

ARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Thirsting for God:

The Spirituality of Mother Teresa | BY RACHEL DAVIES



I don't know what inspires childhood infatuations, but the day Mother Teresa died is the day one was born in my life. I was thirteen at the time, an enthusiastic eighth-grader with a penchant for the melancholy. Perhaps that explains why, when my teacher assigned a research-your-favorite-hero project in the weeks that followed their deaths, I chose Mother Teresa, whereas most of my friends picked Princess Diana.

I admit I felt somewhat on the outs when the time came for presentations. Display boards on the late princess were glamorous, full of color and life. But mine featured grey cutouts of starved babies held by a wrinkled old woman who smiled too much. I wondered what my classmates would think.

To the credit of all us kids, we were moved by Mother Teresa's story. And who wouldn't be? She was a good woman and had lived well in a world where even heroes struggle to find purpose.

Middle school research gave me the basics: Teresa (Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu) was born the youngest of three siblings in Skopje, Macedonia (former Yugoslavia), to Albanian parents. Her father died quite young, leaving the family to survive by means other than his once-steady income. Gonxha's mother was a devout Catholic, and the nun-to-be would later reflect on how her mother's good deeds shaped her own model of compassion from a very young age.

When Gonxha was nineteen, she left home and joined the Sisters of Loreto in Ireland. Having learned English and finished her novitiate in Darjeeling, she was then transferred to a Catholic

girl's school in Calcutta, where she taught geography for nineteen happy years before leaving the convent and starting her own religious order, the Missionaries of Charity, in 1948.

When I was thirteen, I didn't wonder why she did this. Perhaps the stories overwhelmed my curiosity, like the first time she washed a worm-eaten beggar on the street and said she did it because she loved him. I carried that moving life image in the back of my mind throughout high school and into college. Eighth-grade teachers, beware what you inspire.

I'm an idealist by nature. I love the world and stories where good conquers evil and truth triumphs. But growing up is full of painful lessons. Joining a large community like a college campus puts one in close touch with the experiences of others, and sometimes those experiences speak of death more than childlike hope and victory. Sometimes people lose their faith, or even their lives or the lives of people they love. Whether it touches new friends or distant acquaintances, death wounds the spirit of each of us.

Perhaps one of the most painful things death can take away is a sense of God's presence. Death, a spreading motif, fills out and makes itself at home in our thinking (at least, that's what started to happen to me). For me, the silence of God became tangible, and it threatened to swallow my once-vivid experience. I didn't like it. I didn't like the violence; I couldn't stand the heartlessness of it all. So I went back in search of my childhood hero, that woman of faith, charity, and life. Maybe she could push death back, make God speak to me again.



PHOTO FROM WWW.EXCEPTIONAL.ORG.AU

Mother Teresa visiting the Children's Hospital at Mater Health Services in Brisbane, Australia, October 1981.

I'll never forget the night of shock. "Mother Teresa," I typed into the Google search bar, waiting for a good read. Thousands of articles popped up. Most of them gave simple praise and laud to this woman who had devoted her life in service to the "poorest of the poor." Glossy, triumphalistic titles flooded my computer screen. I read half a dozen or so, but none seemed to have substance beyond the obvious. "Perhaps holy people, life-knowing people, don't have personalities," I thought fleetingly.

But then the words popped out: "Research Reveals a Dark Side of Mother Teresa." I opened the article like a child carefully thieving a cookie...my neck tingling, my heart racing. I was already aware of some popular criticisms leveled against her by journalists like Christopher Hitchens, but this article wasn't about those. This one was different. This one was terrifying to the core:

As the Roman Catholic world prepares for tomorrow's beatification of Mother Teresa, she is being revered as a missionary to India's poorest of the poor, someone whose relationship with God seemed obvious from her willingness to undergo incredible hardship... But her exterior buoyancy masked an astonishing secret-

known to a small number of clergy counselors but no other close colleagues—that was revealed only through research for her sainthood candidacy. Mother Teresa was afflicted with feelings of abandonment by God from the very start of her work among the homeless children and dying people in Calcutta's slums. From all available evidence, this experience persisted until her death five decades later, except for a brief interlude in 1958.¹

According to another article, 1958 is the year in which she wrote: "My smile is a great cloak that hides a multitude of pains."²

My faith icon had more to say in private letters to her spiritual advisors:

I am told God lives in me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

I want God with all the power of my soul—and yet between us there is terrible separation.

Heaven from every side is closed.

I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing.³

This was only one of the many articles I found that night. Search after search verified what I had read and more. Apparently, Mother Teresa had an average Christian experience until the time of her "call within a call" in 1946. During that year, she took a train from Calcutta, where she was teaching, to Darjeeling for her annual spiritual retreat.

It was on the train that God asked her to leave the convent and start her own religious order in the slums. She didn't want to. She had a happy life with the Loreto sisters. But according to Richard Ostling, "she said she distinctly heard [God's] voice say, 'I want to use you for my glory. Wilt thou refuse?'"

Mother Teresa answered God's call with a letter to the Vatican requesting permission to leave the convent. The process took almost two years, during which she "experienced profound union with Christ."⁴ However, according to Carol Zaleski, "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."

I was angry and confused. I had been looking for life, not more death. What about the stories? What about the sunny pictures I had seen of her smiling, praying, spreading the “love of God”? How could it be, and why would God let it be? She had given everything to him!

Though my discovery did not breathe life the way I had hoped, it did give me a temporary metaphor to express and explore death further. Mother Teresa, beacon of hope to thousands, knew silence just like me.

Six months later, I packed my bags and headed off to Calcutta. I went for many reasons, but most pressingly to “explore the presence of God and the lack thereof in the world and in individual human experience” (or so I said in my preflight blog entry). I was scared, eager, and hopeful.

To my surprise, I was only one of many volunteers at Nirmal Hriday (the infamous Home for the Destitute and Dying). Individuals from around the world were there, many on the same quest as me (though knowledge of Mother Teresa’s darkness was not widely spread—only the nuns seemed to know).

The sisters were loving, warm, and sometimes hysterically funny. “Certainly holy people have personality,” I thought. But the atmosphere of the house itself, and indeed the whole city, is what set the dominant tone of my experience in Calcutta and ultimately pointed me toward resolution.

Just as there was more to Mother Teresa than the media said, I also found Calcutta incredibly complex. No, carts didn’t come through the streets collecting dead bodies each morning (somehow I had gotten that impression from eighth grade and Monty Python). It is actually possible to live one’s entire life in Calcutta without meeting a slum or a corpse.

The Adventist church on ritzy Park Street accepted me warmly into fellowship during my time away from home, but its members seemed as little aware of what was happening down the street as most of my friends were on the other side of the globe. Lots of distant admiration—just like the superficial articles I had read.

Paradox is the word, I think. Slums and fast cars, the rich and the poor, life and death. Nirmal Hriday was a home “for the dying,” and yet 50 percent of those admitted actually lived. Journalists made a mistake in how they portrayed the home. Newspaper pictures of Nirmal Hriday are devoid of the human: deadly figures lie here and there, clasping for water, but not for touch or conversa-

tion. “How horrible,” is a true but incomplete message. I got to know and love those patients. I saw nuns laughing and playing with individuals.

Death didn’t stand alone, and there were more sides to Mother Teresa’s story. On the roof of Nirmal Hriday, in all the chapels and in all seven-hundred-plus of Mother Teresa’s homes around the world, the phrase “I Thirst” is prominently displayed. “Of all the cries of Christ from the cross, what an odd one to choose for special attention,” I thought. Why not “My God, why have you forsaken me?” or even “Father forgive them”?

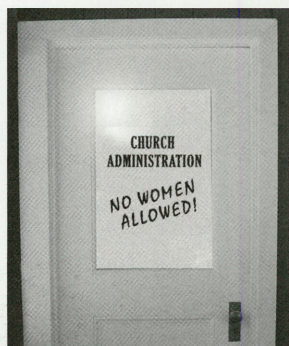
But the image is striking once you think about it. Personal letters reveal that it came from Mother Teresa’s Darjeeling train ride. She had a vision—or series of visions—in which Jesus cried “I Thirst” from the cross, and pleaded with her to go out in search of those for whom he was so thirsty: the poor, the lonely, the dying, the street children, the social outcasts.⁵ “Satisfy my thirst,” he said.

But he also warned her that she might have to share in his thirst. Indeed, it was her thirst for God that qualified her to be his agent of mercy in the first place (if it’s even possible to be “qualified” for such a task). “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,” says Jesus in Matthew 16:24, 25 (ESV).

Our Catholic friends place great emphasis on this verse, and rightly so. It’s brutally fair. Who can honestly confront a world like ours—as Christ did—without feeling the cross of horror, shame, and despair? Answering the call of Jesus inevitably means sharing in the Passion—suffering the weight of sin along with Christ—before we can partner with him for its redemption. Only after we have acknowledged death’s presence in the world will we be able to speak with any tenaciousness about life. “For who hopes for what he already has?” (Rom. 8:24).



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I see it now, and I'm not so angry. Facing our death and our need separated Jesus from the presence of the Father. He was thirsty. Mother Teresa responded in love by going to a thirsting world, a world whose pain hid God from her eyes in the same way it had from Christ's. That bitter absence, thirst for God and thirst for those he died to save, wrote Christ's heart onto hers in the end.

Christianity teaches that Jesus endured crucifixion for the sins of all people, and that he cried from the cross about God's abandonment. Similarly...for this woman who loved God above everything else, loss of the divine presence was the ultimate sacrifice that emptied her soul but mysteriously energized her mission.⁶

I didn't come away from Calcutta as a conqueror, with sunny God feelings as my souvenir from the House of the Dying. But I now see death and life in conversation, honesty and hope together. A very fragile theme of grace is emerging from the text that once seemed so cruel and so stern: "take up your cross, and follow me." Maybe Mother Teresa sensed it, too. Maybe that's what made her smile. ■

Notes and References

1. Richard Ostling, "Research Reveals a Dark Side of Mother Teresa," *Washington Times*, Oct. 19, 2003.
2. Bruce Johnston and Brigid Delaney, "Does God Really Exist? The Agony of Teresa," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Nov. 30, 2002, viewed online at <www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/11/29/1038386314539.html?oneclick=true>
3. Taken from Richard Ostling, "Research Reveals a Dark Side," but also found in many other articles.
4. Carol Zaleski, "The Dark Night of Mother Teresa," *First Things* 133 (May 2003): 24-27, reprinted in Catholic Education Resource Center and viewed online at <www.catholiceducation.org/articles/facts/fm0030.html>. Much of Zaleski's information came from a study prepared for Mother Teresa's sainthood candidacy, which is titled "The Soul of Mother Teresa: Hidden Aspects of Her Interior Life," by Brian Kolodiejuck. ZENIT (online) News Agency published it in 2002, but later retracted it because the Missionaries of Charity felt it was being abused by journalists, or so the nuns in Kolkata told me. Though I was trusted to read the study in Kolkata, I can't currently obtain a legal copy.
5. Zaleski, "Dark Night."
6. Ostling, "Research Reveals a Dark Side."

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