

Homily090416

SHE LOVED EACH POOR PERSON THE WAY SHE LOVED CHRIST

Saint John Neumann died in 1860. Saint Katharine Drexel died in 1959. I was 12 and I have been to the Motherhouse but never met her. I received communion from Saint John Paul II in 1979 here at the Cathedral. I met Father Bill Atkinson on a number of occasions throughout the years of my priesthood. He was an Augustinian priest quadriplegic who taught at Msgr. Bonner High School in Darby and whose cause for canonization has been accepted by the Congregation for Saints. He died in 2006. I met Mother Teresa of Calcutta in the briefest of encounters in 1976 at the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia at the Ecumenical Celebration and Foot Washing Ceremony. They are the Hall of Fame saints I have known or known of besides the many day in, day out saints I have encountered over my 43 years as a priest.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta is now Saint Teresa of Calcutta. A true saint for our times. I don't remember when she first entered into my consciousness. It might have been at the Eucharistic Congress. I remember being impressed by this little nun whose smile lit up the room and whose eyes radiated light. You could tell. Not everyone presents as Mother Teresa did. She knew who she was. She knew what she was about. She knew the Lord and she was not afraid. She spoke the truth quietly but with a conviction and firmness that was unmistakable. I remember thinking to myself, "Jesus probably spoke like that." I was definitely impressed. Similar to the way I was impressed when I was blessed to eat lunch at the Seminary with Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen whose cause for canonization has also been introduced in Rome. There was something about the eyes.

I have been told that I have an expressive face, not to say a funny face or to say I am funny looking, but an expressive face. One story that Mother Teresa told was how she had to train her sisters when they would go out onto the streets of Calcutta for the first time and bring in the dying poor. She tried to prepare them for what they were going to encounter because it was not going to be pretty. She told them that they would be seeing people at their absolute worst. She told them that they would have to learn to expect some of this if they were really going to help people. But then she said: "If you allow the horror you see to be reflected in your face, or if you allow your revulsion to show itself in the look on your face then the dying person will see your face and realize that they have caused such a look. In an instant they will know that their situation has caused that look and that will only reinforce their unloveableness." Mother Teresa said that the Sisters had to approach the dying poor as if they were approaching the broken body of Jesus on his way to Calvary or as He was taken down from the cross. Our faces send messages, she told her Sisters. With effort we can train our faces to send only the best messages. We can learn how to look with love.

When Sister Teresa, as a still young nun had her moment with Our Lord and she heard him speak to her, He said: "I am sending you into the dark holes of the poor—to be my light." And that is what she signed on for and that is exactly what she did all the rest of her life. It really wasn't until after her death in 1997 when her personal diaries were released and her correspondence published that the world began to realize that Mother Teresa although light for countless others was herself a person who experienced great darkness. Depression. Aridity or spiritual dryness. She struggled with these realities until with good spiritual help she was able to see what was going on inside her. Why, she wondered, with her new extraordinary demands of caring for the dying poor, would God also subject her to such difficult inner and personal darkness? It was agony, in her own words. What she came to realize was that Our Lord saw her great self-emptying love and loved her so much that He wanted to allow her to experience what he rarely

allows other humans to experience—some of his own dark night of the soul from Gethsemane and Calvary. The silence of the Father; the abandonment of his disciples and friends in his final hours.

Teresa thought that her agony was a rejection from God as Jesus himself cries out from the cross. She felt that she had somehow failed her Lord or let Him down. She had this personal agony that was never satisfied. What she learned was that her sharing in his abandonment was one of his greatest gifts. Something truly priceless, not in the realm of human life, but in the realm of kingdom life. Something God almost never does because its weight would crush most souls except those filled with exceptional love.

My friends, God's ways are not our ways but they are God's ways. The author of the Book of Wisdom raises a very ancient but very modern question: What kind of counsel or advice does God give? Well, as it turns out, it all depends. And who can figure out what God is about? Turns out that we can, sometimes, but we have to pay close attention and we have to be making an effort to live the way of Jesus. And what is that? Listen again to the gospel: "unless a person hates his spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends and his own life they can't even come to Jesus." What? Hate? Hate all the people that make a difference in my life? What? It's called Hyperbole, folks. Exaggeration to make a point. Overstatement that is not meant to be taken literally.

What is Jesus' point? In effect he is saying to us: "Do the math. Make the calculation. I am the pearl of great price. I am the buried treasure. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. I am the Word made flesh. I am the Son of the Living God. I am the Resurrection and the Life. The Father and I are One. Who sees me sees the Father." All your relationships are to be lived in and through your relationship with me. Period. All you do in life and in your work and in your family is to be accomplished in and through me. Period. Is that surprising? Shocking? Impossible? Will any of us walk away because of what Jesus says here? Teresa of Calcutta got it. She chose to throw herself into what Christ was offering. She reigns with him now in the kingdom even though she is also doing good still on earth, witness the two miraculous cures attributed to her intercession which establish her sanctity.

Her motto was pretty simple. All for Jesus. Thank you Jesus. Mother Teresa was once asked about becoming a saint and she responded this way. "If I ever become a saint, I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth." We all know someone in the thrall of darkness. Let us pray for and reach out to them. May our faces shone and not reflect condemnation. May we dare to believe in the grace God continues to lavish upon our earth.