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**Surrounded!**

“COME BE MY LIGHT: MOTHER TERESA”

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Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Psalm 139:1-14a, 2 Timothy 1:8-12

As soon as I heard about the book, I ordered it and picked it up in Grand Rapids on its publication day, September 4, 2007. This is the book: *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. The book caused quite a stir because it contains the private writings of Mother Teresa, writings she begged never to release. It’s the rest of her story, published ten years after her death. As you know, Mother Teresa was a spiritual giant during her life and continues in her death to be an icon for so many people around the world, Christian or not. In her work with the destitute and dying in Calcutta, India, Mother Teresa became a symbol of pure love, pure grace, pure compassion.

Mother Teresa was a simple nun who wanted to live a simple life. She did not seek fame. Nor did she want to be the object of anyone’s attention. Mother Teresa would tell her nuns,

> “I am a small pencil in the hands of our Lord. The Lord may cut or sharpen the pencil. God can write whatever God wants. If the writing is good, we appreciate the writer, the one who used it, not the pencil. The poor are human beings, aren’t they? Are they not created in the image of God? Yes, they are. Are they not to be respected and cared for? God is using me to do precisely that. Thank God.”

We admired her smile. We respected her determination to care for the very least of God’s children. We were inspired by her insistence that what changes our world is small deeds done with great love. Very few people, however, knew that Mother Teresa’s inner, spiritual life was filled with suffering, doubts and deep pain. For years, in fact, for most of her time working with the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa did not feel God’s presence in her life.

*Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* contains letters Mother Teresa wrote to her spiritual directors and close friends, the few people with whom she could be completely honest. I suspect the reason I felt compelled to read the book immediately is that I, too, have felt like Mother Teresa. I, too, have had periods of dryness and darkness in my spiritual life. I, too, have felt as if I were wandering in the desert. And I, too, have been reluctant to share my inner pain with others. Perhaps you feel the same way at times.

Mother Teresa was born in Yugoslavia, which is modern day Macedonia, in 1910 as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhieu. At age twelve Agnes heard a voice in her inner spirit saying,
“Dedicate your entire life to Jesus Christ and try to become a holy nun.”

By the time she was eighteen, Agnes was inspired to leave her home and join the Sisters of Loreto, an Irish order known for its missionary work in India. She never had any doubts about her choice of vocation. When Agnes told her mother what she intended to do, her mother went into her room, closed the door and did not open it for 24 hours. When she finally came out, she embraced Agnes, wept and said:

“My child, offer your hands into the hands of our Lord Jesus. Accompany him till your last breath. Live only for God.”

Now named Teresa, she taught at St. Mary’s High School in Calcutta until 1946, when she felt a call to leave the Loreto convent and minister to the poorest of the poor. It was actually the call within the call. Teresa said there were lots of nuns to minister to the rich but none to the poor. Furthermore, she felt that she could not carry Christ into the slums as a Loreto nun. She needed to dress, eat and sleep like the poor.

For Mother Teresa, the salvation of the poor meant helping them to experience God’s infinite love. She made a deep connection between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the poor. The voice of Jesus said to her,

“Come, come, carry Me into the holes of the poor. Come, be my light.”

Thus began a year and a half process to seek permission from the archbishop to begin this new ministry. Her plan was to leave the convent, wear only a sari (that is, Indian clothes) and live like an Indian. The voice of Jesus also said to Mother Teresa,

“Your vocation is to love and suffer and save souls.”

Like the apostle Paul’s words in 2 Timothy, Mother Teresa felt called to a life that would only bring her suffering. She admitted being afraid of the suffering, but she persisted. Mother Teresa had actual visions of the poor with hands lifted toward her, pleading,

“Come, come, save us - bring us to Jesus.”

Mother Teresa pleaded for God to send someone else but felt strongly that she was the one to undertake this ministry. In 1948 Mother Teresa finally received permission to begin the Missionaries of Charity. Eventually, many other sisters joined her in this ministry, and today there are Missionaries of Charity all over the world. From the beginning, the sisters literally lived among and with the poorest of the poor. They were allowed to own three white saris with blue borders, which was the clothing worn by the poor in Calcutta. Most of the time, they ate just rice and bread, like those they served. They spent their days walking around the city of Calcutta, attending to the sick, the poor and the dying.

Finally, Mother Teresa was fulfilling her call from God. Paradoxically, however, this began a period which she described as “empty” and “arid.” She doubted her faith, even her God. The first hint of darkness came in 1953 in a letter to the archbishop.
“Please pray for me … 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.”

Except for a period of five weeks, ten years into her Calcutta ministry, when the painful silence of God left Mother Teresa, that emptiness lasted her entire life. One of her first followers remarked,

“Seeing her poorly dressed in a simple humble sari, with a Rosary in her hand, making Jesus present among the poorest, one could say a Light has dawned in the darkness of the slums.”

Mother Teresa was called the “slum sister.” Yet at the same time as she brought light to others, she lived in continual darkness herself. Although perpetually cheery in public, the Teresa of the letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In more than forty communications, many of which had never before been published, she bemoaned the “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness” and “torture” she was undergoing. Mother Teresa compared the experience to hell and at one point said it had driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. Can you imagine?

Mother Teresa was acutely aware of the discrepancy between her inner state and her public demeanor. “The smile,” she wrote, is “a mask” or “a cloak that covers everything.” She wondered whether she was being hypocritical. She remarked to an advisor,

“I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God – tender, personal love.”
“If you were (there), you would have said, ‘What hypocrisy.’”

Here are a few excerpts from her letters. To her spiritual director: “You must have prayed much for me – I have found real happiness in suffering, but the pain is sometimes unbearable. You don’t know how miserable and nothing I am.”

To her superior the archbishop: “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.”

Today Mother Teresa is known the world over. She, perhaps, more than anyone else in the past two thousand years, symbolizes the pure love of Christ. Why did the world begin to notice Mother Teresa? In a society driven by celebrity-watching and the desire to become rich and famous, how is it that a poor Yugoslavian woman who lived her entire life in poverty in India and tried her best to avoid the limelight, became such a compelling figure?

Mother Teresa is esteemed because she saw the suffering Jesus in every person. She never asked anyone to do things she would not do herself. At times, the poor would arrive at her doorstep in an awful state: filthy, covered with sores and ulcers, eaten up by cancer, syphilis or leprosy. The nuns would wash them all, but Mother Teresa would take the worst cases herself – bathing the sick, feeding the poor, holding the dying in her arms, seeing in their eyes the eyes of Christ.
Mother Teresa is also esteemed because she understood that people are whole human beings, with physical, emotional, relational and spiritual needs. She used to say that the worst disease that could afflict a human being is the feeling of being utterly useless and unwanted in his or her society. With willing hands and a heart full of love, Mother Teresa set out to change the world, one poor person at a time. Physical and spiritual poverty were equally dreadful diseases for Mother Teresa. She once said,

“You in the West have the spiritually poorest of the poor much more than you have physically poor people. Very often among the rich there are very, very spiritually poor people. I find it is not difficult to give a plate of rice to a hungry person, to furnish a bed to a person who has no bed, but to console or to remove that anger, to remove that loneliness takes a long time. When you look at people, they must be able to see God in your eyes. If you are distracted by the cares and things of this world, they will not be able to see God.”

Most people who have ever had contact with Mother Teresa, particularly those of us in the West, have come away realizing that the journey toward the poverty of the poorest turns out to be an agonizing journey into our own spiritual poverty and that the love of Christ transforms both kinds of poverty. All over the world there is a terrible hunger for love, which can only be filled by Jesus.

A third reason why Mother Teresa is so esteemed is because she respected all religions and did not try to convert people to Catholicism. “Mother Teresa was always very particular that the dying should receive the rituals of their faith before they die – for Hindus, a little holy water from the Ganges on their lips; for Muslims, readings from the Holy Koran; for Christians, sacramental anointing, and so on. Everyone should die peacefully and beautifully, she always maintained, in the way of his or her own faith.”

One time, “Mother Teresa was carefully removing maggots, with a pair of forceps, from the festering sores of a dying destitute, and consoling him with words of love and sympathy. ‘Please say any prayer of your religion. I shall say the prayer that I know. Both the prayers will please God, Our Loving Father.’”

Yet, in the midst of admiration and respect the world over, Mother Teresa herself suffered greatly. In her later years, Mother Teresa seldom referred to the darkness in her life, even though it never went away. How did she interpret the darkness, the silence? Mother Teresa was convinced that she was participating in the suffering of Christ, for her suffering was at the deepest possible level. She wrote to her spiritual director,

“For the first time in eleven 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.’”

The one person in the world who most famously spoke of Jesus, acted like Jesus with the poor, and inspired others toward Jesus, could not in her own heart, feel Jesus’ presence. In the midst of the darkness, however, Mother Teresa had joy because she was certain of the ultimate goodness
of God’s plan for her. She loved God whether or not she felt God’s presence. In coming to accept this mysterious suffering, Mother Teresa’s greatest secret became her greatest gift.

What do we make of all this? What do you think? Knowing that all great saints of the Christian church experienced dark nights of the soul, does this new information cause you to think less of Mother Teresa or more? Does it change your opinion of her? For me, it only increases my admiration for Mother Teresa. I weep for her pain, knowing that she felt she had to hide it from the millions of people who revered her. At the same time, she is an example for all of us, persisting in the face of darkness, clinging to the words of the psalmist to God, “Even the darkness is not dark to you, for it was you who formed my inward parts,” and always praying, “Come, be my light.”

Could it be that both darkness and light are necessary parts of our journey? Could it be that the darkness teaches us important lessons about living in the light? The prophet Isaiah said (45:3), “I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.”

How do you find meaning when you are in the desert, when your heart is empty, when God seems absent, when you are utterly spent, when scripture no longer speaks to you, when there is intense loneliness, when you feel lost? Will you remember that Jesus, too, suffered greatly and felt God’s absence at times? Will you seek out spiritual companions, as Mother Teresa did, with whom you can be honest about your joys and struggles?

Will you continue to serve others with faith and trust? Can you conceive of your pain as being part of the sufferings of Christ? Could it be that participating in the suffering of Christ does not necessarily mean physical deprivation and pain, but it can imply interior suffering, contradictions, dryness, anxiety for self and others, failure and misunderstanding?

Could your willingness to share your suffering help others along their Christian journey? Can you be light to others, even from the dark side? What can you learn about God and yourself from the rest of the story about Mother Teresa? Come, be my light.

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5 Mother Teresa, *Jesus, the Word to be Spoken; Prayer and Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, Brian Kolodiejchuk, editor, New York, Walker and Company, 1986, p. 109.
6 Mundakel, p. 65.
7 Mundakel, p. 65.
8 Kolodiejchuk, p. 209.