since she burst onto the scene at the turn of the twentieth century. It has only increased as more people discover the breadth and depth of her spirituality. Contemporary readers of her story, like me, appreciate her as a truly modern saint, who blended the best of traditional piety with twentieth- and twenty-first-century spiritual disciplines, which she anticipated. I have in mind her forward-looking approach to Scripture, her observance of the liturgical year, her use of meditative prayer, and her refreshing disdain for self-imposed mortification.



Thérèse was born to Louis and Zélie Martin on January 2, 1873, at Alençon, a small town in northern France. Louis worked as a watchmaker and jeweler, and Zélie as a lacemaker, so the family was moderately well-to-do. The Martins' four older daughters—Marie, Pauline, Léonie, and Céline—doted on their baby sister. As a child, Thérèse already showed the intelligence, joy, spunk, and strong will that marked her adult character. At the age of four, for instance, she wrote a note to one of Pauline's friends celebrating her enjoyment of the family. Pauline, she wrote, "wants me to tell you that I'm a lazy little girl, but this isn't true because I work all day long playing tricks on my poor little sisters."<sup>5</sup> In her autobiography, Thérèse told of a childhood experience with Léonie and Céline that revealed her innate capacity for total commitment:

One day Léonie, no doubt thinking she was too old to play with dolls, came to us both with a basket filled with their clothes,

ribbons, and other odds and ends. Her own doll was on top. She said: “Here you are, darlings. Take what you want.” Céline took a little bundle of silk braid. I thought for a moment, then stretched out my hand and declared “I choose everything.” And without much more ado, I carried off the lot.<sup>6</sup>

Thérèse observed that this incident summed up her whole life. She said that later when she understood the call to holiness, she exclaimed, “My God, I choose all. I do not want to be a saint by halves.”



As well-formed Catholics with a solid understanding of doctrine and practice, Louis and Zélie ran their family as a training school for their daughters. The Martins centered their life on God and the church. They worshipped at Mass on Sundays and frequently on weekdays. In the evenings, they enjoyed games and storytelling and then joined together in prayer. Together they also read and discussed Scripture and books such as *The Liturgical Year*. Louis paid special attention to forming his youngest daughter. Often, in the late afternoon, he took Thérèse for walks to nearby churches, where at prayer before the tabernacle she acquired a devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist. As an adult, she recalled having accompanied her father on fishing trips, during which she accidentally stumbled upon meditative prayer. “Sometimes I tried to fish with my own little rod,” she wrote, “but I preferred to sit amidst the grass and flowers. I thought deeply then and, although I was quite ignorant about meditation, my soul did plunge into a state of real prayer.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Martin family life planted the seeds of holiness in Thérèse.

Zélie died of cancer in 1877, bringing an end to Thérèse's bright early childhood. She comforted herself by adopting Pauline as her "little Mother." Louis moved the family to Lisieux in order to be near the supportive family of Zélie's brother. During these difficult transitions, Thérèse became melancholy and began to suffer a variety of nervous ailments, which lasted for several years.

When Thérèse was nine, Pauline entered the Carmelite convent at Lisieux. For several months Thérèse reacted to the loss of her second mother with headaches, insomnia, hypersensitivity, and bouts of weeping. Visits to Pauline failed to console her. Temporary relief came one day when her sisters knelt before a statue of Mary and asked her to intercede for Thérèse's healing. She reported in her autobiography that Mary smiled at her through the statue and delivered her from her pain.<sup>8</sup> But the ailments soon returned. Even the joy Thérèse experienced at her first Communion and confirmation did not dispel them. Extreme sensitivity, loneliness, and mind-numbing attacks of scruples continued to plague her.

A life-changing event occurred on Christmas morning in 1886 that finally brought Thérèse deliverance from these terrible problems. She had prayed for a miracle to bring her peace, freedom, and strength to resist her hypersensitivity. And just after midnight Mass she received it. "Jesus, the Child then only an hour old," she said,

flooded the darkness of my soul with torrents of light. By becoming weak and frail for me, He gave me strength and courage. He clothed me with His weapons, and from that blessed night I was unconquerable. I went from victory to victory and began to run as a giant.<sup>9</sup>

At home after Mass, Thérèse overheard her father snap that he was glad it was the last time they would have to endure the family ritual of surprising her with gifts. She handled this emotionally fraught episode with unusual composure, which assured her that the miracle was genuine.

Thérèse regarded this event as closing her childhood and opening her life as an adult. Years later she recalled how the miracle gave her a heart for the conversion of sinners:

Jesus . . . accomplished in an instant what I had been unable to do in ten years. Like the apostles, we could say: “Master, I have toiled all the night, and caught nothing.” Jesus was more merciful to me than to His disciples. He Himself took the net, cast it, and drew it up full of fishes. He made me a fisher of men. I longed to work for the conversion of sinners with a passion I’d never felt before. Love filled my heart, I forgot myself and henceforth I was happy.<sup>10</sup>

This experience launched Thérèse’s lifelong practice of interceding for serious wrongdoers.



In her fourteenth year, Thérèse heard God calling her to enter the Carmelite convent at Lisieux—and she became determined to do so by Christmas 1887, just before her fifteenth birthday. Her father gave his permission, but the superior at Carmel refused to consider her for admission until she was at least sixteen. Thérèse and her father appealed to the local bishop, but he sided with the superior, telling her that she was too young to become a nun. “I’ve longed to

give myself to God ever since I was three,”<sup>11</sup> objected Thérèse, but the bishop held his ground.

Thérèse was disappointed but not deterred. On a pilgrimage to Rome a few weeks later, she boldly asked Pope Leo XIII at a papal audience to let her enter Carmel at fifteen. The pope told her to obey the local authorities. “You will enter,” he said, “if God wills.”<sup>12</sup>

Deeply distressed but at peace beneath the surface of her feelings, Thérèse entrusted to Jesus her campaign to become a Carmelite. But he seemed to ignore her request. Thérèse had often imagined herself as a little ball that the Child Jesus could play with and treat any way he wanted. “I longed to amuse the little Jesus and offer myself to his childish whims.” When the pope denied her at Rome, she felt as though Jesus had pierced his toy to see what was inside, and then let it drop and went to sleep.<sup>13</sup>

However, Thérèse did not stop expecting God to intervene on her behalf. And finally the obstacles began to fall away. Just after Christmas, perhaps influenced by his vicar-general, who had promised Thérèse that he would intercede for her, the bishop changed his mind and gave permission for her to enter Carmel immediately. But the Carmelite superior tested Thérèse’s endurance further by holding off her admission until after Easter 1888.

On April 9, 1888, Thérèse Martin disappeared into the Carmel at Lisieux and as Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus began her nine undistinguished years as a nun. She served as assistant novice master for three years, but that was the only office she held in the Carmelite community. Her charism was simply loving God above all. “Now I wish for only one thing,” she once wrote, “to love Jesus unto folly!”<sup>14</sup>

Thérèse did not set out to develop a method for holiness. If she had foreseen that one day Pope John Paul II would declare her a

## AN IMMEASURABLE LOVE



*Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380–1471)*

*Loving God above all is at the heart of Thomas à Kempis' teaching in The Imitation of Christ.*

Ah, Lord God, my holy Lover, when You come into my heart, all that is within me will rejoice. You are my glory and the exultation of my heart. You are my hope and refuge in the day of my tribulation. . . .

Love often knows no limits but overflows all bounds. Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of troubles, attempts more than it is able, and does not plead impossibility, because it believes that it may and can do all things for its Beloved. . . .

This warm affection of soul is a loud voice crying in the ears of God, and it says: "My God, my love, You are all mine and I am all Yours. Give me an increase of love, that I may learn to taste with the inward lips of my heart how sweet it is to love, how sweet to be dissolved in love and bathe in it. Let me be rapt in love. Let me rise above self in great fervor and wonder. Let me sing the hymn of love, and let me follow You, my Love, to the heights. Let my soul exhaust itself in praising You, rejoicing out of love. Let me love You more than myself, and let me not love myself except for Your sake. In You let me love all those who truly love You, as the law of love, which shines forth from You, commands."

—Adapted from Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III, 5, at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kempis/imitation.toc.html>.

doctor of the church, she would have wondered why and may even have laughed at the apparent incongruity of the idea. She would have been uncomfortable to be universally recognized as a spiritual guide. “Jesus has no need of books or doctors of the Church to guide souls,” she wrote. He, the Doctor of doctors,

can teach without words. I have never heard Him speak, but I know that He is within me. He guides and inspires me every moment of the day. Just when I need it, a new light shines on my problems. This happens not so much during my hours of prayer as when I’m busy with my daily work.<sup>15</sup>

As a teen, Thérèse had devoured *The Imitation of Christ* and the works of St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and many other spiritual writers. However, in the sunset of her life, she grew tired of spiritual treatises that said perfection was hard to attain. Once she said, “I shut the learned book which is giving me a headache and drying up my heart, and I open the holy Scriptures. Then everything seems clear; one word opens up infinite horizons, perfection seems easy. I see that it is sufficient to abandon myself like a child in God’s arms.”<sup>16</sup> Apparently Thérèse enjoyed a form of Scripture meditation that twenty-first-century Catholics still find attractive and practical.

Those of us who have difficulties with prayer can appreciate Thérèse’s candid admission that she often fell asleep while meditating. Since I frequently nod off during my morning prayer, I am heartened by her observation that God, like any good parent, loves his children dearly whether they are asleep or awake.<sup>17</sup> Thérèse also endured long stretches of dryness, but instead of worrying about it, she delighted in it. She envisioned that in times of spiritual aridity, Jesus was “asleep in her little boat.” Instead of shaking him awake

as others did, she let him sleep peacefully, as she thought that he must be wearied by all he has to do for us. Imagining that her dryness afforded Jesus much-needed rest pleased her.<sup>18</sup> I plan to imitate her approach the next time my prayer gets dry.

Thérèse did not believe in using penitential practices except the fasting required in the Carmelite rule. She especially advised against using “instruments of penance” to discipline the body. She argued that Jesus said his yoke was easy and his burden light. He did not tell us to burden ourselves with extra weight.<sup>19</sup> I find her view comforting, because I, like many contemporaries, believe that enough suffering comes our way daily that we don’t need to impose additional bodily pain on ourselves. Thérèse said that her real penance was breaking her self-love by serving others when she did not feel like it and doing little kindnesses that went unnoticed. I don’t find this perspective on mortification very comforting: chiseling away at my self-will with unselfish acts hurts.

While Thérèse used spiritual disciplines, she did not view them as causes of perfection. “Holiness,” she said, “does not consist of any one particular method of spirituality: it is a disposition of heart which makes us small and humble within the arms of God, aware of our weakness but almost rashly confident in His fatherly goodness.”<sup>20</sup> Committed from childhood to become a saint, she had always sought perfection. But toward the end of her life, she realized that the harder she ran after it, the further away it seemed to be. She came to embrace her imperfections and even to relish them. She once assured a novice at Carmel not to worry about her faults because God was blind to arithmetic. “Were He clear-sighted enough to see all our sins, if He were good enough at figures to be able to total up their number, He would send us straight back to our nothingness. But His love for us makes Him blind.”<sup>21</sup>



Thérèse was convinced that God had called her to be a saint. However, when she compared herself to the saints, she felt like a grain of sand in the presence of mountains reaching into the clouds. She decided that God knew of her littleness and would provide her a “little way” to get to heaven. Observing that in some mansions you could take an elevator instead of climbing stairs, Thérèse determined to find an elevator that would carry her to Jesus, “because I was far too small to climb the stairs of perfection.” She searched the Bible and found her elevator in Proverbs 9:4, “Whosoever is a little one, let him come to me” and Isaiah 66:12-13, “You shall be carried at the breasts and upon the knees.” The arms of Jesus would be the elevator that would carry her to heaven. “And so there is no need for me to grow up,” she said, “In fact just the opposite: I must stay little and become less and less.”<sup>22</sup>

Total reliance on Jesus constituted the heart of Thérèse’s “little way.” Then, resting comfortably in his arms, anyone could become holy by doing ordinary things for love. “The most trivial act,” she said,

one that no one knows about, provided it is inspired by love, is often of greater worth than the greatest achievement. It is not the value or even the apparent holiness of deeds which counts, but only the love put into them. And no one can say that he cannot do these little things for God, for everyone is capable of them.<sup>23</sup>

Thérèse herself aspired to achieve great things for love of God. She wished she could be a missionary who evangelized the whole

world. She also wanted to be a martyr who suffered every torment endured by those who had given their life for Christ. But she decided that she was too little and too weak for such greatness. Instead of settling for a lesser vocation, she chose a calling even higher than foreign missions or martyrdom. She chose to do everything with love and so become a channel of grace for others. "I care now about one thing only," she wrote, "to love You, my Jesus! . . . The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least of actions for love."<sup>24</sup> She believed that Christ would use the graces released by her little sacrifices to strengthen the church and bring relief to those who suffered.

Thérèse wrote this summary of her life's mission shortly before her death. She contracted tuberculosis during Holy Week in 1896. For the next year and a half she endured severe physical pain and spiritual agony. She died on September 30, 1897, a nun who had been enclosed for nine years in an obscure Carmelite convent. But popular devotion to Thérèse spread rapidly soon after her death, due both to the publication and widespread circulation of her autobiography and to grace.

So many thousands testified to miracles won through her intercession that authorities in the Vatican hastened her canonization. Pope Pius XI declared her a saint in 1925. And from her home in heaven, she achieved one of her deepest longings. In 1927 the pope declared her, along with St. Francis Xavier, a principal patron of all missionaries.

## Think, Pray, and Act



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Few of us will become great missionaries or martyrs. But all of us can embrace the higher calling of loving God above all and imitating Thérèse's practice of letting that love direct all of our actions. Then our lives, too, will become channels of grace, supporting others on their journey to God.

Take stock of your life to determine how you might adopt the principles of St. Thérèse's "little way." Use the following questions to help you consider how to love God more and do even the most trivial things for love.

### THINK



---

-  How much do I love God? How would I describe my relationship with him?
  
-  How often do I perform little acts of kindness without expecting any thanks or notice?

### PRAY

---

Set aside a half hour of quiet prayer and reflect on the following questions.

-  Do I put God first in my life? If not, what occupies first place in my mind and heart?
  
-  What difference would it make for my life if I decided that I wanted to become a saint?