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Carmelite Spiritual Center

8433 Bailey Road * Darien, Illinois 60561 * 630-969-4141

Life is Worth Giving

NATIONAL SHRINE OF ST. THERESE INSPIRES DEVOTION

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

St. Therese of Lisieux, a French cloistered Carmelite nun who died at the age of 24 in 1897, has been described as "the greatest saint of modern times." Two years ago when her relics were brought to the U.S., literally millions of people came to venerate the remains of St. Therese. And when her relics came to the National Shrine of St. Therese in Darien, Ill., some 50,000 people arrived in a period of three days to ask for her intercession for spiritual or physical needs, or to offer thanks for favors already received.

"My mission — to make God loved — will begin after my death," she said. "I will spend my heaven doing good on earth. I will let fall a shower of roses."

So great is devotion to this saints, the Carmelites in Darien had to more than double the size of the National Shrine to accommodate the many pilgrimage groups who visit throughout the year, but also the hundreds of faithful who attend the daily Mass offered at 11:30 a.m.

The National Shrine, which is open daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., also contains one of the largest collections of relics and mementoes of St. Therese outside of France.

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The Original Shrine

Although decades of devotees of St. Therese in the Chicagoland area remember the spacious shrine to St. Therese at St. Clara's Church in the Woodlawn section of the city, the original shrine was at nearby St. Cyril's Church on the campus of Mt. Carmel High School. According to Fr. Kieran O'Hara, who served at St. Clara's as associate and pastor from 1944-60, it was when the new St. Clara's Church was completed in 1925-26, the ^(CARMELITE) Provincial Council and others concerned with devotion to St. Therese decided on the much larger church to house the relics and altar dedicated to her devotion.

A Saint for Many People

The period from the 1920s to the 1950s might well be designated a "golden age" for devotion to St. Therese at St. Clara's Church. Novenas focused on her feast-day (originally Oct. 3rd but now Oct. 1st), a Christmas novena, and others during the Liturgical year. Literally thousands of people lined the streets around the shrine patiently waiting for one of the several sessions of the novena presented each day. This would continue until the demographics of the area changed. People from all walks of life were devoted to the "Little Flower" and sought her intercession for many reasons. This devotion intensified during the years of World War II.

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Another important factor was the compilation of the "Little Flower Prayer-book" by the late Fr. Columba Downey. This became a standard part of devotion to St. Therese and this writer remembers well using the book as a ~~Manual~~ ^(STUDENT) at the former Carmelite Junior Seminary in Hamilton, Mass., in the 1945-49 period.

In 1924, too, just before her canonization, the Carmelite church of ~~██████████~~ Cresskill, N.J., was named in her honor. In addition, the Eastern Shrine of St. Therese was established at St. Cecilia's Church in Englewood, N.J., and a shrine in her honor was also established at Holy Trinity Church in Pittsburgh, then under the care of the Carmelites.

A Move to Aylesford

In May of 1959, Frs. Alexis McCarthy and Howard Rafferty, who had been stationed at St. Clara's Priory as directors of the Lay Carmelites, bought some 40 acres of the former Madden Estate along old Rt. 66 (now I-55/Stevenson Expressway) in what is now Darien, Ill. A short time later they were joined by Fr. Kieran O'Hara who arrived to found the Carmelite Missions Office at what was named Aylesford Priory. This writer joined them a short time later to set up the communications office for the "Sword" Magazine, the "Carmelite Review" and the Carmelite News Service.

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It was then decided to begin moving some of the relics of St. Therese, which the Carmelite nuns at Lisieux had so generously shared with Fr. Albert Dolan, to Aylesford.

In 1987, when Fr. Murray Phelan was provincial, it was decided to build a new St. Therese National Shrine in Darien, Ill. The new St. Therese Chapel, which had been funded at least partially by a very large donation from a devotee of St. Therese, was dedicated by Auxiliary Bishop Roger Kaffer at the concelebrated Dedication Mass on Sunday, Nov. 1, at 2:30 p.m., 1987.

The new National Shrine features relics and mementoes of the life of St. Therese from the former shrine in Chicago, and also from Englewood, N.J., and Pittsburgh, Pa. Included in the collection is the original painting of St. Therese by her sister Celine. The chapel also features a hand-carved mural depicting the life of St. Therese and her influence on the lives of Christians everywhere.

Two years ago, when the world-travelling relics of St. Therese arrived in Darien, some 50, 000 people arrived to offer their devotion to the Little Flower.

An Expanded Shrine

About that time Fr. Leo McCarthy, provincial, and his council, along with Fr. Robert Colaresi, director of the Society of the Little Flower, decided that it was time to expand the Shrine

TO DOUBLE ITS SIZE.

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Overflow crowds were common at the daily 11:30 a.m. Mass.

On Thursday, Feb. 14, 2002, Bishop Joseph Imesch of the Diocese of Joliet, Ill., along with Fr. Leo McCarthy and Fr. Robert Colaresi, Fr. Roger Bonneau, Director of the Shrine, Fr. Kevin Shanley, prior, and others, concelebrated the Re-Dedication Mass.

Devotion to St. Therese continues joyfully and steadily at the National Shrine.