



«I will return!»

Pastoral Letter from the Nordic Bishops' Conference on the occasion of the visit of the relics of St. Therese of Lisieux and her parents to the Nordic countries

Our entire life here on earth is a pilgrimage. We, the Church, the holy people of God, are journeying towards the eternal glory revealed to us by the Father. Just as the people of Israel left their old country behind at the Exodus from Egypt, so we too should leave our sins behind, as we progress towards the promised land.

We make our pilgrimage together with Our Lord Jesus Christ and His saints. This truth becomes manifest in a special way this autumn when the relics of St. Therese of the Child Jesus and her holy parents, Louis and Zélie Martin, will visit our Nordic countries.

It has been the practice of the Church since times immemorial to celebrate the Holy Eucharist on the tombs of the martyrs. Their relics are recognised as visible signs of our redemption, affecting all aspects of human existence, by virtue of the Incarnation. As human beings, we are dependent upon things physical and material in order to experience and accept the saving grace of God in the midst of our earthly lives. We, your bishops, entertain an earnest hope that this visit of the holy relics will aid us in rediscovering God's presence and actions in our time.

St. Therese of the Child Jesus is numbered amongst the female Doctors of the Church, who have helped numerous people to experience the paternal mercy of God. Through her life and writings, she constantly emphasises the central message of the Gospel: The Father has sent His only-begotten Son in order that we might become His beloved children. The discovery of this state – as adopted children of God – is humanity's chief joy. In our weakness and lowliness, as we struggle with the mundane challenges of everyday life, God stretches out to us and affords us this great grace and inestimable dignity, lifting us up to Himself. Our frailty is no hindrance. God sent His Son precisely to weak and frail sinners. "He hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden." (St. Luke 1,48). Thus sings Our Lady in her Magnificat. The message of St. Therese echoes this great canticle of



praise, which the Church continues to sing daily in her liturgy every evening at Vespers. Like Mary, St. Therese desires to teach us to walk this “little way”, the way of the Beatitudes, following in the footsteps of Jesus and walking in His presence. Through the grace of baptism, we are granted a share in the most profound relationship between the Father and the Son. We become “sons in the Son”, as the Fathers of the Church express it. We are permitted to join in in the prayer of Jesus, and through Him we receive the tender, maternal love of the Father.

Already at a young age St. Therese entertained a longing to give herself entirely to God and do all things for Him. She experienced much love and care in her family. Her mother died when Therese was still young, and this loss was a heavy burden to bear for the young girl, even if her father showed himself most loving and attentive towards her and her sisters.

In the Blessed Virgin Mary St. Therese discovered a new mother, who helped her find her path in life. Nevertheless, this somewhat over-sensitive girl had to engage in heavy battles to be able to exchange self-pity for total surrender to God. She describes this as the “Christmas gift of grace” which enabled her, through the sudden outpouring of the power of the Holy Spirit, to let go of herself and her problems and surrender to God’s mercy and put her trust in Him.

At an early age Therese sensed a Carmelite vocation. Her determination made it possible for her to surmount all obstacles and enter the Carmelite convent in Lisieux at the young age of 15. She longed from the bottom of her heart to do all things for God. She was not, as it were, satisfied with one vocation only. She became convinced that she should live in the heart of the Church, aflame with love for Jesus.

At that point all vocations converge. That was the place where she could live out all the vocations she was not able to pursue on her own. Through this insight, St. Therese helps us to rediscover today the deep mystical aspect of the Church.



At the heart of the Church, she was able as bride to live united to the bridegroom, Christ. Uninterruptedly His Heart could communicate with her heart. St. Therese lived out her contemplative vocation as a Carmelite at the heart of the Church, where she could devote herself to constant intercession for the salvation of mankind.

This is the reason why she has been proclaimed the patron saint of missionaries – together with St. Francis Xavier. Even if she never left her convent, Therese was able to inspire numerous people to receive the Good News of the Gospel, to turn to Christ and follow Him ever more intimately. This she effected through her prayer and total self-surrender to Christ.

It is of the utmost importance that we who live today open ourselves and try to grasp this profoundly mystical dimension of the Church. Some people are tempted to reduce the Church to an institution or organisation. Others are prone to be trapped in an ideological understanding of the Church – liberal or traditionalist. Therese helps us understand that the Church is our Mother. In her bosom we are taught a life of constant prayer and true surrender to our Heavenly Father. St. Therese should be a source of inspiration to us, living as we do in secularised countries, so that we become more fully aware of our responsibility to bear witness to the true nature of the Church: that of a loving Mother to all those who feel ignored, or even unloved.

During her short time in the Carmelite convent, St. Therese pursued a most intense spiritual life – albeit one not without sorrows. She fell ill with tuberculosis, and at the same time she entered “the dark night of the soul”. During the final stage of her life, she lost the ability to experience God through senses or feelings. It was as if the light had been extinguished and God disappeared. She managed, however, to turn this experience of emptiness into an occasion for a deeper union with the deserted Christ, suffering for the salvation of the world. She was able to gain an insight into the world of the atheist and eat his stale bread. She consciously interpreted this experience of the dark absence of God as vicarious suffering and reparation for those people who say that they cannot believe in God. Thus she becomes for us a model, helping us to discover the true essence of our faith, which consists not in sensual experiences, but in the surrender of the will.



“I am not dying, I am entering life”, was the maxim of St. Therese as she approached the end of her earthly life. The beatific vision offers true life. We shall see God as He is. We shall join our voices in the unceasing song of praise and adoration.

At the same time, St. Therese was fully conscious of the fact that the angels and saints are engaged in a service to us living here on earth. She said: “I will return”. She desired to continue to do good here on earth, from her place in Heaven. Many different sorts of people have experienced her help, very often in a concrete sort of way. She spoke of “showering roses” – this is why she is often depicted carrying a bouquet of roses. She wishes to convey, also to us, the fatherly grace of God. In the midst of daily life, often through small and simple things, we are capable of experiencing God’s caring presence. St. Therese speaks of “the little way” by which we receive the great graces Jesus wishes to impart to us.

We should understand this pilgrimage, where the relics of St. Therese and her parents are coming to us, as a visible, indeed as a bodily, expression of God’s infinite mercy towards His people. The relics remind us of our vocation: to be transformed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This enables us to share the message of the Gospel with everyone with whom we come into contact during our earthly pilgrimage. Furthermore, as St. Therese is visiting us together with her parents, we are reminded of the profound importance of the family as an institution. Therese grew up in a most devout family – in this context she was able to receive her faith and her vocation. We pray that this pilgrimage of the relics may bring many blessings to our families. May St. Therese and her parents help us all to open ourselves up to the love of the Father, so that we, aided by the Holy Spirit, may follow Christ ever more closely and faithfully. Then we will become credible witnesses when sharing our faith with others. There are numerous people in our countries, who – knowingly or unknowingly – long to hear and receive the message of God’s infinite mercy and our dignity as his beloved children.

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