



THE BISHOP OF LEEDS

Pastoral Letter in Preparation for the Visit of the Relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux to the Diocese of Leeds

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

At the beginning of October the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux, so well known as the Little Flower, will come to our Cathedral in Leeds and remain with us from Saturday the 3rd to Monday the 5th. I suspect that you will have read or seen in the papers something of the effect her visit is already having in other parts of the country. During her days with us in Leeds the Cathedral will become a "*little Lisieux*," - a shrine to one of the most remarkable and well-loved saints in the history of the Church.

St Thérèse was born in France in 1873. She was the youngest of nine children. Her father and mother, Louis and Zélie Martin, whose cause for canonisation is presently under consideration, were loving parents and extremely devoted to their family. Sadly, four of their children died in childhood and, at the tender age of four, Thérèse lost her mother from cancer. It was shortly after this tragedy that the family made their home in Lisieux; and it was there that Thérèse received her vocation to dedicate her life to God as a Carmelite nun. You will realise that we are fortunate enough in this diocese to have these same Carmelite sisters with us at Wood Hall near Wetherby.

As a young girl, Thérèse was resolute about what God wanted of her. She pestered the local bishop and even the Pope and, eventually in 1888, she entered the Carmel in Lisieux at the youthful age of fifteen.

It was there that Thérèse climbed the ladder of holiness. She learned the importance of patience and perseverance and was captivated by the power of prayer and the beauty of the Gospel. Above all, she came to experience an intensely deep and personal relationship with Jesus. Her way of loving and following Jesus became known as the "*Little Way*" - a simple path of discipleship grounded in trustful surrender to God's mercy and love. In her own

words, *the Little Way*” means “*to recognise our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father.*”

Saint Thérèse was so intensely in love with Jesus and the Gospel that she desired with all her heart and even dreamed about becoming a missionary like Saint Paul – to travel throughout the world and tell everyone about the beauty and the greatness of God’s love and mercy. On her deathbed, she promised to spend her time in heaven doing good on earth. The visit of her relics to many countries throughout the world has seen something of the fulfilment of that promise. She has become a modern day missionary - exercising a most amazing influence and speaking to the hearts of all who come into contact with her. No wonder she was declared by the Pope to be the Patron Saint of the Missions. In her passionate desire to be a missionary, and her frustration in not being able to be so, she came to realise that the special vocation God had given her was “*to be love at the heart of the Church.*” Many people are called in life to do all sorts of things that seem to be so important, but nothing is as important as being “*love at the heart of the Church.*” She wrote in her diary, “*I was still being tormented by this question of unfulfilled longings ... when I decided to consult Saint Paul’s letters. The Apostle explains that all the gifts of heaven, even the most perfect of them, without love, are absolutely nothing; charity is the best way of all, because it leads straight to God. I cried out ‘ Jesus, my love! I have found my vocation... to be nothing else than love at the heart of Mother Church; that is to be everything at once – my dream wasn’t a dream after all.*”

This “*being love at the heart of the Church*” was to cost her greatly. She began to struggle with grave doubts and found it difficult even to pray. She suffered poor health due to tuberculosis and had to endure excruciating pain, so much so that she was tempted to end her own life. But with great courage and faithfulness she gave herself over to Jesus, just as she was, believing that even in these terrible difficulties she was experiencing was a grace on offer that would achieve something even greater. Finally, after suffering with such love, united with Jesus on the Cross, she died at the age of twenty-four in 1897, her short life full of heavenly promise.

Her fame rapidly spread across the world especially through the publication of her spiritual autobiography, “*The Story of a Soul.*” In that work we find that, despite her young age, she knew much of

the difficulties of life and the destructive temptations that come our way, and she constantly points us toward the way of love. Her holiness and heroic virtue were quickly acknowledged by the Church in 1925 at her canonisation; and the importance of her spiritual teaching – her little way - was confirmed when she was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II. She has become for countless people a sure guide towards the way of holiness; and vast numbers have found her to be a faithful companion in praying for them and helping them along their way through life towards God.

The visit of St Thérèse's relics to the diocese is a special occasion and a very great honour. She comes as a modern day missionary to remind us of many things but, not least, that it is possible even for the most fragile human being, despite all the struggles, doubts and temptations - whatever they may be - to become a saint where we are. Her visit is a call to holiness - an invitation and a timely reminder to us all to seek and live for God. I tell you now that she will attract believer and un-believer alike and do the most remarkable things amongst us. Above all, as we come into her presence, she will pray for us and seek for us the things we most deeply desire; she will show us how to follow Jesus and how to become *"love at the heart of the Church."*

It is with great confidence in the power of this young but very great saint that I invite you to come to the Cathedral and venerate her relics, asking her intercession for yourself, for those you love, for the Church and for the world. I pray that she, together with her parents, will obtain for all of us abundant blessings.

Devotedly yours in Christ,
And with my blessing,



✠Arthur Roche
Bishop of Leeds