

## VISIT OF THE RELICS OF SAINT THERESE OF LISIEUX TO SOUTH AFRICA

On the afternoon of Friday, 25 June, 2010, shortly after the relics had arrived in Johannesburg by air from Lisieux in France, priests of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, Carmelite Sisters, members of the Order of the Knights of da Gama and other lay people received at the Carmelite convent in Benoni the travelling reliquary containing relics of St Therese of Lisieux. The reliquary, an ornate casket containing some of the mortal remains of Saint Therese, was then carried in solemn procession, with rose petals strewn before it, into the convent chapel where they remained for veneration for three days. This was the first stop in a three-month tour of the relics across the length and breadth of South Africa. The organisers of the visit of the relics to South Africa are Fathers Vusi Sokhela and Shaun Von Lillienfeld, both priests of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg.

Father von Lillienfeld hopes that the visit of the relics to South Africa will lead to 'devotion to the saints taking its rightful place in the Liturgical Calendar'. He hopes too that the secular media will give the visit some coverage so that all Catholics, including those who may have lapsed from the practice of their faith, may have the opportunity to share in a spiritually joyful event.

It was Father Sokhela who initiated the visit to South Africa after meeting a French follower of St Therese's *Little Way* in his parish in Johannesburg. It is his wish that Saint Therese may be a role-model for the youth, especially since we 'have no (South African) saints of our own.'

Catholics believe in the Church 'on earth and in heaven', and venerate the saints, our ancestral family in faith. The saints who on earth led exemplary lives and are now in heaven, are in a position to intercede for the living.

Devotion to Saint Therese of Lisieux, also known as St Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, and the Little Flower, is indeed quite remarkable considering that she died in 1897 at the young age of twenty-four years, having been an enclosed Carmelite nun for all of her short adult life.

During the three month visit of the relics to South Africa which concludes on Monday, September 27 when the reliquary is returned to Lisieux, more than twenty-four churches, monasteries and other Catholic institutions in the Archdioceses of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town and the Dioceses of Tzaneen, Aliwal North, Queenstown, Kokstad, Umzumkulu and Mariannhill will host the relics.

Over the last 15 years the casket containing the earthly remains of this much loved saint has visited 40 countries in all five continents. One of the more recent visits of the reliquary was to England and Wales from 16 September to 7 October 2009. It is interesting to note that while there had been a great deal of cynicism prior to that visit of the relics, a quarter of a million people in England and Wales actually venerated the relics at twenty-eight venues - 35,000 at Westminster Cathedral alone. A tour of Ireland in 2001 sparked the biggest mass movement of people ever witnessed in the country with an estimated 75% of the population making pilgrimages to visit the relics. It is hoped that there will be the same enthusiastic response to the visit in South Africa.