



Love and Mission persevere despite pandemic restrictions on St. Thérèse's Feast Day

MAKATI CITY, Philippines - The COVID-19 pandemic may have prevented most of us from going to church and celebrate special occasions, but it will never take away our faith. It roars on for 2 years now, but despite the restrictions, hundreds of devotees still continued to join us physically and virtually in commemorating the Feast Day of our patroness, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus last October 03, 2021, with its theme: *"Parokya ng Santa Teresita, Padayon sa Hamon ng Misyon sa Panahon ng Pandemya"*. The parish fiesta theme was aligned with the 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines, also known as the Year of "Missio ad Gentes" (Mission to the People), which had the theme "Gifted to Give." Thousands of missionaries from all over the world have committed their lives to establish the Christian faith to our country and seeing it flourish. They were grateful for the gift of faith they had received and wanted to share it with others. This "giftedness" has encouraged generous missionaries throughout history, and it must continue to inspire us all to take part in the essence of mission to share the faith wherever we are and whatever challenges we are facing in this dire time.

The novena Masses which were presided by the priests of the Montfort Missionaries were held from September 24, 2021 to October 02, 2021. Each day of the novena Mass had a simple theme relating to the mission, which was brilliantly explained to us by the designated Mass presider for the day. The livestream of Masses has been held every day for those faithful who were not able to attend physically. One of the highlights of the novena and fiesta Mass was the candle offering to St. Thérèse. People are still unable to gather together since the COVID-19 outbreak, and the world has become a much darker place for many. The offering of the candle was not only a plea to St. Thérèse to help us in praying to get through the pandemic. In times of darkness, a glimmer of light is a message of hope, and we aim to inspire people in their hopelessness. The flame signifies our strong and thriving faith and we implore to God that He would give us the courage to persevere and rekindle the fire of mission in our hearts at this difficult time. The candles were offered by the Mass goers and blessed by the main celebrant before the Mass, and small statues of St. Thérèse were being sold as souvenirs for the celebration. The Delegation Superior of the Montfort Missionaries in the Philippines, Rev. Fr. Norwyn Baydo, SMM, presided over the Fiesta Mass at 9:00 AM on October 03, 2021, together with his confreres.

Fr. Norwyn highlighted the theme of the fiesta celebration by recounting their mission experience in which they go to far-flung places for an extended period of time, and at the end of their mission, there is an implantation of a huge mission cross in chapels or parishes. The words "Continue the mission of Christ" are engraved on the mission cross that serves not only as a reminder that the area has been commissioned but also as an invitation for everyone to continue to unite in the mission that Jesus Christ has brought forth. The mission of Christ is to experience God's goodness, reign, and love. As Christians, we are reminded that whatever our mission is, it is anchored in Christ's mission. It only differs in the methods of missionary services.

He emphasized that through the life of St. Thérèse, God had revealed to us a glorious manner of performing missionary work - that we don't have to go far to serve. St. Thérèse was recognized as the Patroness of the Mission. Although she was confined in the monastery for most of her life and could not go to the missions because of her poor health, her heart was for the missionaries. She had been united with missionary works by the bonds of her prayer and sufferings. Her vocation is to pray and serve with love, sharing in God's sorrow, and to save many souls through prayer.

Fr. Norwyn stressed the three points of St. Thérèse's mission. First is the importance of prayer in human life. We are urged to strive in praying that even if we are restricted in attending church, we are all called to set aside a time to pray not only for ourselves but also for others. The second point was to examine our relationship with God more closely. We must listen not merely to our own will, but above all to God's will, for our connection with Him will reflect in all our dealings. Finally, St. Thérèse tells us that love should complement our prayers and service. Love can only be expressed when it is shared. Love reveals itself through actions. St. Thérèse's "Little Way" teaches us to do ordinary deeds with extraordinary love. If done with love, even the smallest action or gesture we do for others is more meaningful than big deeds done for personal glory. She may have been regarded as an ordinary person in her time, but her greatness was demonstrated by the consistency of the love that she expressed for others in the most simple and little ways. She understands her mission, and that is to be a disciple of prayer and service with love like Jesus Christ. Our patroness teaches us that even if we do not travel far, we are all missionaries in our own little way. We are challenged to carry on Christ's mission in the present times. Our movements may have been disrupted due to the pandemic, but the Lord continues to invite us to be more involved in His mission, and He continuously reminds us not to yield to the fear and anxiety brought on by the pandemic. He concluded his homily by reminding us that in our devotion to St. Thérèse, we may imitate her by following her mission and lovingly share it with others.

Before Fr. Norwyn bestows his final blessing, the Parish Priest of Sta. Teresita Parish, Rev. Fr. Santiago Casing, SMM expressed his gratitude to everyone who made the fiesta celebration possible despite the challenging situation. In particular, he was grateful to the Parish Pastoral Council, ministries, organizations, zone leaders, and special sponsors. He also thanked the youth who are in special ministries that arose during the pandemic, such as the Social Communications Ministry, which serves as a channel of communication for evangelization and information dissemination within the parish through the use of the social media platforms; and the Sanitation Ministry, which ensures that the church's premises are clean and disinfected before and after each Eucharistic celebration. Fr. Ting believes that the presence of Christ is not lost among the faithful. Our celebrations may be deterred by the difficulties we have encountered due to the pandemic, but this episode in our lives has strengthened our faith, and we are called everyday to return to the depths of our hearts and realize that what matters most are not the external manifestations of faith but what lies within. Towards the end of the Mass, roses were blessed and distributed to the Mass goers. Roses are St. Thérèse's signature. It's her way of letting those who are looking for a sign know that she has heard them and that God is answering. It's essential to keep the rose of faith alive in the understanding that our All-Loving God hears and tends to our needs in mysterious ways. We thank God for the gift of faith.

Viva Santa Teresita! Mabunying Teresita!

"It is true that Love knows no such word as "impossible," for it deems "all things possible, all things allowed."
(St. Thérèse of Lisieux)

Sis. Jackielou Foster, AMM