

Through Highs and Lows, God is With Us - Let's Stay With Him

Saint Mother Theresa was known as a woman who truly brought the face of God to dark places. She ministered to people whom society had forgotten about, and tried her best to combat the horrible conditions of poverty that so many people faced. In recent years though, some have noted her faith writings that tell of a soul who often had difficulties on her spiritual journey, with some suggesting she might have been on the brink of atheism.

It is true that excerpts from her correspondence suggest that on two occasions, she doubted or was tempted to doubt in the existence of God, as she wrote in 1959 *What do I labor for? If there be no God – there can be no soul – if there is no Soul then Jesus – You also are not true.* But from the rest of her correspondences, it's clear that this kind of doubt did not last long. Instead, what remained throughout her life was a feeling that God was not close to her, and that He had even abandoned her. She uses words like "pain," "silence," "emptiness," "loneliness," "dryness" and even "torture." These generally aren't the sorts of words that we hear in our hymns or utter in our prayer lives. Despite that, it's important to remember that these are very different words than saying one has come to the intellectual conclusion that God does not exist and then remaining in that conviction over the course of a lifetime. Belief in God and the feeling that He is near are two very different things. Over her long years of feeling abandoned, Teresa continued to address her prayers to the God she believed was there, even though she felt He was far away. "Pray for me please" she once wrote, *"that I may keep smiling at Him in spite of everything."* These are hardly the words of an unbeliever. Rather, they are the words of a lover, who is terrified because the beloved seems absent and uninterested. Describing her spiritual battles, Fr. Richard McBrien, a theologian of the University of Notre Dame, said "It shows that she wasn't a plaster-of-Paris saint who never had a doubt about God or the ultimate meaning of life. This can only enhance her reputation as a saintly person with people who aren't easily impressed with pious stories. Those who think otherwise have a lot of learning to do about the complexities of life and about the nature of faith." And indeed, part of the nature of faith often includes doubt and battles where we wish we would know God was close, and what His plans were, but don't.

We get a glimpse of that in our Gospel today, where we return to the Nativity scene, and find a seemingly peaceful scene with Mary and Joseph and the Christ child lying in the manger. It seems peaceful, but let's not forget there is no room for them in the inn; they have to flee to Egypt; Herod is trying to kill Jesus, the messengers are shepherds, people on the margins who Mary and Joseph do not know, and Mary will be told a sword will pierce her heart. Indeed, while there are tender moments ahead, so are storm clouds and a faith that will be put to the test. As the evangelist tells us, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart."

I think in how both Mary and Mother Teresa respond to what is happening around them, we have two models of faith in how they live it out that are worth thinking about as we

start a new year, for faith is a way of life and just as the new year will bring highs and lows, so, too with our faith.

Both had prayer as a key part of their life, which is a key part of reflecting. As I've said before, I've had moments in my past of intense prayer, where I have felt so much at peace. But when those moments went away, initially I felt something might be wrong, or a sense of abandonment. Mother Teresa, early in her life, had visions of Jesus speaking to her early in her ministry, only to lose that connection which lasted the bulk of the last four decades of her life. But yet, she continued her prayer, and did not walk away from God. She trusted that even if she was not feeling a number of mystical emotions, that God was still there, even if He seemed distant. I suspect Mary must have felt the same things too; think of her at the foot of the Cross or when she held Jesus' lifeless body on Good Friday. As CS Lewis noted in "A Grief Observed," his journal of reflections going through emotions having lost his wife, he wrote of God looking back with the loving gaze of a grandfather who assures us we may not always understand, but we are loved and it will be OK. Mary had this trust, even in the dark moments. It can be hard though to trust like Mary, like Jesus. So many of us want control, and all the answers, especially in difficult parts of our lives, and when they don't come, some just shrug their shoulders and throw in the towel, saying essentially "I guess its just up to me and He's not listening anymore." Others realize that despite the distance that might seem to be there at times, and despite the pain, uncertainty and anxiety that life can bring, God is there and still hears our prayers. Mary and Mother Teresa, are testaments to that, and my hope is that we never cease praying, remembering that God hears us. Prayer isn't about the "warm-fuzzie." If that comes, that's great – but often it won't. And when it doesn't, we can't fall for the lie that we are alone to walk this world, but rather need to remember God hears us no matter whether our prayers are of thanksgiving and joy, or lament and anguish.

Finally, as we persevere in our prayer through challenging times, a key part of that as well is patience. We have to remember that we always are not going to have all of the answers, and know what is going on and why it is happening. We all will face tests of faith. What matters is not how often or how severely faith is assailed, but whether in the end faith triumphs. When we face those difficult moments in our lives, not only do we need to continue to pray and put our trust in God, we also need to continue to live out the faith. Again, just like with prayer when the emotional highs don't come and God seems far away, we might be tempted to throw in the towel on God, when we suffer in life or when our best efforts seem fruitless, we can be tempted to walk away too. No one likes pain. But when Christ said to "Come, follow me," he was not giving His followers a get-out-of-Good Friday-free card. Mother Teresa said that she wanted to share in the Passion of Christ, and "drink only from His chalice of pain." In the deepest dregs of the "chalice" of Christ, hanging on the Cross in agony, perhaps greater than the physical torment was the emotional, where Christ felt the absence of the Father. But nonetheless, He, His Mother, Mother Teresa, and so many of the saints lived out their lives showing the world what faith was all about through persevering in good times and bad. And that ultimately is the challenge for us as well.

Today, we begin a New Year, and we celebrate Mary having the title of Mother of God. But it is perhaps better to celebrate the day by reflecting on the title she is given in Greek as *theotokos*; the God-bearer. As the woman who brings Jesus and God Himself into the world, she also teaches us so much about Christ. And when we look at the Nativity scenes in our homes, I hope our hearts are warmed and we do so with joy. But I also hope that we take a moment to gaze upon Mary's face, and take to heart those powerful words of our Gospel: "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." To love at all is to be vulnerable; and our heart may very well be pierced with a sword and broken with respect to our loved ones. At other times it may seem empty, as if we have given all we can after a job loss, or after the love we give seemingly isn't returned from a parent, child or spouse. Our faith and hope in one another and God may stumble, but as Saint Paul reminded us "So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Mother Teresa continually pursued in the way of love, as did our Blessed Mother Mary, and in doing so through their prayer, patience and perseverance, they brought God into the world. May we strive to do the same, never forgetting God is with us through the highs and lows and will never abandon us.

Blessings to you and a very Happy New Year,

Fr. Paul