

Quarterly Yoke Letter

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Renewing The Spirit...Renewing The Mind...

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Dear Friends,

Malcolm Muggeridge was a writer, university chancellor, and BBC commentator. The most important project he undertook was to do a report, and then write a book on the work of Mother Teresa in Calcutta. The book was titled, *Something Beautiful for God*, and when released became an immediate best-seller. During one of my visits to see him at his home in Sussex, Roberstbridge, England, Malcolm told me the story about a time when Mother Teresa was invited to be on a television program with a panel of Christian leaders. Their assigned topic was to share about their faith. Here was the Archbishop of Canterbury and other world renowned theologians, and then there was this small in stature Albanian nun from Calcutta. When asked to explain her faith, following the very eloquent academic dissertations of the other guests, Mother Teresa said, "Oh, I try to follow the example of Jesus. I want to love as Jesus would have me love—care for the sick, feed the hungry and love the poor." Following the program, the Archbishop was heard to say, "You know, if I had to spend much time with that woman, I would go mad!" The reason why the Archbishop would "go mad," is because such a beautiful simplicity of faith as represented by Mother Teresa, always causes discomfort in those who do not have it. It is a childlike openness to the workings of the living God. It is not a simplistic faith, but a faith of profound simplicity.

I thought about this story recently when I began to hear and read news reports about a new book that includes letters from Mother Teresa, wherein she openly writes about not only her "dark night of the soul," but "dark nights of the soul." The media reported on these letters as if doubts and questions were something new in the lives of faithful Christians, almost calling Mother Teresa a hypocrite for feeling such a distance from God! To my knowledge, there was no credible Christian response to the "surprise" that the media was reporting.

Such doubt has been a part of the human condition from our very beginning, and it has certainly been a part of the Christian faithful throughout our 2,000 year history. Doubt and faith go hand in hand, and as a good friend said to me, "Faith without doubt is not faith." It should not be surprising to any who know religious history that many of the most committed persons to their faith, are also the ones who experience God's absence in the most excruciating ways. Mother Teresa is not an exception. In a letter to one of her spiritual directors, she wrote:

Now Father—since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart—Darkness is such that I really do not see, neither with my mind nor with my reason, the place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me—when the pain of longing is so great—I just long and long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there—God does not want me—Sometimes I just hear my own heart cry out, 'My God' and nothing else comes—The torture and pain I can't explain.

Trying to comfort her and help Mother Teresa understand that what she was experiencing was a part of the mystical life, her confidant, Archbishop Perier writes to her, saying:

In what you reveal there is nothing which is not known in the mystical life. It is a grace God grants you, the longing to be His entirely without return on self or creatures, to live by Him and in Him but that longing which comes from God can never be satisfied in this world, simply because He is infinite and we finite.

The inner pain persisted as she responded to the archbishop...*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.

This longing for, “the Absent One” is the theme in one of the most beautiful of the Psalms. In Psalm 42 the Psalmist writes:

*As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and
behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night,
while persons say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’...*

*My soul is cast down within me...I say to God, my rock: ‘Why
hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning because of the
oppression of the enemy?’ As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually,
‘Where is your God?’...*

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?...

And there is the example of Jesus and his own experience of darkness on the cross. Writhing in agony, he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Mother Teresa, the author of the 42nd Psalm, and Jesus are just three examples of those who expressed doubts and struggled with their faith. I am sure that the readers of this *Letter* could write about their own dark nights of the soul. It is important to know that we are not alone, and that even the most faithful have had questions and times when they have felt the absence of God in their lives. This is a part of faith development...But it is only one part. Even though Mother Teresa experienced such an agonizing absence of God, Malcolm Muggeridge could write of her: “In a dark time she is a burning and shining light; in a cruel time, a living embodiment of Christ’s gospel of love; in a godless time, the Word dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. For this, all who have the inestimable privilege of knowing her, or knowing of her, must be eternally grateful.”

For the Psalmist, the feeling of God’s absence is only part of the faith story expressed in Psalm 42. There are also words of affirmation: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God...By day the Lord commands his steadfast love; and at night his song is with me; a prayer to the God of my life...”

The agonizing question of Jesus while on the cross is recorded in both Mark and Matthew. Except for “A loud cry,” they are the last words that Jesus utters before he dies. In the Gospel of Luke, however, there is an utterance of affirmation, when Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

Doubts, questions and a longing for God in the midst of an enveloping darkness...At times this may well be our experience. But there are also awakening moments when God’s presence feels overwhelming. Why such contrasts in our faith development? I don’t know. I do know that whatever I am experiencing in my life of faith, I am helped when I can share it within the context of community...with spiritual friends who are supportive and understanding. Christians are a people who take seriously the truth that we are members one of another. In a community where love is practiced, the times of doubt are less painful, and the times of awakening are intensified. Wherever we are along this continuum of faith development, we can be comforted by knowing what Julian of Norwich learned in her own classroom of spirituality... *And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*

Faithfully,

James R. Newby

P.S. The new book of Mother Teresa’s letters is titled, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, edited with commentary by Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C., and published by Doubleday.

