

Churchman

EDITORIAL I

Few readers of *Churchman* will have noticed, but the most popular religious event of 2001 in the British Isles has been taking place in Ireland. In response to an increasing lack of popular demand for its services, the Roman Catholic Church in that country decided that drastic action was necessary if the formerly faithful were somehow going to be brought back to God. Protestants, and especially English ones, know only too well how a sense of panic can set in when attendance figures (and revenues) fall below replacement level, and over the years we have witnessed any number of failed campaigns designed to fill the pews once more. Catholic Ireland is now catching up with the rest of us, and it is most instructive to see how it has decided to go about it.

Revivalistic preaching, though not entirely unknown in Catholic circles, has never been a central feature of their evangelistic activities, and so we are not surprised to find that the Irish hierarchy has not gone down that route. Faith healing is perhaps more congenial, but the Roman style is different from what we find among Protestants. To put it bluntly, Evangelical faith healers come to you, but in the Roman church you are normally expected to go to them (at Lourdes, for example) and this is bound to make a popular campaign difficult to organise.

With these options closed or available only to a relative few, the Catholic church authorities in Ireland decided on something totally different. To bring the masses of the people back to God, they organised an eleven-week procession of the reliquary of St Therese of Lisieux, a nineteenth-century French nun who has attracted a devoted, if somewhat limited, following in Catholic circles. The reliquary does not contain *all* her bones, but that does not seem to matter. Enough of them are there to give the prospective pilgrims the sense that they have come into (living?) contact with a holy person, and by doing that, that they have drawn nearer to God himself.

This was not an exercise designed to appeal to Protestants, though it appears that a few went along to see what it was all about, and no doubt there were handfuls of protesters ready with anti-Roman tracts during the processions week-long sojourn in Northern Ireland. But the fact that it could happen at all in the early twenty-first century gives us a fascinating insight into the way

in which the official Roman mind works. Whether or not the hierarchy really believes that a selection of St Therese's bones will bring people closer to God does not really matter, since they are clearly convinced that there are enough lay people out there who will believe it with sufficient fervour that the church itself will experience a spiritual revival. They would hardly put themselves to such trouble and expense if they did not think that it would bear fruit, and all the newspaper accounts seem to suggest that they were right, at least in the short term. Wherever they appeared, the bones were literally besieged by thousands of devout worshippers, many of them carrying roses (St Therese's favourite flower) to deposit next to the reliquary. Whether this will result in a long-term upswing of the church's fortunes (material, every bit as much as spiritual) remains to be seen, but things have certainly got off to a good start.

It ought to be said, before we go any further, that not all Catholics have been enthusiastic supporters of this project. Some have been critical of the way in which the church has basked in state support, in the form of a military guard of honour, and complained that any pretence which the Irish republican state may have to religious neutrality was openly denied in the process. Others have produced more theological objections. The Sr Reverend Joseph S. O'Leary, for example, who teaches at the Sophia University in Tokyo, wrote a letter to the *Irish Times* (14 April, 2001) in which he said:

Therese's own writings have elements of naivety and sentimentality that were quite normal in late 19th-century Catholic France, but she was a woman of profound intelligence and deeply rooted mystical awareness. There is nothing in her writings that betrays anything like the ghoulish bad taste and theological destitution I see in this relic-tour. Exploitation of the lovable figure of Therese was carried out with huge success earlier in the century. Beleaguered bishops today imagine the same tactic is going to revitalise the church, but times have changed. What was a respectable and natural demonstration of piety before Vatican II has been replaced by something forced and insincere. The acclamation of Therese as a doctor of the church was a highly questionable way of celebrating her distinctive charisma. The cult of her bones is an even more insensitive response.

Father O'Leary's courage will probably have cost him whatever chance he may have had of getting a bishopric, and it is important that those of us who dissent from the official Roman line from the outside should recognise the

bravery and the integrity of those who do the same from within.

Yet Father O'Leary's belief that Rome changed after Vatican II (1962-5) is surely one of the things which the organisers of the relic-tour have set out to disprove. On the contrary, they are claiming, Rome has not changed at all on the things which really matter. You may now be able to understand the liturgy and eat meat on Fridays, but when it comes to the way of salvation, everything has stayed the same—in particular, venerating bones is still a way to get closer to God.

This, after all, is the heart of the matter. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Therese of Lisieux was indeed a holy woman who lived a life of exemplary piety on earth, and who is now reigning with the saints in heaven. If that is the case, then she is one of millions in the same blessed position, and we who follow Christ here on earth believe that in a short time we shall go to be with them too. Do we want future generations to venerate our bones (or some of them)? What is so special about Therese, that she should be singled out for this somewhat dubious privilege?

The Apostle Paul states quite clearly (1 Cor. 15:50) that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. When we die, our bones will go back to the earth from which they came, and it makes very little difference whether this happens over a period of centuries in a graveyard or of minutes in a crematorium. Either way, we are told that our resurrection bodies will be of a different substance from the ones we have now (a fact for which most of us are profoundly grateful). We are also told by the same Apostle that to live is Christ and to die is to gain more of him (Phil. 1:21). When we depart this life we go to be with him in heaven, leaving earthly cares and sorrows behind. When Jesus appeared in his glory on the mount of transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were revealed in that celestial light, but although Jesus spoke with them, the disciples who saw them were unable to do so. They could talk directly only to Jesus, who is the sole link between the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven. What Moses and Elijah could not do for Peter, James and John, St Therese cannot do for any of us, and it is no disrespect to her to say so honestly.

Then too, there is the question of what it means to be a holy person. There are doubtless many eccentrics in the kingdom of heaven, and we must be very

careful not to draw up a list of characteristics which, because they are desirable to us, we assume must be equally desirable to God. But having said that, there can be no doubt that anyone who is truly holy will claim no credit for this, and will instead give all the glory to God. In other words, if Therese of Lisieux is really the kind of person her devotees believe she is, the last thing she will be wanting now is their devotion to her! There is a deep inner contradiction in this whole business which needs to be pointed out, not least to those who have been so seriously misled by the whole affair.

Finally, we must ask how it is that so many thousands have turned out to pay their respects to the reliquary. Some Orangemen have wondered what would happen if they organised a similar procession of the relics of King William III, but such a question is obviously facetious, since not even the most bigoted Protestant would ever think of doing such a thing. In Catholic circles however, the procession of the reliquary has been officially authorised and encouraged by men whose (presumed) theological training should have taught them better. What is still worse, they have no hesitation in recommending this kind of ignorance (at best) or deception (at worst) to the people committed to their charge. Most of those who have paid homage to the relics are perfectly sincere individuals who are doing something which they believe will bring them closer to God. They believe this, because it is what they have been taught by pastors whom they trust to tell them the truth. And their pastors have led them astray. This is the heart of the scandal which the procession of St Therese's bones brings to light. The Apostle Paul tells us that faith comes by hearing, and that no-one will hear without a preacher (Rom. 10:14). The preachers of the Roman church must take the responsibility for the results which we have seen in Catholic Ireland, and which could presumably be repeated elsewhere as well. As Protestants, we must call them to account for their error, and do whatever we can to tell those who have been so seriously misled that Jesus said that he alone is the way, the truth and the life, and that no-one can come to the Father, except through him (John 14:6). That, and that alone, is the only sure way to salvation and the knowledge of God which the devotees of St Therese so earnestly desire.

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