Greetings in the Lord! For many of us in the northern climates it’s the dark of winter. I’ve wanted to share some reflections on the widely reported “dark night” of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and have decided this is a good month to do so.

Even though the main lines of Mother Teresa’s experience of “darkness” had been known for several years, the full publication of her private letters drew world-wide media coverage.

Some secularists chose to interpret her talk of darkness as a sign of hypocrisy and even accused her of not really believing in God. Only a very superficial and partial reading of these letters could have occasioned this interpretation. Some believers were disturbed and confused to hear of her prolonged experience of aridity or emptiness in her relationship with God. Some thought the letters were so disturbing it was a mistake to publish them. This last concern, while understandable, is unfounded, since the letters in question are part of the official record compiled in the process of canonization and are generally made public.

Having carefully read these letters, I am left awe-struck at the depth of Mother Teresa’s holiness. Her faith and her heroic service were more profound than I ever imagined.

It is certainly true that while receiving remarkable communications from the Lord and deep spiritual/sensible consolation at the beginning of her mission, for almost 50 years Mother Teresa was left almost totally bereft of such consolation. She carried out her mission with almost no affective experience of God’s love and presence. She could see the fruit that her work was producing. She could see that when she spoke to her sisters and others that they came alive and grew in the experience of God’s love, but she herself for the most part felt only emptiness.

During the first ten years of this “darkness” she was deeply troubled by it and sought to understand what was happening by consulting a few trusted priests. She wondered if this prolonged darkness was a sign of her great sinfulness and imperfection. Some of the advice she received was helpful but it wasn’t until she met Fr. Neuner, a Jesuit working in India, that she came to grasp some of the special meaning of her suffering. He explained to her that this wasn’t the typical “dark night” as described by St. John of the Cross, that it wasn’t just for her own purification, but that it was a special gift that God was giving her to participate in the sufferings of Christ, particularly in Jesus’ own sense of abandonment in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. She was forever grateful:

“I can’t express in words the gratitude I owe you for your kindness to me. For the first time in these 11 years I have come to love the darkness. For I believe now that it is a part, a very, very
Dear Brothers and Sisters

Having carefully read these letters, I am left awe-struck at the depth of Mother Teresa’s holiness. Her faith and her heroic service were more profound than I ever imagined.

She was able to understand and feel deep compassion for these abandoned ones in part because of her own experience of ‘darkness’ and abandonment.

small part of Jesus’ darkness and pain on earth. You have taught me to accept it as a ‘spiritual side of your work’ as you wrote. Today really I felt a deep joy; that Jesus can’t go anymore through the agony but that He wants to go through it in me. More than ever I surrender myself to Him. Yes, more than ever I will be at His disposal.”

In fact Mother Teresa had prayed for just such a participation in the agony of Christ years previously!

As a young woman she had resolved “to drink the chalice to the last drop.” After the founding of the Missionaries of Charity she again resolved “to drink only from His chalice of pain and to give Mother Church real saints.”

The understanding she received from Fr. Neuner gave her a measure of peace and even joy, although it didn’t take away the pain of not being able to experience the sensible/spiritual consolation of God’s love and favor which often seemed on the verge of being unbearable.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa in his Advent Meditations given in 2003 to the Holy Father and the papal household summed up well the reasons why God led Mother Teresa by this unusual path. The publication of the full text of the letters and the commentary of Fr. Kolodiejchuk in Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light confirms this interpretation. I actually discussed the unique experience of Mother Teresa in terms of her “dark night” as interpreted by Fr. Cantalamessa and its relationship to the “ordinary dark nights” as taught by John of the Cross in chapter XVII of my book on the spiritual tradition, The Fulfillment of All Desire: A Guidebook for the Journey to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints.

Because the Lord knew that the remarkable mission that Mother Teresa was undertaking would be blessed greatly and that the whole world would come to admire it, it was important that the special gift of acute “spiritual poverty” be given to Mother Teresa as a protection against pride. The experience of her “nothingness” and “emptiness” was a gift that God gave to protect her from the adulation she would receive, including the reception of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Also, because of the specific nature of the mission he was calling her to, he gave her the gift of knowing in the depth of her being what it was like for those she was serving, those who had been abandoned by their families, rejected, unwanted, left alone to die on the streets of Calcutta, or children abandoned by their parents. She was able to understand and feel deep compassion for these abandoned ones in part because of her own experience of “darkness” and abandonment.

And finally, she was being given to a remarkable degree the gift of being one with Jesus in his passion, out of which comes so much redemptive power. A gift she had asked for on more than one occasion.

Yes, she experienced temptations to give up, to despair, even temptations to blasphemy and unbelief, but to be tempted is not to sin. Her heroic perseverance in the face of such interior suffering is truly awe-inspiring to behold. What an example to us in our need to persevere no matter what the difficulties, no matter what we experience or don’t experience.

On the other hand there are dangers in misunderstanding Mother Teresa’s unusually sustained experience of darkness. It was because of her very special vocation that this darkness accompanied her for so long. It is not the normal purifying “dark nights” that John of the Cross speaks of, neither for beginners or the more advanced. Nor is every experience of aridity, emptiness or darkness a purifying or redemptive “dark night.” It is very helpful to avail ourselves of the wisdom of our spiritual tradition to understand this better.

In brief, John of the Cross teaches that there are three reasons why someone may experience deep aridity, empti-
ness or darkness in their prayer or relationship with God. (See Chapter 14 of *The Fulfillment of All Desire* for a much more complete explanation.) One reason why such aridity may be experienced is because of “lukewarmness” or infidelity in “doing our part” in sustaining our relationship with God. We may become careless about regular prayer and spiritual reading, we may not frequent the Eucharist and Sacrament of Reconciliation, we may fill our minds and hearts with worldly entertainment, we may not develop relationships with others who desire to follow the Lord. This carelessness and infidelity lessen our hunger for God and desire to be with him and produce lukewarmness and repugnance for things of the Spirit. This is not a purifying darkness but rather the result of laxity and the only solution is to repent and take up the spiritual practices that dispose us for union with God.

A second reason why such aridity may be experienced is because of physical or emotional illness. The advice of the saints is to try to get better, pray for healing, go to the doctor, but keep on as best one can in living a fervent Christian life. And if one is not healed it’s an invitation to join our suffering with the suffering of Jesus and offer it as reparation for our own sins and as intercessory prayer for others.

A third reason why such darkness or aridity may be present is that we are ready to move to a deeper level of faith, hope and love and that God purposely removes the experience of his love, presence or favor—but not their reality—in order to give us a chance to believe, hope and love more deeply and purely. This true “dark night” may be quite intense and last for a long period of time, or it may happen intermittently, interspersed with times of sensible consolation. A true dark night is accompanied by deep, painful longing for God. This is acutely present in Mother Teresa. One sign that it is an authentic dark night is that we don’t in our aridity try to fill the emptiness with worldly or fleshly consolations but remain faithful in seeking God even in the pain of his apparent absence. The authentic dark night isn’t an end in itself, but is intended to prepare us for an even greater union with and experience of God.

Mother Teresa, pray for us!

Also thank you for your continuing support of Renewal Ministries in prayer and giving. As you can see from the articles in the rest of the newsletter, a lot is going on including the upcoming March launch of the 24th year of *The Choices We Face*! Your support is vital.

Your brother in Christ,

Ralph Martin

P.S. We’re posting on our website ([www.renewalministries.net](http://www.renewalministries.net)) a somewhat fuller version of these reflections on Mother Teresa. You’ll find the link on the home page.

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**Please Pray…**

+ that the new season of *The Choices We Face* television programs will help many know the gracious love of God in Jesus Christ.

+ for the work of Renewal Ministries throughout the world in this new year. May the Lord continue to open doors for the proclamation of the Gospel and may He empower all those who serve Him.

+ for the prayer intentions of all our supporters and their family members.

_Thank you for your continued support through prayer as we labor together for the Gospel and the renewal of the Church._
Outdone in Generosity

Recently, I spent some time in Brazil at the invitation of a Catholic Community in the cities of Sao Jose and Iturama. The community is actually a blend of two groups: the Community of Life which includes priests, seminarians, and lay men and women with a celibate commitment. The other group, The Community of Alliance, is composed of families, children, and single men and women.

Before I made the trip I kept hearing the word “more” every time I went to prayer. “More, more...” It was so insistent that one day I said to the Lord (assuming I knew what He meant), “Lord, I have no more to give...I think I’m giving everything but if you want more, you’ll have to supply.” Then a sister in my community told me that as she prayed for me about the trip, she felt the Lord was asking more from me. A bit frustrated, I threw up my hands and said, “What does God want, to squeeze blood from a stone?” But I’ve known God and His ways long enough to say, “Well Lord, then You supply—I have no more to give.”

Brothers and sisters—from the moment the trip began, Sister Christina and I were overwhelmed by God’s generosity. His supply was so abundant, from planes and schedules and customs lines to the lavish care of the community for

our every need, that I was repeatedly moved to tears. Never have I experienced my needs so anticipated and so lavishly met as in those two weeks.

Let me give you two examples. On Sunday we were invited to a home for a 5:00 dessert. There were about fourteen of us. The entire dining room table was full of different desserts as well as three side tables (I couldn’t even see the side table behind me). I sat there staring while Sister Christina, wide-eyed, whispered, “What is God doing?” When she said that, things began to click, and I said, “Lord, what are you doing?”

I heard clearly in my spirit, “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God has prepared for those who love Him. I am lavish- ing much upon you to give you a sign of my abundant provision, a sign of my love for you and for all my people. You cannot even see all the desserts in this room, just like you have not yet even really begun to imagine what I have prepared for you in heaven...”

(Those of you who might be thinking of wasted food—never fear—the community has a tremendous daily outreach to the poor, many of whom live in cardboard shacks by the river.)

I began to notice how people in the community in daily life gave of themselves and what they had so generously and freely. They told...
me it was one of the things God asked of them as part of community living. They are becoming a sign of the lavish love of God! But lavishness is not primarily characterized by quantity. For example, one day while we were there, I said to the Lord in prayer, “Lord, if all this is not just coincidence, but a sign from you about your love—its scope, its abundance, its power, let someone give me a small, embroidered altar cloth for the little chapel in my house back in Ann Arbor.” No one, but God, could know of my desire.

The very next morning a poor woman in the neighborhood came to the house where I was staying with a small gift wrapped package. She couldn’t speak a word of English and I couldn’t speak a word of Portuguese but with a wonderful smile she held out her gift. And yes, when I opened it, it was exactly what I had asked for—a beautiful altar cloth embroidered with a chalice and other decorations. “O, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God…”

Finally, the day before we left, a young mother came to me with her ten month old son João Paulo, in her arms. She told me he had something to give me. Very soberly, he looked at me for a long moment and then reached up and pulled off his favorite bib with his name on it and held it out to me. I said to the mother, “Oh, I cannot take this.” “Yes,” she said, “it is good. It is for you.” The child smiled and then opened his arms for a hug. That community is truly becoming a sign of God’s love through their generosity in very small and big ways. Their community name is Mar a Dentro—Portuguese for Launch Out Into the Deep. With great generosity they are serving many needy but also bringing God’s love to one another—daily.

Their major project currently is the building of a monastery for the priests who are part of the community. There are two ordained now and six more in the seminary. While we were there, the Bishop laid a foundation stone for the monastery on a plot of land in a rural section of the area. Next to it they will build a clinic to treat depression. They tell me it is a major area of need in addition to the poor and the youth on drugs that the community serves.

In a certain sense, since I returned I do run a bit harder and faster because I am carried at a new depth by His lavish generosity and a clearer vision of the greatness of our God!

On a final note, many people who listen to my radio program Food for the Journey write to me and it often enables me to glimpse the lavishness of God’s love for them. Below is one example:

“It has been a hard year. Your program has helped me make it through. Your words inspire me to go to church. God’s words have made the suffering endurable. I’m sure you get lots of these emails, however the life you have saved is very important to me. It is me.”

Keep praying that all our work can continue to bring God’s saving and abundant love to all those who so desperately need it!

Two concrete signs of God’s lavish love and generosity—a child’s bib and an altar cloth.

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Keep praying that all our work can continue to bring God’s saving and abundant love to all those who so desperately need it!

To hear more of St. Ann’s reflections, listen to her daily radio program Food for the Journey at www.renewalministries.net—click on TV/Radio and “Listen to Radio shows”.

“Lord, if all this is not just coincidence, but a sign from you about your love—its scope, its abundance, its power, let someone give me a small, embroidered altar cloth for the little chapel in my house back in Ann Arbor.”
Jack McAleer
*The American Dream*

Krispy Kreme gave the world a new appreciation for doughnuts, but it also gave Jack McAleer, the company’s executive vice president, an opportunity to re-evaluate his own life in light of eternity. In this compelling show, Jack shares how the rapid rise and painful fall of the family business led to his spiritual growth and renewal.

Fr. Thomas Dubay, S.M.
*Deep Conversion—Part 1*
*Deep Prayer—Part 2*

Why do so many people commit the same sins for years and years without any real change? Why are so few Christians converted from mediocrity to excellence? In these two fascinating shows Fr. Dubay, well-known retreat master and best selling author explores the true meaning of conversion and authentic prayer.

Melissa Dayton
*My Yes to Life*

Wife and mother of seven, Melissa Dayton relates the deeply personal story of her teenage pregnancy and how her yes to that unborn life led her back to God and to an eventual ministry in art. Melissa speaks with candor and insight about faith, family and marriage, and the joy of welcoming her husband into the Church.

Fr. John Riccardo
*A Voice for the Word*

Ordained in 1996, Fr. John is currently the pastor at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Plymouth, Michigan as well as a popular speaker and radio personality. In this show Fr. John talks about the innovative ways he is bringing Christ’s truth and love to his parishioners.

Sherry Weddell
*The Laity: Called and Gifted*

Lay Catholics, who comprise 99% of the Church, are often ill equipped to effectively carry out their essential part in the mission of the Church—the proclamation of the Gospel. In this show Sherry Weddell, co-director of the Catherine of Siena Institute, outlines the innovative programs, resources, and leadership training that help Catholics learn to discern God’s unique call in their own lives, and become effective apostles in the world.

Jennifer Naimo
*Blessings on Broadway*

How does a Catholic actress maintain her faith under the bright lights of Broadway? This lively and entertaining show features actress Jennifer Naimo as she shares both the challenges and unexpected blessings of her Broadway career, and the keys to a vibrant, Spirit-filled faith.

Theresa Burke, PhD and Kevin Burke, MSS
*Rachel’s Vineyard: Healing the Trauma of Abortion*

Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries, founded and directed by the Burkes, is an international outreach to women, men, and family members who have been impacted by the trauma of abortion. This show provides a hopeful glimpse into the powerful and ground breaking retreats, resources and support groups that are helping many people begin the process of post-abortive restoration, renewal and healing.
Immaculée Ilibagiza
*Left to Tell—Part 1 & Part 2*
In 1994, Immaculée returned home from the National University of Rwanda to spend Easter with her family and her life was forever changed. Caught in the midst of the Rwandan genocide and the three-month slaughter of nearly one million ethnic Tutsis, she survived by hiding in a tiny bathroom with seven other women for 91 terrifying days. Most of her family was massacred, but Immaculée survived and tells her story in the best-selling autobiography, *Left to Tell*. In these two shows, complete with photos and video footage, Immaculée shares the powerful first-hand account of her horrific ordeal, the miracle of God’s deliverance, the power of prayer, and the triumph of faith and forgiveness.

Jesse Romero
*God’s Word is Living and Active*
Catholic Evangelist Jesse Romero gives a passionate, action-packed account of his own conversion story. You’ll laugh and cry with Jesse as he takes you from his devout Latino upbringing to his search to define his manhood through kickboxing and police work, to his eventual encounter with the living God through the Scriptures.

Tim and Michele Green
*Trusting in God*
Devout Catholics, the Greens were faced several years ago with the seemingly overwhelming challenges of Tim’s incurable brain tumor, miscarriages, and a difficult adoption process. Join them as they share about how their suffering and surrender to God’s ways produced in them the deep and abiding fruit of trust and a new found power in the victory of the Cross.

Jim Murphy and Debbie Herbeck
*Mission to Mexico*
Using video footage and photos, Jim Murphy and Debbie Herbeck describe their work in the garbage dumps of Mexico City, and the tremendous value of helping high school students engage in Christ’s mission to the poor.

Don’t miss shows with frequent and popular guests Fr. Michael Scanlan, Patti Mansfield, Dr. Janet Smith, and other inspiring guests.

For a complete schedule of programming in your area beginning March 2008, go to www.renewalministries.net
“All we do, our prayers, our work, our suffering, is for Jesus. Our life has no other reason or motivation.”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

January 2008

Ann Arbor, MI, Christ the King Men’s Retreat
January 11–13
Ralph Martin
Contact number: 734-665-5040

Panama City, FL
Catholic Charismatic Renewal Conference
January 11–13
Sr. Ann Shields
Contact July Mikulec at juday@emcst.com

West Palm Beach, FL
Catholic Charismatic Renewal Conference
January 18–19
Ralph Martin
Contact John Dean at JDEANEPH320@earthlink.net

Kalamazoo, MI, Men’s Conference
January 26
Peter Herbeck
Contact Rob Webb at 269-388-3020 or cmckzoo@att.net

Ames, Iowa, St. Thomas Aquinas Parish
January 29–30
Ralph Martin
Contact Bob Horton at rhorton@iastate.edu

February 2008

Paris, France, Community of the Beatitudes Retreat for the Sick
February 8–10
Sr. Ann Shields
Contact Fr. Luc-Marie at Luc-Marie_valliant@yahoo.fr

Clarksdale, MS, Women’s Conference
February 8–10
Debbie Herbeck
Contact Valerie Britt at 662-627-1823

Kansas City, MO, Men’s Conference
February 9
Peter Herbeck
Contact Dan Spencer at dspenceriii@kc.rr.com

Ann Arbor, MI
St. Thomas the Apostle Lenten Series
Wednesdays Feb 13, 20, 27
Ralph Martin
Contact www.stthomasannarbor.catholicweb.com or 734-761-8606

Vero Beach, FL, St. John of the Cross Parish
February 15–16
Ralph Martin
Contact number: 772-563-0057

Brighton, MI,
Michigan Men’s Catholic Conference
February 16
Peter Herbeck
Contact number: 810-225-0358

Pewamo, MI, St. Joseph’s Parish Mission
February 23
Ralph Martin, Peter Herbeck
Contact Aaron Epkey at 989-593-3384

Eaton Rapids, MI, St. Peter’s Parish Mission
February 24–27
Ralph Martin, Sr. Ann Shields
Contact Fr. Bennett at 517-663-4735

SAVE THE DATE!
Lift Jesus Higher Rally
Toronto, Ontario
April 19, 2008

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Renewal Ministries is a Catholic ministry committed to renewal and evangelization in the Church. It seeks to proclaim Jesus Christ through its TV and radio outreaches, as well as through books, tapes, conferences, retreats and other international evangelistic events.

Editor
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Design
Anne Martin

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