

Teresa of Calcutta: A model of theological charity

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, beatified by John Paul II this past Sunday, searched for "union with Christ, who awaits his disciples, and consoles and blesses them in their poverty and charity." An article by the postulator of the cause of St. Josemaría Escrivá published by La Razón.

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Saints make the perennial timeliness of the Gospel come alive. Each one is like a living parable of that phrase in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). Today, just like two thousand years ago on the roads of Palestine, Christ is walking at our side and calling us: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). Today, as then, each and every person can rest his head on Jesus’ breast and listen to the heartbeat of God’s love for his creatures (cf. Jn 13:25).

To understand Mother Teresa’s timeliness one has to set aside normal anthropological and sociological categories. Her ideal is not only a rejection of the consumer society. Neither is it mere philanthropy nor simply the defense

of the dignity of those who have nothing. Instead she is an example of zeal for the virtue of poverty, lived without half measures. She did not want anything among her nuns that could detract from the supernatural witness of Christ's example. Her love for poverty strikes a real blow at the attachment to comfort and flight from suffering which has accompanied progress in the West. Her love is the fruit of the zeal with which a holy soul searches for Christ. For a soul in love, St. Josemaría Escrivá said, the sick are Christ (cf. *The Way*, 419).

Mother Teresa's charity was not inspired by trendy social reforms or health care schemes. In the poor, the sick and the dying, Mother Teresa saw and tried to console Christ himself. Her charity responded to the spirit permeating Pope John Paul II's letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "We must therefore ensure that in every

Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the Kingdom? Without this form of evangelization through charity and without the witness of Christian poverty the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications. The charity of works ensures an unmistakable efficacy to the charity of words" (no. 50).

In other words, the message of Mother Teresa and of all the saints has a source, a strength, and an unmistakable focal point which is specifically theological: it is born of Christ, it is nourished by the thirst for Christ, it tends towards Christ. Union with Jesus Christ: this is the goal of the untiring and insatiable

search seen in the existential trajectory of all the saints.

In Mother Teresa it appears especially clear in those times in which our Lord wanted her to undergo the experience of the dark night of the soul. In 1956 she confided to the Archbishop of Calcutta: "I want to be an apostle of joy." But, through a mysterious disposition of providence, she had to carry out that apostolate in the agony of an absence of God which she found unbearable, as she wrote in March of 1956: "At times the agony of the absence of God is so great, and at the same time the vivid desire for the Absent is so profound, that the only prayer which I can still manage to recite is 'Sacred Heart of Jesus, I trust in you. May your thirst for souls be satisfied.'" Four years later, this trial still tormented her, but she continued to seek Christ persistently and trustingly, sure that she would

obtain a response: “I have begun to love the darkness. Because now I believe that it is a part, a very tiny part of the darkness and pain that Jesus experienced on earth.” With Christ, the darkness became light, the dryness became a consuming fire.

In this unceasing effort of seeking union one also finds an explanation of the spiritual fruitfulness of the saint. The most fundamental quality of the daughters and sons of Mother Teresa of Calcutta is not their witness to poverty, nor their help to the sick and dying of the most impoverished pockets of society. Rather it is their search for union with Christ, who awaits his disciples, and consoles and blesses them in their poverty and charity.

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