

# The dark night of 'a blessed soul'

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**W**hen the Rev. James Garneau describes his first encounter with Mother Teresa in Baltimore in 1976, it sounds as though he was, for a moment, in the presence of God on Earth.

"I was just awed," said Garneau, academic dean of the Pontifical College Josephinum in Ohio. "Not because of one particular thing she said, but because what she said was so simple and clear. She was just brimming with joy."

Like Garneau, most people who met Mother Teresa seem to describe her as almost intoxicated by God.

Few people knew, however, that for five decades, Mother Teresa experienced a prolonged spiritual depression - intense doubts not only about her faith, but also about the existence of God.

She wrote in a particularly bleak letter to one of her spiritual advisers: "They think that my faith, my hope and my love are overflowing, and that my intimacy with God and union with His Will fill my heart. If they only knew."

In another letter, she said: "I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing."

Mother Teresa will be beatified today in Rome by Pope John Paul II. A major step toward canonization in the Roman Catholic Church, beatification is the act by which a pope declares a deceased person worthy of public veneration and supreme happiness. Henceforth, she will properly be referred to as "The Blessed Mother Teresa."

The event will mark the fastest beatification in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, taking place a little more than six years after Mother Teresa's death Sept. 5, 1997. In making these decisions, the church usually takes decades, or even centuries, to satisfy itself that the deeds of a potential saint outweigh any moral shortcomings.

While most of the headlines leading up to the event have focused on the lifetime Mother Teresa spent serving the poor and suffering as Calcutta, India's "Angel of Mercy," news of her suffering is gradually coming to light.

Three years ago, as part of the exhaustive study of Mother Teresa required by the beatification process, more than 80 volumes of her letters to Calcutta Archbishop Ferdinand Perier and a Jesuit priest, the Rev. Celeste Van Exem were examined. Mother Teresa asked that the letters be burned.

But when Van Exem died in 1993, he left them in a sealed envelope with orders that they be read only in the event of her beatification. The Rev. Brian Kolodiejchuk, a Canadian priest in charge of the study process, decided to make the content of the letters public.

In November 2000, he released them to the online Zenit News Agency, which published them in four installments titled "The Soul of Mother Teresa: Hidden Aspects of Her Interior Life." The letters are available through Zenit's online news archive.

Garneau, who met Mother Teresa when she spoke at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in 1975, regularly conducts lectures on her life and the content of her letters. He said in an interview last week that even though they are filled with despair, they only serve to reinforce most people's image of Mother Teresa as a saint, and, in some ways, make her more human.

"This information will strengthen people in the midst of their own doubts," he said. "We know now that her joy was not exuding from a bubbly intoxication with God. For years, she had no tangible sense of His presence. Her joy came instead from a trust in God, whom she once knew in extraordinary ways."

In addition to making her internal crisis known, Mother Teresa's letters detail the extent of her calling to a lifetime of serving the poor. On a Sept. 10, 1946, train ride from Calcutta to a retreat in Darjeeling, where she had been sent to recover from an illness, Mother Teresa recalled experiencing several intense visions, or "interior locutions," with Jesus.

According to her letters, Jesus appeared to her in a vision during her 10-hour train trip, asking her to leave her life as a Loretto nun and minister to the sick and dying in Calcutta. She wrote that although she tried to refuse him, saying he was "asking too much," he would not leave her side, insisting that he wanted her to act as the "fire of my love among the poorest of the poor, the sick, the dying, the children in the streets."

Over the next several months, Mother Teresa wrote, she had several visions. In one of them, a large crowd of poor people cried out to her with outstretched arms. In another, a group of children with shrouded faces appeared before her, next to an image of herself as a child standing before a cross. She then heard the voice of the Lord, she wrote, asking her to take care of the children.

Although it is unclear from her letters exactly when Mother Teresa felt that Christ abandoned her, she wrote in painful detail in letters after fall 1947 of her longing for his return. Over the years, this sentiment seemed to grow stronger.

In 1959 she wrote: "The damned of Hell suffer eternal punishment because they experiment with the loss of God. In my own soul, I feel the terrible pain of this loss."

The idea that Mother Teresa once had these drastic visions has surprised even some of the foremost experts on her life.

"This was a whole side of her that I never expected to hear," said Carol Zaleski, a professor of religion at Smith College in Massachusetts. "I didn't know that she was a full-blown mystic, in the sense that the inspiration she received was not just abstract intuition. This was a concrete visionary experience - an extended dialogue with Christ."

All of which, Zaleski said, made Mother Teresa's lifetime of service even more remarkable.

"The secular interpretation of all this might be that she went out into the streets of Calcutta and just burnt out and lost it. But this was not ordinary, garden-variety skeptical doubt, the kind when someone doesn't even have a faith to lose. There was a meaning to her meaninglessness. And no matter how hollowed-out she felt, she was still radiant and expressive of joy."

The history of Christian theology is filled with references to what is commonly called the "dark night of the soul," a feeling of doubt and loneliness first explained by St. John of the Cross. Mother Teresa's namesake, St. Therese of Lisieux, was a French Carmelite who wrote about her sense of being in a dark tunnel where, she wrote: "My consolation is to have none on earth."

According to the Bible, Christ experienced that spiritual bleakness on the cross when, after nine hours of suffering, he called out: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Mother Teresa's darkness, as she writes of it, has moved many in the religious community.

"I was so touched to hear that while she was immersing herself in some of the worst examples of human suffering possible, she didn't run from it," said the Rev. Philip Gage of the Society of Mary. "She never once stopped and asked, 'Why am I even doing this?' Instead, she went ahead knowing that people were in desperate need and that she was guided by God's love. It's a really intriguing paradox - this idea that she was doing something right and good, but really not enjoying it. To me, this represents the height of nobility. It's where faith meets doubt."

Zaleski, who published an article in May about Mother Teresa's "Dark Nights" in *First Things*, a religious journal, said that she has since received hundreds of letters from people, telling her they took great comfort in learning of Mother Teresa's internal strife.

"There are so many people out there that feel a lot of this darkness," she said. "This information gives them hope. They think that if Mother Teresa the great saint could feel this and get through it, then they can, too."

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