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# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop  
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## THE LONG DARK NIGHT OF MOTHER TERESA

One of the major literary events of the past year was the appearance of *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. If there can be a middle ground between “biography” and “memoir” then this book occupies that ground. Certainly she never sat down to write the story of her life, and so the book’s true “author” must be accounted Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C., a Canadian priest, a member of one of the orders founded by Mother Teresa, and the postulator for the cause of her canonization. Maybe half or a bit less of the words are his, as he provides the necessary commentary and narrative to what would otherwise be a bewildering parade of private letters, most of which were written by her but many of which were composed by the men and women with whom she was in correspondence. Thus the book is almost what its subtitle says it is, *The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta”* – a spiritual autobiography pulled together from excerpts from the many and the long letters she wrote over the course of her nearly seventy years in India.

Since Mother Teresa was long ago accorded rock star status by the media and the popular culture (the which she found, by turns, amusing, obnoxious, and useful), the book was bound to be widely read and commented on. In the Catholic press there have been many fine articles and reviews. In the mainstream media, however, it has been mostly nonsense. For a month and more after the book’s publication we were reading and hearing from them that Mother Teresa had (gasp!) lost her feel for God and lost her faith; that she had become at least a closet skeptic and perhaps a closet atheist, keeping on with

her work long after it had ceased to make any religious sense to her personally; and that all this made it difficult, if not impossible, to take her and her work at face value. All of which is ridiculous and just about what we have come to expect from religious morons who try to act knowledgeable about things outside their frame of reference. The truth here is less spectacular, and more, much more, wondrous.

Gonxha Agnes Bojahi, the future Mother Teresa, left her native Albania for Ireland in 1928. She was eighteen, and had known for six years that her vocation was to be a nun and a missionary. She was joining the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the “Loreto sisters,” and was already marked for India, where she was sent almost at once to begin her religious formation and training. She arrived in Calcutta, the city that will forever be associated with her name, on January 6, 1929. Shortly after her arrival she wrote a letter to her pastor back home, and already she is using a word that she will use a great deal throughout most of her life. *Do not think that my spiritual life is strewn with roses—that is the flower which I hardly ever find on my way. Quite the contrary, I have more often as my companion “darkness.” And when the night becomes very thick—and it seems to me as if I will end up in hell—then I simply offer myself to Jesus.* In spite of these spiritual difficulties, she describes herself as *happy—yes happier than ever*, and her years of training passed quickly and without any obvious problems. In late May of 1937 she professed her final vows as a Loreto nun. The Loreto sisters in Calcutta were mainly

educators, and Mother Teresa (all IBVM nuns in final vows were called “mother”) served as a teacher and school administrator for the next ten years. By all accounts she was an excellent teacher and a first-rate administrator, able to find food and supplies even during the worst of the wartime shortages. She made a profound impression on her students, and a fair number of the girls she taught would later join her Missionaries of Charity.

In April 1942 she made a “private” vow to God. This was not a part of the religious life of her order, but something she felt prompted to do by the grace of God. *I made a vow to God, binding under pain of mortal sin, to give to God anything that He may ask, “Not to refuse Him anything.”* She considered herself bound by this for the rest of her life, and it served as the guiding principle of all her decisions and actions.

Mother Teresa’s primary work was in the convent school, but she had her own projects that she pursued on her days off, usually on Sundays. She visited the people in the worst parts of Calcutta. She brought food and medicine with her when she could, but mostly she went to visit, to pray, and to offer spiritual companionship and consolation. So she had some first-hand experience of the Calcutta slums when, on September 10, 1946 she received from Jesus her “call within the call.” She was on her way by train from Calcutta to Darjeeling for a short vacation and a retreat. As she rode the rail car, she had a vivid mental apprehension of Jesus, Jesus on the cross, saying to her what he had said from the cross at the time of his death, “I thirst.” She knew that he thirsted not for water but for souls to love and save. He wanted her to slake that thirst by bringing his light to the souls of the poorest of the poor. The work he wanted her to undertake was the sanc-



tification of the souls of the poor, and to do this she had to leave Loreto and live with the poor.

For the better part of the next year, Mother Teresa was visited regularly with visions and voices, usually of Jesus but also of Mary, and all of them urging her to undertake this work. *Come, come, carry me into the holes of the poor,* he said to her, *Come, be my light.* Mother Teresa did not consider these voices and visions to be of much importance, and her confessors

and spiritual directors likewise urged her to pay no attention to them. For her, it was not that the voices and visions were real and therefore the call was genuine; just the opposite, she knew that the call to serve God’s poor in the slums was authentic, and this authentic call then suggested (it could do no more) that the voices and visions were similarly true. Over the next two years she worked with her confessor, the archbishop of Calcutta, and her religious superiors to acquire the necessary permissions to leave Loreto and begin her work. It was a very frustrating and difficult time for her, and success was anything but assured, but spiritually it was a

very rich time. She had always been happy as a Loreto nun, and now to that were added the graces of an extraordinarily rich prayer life, verbal and visual commerce with the Lord that confirmed her in her pursuit, and a deep, consoling sense of the presence of God in her life.

On August 17, 1948 she left the Loreto convent to begin her new work. She wore a simple white sari with a blue border, and went to the Holy Family Hospital, run by the Medical Mission Sisters, to receive several months training as a nurse so that she could the better serve the poor. By the end of the year she was doing the work, and early in the next year she had a small group of young women who were doing what she was doing. The Missionaries of Charity had begun. About this work and about her call from

the Lord to do it, Mother Teresa never had any doubt or difficulty. It was always his work, not hers, and he had simply used her, a little one and a nothing, to see that it got done.

From the time the work began in earnest in 1949 until her death in 1997, as we now know from this book, Mother Teresa lived in a spiritual wasteland, a darkness so unyielding that just reading about it is profoundly disturbing. Except for a brief time in late 1958, she had no feeling at all about the presence of Christ. In the two years leading up to the beginning of the work of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa had received extraordinary graces: she had seen visions, she had heard Christ speak to her in words, she had felt in prayer a strong, sweet union with the Lord. All of that was now gone, and nothing took its place. She prayed as much as she had before, even more, and she longed with all her being to be close to Jesus and to do whatever he wanted her to do. Her private vow, to deny him nothing, remained the guiding light of her life. Yet she did not feel him near her at all, she felt no grace of union, she of course heard and saw nothing, and everything about her interior life now seemed turned to dust and ashes. All of the many hours in the day that she gave to prayer seemed dry and profitless, so much hollow time into which the Lord never set foot so far as she could tell. She felt herself an abandoned soul, and she worried that this interior darkness might somehow jeopardize the work, which she always knew and never doubted was his and would always be his.

In 1953 Mother Teresa confided to Archbishop Périer, who was then both her religious superior and her spiritual director, the darkness in which she had been living for several years. In a number of long letters to him – which he preserved in defiance of her wishes in later years that all the letters she had sent him should be destroyed – she laid out for him exactly what it felt like to be her. Périer was clearly surprised to hear this, but just as clearly he was neither shocked nor convinced that there was anything here that was all that unusual. He wrote back to her: *With regard to the feeling of loneliness, of*

*abandonment, of darkness of the soul, it is a state well known by spiritual writers and directors of conscience. This is willed by God in order to attach us to Him alone. He encouraged her and assured her that this state, in spite of how it felt, indicated the very closeness of God and not his distancing himself from her. If the soul desires God, as she clearly did, it is only because God is already at the heart. Over the course of fifty years, Mother Teresa opened her soul to no more than half a dozen confessors and directors. They all told her the same thing, and a few of them specifically made reference to the works of St. John of the Cross, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite mystic whose *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* are the classic exposition of spiritual darkness and its role in the lover of God's life. It appears, from the book, that she did not actually read John of the Cross until late 1969. She wrote then that she understood him a little and enjoyed much of his writing. What reassurance she received, however, came not from spiritual reading but from spiritual direction and confession. Gradually she became first acclimatized to the darkness and then she embraced it, seeing it as God's will for her and an essential part of her work, and loving it as his "gift" to her, a gift that she would offer back to him as her sacrifice.*

This does not mean that Mother Teresa moved out of darkness into sweetness and light. That never happened. She understood it more and accepted it, but it never hurt the less for all that. And even her directors, the later ones, had to acknowledge that there was something extraordinary going on her. The spiritual darkness she described and lived was not in itself a new thing; it was indeed familiar to all who read deeply in mystical literature or spent much time in the counseling of souls being drawn close to God. But Mother Teresa's darkness was so profound and so long, that this intensity and long, drawn out quality were astonishing, the more so when they were coupled with an exterior cheerfulness and joy that she always manifested in her own behavior and demanded in all her sisters. To endure what she endured was not perhaps too unusual, but to endure it for as long as

