

What Makes a Genuine Saint

Mother Teresa's public image will never be the same. Even those who worked closely with her were in the dark. I had been part of her priest's community for three years, and had met her on many occasions, yet never knew the extent to which the interior desert had dominated the spiritual life of this iconic modern saint.

The world could not believe that a woman so full of inspiration, so dedicated to charity, so focused on Jesus Christ, and so defiant in the face of social indifference could have persevered over 50 years through an unending night of the soul. Mother Teresa had us all convinced. We were certain of her constant communion in ongoing intimacy with the Lord whose beautiful face she saw everywhere. Little did we know that she was quietly dying inside.

Some will declare her unfit for heaven: If Mother Teresa, the ultimate Catholic, lacked Blessed Assurance of her salvation, if she doubted God's love for her, if she struggled with a sense of abandonment, then she could not possibly have been saved. In that case, all the good works in the world would not redeem her.

Of course, such a condemnation would miss an essential part of Jesus' work of redemption for us: the Cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, and in the hour of his crucifixion, Christ suffered a sense of abandonment so intense that he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). It would also deny the mysterious claim of St. Paul to the Colossians: "In my body I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for his body, the church." (1:24). Finally, it would undermine this exhortation: "We are...heirs of God, heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so as to be glorified with him" (Romans 8: 17).

The true power of Mother Teresa's faith and life of unhesitating commitment to Jesus was her unfailing fulfillment of her motto: "Everything always only for Jesus." There was no other motive.

A representative of our Diocese asked me to reflect on spiritual growth and faith-development. Ironically, I've been feeling more stagnant than ever this past year. The work seems to pile up, and no sooner have I completed one task than a dozen more arise. I find myself settling for less and less in my prayer and meditation.

And then I hear the words of Jesus to Martha in Bethany, when she complained that her sister was shirking her duty of hospitality by sitting, transfixed, at the feet of Jesus. "You are anxious and upset about many things; one thing only is required." (Lk 10:41).

Yes, Mary of Bethany had chosen the better part. In the midst of all the familiarity of her family home, she had found the Messiah.

This is Emmanuel, God-With-Us. No, she wasn't ignoring the needs of the Master. She was absorbing every blessing he'd come to impart. Her eyes would never abandon her Lord and Savior.

And yet later, at the death of Lazarus, her faith would be shaken. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

To be alive is to grow and to continue developing. Even growing older supposes a development in wisdom, in patience, and in the ability to see things from a higher perspective. But just as growth in any person's life involves stages, and the peaks and valleys of human experience, so too growth in the Spirit does not follow a rigid path or a gentle upward slope. Rather, it is a dynamic process. By means of continual conversion through an ongoing dialogue with God and all God sends into our lives, we progress.

Life-long faith development, I believe, requires a constant attention to one's interior voice, a voice informed by the Word of God, by the Spirit, and by the Church. The ordinary activities and circumstances of daily life, when held reverently and prayerfully examined in the light of Christ, open for us the unfolding Gospels that speak in today's idioms and to the issues of the day.

The former model of holiness – that of escaping the world through denial of all that might cause temptation, then of returning to civilization as a kind of spiritual super-hero, no longer speaks as it did in times gone by. The saint of old was a person who floated above the ground, who lived without food or water, who needed no one but God, who deprived themselves of every consolation, and who yearned for cruel martyrdom or at least an early death.

Of course, the reality was that saints like Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, John of God, and Blessed Damien of Molokai were hardly caricatures. So the model of holiness for today, in my opinion, is a person who gets their hands dirty. He or she is willing to walk into another person's hell, even at the risk of becoming unclean. This, after all, is what Jesus did.

The world has learned, unbelieving, that Mother Teresa suffered for half a century the interior desert of a profound desolation. Yet she carried out her mission faithfully. In the end, spiritual growth demands the greatest leap of faith: total abandonment of oneself into the hands of a God who may seem very far away.

Mother Teresa's quiet agony is a testimony to a love for God so great that it keeps seeking only his Glory, even as he seems to be crushing her spirit. This kind of love draws one above everything that is mortal, not by denying one's humanity, but by entrusting it wholeheartedly into the care of the only one who can raise us up.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (NIV, Hebrews 5:7-10)

*Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, CA
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