

**WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, MASS OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE VISIT OF THE
RELICS OF SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, THURSDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2009**

Celebrant and Preacher, the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, and President of the Bishop's Conference of England and Wales - together with a priest representative from every place visited by the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux, 1873-1897, Doctor of the Church, during a month long public tour of England and Wales, that commenced in Portsmouth RC Cathedral on Wednesday, 16 September 2009.

***“AS MESSENGERS OF CHRIST, IT IS NOT EFFECTIVENESS WE SEEK; IT IS
FRUITFULNESS”***

Homily as delivered by Archbishop Vincent Nichols:

Over the past 28 days, thousands upon thousands of people have thronged to pray in the presence of these precious relics of St Thérèse. **It has been for us an extremely uplifting experience in all the places they have visited.** Today, as we prepare to return these relics to Lisieux, we thank God for the graces and blessings we have received. This has been a time of such wonderful expressions of faith and love in which we have been strengthened and filled with joyful encouragement.

This outpouring of faith has baffled many people. Some secular commentators have not been able to make sense of it all. I have found their incomprehension quite intriguing. Other reports have simply described what was there to be seen: so many people finding encouragement, perseverance and hope through the example and prayers of this most remarkable of young women. But surely they can see, unless they refuse to do so, her testimony to the spiritual dimension of human living, a dimension which takes us beyond that which can be measured and lifts human reasonableness to new levels, **until it** flowers in heroism, sacrifice and perseverance **in great difficulties.**

For many, these days have been a time of conversion; for some they have been a time of appreciating again the value of relics as an ancient expression of our faith in God's transforming presence in the midst of our human failures. The sense of

uneasiness felt even by some Catholics can itself be a grace, prompting us to trust more readily in the closeness of God to each of us.

The real meaning of relics is, of course, that they are but a sign, a token of the holy life of this much-loved saint. They are God's way of opening our hearts to his unwavering love. We do well to draw all the encouragement we can from this time of grace.

Today we ponder on what happens next. Where do we go from here? What do we learn from Thérèse of our mission [here](#) today? How do we in our turn, speak of the Gospel to this society of [which we are part of](#)?

We must remember that St Thérèse is the Patron Saint of the Missions. What an irony that she who never left the cloister of her convent became the patron of every mission, of every 'sending out'! Of course we know of her dream of being a missionary, expressed in the words: 'I would like to travel the earth preaching your name...I would be a missionary right up to the end of time,' [she said](#). And we have recalled her wish that she could spend eternity doing good on earth. How true that is and how grateful we are!

There is a profound sense of purpose running through the whole of the life of St Therese. She said that her single desire was 'to love Jesus and to make him loved.' This was her mission statement.

Can it be ours too? Can we, today, truly love Jesus and make him loved?

[Love](#) is the key. Of course, in our mission efforts we need to be clear and reasoned in all we say and do. We need to be well versed in contemporary affairs. Yet Therese teaches us the ancient Christian message: [that](#) without love all our efforts are little more than a 'gong booming or a symbol clashing.'(1 Cor 13.1)

She had her own way of expressing this: 'Finally I understood that love comprises all vocations, that love was everything, that it embraced all times and all places....in a word that it is Eternal.' Then she cried out, 'My vocation is love...Yes, I have found my place in the Church....in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love.'

As often as we listen to these words, well-known and inspiring as they are, we need to remember that they were written in October 1896, nine months before she died.

They were written, then, at a time of anguished pain and suffering. They are not the words of a young romantic, day-dreaming of an ideal future. They are born of abandonment to God, in darkness and desolation. They are, therefore, powerful testimony to the grace of God at work in our weakness, and not to the power of a self-centred romantic imagination. They are words **that can** shape our mission today.

These words speak directly to us today when, as a society, we struggle to understand and respond to the experience of terminal illness and approaching death. In the shortened perspectives of many, such moments are pointless and **they say** actually rob life of all its meaning. Therefore some seek the right to exercise the only solution that is within their own power: that of killing themselves and having others free to assist them to do so.

St Thérèse lived through those **kind of** moments. She too experienced suicidal thoughts of ending the pain and the overpowering sense of futility. She warned the sister who cared for her that when she had patients who were 'a prey to violent pains' she must not 'leave them any medicines that are poisonous.' She added, 'I assure you it needs only a second when one suffers intensely to lose one's reason. Then one would easily poison oneself.'

So Thérèse too lived the tension that many experience today, the tension between her individual, autonomous choice, on the one hand, and, on the other, the bonds which bound her to her community, to her family, to those who cared for her, to life. She argues, as we do today, that reason, in the context of our relationships, must acknowledge life as a gift and not an individual possession and, at the same time, embrace death when it comes.

This is so because the full expression of such reasoning is love seasoned by truth: the bonds of love which truly tie the dying person to those who care **for them**; the love which recognises the true impact on others of every personal action; the love of life itself, as the ultimate gift, and as stretching beyond the immediate horizons to the eternity of God's presence.

Here we see St Thérèse **preaching the** Gospel for our times.

For we live in a time of fragile and disposable relationships whereas she fashioned bonds with her sisters and with the Lord that grew stronger through every trial.

We live in a time in which affectivity and love itself seem to be commercialised and relationships subject to calculations of benefit and loss, and used accordingly. She reminds us that no cost is too high for God's love to meet, and that in love for us God has abandoned every calculation of worth and reward.

We live in a time when each individual must impose himself or herself on every relationship, fashioning it in his or her own likeness. She, on the other hand, teaches us that we find ourselves by living in and through our relationships, and that we find ourselves fully only by abandoning ourselves into the loving embrace of Christ.

In our desire for individual autonomy, we push relationships out of the heart of our living. But she shows us clearly that neither life nor death, certainly not death, has any enduring meaning beyond **relationships of** our belonging to each other and to the Lord.

And so out mission today - The practice of love in every relationship is the heart of our mission, a mission carried out in every action, at every moment. And our mission is here. 'Make love real where you live'. **This** is her invitation.

Hidden in this invitation, and making it come to life, is a single question, addressed to every one of us who wish to share in her mission. The question is this: Do you really want to be close to God? Do you really want to live close to the Lord? Only when we answer with an unequivocal 'Yes!' will our mission be fruitful. As messengers of Christ, it is not effectiveness we seek; it is fruitfulness. And to bear that fruit we must abide in him, remain part of him, be with him one vine.

Now, as we continue with this Mass, we prepare for the moment in which these precious relics will leave. **So let us** again, we open our hearts to the Lord that he may guide our every moment, and fill the reservoir of emptiness within each of us. Then we will be able to accept our mission, our task, in this land today. If we are renewed in this sense of purpose, then these wonderful days of this pilgrimage will bear fruit indeed. Amen.

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