

KEITH BARLTROP

Through the visible to the invisible

The relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux will be travelling around England and Wales in a year's time. Some people are puzzled by the survival of this form of devotion, but it is deeply rooted in the Catholic faith and has a power to reach out to spiritual seekers

A friend of mine recently spent the whole of a three-hour train journey talking to someone of no particular religious persuasion about her conviction that she regularly sees angels. Such offbeat fascinations may strike us as weird, but they are closer to the heartbeat of spiritual life in Britain today than we may care to recognise. Similarly, the journey made around the country last year by John Lennon's piano, to say nothing of the obsession with Princess Diana memorabilia, suggests how much a physical connection with those loved and admired matters to people. And objects associated with holy people may generate interest where no amount of sermons or articles has succeeded.

Pilgrimage, too, is a big draw for people today, and this is a kind of pilgrimage in reverse, whereby a holy person comes to us rather than we to them.

That is why the visit of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux to England and Wales next year has been conceived as an opportunity to reach out to spiritual seekers of all faiths or none, who may actually be far more open to such things than we realise.

But it is above all an opportunity for catechetical and spiritual preparation for Catholics, based on the obvious themes arising from the life and message of the saint. For some in the Church today, relics are a thing of the past, an unwelcome reminder of a superstitious age and one in which clerics were not above trading in holy objects. What have the relics of saints, even a much-loved one such as St Thérèse, to do with the concerns of people today such as the environment and world poverty? Is this some ill-conceived attempt to revive an age of Catholic triumphalism?

Far from it. As one bishop reflecting on the visit of St Thérèse of Lisieux's relics to Ireland in 2001 put it, "What the casket contained was not a bundle of bones, but the remains of a burnt-out love for God."

Veneration of relics is a sign of the incar-

national nature of Catholic faith. The report "On the Way to Life", commissioned by the Catholic Education Service from James Hanvey SJ and Tony Carroll ST of Heythrop College's Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, refers to what it calls the Catholic "sacramental imagination", which it links with the emphasis in today's culture on the visual and tangible. This suggests that relics can help us to draw close to God with our hearts and bodies as well as our heads, and thus strengthen our faith in the invisible.

With attention focusing recently on the proposed transfer of Cardinal Newman's body from his chosen resting place to Birmingham Oratory, prior to his beatification, questions are naturally raised about leaving the bodies of saints in peace. Yet for St Thérèse the visits of her relics to nearly 40 countries around the world to date fulfil in a remarkable way her extraordinary desire "to travel over the whole earth to preach Your Name and to plant Your glorious Cross on infidel soil. But O my Beloved, one mission alone would not be sufficient for me, I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages."

Wherever her relics have travelled, this desire has borne fruit in graces of conversion, healing, both physical and spiritual, and the discovery of vocation. For this to happen in our own country, it is important that explanation and catechetical preparation take place about relics in general, but more importantly about the message of St Thérèse. The group organising the visit has identified five themes that seem appropriate for this.

First, the obvious theme of holiness of life. This was the resounding call of *Lumen Gentium*, the "universal call to holiness", but also of Pope John Paul II's pastoral plan outlined in "Novo Millennio Ineunte", where he contrasts a kind of pastoral planning based on human effort and insight alone with that which



St Thérèse of Lisieux: 'I will be a missionary ... from the beginning of Creation until the consummation of the ages'

respects the primacy of grace. St Thérèse's "Little Way of Spiritual Childhood" offers an approach to holiness which, when properly understood, is thoroughly modern, indeed postmodern, in its appeal to all.

Other themes are the importance of prayer, focusing especially on St Thérèse's love for Scripture, and her persevering faith through darkness in prayer; family life as a school of charity, seen especially through the insights of a woman (this resonates particularly with the bishops' initiative Home is a Holy Place); vocation, and evangelisation, remembering that St Thérèse is patroness of the missions.

Mentioning evangelisation may seem risky in this context. Is the climate of secular, multicultural Britain the right one in which to parade the relics of a saint who belongs firmly to one religion, and one often not regarded as much in tune with the tolerance required in a pluralist society?

Our research suggests that, while there will no doubt be a few hostile voices, the great majority of other Christians will be sympathetic to it if it is properly explained. An Anglican priest on the working group had been present at a retreat in France where the relics of St Thérèse were venerated, and though uncertain at first he ended up experiencing deeply the power that such simple sacramental reminders can convey. The ecumenical nature of the visit will be highlighted by a visit to York Minster. As for members of other faiths, it should be remembered that the relics have already visited such countries as Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon and Iraq. Some Muslims actually venerate St Thérèse as "the little saint to whom Allah refuses nothing".

What, then, will actually happen during the relics' tour of England and Wales, and how can we make the most of it? The relics –

actually just a few of St Thérèse's bones, contained in a large, heavy casket for reasons of security – will arrive at Portsmouth in the middle of September 2009 and will travel around the country for a month, taking in cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Nottingham, where they will be based for one or two days in cathedrals or smaller churches. They will also visit a few Carmelite monasteries, a prison and a hospice for the dying, as well as Aylesford, Walsingham and Westminster Cathedral.

The accent in each venue will be on enabling as many as possible to venerate the relics, which they may do in any way they wish, perhaps by touching or kissing the casket, or by simple silent prayer. People may have a particular intention in mind for themselves, their dear ones or for the nation or the Church as a whole. Mass will be offered in each venue, and in many cases special events such as an all-night vigil.

The visit is for everyone, but three groups will be kept specially in mind: the sick, bearing in mind the part that severe illness played in St Thérèse's life; the young, for whom her story is powerful; and the lapsed and non-Christians. We are all concerned about the lapsed, but often lack suitable opportunities to invite them to church. The visit of the relics is a perfect opportunity.

Preparation for the visit could include reading St Thérèse's own words and literature about her. The website of the relics tour – www.catholicrelics.co.uk – as well as giving details about the itinerary, provides a host of background information and suggestions for further reading or internet searching, including a mention of the superb site www.thereeoflisieux.org, which contains enough material for a lifetime. The Catholic Truth Society will be producing a special booklet next year to enable all to get as much out of the visit as possible.

St Thérèse's message is simple yet profound, and new in ways that have not yet been fully explored. Her well-known sayings, "In the evening of this brief day, I shall appear before you with empty hands", or "One can never have too much confidence in the good God", can nourish the spiritual life of all. Yet if we wish to go deeper, there is ample room to explore. Hans Urs von Balthasar claims that she revolutionised the very idea of contemplation, transforming it from the neo-Platonic "flight of the alone to the alone", which characterises the Church Fathers, into a vision of it as the highest form of activity and the source of all fruitfulness in the Church, a view which sheds light on her famous prediction that she would spend her heaven doing good on earth.

Not for nothing has she been declared a Doctor of the Church. Her poverty conceals immense riches showered on a little one by the good God. How much of that we take to ourselves next year depends largely on us.

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