**Homily for the 5th Centenary of St Teresa of Avila**

**26th September 2015**

I am really delighted to be with you all today, and to give thanks for the presence of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites here in the Diocese. I thank Fr Matt Blake ODC for being with us. It is good to have you, Fr Matt, in the Diocese. It is good to know, too of the long association that the Diocese has with Carmel through Sclerder Abbey and Lanherne.

I have a long association with Carmel in its different manifestations, but probably am most familiar with the life of the enclosed nuns, having been a Confessor at Notting Hill Carmel for several years and a friend of Ware Carmel for many years. In fact, I was at Ware for my retreat last month, so the sisters are dear to my heart – they really are sisters to me!

So, I am really pleased that during this 5th Centenary year of the birth of St Teresa we have this opportunity to be together and spend time reflecting on her life and message. Several years ago I had the great privilege of concelebrating mass in the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila. It was a marvellous experience to be in that place where St Teresa of Jesus had the beginnings of her religious life, where she conversed with St John of the Cross, and where she had experienced in a profound and deep way the mystery of Her Lord. That mass took place on the 27th September the date – tomorrow – on which, in 1970, Pope Paul VI declared St Teresa the first woman doctor of the Church. I cannot help but feel that the opening words of his homily on that occasion describe what we are about today:

“We invoke the figure of Teresa and we see her appear before us as an exceptional woman and religious, from within whom, completely hidden by humility, penance, simplicity, shines forth the flame of human vitality and spiritual fruitfulness. How unique, how human, how attractive a figure she is.” (Paul Vi Homily 27th September, 1970).

I have three ideas which I’d like to share with you – the three C’s of a Carmelite, if you like - Crisis, Companion, and Community. These were important in the life of St Teresa, and they are certainly important for Jennifer and Christine who are to make their profession as Secular Carmelites today. But they are important, too, for each one of us who is trying to live a deeper Christian life.

So the first of these – Crisis. You will know that Teresa began her life at the Convent of the Incarnation and lived there a straightforward, rather easy-going kind of religious life, for about twenty years. It was a time when she occasionally experienced bouts of ill-health, and seemed rather dissatisfied with how her life was unfolding. In the Book of her *Life* she constantly talks about her struggles with her weaknesses. This was mirrored by events in her personal life. In 1543, for example, she lost the closeness of her relatives; her father died and all her siblings, one after another, immigrated to America.

In 1554, when Teresa was 39 years old, things came to a head and she had what I suppose nowadays we might describe as a kind of breakdown. It affected here at all levels – psychologically, spiritually and physically. She was confined to bed for long periods.

At one point in this experience she describes the reality of discovering a statue of “Christ most grievously wounded”; this was an image of Christ in His Passion, being scourged at the pillar. The thought strikes her, “He looks lonely….my Lord is lonely, maybe I can comfort Him”. It is this sense of the magnitude of God that chooses out of love to enter fully into the human condition, even into the experience of darkness and loneliness, that is the beginnings of Teresa’s recovery and the beginnings, too, of the Carmelite reform. There is an important lesson here - crisis in human life is not disaster, but could well be the opening up to a newer, more profound experience of God. What seems like break down becomes a break through.

It means of course that we must be prepared to experience and give way to the deprivations that belief in God may impose upon us. As St Teresa would pointedly ask, “Do you seek the consolations of the Lord or the Lord of all consolations”?

But in this journey we are not alone; in Jesus Christ we are given a Companion to be with us. Teresa’s experience of personal darkness led her to discover a friend and companion stronger than any other. This would be the heart of her teaching on prayer. In the *Way of Perfection* she instructs her sisters: “Let us imagine that within us is an extremely rich palace, built entirely of gold and precious stones…..imagine that you have a part to play in order for the palace to be so beautiful…imagine that in this palace dwells the mighty King who has been gracious enough to become your Father, and that He is seated upon an extremely valuable throne, which is your heart.”

She goes on to say, “Let’s not imagine that we are hollow inside…..turn your eyes inward and look within yourself.” (Ch 28 and 29).

For Teresa, it is part of the Majesty of Christ that he can make Himself present to me, within me, in all the differing circumstances of my daily life. She teaches us who read her works how to pray by praying with us. Indeed, she often interrupts her account with a prayerful outburst. She encourages us not to lose heart, but to return constantly to He who dwells within us, He who is the ultimate goal of all our longings.

This journey is also carried out in the company of others. It may be deeply personal, but it is not a private affair. It is carried out in the midst of a community; indeed the path of prayer leads me to others. St Teresa knew the importance of authentic community life and that neither prayer nor mission can be sustained without it. This is why we can say prayer sustains the Church, the Body of Christ.

To make this real, St Teresa built monasteries characterized by fraternity and insisted that there were to be no cliques or elite groups. She warned her sisters of the danger of individualism, as well as gossip, jealousy and criticism which severely damage relationships with others.

We need to bear this in mind as we seek to grow in holiness and deepen our personal spiritual lives. In a wide-spread diocese like ours we must build up the sense of being on this journey of holiness together, assisting and helping one another where possible. And seeing our prayer and our sacrifices as part of the rich contribution that we make to healing and repairing the Church, which needs our love and our support. Again and again Teresa would teach her sisters that their life of renewal was for the sake of “Holy Mother” Church.

So it is with us. This is why it is important to have occasions like today which bring members of the Secular Order together, so that you can continue to support and encourage one another in following the way encouraged by St Teresa. May she continue to guide you on the path of prayer and of holiness. And may Mary, Mother of Carmel, continue to bless you and lead you in the following Her Son.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel….pray for us.

St Teresa…pray for us.

+Mark O’Toole, Bishop of Plymouth