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The Twenty-second Sunday of the Year (C)

What does it mean to be humble? Saint Bernard of Clairvaux tells us that to be humble is to recognize both our strengths and weaknesses, our virtues and vices, and to live accordingly with our eyes set on the prize of heaven, on the seat that is ours at the banquet in heaven. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta is a model of true humility, for she lived her life in this way. She is the model of humility, of love, of service and of perseverance.

You might have seen an article in the current issue of *Time* magazine about Mother Teresa titled, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith." The title is a bit misleading, as you might have guessed. The article was published just days before a new book by Mother Teresa comes out on Tuesday, *Come, Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. This new book is a collection of some of her letters spanning some sixty years.

Some in the media are suggesting that these letters have been recently "discovered" and that these letters show that Blessed Teresa had a lack of faith. Both of these suggestions are not quite true.

These letters were not lost and could not, therefore, be "discovered." They were collected ten years ago after her death

by the Vatican and were used in the process for her beatification and, God willing, her future canonization.

Only two of these letters imply that she nearly lost her faith. What, then, do these letters reveal?

They reveal a woman of deep faith - and of doubt as well, of strong and tenacious personality, who constantly sought the face of the Lord. Yet, as she said, "The more I want him - the less I am wanted." Though she deeply hungered for the presence of God she did not feel his presence for some forty years, with the exception of a period of five weeks. She wrote to one of her spiritual directors:

Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see - Listen and do not hear - the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me - that I let him have a hand.

This is probably not the image of the Saint of the Gutters that we had in mind.

We often think of Mother Teresa as a woman very much unlike ourselves. We are familiar with the great and generous mission to which she dedicated herself by caring for the poorest of the poor in India. She gave her life in service to the most destitute of the earth. We have seen her in prayer and we have seen her at service. We have seen her stand up to the most powerful men in the world and we have seen her love the most pitiable person. We have seen her smile at people and radiate

the love of God, a love that she herself did not always feel. And yet she writes that her smile was "a mask," "a cloak that covers everything." In this way she is not very different from us.

Who among us has not experience the absence of God? Have we not all searched for him and listened for him, never to feel his presence at all? Has he not remained silent when we have shouted? Mother Teresa shares this experience with us, but her dark night of the soul lasted some forty years. Few among us can say that Christ was absent for so long. The example of Mother Teresa challenges us to remain faithful.

We must, then, ask the question: Why would God do this to so holy a woman? I answer you: God remained the "Absent One" precisely because she was holy. What do I mean?

Mother Teresa began her Missionaries of Charity after she heard Jesus say to her:

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 ... You are, I know, the most incapable person - weak and sinful but because you are that - I want to use you for my glory. Wilt thou refuse?

She accepted his invitation because he called to her: "Come, come, carry Me into the holes of the poor. Come, be My light."

When she first set about lighting the darkness she said, "My soul at present is in perfect peace and joy," but only two

months later her dark night of the soul set in and she did not feel the presence of God. She wrote to Jesus:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The Child of your Love - and now become the most hated one - the one - You have thrown away as unwanted - unloved. I call, I cling, I want - and there is no One to answer - no One to Whom I can cling - no, No One. Alone.

Why would Jesus do this to her? Why would he give the impression he had abandoned her?

In 1951, Mother Teresa wrote, "I want to ... drink ONLY from His chalice of pain." This the Lord granted her. The Lord gave her the grace to feel the abandonment that he felt on the Cross. She also said, "I want to love Jesus as he has never been loved before." The Lord seems to have granted her this, as well; no other saint endured the dark night of the soul as long as she.

Some time after the darkness fell upon her, Mother Teresa wrote, "If I ever become a Saint - I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven - to [light] the light of those in darkness on earth. I am willing to suffer ... for all eternity, if this [is] possible." This is true love, true and humble love, and this is why she is holy.

Even though for forty years she did not feel his love, Blessed Teresa never stopped getting up at 4:30 in the morning for prayer. She never stopped caring for the poor. She never stopped lighting the darkness around her. She never stopped speaking of God's love.

In 1970, she wrote to the filmmaker, Malcolm Muggeridge whose film, *Something Beautiful for God*, brought her to the world's attention, saying:

Your longing for God is so deep and yet He keeps Himself away from you. He must be forcing Himself to do so - because he loves you so much - the personal love of Christ for you is infinite - The Small difficulty you have [regarding] His Church is finite - Overcome the finite with the infinite.

These words she might well say to each of us.

How was she able to say this to someone when she could not feel Jesus' personal love for herself? One of her spiritual directors reminded her of three important things. First, that there was no human remedy for what she experienced and that she did not cause it. Second, that feeling Jesus is not the same as his presence; Jesus is often present without our being aware of it; also, that faith is not an emotion. Her deep longing for God and the success of her work were both signs of his presence. Third, that the dark night of her soul was part of the work God had given her and would be used by God to purify her and to lead others to him.

When she accepted this suffering, she was able to write to this spiritual director:

I have come to love the darkness - for I believe now that it is part of a very, very small part of Jesus' darkness and pain on earth. You have taught me to accept it [as] a 'spiritual side to [my] work'... Today I really felt a deep joy - that Jesus can't go anymore through the agony - but that He wants to go through it in me.

Paradoxically, this is a comforting thought.

The love of Christ Jesus for us brought him to the Cross and led him to invite us to share in his sufferings. The love of Mother Teresa for Jesus brought her to the Cross, to accept a share in his sufferings so that she might light the way for us who sometimes walk in darkness and do not feel the presence of God.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta took for herself the lowest seat and shared profoundly in the sufferings of Christ. Because of her faithfulness, the Lord has lifted her high.

Let us look to Mother Teresa, to the Saint of Darkness, and learn from her true humility, true love and faithful perseverance. Amen.