

St Thérèse: a mission of evangelisation

Sr Janet Fearn FMDM

The tour of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux has been an invigorating event for the life of the Catholic Church in this country, but has been met by curiosity and even scepticism in some quarters. Sr Janet Fearn explains the value of the visit as an opportunity for evangelisation, as she recalls her encounters with journalists and pilgrims. How has St Thérèse enabled the many thousands of people who have queued to venerate her relics to become missionaries?

I've just returned from escorting the relics of St Thérèse around the northwest of England: Liverpool, Salford and Lancaster Cathedrals, Manchester University Catholic Chaplaincy and the Preston Carmel monastery.

St Thérèse is the Patroness of the Missions and so the three organisations that are responsible for the care of the home and foreign missions worked together to organise the tour around Britain of her relics: Missio (formerly Pontifical Mission Societies), the Bishops' Conference and CASE (Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation) divided the tour between themselves and so I, on behalf of Missio, headed north with instructions to help produce a daily [blog](#) and [photographic album](#) for the Conference.

It was the experience of a lifetime. Within the space of six days, more than 76,000 people in the northwest alone came to venerate the relics. Among the visitors, there was an outpouring of simple faith and sheer goodness that is so difficult to describe in words. People can identify with Thérèse, a young Carmelite nun who put God first in spite of poor health and who made her way to God through doing little things as perfectly and as lovingly as she could. Most of us



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do not perform great miracles: ours days are filled with unspectacular moments that we face one by one. Thérèse also took one day at a time: she had no visions, heard no supernatural voices, had no fan club and seemed to achieve little by many people's standards in her 24 years of life, nine of which were spent in Carmel.

The tour has attracted a great deal of attention not only from religious media but also from the secular press. I experienced widely differing reactions to the relics and those who came to venerate them from the journalists who were present to cover the tour, and each meeting I had brought out a different dimension of the meaning of the visit.

Interpretation

In Liverpool, the members of a BBC crew reporting for radio and television were Catholics, although I didn't realise it until I began answering their questions – 'Give us something that will help us to make sense of all this to people of all faiths and none' – and saw that all three of us were on the same wavelength. The role of the cameraman and reporter was then one of interpreting for their audience what they had seen themselves – they had to explain the

meaning and significance to a radio and television audience, who might or might not understand why so many people had chosen to spend time before a wooden and gilt casket containing some bones of a long-dead Carmelite nun.

Comparing the relics of St Thérèse to my uncle's war medals, pointing beyond the merely physical to a different kind of reality was a simple comparison, but one that could be readily understood without the need to resort to too much theology. It was a basic way to allow the reporters to communicate to their audience something that may have been very unfamiliar to them, a starting point from which the audience could begin to come to terms with what was happening.

Relevance

A reporter from Wythenshawe Community Radio had a slightly different agenda: 'Yes, I can see what you are saying, but why should the people of Wythenshawe make the effort to visit what are, in effect, a pile of bones in a casket?' was the question posed to me. My reply was an attempt to relate the practice of visiting 'a pile of bones in a casket' to something that would already have had meaning for the listeners: 'But don't they make a point of visiting Manchester's Imperial War Museum and the cemeteries in which their own friends and relatives are buried? Don't they feel closer to those who went before?'

A similar question was asked by a young newspaper journalist in a telephone interview in Lancaster: 'Isn't all this just silly superstition?' 'Not at all! Just come and see the people who are present and see the generosity of the volunteers; those who come long distances; the many in wheelchairs; the sick and suffering; young and old, and you will see that there is nothing superstitious at all. Experience for yourself the incredible atmosphere of warmth and sheer goodness.' A smile entered the journalist's voice as we spoke. Was he a 'Retired Catholic' for whom something, in the course of our conversation, suddenly 'clicked'? He hadn't been aggressive, far from it, but there was a difference between the beginning and the end of the interview. Something had changed.

These two journalists demonstrated through their questioning that mere interpretation and explanation

are insufficient in themselves. It is possible to interpret the whole of the Bible, but unless it touches me personally, it will never invite commitment. It is only when something becomes relevant that I can take my growing understanding one step further and consider something deeper and more meaningful. Both journalists sought a normal, everyday parallel that could convert potential superstition into something rational. They could understand a visit to a museum. Personal reflection and some help from God could take that glimmer of light one stage further. Relevance is one step on the road towards faith.

Evangelisation

Then there were more BBC personnel, but in this case the cameraman and journalist happened to be my young cousin and his girlfriend, neither of them Catholic but both utterly amazed at all they were seeing. The huge crowds waiting to venerate the relics and then to carry them in torchlight procession along one of Manchester's busiest roads were totally alien to them. 'What on earth is happening? Can you explain all this to us, as well as to our audience?'

Whereas the other media personnel had some understanding of Catholicism, these two were people of goodwill and a basic background of Christianity but had no previous involvement with collective faith on such a scale. Their faith position was one step further back than the other journalists. They were seeking to receive something themselves, as well as to pass it on to others. They identified themselves with their audience in such a way that they were themselves the 'fields white for the harvest', the ones looking for evangelisation, rather than the evangelisers. This was, for them, an opportunity to learn something about the Catholic faith, as it was for so many other people in this country. It was also, therefore, a chance for others to teach them, a chance for us to respond to people's intrigue by telling them about our faith; we could all become evangelisers.

Catechesis

On one occasion, it was I who was conducting the interview. On this occasion, the interviewee was Catholic, a volunteer on the tour and a professional print and broadcasting journalist, who knew that the recording would be heard by a predominantly

Catholic audience. 'Let's tell the world what is happening here and let's help to strengthen their faith. Let's bring them into our own experience.' The result was entirely different from any of the other interviews. It was shared faith, a dialogue between believers, aimed at intensifying an already-present commitment. It was true catechesis.

Inevitably, those of us privileged to accompany the relics had a number of opportunities to talk together about our own impressions and experiences. Sometimes a comment was more meaningful than even the speaker realised. One such remark was: 'There has been no real criticism from the media because if they come here, all they will see is goodness. These people are not looking for attention. They are here because they want to be and they have come regardless of what anybody else might think or say.'

The presence of the relics of St Thérèse has given the Catholic community a chance to congregate, and to share and strengthen their faith. In being evangelisers to one another, there has been an overflow: others have been touched and felt compelled to ask questions, observing something completely different from the ordinary. The collective goodness of many thousands of people gathered in one place is definitely extraordinary. As crowds filed past the reliquary, gathered in small groups for refreshments or merely chatted, time and again people commented on the pervading atmosphere of unity, friendship, prayerfulness, mutual concern, generosity and commitment. Thérèse had acted as a catalyst, giving Catholics an excuse to be 'Church' in a way that does not often happen.

Sacrificial generosity

God reveals himself in my life through the circumstances, events and people I encounter in the course of my daily life. So he has shown himself with special clarity in some of those who came to venerate the relics.

For some, this has been a time of new beginnings. One young man, in appearance an unlikely character to associate himself with any Church, stood outside Liverpool Cathedral, admittedly a little awkwardly and not quite as invisible as he might have thought,

whilst a priest in a purple stole gave absolution. May we accompany this young man with our prayers on his journey.

One man in particular brought tears to my eyes. In agony with a ruptured kidney, he signed himself out of hospital for the day, somehow made it as far as Lancaster and sat, sometimes crying with pain, praying, not for himself but for a young soldier who was to have both legs amputated the next day, following an incident in Afghanistan. In spite of his acute pain, this man insisted on standing so that he could give his seat to a woman, refusing to accept that his was the greater need. 'St Thérèse kept me safe to reach here. She will keep me safe until the end of the day.' His face screwed up in acute pain and tears flowing down his cheeks, he continued, 'I have not suffered as much as she did and until my pain is as great as hers, I can keep going.'

People did not recognise limits. 'We were up all night last night and all day today, but we still had to come tonight. We can sleep tomorrow.' These words came from the people responsible for the refreshments, who had taken tea and biscuits at 2am to those waiting in the chilly roads outside the cathedral in Salford. 'We didn't want them to think they were forgotten', one lady remarked.

Pope Paul VI wrote:

The Christian community is never closed in upon itself. The intimate life of this community ... only acquires its full meaning when it becomes a witness... Thus it is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual member is important for the whole. (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* §15)

His words describe so well my experience of the visit of the relics of St Thérèse to England and Wales:

Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good... questions will arise ... evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization. (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* §21)

Pilgrimage and Eucharist

Human beings have always made pilgrimages to places perceived as 'holy'. During the past month, England and Wales has undertaken a two-way pilgrimage: Thérèse has 28 locations on her itinerary, but, simultaneously, people have also travelled, often experiencing great difficulty, in order to be part of this migration towards holiness.

To group everything together under a single word, 'pilgrimage', is somewhat simplistic. Unfortunately, I know of no other word in the English language that will unite the concepts of journey, self-sacrifice, generosity, kindness, goodness, concern, prayer, community and celebration. My personal reaction always returns to 'Eucharist' as the only word that seems to express the experience of recent days.

Among the thousands who have come together, the Eucharist has been celebrated in the Mass, but also in the visible, physical reality that has pointed far beyond the shuffling lines of people to a sense of unity in God. Jesus was truly present in his people, gathered together in prayer. He was not visible and yet he was tangibly in the midst of his Church. The gathering of such crowds was, as it were, a remote

preparation for the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, but was also a concrete sign of the effect of the Eucharist in their lives. How does one separate cause and effect on such an occasion?

The visit of the relics of St Thérèse has been far more of an exercise of mission and evangelisation than anybody had ever expected. Instead of the beautiful and meaningful homilies given in the liturgical celebrations, the real evangelisation has taken place among the ordinary people. Even the most cynical media personnel have been forced to say, 'See how they love one another'.

St Thérèse always wanted to be a missionary. The primary role of a missionary is one of evangelisation. At this present time, the missionaries and evangelisers are in our midst if we but open our eyes and gaze at the people around us. We have 'a treasure, not made of gold', but of the simple human hearts of the people of this country. 'Let us rejoice and be glad!'

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