

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE JOURNEY TO ROME

ON November 4, 1887, three days after the visit to Bayeux, Celine and Therese set out with their father for Rome.

The first stopping-place was Paris. They saw all the wonderful sights of the capital, but nothing delighted Therese so much as the shrine of Our Lady of Victories. She prayed earnestly to her Blessed Mother, who had smiled on her in her childhood, and as we cannot love Our Lady without loving St. Joseph too, she put herself under his protection, asking him to take care of her as he had care of the Holy Child and His Mother during their life on earth.

The travellers continued their journey through beautiful Switzerland, with its gigantic snow-capped mountains, its lakes and waterfalls, its pink heather and gorgeous sunsets. Then, crossing the Alps by the famous St. Gothard tunnel, they entered Italy. At Milan, Therese and Celine climbed to the top of the wonderful Cathedral. From Milan they went to Venice, and from there to Loretto, where the house of the Holy Family is honored.

The following night they were awakened by the voices of the porters shouting: "Rome! Rome!" It was not a dream; they were in Rome at last. The two sisters visited all the monuments of the Eternal City, and were especially struck with the Coliseum and the Catacombs. The Catacombs are vast subterranean passages, where the early Christians used to hide from persecution, and where they buried their dead.

The Coliseum is an immense arena built of stone, and large enough to hold thousands of spectators. The Romans came there to watch the Christians being devoured by wild beasts, or tortured in other horrible ways, because they would not give up their faith. Therese, who loved the martyrs, was very anxious to go down to a part of the arena which was closed to the public because the excavations then being carried on made the descent dangerous. But all the same, she and Celine darted forward in front of the guide, boldly crossed the barriers, and, clambering over the walls, which crumbled under their weight, succeeded in reaching the spot without any mishap. As Therese kissed the sacred ground on which the martyrs had shed their blood, she asked Our Lord that she, too, might be a martyr for His love.

To return, they had to make a difficult ascent, but were soon back safe and sound with their father, who, seeing them so happy, had not the heart to scold them. He even seemed proud of their courage. They spent six days seeing the wonders of Rome.

On the seventh day they were to have the great privilege of an audience with Leo XIII. Therese had been longing for it, and at the same time she dreaded it because of what she had planned to do. The audience began after the Pope's Mass. Dressed in black, with black mantillas, according to the etiquette prescribed, Celine and Therese joined the long line of pilgrims and advanced slowly through the great halls of the Vatican, till they came to a large room, hung with red tapestry, where Leo XIII was seated on a raised chair, surrounded by dignitaries of the Church. Therese felt her heart beat violently, and her nervousness increased when the Vicar-General of Bayeux, who was standing to the right of His Holiness, announced in a loud voice that no one was to speak to the Pope. She turned to her sister with an appealing glance. "Speak," was Celine's whispered reply.

A moment later Therese found herself kneeling before the Holy Father. After she had

kissed his foot and his extended hand, she raised her eyes and said imploringly:

"Holy Father, I have a great favor to ask of you." The Pope bent his head, and his dark penetrating eyes seemed to read her very soul.

"Holy Father," she continued, "in honor of your Jubilee, allow me to become a Carmelite when I am fifteen."

The Vicar-General, astonished and annoyed, interrupted:

"Most Holy Father, this child wishes to join the Carmelites, and the Superiors are now considering the matter."

"Well, my child," said His Holiness, "do as the Superiors shall decide."

Joining her hands and resting them on the Pope's knees, Therese made a last effort:

"Holy Father, if you will only say yes, everyone else will agree." Leo XIII looked at her fixedly, and slowly and emphatically said:

"Well, well, child, you shall enter if it be God's will." She was about to repeat her request when two of the noble guards made a sign for her to rise. The Pope held out his hand to her to kiss, and, blessing her, followed her with his eyes as she moved away. She left the audience-room in tears, and the whole of that day the fair Italian sky was veiled with dark clouds, and wept in sympathy with her. Her great plan had failed. But she had done her utmost to follow the call of God, and her soul was at peace. She remembered that she had long ago offered herself to the Holy Child to be His little "plaything." Having noticed that children, as a rule, do not care much for expensive toys, she had given herself to Him as a cheap toy, a little ball which He could throw about, and treat just as He liked. In Rome He set down His little ball, no doubt to see what it was made of, and finding it full of love for Himself, He wanted to test it still further, and sent it rolling into a corner. There it lay four long months, and then, at last, the Holy Child picked up His toy again.

When Therese got back to France, she renewed her request to the Bishop. Every morning her father went with her to meet the postman, to see if there was a letter from Bayeux. The letter came on December 28, Feast of the Holy Innocents. It was addressed to the Prioress of the Carmelites, and gave permission for Therese to enter immediately. But alas! the Prioress thought it wiser to defer the entry till the following Easter. After having already overcome so many obstacles, this final delay was a sad trial to poor Therese. In her disappointment she was tempted for a moment to get all the enjoyment she could out of the remaining months at home. But Our Lord made her see the value of this time of waiting. She resolved not to lose a moment of it, and to try to be still more mortified.

Her mortifications consisted simply of such little things as not answering back when reproved, giving way to others, holding herself straight without lolling lazily against the backs of the chairs, and doing little kindnesses to those around her. If anything in daily life tried her—if, for example, she lost one of the prettiest birds from her aviary—she quickly raised her heart to God and tried to take the little cross from His Hand.

One day, her father gave her a white woolly lamb as a pet. But she had hardly got it when it died. She buried it under the snow in her garden, and its death made her understand that we must be ready to part with the most innocent joys.