

Mother Teresa's "Dark Night"

What did it mean for her?

What does it mean for us?

By Ralph Martin

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. (Mother **Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta"** Edited and with Commentary by Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C.)

TIME Magazine did a cover story on it. Prominent articles appeared in the NY Times and other major publications. There were many TV and radio interviews.

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. And by now we must know that efforts to "edit" the life or writings of a saint (as the sisters of Therese of Lisieux tried to do in the case of their sister's writings), only detract from the awesome witness to holiness that is found, albeit in sometimes unexpected and disturbing ways. I think we will see that in the long run this widespread media attention, even with its imperfections, and the publication of these letters, will bear great fruit.

Having read the entire book, which includes all the available letters and the sensitive and expert commentary of a priest from Mother Teresa's own order, 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 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." (p. 241)

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." (p. 141)

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, and the publication of the full text of the letters and the commentary of Fr. Kolodiejchuk 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, emptiness 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 be diligent in rejecting temptation, 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!

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