

The Mother Teresa We Never Knew

“...there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead...the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear...no faith, no love, no zeal...the saving of souls holds no attraction...heaven means nothing...what do I labor for...where is my faith...I no longer pray...what hypocrisy...”

This is not the journaling of a confused college student struggling to hold onto his faith amidst the tumult of conflicting ideologies. No, these are the confessions of an icon of the Christian faith, a saint who spent her entire life fulfilling a calling to serve among the destitute and dying on the streets of Calcutta, a model of sacrificial service recognized the world over for her total devotion to Christ, a Nobel Prize winner. These are Mother Teresa's confessions, written to her superiors over the span of her 66 years of ministry. She had hoped that these very private admissions would never be revealed, she requested that they be destroyed, but in the process of her nomination of canonization for sainthood they have come to light.

Some say that these dark confessions expose a crisis of faith. Others believe they reflect periods of depression when Mother Teresa experienced momentary doubts about her calling. But this was no temporary valley between the hills of an otherwise sunny spiritual journey. **“...it has been life this more or less from the time I started the work,”** she revealed to her spiritual advisor. After her initial calling – the clear and unmistakable voice of God telling her to go to the poorest of India – she never again heard His voice so clearly. She forged forward guided by this calling, embracing the most destitute people of earth, loving selflessly as Christ loves, gathering with her a host of joyful helpers from around the world to share in the immense task. She was sustained not by emotional fervor or passionate zeal but by an unswerving commitment to follow God's call even when she could not feel His presence, when all was darkness, when prayer seemed meaningless. No, this was no crisis of faith; this is the *essence* of faith!

Mother Teresa's ministry can be rightly described as a long obedience in the same direction. Certainly she experienced genuine joy – her cheerful countenance registered that. There were moments of great inspiration, amazing stories, even miracles. Yet the never-ending pressures of inadequate finances, over-crowded facilities, over-burdened management, and the never-ending deluge of human need – these realities do take their toll. Compassion fatigue sets in. Numbness, even cynicism creeps into one's soul. Daily prayers for strength to endure, for a restored right attitude, are more about survival than inspiration. The one who once heard God speak so personally goes on autopilot. She longs for the passion, the bliss the intimacy that once consumed her and she wonders if somehow she has lost her first love. Mother Teresa cries out: **“Where is my faith? Even deep down...there is nothing but emptiness and darkness!...if there be God please forgive me.”**

It is predictable that the faith journey will be marked by occasional periods of doubt. Most all the giants of the faith have at one time or another questioned their calling, wondered whether they heard God correctly, even had serious doubts about their faith. Remember John the Baptizer. No greater man ever lived, Jesus said of him. And yet, when the crowds had departed and John sits alone in prison, dark clouds of doubt roll over his soul causing him to question the undeniable Voice that once validated his calling. Even for spiritual giants, it seems, faith and doubt are never too far apart. Like two sides of the same coin, doubt is the other side of faith.

But these confessions of Mother Teresa arise from a much deeper place in the soul than mere doubt. Secrets like these are seldom admitted to even the closest of confidants, hardly admitted to oneself. So ashamed is Mother Teresa at having these dark thoughts that she conceals them for everyone, even her closest associates. When she finally admits to her spiritual advisor that

her soul has become deadened, that her passion is gone, she requests that he destroy her letters as soon as he reads them. How can one who is called by God to serve the poor, one who has become famous for her great compassion, one recognized the world over for her sacrificial acts of love and devotion to Christ --- how can a hero of the faith admit to having “...**no faith, no love, no zeal...the saving of souls hold no attraction...heaven means nothing.**”? It would have been far more tolerable if this were a momentary spiritual valley—we all go through our down times – but for this hidden darkness to go on for years on end – **of course** she would feel like a hypocrite! **Of course** she would want to conceal it from those who admire her so much, from those who draw inspiration from her example.

Strangely, as I read these private confessions of Mother Teresa, something resonated deep within my spirit. I went to my desk and pulled out my journals that traced my tracks over the past thirty-seven years of urban ministry. Emotion-filled memories flooded back as I recalled how clear was the calling that compelled me to move into the city. My writing in those early years was filled with excitement and passion. Everything was an adventure. On through to the second decade I read, my journey still marked with confidence and visionary zeal but beginning to show telltale signs of fatigue. But by year twenty-five I was journaling secret thoughts of impatience with the poor, of racist attitudes within me that seemed to be getting worse rather than better, of spiritual dryness. Finally, in my twenty-seventh year of urban ministry, I confessed this troubling trend to Peggy. “It might be time to get away from the city for a while,” she said, “maybe even consider getting out of ministry altogether.”

Two more years. Years of good accomplishments, years of motivating and mobilizing many in urban mission, years of private struggle, with “race fatigue,” years of living with spiritual numbness concealed behind an enthusiastic public persona. At last, in year twenty-nine I did get away from the city for a three-month sabbatical in England and Wales. My longing was that God would restore vitality to my soul and renew within me the love and compassion that I once felt for the poor. But this was not to happen.

Three months of study and rest in a totally different world was indeed good for my mind and body. But by the last week of my sabbatical I had sensed no significant change in my compassion level, no rethinking of fire with my spirit. And the, with three days remaining before our return to the city, as I listened to the stirring anthems sung by a Welsh male choir, God spoke. It was not what I had hoped to hear but it was a clear message non-the-less, clear as the call I had heard nearly thirty years earlier. The song through which His words came was entitled “One Day at a Time.” I could not choke back my tears as I listened to the chorus:

*One day at a time, sweet Jesus, that's all I'm asking from you,
Just give me the strength to do every day what I have to do.
Yesterday's gone, sweet Jesus, and tomorrow may never be mine,
So help me today, show me the way, one day at a time.*

The question I heard from God was as simple as it was clear. “Can you be faithful to your calling for one more day?” If the feelings of compassion never returned, could I demonstrate a disciplined love for the poor for one more day? Could I continue to reject the racist stereotypes that rise up within me for one more day? Even if I am weary of being viewed as an oppressive white male, could I take up the thankless cause of justice one more day? Could I stay the course even if the rush of spiritual passion never returned? Yes, Yes. Of course I could. I could certainly continue for one more day. That would not be so difficult.

And thus I have – for the past eight years since my sabbatical – one day at a time. There have been few highs, some crushing grief, mostly plodding, an occasional miracle, largely going on auto pilot, prayer conversational – more stream-of-consciousness than intense or disciplined. My writing is better than ever, I'm effective as a speaker and inspirer I lead my organization responsibly, yet all the while I secretly feel very much a persisted faithfully to the end. I hope I can do as well.

Bob Lutpon, October, 2007