

Aspects Revealed by Mother Teresa's Process of Beatification and Canonization

© Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C.
Postulator

In July of 1999, after John Paul II made an exception to the requirement of waiting five years after death, the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of Mother Teresa began in Calcutta. At present, two years later, the process for Mother Teresa's Beatification and Canonization is beginning its Roman phase of study and evaluation in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

There is much material of interest in the 76 volumes of eyewitness testimony and documents that form the acts of the Diocesan Enquiry into the life, virtues, and reputation of sanctity of the Servant of God Mother Teresa. Two particularly interesting and up until now unknown aspects of Mother Teresa's life are revealed in the documents that have been gathered: the first element is *the nature of the inspiration Mother Teresa received* and the second is *Mother Teresa's interior experience* once she began her work for the poorest of the poor **in** the streets and slums of Calcutta.

1) Mother Teresa's Inspiration

On 10 September 1946, while on a train journey to her eight-day retreat in Darjeeling, Mother Teresa received what she always called her "call within a call." This day came to be celebrated among the Missionaries of Charity as "Inspiration Day." Mother Teresa steadfastly refused to speak of what happened on that train ride. As she explained to Archbishop Ferdinand Perier, S .J., in March 1957, "I want the work to remain only His. When the beginning will be known people will think more of me, less of Jesus."

What was that beginning? After she returned to Calcutta from Darjeeling, Mother Teresa revealed what had happened - both on the train and during the retreat - to her spiritual director, Fr. Celeste Van Exem, S .J. It was not until January 1947 that Fr. Van Exem was convinced Mother Teresa's experience was, as he later wrote to Archbishop Perier, "from God and from the Immaculate Heart of Mary:" He then allowed Mother Teresa to write to the Archbishop, telling him of her call from Jesus. She begins her letter of 13 January by informing the Archbishop that "from last September strange thoughts and desires have been filling my heart. They got stronger and clearer during the eight days retreat I made in Darjeeling."

Before Mother Teresa proceeds to tell the Archbishop what these thoughts and desires are, she discloses that "during the year very often I have been longing to be all for Jesus and to make other souls - especially Indian - come and love Him fervently, to identify myself with Indian girls completely, and so love Him as He has

never been loved before." But it seems she was not sure if this longing was genuine or not: "I thought [this] was one of my many mad desires." As a result, "I put it off again and again." But on September 10 Jesus intervenes to make His will known. During the retreat His message becomes clearer and stronger:

"In all my prayers and Holy Communion He is continually asking 'Wilt thou refuse? When there was a question of Thy soul I did not think of Myself but gave Myself freely for Thee on the Cross and now what about Thee? Wilt Thou refuse? I want Indian Nuns, victims of My love, who would be Mary and Martha, who would be so very united to me as to radiate My love on souls. I want free Nuns covered with My poverty of the cross. I want obedient Nuns covered with My obedience on the cross. I want full of love Nuns covered with My Charity of the Cross. Wilt Thou refuse to do this for Me?'"

If before we had imagined that on 10 September Jesus asked Mother Teresa to take on a new mission, that she accepted immediately, and only waited for the Church's permission, we now know that this was not the case. In fact, Mother Teresa's first reaction was to let someone else better and more worthy answer the call. "My own Jesus - what you ask it is beyond me. I can hardly understand half of the things you want. I am unworthy, I am sinful, I am weak. Go, Jesus, and find a more worthy soul, a more generous one."

But Jesus is persistent in his call. "You have been always saying 'do with me whatever you wish'. Now I want to act. Let me do it, My little Spouse, My own little one. Do not fear. I shall be with you always: You will suffer and you suffer now, but if you are My own little Spouse, the Spouse of the crucified Jesus, you will have to bear these torments in your heart. Let me act. Refuse me not. Trust me lovingly, trust me blindly."

But still Mother Teresa was struggling between acceptance of her new call and a desire to become a perfect Loreto nun. "Jesus, my own Jesus, I am only Thine. I am so stupid. I do not know what to say, but do with me whatever You wish, as You wish, as long as you wish. I love you not for what you give, but for what You take, Jesus. Why can't I be a perfect Loreto Nun, a real victim of Your love here? Why can't I be like everybody else? Look at the hundreds of Loreto Nuns who have served You perfectly, who are now with You. Why can't I walk the same path and come to You?"

But Jesus is sure of his choice. "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 poor I want you to bring to me and the Sisters that would offer their lives as victims of My love will bring these souls to Me. You are, I know, the most incapable person, weak and sinful. But just because you are that, I want to use You for My glory. Wilt Thou refuse?"

During the year 1947, Jesus is still expressing his desire to Mother Teresa. For example, He says: "My little one, come. Come, carry me into the holes of the poor. Come, be My light. I cannot go alone. They don't know Me so they don't want me. You come. Go amongst them. Carry Me with you into them. How I long to enter their holes, their dark unhappy homes. Come be their victim. In your immolation, in your love for Me, they will see Me, know Me, want Me."

At the beginning of December 1947, more than a year after Jesus began to make His will known, Mother Teresa writes to Archbishop Perier that on the one hand she is still reluctant, but on the other she finds in herself a growing longing to satiate His thirst, the fruit of the grace of her interior locutions. "Why has all this come to me, the most unworthy of His creatures, I do not know. And I have tried so often to persuade Our Lord to go and seek another soul, a more generous, a stronger one, but He seems to take pleasure in my confusion, in my weakness. These desires to satiate the longing of Our Lord for souls of the poor - for pure victims of His love - goes on increasing with every Mass and Holy Communion. All my prayers and the whole day, in a word, are full of this desire. Please do not delay longer."

However, the Archbishop was not yet ready to move ahead. Previously, he had told Mother Teresa that before he gives his approval "I must be able to say that I have prayed much and long, that I have studied carefully, that I have consulted different experts in these matters, that I have placed myself in a state of complete indifference as regards the acceptance or refusal and that my judgment is based solely on the merits or demerits of the case. ... I shall do the will of God; but that must be clear to me."

The will of God was not clear to the Archbishop until January 1948: After celebrating Mass on 6 January 1948 at Loreto Convent, Entally, he told Mother Teresa, "You may go ahead." Mother Teresa was now able to write to her Superior General, Mother M. Gertrude, L.B.V.M., and tell her of the call. Mother Gertrude's response was positive and so on 7 February 1948 Mother Teresa wrote her petition to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious asking the indulgence that would allow her to leave Loreto and begin her work for the poorest of the poor of Calcutta.

2), Mother Teresa's Interior Experience of Darkness

In her first letter to Archbishop Perier, Mother Teresa tells him that she has been and is "very happy as a Loreto Nun." But she expresses her clear realization that the new call would involve much suffering. She is "to leave that which I love and expose myself to new labours and sufferings which will be great, to be the laughing stock of so many - especially religious - to cling and choose deliberately the hard things of an Indian life, to loneliness and ignominy, to uncertainty, and all because Jesus wants it." Jesus Himself had told her, "You will suffer and you suffer now, but If you are My own little Spouse, the Spouse of the crucified Jesus, you will have to bear these torments in your heart."

Thanks to the three Jesuits (Archbishop Perier, Cardinal Lawrence Picachy, and Fr. Joseph Neuner) who saved her correspondence, we have now some idea of what that suffering involved. In the 1950s she wrote often to Archbishop Perier, the ecclesiastical superior of the young Congregation, revealing to him her interior state. Some examples follow.

March 1953:

"... Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself - for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started 'the work'. Ask Our Lord to give me courage. ..."

January 1955:

"I don't know, but there is such a deep loneliness in my heart that I cannot express it."

December 1955:

"... Pray for me, for within me everything is icy cold. It is only that blind faith that carries me through, for in reality to me all is darkness. As long as Our Lord has all the pleasure, I really do not count. ..."

March 1956:

" .. sometimes the agony of desolation is so great and at the same time the longing for the Absent One so deep, that the only prayer which I can still say is, 'Sacred Heart of Jesus I trust in Thee. I will satiate Thy thirst for souls.' ..."

February 1957:

"... Such deep longing for God - so deep that it is painful - a suffering continual - and yet not wanted by God - repulsed - empty - ... and yet this torturing longing for God."

April 1957:

" .. My second resolution is to become an apostle, of joy, to console the Sacred Heart of Jesus through joy.

Please ask Our Lady to give me Her heart so that I may with greater ease fulfill His desire in me. I want to smile even at Jesus and so hide if possible the pain and the darkness of my soul even from Him. ..."

January 1958:

“...Please pray for me. The longing for God is terribly painful and yet the darkness is becoming greater. What contradiction there is in my soul. The pain within is so great that I really don't feel anything for all the publicity and the talk of the people.

Please ask Our Lady to be my Mother in this darkness. ...”

What is so astonishing is that throughout these years no one, with the exception of the Archbishop and Fr. Van Exem (and somewhat later Fathers Picachy and Neuner), knew anything about what Mother Teresa was experiencing. In her outward behaviour she continued to act cheerfully, to be "an apostle of joy." As she wrote to the Archbishop in July 1958, "the smile is a big cloak which covers a multitude of pains."

Mother Teresa experienced both a painful sense of the loss of God and the painful longing or thirst for God, which she considered even more painful than the experience of "loss".

"In spite of all, this darkness and emptiness is not as painful as the longing for God. The contradiction I fear will unbalance me. What are You doing, my God, to one so small? When You asked to imprint Your Passion on my heart, is this the answer?

If this brings You glory, if You get a drop of joy from this; if souls are brought to You; if my suffering satiates Your Thirst - Here I am, Lord, with joy I accept all to the end of life, and I will smile at Your Hidden Face - always."

Only in the 1960s did she come to some understanding of what this painful experience of darkness meant. Fr. Neuner, in particular, helped Mother Teresa to connect this experience with her vocation. She writes to him:

"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."

Conclusion

In the work of the Roman phase of Mother Teresa's Cause of Beatification and Canonization, these two aspects of Mother Teresa's life will receive further study. An especially interesting question is the meaning of Mother's Teresa's experience of "darkness" and its place in her vocation of "satiating Jesus' thirst on the Cross for love and souls". Was this darkness primarily purgative and therefore preparatory to

union with God, or was it more like the experience of her patroness, St. Therese of Lisieux, who underwent her trial of faith in solidarity with those who struggle with or lack faith?

Clues to the answer are there. According to Fr. Van Exem, in 1947, before this darkness began, Mother Teresa's "union with Our Lord has been continual and so deep and violent that rapture does not seem very far." Mother Teresa herself observed in a letter to Fr. Neuner (in June 1961) that "even now when I am surrounded with so many nuns and people, with things that could preoccupy me completely, Father, my mind, my heart, my very thoughts and feelings, seem so very far - so far that I don't know where they are. But on pulling myself I find they are with God."

Whatever be the definitive answer to this question, we can take inspiration from how Mother Teresa accepted this darkness in complete, even joyful, surrender to God, as she sought to respond to Our Lord's call with the generosity that would come to characterize her entire life and work. Ten years after that call she would write, in a moving "letter" addressed directly to Jesus:

"In the call You said that I would have to suffer much. Ten years, my Jesus, You have done to me according to Your will - and Jesus hear my prayer. If this pleases You, if my pain and suffering, my darkness and separation gives You a drop of Consolation, my own Jesus, do with me as You wish, as long as You wish, without a single glance at my feelings and pain. I am Your own. Imprint on my soul and life the sufferings of Your Heart. Don't mind my feelings. Don't mind even my pain. If my separation from You brings others to You, and in their love and company You find joy and pleasure, why Jesus, I am willing with all my heart to suffer all that I suffer, not only now, but for all eternity - if this was possible. Your happiness is all that I want. For the rest, please do not take the trouble, even if you see me faint with pain. All this is my Will. I want to satiate Your Thirst with every single drop of blood that You can find in me."

So she lived, and so she died - consumed by this call to love beyond pain, joyfully joined to her Lord in this night of self-emptying, sharing His Calvary prolonged in the poor. This call, given September 10 1946, was ultimately answered "with every drop of her blood" - after 51 years of faithfulness - the night of September 5, 1997.