

The Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Life of Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa is not an unfamiliar saint. Her name has practically become a household word. She has been lauded throughout the world for doing something that all of us by the very fact of our being human are called to do: to love and to be loved. What was however extraordinary about Mother Teresa in her service of love to the poor was her profound vision of faith. She saw in every person and in everything the hidden Jesus in His “distressing disguise”. Sharing in the Passion of Christ, for fifty years she carried within herself the painful darkness of those she served. She accomplished this God-given mission of living simultaneously in interior darkness while establishing the Missionaries of Charity by placing herself and her Society under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Mother Teresa was born in 1910 on August 26th in Skopje, Albania which is in present day Macedonia. Given the name Gonxha Agnes, she was the youngest of the three Bojaxhui children. Raised in a good devout Catholic home, she enjoyed a happy, comfortable childhood. Her father’s construction supply business often kept him away from home but he would return home with gifts and stories for his wife and children. A generous man, he gave money and food to those who were in need. He told his children that they should always share their food with the hungry and never put anything in their mouth that they were not willing to share with others. He was passionate about politics and as a high profile nationalist in the city government he played an active role in Albania’s recovery efforts. One evening in 1919 after a meal following a meeting, he became violently ill. The following day he died in surgery. Because his partner in the business took Mr. Bojaxhui’s share, the family suffered both an emotional loss and a financial blow. In order to support the family, her mother, a firm, strong willed, loving woman

with deep faith, established herself as a dressmaker and weaver. During this difficult time, she continued to instill in her children a deep faith as well as a desire to share their possessions with the poor.

When Agnes was a teenager she became a member of the Sodality of Mary, a young people's group in her local parish, which was named after the Sacred Heart. The group was under the guidance of a Jesuit priest whose order was known for their missionary work. As she heard stories from visiting missionaries, her passion to serve the poor grew.

The call of a vocation to be a religious sister came to her at the age of eighteen. She chose the Irish order of the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto since they were well known for their work with the missions particularly in India. Having desired to go to India since an early age, she first went to Rathfarnham, Ireland to learn English. After a few months, she and her companion set sail for India on December 1st, 1928. They arrived in Calcutta in early January 1929 and one week later went to Darjeeling to begin their two year novitiate. She took for her religious name Sr. Mary Teresa of the Child Jesus after St. Therese of Lisieux. On May 25, 1931 she professed her first vows. She professed her final vows on May 24, 1937 and following the Loreto custom at the time was henceforth known as Mother Teresa. She taught at St. Mary's school for several years and was made principal in 1944. A woman of profound prayer and deep love for her religious sisters and students, she never forgot the poor. The winds of change began to stir within her soul during the political upheaval in India in the nineteen forties. Receiving permission to go outside of the walls and attend to the needs of those who were suffering, she continued to make several such trips and her desire to help the poor intensified. For 20 years she lived out her consecration in Loreto with fidelity and joy. Then on September 10th, 1946 something happened that changed her life and ours forever.

Every year the Sisters of Loreto made an 8-day spiritual retreat at their retreat house in Darjeeling which was located in the Himalayan hills. In order to get there, one had to go by train. It was while riding the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway on what was affectionately known as the “Toy Train” because of its little size that Sister Teresa had an extraordinary encounter with God. This encounter, which she would simply refer to as “Inspiration Day”, were three visions in which she was given a profound sense of the thirst of Jesus on the Cross. The desire to satiate His thirst, His painful and burning longing for love, continued to well up within her and it became the driving force of her life. She who had been Mother Mary Teresa of the Child Jesus of the Sisters of Loreto now was to become Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

For years whenever she was asked to explain what transpired on that day, she humbly described it as receiving a “call within a call.” It was not until the last years of her life that she felt compelled to share with others more than in a general way this life changing sacred moment. On that day not only did she encounter the divine, but she was also entrusted with a message, which can be seen next to every crucifix in the chapels of the Missionaries of Charity around the world. The message is summarized in two words: “I thirst.” These are the words Our Lord cried out as He hung on the Cross to free us from sin and death. They are recorded in chapter nineteen of John’s gospel. In this same chapter we read John’s description of how after Jesus cries out ‘I thirst’, He receives the drink offered to him thus fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 69:21: “In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” Here in this last act of divine love we see the bitter response man so often gives to the One who intensely desires our love. Mother Teresa came to understand that this thirst of Jesus was not primarily His human, physical thirst, but His painful and burning divine longing for loving union with every soul. She saw that “He was not thirsting for water but for souls, for love.” (Langford, *Secret Fire*, 261) Her insight is confirmed

in Scripture which is filled with a rich symbolism of thirst— as a metaphor for both man’s longing for God and God’s longing for man. Having created man in His own image to love and be loved, God desires—longs—thirsts to love us and be loved by us as well.

With the blessing of her superior to follow the path God was revealing to her, Mother Teresa left the Loreto convent assured that this was God’s will but unsure as to how everything was to unfold. Leaving the secure confines of the convent behind and venturing out into the slums of Calcutta with only five rupees in her pocket, trusting in divine providence, she placed herself completely and confidently in the Heart of Our Lady. Her former spiritual director, a Jesuit priest to whom she had confided her dreams, recalls the visit she made after returning from a basic nursing course with the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna. He wrote in his diary: “Today, 19 August, 1949, Mother Mary Teresa is leaving Saint Mary’s, Entally, to work in the slums of Calcutta for the poor. For this very difficult task she places all of her confidence in the Immaculate Heart of Mary.” (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 47)

We may ask ourselves: How could Mother Teresa take on her daunting task all on her own simply by placing all her confidence in Our Lady and why in her Immaculate Heart? What is it about the Heart of Our Blessed Mother that brings us to Jesus and thus into the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Unlike most of Mary’s other titles which celebrate an event, the title Immaculate Heart of Mary celebrates a gift that Our Blessed Mother is able and wants to share with all of us. When we speak of Mary’s Heart we speak of her soul, her interiority, the grace she carried within herself. Here we find a sacred space in which we can dwell and hear the voice of Jesus Crucified.

Our Lady, as Mother Teresa liked to call Her, was integral in her life. The charism and spirituality given to Mother Teresa flowed from her intimate relationship with Our Lady. It was this love and devotion, this complete trust in Our Lady's presence and aid that brought Mother Teresa to experience the closeness and power of God, enabling her to have a deep union with Jesus Crucified. She asked Mary not only to "keep her in Her Heart" but also to "lend her Her Heart" so that like Mary, she too could love her Lord and her neighbor.

We should examine ourselves in relation to Our Blessed Mother. Have we given Her our confidence? Do we place our worries, our weaknesses, our sinfulness, all our struggles with prayer and the spiritual life in Her hands? Mother Teresa became holy because she consistently remained close to Our Lady. To her Sisters she said: "Stay very close to Our Lady. If you do this, you can do great things for God and the good of people." (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 11)

Our Lady's spirit, enclosed in Her Immaculate Heart, is the Spirit of the Missionaries of Charity Society. It was Mary's own grace that Mother Teresa received in the following months and years after her initial encounter on the train. Because she was practical and wanted to both insist on the importance of Our Lady as well as explain how She supplied spiritual inadequacies and brought about holiness and intimacy with God, Mother Teresa formulated this spirit into three states of soul: loving trust, total surrender, and cheerfulness or cheerful giving. She saw these three as an extension and participation in Our Lady's Spirit.

This three-fold response of Mary's fiat, her "Yes", comes to light in the gospel account of the Annunciation and the Visitation which is found in Luke 1: 26-56. In the Visitation, Elizabeth attests to Mary's trust: "Blessed are you who believed (trusted) that what was spoken by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45). At the Annunciation, Mary surrenders before the unknown plan of God: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Her cheerful gift of self

is manifested in her joyful response to God's call: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:47). She brings that joy to others: "For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1:44). It was this spirit of Our Lady that Mother Teresa was given for her community. "That is so much our life— saying, 'Yes' to Jesus and running in haste to serve Him in the poorest of the poor. Let us keep close to Our Lady and she will make that same spirit grow in each of us." (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 52)

As Mother Teresa came to the end of her life, Fr. Joseph Langford, co-founder of the Missionary of Charity Fathers, from whose book *In the Shadow of Our Lady* I have gleaned many insights, had an opportunity to witness just how much Mary's presence meant in Mother Teresa's life. They were on a plane in early 1996 flying to Tijuana, Mexico to visit the Missionary of Charity Fathers, having just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Mother Teresa's Inspiration Day vision with the Sisters in Washington D.C. Gazing out the plane window, lost in thought recalling that September 10th, in 1946 when she had experienced her vision on the train, Mother quietly said: "If Our Lady had not been there with me that day, I never would have known what Jesus meant when He said, 'I thirst'..." (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 40).

In her desire to satiate the thirst of Jesus for love and for souls, Mother Teresa totally abandoned herself into the hands of God and for fifty years she experienced an intense agonizing darkness which at times she found almost unbearable. Confiding in the late Archbishop Perier of Calcutta she wrote: "There is so much contradiction in my soul.—Such deep longing for God—so deep that it is painful—a suffering continual—and yet not wanted by God—repulsed—empty—no faith—no love—no zeal.—..." She always asked for prayers and when things were especially difficult, prayers to Our Lady. "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 & so hide if possible

the pain and the darkness of my soul even from Him.” And still another time: “Please ask Our Lady to keep me close to herself that I may not miss the way in the darkness.” (Kolodiejchuk, 177)

Mother Teresa constantly modeled her life on Our Blessed Mother who trusted, never asked questions, made no complaints, and never ran away even in the darkest of interior nights. When the sword pierced Her Heart, Mary did not pull away. In spite of human appearances, She clung to Jesus in His Passion with unshakable faith. Mother Teresa reflects: “At the foot of the Cross, Our Lady saw only pain and suffering—and when they closed the tomb, she could not even see the Body of Jesus. But it was there that Our Lady’s faith, her Loving Trust and Total Surrender were greatest.” (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 54)

Mother Teresa’s faith resembled that of Our Lady and was made possible because of her own life of prayer. Like Mary, when Mother Teresa prayed she went to the depths of her being, pondering all in her heart, not in her head. One of her frequent repeated lines were: “In the silence of the heart God speaks.” (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 54) We all know that in order for us to really reach God we cannot stay on the surface of our souls. If we desire to obtain the “pearl of great price,” then like a diver who searches for treasure on the ocean floor below, we must go to the depths of our being. There, in the deep, we will find calm and tranquility of soul. We may spend all day looking for the pearl on the water’s surface, but if we do not penetrate it, we won’t find what we are seeking because pearls do not float. The same can be said of prayer. We may spend the day praying but if we do not pierce below the surface of our souls, our prayers will bear little fruit. God is encountered at the level of the heart, not the head where we have our five senses and where we interact with the world. To meet Him where He quietly waits we need to go into the heart. The heart, as we read in Scripture, is that place of deep inner quiet, not

feelings or sentimentality but that inner place where in silence God speaks to us. Here we open ourselves to the activity of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and if we allow Him to do His work in us in silence, we will perceive His presence.

Imitating Mary who treasured everything in Her Heart, Mother Teresa confided the workings in her soul to only a few. Even those very close to her had no idea what had transformed in her soul because she kept it so hidden. Humbly keeping all attention off herself, she pointed only to Jesus seeing and finding God in all things.

We too can share in this contemplative spirit if we make a conscious effort of setting some time aside for prayer each day remaining in the presence of Our Lady. Gradually we will desire to spend more time even if only in short intervals and we will find ourselves walking with Her. Mother Teresa practiced union with Our Lady by having frequent recourse to the rosary which was without doubt her favorite prayer. Even when she was not praying the rosary, she kept Mary close by holding a rosary in her hand. She exhorts us to do the same: “Cling to the Rosary as the creeper clings to the tree, for without Our Lady we cannot stand.”

(www.moherteresa.org, daily meditations)

The Rosary is truly a form of contemplative prayer in which we can seek and find God in all things. When we “pray it slowly and deeply, when we go to a deeper level of the soul, staying at the level of the heart, wrapped in Our Lady, meditating with her the mysteries of our salvation in Jesus Her Son,” then the Rosary which Our Mother has consistently requested in her apparitions around the world will become true prayer. In his apostolic letter on the Rosary, Blessed Pope John Paul II quoting Pope Paul VI in *Marialis Cultus* says: “Without contemplation, the Rosary is a body without a soul, and its recitation runs the risk of becoming a mechanical repetition of formulas ... By its nature the recitation of the Rosary calls for a quiet

rhythm and a lingering pace, helping the individual to meditate on the mysteries of the Lord's life as seen through the eyes of her who was closest to the Lord. In this way the unfathomable riches of these mysteries are disclosed.” (Langford, *In the Shadow*, 60-61)

Fr. Langford, who knew Mother Teresa for thirty years, said that she became for him the one book on Our Lady that he could never put down: “Sitting with Mother Teresa, watching her tend the sick and the dying, feeling the aura of holiness around her person, seeing her bent in prayer, lost in God—how often I asked myself if I was not seeing something of Our Lady, experiencing a glimpse of the Virgin of Nazareth.” (Langford, *In the Shadow*, back cover)

The life of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta is held before us as an example of what one person clinging to Our Lady and placing all her confidence in her Immaculate Heart can do. Her life bore witness to the intimate communion she shared with the person and grace of Our Lady to such a degree that many people, including those who were not Christian, experienced the sense of being before a living mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, wrapped in Our Lady's mantle, Mother Teresa lived, worked, prayed and loved. At the age of 87 on September 5th, 1997, having faithfully completed her mission, she went home to God.

For Mother Teresa, the Blessed Virgin Mary was the indispensable key to her own holiness. How often she must have exhorted her Society to “be only all for Jesus through Mary.” May the example of this saint bring us to heed, as she did, the solemn invitation of Jesus: “Behold, your Mother” (John 19:27).

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