

For the people of St. Philip's
September 2, 2007
Year C, 14 Pentecost, (proper 17)
Maria Hoecker, preacher

Not many of you may know this, but this past week, August 27, was the birthday of Mother Teresa. She would have been 97 years old. News of her birthday coincided with publicity about a new book coming out titled, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (Doubleday) It consists primarily of correspondence between Teresa and her confessors and superiors over a period of 66 years. It provides the *spiritual* counterpoint to a life known mostly for its works. The letters, many of them preserved against her wishes (she had requested that they be destroyed but was overruled by her church), reveal that for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever - or, as the book's compiler and editor writes, "she felt no presence of God, neither in her heart or in the eucharist."

Today, I'd like to tell you Teresa's story . I can't think of a more fitting illustration of someone who walked the walk of seeking the lowest place at the table. Much of this story comes from a news article written for Time Magazine (by David Van Biema.) http://news.yahoo.com/s/time/20070823/wl_time/motherteresascrisisoffaith

God's seeming absence from Teresa's life seems to have started at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta, and - except for a five-week break in 1959 - it *never* abated. Although perpetually cheery in public, the Teresa of her letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In more than 40 communications she bemoans the "dryness," "darkness," "loneliness" and "torture" she is undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. She is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her inner state and her public demeanor. "The smile," she writes, is "a mask" or "a cloak that covers everything." Similarly, she wonders whether she is engaged in verbal deception. "I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God - tender, personal love," she remarks to an adviser. "If you were [there], you would have said, 'What hypocrisy.'"

Yet Teresa found ways, starting in the early 1960s, to live with it and abandoned neither her belief nor her work.

On Sept. 10, 1946, after 17 years as a teacher in Calcutta with the Loreto Sisters , Mother Mary Teresa, 36 took a long train trip to go on retreat. She had been working herself sick, and her superiors ordered her to relax in the Himalayan foothills. On the ride out, she reported, Christ spoke to her. He called her to abandon teaching and work instead in "the slums" of the city, dealing directly with "the poorest of the poor" - the sick, the dying, beggars and street children. "Come, Come, carry Me into the holes of the poor," he told her. "Come be My light." The goal was to be both material and evangelistic "to help them live their lives with dignity [and so] encounter God's infinite love, and having come to know Him, to love and serve Him in return."

It was wildly audacious - to provide individualized service to the poorest in a poor city made desperate by riots. The local Archbishop, was skeptical. But her letters to him, preserved, illustrate two linked characteristics - extreme tenacity and a profound personal bond to Christ.

On Jan. 6, 1948, the Vatican, finally gave permission for Teresa to embark on her second calling. But, within the year, Teresa writes, Jesus left again.

In the first half of 1948, Teresa took a basic medical course before launching herself alone onto the streets of Calcutta. She wrote, "My soul at present is in perfect peace and joy." She writes a moving description of her first day on the job: "The old man lying on the street - not wanted - all alone just sick and dying - I gave him water to drink and the old Man - was so strangely grateful ... Then we went to a Bazaar, and there was a very poor woman dying I think of starvation more than TB ... I gave her something which will help her to sleep. - I wonder how long she will last." But two months later, shortly after her major triumph of locating a space for her headquarters, "What tortures of loneliness," she wrote. "I wonder how long will my heart suffer this?" The more success Teresa had - and half a year later so many young women had joined her society that she needed to move again - the worse she felt.

Teresa's spiritual spigot went dry just as she prevailed over her church's perceived hesitations and saw a successful way to

realize Jesus' call for her.

When Teresa turned to her spiritual director with her "darkness," he told her the three things she had needed to hear:

1. there was no human cause or remedy for it;
2. Perceiving Jesus is not the only proof of his being there, and
3. her very craving for God was a "sure sign" of God's "hidden presence" in her life.

This insight gave Teresa a tremendous sense of release. For all that she had expected and even craved to share in Christ's Passion, she had not dreamed that she might live out the particular moment on the Cross when Jesus asks, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Not that it didn't continue to torment her. Years later, describing the joy in Christ experienced by some of her nuns, she observed dryly, "I just have the joy of having nothing - not even the reality of the Presence of God [in the Eucharist]." She described her soul as like an "ice block."

When any of us hear such a statement we just have to ask, "so why do it, Teresa?" If it felt so terrible and lonely to fulfill this ministry, why did you do it?"

For most of us, the totality of love is what we hope to feel. But what is love when we *don't* feel it? Can it still exist? How do we experience that sort of illusive love? To really love Jesus Christ requires commitment, fidelity and vulnerability. Such love can't be seen or felt. Mother Teresa rarely 'felt' Christ's love, and she could have shut down. But she was up at 4:30 every morning anyway, and she still lived as though he would return to her. She found her spot at the lowest place at the table, even though others asked her to move up to a place of honor. She remained in a dark pit.

"Everything that Teresa experienced, is what average believers experience in their spiritual lives. "Who would have thought that the person who was considered the most faithful woman in the world struggled like that with her faith? And who would have thought that the most ardent of believers could be a saint to the skeptics?" But the humility of doubt is a natural part of *everyone's* life, be it an average believer's or a world-famous saint's.

Jesus saw the certainty of pride in those who came as guests to the wedding banquet and he felt free to make observations about the absence of humility in their lives. Jesus must have known in his day, and in our day, that his work in the world is completely dependent on our hospitality and our *humility*. If we take the lowest place at the table so that ultimately we'll be exalted, we've missed the point. Teresa gives witness to the emptiness of exultation on this earth. Jesus calls us, again and again, to prepare a feast for those who can not return the favor: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And guess what? It's hard, lonely, messy work. In this lifetime, we probably won't always feel all that good about doing it.

As Mother Teresa wrote in 1979, "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." It's hard, lonely, and messy work, this life as followers of Christ. We may not *ever* see that Jesus is seated right there with us, but he is. He is.