

**Two homilies on St. Thérèse of Lisieux
delivered at Aylesford Carmelite Priory in Kent, England,
during the visit of her relics, October 2009**

Surrendering to God's Love
Homily by Very Rev. John Keating, O.Carm.
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What is it about this little saint of the 19th century that can still capture our imagination even today? Why is it that in practically every church in these islands you will find a statute to this young woman, dressed in her familiar brown and cream habit, whose life was hidden away in an obscure Carmelite Monastery in Normandy? And why was it that even to some members of her own community there seemed nothing extraordinary or strikingly obvious of a profound holiness? The answer is simple, one word - love.

Today in this place, central to the history of Carmel, not just in this country but throughout the Carmelite world, I would like to suggest four aspects of that love that we might learn from in our own journey as Christians of the 21st century.

Desire

When you read her story of a soul, it is seasoned with a variety of desires: the childish desires of curiosity concerning the things of God and religion; the earnest desire of a self-willed young girl to enter a Carmelite monastery; and ultimately the desire to follow the path of holiness.

A young woman, born in Alençon in 1873 and died in the Carmel, Lisieux at the age of 24, who would in the end discovered the secret that her desires would not prevail, were they not the loving desire of God. Her Story of a Soul has given us the testimony of an extraordinary life of loving holiness. A holiness that transcends boundaries, of time, of convent walls and golden caskets, prison walls and even ecumenical divides as witnessed these the past few days in York Minister. There are no boundaries to holiness!

The world of today invites us to desire many things, mainly material, in the confident hope that they will bring fulfilment and happiness, Thérèse discovered something very important and very different - that we have to live beyond our personal desires, for these can never totally satisfy. These are too narrow and restrictive and indeed passing. But following the desire of God, horizons open up concerning our true nature and identity, and this is precisely where we will find true happiness and the fullness of life. Living beyond personal selfish desires is the true path to holiness.

Her story is filled with desires: the very longing to be all, to do and be everything, brought her to a new reality about herself. God desires not great deeds but our availability. Her desire to be heroic would bring her to find her way - "I will be love in the heart of the Church." We often speak about "being in love", Love is not fundamentally about doing loving things, but a way of being, seeing and doing with the eyes and heart of the lover. What a wonderful vocation! It too is our calling - each one of us finding our vocation to be love in the heart of our homes, communities, society - this is a little way, but it is a great way. Her path to holiness can also be ours. It is universal - "I have found my place in the Church... my vocation is love". In fact, this young woman did no great deeds hidden away as she was behind her convent walls. She was enclosed not just in restricted physical space, but within the very narrow and rigid society of her day. And even more, she lived within the very narrow confines of a Jansenistic spiritual environment typical of her time, yet she transcends that narrowness to become the Doctor of Love (*Divini amoris scientia*). *Jésus est mon unique amour* - Jesus is my only love, she scratched into the wood in her small room in Lisieux, as Cardinal Basil Hume once recalled. Her heart opened to receive the love God would pour into it. In one of those powerful moments recorded in her story, she describes how she felt the love of God enter her heart.

Struggle

Her life highlights the interior struggle that takes place in each of us - the struggle with God who wants to lead us in the dance of life. The struggle between the desire to do good and the weakness of the flesh, a weakness that seeks to triumph in our moments of frailty. She teaches us that weakness and holiness co-exist, the wheat and the darnel will grow together. Yet, we are not to be discouraged. Today when people face failure, they can feel all has ended, but it is not so with God. Thérèse shows us the soul of one who struggles deeply to believe even in the darkest night, of suffering and pain, which she describes as "a dark tunnel".

Her early life brought its own struggles, the death of her mother when she was only four years of age, the gradual departure of her beloved sisters into Carmel, a period of spiritual trial for eight years, the mental illness of our dear father and the physical pain endured in her body at the end of her life. And above all, when in the final days of her short life she had to struggle to believe when all was dry and without consolation.

I believe this is what makes Thérèse so relevant and universal in the 20th and 21st centuries. Her struggles, despite the short and very different circumstances she faced, are ours also. In the 1940's and 50's her story touched a champion of the New York poor, Dorothy Day by means of a little medal given to her in hospital that would lead Dorothy to a life-long relationship with the saint. A visit to the tomb of Thérèse by the French singer Edith Piaf, as a little girl, would remain with her throughout her tortured life, which was so beautifully expressed in the film *La vie en rose*.

What is it about this little saint the thunders greatness? Faced with the emptiness of all her struggling, she teaches us to sing a song of life. God triumphs within her because Thérèse had grown into a loving relationship with God. Even in God's seeming absence and her inability to pray, she continued without words, she said "I just love him".

Confronted with the walls of division and intolerance, the Christian of today must stand as a witness to the mercy and love. This type of holiness the Vatican Council of the 60's tells "is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth." (LG 40) Throughout her suffering she learnt the power of suffering to bring about transformation and purification. She is not the sweet little saint of plaster statues, but a doctor of love - amidst her suffering.

We all struggle - The struggle of institution and individual - the struggle for justice; the struggle just to keep going at times. The struggle that comes in the night and only God knows about, that dislocates our very being and leaves us reeling in pain; "My God, my God, why"? Perhaps, that may be why we are here today!

Ultimately, it is the struggle between the light of self and the transfigured light of the God who on Tabor says this is my beloved Son, listen to him, follow him. Thérèse, meticulously pondered God's word and thus came to know not more about God, but to know God.

Surrender

Ultimately, her only desire was to go beyond the struggle and fear and to trust in God's love and mercy, to surrender, feeling like a child safely playing within the protection of a loving parent. One contemporary writer put it this way, it was a "problem of reconciling the great desire she had to love God and her experience of imperfection and powerlessness. Her little way to holiness is a 'daring surrender' and abandonment to his mercy." (Donna Orsuto, *Holiness*) This secret to holiness, is accessible to all. It is not easy, especially if we feel on our own. But we are not alone. Life calls for a truthfulness in the face of our own reality and limitation. Only God can lead us loving beyond all the limits of this world. In this moment we must surrender and let the Lord lead us - let God's will be done. Literally, she had to throw herself on the mercy of God. To use the phrase of the mystic Adrienne von Speyr "littleness absorbed into holiness".

Peace

This visit of the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux to England and Wales is a very special moment. It is not about bones in a box - it is about the call to each one of us to holiness - to be other saints. Saints are models, teachers, witnesses.... Thérèse herself describes them as levers that have "lifted the world" (Ms C36v).

We come here today with many desires, struggles and pains, and indeed many intentions. My experience of the visit of the relics to Ireland was that lives were touched and hearts lifted. [Just one simple story: I met a religious sister who worked with drug addicts here in Britain and had gone to visit the relics in Ireland to pray for one particular young woman. In our church she happened to sit beside a friend of mine whose young daughter had just died of cancer. This friend had come with the pain of her loss, but seeing the sister beside her without a rose, she offered her the rose that was in memory of her daughter. The sister took the rose offered to her to bring back to the young addict as a gift, not from an unknown woman beside her but from Thérèse. Neither of the two women met or knew each other's story. By chance I met them separately afterwards and heard their stories. Unknowingly, two hearts were moved that day. We might say coincidence, but moments like these are special and mysterious.]

What does God desire of us today? What struggles must we endure to ensure the victory of God in our fragmented and highly secular reality, one that is gradually forgetting its God? It is not policies, or politics, or programmes or even economics that will change the world we live in. What can silently touch hearts and bring it peace but God's love shining through our human weakness! It is the power of holiness. This little saint enables us to perceive a little way to holiness that is accessible. It is obvious that Thérèse still speaks to our world. Just look around you. Unlike a pilgrimage to a holy place, she has come to visit us. What mysterious rose might be handed to us today? Thérèse was aware of her weaknesses. St. Paul reminds us "when I am weak then I am strong." Our saints are those who surrender to God's merciful love. Love is the way to peace and harmony - there is no other way.

**Homily by Most Rev. Fernando Millán Romeral, O.Carm.
Prior General of the Carmelite Order
Sunday 11th October 2009**



When I visit a country, a Carmelite community somewhere, one of our schools or parishes around the world, I use to begin my talk or my homily saying that it is a great pleasure, a privilege and a great honour to be here – and most of the time that is true. It is always nice to visit our brothers or sisters (friars, nuns, lay Carmelite groups) and to share with them the word of God on a special occasion. Many times that has happened here in Aylesford over the past two years, in such a special place for the Carmelites. It is always an honour and a privilege to be in the place where, according to the tradition, Our Lady of Mount Carmel gave Saint Simon Stock the holy Scapular, a tender loving sign of protection and help. This place is very special especially for us Carmelites.

But, to be here today is not just a privilege and an honour, it is a real grace. The relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux are visiting Britain after being in so many other countries. During the last few days we have seen thousands of people visiting them, venerating them, accompanying them in processions or just praying in front of them, in silence and in a spirit of recollection.

Joyfully we can say that the visit has been a great success and I congratulate the Church here in England and Wales, the Carmelites, the organizers and everyone who has been involved in this visit.

But we must ask ourselves: when we say that the visit has been a great success... what does it mean? What is "success" for us? If we speak in terms of numbers of people, crowds and so on, there can be no doubt that it was successful. If we talk in terms of organization there is no doubt either. But there are two ways to understand this expression "great success" that I consider very important and that I want to share with you:

- The first one is that many people have found during this visit and in these wonderful celebrations a good occasion to renew, to re-find, or even to discover their faith. Little Thérèse, a young and humble cloister nun who lived in the North of France at the end of the Nineteenth Century, didn't write long volumes of theology, and she died quite young after two years of suffering... Little Thérèse has something special. She inspires us with the freshness of the Gospel; she teaches us how to live it more profoundly, in a committed, beautiful and honest way. This is the real success of this visit. I have been very touched during these days when someone comes to me and says "Father, I went to confession after 20 or 30 years", or "I got the grace to forgive somebody or to ask someone's forgiveness".

This is the real "shower of roses", the shower of grace that Thérèse spoke about. This is not (or it shouldn't be) superstition, or idolatry, or religious folklore, or sentimentality, or something of the kind. Thérèse points very clearly to the very heart of the Gospel, that is: to love, to respect, to forgiveness, to tenderness, to compassion, to be more understanding of the needs of the people around us... to be day-by-day more human.

In the first reading today we have heard to talk about real wisdom that is more important than silver or gold, more than health or beauty. Thérèse received that wisdom reserved to the poor ones, to the humble ones, to the simple ones.

- The second success is no less important. Many have underlined the ecumenical importance of this visit. Not only Catholics, but also Anglicans, Methodists, Buddhists, and people without religious affiliation... came to visit the relics. There is something so basic, so fundamental, so essential in the message of Thérèse that many people, no matter what their religious confession, feel she has something to say to them.

Perhaps (among many other elements of her spiritual teaching) we find with Thérèse that God is not a God of fear, a God of implacable Justice, a God before whom we feel afraid. When Thérèse listened to talk of the justice of God, instead of being sad and fearful... she was quite happy: "God knows how weak we are!" When Thérèse was writing this, in France there was still a very strong influence from Jansenism. That was a religious group or movement, with very good people and very committed Christians, who were worried about the level and the quality of religious life in France. They were asking for a greater seriousness, more commitment, and they were always stressing the justice of God and the gravity of sin. That is fine and there is nothing wrong with it. But, Jansenism forgotten the key point, the essential element, the basis of the Gospel and Christian life is not rules, justice, norms for punishment... but that it is about grace,

love, mercy and freedom. That is the secret of Thérèse; that is perhaps also the secret of her success.

It is something more than fulfil the law, it is a love story. It is about loving God, and especially about feeling loved by Him. The young man in the Gospel was a quite good religious person. He fulfilled the law and the religious rules, and he wanted to be good. But he didn't put God at the very centre of his heart.

That is why, when we look at the life of Thérèse, when we listen to her message, we get the impression that she is directing us to the very heart of the Gospel.

If, after this visit we are a little bit closer to the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ; if we have been able to forgive somebody; if we have decided to remove from our hearts hatred and prejudice; if we trust more in God, even when we are suffering; if we are ready to feel the love of God in our lives... if only one person has received that message and is willing to live it... the visit has been a great, great success, and we can say that it was worthy to bring the relics of this Carmelite to this country. I am sure that not only one person, but a lot of people today are a little bit closer to God, and so a bit closer to others around them. I am sure that we all have grown these days in faith, in humanity, in tenderness in solidarity...

THANK YOU, LITTLE THÉRÈSE, FOR BEING WITH US. YOU SAID THAT YOU WOULDN'T BE PASSIVE IN HEAVEN, BUT VERY ACTIVE. PLEASE, INTERCEDE FOR US, FOR OUR FAMILIES, FOR OUR COUNTRIES, FOR PEACE AROUND THE WORLD. INTERCEDE ESPECIALLY FOR ALL THOSE WHO SUFFER, ALL THOSE WHO ARE SICK AND LONELY, ALL THOSE WHO NEED MORE OF OUR LOVE AND OUR PRAYER... AMEN