



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

New Series, No. 12 (A)/ 3 (B) November 1997

"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

ST. THERESE OF THE CHILD JESUS AND THE HOLY FACE

Born 1873. Entered Lisieux Carmel 1888. Died 1897.

1898: "Histoire d'une Ame" first published. Sales of thousands rapidly become millions: it is translated into 50 languages.

1914: Pope St. Pius X introduces her Cause, declar-ing her "the greatest Saint of modern times".

1921: Pope Benedict XV declares that she lived all the virtues to a heroic degree. Promotes her "little way" throughout the world.

1923: Pope Pius XI beatifies her; then in 1925 he Canonizes her a Saint, calling her "the star of my Pontificate". In 1927 he declares her patron-ess, with St. Francis Xavier, of all foreign missions.

Popes Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI all strongly recommend her as a teacher of the spiritual life and of prayer, and a powerful intercessor.

Pope John Paul II, on Mission Sunday 19 October 1997, in her Centenary year, solemnly declares her a Doctor of the Universal Church.

Monastic Voices

"To be betrothed to you, Jesus, to be a Carmelite, to become, through my union with you, a mother of souls - surely that ought to be enough for anybody? But somehow, not for me; I seem to have so many other vocations as well! I feel as if I were called to be a fighter, a priest, an apostle, a doctor, a martyr... Dear Jesus, how am I to reconcile these conflicting ambitions, how am I to give substance to the dreams of one insignificant soul? I decided to consult St. Paul's epistles, in the hopes of getting an answer....

St. Paul explains in I Corinthians 13 that all the gifts of heaven, even the most perfect of them, without love, are absolutely nothing: charity is the best way of all, because it leads straight to God. Now I was at peace. Charity - that was the key to my vocation. If the Church was a body compos-ed of different members, it couldn't lack the noblest of all; it must have a heart, and a heart BURNING WITH LOVE. And I realised that this love was the true motive force which enabled the other members of the Church to act; if it ceased to function the Apostles

would forget to preach the Gospel, the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. LOVE, IN FACT, IS THE VOCATION WHICH INCLUDES ALL OTHERS; IT'S A UNIVERSE OF ITS OWN, COMPRISING ALL TIME AND ALL SPACE - IT'S ETERNAL! Beside myself with joy, I cried out: 'Jesus my Love! I've found my vocation, and my vocation is love'. I had discovered where it is that I belong in the Church, the niche God has appointed for me. To be nothing else than love, deep down in the heart of Mother Church: that's to be everything at once - my dream wasn't a dream after all." (Abridged from St. Therese of Lisieux: Autobiography, tr. Ronald Knox. Quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church n.826.)

Dear Oblates and Friends,

I must confess I was surprised when I first heard that St. Therese of Lisieux was to be declared a Doctor of the Universal Church.

Could this young woman who died aged 24, who had studied neither theology nor philosophy, and who wrote nothing more substantial than a brief autobiography, really rank with such intellectual giants as St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas? Could she be compared as a mystic with the other two female doctors, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa of Avila? Indeed, was not her own close contemporary Bl. Elisabeth of the Trinity a greater contemplative, who left more writings, and whose teaching has much more properly theological content than that of Therese?

The Pope chose to set aside all such objections to the contrary. He knew what he was doing, and I think now that he was right. This Declaration should be seen as an act of his prophetic ministry. He has proclaimed to the Church and the world that St. Therese has something uniquely important to teach us; and that we need to listen to what she has to say.

It is especially remarkable that this philosopher Pope, himself such a profound thinker and prolific writer on every aspect of the Christian life, should so honour St. Therese, the teacher of the "Little Way". It shows how seriously he takes Jesus' words in the Gospel: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3; cf. also e.g. Mt 11:25, Lk 1:52; 1 Cor 1:27).

The mature Therese was not of course in any way childish. Rather, it was her genius to discover anew the perfect simplicity of the Gospel message. What she both lived and taught was the way of spiritual childhood. The essence of this is that Christians should cultivate towards God the same attitude a little child has (or should have) towards its father: an attitude marked by confidence and love. The power of her witness becomes clear precisely when we realise how ordinary her life was in all external respects. Without the benefit of great scholarship, or of extraordinary spiritual experiences, she understood the secret of sanctity, and she shows that this can be within the reach of anyone at all.

St. Therese had an enormous impact on Dom Maurus' generation. Certainly she was the Saint he most constantly proposed to us in the noviciate for our emulation. Br. John Ogilvie recently recalled how the Belgian Jesuits who educated him even had to warn people not to let Therese take the place of Our Lady in their hearts. It seemed in those days that the world was deluged in miracles and spiritual favours attributed to her intercession. Perhaps a deeper reason for her popularity then was that she came like a breath of fresh air in the Church: she did much to displace the lingering traces of Jansenism. Jansenism had been frequently condemned as a heresy, but it remained very influential among Catholics, especially in France and Scotland. It tended always to emphasise God's Justice, and distance from us. It discouraged frequent communion, and made people feel they could not approach God until they had become pure and perfect.

Therese helped to liberate many Catholics from a religion dominated by fear. Pope St. Pius X was influenced by her in his decision to encourage daily communion, and for small children as well. She also encouraged Catholics to take up reading scripture, and especially the Gospels, for themselves. And she helped people to see again in all its clarity and beauty the essential heart of our faith - the merciful love of God - which could sometimes become obscured under a multitude of diverse religious practices.

Those were also the days of inhuman political ideologies. Therese's message of littleness and dependence was eagerly taken up as a counter to these. Pictures of her therefore tried to bring out her other-worldly purity and innocence. And it is true that from the age of 3 she never refused God anything, and never committed a serious sin in all her life.

For a variety of reasons, after the Second World War St. Therese's popularity began to wane. People nowadays tend to react against the sickly-sweet piety in which she has been wrapped. Many today find the sort of purity she is supposed to represent to be inaccessible, and even unreal.

Nevertheless, the Holy Father believes that St. Therese is still urgently relevant to our modern world. But we need the real Therese, not the plaster statue. Far from being a weakling, she was immensely strong in faith, hope and love. In this, she is an outstanding and attractive model for us. If St. Benedict were alive today, he would surely have included her in his list of recommended reading (HR 73; cf. also 9:8).

Let me dwell here on just two aspects of Therese's doctrine. First of all, the way of humility she teaches. This is the way also of St. Benedict, and of the whole monastic tradition. It was the way of Christ. Christ humbled Himself, and asked us to imitate His humility (Mt 11:29; cf. Phil 2:5). Humility for Therese meant seeking always to go un-noticed. It meant readiness to sacrifice her own will in everything. It meant also readiness to accept every kind of suffering gladly, even cheerfully. Therese wanted to be empty, in order that God might fill her.

She well understood the power of Christian humility. She knew that one truly humble, Christ-like person can bring about the salvation of many. So she humbled herself to a heroic degree, not just because she wanted to be holy, but because she wanted people to be brought to Christ.

According to the "little way" she taught, the most ordinary tasks or actions can become means of sanctification. This message is most important for Oblates to grasp: it means that any lay person, just as much as any religious, can pursue holiness in the midst of daily work. Therese speaks here also to the sick, the house-bound, the elderly. She proclaims: You have a mission in the Church! In your lives, there is potential for tremendous spiritual fruitfulness! You have power to save souls!

Then, secondly, St. Therese is the great modern Apostle of love. Is there not a terrible lack of love in our society? But we cannot live without love! Only love makes life worth living! She reminds us again that God is love, and that the only proper way to respond to Him is with love. I have always been greatly moved by the passage quoted overleaf. It seems to me to be a wonderful exposition of the purpose of monastic life. Is not Plus-carden also called to be love at the heart of the Church?

The love Therese spoke of has of course nothing whatever to do with sugary sentimentality. She meant Christ-love. Utterly devoid of self-seeking, it is self-sacrificing, even unto death. The authenticity of her love was proved by the test of a terrible spiritual darkness she endured in her last years. To this was added the slow crucifixion of her body, through the ravages of T.B. She was tempted to atheism, and to suicide. But like her Master, she showed the depths of her love: she loved even to the end.

It will be consoling to many today to know that the Little Flower was in fact a wounded person psychologically. Having lost her mother aged 4, and her surrogate mother aged 9, she was desperately insecure, and inclined always to cling on to anyone or anything she had. But she learned to let go; to be free to fly to God, on the wings of confidence and of love....

I have written about St. Therese partly because this is a letter for Christmas. Her penetrating insight into the mystery of the Divine Child came not from deep learning, but from poverty of spirit. May she help us also to understand the meaning of what we celebrate this Christmas.

Finally. One monk much influenced by St. Therese is the modern Coptic Orthodox Desert Father, Matta al-Miskin: Matthew the Poor. I want to leave you with the entrance test he sets for his postulants. First they are asked: Do you love God? If they are able to answer positively, he proceeds to the second, more difficult question. Do you believe that God loves you? If they answer Yes to that, the test is over. Come in, he says. You have all the qualities needed to be a monk.