The Assumption Reminds us We are All Body and Soul, Created in God's Image

On September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa was traveling by train to a convent from Calcutta for her annual retreat. Up to this point, she had done work as a teacher in eastern Calcutta, having taken her solemn vows 9 years earlier. She enjoyed teaching, but teaching in Calcutta, she was deeply troubled by the poverty that surrounded her, as a 1943 famine and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims had devastated the city.

It was on that train ride that she experienced what she later referred to as "the call within the call." She felt compelled to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. Two years later, her missionary work began after she received some basic medical training. Though tempted to return to her old order and relatively comfortable living conditions, she wanted to completely identify with the people she was serving. In 1950, she received permission from the Vatican to start the diocesan congregation that would become the Missionaries of Charity. It's mission was to care for "the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone."

Mother Teresa would continue that work for the rest of her life, but one of the things that is so amazing with her is how she truly cared for the *whole* person, and gave such dignity to the body.

Harriet Heyman, writing for *Life* Magazine in 1980, profiled her along with Mary Ellen Mark, a photographer. She noted that the $7,000 that was to be spent on a banquet for her Peace Prize was sent to her mission in Calcutta where it would feed 400 people for a full year.

Heyman and Mark went to her mission, and were immediately struck by the sights, sound and smells alongside the acts of gentleness and patience as people were cared for. Harriet remarked that "at Mother Teresa's…there is such kindness and hope that these people are encouraged to be alive up until the very last moment. What really impressed me was that humans could be so good and brave."

Mary Ellen noted that: "In this extreme of suffering…pus, blood, vomit, urine, screams, sad and vacant faces--the sisters never stop working; they are gentle and kind. Each time I ask something, the sister tells me, 'It is God's work, don't you see? You should put down your camera and do some work.' Quite honestly, I don't think I could." Mother Teresa also was very much aware that what she was doing was a drop of mercy in an ocean of despair. That didn't matter, because it was helping one person who was unique, created in God's image. She also noted how people were treated at a hospice that Mother Teresa built. Here, when they arrive filthy and ravaged by vermin and disease, they were washed, their hair is cut and their wounds were dressed. The sisters would help them find strength, or just give them peace before death. About half of the people who came would die, and even the bodies of the dead were treated very carefully. Mark observed the sisters closing the eyes of a person, washing her body,

and then putting her in a cloth. She also was struck by how some people were embarrassed that they could not control their body functions, but the sisters wanted to make sure they kept their dignity. In her journal, Mary Ellen wrote “the nuns work so hard, oblivious to the most terrible sights and smells.”

Mother Theresa’s ministries expanded to include institutions for the physically and mentally ill, rehabilitation centers where people can work, and leper colonies for those ostracized because of disease, along with mobile clinics and food programs. Summarizing why they worked so hard, Mother Teresa said: "Our work is only the expression of the love we have for God," explains Mother Teresa "To us what matters is an individual. Every person is Christ for me. And since there is only one Jesus, that person is the one person in the world at that moment.”

This past Thursday, August 15th, we celebrated the Assumption, which was declared a dogma of our faith in 1950, when the pope declared that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. He didn’t just make up the feast; it had been a part of our faith for centuries. A key part of this though to me is the reminder of the whole human person, body and soul. We as Catholics believe the two are never separated. Sadly we are all aware of the separation in body and soul in the eyes of so many; we look at people based on their body or appearance, their race, or what they can do for us. Rather, as Mother Theresa said, “every person is Christ for me” and this is a great feast for us to be reminded of that truth and apply it to us.

First, we remember that everyone we encounter is created by God. We are told by our Lord that whatever we do for the least of people we do unto him. This means we are also held accountable by God for how we treat people. We can think about this when we’re tempted to gossip or be quick to anger or look down on someone based on their wealth or what they do for a living or their political background or whatever it may be. With that as the starting point, it helps keep us on the right track of truly loving our neighbor - something we need to remember more than ever in these polarizing times.

Secondly, with the Assumption being the body and the soul, we also need to remember this applies to people we have never met. One of the most common things people can struggle with is inappropriately looking at the human body. Thoughts aren’t sinful, but sometimes with bad things available so easily on TV, on our phone, on the computer, we can abuse how we look at the human body, and this impacts others. No sin is private, and for so many in our world this can become an addiction - but it changes how we view others and it’s important not to ignore it, but to address it.

Finally, we remember the many small things we can do for care of people that make such an incredible difference. Mother Theresa could often not cure someone of their illness, but she cured souls. There are so many unsung heroes who are quietly there for their spouses as one deals with aging, or who minister to them by helping people maintain their dignity when there are things they cannot do anymore. Other times just visiting a loved one in a nursing home can be so meaningful. So many thousands of people have been helped by Mother Teresa and over the years, and while many of

them were not healed physically, spiritually they were helped because of a bath, time spent with them, or prayers said with them. As a priest, I've observed so many people be the face of Jesus to those through their presence to them, and that means so much to people. It also teaches others how to treat others, as they are inspired to help their loved ones, or one day give the love they saw given to others in the family.

Mary teaches us through her life about what it means to reach out to others. As she was assumed body and soul into heaven, this beautiful feast reminds us that each of us are precious to God, and are a body and a soul. Let us never forget that and incorporate that kind of thinking into all we do, giving the love of God to the world as our Blessed Mother did, living out that commandment Jesus gives us to love one another as He has loved us.

God bless,

Fr. Paul