

**VISIT OF THE RELICS
OF
ST. THÉRÈSE**



LIMERICK 18-19 JUNE 2001

BISHOP DONAL MURRAY

When a young Carmelite sister, not yet 25 years of age, died in Lisieux on September 30th 1897, nobody could have imagined that millions of people in Ireland would be honouring her more than a century later. One reason for that extraordinary attraction is that her life has important implications for us today.

THE LITTLE FLOWER

She is known as “The Little Flower”. The name might seem to suggest something pretty and fragile and merely decorative. In fact, the phrase, as she uses it, says something strong and invigorating to our restless world. We see ourselves surrounded by enormous problems of war, famine, poverty, environmental destruction, racism and inequality. When we stop to reflect, we feel a responsibility to reach out to brothers and sisters, but we also see how inadequate our resources are.

Thérèse felt a burning desire to respond to all the needs of the world, to serve God in an infinite variety of ways, like the martyrs and the missionaries and the great saints. She felt the longing, the frustration and the restlessness of the human heart. But, reading St Paul (1 Cor 12, 13), she saw that without love, all of these activities, however exalted, would be worthless. The answer to our infinite longings lies in love:

I've found my vocation, and my vocation is love. I've discovered where it is that I belong in the Church, the niche God has appointed for me. To be nothing else than love deep down in the heart of Mother Church; that's to be everything at once¹.

Two things follow from this insight. The first is that ‘being love’ makes unceasing demands, even in the smallest, apparently trivial, things. She responded to those demands with such generosity that the sister whom she found most irritating was sure Thérèse found her company especially pleasant; those who behaved insensitively or ungraciously towards her were never reproached or even embarrassed. This was, for her, part of the same love which was shown by the martyrs and the missionaries. Through her Jesus was continuing to love them:

Always, when I act as charity bids, I have this feeling that it is Jesus who is acting in me; the closer my union with him, the greater my love for all the sisters without distinction².

The second thing that follows is that we are called to live fully and wholeheartedly here in the present moment. Our call does not lie in fantasies about all the great things that one might do in some impossible dream. The challenge to love as Jesus loves is here and now; it endlessly calls us to do more. We must not let the apparent ordinariness of our lives blind us to that challenge. Thérèse meditated about the great variety of people, the great saints, people for whom everything seemed easy, people who never heard of Christ. Then she saw that the little flowers are part of God's plan as well:

I realised that all the flowers he has made are beautiful, the rose in its glory, the lily in its whiteness, don't rob the tiny violet of its sweet smell, or the daisy of its charming simplicity... Perfection consists simply in doing his will, and being just what he wants us to be... The sun's light, that plays on cedar trees, plays on each tiny flower as if it were the only one in existence; and in the same way our Lord takes a special interest in each soul as if there were no other like it³.

To be a little flower is not to be merely decorative; it means trying to show in ordinary things the same heroic love by which the martyrs gave their lives.

¹ ST THÉRÈSE, *The Autobiography of a Saint*, [AS] tr. R. Knox, Fontana 1958, p.186.

² AS, p.209.

³ AS, p.26f.

THE SILENCE OF GOD

Pope John Paul says of the modern world: "Our age speaks of the silence or absence of God"⁴. The words come in a Letter about St John of the Cross, whom he described as Thérèse's "true spiritual master"⁵.

In the face of the suffering in the world, in the face of the mystery of death, in the face of the drift away from religious belief and practice, people struggle to make sense of their lives. Worse still, the plunge into a buzz of activity, leaving the fundamental question of meaning unanswered.

What could a young nun have to say to this search for meaning? Very often the question of meaning is raised starkly by the tragic death of a young person.

On Good Friday 1895, when she was not yet 22, Thérèse realised that she was dying of tuberculosis. She faced the prospect with faith, even with joy. But her passage into eternal life was not to be an easy one. The last two years of her life were filled with darkness.

She tells how the darkness seemed to find a voice to mock her faith:

You really believe, do you, that the mist which hangs about you will clear later on? All right, all right, go on longing for death! But death will make nonsense of your hopes; it will mean a night darker than ever, the night of mere non-existence⁶.

She felt separated from the invisible world of God's grace not merely by a veil, but by 'a great wall which reaches up to the sky and blots out the stars'. But through that ordeal, she continued to turn to God: 'The only thing I want badly now is to go on loving till I die of love'⁷.

St John of the Cross taught that, 'Even the experience of his absence can communicate faith, love and hope to one who humbly and meekly opens himself to God'⁸.

The faith that she continued to show in the darkness of her last years reveals the secret of her heroic love. It was her unshakeable entrusting of everything to God:

In the evening of this life, I will appear before you with empty hands, because I do not ask you to weigh up my achievements. All our good deeds are tainted in your sight. I want, therefore, to be clothed in your justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself. I seek no other throne, and no other crown, than you, my Beloved One⁹.

Those who are searching, those finding it hard to hear the still small voice of God, can find in St Thérèse a model who has humbly and meekly opened herself to God in what she called 'the darkness in which my soul is blindfolded'¹⁰.

Those who are concerned about relatives and friends who seem to have lost sight of the hope God offers can be confident, if they pray to St Thérèse, that they are seeking the intercession of someone who knows the struggle to turn with trust to God even when all seems dark.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Master in Faith* [MF] (Letter for the Fourth Centenary of the Death of St John of the Cross), 14.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Divini Amoris Scientia* (Proclaiming St Therese a Doctor of the Church) 9.

⁶ AS, p. 201.

⁷ AS, p. 202.

⁸ MF, 15.

⁹ ST THERÈSE, *Act of Offering to the Merciful Love of God*.

¹⁰ AS, p. 201.

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH

At the beginning of a new century and a new millennium we find the earth being shrunk by the communications revolution. We are in immediate contact with the whole planet in a way that was never true in the past. That world is inhabited by millions of people who have never heard the Good News. Population is increasing in places where Christianity has never been widespread. Most Christians are now to be found outside Europe. 'The greatest challenge facing the Church'¹¹ is to bring the Gospel to this changing world.

Thérèse keenly sensed the need to bring the Gospel to those who had never heard it. When she first entered the convent, she hoped she might be sent to a Carmelite house in Vietnam, but her health did not allow it. She would have loved to travel all over the world making the Lord's name known¹². Without leaving her convent, she prayed for the spreading of the Gospel. She supported two missionary priests by her prayers and by her letters, Father Adolphe Roulland who worked in China and Father Maurice Bellière who worked in what is now Malawi. In her first letter to Maurice, while he was still a seminarian, she encouraged him in his missionary vocation and said:

I am asking Jesus that you be not only a *good* missionary but a *saint* all on fire with the love of God and souls. I beg you to obtain also for me this love so that I may help you in your apostolic work. You know that a Carmelite who would not be an apostle would separate herself from the goal of her vocation and would cease to be a daughter of the Seraphic Saint Teresa, who desired to give a thousand lives to save a single soul.

Surrounded as we are with declining vocations and declining Mass attendance, we could easily be absorbed in a kind of pessimism. Thérèse, living an enclosed life and suffering greatly towards the end, could very easily have become self-absorbed. But even her approaching death was taken up into her missionary spirit. She wrote to Fr Roulland:

Ah, Brother, I shall be more useful to you in heaven than on earth, and it is with joy that I announce to you my coming entrance into that blessed city, sure that you will share my joy and thank the Lord for giving me the means of helping you more effectively in your apostolic works.

At the beginning of the Church, to be a missionary was 'considered the normal outcome of Christian living, to which every believer was committed'¹³. This autumn we will celebrate *Mission Alive!*, recalling the extraordinary missionary history of our country and looking forward to a new missionary outreach in the future. St Thérèse prompts us to listen more seriously to Pope John Paul's repeated 'summons to the new evangelisation':

...we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost¹⁴.

The visit of the relics of St Thérèse to the diocese will, I have no doubt, be a time of great devotion and grace. It is important that we do not miss the challenges which the life of a young nineteenth century nun poses so sharply to our lives in the twenty-first century.

+Donal Murray
June 2001

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio* [RM] (On the Missions), 40.

¹² AS, 184.

¹³ RM, 27.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Close of the Great Jubilee), 40.



PRAYER TO SAINT THÉRÈSE

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus,
teach us to follow your way
of confidence and trust.

Help us to realise that
a Father's love watches over us
each day of our lives.

Obtain for us the light to see,
in sorrow as in joy,
in trials as in peace,
the loving hand of our Father.

Give us your own faith and trust,
so that we may walk in darkness,
as in the light, holding fast
to the way of love,
knowing as you did,
that everything is a grace.

St Thérèse,
Patroness of the Missions,
pray for us



Mural by Seán Keating
Church of St Therèse
Mount Merrion Co Dublin