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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 PRICE OF OUR REDEMPTION

Mother Teresa of Calcutta seemed always to have a smile on her face. As you work your way through any collection of photos of her, you find that smile in most of them. Moreover, she always insisted that her sisters, before going out on their mission visits to the slums, should check themselves and make sure that they had cheerful hearts and smiling faces – the life of the poor was hard enough without their being visited by gloomy nuns. So the publication last year of the book *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* came as something of a shock both to those who knew her well and to those who knew her only from press pictures and TV news video. The book is a collection of her private letters and writings, most of them sent to confessors and spiritual directors, in which she reveals that for nearly all of her years in the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order that she founded, her spiritual life was not the kind of thing that sounds like it would put a smile on anyone's face.

Earlier in her religious life, from the time she had joined the Loreto sisters until she left them to begin her work in the slums and to found the new order, she had been very happy, and especially happy in her prayer life. In the two years leading up to her departure from Loreto, she describes a spiritual life that is rich beyond the dreams of most of us: she experienced vivid apprehensions of Jesus and his mother, she heard them speak words to her in her mind, she had the deep consolation of feeling the presence of the Lord, she knew of her own love for him (imperfect as it was) and she had many feelings and experiences of his infinite love for her (un-

worthy as she knew herself to be). All of these were a powerful and frequent part of her life until she left to begin the work that he had given her to do, the work about which she never had a moment's doubt or hesitation for the rest of her long life. All of these graces stopped, as if turned off by the flip of a switch, as soon as she started her work in the slums. From late 1948 until her death in 1997, except for several months in 1958, there was no comfort, no consolation, no refreshment in her spiritual life. She did not abandon the practice of prayer; indeed, she gave herself over to it even more devotedly. But it was all dry and dark. There was no sense of the presence of God, no touch of the Lord, no feelings of union with him, no hint that he yet loved her or cared for her or even knew she existed. Her prayer life and her spiritual exercises continued on as before, only now there seemed to be no one there but herself, the one who had been beloved but now was quite abandoned and unloved.

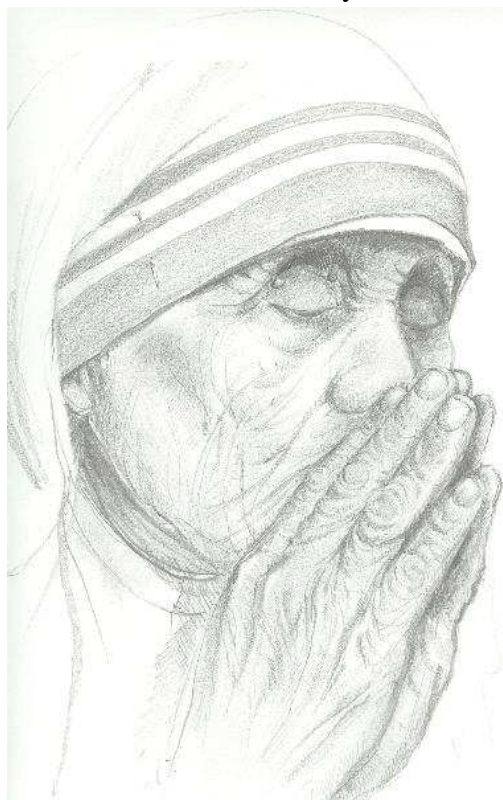
This interior darkness and dryness was in sharp contrast with the success and praise and appreciation that she received for her work. Like any new religious order, the Missionaries of Charity began small, but it soon saw a growth that was nothing less than spectacular. They had many vocations and were able to open many houses (Mother Teresa always referred to them as "tabernacles") not only in India but in other countries. Awards and much favorable attention in the international press were soon a fixed feature of her life. None of this outward success meant anything to her – she joked about the cardboard box in her room into which she would

toss the awards and testimonials she received, including the Nobel Peace Prize – and none of it eased or compensated for the pain and dryness of her spiritual life. If anything, it deepened that interior pain.

Her sisters, even her closest associates, never knew anything of this inner darkness. She gave them all her love and attention, for she saw in them her own obedience and her fulfillment of the mission she had received from Jesus. On her “Day of Inspiration” in 1948 she had seen in her mind Christ crucified, who cried out, “I thirst,” cried it out just as he had in the gospel and just as he has always cried it out, for she knew at once that he was not thirsty for water but for souls, and he was calling on her to go specifically to the poorest of the poor, to bring them to him and him to them so that his thirst might be slaked. The Missionaries of Charity was founded on that vision and with that mission. In addition to the usual trio of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience professed by most religious orders, the MCs professed a fourth vow, the vow of charity for the poor. All of this was going well, and she had no doubts about its worth or about God who was using it and guiding it to achieve his own purpose. Yet not even this sure knowledge eased the pain of her interior darkness. That endured, no matter what.

**W**hat did Mother Teresa make of this darkness, this spiritual wasteland that she found herself in, as it went on year after year, decade after decade? She sought help from her confessors and spiritual directors, who all interpreted her experience as the dark night of the soul that had been described so well by St. John of the Cross and that was a familiar reality to those who read deeply in the spiritual masters or

who had had experience in the direction of others. However, the dark night discussed by these writers is very much a purifying experience and therefore a kind of preparation for the next level of God’s raising the soul to himself in the gift of union. This did not seem to be an adequate description of Mother Teresa’s experience, for in her case it did not seem to be going anywhere, it did not yield to anything else. For



her, it seemed to be a permanent state, and not at all a preparation for something else. She was perfectly willing to endure this hell – and that is just what she called this loneliness, this being abandoned by the one she loved with all her heart – if it in any way gave him pleasure, but it all seemed so pointless. Then one of her confessors, who seems to have run out of ideas, suggested that she regard this darkness as God’s will for her, and if it was indeed God’s “gift” to her, then she could offer it back to him as her own best, deepest gift.

She did this, and although it did not lead her out of the darkness, it did take her into a deeper understanding and love for it. Her original vision had been of Christ on the cross, crying out, “I thirst.” Now she began to hear other words he had spoken from the cross – “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” – as the words that bound together her interior dryness, her love for her sisters in religion, and the charism of the Missionaries of Charity to go to the poorest of the poor, to bring Christ to them and them to Christ. It all came from Christ, from his sincere cry on the cross, from the very heart of his suffering, and it all led back to him. Here was her own and her order’s deepest encounter with the price of our redemption.

In 1981, already more than thirty years into her dark and unyielding night of the soul, she wrote an instruction to her sisters. It is the purest

wisdom distilled from her pain, and easily the most remarkable passage in a book that is filled with remarkable passages. She wrote:

*At the Incarnation Jesus became like us in all things except sin; but at the time of the Passion, He became sin.—He took on our sins and that was why He was rejected by the Father. I think that this was the greatest of all the sufferings that He had to endure and the thing He dreaded most in the agony in the Garden. Those words of His on the Cross were the expression of the depth of His loneliness and Passion—that even His own Father didn't claim Him as His Son. That, despite all His suffering and anguish, His Father did not claim Him as His beloved Son, as He had at the Baptism by St. John the Baptist and at the Transfiguration. You ask "Why?" Because God cannot accept sin and Jesus had taken on sin—He had become sin. Do you connect your vows with this Passion of Jesus? Do you realize that when you accept the vows you accept the same fate as Jesus?*

It is still a shock to hear Jesus, the innocent victim and the sinless Son of God, spoken of as becoming sin, as being sin out of love for us, even though we have had the letters of St. Paul with us for nearly two millennia, and Mother Teresa is quoting almost verbatim II Corinthians 5:21. In the end, every follower of Christ and reader of the gospels must decide what to make of Jesus' cry of abandonment from the cross. Did he really mean it, or was he just play-acting, quoting a psalm verse for a dramatic effect? By 1981 Mother Teresa had no doubt: it was a true word of Jesus and it had to be taken literally, for only in the light of the truth of that word could one catch a glimpse of the meaning of her own pain and the providential role of the Missionaries of Charity in the Church and the world.

Her own darkness and spiritual aridity was not, after all, what St. John of the Cross had been talking about; it was not a purification, a preparation for a deeper sharing in the life of God. It was, rather, the final stage of her soul's perfection as willed by God, her union with God through the deepest possible sharing in the redemptive sufferings of Jesus. In a way analogous to him because it was his grace to her, she

was abandoned and rejected by God, left alone and lonely all those years, not because she was yet sinful and deserved it and still less because he is cruel and vindictive, but because that sharing in the deepest suffering of Christ was precisely the gift and grace for which she had been created. Of course it showed up in her own soul, but it was not confined there, a private grace to be endured and enjoyed privately.

Mother Teresa's mission was to the poor, and she knew at the outset that to fulfill that mission she would have to become poor. She came to see that the greatest suffering of the poor is not their physical and material poverty, horrific as that is. Their greatest suffering comes from their being cast off human beings; nobody cares if they live, and nobody will miss them when they die. Everyone has better things to do, and they are abandoned, left alone to do for themselves as best they can. Mother Teresa's own loneliness and darkness, her keen and painful sense of being ignored by God, equipped her perfectly for the deepest possible solidarity with the poor to whom she had been sent. This was true not only of her, but of all the Missionaries of Charity. By all their vows, but especially the fourth one, they yield themselves to the darkness and abandonment of Christ on the cross, a most necessary part of their vocation.

Very few of us are Missionaries of Charity and probably none of us have an interior life anything like Mother Teresa's. Still, there is something in her life that speaks to us, something that we need to hear if we are to understand fully our own vocation as followers of Jesus and our own mission in the world. Sooner or later, every member of Christ's body must share in the redemptive sufferings of Christ, including his greatest suffering of being abandoned by God. We have this as both gift and command, a key part of our being sent into the world to proclaim the gospel to others, others with whom we must be in complete solidarity before we can open our mouths to speak the name of Jesus. As is so often the case with the saints, in one person, in Mother Teresa, is an arresting, extreme, distressing image of what we are called to be.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



### MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

#### APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

*(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)*

To be lit in honor of: \_\_\_\_\_  
Living \_\_\_\_\_ Deceased \_\_\_\_\_

Requested by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately \_\_\_\_\_ Specific Date \_\_\_\_\_

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



#### MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



#### APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

*(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)*

Please Enroll: \_\_\_\_\_  
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.  
Living \_\_\_\_\_ Deceased \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 \_\_\_\_\_ Family, \$100.00 \_\_\_\_\_ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*