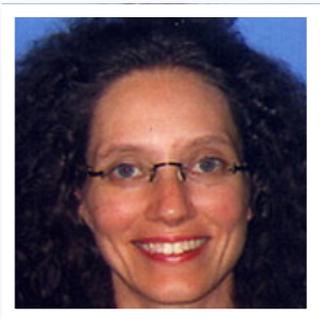


SAINTS

LIVING GOD'S WORD LIKE THE SAINTS

RECEIVING CHRIST AND BECOMING LIKE HIM

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Benedict XVI concludes the first part of his apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini* (2010), by recommending the saints as expert witnesses to Scripture's abiding truth: "The interpretation of Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to those who truly lived the Word of God: namely, the saints" (§48). The saints unfold the contents of Scripture by dedicating their lives to performing its message. Their ability to bring the Word of God to life begins when they open the pages of Scripture in order to encounter Christ and to nurture their baptismal relationship with Him. Once they learn of Christ's undying love for them, expressed supremely in His suffering and death, they resolve never to be parted from Him. For they are assured by the Holy Spirit that He wishes to remain with them always (Mt 28:20). They rejoice in the knowledge that there will

Thérèse of Lisieux (1896)
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never be a greater love than the Lord's, this love that reconciles the world to God and that is given to them completely in the Eucharist. This joy of the saints is ours as well. For we, too, can welcome our crucified and risen Savior in the gifts of Word and Sacrament and become like Him whom we have received.

Let us explore this possibility by briefly reflecting on one such radiant saint, Thérèse of Lisieux. This nineteenth-century Carmelite nun is most famous for her "Little Way," that biblical manner of being that follows God's will in all the ordinary affairs of daily life. In her autobiography, *"The Story of a Soul,"* Thérèse explained that her perseverance in seeing life's mundane moments as extraordinary arose from the Gospels' proclamation that God was forever bestowing lavish graces upon her and upon all those around her. If every instant of our lives is already bursting with God's redemptive love, then all experiences, even those darkened by suffering, tragedy, and death, are opportunities to find Christ, our lover, and to love Him in return. Thérèse recognized that if we are to be strengthened by this good news, we must repeatedly echo Scripture's words on our own and in the company of the whole Church, so that we "are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil 1:27).

Our adoption of "the mind of Christ" (Phil 2:5) means allowing the twists and turns of our journeys to conform us to our Savior, that we might traverse with Him the path of cross and resurrection. Early on, Thérèse was mesmerized by the Eucharist's recapitulation of Christ's dying and rising, wherein the Spirit draws us into participation in the event of our salvation. She perceived the eucharistic pattern unfolding in her own life. Mourning the death of her mother at the tender age of four, she found joy in the steadfast love of her father and sisters. Afflicted by childhood illness, she recovered under the watchful

gaze of the Virgin Mary. Denied admittance to the convent due to her youth, she appealed to Pope Leo XIII and was received by the Lisieux Carmelites at age fifteen. Tormented by her elderly father's suffering, she watched from afar as he endured his Calvary of physical and mental illness. Mourning her father's passing and battling tuberculosis until her death at age twenty-four, she struggled ardently to maintain her vibrant faith, remembering the unfailing generosity of her Beloved who was now silent and hidden. The words of Scripture fortified her in their promise of Easter exuberance, when it was impossible for her to speak the words of resurrection on her own.

Thérèse of Lisieux is one of the saints "who truly lived the word of God," because she responded to her life experiences with the attitude of Christ that the Scriptures imparted to her in personal prayer and communal worship. In times of suffering, tragedy, and death, when it seemed as though the overflowing river of God's graces had run dry, she sought out her Beloved by imitating his humble obedience in the Garden. When grief and exhaustion prevented her from praying, she defied the demon of desolation by waiting patiently in the silence. Though she could not see the eschatological outcome of her Christ-like agony, we have marveled at her new birth in the communion of saints.

We can look to the saints to help us make sense of Scripture, because its meaning is clarified when we see people embodying it. Just as the salvific intention of God's self-communication was fully disclosed in the Word made flesh, so too are the lasting effects of the Incarnation made known in the many and varied lives of Christians who have faithfully followed Jesus down through the ages. Thérèse of Lisieux is particularly important in this regard, because her modest yet profound life demonstrates that the saintly performance of Scripture is neither simplistic

nor spectacular. It was for this reason that Georges Bernanos was inspired by Thérèse to write his novel, *Diary of a Country Priest*, in which his character, Curé de Torcy declares that, “sanctity has nothing to do with being sublime.”

When listening to Thérèse live out the Word of God, we hear God’s desire for us to become saints by embodying Scripture. No matter what the differences that distinguish us in responding to this summons, we all share with Thérèse in the sorrows of illness, despair, the loss of loved ones, and coming to terms with our own death. In these most painful moments, we too can welcome Jesus as our guest when He gifts Himself to us in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist. As we do so, we will be nourished to become Christ-like in patient solidarity with Him and with all those who suffer, uniting our tears with those of Jesus in Gethsemane. The intense heartbreak involved in our communion with the Crucified is never glorious. Yet, we are uplifted in the knowledge that the splendor of new life arises from out of the depths of cruciform love.

