

“Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light” – A Book Review

Colleagues,

This week’s Thursday Theologian is Pastor Stephen C. Krueger, Seminex grad, LCMS rostered pastor, now serving as hospice chaplain in Florida. Steve’s world of daily work is LifePath Hospice and Palliative Care, the largest not-for-profit hospice program in the United States. LifePath Hospice currently serves over 2,000 patients in the area of Tampa. Steve was the first one I thought of as reviewer for the recent revelations of Mother Teresa’s “dark night of the soul.” Reason #1: Every one of his parishioners is face-to-face with the final “Good Night . . . the dying of the light.” (Dylan Thomas). Reason #2: October a year ago Steve was our ThTheologian with a show-and-tell about his law/promise theology in praxis: “Hospice Reflections on John 11.” He gave us a tour-de-force of cross/resurrection pastoral care, Christ’s light shining into the darkness and—as St. John claims—“the darkness does not overcome it.” After you read today’s post—his appreciation of, and “conversation” with, Mother Teresa—you’ll want to go back to that one again. It’s at <https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur101906.shtml>

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

**A Review of MOTHER TERESA: COME BE MY LIGHT,
ed. Brian Kolodiejchuck, M.C.(New York: Doubleday,
2007), 404 pp., \$22.95 US.**

As historians assess the shapes of the latter half of the twentieth century, two shapers will certainly stand out. Ironically, both came out of the same orbit of Eastern European Roman Catholic Christianity and emerged on the world stage in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, and then the massive social changes which the Eastern European world knew as the Iron Curtain fell. Scholars will continue to have to debate why these two somewhat unlikely representatives of the post Vatican II church are the ones being considered for sainthood, but there can be little debate about the influence of Pope John Paul II and his contemporary, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Both in their own ways captured the attention of an increasingly secularized west and, with the power of contemporary media, gained an enormous following.

Who can argue about the key role Pope John Paul II played to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Empire? And who again can dispute how a diminutive nun born in Macedonia who founded a religious order became, in the words of Javier Perez de Cuellar, the Secretary General of the United Nations, "the most powerful woman in the world"? Among the things which intrigue is how countercultural both appear to have been to the themes of modernity and post-modernism. Yet, the compelling power of both figures to critics and fans alike is virtually beyond dispute. It is almost as if we loved them because they were so profoundly different from us. And, in being different, they both (in ways strikingly parallel), revealed to us a better way.

Comes now, in the wake of noticing this possibility, a book about one of these two larger-than-life figures that equally

endears her even more and yet disturbs, in ways we had not thought or, perhaps, were quite ready for. Edited by admirer, associate and biographer, Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuck, M.C., Ph.D., *MOTHER TERESA: COME BE MY LIGHT* is a fairly exhaustive and intimate portrayal of the saint of Calcutta, containing Mother Teresa's writings and thoughts as they evolved over her lifetime.

Fr. Kolodiejchuck is postulator of the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and director of the Mother Teresa Center, so the account is hardly an adversarial one. Probably to his credit, the editor is convinced that revealing Mother Teresa's deepest heart in her most intimate correspondence and writings will only all the more endear her to us. But there is a risk in accurate truth-telling, too. From the account we learn about "the darkness" which accompanied Mother Teresa throughout her life and, if anything, grew more intense over the years. If somehow we had thought that Mother Teresa was one of those rare souls who could lead us out of the night into the light of God, we are in for a rude awakening. No wonder the book (in the words of the salesperson who sold me my difficult-to-find copy) is "flying off the shelves." Mother Teresa had doubts, too, just as the rest of us.

Yet then again, and more deeply, that probably comes more nearly to the point, purpose and gift of the treasure of this volume. The book is written chronologically from the time eighteen-year-old Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu, the future Mother Teresa, left her home in Skopje in 1928 and joined the Loreto Sisters in Ireland to the time of her death in 1997 in India. It chronicles the journey with the known writings and letters of this unique missionary to the poorest of the poor.

The corpus is supplemented with historical commentary and

interpretation by the editor and generously footnoted and indexed throughout. Just on the face of it alone, the book is masterfully crafted by an exacting historiographer. Yet throughout the volume the overriding "mission statement" is kept central as something of a mystery less to be solved and understood than it is to be thought about and savored as part of the spirituality of a true saint of God: "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 of earth" (p. 1).

As we look into her heart through her writings (most of which Mother Teresa begged to be destroyed but weren't) the darkness can get pretty dark. We watch how a young nun, immersed in her love for her Bridegroom, eager, naïve, passionate, hears her Spouse calling to her on a train in September of 1946:

"[It] was a call within my vocation. It was a second calling. It was a vocation to give up even Loreto where I was very happy and to go out in the streets to serve the poorest of the poor. It was in that train, I heard the call to give up all and follow Him into the slums-to serve Him in the poorest of the poor...I knew it was His will and that I had to follow Him. There was no doubt that it was going to be His work (p. 40)."

Thus, the Missionaries of Charity, the missionary order Mother Teresa ultimately founded, was born. She elsewhere said that the call to her was an invitation to quench the thirst of her Beloved as he said, "I thirst" from the cross:

"'I thirst,' Jesus said on the cross when Jesus was deprived of every consolation, dying in absolute Poverty, left alone, despised and broken in body and soul. He spoke of His thirst-not for water-but for love, for sacrifice. Jesus is God;

therefore, His love, His thirst is infinite. Our aim is to quench this infinite thirst of a God made man... (p. 41)."

As Mother Teresa fought church authorities to legitimate her calling, her order and the needs of a small community of workers to minister to the poorest of the poor in India, her love affair with Jesus demanded more and more that she "bring joy to the suffering heart of Jesus" (p. 56). This insatiable longing by her Lord, Teresa found, rather than fulfill her and be the source of joy, instead, led her further and further into the darkness. Mother Teresa herself attributed the demand to a series of visions from which a voice cried out to her "Come be my light" (pp. 101-102). Teresa finds, however, to be Christ's light to others costs, and the cost can be terrifying. It meant for her joining in solidarity with the Christ embodied most in the abandoned of all humanity...and not just abandoned by humankind...but by God.

Outwardly, as the mission unfolds, Teresa is perceived to be a single-minded tower of strength. Even her confessors, who hear about her increasing but quiet and private complaints about "the darkness within" and God's "abandonment and absence" attribute the isolation and loneliness to little more than the normal experience of those whose spirituality runs deep. But the darkness does not go away for Teresa. "Your Grace," she begins to write to Archbishop Perier in 1953, "...Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself-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..." (p. 149).

As Teresa matures further in her own contemplation about all this, she apparently thinks deeply about the Christ-connected

meaning of the darkness she continues to experience. "The physical situation of my poor left in the streets unwanted, unloved, unclaimed-are the true picture of my own spiritual life," she writes in 1962 (p. 232). With such words Teresa sees herself becoming ever more one with her Beloved, the Abandoned One of God. Thus, Mother Teresa by 1979 states to her attentive audience as she accepts the Nobel Peace prize:

"[Jesus] makes himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one, the sick one, the one in prison, the lonely one, the unwanted one, and he says, "You did it to me." He is hungry for our love, and this is the hunger of our people. This is the hunger that you and I must find... (p. 291)."

That Teresa found that hunger in her oneness with her Lord, whose life was lived in solidarity with the poorest of the poor, begins to go to the core of her unfolding spirituality. And it was never satiated. Her biographer, Fr. Kolodiejchuck, wrote of her and Jesus, "Her heart was 'one' with His. His wounds were so imprinted on her soul that they had become hers. She suffered intensely at seeing the sufferings of those she loved, but she kept highlighting the value and the meaning of human suffering as a means of sharing in the Passion of Jesus" (p. 264). This observation probably says it all of Mother Teresa whose self-view of her own importance in God's economy of things was: "Only Jesus can stoop so low as to be in love with one such as me" (p. 268).

So now that we have the book, we discover that Mother Teresa was human after all, filled with "darkness" and feelings of "abandonment." But on the other hand, these were her experiences because she had given herself over to Jesus so completely that it was his darkness and abandonment that had filled her soul as she followed him in his divine solidarity

with the poorest of the poor. Sainthood? She's got my vote, to be sure. But did she ever get God's vote of approval for sainthood? And make that vote her own by "simply" trusting it?

That's a question whose answer we probably will never know.

Toward the end of her life Mother Teresa wrote almost as a prayer:

"The joy of loving Jesus comes from the joy of sharing in His sufferings. So do not allow yourself to be troubled or distressed, but believe in the joy of the Resurrection. In all of our lives, as in the life of Jesus, the Resurrection has to come, the joy of Easter has to dawn (p. 300)."

In the Christian rite for the Burial of the Dead, as Baptism is recalled, its promise is summoned by words just a little bit different but the difference is profound:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6: 3-5)."

As far as I can tell, the resurrection promise to Mother Teresa remained futuristic and informed very little of her working theology. However, as Moltmann and Pannenberg and a host of "hope thinkers" have since noticed, that same promise lays the grounding now for the Christian community to celebrate, even in its hardships and tears, the victory of the Lamb. Robert Bertram used to remind us how the promise authorizes even now the Christian life as a kind of glorious dress rehearsal for

the grand banquet yet to be—a foretaste of the feast to come, as we sing in the liturgy. One wonders if such faith—Easter already now—might have better served to lighten the darkness of the woman of Calcutta whose world seemed so full of Good Friday alone.

In the writings of Teresa of Calcutta, one is struck by the deep parallels between them and some of Bonhoeffer's LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON. While struggling certainly with a different set of issues and concerns, both writers conclude that the baptismal vocation of Christians is (in Bonhoeffer's words) "to stand by God in the hour of His grieving," as God's Son hangs on the cross for Christians and pagans "both alike forgiving" (from the poem "Christians and Pagans"). Yet one wonders whether Mother Teresa, from her Tridentine spirituality, ever let God forgive her, even as God does not forgive Jesus.

Then, more deeply, there is another question Mother Teresa's book leaves us with. Does she ever forgive God for doing what God did to her Beloved (known through Jesus' solidarity with the poorest of the suffering poor of the world)?

Perhaps if Mother Teresa had had a spiritual advisor/mentor as did young Martin Luther in his father-confessor Johann von Staupitz, more light might have shown in her own darkness. It was Staupitz who once told Luther: "Martin, it isn't God who is angry with you. It is you who are angry with God." Perhaps she, with C.S. Lewis, could have found delight and promise in noticing as Lewis did (as he grieved the death of his wife): "Sometimes it is hard not to say 'God forgive God.' Sometimes it is hard to say so much. But if our faith is true, He didn't. He crucified Him." (from A GRIEF OBSERVED). And, having said that, let God's forgiveness of Mother Teresa reign in her own soul.

But then, again, who knows? If Mother Teresa had taken that promise—a promise true for everybody else—and made it true for herself by believing it, there might never have been a Mother Teresa, the driven saint of Calcutta who loved her Lord so much she took God’s unforgiveness of him as her own.

MOTHER TERESA: COME BE MY LIGHT gives the world the likely bone fide saint as she was. She would have smiled at Bonhoeffer’s famous opening to THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” She would, of course, have known that those dated words apply to women, too, as they always have since the cross and the empty tomb. But what she struggles with in that dear discipleship of hers is whether Christ’s death and resurrection were for her, too. The Son whom she loved with all her heart as her Beloved Jesus got damned for her, that she need not be. Only her Beloved knows if she ever made that promise her own by believing it, even as it now is most certainly fully hers.

Personally, I hope they declare her a saint for our sakes but not for hers. She doesn’t need it. That promise had been true for her all along.

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