

August 31, 2007

Hi Mountain,

Some of the letters Mother Teresa wrote to spiritual confidants are now being made public, and it's causing quite a stir. There is probably no greater modern icon of Christian spirituality than Teresa of Calcutta - Saint of the Gutters. So when some of her heartfelt prayers and confessions were published recently, lots of folk took notice.

In 1979, the woman from Bulgaria formerly known as Agnes Bojaxhiu, traveled to Oslo, Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Working in Calcutta since 1948 among the poorest of the poor, Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity taught us to see Jesus in places most would not: in the faces of the poor. In dying on the Cross, Teresa said, God made "himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one." Jesus' suffering and nakedness is what you and I must find and work to alleviate. In her acceptance speech she reminded the world that Christ is everywhere - "Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile that we receive."



We were all left with the feeling, this woman really knows Jesus.

And yet, just a couple months earlier, in a display of transparency, she confessed in a letter that in terms of her relationship with Christ, all she was feeling was "silence and emptiness." "I look (for him) but I do not see, listen and do not hear." From other parts of her letters, we see Teresa feeling as if she lived at a painful distance from God. For years she longed to be closer, to see and feel Him more intimately - a longing that was never quite satisfied. She eventually came to see her struggle as a gift, a way to identify with Christ himself. But for years she struggled with a "pain and darkness" in her soul that left her feeling spiritually alone. Her raw prayers and letters reveal cries to God of hurt and longing that seem hardly to square with the tireless servant we became accustomed to seeing behind her public smile.

So is this a contradiction? Is this a crisis of faith? Do her statements of doubt square up with her outward life of devotion, discipline, prayer and service? Is she a hypocrite? Quite the contrary. The buzz at the water cooler is considerable these days. In the interest of offering thoughts to help us talk about these things when they come up, here are some vital truths I think are important to remember.



1. Teresa's letters and life show us what genuine Christian faith often looks like. Antagonists see Teresa's words as evidence that Christianity is a farce. Atheists have jumped in saying this just proves no intelligent person could have faith in God - Teresa knew it but couldn't bring herself to admit it, they say. But what they say reveals how little they understand about what faith actually looks like. Teresa's words don't uncover a secret doubt in God's existence, they reveal a well known hunger for Him.

The fact is, many heroes of scripture talk to God just like Teresa did. Teresa's published documents sound a lot like the Psalms of scripture. So many Psalms are once-private prayers, venting anger, filled with loneliness, absence, fear and what can only be described as doubt -- and yet they are words always offered to the One in whom we ultimately place our trust. Maybe God gave us the Psalms so we would see what real prayer sounds like. I suspect too few of us pray with such raw and real words such as "Where are you, God?" "How long will you hide your face from me?" "Why don't you do something? I've been asking and asking, and yet you are silent! Are you there?" But the Psalmists did. If modern journalists read the Psalms, they would conclude the writers were having a crisis of faith. But words like those aren't unfaithful. They are honest. And they are part of the life of faith.

2. The news accounts have been accenting the frustration in Teresa's heart - how her intimacy with God was never quite satisfied. But what stands out to me is her unquenchable hunger for the Lord. This was a woman who was not content with a small taste of God. She

longed for deeper friendship with Jesus. She wanted a keener awareness of Jesus' presence every moment of her life. Her angst arose from her desire for more of God. She prayed for hours each day, and served him faithfully for over 60 years. And yet she wanted a communion with Christ so intimate, an identification so close that there was no part of her heart or life that was separated from Him. It leaves me asking, "Am I that hungry for God?" In Psalm 42 the writer says his soul longs for God the way a thirsty animal hunts for water. Teresa wanted God that badly. Do you?

3. Any honest, mature Christian will tell you to expect spiritually fallow periods. Experiencing spiritual dry spells is not an indication of apostasy; it's proof you're human. The life of discipleship is not one long honeymoon filled with mountaintop experiences. There are valleys. Sometimes the shadows of depression and spiritual longing mix into a pretty bitter brew. It's common and ordinary, though not talked about often (or honestly) enough. In the 1500s, John of the Cross described his difficult period of spiritual struggle as "the dark night of the soul." Our sense of God's presence is like rainfall; not every year brings the same amount. There are periods of drought. But they don't last forever. Just knowing that helps when it's your turn to walk through the valley.

4. God is there - even when we can not feel Him. Teresa's inability to perceive Christ doesn't mean He wasn't there. Sometimes God's presence is palpable, tangible, so real you know it. But few are blessed with visitations like this. Scripture warns us not to base our faith on feelings. Teresa was - fortunately or unfortunately -- influenced by some of the great mystics of our faith, who gave us both a hunger for subjective experiences with God, and tremendous guilt that we don't have them more often. Her life was plagued with both. In 1946, when Teresa was 36, she says Christ spoke to her, calling her to abandon teaching and to work instead in the slums of the city, among the sick, dying, beggars and street children. "Come, carry me into the holes of the poor," Jesus told her. "Come be My light." And she did. But that's about the last time she heard from Christ in a Voice or specially demonstrative fashion (except for one more powerful manifestation in the 1950s). The rest of her life she spent reminding us that Christ is seen in the face of the poor, the hungry, and the sick (Matthew 25). But this was never enough for Teresa, and she worried that this meant she was somehow out of favor with God.

Not everybody has encounters with Jesus like Teresa had in 1946. When we hear about others who do, we can be amazed or skeptical, encouraged or envious. But let's remember: they are not the norm. And they are not the ultimate test of knowing God, or of God's knowing us. This is a good thing. If you walk with God, you may never have close encounters of the divine kind, with visions or voices appearing in mystical or startling ways. Bottom line - our own feelings are an unreliable guide as to the nearness of God. Even Jesus struggled in his moment of estrangement on the Cross, saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Indeed, the Father had not abandoned Jesus; it only seemed that way.

And so it is for us. If you walk with God there will be times when you can't "feel" anything. But feelings are not required for us to know that God loves us, and that He is there. We have the scriptures, living and active, through which Jesus visits and speaks to the deepest points of our hearts and minds (Hebrews 4:12). We have prayer, a dynamic communication linkage through which God's Spirit interprets even our innermost groans and utterances (Romans 8:26-27). Sometimes our craving for God is the surest sign of His hidden presence. All of this is a great comfort to those who have experienced some doubt or absence of God in their lives. And we all know who that is: everybody. God is there even when you can't feel him.

5. Persevere in prayer and service. Despite her decades-long perception of God's remoteness, Teresa never let up on her work in His name. Her life is a beautiful one, even amidst the inner agony she hid. Beautiful because it demonstrates what real love looks like - "it always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:7). We live in a day of quitters, of people who wilt at the first sign of opposition or struggle. Teresa languished in her spiritual darkness for years, but she never quit. It was not hypocrisy - pretending to be something on the outside that she was not on the inside. It was love - hoping and persevering through service when you don't feel like it. Most folk don't seem to understand this. We tend to think that what we feel is most important. But as Brian Kolodijchuk says in the book he published about her, "To really love someone requires commitment, fidelity and vulnerability. Mother Teresa wasn't 'feeling' Christ's love, and she could have shut down. But she was up at 4:30 every morning for Jesus and still writing to him, 'Your happiness is all I want.' That's a powerful example."

A powerful example indeed - for every person who is married and who doesn't always feel like continuing to love. A powerful example for those whose friends and loved ones require more care and patience than you feel like giving. A powerful example for all who find selfless service to Jesus over the long haul difficult or at times not much fun. A powerful example, indeed.

"Thank you, Jesus, for being faithful to your beautiful servant Teresa of Calcutta, and for her example to us of genuine faith and perseverance, even through struggle. May you find us faithful in your sight. Amen."



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