

# LETTERS cont'd

## VERY SAD READING

*I found the entry in the October/November letters column about the visit of the relics of St Thérèse very sad reading.*

*St Thérèse most certainly does not need me to defend her ~ and what a consolation and powerful antidote are Bishop Crispian's words, Sue, on the page opposite your letter:*

*'Over the years of the history of our Diocese and our Cathedral in Portsmouth, we have witnessed many great events and occasions. But, for sheer intensity of prayer and real devotion, I doubt whether any have matched what we have experienced during the hours of the visit to the Cathedral of the Relics of StThérèse ... There have been many occasions when I have been intensely proud to be Bishop of our Diocese of Portsmouth, but never more so than now. I will keep the memory of these days and, I hope, the graces that have flowed from them forever in my heart.'*

*Lovely words, re-echoed by Bishop Crispian's fellow Bishops the length and breadth of England and Wales, as close on a quarter of a million people eagerly and prayerfully welcomed the Relics into their midst. We cannot but see it as St Thérèse fulfilling her promise 'to spend her heaven doing good on earth' since, of course, the only purpose of the Relics was to remind us of the one they belonged to who is now a canonised Saint in heaven.*

*St Thérèse, in her Carmelite habit with Crucifix and roses, is a precious icon in many Catholic churches in the world, and even 'primary age children' properly introduced to her will love her as she loves them.*

*Incidentally, do we underestimate the attraction of the religious habit, reminding people of the peace and joy of another World in the midst of their often frenzied and worried lives? I find it very interesting that, of all the photographs The Daily Telegraph might have published of pilgrims visiting the Relics in Portsmouth, they chose one of two Sisters from our own Diocese dressed in their magnificent Dominican habits. Mind you, I write this last bit very much tongue in cheek as, being retired, I don't always wear clerical attire!*

*Dear Sue, don't you think it rather unfair to describe the 15-year-old Thérèse as 'unbalanced and in need of counselling for what we now know was probably OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive-Disorder)'? You are talking about a lady who, between the age of 15 and 24, absorbed so fully, purely and lucidly into her mind and heart and life the teaching of the Gospel that she has the rare honour of being declared Doctor of the Church, an honour she shares with just two other women Saints and a handful of men. Surely not the Curriculum Vitae of an unbalanced teenager.*

*You think that involvement in welcoming the Relics 'may be a huge displacement activity' in a sad world needing our practice of the Beatitudes. Again, it occurs to me this devotion to St Thérèse is excellently promoting the Kingdom of God. We need look no further than the 'Little Way Association' based in Clapham, London, under the patronage of the Little Flower, which each year sends millions of sterling in support of myriad needs in the Third*

*World ~ and all without reserving for itself one penny for administration purposes.*

*Finally, dear Sue, these faltering lines of mine will be totally self-defeating if I write them without love, which is the central prize of our Saint's spirituality. Please be assured that I do not do so.*

*This is the Year of the Priest. St Thérèse is a great lover of the ministerial priesthood. But, astute young lady that she was, she had no illusions about the faults and failings of us who hold the office. Hence her life and apostolate in Carmel was to pray for Priests. So, dear Sue, do please say a prayer for the old and spiritually needy one that is me.*

Canon Dermot MacDermot-Roe  
Southampton

### **RELEVANT ROLE MODEL**

*The letter in your October/November issue from Sue Oakley (Puzzled, Bemused and Disillusioned) left me, funnily enough, puzzled, bemused and disillusioned. How can a practising Catholic (and a teacher at that) have so scanty a grasp of Church teaching on such basic issues as sanctity and the veneration of relics? Ms Oakley seems to have, at some point in her Catholic formation, adopted a number of curiously 'un-Catholic' ideas: for example, she believes that practices disapproved of by our Protestant brethren should, in light of this disapproval, be stopped; that a saint who lived in an earlier age is irrelevant as a role model for modern Catholics; that the desire to be a nun can be a sign of mental imbalance; that parents trying to raise their children to be saints (as we are all called to do) are, shockingly, 'ultra-fervent'; and that asking the saints to intercede for us and our troubled world is not only ineffective but somehow 'excuses us from reflecting on how we might... bring God's Kingdom to this earth'.*

*Ms Oakley's puzzlement and irritation with the events surrounding the visit of St Thérèse's relics stem from these basic misunderstandings, all of which I have heard many times before on the lips of non-Catholics. Perhaps she would benefit from studying what the Catechism has to say about the efficacy of the Communion of the Saints, about the Church's reasons for venerating relics, about the nature of Catholic life as, essentially, a striving for sanctity and, finally, about the authority of the Church to continue with practices (yes, even those which existed in medieval, Roman or apostolic days) because they are good and true, without needing to seek approval for them from those outside the Church.*

*In the light of such study, I pray that Ms Oakley would put aside her present misconceptions and realise that we honour our saints because they have already achieved that perfect love of God which Our Lord calls on us all to strive for. They are our role models in this love, no matter when they lived or how this love was expressed, and, in this sense, the saints are timeless. I don't have any particular devotion to Saint Thérèse, but I travelled to honour her and beg her to intercede for me that I and my family might begin to love God as she does!*

Mrs. Kathryn Hennessy  
Reading

### **FIRE WITH LOVE**

*I have no doubt that my comments on what Sue Oakley wrote in the last edition of **Portsmouth People** will be swamped by many others. But I just wanted to add my thoughts as to what the reaction to the visit of the relics of St Thérèse meant to me.*

*As someone who has a degree in Philosophy and who runs the RCIA programme in my parish I have a great love for the intellectual aspects of our faith. I like nothing better than a good intellectual discussion about anything to do with religion.*

*And so the visit of some old bones of someone who in our day would be regarded as an aberration was a challenge. The challenge for me was that while the intellectual side of my faith is vital and I wouldn't give that up for the world I also need to be reminded that what we preach is not just a philosophical construct but is based on real events that happened to someone called Jesus 2000 years ago.*

*I remember asking the same questions about the outpouring of emotion during the funeral of Lady Diana. But perhaps we should not look down on the outpouring of love shown for someone who we can rightly regard as a 'Princess of the Faith'. Perhaps those of us who imbibe their faith principally through intellection should be reminded from time to time that it is not just about the head but it is about the heart and every part of me. If my faith is true then it affects every aspect of me. When Jesus rose from the dead He said: 'Look, I have flesh and bones, just as you have.'*

*The resurrection (the chief event of our religion) was a matter not just of theological and philosophical importance – it had to do with flesh and blood. I need to be reminded that my faith is not some sort of bloodless belief but that if what we preach is the truth then I should have no choice but to be passionate about it. And that passion should reach right down to my toenails.*

*If children can be excited by comic book creations such as Superman then I am sure they will find something exciting about St Thérèse. Perhaps children need a larger than life figure to relate to because they have not yet lost that sense of wonder and amazement at the wonder of the world. Perhaps they need a larger than life figure because the life-size figures they see day in and day out are so drab and mediocre.*

*And perhaps we who live in a culture of intellectualism need to be reminded by a schoolgirl that Our Lord died so that we may have life and life in its fullness. Jesus said 'I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already ablaze.' St Thérèse reminds us of what it really means to be on fire with love for God and for our neighbour.*

Simon Whitney  
Bracknell

## **WITNESS OF OTHERS**

*I would like to make a short response to Sue Oakley's letter in the October/November 2009 issue of **Portsmouth People**.*

*The answer to any puzzlement, bemusement, disillusion and serious concern over the 'celebration' of the relics of St Thérèse can be found in 26 September 2009 issue of The Tablet (page 12) and in The Daily Telegraph of 15 October, Features page 22, as well as in numerous first-hand verbal accounts*

*from the thousands who queued to see the relics. Thank goodness for the witness of non-believers and non-Christians.*

Val Pearce  
Hampshire

## **ANCIENT PRACTICE**

*I'm sorry that Sue Oakley (Letters, October/November issue), feels 'puzzled', 'bemused' and 'disillusioned' about the recent visit of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux. I've been looking forward to the arrival of the relics in Oxford (I live in the very north of our diocese) for months.*

*The veneration of relics is a very ancient practice which goes back to the first centuries of our faith and is not a reversion to some kind of 'Medieval Cult'. Relics provide a tangible link with the sacred and a powerful focus to re-energise personal faith.*

*I am also puzzled as to why Sue thinks children should not be able to relate to a saint in a nun's habit (or indeed to a nun at all); surely any child brought up in the faith will see the relevance and beauty of a life spent devoted to God? Thérèse's message is so inspirational because it is so simple and yet so powerful – it's no accident that she is a doctor of the church! She was never 'ordinary'; her depth of understanding of the message of the gospels was more profound than I will ever aspire to (and I'm a lot older than she was when she died)!*

*Catholic social teaching (Sue's wish to 'live out the Beatitudes') cannot happen without God. So far from the visit being a 'displacement activity', it should be seen as a powerful inspiration for people to live their faith and make this reality.*

*Finally, what does the visit say about us? All the serious commentators have given very positive reports. We show strongly that we are here and that what we believe has relevance today. The sight of thousands of people filing in a dignified manner past the reliquary is a powerful and positive witness to our faith.*

Rachel Everett  
Abingdon

## **NO CONTRADICTION**

*On first reading the letters in the October/November **Portsmouth People** I was struck by the contrast between the responses of Bishop Crispian on the one hand and Sue Oakley on the other to the celebration of the visit of relics of St Thérèse to the Cathedral. Are they living on the same planet I wondered? Bishop Crispian said: 'There have been many occasions when I have been intensely proud to be the Bishop of our diocese, but never more so than now.' Sue said 'It leaves me, and many others, totally bemused and, I have to say, adds to our disillusionment with the Church as an institution.' Then I was amazed to realise that for the first time in 75 years of life as a Roman Catholic I was witnessing an official publication of a Roman Catholic Diocese publishing a letter from the Bishop next to a dissenting letter from a lay person. Then suddenly it all made sense. I realised that the two letters were not contradictory, they were complementary. The Bishop was describing a celebration of communion in the Cathedral; Sue was challenging us to go out in mission to the world. And these are two sides of the same coin.*

*As we gather round the Father's table on Sunday we deepen our communion with one another and with the Father who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. We deepen our roots in the Father's love. As we go out in mission to the world from Monday to Saturday, we sprinkle drops of the Father's love on those we encounter. The wider we spread ourselves in mission to the world, the deeper we need to be rooted in the Father's love. We all live out our mission in the course of our ordinary everyday lives, by sprinkling those we meet with the Father's love. As a religious, St Thérèse lived out her mission within the enclosed confines of her convent. As lay people, we live out our mission in the wider world. The context is different, but it is the same mission.*

*Sue pointed out that St Thérèse, deprived of the nurturing love of her human mother in childhood, was emotionally immature when she entered Carmel at the unusually young age of 15. Her sisters took on the role of mother. She still related to her older sisters as a child to a mother. To be emotionally mature is to 'grow up' and relate to siblings as equals. This is to learn to keep the second commandment of Jesus, to love our neighbour as ourselves. It sounds simple, but is difficult to practice. If we practiced it, we Roman Catholics would relate to Christians of other Churches as equals; we would relate to people of other Faiths, or of no particular Faith, as equals. This is the principle underpinning the concept of Churches Together; to relate to Christians of other Churches as equals. When we love one another as equals, we love one another as the Father loves us. This is how we reveal the Father's love in the world; by keeping the second commandment of Jesus.*

*St Thérèse was highly sensitive emotionally and acutely aware of her loving relationships within the convent community. At first she struggled with the temptation to be the favourite. She learned with difficulty that the Father has no favourites. In relation to her fellow sisters, she struggled to love those who annoyed her (her enemies) as much as those who pleased her (her friends). Later, when she was novice mistress, she struggled with the temptation to have favourites. It is through struggling to keep the second commandment of Jesus, even in small things as St Thérèse did, that we mature into adulthood as humans. And it is through our equality with one another that we realise that we are all children of the same Father.*

*The Bishop was grateful for all the time and effort that was devoted to preparing for the celebration in the Cathedral. Sue wondered if this could all be a displacement activity. A displacement activity distracts us from dealing with something more urgent. It is like rearranging the deck chairs on the deck of the Titanic. Could that be the case? Only time will tell. The test will be the extent to which the many graces received in the Cathedral flow out and transform the society in which the Cathedral sits.*

Philip Sheppard  
Eastleigh

## **BLANKET VETO?**

*I have to say that Dominica Roberts' piece in the October **Portsmouth People** appears to be very simplistic.*

*The whole abortion question is fraught with difficulty, as any moral theologian will tell you. The immense debate recently about the case of the young rape victim in Brazil who recently underwent an abortion because she would have died if she*

*had carried the child to term showed up a Vatican prelate disagreeing fundamentally with a Brazilian archbishop. The Brazilian archbishop was simplistic, the Vatican prelate not.*

*As for advocating a blanket veto on 'pro-abortion politicians receiving Communion' – well, the difficult question we need to decide is which politicians are pro-abortion. In fact most of them are not. (This is why most of the American bishops were unwilling to follow the small minority of their very vocal colleagues in advocating denying Communion to politicians who vote for abortion legislation.)*

*The thing is, politicians are elected to represent the views of their constituents. If they are anti-abortion but the majority of their constituents are in favour of allowing women to have abortions (even if those constituents themselves would never be party to procuring one), then those politicians must either vote in favour of pro-abortion legislation or resign their seats. They're not actively pro-abortion themselves, but they are actively representing the views of their constituents, which is what they are elected to do.*

*It's the reverse dilemma for pro-abortion politicians, who may find themselves representing constituents who are not in favour of abortion. Even if they themselves are in favour of it, they have to vote against in order to represent the views of their constituents, or once again resign from politics.*

*There is quite a lot to be said for being an elected politician, even if you find yourself voting for legislation that you do not agree with by following the wishes of your constituents. By remaining in politics, you may well be able to influence legislation for the better at a future date.*

*In my view, issuing blanket condemnations and pointing the finger at people who are trying to do a very difficult job in impossible circumstances is really not helpful, and gets the Church a bad name too.*

Paul Inwood  
Havant

## **MAKING THE CONNECTION**

*Richenda Power (Uniting a Pastoral Area - **Portsmouth People** Oct/Nov 2209) is right to draw attention to the importance of transport issues for the Larger Pastoral Areas - though I would take issue with the statement that the rural areas lack an adequate transport system. With an area of around 400 square miles in her particular pastoral area, the times and locations of Mass and community events will need to be planned, where possible, to cater for those who may not have a car at their disposal whether by taking account of public transport routes and times or by making alternative arrangements.*

*The event at Farleigh School seems to have been a great success, but for those travelling from, say Tadley 8.5 miles outside Basingstoke which enjoys three buses an hour to that town, Farleigh School, five miles outside Andover and a 20 minute walk from an hourly bus service, may seem a long way away. There is a good train service between Basingstoke and Andover making the journey time from Tadley to the school two hours including the buses each end and the walk. This may be why some arrived a little late. Rural transport is designed to provide links to the nearest town with inter-urban services between, and for public transport users, venues in urban settings will usually be easier to get to.*

*Help is at hand, the Passenger Transport website of Hampshire County Council [www.hants.gov.uk/passengertransport](http://www.hants.gov.uk/passengertransport) offers an impartial journey planner bringing together bus, coach and train, shows maps and times of local buses for any post code or location, has an extensive catalogue of free publications to download or view on line, and gives phone numbers of people to talk to for further advice. If you prefer, contact details of local community transport groups across Hampshire which provide or hire minibuses are also shown.*

*In combining parishes to share faith and resources, we must not forget our mission to reach out to welcome those seeking the Lord from within our own community and beyond. Where we decide to build our churches, celebrate Mass or hold our events can make a great difference to the ability of many in the community to sustain and grow their faith. So please check the website before you make your plans.*

Peter Shelley  
Hedge End

[The Editor regrets being unable (1) to enter into correspondence other than through the pages of the magazine and (2) to accept for publication any copy, including Letters, submitted other than electronically]