

Relics' visit affirms evangelisation and sanctity of life

Bishop Malcolm McMahon

Twenty-two venues across England and Wales, including Aylesford Priory in Kent, the National Shrine of Our Lady in Walsingham, Westminster Cathedral and York Minster, will host the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux during September and October next year. In an exclusive interview with The Catholic Herald, Bishop Malcolm McMahon (Nottingham), who is Chair of the Bishops' Conference Department for Evangelisation and Catechesis and one of the bishop patrons of the visit of the relics, explains why the bishops have initiated this event.

During the last 15 years, the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux have visited 40 countries in all five continents, and millions of people have prayed beside them and experienced many graces of healing, conversion and vocation. Affectionately known as 'The Little Flower', this young girl seemingly achieved nothing in worldly terms during her lifetime, and yet just 28 years after her death, she was declared a saint, 'Patroness of the Missions', later becoming a 'Doctor of the Church'. Her appeal is universal and she is famed as a powerful intercessor.

In February 2008 the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales announced that her earthly remains were to visit our two countries in autumn 2009 as a source of renewal and blessing.

The focus of the visit is not so much St Thérèse herself, but Jesus Christ; the relics serve to signpost people to the story of how one person's life was transformed through an encounter with Jesus – His unconditional love and mercy. In the footsteps of St. Thérèse, all of our lives can be transformed if we so desire it and allow Jesus to work within us. As such, the Bishops' vision was that the relics' tour of England and Wales will serve to provide many opportunities for Spirit-filled encounters and for evangelisation – explicit proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

All those people who want to draw closer to God are invited to come along to a participating venue. There are many people in our countries searching for God and St. Thérèse is a good patron for them because she spent many days and months in a wilderness where she herself was searching; she was a spiritual seeker who posed spiritual questions and actively sought truth in her life. Her journey wasn't passive, but passionate and heart-felt. Even though she thought that she had found God at times, for much of her life she felt alone and isolated. In this sense and others, she is therefore a good role model not just for Catholic 'seekers', but people of all faiths and none who looking for direction, purpose and meaning.

In today's world, when we are seeking to go somewhere, many of us use electronic devices to help us find our way. In the spiritual life, St. Thérèse signposts us to our heavenly destination by the 'Little Way'. You don't need expensive equipment or specialist skills, but simply to aspire to fill your day with small acts of love. Holiness often seems to be something remote and yet she teaches us that we can become saints by taking small steps, be that humbly making a cup of tea for someone with whom we work, or through almsgiving. There are many roads to holiness, there are many ways in our daily lives to evangelise and no one size fits all. Of course central to this path is prayer.

As 'Patroness of the Missions' she reminds us that it is the task of us all to go and teach the Gospel as Our Lord commanded us to. During her life she offered her sufferings for the work of mission and the spreading of the Gospel to all corners of the earth. She offered her illness, by uniting herself to the sufferings of Jesus, for

missionaries. This is one of the reasons why the sick are being especially invited to visit the relics. She also reminds us that whatever our state in life, even if we're unable to make big gestures, we can be bearers of God's love and mercy through a humble life if we surrender all that we are to Jesus.

On another level, the sacramentality of the relics serves to emphasise the dignity of human life, the sacredness of our human body. In some sectors of our society, bodies today are not treated with much respect; we see this in legislation, in individuals' choices in life when bodies are regarded almost as another possession or must-have item. In the midst of that, we have an important counter-cultural message to share. In the Catholic Faith the body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit and is to be venerated and treated with reverence even after death. The relics help to remind us that bodies do matter and that we have a duty to respect life. No doubt, 'The Little Flower' is supporting us in our proclamation of this truth through her prayers.

Relics have a role to play in the life and mission of the Church yesterday, today and in the future. Catholicism is very much a 'touchy feely' religion. We express truths through signs, symbols, physical things, through touching; these things are an affirmation of our sacramental theology which is based on the truth that God made Himself present to us through the human body in His Son, Jesus Christ. In venerating St. Thérèse's relics we are reminded of this truth and that the Spirit of God is present in our bodies and transforms us from within. We can experience and touch God in and through the natural world. Sanctity can therefore leave its mark on the physical, providing us with an opportunity to touch the divine. Of course, the summit of the Christian life, of our sacramental theology, is the Eucharist.

I would therefore like to extend a welcome to everyone in this country to come along to our cathedrals, churches and centres of pilgrimage where the relics will be hosted. Do find out where your nearest venue is and maybe help to organise a coach. We welcome people of all faiths and none to come and pray. Each venue will make available the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a source of spiritual and inner healing and wholeness. You are warmly invited to come and see."

For more information please see www.catholicrelics.org.uk. The visit is being funded by donations; cheques to help defray the costs are welcome and should be made payable to 'CATEW', marked 'Relics Visit' on the back and sent to: Mgr Keith Barltrop, The National Coordinator, Relics Visit, 39 Eccleston Square, London. SW1V 1BX.

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