



VINTAGE  
**Saints**  
AND  
**Sinners**

25 CHRISTIANS WHO  
TRANSFORMED MY FAITH

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FOREWORD BY LAUREN WINNER



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## Take the Little Way

*Jesus does not demand great deeds.*

*All He wants is self-surrender and gratitude.*

A GRACIOUS HOME TO WELCOME THE world, an experiment in community, an expression of lived faith, and an invitation to thoughtful exchange. We envisioned all this (and more) when Charles and I and our three kids fastened the bronze plaque onto the freshly painted front door, announcing: Bonhoeffer House.

The child of a minister and oldest of five children, I grew up in a household where our shoes were lined up on Saturday nights, newly polished for church the next morning. Sundays brought extra guests to the dinner table; my unflappable mother simply doubled the recipe for macaroni and cheese and mixed up more Lipton instant iced tea. Staying over? She pulled out the sleeper sofa, grabbed a set of sheets from the linen closet. Mom made it look effortless. I believed that I could too. The Bonhoeffer House was ready for visitors and I was up for the venture.

In the seventeen years since we pushed open the Bonhoeffer House doors, the glow is off the golden dream. Cracked radiators, charred lasagna, midnight visitations, roaring undergrad parties next door, cranky kids, sacrificed privacy, and overbooked schedules have

chastened our utopian ambitions. The Professor demands quiet; he's got a lecture to write for tomorrow's class. Students are arriving for a Bible study and now Nan urgently requires a ride to volleyball practice. The dinner dishes are congealing on the counter, the dog has raided the trash. I try to keep it together, but beware if you hear me begin to speak in what Nan calls "Mom's real scary quiet voice." I'm about to lose it.

I still long to be that person who loves patiently, believes deeply, lives fully. When I'm frazzled by daily life here, I occasionally entertain that odd, alternative ideal—the one in which I've escaped to a convent, far from this relentless, changeable activity. I imagine myself mindfully present to each moment, centered by peaceful prayer and invigorated by physical labors. When the sisters and I gather in the chapel or weed in the garden, we always know what comes next in the rhythm of community living. With a stripped-down agenda, limited wardrobe options, and a decluttered closet, my mind is clear.

Thérèse of Lisieux shatters my monastic reverie. She left her own comfortable bourgeois home in northwestern France for the convent—and she ended up in an unheated cell, dying of tuberculosis on a straw pallet. Dead at only twenty-four, she'd accomplished so little that the other nuns had nothing to write about in her obituary. I'll bet that Thérèse had her own romantic visions of shared life; she must have been sorely disappointed.

There are some glaring problems with my own getaway scenario too. My husband is missing from the picture, and I couldn't do without Henry, Will, Nan, or our dog Ginger. The flowing nun's habit? Most definitely *not* my look. Total obedience to superiors? Never. I know I'm just daydreaming a way to be stronger and more spiritual, calmer and more focused.



The story of Thérèse, aka "The Little Flower," is a backwards fairy tale, from silk slippers to rough sandals. Like me, our heroine was one

of five children born into a respectable Christian family. Her super devout parents kept up a regimen of daily prayer (at 5:30 a.m.!), regular fasting and Sabbath observance. Thérèse loved God from day one, claiming that even as a toddler she'd never refused God anything.

Thérèse's first few years were golden. Her four older sisters pampered her, her parents found her adorable. Everything on earth smiled at her; she found blossoms under her feet. Then, when Thérèse was only four, her mother, Zélie, died. Her sisters all left to become nuns. Without her family to shelter her, Thérèse was sickened by grief.

But Thérèse had boldness at her core. The valiant little girl decided to devote her whole life to God. Planning her future, she fantasized that she'd grow up to be a soldier, an apostle, a hermit, a missionary, or even a priest. No surprise: none of these careers were open to nineteenth-century village maidens. And so, at nine years old, Thérèse marched, with utter confidence, to enlist at the local Carmelite monastery. The nuns sent her back to her father. She was, of course, too young.

Thérèse waited impatiently and then returned to the convent gate at age fourteen, ready to begin her awesome new career. But she was refused again. When she met Pope Leo VIII during a family pilgrimage to Rome, the desperate girl saw her chance. She got right up in the pope's face and begged him to pull some strings. The flustered pope muttered something about obeying her superiors. Thérèse turned up the volume, clutching his legs, refusing to budge. As the papal guards dragged the sobbing girl toward the door, Pope Leo passed the problem off to God, saying, "Go . . . Go . . . you will enter if God wills it."

Back home in Lisieux, she was promptly admitted to the convent. (I ask you: Was it divine providence or stubborn melodrama that unlocked the door?) She had arrived at last. To the Carmelite convent, where all was silence except for the sweep of long habits and the hiss of rope sandals along the echoing hallways. Here was a physical grace and order she craved. She was delivered from her stifling, overstuffed middle-class childhood and into her life's calling: to adore Jesus utterly.

Thérèse's vivid spiritual imagination comes through in her memoir. In many ways, it's like any teenaged girl's diary. The pages burst with capital letters, exclamation points and images of pretty flowers, victims, salty tears, little angels, martyrs, consuming fire. One biographer said that reading the book feels like eating too many marshmallows. But Thérèse isn't writing about flirtations with cute boys; she's all about abandonment to her beloved Jesus. Thérèse writes of scaling the summit of the mountain of love to demonstrate her total trust in God. She describes Jesus leading her into a "furnace of divine love."

As she writes, Thérèse imagines herself into the story of Jesus by the well. When he asks for water, she's the humble Samaritan woman with a cup in her hand, saying, "I am only a very little soul, who can offer very little things to our Lord." Thérèse often speaks of taking the Little Way, where every small action, every unseen sacrifice—even a drink of water—is a full surrender to the tenderness of Jesus' infinite love.

"My God, I choose all! I do not wish to be a saint by halves," she prays. Ever the go-getter, Thérèse envisions bold saints out there, doing big things for God in the world. She admires an earlier French girl, Joan of Arc, valiant in bloody combat for the Lord of Hosts. But little Thérèse? Though she burns to do battle for God's glory, her war will never be on the open field; instead, she is a prisoner of Love, forever cut off from the world, held captive within the cloister. Choosing the Little Way will be Thérèse's ultimate challenge. The great demand to submit her will to God in everything.

Let us keep far from all that glitters, she would say, and learn to love our littleness. Follow this Little Way with an attitude of lowliness, poorness of spirit, trust. Let us even be satisfied to feel nothing as we serve God and others whenever and wherever we can. It is then, however obscure and unnoticed we may be, that Jesus will come to seek us out and transform us with his love.

Yes, Thérèse was given to austere heroics and interior struggles. By her telling, suffering intensifies devotion. After all the years of

planning, praying, and envisioning her ecstatic life with God, she must have been privately disenchanted by how things turned out. I imagine the teenaged Thérèse, realizing that she's truly stuck for life inside an obscure convent in chilly Lisieux. She's crowded in with much older nuns who apparently do not share her passion for Christlike loving service. In fact, the sisters annoy her in a million little ways.

Here's a snapshot. Each day, Thérèse patiently escorts a sick, irritable sister from prayers to dinner, cuts her bread, endures her criticisms. Thérèse's humanity comes through at prayer, as the young woman fights to concentrate while another sister rattles her rosary beads incessantly. She writes, "Perhaps none heard it but myself, for my hearing is extremely acute, and I cannot say how it tormented me!" At work, washing handkerchiefs in the laundry, the nun seated close by constantly "besprinkles" Thérèse with filthy water (on purpose?). Though Thérèse is tempted to make a show of wiping off her face, she bears the offenses uncomplainingly. Still, I'll bet that some nights she lay on her pallet wondering why God had ever inspired her with such fantastical, unfulfilled dreams.

Thérèse was a tough girl who stayed in there. She didn't hide behind abstractions or doctrine; she was about action. She put it simply, saying, "Jesus does not demand great deeds. All He wants is self-surrender and gratitude. That is all Jesus asks from us. He needs nothing from us except our love." Day in and day out, Thérèse lived an ordinary witness of extraordinary love—theology on its knees. Though the Little Way brought her no glory, she chose it anyway.

Whenever the nuns got on her saintly nerves, Thérèse made a choice: to treat them as companions whom she dearly loved. To get there, Thérèse adopted the "fake till you make it" approach. "When I suffer much, when things that are painful and disagreeable befall me," she said, "instead of assuming an air of sadness, I respond by a smile." Reading her words, I feel my teeth clench at the forced cheer.

Still, I'll give the young woman credit. She always did defy expectations, even at the end when she was dying of tuberculosis at twenty-four. Where Kierkegaard made a leap of faith, his intellectual vault over the abyss of doubt into Christian faith, Thérèse took the Little Way, a brave emotional vault over the abyss of self-interest and into radical Christian love.



I've always seen the youthful Thérèse and the teenaged Karen as different girls—Thérèse scribbling quaint piety and Karen analyzing a Vonnegut novel. Thérèse repeating Latin prayers and Karen cramming for the A.P. biology exam. Recently I dug out my old high school diary and, faced with my own handwriting, I felt a peculiar sensation. There were no capital letters (my e e cummings phase) among the words: “i will act and trust that god has honored my feeble desire to praise him through my life.” I found a prayer in which I wrote, “i believe that what i do makes a difference. my time is valuable. but you are god. my little efforts are worthless until you bless them and fill them with your power. here am i. send me.” I heard the voice of a fervently believing Karen, the idealistic adolescent I once was.

I still have lofty notions, but the convent-as-spiritual-spa-getaway won't be happening. Thérèse quickly discovered that the cloister would not be all tranquility, glowing beeswax candles and choral polyphony. It was a place of affliction. The Carmelite sisters endured restricted sleep, no travel, no comforts, no easy conversation, no family or romantic attachments. No freedom. Daily religious life would sorely try Thérèse's single vocation, her sole occupation: *to love*.

In the grind, it was no easy thing to abandon herself utterly, unflinchingly to God. Still, she chose to take the Little Way, no matter how difficult. As usual, she made up her mind, saying, “Out of love I will suffer and, out of love, rejoice.” When she folded the laundry, scrubbed the cold stone floors or knelt before the altar, she would do

it all for love. “In everything I must find self-denial and sacrifice,” she pledged.

Ah, the martyr complex. We’ve all seen it, the person who sighs theatrically and says, “Don’t mind me! You go first/make the decision/have the last piece of cake/let me wash all the pots. It’s fine, *really*.” I may tend to play the victim myself, though I won’t admit to it here. (I truly prefer burned toast.) But Thérèse takes self-denial to an extreme. Her high-pitched virtue grates on me; all the suffering talk makes me queasy.

And now? I’d truly be acting the martyr if I claimed that life in the Bonhoeffer House is rough. I have privilege and comfort beyond compare. Honestly, though, the experience of sharing my family, privacy and possessions is not the unmitigated joy that Charles and I once thought it would be. Real experiences rarely are. I didn’t see what was coming when I prayed, “here i am. send me.”

Life goes on. I am no Little Flower. I am often ambitious and restless. Thérèse and I still deeply disagree over the merits of self-denial, but I’ve come to respect that bold child who banged on the doors of the convent as a nine-year-old, marched up to the pope in Rome, and mastered the grueling monastic routines, all for the love of Christ. When dreams of the Christian life disappoint, I recall the Little Way of Thérèse. What might it mean to learn to love my littleness? To serve without demanding praise—or even satisfaction? Here and now, with all that I know, I consider the confines of this place and this day. The invitation into my own Little Way.

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