

BISHOP JOHN MICHAEL SHERLOCK
OPENS THE FIRST CONGRESS
HELD IN ENGLISH CANADA

by Bishop John Michael Sherlock

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you tonight, because this is an historic occasion. It is historic because it is the opening Mass of the First Congress of the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order in Canada. It is historic because it is the first of a series of Congresses which will be held over the decades to come. A hundred years from now they will look back and say "yes, it was in 1996, in the City of Toronto that the First Congress was held". So you are pioneers. The very fact that this Congress can take place is a tribute to the incredible rapidity with which the Carmelite Secular Order has grown in Canada. It is in my opinion, an affirmation of the providential design by which God has brought the Discalced Carmelite Friars and their Secular Order to our country. For that I say publicly "Thanks be to God." I also thank God that I had a small part to play personally in bringing the Carmelites, the English Speaking Discalced Carmelites to Canada. It is not accidental that the Friars are living in the Diocese of London, and I am grateful for that.

This is also an historic occasion because we have begun the centenary year of the birth of St. Therese of Lisieux to eternal life.

September 30, 1997 will mark the one hundredth anniversary of her death. There are some people still alive today who were alive when St. Therese was still on earth. My own father was born seven years after St. Therese. He was seventeen years old (my father) when St. Therese died, and forty-five when she was canonized. That canonization took place on May 17, 1925. On May 17th, 1925, I was in my mother's womb, unborn. Fortunately, in those days, unborn children were treated with great respect. My brothers and sisters and I were very blessed to have parents who taught us to pray, and in a very special way to love God and to have a devotion to certain Saints. Among those St. Therese was one of the very special Saints who was part of our daily prayer. In fact, our parents taught us every day, morning and evening to pray "St. Therese, little flower of the Child Jesus, pray for me and my brothers and sisters that God may keep us always pure." I have said that prayer every day of my life since. I have a deep affection for St. Therese that dates to my childhood. Now when I pray that prayer, I don't think only of my brothers and sisters, my nieces and nephews, but I think of all my brothers and sisters in the faith.

There is no question St. Therese is for us a powerful intercessor, and a convincing model of what would later become a major theme of Vatican Council II, and that theme is the universal call to holiness. Prior to Vatican II, we all had a terrible temptation to think that the call to holiness was unique and special for priests and religious. Vatican II reminded us it is a call from God to all of us. We are all called to the heights of holiness and of sanctity - and that means then if the call is universal, everyone, humble and ordinary people, factory-workers, housewives, school-teachers, secretaries, mothers, fathers, children, single people, the hidden, the unknown, the uneducated, the poor - we are all called to the heights of holiness. Now what has that to do with St. Therese? The truth is that St. Therese was very ordinary, so ordinary, that the people she lived with had no idea of the depth of her union with God.

Shortly before her death, one of the sisters who lived with her in the convent said "She is a

sweet little sister, but what will we be able to say about her after her death? She didn't do anything." She didn't do anything. ... Nothing spectacular. Nothing noted by the world. ... Nothing that even her sisters in the convent noticed. All she did was love God with her whole heart, her whole soul, with all her mind and all her strength. Even her sister, Mother Agnes, who was closest of all to her, and knew her best, left the manuscript that Therese addressed to her unread for at least three months. When she read it, she was astounded by what she read, and she said "How is she unknown here?" - her own sister. It may be shocking to pious ears to hear that St. Therese was ordinary, but she truly was. And the reason that I insist on that is because most of us know that we are ordinary, and it is in order to give us hope and to give us confidence that holiness is possible for us. The greatest falsehood perpetuated about the saints is that they are naturally better than other people. The saints themselves, Therese among them, denounced that falsehood every time they heard it. Saints know that holiness comes from God. It is God's gift. It is a grace, undeserved, unmerited, and unearned. It is a grace which God offers to each one of us. Why then do some accept it and some not?

What is the secret of how a tiny, insignificant person like Therese became one of the greatest saints of our time, as Pope Pius XI describes her. There are many ways of explaining the road to holiness, and many words to express the attitude of mind and heart by which a human being permits our loving Father to perfect the radiant image, reflection of His own divine holiness in life in one's heart. Therese brought all these ways together in what she called her "little way". A few months before her death Therese said "I feel my mission is about to begin ... my mission to make God loved as I love Him, to teach souls my little way." When her sister, Mother Agnes of Jesus asked her "What is this little way you want to teach souls?" She answered "It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and absolute surrender."

So what are the components of this absolute trust? this total surrender to God, that is within the province of the possibilities of every single believer?

First it is Faith. It is a way of Faith, a living Faith, a living Faith by which in imitation of the Fiat of our Blessed Mother, in answer to the request to be the Mother of the Redeemer, "that what you have said be done to me", in imitation of that Fiat, living Faith is the way in which we surrender our whole lives to God's direction, with utter trust in His promises, despite the darkness of our own weakness, despite the darkness of our own unknowing, and the unexpected and painful paths we tread in following Him. Mary said yes to God in darkness, not in light. In unknowing where that would lead, unaware that she would stand beneath the Cross, and see the promised King, this Son of hers, whom the Angel had told her would inherit the throne of David, his father, and reign in the house of Jacob forever, she sees him there, dying, apparently defeated. This is living faith. St. Therese spent her short life surrendering herself in all its weakness, and in all the darkness that attended it, and there was much, to God's love. Along with faith, part of the little way of poverty of spirit by which we not only understand, but lovingly embrace our creaturehood, is our utter dependence for life, breath, talent, possessions, families, friends and faith all our gifts, as is our very being and every moment of time accorded to us.

Poverty of spirit means the acceptance of ourselves as a vacuum which only God can fill. A hunger which only God can satisfy, a thirst which can be quenched only by the living water that Jesus promised to the Samaritan woman at the well. Saint Therese had poverty of spirit. She said "I am resigned to seeing myself far from perfect, and even glad of it." Weakness for her, was not an obstacle, but a stepping stone to trust in God, dependence, childlike dependence upon God.

Another component of her little way is humility, by which we grasp and affirm the truth

expressed by St. Paul in his famous question: "What have you that you have not received, and if you have received it, why do you glory as if you had not received it." Humility is generally described as truth, a truth in this sense ... truth does not deny our gifts, but acknowledges from where they come. There is nothing we have that does not come from God ... and that is humility. St. Therese wrote in her own autobiography these words "It seems to me that if a little flower could speak, it would tell simply what God has done for it without trying to hide its blessing. It would not say under the pretext of a false humility "it is not beautiful" or "without perfume", that "the sun has taken away its splendour", or the storm has "broken its stem", when it knows that it is all untrue." The flower about to tell her story rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus. She knows that nothing in herself is capable of attracting the Divine glance, and His mercy alone brought about everything that is good in her. That is humility. Recognizing the immensity of God's gifts, recognizing how marvellously God has worked in one's life, but seeing that it is God, and not oneself to whom the glory belongs. Above all, the little way of Therese is the way of love. The way of seeking always the will of God alone, and of sacrificing every selfish wilful or self-gratifying impulse of our hearts, and we all have them. This love is an imitation of Jesus who emptied Himself and made Himself obedient, obedient even to death on the Cross. It is this love which is itself a grace, for we cannot love God as God desires us to love, and as God Himself loves except, as St. Paul says, through the love that is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us. Self-emptying love is not simply a decision; ... it is accepting the gifts that God offers to enable us to achieve that way of love. Because such love is a gift, it must be believed in, prayed for and exercised through a lifetime of self-denying service of others.

Now I want to say to you something about love. There is a marvellous chapter in the Brother Kamarozov, written by the famous Russian author Dostoevsky. The chapter is entitled "The Lady of Little Faith". In it, a lady whose faith is really crumbling, partly through the influence of those around her who are sceptics, comes to Father Zasima and asks for advice and consolation. He tells her that faith can grow strong by the exercise of active love. He tells her "Try to love your neighbours actively, and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you will be convinced of the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul." And later he tells her "Never be frightened at your own faintheartedness in attaining love. Do not even be very frustrated by your own bad acts." Those words could come from the very lips of Therese. She says "I am sorry, but I cannot say anything more comforting, for active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared to love in dreams." We talk about love, but most of us are better at love in dreams than in the harsh and fearful thing which love is. Active love, means loving everyone with no distinction, not to please ourselves, but to please God. It means loving the agreeable, and the disagreeable, the grateful and the ungrateful, the deserving and the undeserving. It means loving like God who lets His rain fall on the good and bad, and the sun shine on the good and the evil. It means loving our enemies, and doing good to those who hate us. All this St. Therese did in the crucible of the ordinary everyday life of a cloistered convent. And you have no idea of the tension, the pressure, the sacrifice, the self-denial required living in a community life. It was in that ordinary life, lived with extraordinary love that her beloved Jesus made her holy. The rebukes of Superiors, the irritability of the sick old nuns she tried to help, all these crosses, borne with patient love enabled Jesus to strip her of pride, of the temptation to seek the approval of others, and of all that stands in the way of her total identification with Him. Her illnesses frequent, the spiritual darkness, the aridity in prayer, the terrible temptations against faith toward the end of her life, served to perfect her self-surrender.

Therese did not seek, and she did not receive, visions; transports of ecstasy. Through most of her life she prayed in deep aridity, and sometimes in oppressive and overwhelming darkness, but never did she waver in her certainty that her beloved Jesus was near her, purifying her soul

for perfect union, for the glorious revelation of His beloved face. All the beautiful readings of tonight's Mass are the scriptural basis for St. Therese's Little Way. Therese knew that her own strength could not make her the Saint she longed to be. She entrusted herself like a child to the arms of God. She loved the passage from Isaiah that was read in tonight's Mass. In that passage, Isaiah sees Jerusalem as a great mother, which is like the Church gathering her young, as a mother does in her arms. It sees God Himself picking her up as a little child, comforting her and nursing her at the breast. In all of this, she entrusted herself, moved by the simplicity of childhood, of spiritual childhood and of total trust.

She also knew that it was not by study alone, but by love, that she would come to know God in the intimacy of a union of hearts. She experienced what John wrote in tonight's second reading. "Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love." The opposite of that is to say that the way to come to know God is by love, not just by studying. It's not by studying theology that we come to know God. We come to know God by loving Him. How do you come to know those who are closest in your life. It's not by studying them. It's by loving them, and it is only in love that we begin to uncover the reality of another person. John emphasizes over and over again that we cannot know what we do not love. We cannot know God, unless we love Him.

Therese meditated on tonight's Gospel, and made herself a little one, an infant in God's arms because she knew the great depths of God's love which are hidden from the wise and the intelligent, and revealed to mere infants.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ: Something extraordinary is happening around the world in these days. Bishops from all countries of the world are petitioning the Holy Father to declare St. Therese of the Infant Jesus a Doctor of the Church. Now a few people are opposed to that because in their minds she was not a great theologian, a great academic.

They think it may be inappropriate for her to be a Doctor of the Church. Usually, Doctors of the Church are people of great learning like Thomas Aquinas, but St. Therese knew the mysteries of God, as great theologians often regrettably do not. Her knowledge came through the intimacy of love.

She penetrated, by the power of love and the fire of love, into the very depth of the heart of God.

Pope Benedict XV in 1921 wrote "In spiritual childhood is the secret of sanctity for all the faithful of the catholic world. There is a call to all the faithful of every nation, no matter what their age, sex or state of life, to enter whole-heartedly into the little way which led Sister Therese to the summit of heroic virtue. We earnestly desire that all the faithful study her in order to copy her becoming children themselves, since otherwise, they cannot, in the words of the Master, arrive at the kingdom of heaven."

May each of us, through the intercession of beloved St. Therese, receive the grace to hear and heed that wise advice, knowing that our little way, when we embrace it, is irresistible to the heart of God.