

Fifth Sunday of Easter 2021

Sometimes, as if by chance, our lives intersect with people who are famous. For me, one of those people was Mother Teresa, whom I saw twice. The first time was in 1984, at the first World Youth Day in Rome called by St. John Paul II. Given her courage before leaders of nations and her stature on the world's stage, it was striking to see how tiny she was in person ... about so high, with a rather frail voice and a humble, almost shy manner. But she commanded the attention of hundreds of youth that April day, *not* because of her glamour or beauty, *not* because of her wealth or talent, but *because of her radiant and transparent generosity, and her faith in the risen Christ.* She moved them deeply with simple stories about the poor and the lessons those who suffer can teach us. She once said: *"A man told me one day that not even for a million dollars would he touch a leper. I responded, 'Neither would I. If it were a matter of money, I would not do it even for two million. However, I do it gladly for the love of God."*

"Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth," John says. Mother Teresa exemplified that saying. She knew that the Incarnation, the fact that God came into our midst in human form, means that authentic love in our world must *also* always "take flesh," not being mere sentiment but bearing fruit – like branches on the Vine. This is perhaps not so hard when we are feeling generous and benevolent, when we choose when and to whom we reach out. *It is not too hard to be kind to the people we LIKE relying on our own strength. But to love – to do whatever is truly in the best interests of those we do not particularly LIKE – that is the work of grace, a sign that the Holy Spirit is there.*

Jesus has forever linked the two mysteries of human suffering and of redemptive love – the longing for God and the presence of God. The Lord's Cross teaches us the most about love – and Mother Teresa knew the Cross intimately. After her death, the world came to know that she lived for over 50 years with a share in Christ's Passion that none would readily choose: an almost entirely unfulfilled longing to experience God's love in her own soul. She lived out the profound mystery of those words proclaimed

each Good Friday: “My God, my God, why have You abandoned Me?” Her spiritual life seemed frozen in that moment, as she suffered in her own person for a postmodern age when so many have stopped searching for God, forgotten God, even dismissed God as no longer necessary. She knew firsthand, with an intensity none would have guessed, that the greatest poverty is not lack of material goods, but the loss of a sense of God’s love. Perhaps it was this very suffering, accepted in love, that moved her to do what she could to spare others from suffering.

The second time I saw Mother Teresa was a much humbler occasion, but one that means more to me. Part of seminary formation is to do some service, and one year I was at San Gregorio, the church where Mother Teresa’s order, the Missionaries of Charity, had a shelter for the homeless of Rome. I learned that year that it takes a special kind of charity to care for the poorest of the poor, and that was not my gift. But one Thursday Mother Teresa was walking down the hall with the sister who ran the shelter, and I was sweeping the floor. Even then it struck me that if I ran into Mother Teresa at random, this is how I would want to meet her ... doing something simple to make even those who had nothing in the world feel that they deserved a clean place, because they were brothers and sisters of Christ, too.

Each of us has things we would rather not do, people or tasks that are difficult for us. In those moments when we are tempted to take the easier path, to walk away from need or think only of ourselves, may we hear those words of Mother Teresa: “Not for a million dollars would I do it, *not even for two million. But I do it gladly for love of God.*”