

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

Never stop seeking God

“Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light” is a collection of personal letters written over a span of many years which reveal Mother Teresa’s experience of darkness and the seeming absence of God. The book is edited with commentary by a member of the order she founded (the Missionaries of Charity) who serves as the “postulator” (official promoter) of her cause for canonization.

A newer book, “I Loved Jesus in the Night,” is a personal reflection on the same subject by Dominican Father Paul Murray, who also knew Mother Teresa well.

Both books unveil Mother Teresa’s experience of what St. John of the Cross referred to as the “dark night” of the soul, an experience of aloneness and desolation which many have undergone as they have sought to grow spiritually. The “dark night” is a stage in spiritual growth, and its duration varies greatly from person to person. Some have known a dark night of many years, and that was apparently the experience of Mother Teresa.

Spiritual desolation

As a seminarian in Rome in the mid-1970s, I volunteered at a homeless shelter sponsored by the Missionaries of Charity. One week I learned that “Mother” was in the building, and the sisters encouraged me and a friend to meet her. We were escorted to the chapel, where we waited.

We could hear her speaking on the telephone in the next room, and when she had finished she quietly entered the rear of the chapel. As we turned to greet her, she said, “I am sorry I made you wait.” I do not recall what



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we spoke about or how long we spoke, but her humble introduction has stuck with me: “I am sorry I made you wait.” Each person, including young men like us whom she did not know, was important to her.

Ten years later, as a priest in Memphis, I had occasion to meet her when she came to town to discuss the possibility of opening a mission in the inner city. I had the privilege of driving her around town with our bishop. He and I sat up front, she and her assistant in back. “We will open a house here, and one in Moscow, and one in Beijing,” she said. Her companion interrupted, “But Mother, where will we get all the sisters to run these houses?”

“God will provide them,” Mother replied.

I now realize that I witnessed these simple but extraordinary expressions of faith during the years she was experiencing the desolation of the spiritual desert. Reflecting on that contrast, I realize that her dedication to God endured and persisted mightily despite her painful inner dryness.

Perseverance essential

That she continued to give herself to Jesus throughout those many years is a testimony of her love for him. She accepted the grace of her vocation and followed him, loved him, served him, and sought him in the poorest of the poor. She would not turn away from Jesus or abandon his beloved poor.

Pope Gregory the Great (late sixth and early seventh century) reflected in one of his homilies on the witness of Mary Magdalene. When Mary went to the tomb and did not find the Lord’s body, she thought it had been removed and told the disciples so. After they had seen for themselves that the tomb was empty, the disciples went home, but Mary remained standing outside the tomb.

Gregory wrote, “We should reflect on Mary’s attitude and the great love she felt for Christ; for though the disciples had left the tomb, she remained. She was still seeking the one she had not found, and while she sought she wept; burning with the fire of love, she longed for him who she thought had been taken away. And so it happened that the woman who stayed behind to seek Christ was the only one to see him. For perseverance is essential to any good deed ...”

He continued, “At first she sought but did not find, but when she persevered it happened that she found what she was looking for. When our desires are not satisfied, they grow stronger, and becoming stronger they take hold of their object.”

‘I thirst’

Mary Magdalene did not abandon the empty tomb, lonely and desolate as she was to think that her Lord had died and his body had been stolen. She remained to wait for him, desire him,



Mother Teresa thirsted for the Lord.

seek him – even in the darkness of a tomb. It seems that Mother Teresa persisted in seeking her Lord in the excruciating darkness he invited her to enter.

Most of us experience periods of dryness, darkness and doubt in our relationship with God, and they should not shock us (or worse, cause us to turn away from God). The example of Mary Magdalene, St. John of the Cross and Mother Teresa reminds us to never stop seeking God. He is always there, and somehow according to his plan, in the way that is best for each of us, he uses our dark nights to draw us closer.

Every chapel of the Missionaries of Charity across the world has a small sign posted next to the crucifix which bears the words of Christ on the cross: “I thirst.”

Christ on the cross suffered a cruel thirst. The poor endure thirst and hunger beyond our imagining. Mother Teresa thirsted for the Lord, and her throbbing thirst, never quenched, made her desire him all the more.