

THE CRESSSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

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books



Mother Teresa. *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta."*
Brian Kolodiejchuk, ed. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

MOTHER TERESA WANTED THE letters that make up most of this book destroyed, and it is easy to understand why. They contain an intimate picture of the heart and soul of one of the most remarkable people of the twentieth century, and it is a picture that contradicts her cheerful outward demeanor and shocked her closest friends. At times I felt uneasy while reading this book, wondering if I, too, had become privy to something that should never have been revealed to the public. But the inner portrait of Mother Teresa that emerges in the pages of this book offers several meaningful lessons to the reader who approaches it with an open mind and heart.

There were three things about Mother Teresa's inner world that especially impressed me. The first was her great love for God and for lost and hurting people. Mother Teresa had a passionate love for God that motivated her throughout her life: "I want to love Him as He has never been loved before—with a tender, personal, intimate love" (263). Because of this great love, she promised God that she would never refuse him anything he asked of her. She also had a deep love for human souls. Taking Jesus' words "I thirst!" on the cross as a statement of his thirst for the lost souls of the world, Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charities dedicated themselves to satiating this thirst of Jesus for the lost.

The second impressive fact about Mother Teresa's inner world was the terrible darkness that engulfed her for most of her life. Ever since God called her to form her special Missionaries of Charity work, she was filled with an inner darkness that left her feeling totally alone and alienated from God. With the help of her confessing priests she gradually began to see this darkness as a dark night of the soul that enabled her to identify more completely with the darkness and alienation of the people to whom she ministered. It was a sharing in the sufferings of Christ, including the suffering he experienced in the awful plight of the unloved and unwanted sufferers Mother Teresa cared for. This darkness was the more intense and unbearable precisely because her love and her desire for fellowship with Jesus were so strong.

The third impressive part of Mother Teresa's inner life revealed in this book is how she accepted the darkness and pain within her. There were indeed times when she thought the darkness was more than she could bear, times when she prayed desperately for healing and relief. But she learned to accept the darkness without allowing it to impede her work. Her determination is expressed beautifully in these words: "The greater the pain and darker the darkness the sweeter will be my smile at God" (222). Writing to a friend, she expresses her understanding of suffering in a dramatic way: "Sorrow, suffering,

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Eileen, is but a kiss of Jesus—a sign that you have come so close to Jesus that He can kiss you.—I think this is the most beautiful definition of suffering” (281). And at another point she confesses: “The joy of loving Jesus comes from the joy of sharing in His sufferings” (300). Mother Teresa thus came to accept her suffering as a necessary part of her mission and calling, a blessing and a sign of God’s favor to her. She finally experienced it as a necessary part of her mission to the poor, but her outward cheerfulness and energy concealed this inner darkness from even her closest friends.

Mother Teresa’s inner life presents a powerful challenge to every Protestant American. Her passionate love for her Savior, a love that led her willingly to embrace a life of self-denial and sacrificial care to the dregs of society challenges us all to reexamine our lifestyles and our priorities. And her intense inner darkness crashes head-on with the cult of self-fulfillment that characterizes so much of our thinking. How often do we claim that obedience and service lead to satisfaction and happiness? What about a gospel that promises deliverance from suffering and healing of our minds and hearts? How can this gospel square with the experience of Mother Teresa? If anyone deserved a happy and fulfilled life, it was Mother Teresa. Yet she lived most of her life concealing a wretched emptiness and darkness that would have brought a lesser person to despair.

Even if Protestants cannot entirely embrace the Roman Catholic teachings about how Christians can and must share in the continuing suffering of Christ in this world, we cannot pretend that our traditional and popular Protestant theology has all the answers. We at least need to re-examine the nature of our experience in this world and the role that suffering has in obedient Christian living.

If the purpose of a good book is to inspire us and challenge the way we think and live, then this account of Mother Teresa’s inner life is one of the best I have read in years.

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