The “Thirst of Jesus” in the Vocations of Mother Teresa and Therese of Lisieux

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In this article Frohlich compares the profound and difficult spiritual experiences of Teresa of Calcutta with the remarkably similar occurrences in the life of Therese of Lisieux. What might we learn from these two women of God?

The recently published letters and meditations of Mother Teresa of Calcutta make it clear that a profound “convictional experience” of the thirst of Jesus was at the very root of her vocation to found the Missionaries of Charity. (“Convictional experience” is an experience in which self, world, the void, and the holy converge upon a symbol such that one’s entire way of structuring meaning in one’s life is forever changed. See Loder 1989). In her Rule, written only months after the experience that convinced her to leave her happy life as a Loreto Sister and found the new congregation, she wrote: “The General End of the Missionaries of Charity is to satiate the thirst of Jesus Christ on the Cross for Love and Souls.” Yet for Mother Teresa, this thirst became a path of darkness and emptiness so profound that she felt herself abandoned by God. In this essay I will compare this experience of Mother Teresa with the remarkably similar one of the saint whose name young Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu took on entering religious life, Therese of

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Lisieux. In the conclusion I will reflect on some of the interpretations that have been offered for this disconcerting phenomenon, as well as on what it may mean for the rest of us.

The Initial Experiences

Therese’s experience of the thirst of Jesus came within a few months after her well-known “Christmas conversion” of 1886. She described it thus:

One Sunday, looking at a picture of Our Lord on the Cross, I was struck by the blood flowing from one of the divine hands. . . . I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to receive the divine dew. I understood I was then to pour it out upon souls. The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded continually in my heart: “I thirst!” These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls. As yet, it was not the souls of priests that attracted me, but those of great sinners; I burned with the desire to snatch them from the eternal flames. (Therese 1996, 99)

Therese was fourteen years old when this occurred. It was, in a real sense, the foundation of her religious vocation. Although she had long desired to be a religious, this was the moment when she discovered her personal mission of joining Jesus in his all-consuming longing to share divine life with human beings, especially those most alienated.

Therese’s life both then and later in the cloister was a very sheltered one with no real contact with the poverty, violence, political corruption, and suffering that wreak havoc with so many people’s lives. Her notion of the “great sinners” for whom she was to give her life, therefore, was formed not by experience but by what she heard in preaching or read in the Catholic press. At the time of the above incident the newspapers were full of stories about an alleged triple murderer named Henri Pranzini; Therese claimed him as her “first child,” prayed fervently for his conversion, and was thrilled when he was reported to have kissed a crucifix just moments before his execution. For her, assuaging Jesus’ thirst for souls meant living as radically as possible her contemplative life of prayer and charity to the nearby neighbor. It would not be until the end of her life, in her own darkness, that she would begin to get an inkling of the real human potential for evil.

Mother Teresa, on the other hand, was exposed very concretely to the dark forces in human life even in childhood. At the time of her birth in 1910, a war was going on in the Balkans, and massacres and other atrocities against Albanians were frequent in the town of Skopje where the Bojaxhiu family lived. When she was eight, her father died, possibly poisoned because of his involvement with the
Albanian nationalist movement. After that the family was rejected by former business partners and family members, and Mother Teresa’s mother went through a period of severe depression before managing to set up her own business. Later on, when Mother Teresa was a Loreto nun in Calcutta in the 1940s, she again witnessed the effects of wars, uprisings, and, in 1943, a famine so horrendous that several million people in the city died. Finally, on August 16, 1946, as Hindus and Muslims slaughtered each other in the streets, Mother Teresa saw the savagery with her own eyes as she went out into its midst to find food for the three hundred girls in her boarding school. All this, as well as the constant presence of abject poverty in the streets around her convent, is the human background to her particular experience of the thirst and sorrow of Jesus (Sebba 1997).

Only one month after witnessing those Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta, during a train ride to Darjeeling for retreat, Mother Teresa had an experience that awakened the core of her being to the overwhelming reality of Jesus’ thirst. Although by then she had already been a religious for eighteen years, this experience was the foundation of a new and even more radical vocation. She began to see the aching thirst of Jesus not only in the crucified one upon whom she gazed in prayer, but also in the eyes and bodies of abandoned people whose lives were shattered by violence and indifference. Thus while she too placed contemplation at the very center of her understanding of how to assuage Jesus’ thirst, for her it also urgently required concrete service to the poorest of the poor. Henceforward, she was on fire to satiate his thirst by loving those who are most unwanted and by awakening them to love Jesus in return. During the year or so of preparation to begin her new ministry to the abandoned, she seems to have experienced this participation in his thirst as a sweet companionship with him, just as one might experience joy in being with someone one deeply loves even in the midst of suffering. Once the work began in earnest, however, the felt sense of companionship disappeared, and she was left only with the deep, empty ache of the most radical-possible longing. In 1956, for example, she wrote to Archbishop Perier:

Please pray for me, that it may please God to lift this darkness from my soul for only a few days. For sometimes the agony of desolation is so great and at the same time the longing for the Absent One so deep, that the only prayer which I can still say is—Sacred Heart of Jesus I trust in Thee—I will satiate Thy thirst for souls. (2007, 165)
Extreme physical thirst is perhaps the most all-encompassing of all desires, since water is the most basic necessity of life. To enter into the “thirst of Jesus,” then, is to touch the most radical and absolute level of desire. It is to experience, not just conceptually but in the most intimate ground of one’s created being, what Emmanuel Levinas called “the idea of Infinity” that awakens the most imperious desire—in his words, “not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies” (1969, 50). In Levinas’s view, it is above all in looking into the vulnerable face of another human being in need that we may be broken free from our natural egoism and awakened to this infinity of otherness that endlessly calls us forth in love. Both Therese and Mother Teresa confirm Levinas’s intuition, although with their unique emphases. Therese, called to the Carmelite contemplative life, asserted that her most foundational devotion was to the Holy Face of Jesus (1977, 135); Mother Teresa, called to direct service as well as contemplation, found her greatest joy in the faces of the poor whom she served.

While physical hunger, thirst, and other natural needs can be satisfied and thus allayed, this most radical desire only burns more fiercely when it touches that for which it longs. Having been touched by this infinite thirst, both Therese and Mother Teresa named themselves as women of intense, even “mad” desire. Therese wrote in her June 1895 “Act of Oblation to Merciful Love”: “I feel in my heart infinite desires and it is with confidence that I ask You to come and take possession of my soul” (1996, 276). A little more than a year later, she described her struggle with her desires to take on all possible vocations—not only Carmelite, spouse, and mother, but warrior, priest, apostle, doctor, martyr, crusader, and papal guard. Therese described the intensity of these unslakable desires as a “martyrdom” (1996, 192). Mother Teresa also wrote of her “many mad desires” (2007, 47), and the audacity and intensity of her desire to expand the reach of her “work” was legendary.

Yet into the lives of these two women of exemplary dedication and piety, who had both previously experienced so much consolation in their relationship with God, came the totally unexpected experience of the absence of God. Both were shocked and humbled when they suddenly discovered themselves in the psychological and spiritual condition of the “great sinners” and “most abandoned people” whom they sought to aid. Most disorienting of all to both of them was their seeming loss of faith. Therese wrote:

[God] permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. . . . When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness that surrounds it by the memory of the luminous country after
which I aspire, my torment redoubles; it seems to me that the darkness, borrowing
the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: “You are dreaming about the light,
about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about
the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one
day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice
in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound,
the night of nothingness.” (1996, 213)

Mother Teresa likewise felt herself assaulted by the blasphemy of faithlessness. She wrote:

The darkness is so dark—and I am alone.—Unwanted, forsaken.—The loneliness
of the heart that wants love is unbearable.—Where is my faith?—Even deep
down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness.—My God—how
painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing.—I have no faith.—I dare
not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart—and make me suffer
untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me—I am afraid to
uncover them—because of the blasphemy—If there be God,—please forgive
me.—Trust that all will end in Heaven with Jesus.—When I try to raise my
thoughts to Heaven—there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts
return like sharp knives & hurt my soul. . . . In spite of all this—this darkness
and emptiness is not as painful as the longing for God. (2007, 187)

According to Mother Teresa’s testimony, this interior darkness, emptiness, cold-
ness, and pain continued almost unabated for the remaining fifty years of her
life.

**Was Mother Teresa Depressed?**

As these dark experiences have become known, people have begun to ask
whether Mother Teresa was simply experiencing the psychological condition
of depression. A second question quickly follows: If so, would that mean that she
wasn’t really holy?

There are good reasons to ask these questions. Comparing her statements to
the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American
Psychiatric Association on symptoms of depression, she could be said to have
several of them: longstanding dysphoric mood, diminished pleasure in activities,
feelings of emptiness, and feelings of worthlessness. Yet throughout this entire
period Mother Teresa was engaged at full stretch and with great effectiveness in
the work of her rapidly growing congregation. Thousands of those who encoun-
tered her commented on the attentiveness, joy, and love that they felt radiating
from her, never guessing the agony of her soul. Thus, she did not appear to others as depressed or depressing. In these aspects, she exhibited the opposite of several of the key symptoms of depression. While it is possible that she had some psychological tendency to a depressive mood, a diagnosis of clinical depression does not seem appropriate in her case.

The second question is equally important, however. If Mother Teresa were depressed, would that mean that she was not holy? Would it invalidate her witness of self-giving service? No, it would not. Holiness has to do with the degree of one’s givenness to God, which is a response on a level not reducible to one’s psychological state. For the person who says “Yes” to God’s love, whatever emotional and psychological struggles they face become the arena of the development of that love. As Carmelite psychologist Kevin Culligan notes, it is quite possible for a person to be experiencing genuine spiritual darkness and an episode of psychological depression at the same time (Culligan 2003, 131). A depressed person may indeed be holy, if she courageously and consistently allows her experience of inner pain and emptiness to be transformed by God in faith. While my own assessment is that depression is probably not an appropriate diagnosis for Mother Teresa, I do not think that raising the question in any way denigrates her holiness or her witness.

**Mystical Thirst**

Nonetheless, I think a better explanation for the painful darkness into which both Therese and Mother Teresa fell comes from the mystics and is closely related to their common convictional experience of the “thirst of Jesus.” Jan Ruusbroec, a fourteenth-century mystic, describes the human reaction to what he calls the “touch of God” in terms of hunger rather than thirst.

Here begins an eternal hunger which can nevermore be satisfied. This is an interior craving and striving on the part of the amorous power and of the created spirit to attain an uncreated good. . . . Regardless of what they eat or drink, they are never satisfied, for their hunger is eternal. A created vessel cannot contain an uncreated good, and for this reason these persons suffer an eternally tormenting hunger, while God is like an overflowing stream that yet does not satisfy them. . . . Even if God gave such a person all the gifts which the saints possess and everything else which he is able to give, but without giving himself, the ravenous craving of the spirit would still remain voracious and unsatisfied. . . . This is the life of love at the highest level of its activity. (Ruusbroec 1985, 114)

Ruusbroec’s description of this “ravenous craving” that overtakes the lover of God does not stand alone, but is echoed in the writings of other mystics such as
Richard of St. Victor, Hadewijch of Brabant, and Mechtild of Magdeburg, among others (Mommaers 2004, 73–74). Finally, John of the Cross adds his voice, describing the “caverns” of the soul that wait in utter emptiness to be filled by God:

The capacity of these caverns is deep because the object of this capacity, namely God, is profound and infinite. Thus in a certain fashion their capacity is infinite, their thirst is infinite, their hunger is also deep and infinite, and their languishing and suffering are infinite death. (“Living Flame,” 3:22)

Both Therese and Mother Teresa found great solace and counsel in the writings of John of the Cross, which were perhaps the only sources available to them that were able to make spiritual sense out of their incomprehensible emptiness.

Recent commentators on both women have debated whether their profound experiences of desolation should be identified with John’s “dark night of the spirit,” which is said to occur when a person is on the brink of entering the state of union with God, or was instead a distinct, post-union charism of intimate participation in Jesus’ passion. Regardless of the conclusion of that debate, what is certain is that each of them in her own way incarnated what Ruusbroec said about those who experience this most radical hunger and thirst: “This is the life of love at the highest level of its activity.”

To be joined to the thirst of Jesus is to be joined to the infinite desire of God for communion with those who have been created to love God. Both Therese of Lisieux and Mother Teresa were women branded in the core of their being with this thirst.

References


