

A Quiet Revolutionary

by Bishop Hugh Gilbert

The Background to the Visit this weekend to Edinburgh of the Relics of St Therese

It is 25 years since the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux began touring the world. England and Wales were honoured with their presence in 2009, Ireland in 2018. Now Scotland has opened its door. The relics will arrive in the country from Lisieux today (August 30) and remain there until September 20, visiting each of the eight dioceses of Scotland. For more details, see littleflowerinscotland.co.uk/news.

The veneration of relics might seem one of those zany, even macabre things which mark out Catholic (and Orthodox) Christianity. It has Scriptural warrant, though: the cloak of Elijah, the shadow of Peter and the handkerchiefs of St Paul. And seen through the lens of the Incarnation and the Eucharist, it begins to make sense. It fits well with those articles of the Creed: the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. When we venerate relics, we venerate a person, one who lived holiness in a bodily life and will rise from the dead embodied again. The coming of a saint's relics is an opportunity to meet them. It is St Thérèse herself who will be visiting Scotland.

Her life can read like a classic Victorian feminine tragedy, transferred to a French Catholic milieu. She lost her mother when she was four. Her father was incapacitated from the time she was 16 and died when she was 21. Due to the constraints of her religious life, she could never visit him in his last years. Her schooling was largely unhappy. Home life was marked not just by the absence of a mother, but also the progressive departures of her older sisters for the religious life. There would be no nieces and nephews. A few years after her own entry in Carmel at 15, tuberculosis declared itself, ending her life in agony at 24. "If you but knew what this young nun is suffering," said her doctor.

It does not seem much of a life: short, limited in scope and opportunity, marked by a full measure of grief. But there was something else afoot in this young woman: an inner luminosity and originality, deep experience of Christ and a flame of love for God which transfigured everything and matured her beyond her years. Her last words, "My God, I love you", were the sign of victory.

She lived in a creative synergy with Christ, and this conferred a completeness and integrity on her which defy the usual canons. "Being perfected in a short time, [she] fulfilled long years" (Wisdom 4:13).

Quietly revolutionary in her attitudes, she broke new paths and her posthumous impact proved vast. She was one of those "mere children" to whom the Father



St Thérèse of Lisieux's relics will tour Scotland from today

revealed the kingdom (*cf* Matthew 11:25), and the humble of the earth have responded.

Her autobiography has passed into more than 60 languages. She has generated reams of research and reflection. She has found her place in the Liturgy. Dedications abound. She has inspired new impulses in consecrated and apostolic life. Her intercession has been sensed as powerful and many attribute their vocations to her. She has had an impact on the arts. She feels close.

Thérèse was beatified in 1923, canonised in 1925, declared co-patron of the missions in 1927 and designated Doctor of the Church in 1997 – young, feminine and contemplative, as St John Paul pointed out. In Pope Francis's days, her parents have been canonised and the diocesan Cause of her sister Léonie introduced. All this represents an extraordinary reversal and bears the mark of Gospel paradox. "He has cast the mighty from their thrones and raised up the lowly," as another such person sang (Luke 1:52). Intriguingly, too, St Thérèse intuited it.

In her short, intense life, touched by some moments of exceptional grace and

more often navigating in the half-light, much wisdom came her way from above. She shared it ungrudgingly. She left behind the lingering Jansenism of her environment and made straight, we might say, for the Father of mercies. She realised the kind of disciple Jesus was after: poor in spirit, pure of heart, fuller of trust than self-reliance, confident of forgiveness, small, a child – the marks of her famous "Way".

She grasped the opportunities for love of Christ and neighbour hidden in ordinary life and interaction, and love's power to transfigure the negative. Her sense of the missionary character of prayer and her dark night of faith brought her close to her atheist contemporaries; she understood them and carried them. She even re-imagined heaven and foresaw it as an occasion for further loving: "I will spend my heaven doing good on earth."

It is the hope of the bishops of Scotland that this visit of St Thérèse will fulfil that promise, and strengthen the faith, hope and love of all of us, lay and ordained alike.

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