

The Dark Night of Mother Teresa

ON OCTOBER 19, 2003, Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) will be beatified in Rome. During the three-and-a-half-year investigation into her cause, no less thorough for having been hastened by the waiver of the customary five-year waiting period, every nook and cranny of her life was studied for evidence that she is the great saint, the Christian Mahatma, that the world already believes her to be. The date chosen for her beatification, Mission Sunday, is the Sunday closest to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the pontificate of John Paul II and to the end of the Year of the Rosary. This may be taken as a sign of how close Mother Teresa's cause is to the Pope's heart. In any case, the beatification of Mother Teresa makes a fitting colophon to the era of turbulence and grace that will always be associated with his name. Since the pontificate of Gregory the Great (590-604), nearly every generation of Christians has felt itself living in a Church too old to produce heroic saints. If during the days of John Paul II we are inclined to a similar despondency, we have only to consider Mother Teresa to be reminded of how young the Church really is, how capable of fidelity and passionate witness to Christ.

Given the imminent beatification of Mother Teresa, this article—which appeared in the May 2003 issue of First Things, and is reprinted with permission—gives further insight into the reason for conferring the Catholic title of “Blessed” to honor sanctity and spiritual achievement. This text is offered in response to Max Heindel’s June 1916 Letter to Students, in which he urges us, “As followers of Christ,” to “pay tribute to the heroes and heroines who through years of suffering fought for others by rendering tender care in childhood’s helpless days, by unflinching service in times of sickness, by patient participation in poverty and in any and every trouble that might befall....let us honor them here and now.”



Mother Teresa. © Anna May McCallum

One would expect the canonization process to be steady and sure and, aside from a few marginal detractors, uncontroversial, for no saint has ever been more in the public eye. In her lifelong service to Christ in the poorest of the poor, and her simple and consistent teachings on the law of love, she was an open book. She tried always to be transparent to Christ, and in that very transparency her inner life was hidden, making her a difficult subject for biographers. Malcolm Muggeridge observed that when the eighteen-year-old Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu left her family to join the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto, it was “the end of her biography and the beginning of her life.” It is only now with the end of her life, and the beginning of her cause, that the biography resumes, and new dimensions of her character are

revealed.

During November and December of last year, the ZENIT News Agency published in four installments a study of *The Soul of Mother Teresa: Hidden Aspects of Her Interior Life*, by the Postulator of Mother Teresa's cause, Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C. In this study a new portrait of Mother Teresa's interior life emerges, drawn largely from letters she sent to her spiritual directors. She had wanted the letters to be destroyed, not intending to leave behind any record of her spiritual life ("I want the work to remain only His"), but they were preserved nonetheless; and who among us would willingly dispatch them to the shredder? Fr. Kolodiejchuk's study is just the tip of the iceberg—the documentation submitted to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints runs to eight volumes—but what it shows us is Mother Teresa as a classic Christian mystic whose inner life was burned through by the fire of charity, and whose fidelity was tested and purified by an intense trial of faith, a true dark night of the soul.

Fr. Kolodiejchuk sees Mother Teresa's life as unfolding in four phases:

1) Her childhood and youth, when from the time of her First Communion at age five and a half she felt her heart captivated by the love of Jesus and of neighbor, and discovered her call to join the missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto. While it was difficult to leave her family, she found her time as a Loreto nun, teaching in the convent school in Calcutta, immensely rewarding. She was by all accounts a happy though not particularly brilliant nun (she is remembered, among other things, for having fumbled the candles at Benediction). The keynote of this period is youthful zeal and joy.

2) The Vow of 1942. At age thirty-two, at the end of her annual retreat, with the permission of her spiritual director, Mother Teresa made a vow to give herself utterly and unreservedly to Christ: "To give God anything that He may ask...not to refuse Him anything."

3) The Call within a Call. On September 10, 1946, the day celebrated by the Missionaries of Charity as "Inspiration Day," Mother Teresa was traveling by train from Calcutta to a retreat house in Darjeeling. During this trip, the realization came to her that Jesus was calling her to serve him radically in the poorest of the poor. Only in private letters to

her spiritual director, Fr. Celeste Van Exem, S J., and (under Fr. Van Exem's cautious instruction) to Archbishop Ferdinand Périer, S J., did she reveal that this call was more than just an inner prompting. Jesus appeared and spoke to her, in a series of interior locutions and visions. "Wouldst thou not help?" Jesus asked her. "How can I?" Mother Teresa responded, expressing her fear of incurring ridicule, loneliness, deprivation, and failure should she leave her happy life as a Loreto nun, exchange her habit for a rough sari, and take up the uncertain life Jesus was demanding of her. Repeatedly he asked her, "Wilt thou refuse? You have become my spouse for my love. You have come to India for me. The thirst you had for souls brought you so far. Are you afraid now to take one more step for your spouse, for me, for souls?" And again: "I want Indian nuns, Missionaries of Charity, who would be my fire of love amongst the poor, the sick, the dying, and the little children..." The chief motivation for the Missionaries of Charity, as she would often say, was not to do social work, but to adore Christ in the littlest and weakest of his children, and to bring Christ the souls for which he thirsts.

4) The Dark Night. Throughout 1946 and 1947, Mother Teresa experienced a profound union with Christ. But soon after she left the convent and began her work among the destitute and dying on the street, the visions and locutions ceased, and she experienced a spiritual darkness that would remain with her until her death. It is hard to know what is more to be marveled at: that this twentieth-century commander of a worldwide apostolate and army of charity should have been a visionary contemplative at heart; or that she should have persisted in radiating invincible faith and love while suffering inwardly from the loss of spiritual consolation. In letters written during the 1950s and 1960s to Fr. Van Exem, Archbishop Périer, and to later spiritual directors, Fr. L. T. Picachy, S J., and Fr. J. Neuner, S J., she disclosed feelings of doubt, loneliness, and abandonment. God seemed absent, heaven empty, and bitterest of all, her own suffering seemed to count for nothing, "...just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing."

The dark night of Mother Teresa presents us with an even greater interpretive challenge than her

visions and locutions. It means that the missionary foundress who called herself “God’s pencil” was not the God-intoxicated saint many of us had assumed her to be. We may prefer to think that she spent her days in a state of ecstatic mystical union with God, because that would get us ordinary worldlings off the hook. How else could this unremarkable woman, no different from the rest of us, bear to throw her lot in with the poorest of the poor, sharing their meager diet and rough clothing, wiping leprous sores, and enduring the agonies of the dying, for so many years without respite, unless she were somehow lifted above it all, shielded by spiritual endorphins? Yet we have her own testimony that what made her self-negating work possible was not a subjective experience of ecstasy but an objective relationship to God shorn of the sensible awareness of God’s presence.

In the history of Christian theology and spirituality, there have been many accounts of divine darkness, with a host of different implications. It is an ancient doctrine, emphasized by apophatic theologians and mystics, that God dwells in inaccessible light, a light so searingly absolute that it cancels out all images and ideas we may form of Him, veiling the divine glory in a dark “cloud of unknowing.” This tradition owes much to the Christian Neoplatonist Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and his liturgically inspired vision of ascent to the divine throne; as such, it says more about divine transcendence than about human desolation.

Among the monastic writers who flourished during the sunlit years of the twelfth century, divine darkness was an essentially cheerful idea. William of St. Thierry positively delighted in our mind’s incapacity to see that God is present, for he counted on love to make good the deficiencies of our feeble intellect. Love is the eye with which we see God, William said; love itself is understanding. But love is not to be confused with mere feelings. Feelings burn out too easily; they can be manipulated or seduced. The love by which we see God must be an act of the will rather than a passing affection of the heart.

Later generations of Christian mystics dwelt upon the more desolate kinds of darkness to which the spiritual life can lead: the darkness in which all modes of prayer and spiritual practice become arid,

and all consolation in the love of God seems lost. Even in the desolate dark night of the soul, indeed, especially there, St. John of the Cross taught, God is present, purifying the soul of all passions and hindrances, and preparing her for the inconceivable blessedness of divine union. Along with dark knowing, there is dark loving, no less ardent for being deprived of all sensible and spiritual vision of the beloved. Therefore St. John can say, “Oh, night more lovely than the dawn, Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!”

Yet only in the modern period has the dark night of the soul taken the form of radical doubt, doubting not only one’s own state of grace, but God’s promises and even God’s existence. A wise Benedictine, John Chapman of Downside Abbey, made this point in a 1923 letter to a non-monastic friend: “[I]n the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries most pious souls seem to have gone through a period in which they felt sure that God had reprobated them....This doesn’t seem to happen nowadays. But the *corresponding trial* of our contemporaries seems to be the *feeling of not having any faith*; not temptations against any particular article, but a mere feeling that religion is not true.”

For this annihilating temptation, Chapman wrote, “the only remedy is to *despise* the whole thing, and pay no attention to it except (of course) to assure our Lord that one is ready to suffer from it as long as He wishes.” The “feeling of not having any faith” is painful because it is an authentic purgation, during which “faith is really particularly strong all the time,” and one is being brought into closer union with the suffering Christ.

This was exactly the way Mother Teresa learned to deal with her trial of faith: by converting her feeling of abandonment by God into an act of abandonment *to* God. It would be her Gethsemane, she came to believe, and her participation in the thirst Jesus suffered on the Cross. And it gave her access to the deepest poverty of the modern world: the poverty of meaninglessness and loneliness. To endure this trial of faith would be to bear witness to the fidelity for which the world is starving. “Keep smiling,” Mother Teresa used to tell her community and guests, and somehow, coming from her, it doesn’t seem trite. For when she kept smiling during her night of faith, it was not a cover-up but a manifestation of her

loving resolve to be “an apostle of joy.”

One can better understand, having read *The Soul of Mother Teresa*, why she insisted that adoration of Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament should occupy the center of the Missionaries’ daily work; and why she felt it imperative to establish purely contemplative communities that would make the Missionaries of Charity an order of adoration as well as apostolic service. Adoring Christ in the Sacrament is also a way of dark knowing and dark loving. To all appearances he is absent, as Aquinas says in the *Tantum ergo Sacramentum*, so faith must supply what is lacking to our feeble senses. Humanly, there were times when Mother Teresa felt burnt out, but faith supplied what was lacking even to troubled faith; spiritually she was often desolate, but her vow endured and her visible radiance—to which everyone attests—was undiminished. This lifelong fidelity should not be confused with a Stoic determination to keep going in the face of defeat. It was something else entirely: objective Christian joy

Mother Teresa is not the only modern saint to have undergone such a trial of faith; one thinks also of precursors like St. Paul of the Cross (1694-1775), founder of the Passionists, and St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641), foundress of the Visitandines; but above all of Mother Teresa’s namesake, St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), the French Carmelite famous for her “Little Way.” [See *March/April 2000 Rays for a review—Ed.*] The parallels between Mother Teresa (Teresa of the Child Jesus) and St. Thérèse (Teresa of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face) are really quite remarkable. Thérèse also made a vow, informally as a young child, and formally on two occasions as a professed Carmelite nun, to refuse nothing to Jesus. Like Mother Teresa, she had longed to be sent forth in the missions as a herald of God’s love; since her frailty prevented this, she rejoiced in being assigned missionaries for whom she prayed and whom she regarded with great affection as her spiritual brothers. She, too, felt multiple calls; indeed, she felt all calls at once: “I feel the vocation of the warrior, the priest, the apostle, the doctor, the martyr,” she wrote. “I feel within my soul the courage of the Crusader, the Papal Guard, and I would want to die on the field of battle in defense of the Church.” Not for feminist reasons did she say, “I feel in me the

vocation of the priest,” but rather because of a youthful desire to be all in all for Christ. The “Little Way” was her solution: “I understood that love comprised all vocations, that love was everything...my vocation is love!...In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love.” If love were dependent on mere feelings, however, her vocation would have foundered, for as Thérèse wrote, “Do not believe I am swimming in consolations; oh, no, my consolation is to have none on earth.”

From Easter 1896 until her death from tuberculosis on September 30, 1897, at age twenty-four, Thérèse endured a trial of faith of the modern kind, which she described as like being enclosed in a dark tunnel. She seemed to hear the darkness mocking her: “You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.” According to tradition she died trusting and loving God in the very grip of this doubt, and promising to spend her heaven doing good on earth.

Is it fanciful to consider the possibility that Mother Teresa, who died in the same month one hundred years later, who experienced the same ardent call, made the same vow of surrender, suffered the same desolation of faith, and embodied in the face of that dark night the same teaching of fidelity in small things, may have in some way been completing the mission of St. Thérèse? Could it be that this missionary contemplative and this contemplative missionary are companions in a joint work of grace?

However that maybe, it was the same objective Christian joy that made Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu become a Saint Teresa for our time, and a saint-maker for our future. When we consider her life and the ongoing life of her community, the Church seems young again, and everything seems possible. If these days are in any sense a dark night for the Church, then Mother Teresa shows the way forward: faith that we are undergoing a purification rather than a free-fall, and fidelity, in small things as well as big, to the vows that bind in order to set free. □

—Carol Zaleski