

About a year ago, Mother Teresa, the Catholic nun who devoted her life to caring for those who were poor and sick in India, was canonized as a saint by Pope Francis. In the service, Pope Francis said "Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine mercy... She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity. She made her voice heard before the powers of this world, so that they might recognize their guilt for the crime of poverty they created." He urged Christians, "May she be your model of holiness."<sup>1</sup>

It was not surprising the Mother Teresa was formally recognized as a saint or that the path to sainthood was expedited for her. Everyone saw her as such in her life and expected her to be recognized as such in death. However, about ten years ago, and about ten years after her death, Mother Teresa showed up in the headlines in the most unexpected of ways. It was not about a Peace Prize or the force of her faith. It was instead about depths of her doubt. A book of letters written by Mother Teresa to her confessors and superiors was about to be published, and it revealed, for the first time, how deeply tormented she was about her faith. Headlines read, "A Saint's Dark Night," "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," and "Mother Teresa's Doubt."

Excerpts from those letters revealed that her suffering wasn't just occasional, but something that plagued her for significant periods – perhaps much – of her life after she moved to Calcutta. In one letter, she wrote, "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss of God not wanting me — of God not being God — of God not existing." In another, she wrote, "Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness... When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."<sup>2</sup>

Mother Teresa's letters document the intensity of her experience of "the dark night" of the soul – a phrase coined by St. John of the cross in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Dark Night of the Soul is a stage in the spiritual life that is akin to wandering in the desert. It is the stage when spiritual hunger and thirst are met not with spiritual food and drink, but coarse sand and dry hot air.

It's hard to imagine how in the world she kept doing what she did – day in and day out – tending to those the world had abandoned while she herself felt utterly abandoned by the One who had called her to that work in the first place. She surrendered her entire life to care for the poor, the sick and the dying in Calcutta, and instead of feeling strengthened and assured by God,

she felt abandoned and alone. So profound was the absence of God to her that she couldn’t even see the success of her ministry as evidence of God’s presence. But despite all this, she persisted. In the most difficult and desolate ministries that one could possibly engage in, she persisted, and in her persistence her doubt revealed not a lack of faith but, as the compiler of her letters calls it, a a spiritually heroic act.

As I reflected on the story of the Golden Calf that we heard read today, I found myself wondering if what the Israelites had suffered in the desert while Moses was on the mountain communing with God was something akin to a “dark night of the soul.” It is true that God had just delivered them from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Where there was no food, God provided manna and quail. Where there was no water, God provided water from a rock. To assure them of God’s presence a cloud led them by day and followed them by night. How could they question God’s presence with them?

But while all that is true, it is also true that they had been wandering for months in a dry and barren land with no end yet in sight. Their leader, Moses, had left them to go be with God on the mountain top and was gone for 40 days. When someone is gone for an unexpectedly long time in as foreboding a place as a desert, it is reasonable to imagine the worst – that Moses wasn’t coming back. And if Moses, the mediator of God’s redemption was gone, perhaps God was too. It seems reasonable enough to me – in these circumstances – that some of them just might have been experiencing a “dark night of the soul” – when the eyes of faith just can’t seem to come up with the divine silhouette on the horizon. Perhaps it was out of a sense of abandonment, fear and desperation that they turned to Aaron to replace the unseen God for something they could see and touch – for something they could be certain wasn’t going anywhere? If the golden calf couldn’t save them, at least it wouldn’t leave them.

You know, I get the impulse of the Israelites. Most of us have experienced at some point or another deep fissures in our faith. In times of uncertainty, fear, loss, rejection, chaos—in times when we just can’t seem to conjure the divine silhouette on the horizon – in times maybe a lot like the days we’re in now – how many of us don’t want something tangible, something certain, something solid that in some way shape or form, however deceptively says, “It’s all going to be ok,” or at least has the ability to distract us from all that keeps us up at night.

We have lived – and continue to live – in a culture constructed of golden calves, constructed so that many of us much of the time can distract ourselves, soothe ourselves, fool

ourselves, deceive ourselves. The problem is that what soothes also feeds and we are left no less hungry, no less thirsty, no less desperate, alone, or lost.

The truth is we can continue to live with our golden calves, all those useless, dead and impotent idols to soothe the pain and fear that plagues us or we we can persist, as Mother Teresa persisted, with fortitude in the face of her desert experience. Instead of giving into the impulse of easy, empty answers, Mother Teresa built a ministry – a lively expression of faith and hope in the midst of her own doubt and despair. Instead of abandoning the God she sometimes felt had abandoned her, she chose to see that same God in the face of every person she met, loved, and tended. Instead of turning inward, succumbing to the temptation to mask her suffering with careless indulgences, she turned outward choosing to bear the very presence she sometimes doubted existed in the first place. She chose to render what felt like absense to her present. She chose to make God manifest.

Who are we and to whom and to what do we turn when we’re wandering through the desert feeling alone and unprotected? The truth is we can live some semblance of a life with all those golden calves – at least for a time – and somehow I trust that God chooses to save us anyway. But at what cost? At what cost to ourselves? And at what cost to others?

God does not call us to live out the impulses of our deepest fears. Call calls us out of bondage into freedom. God calls us to eat and never be hungry, to drink and be satisfied. God calls us to live, to love, to belong. God calls us to render what might seem absent present. To make God manifest even and maybe especially in the desert and through the dark night. God calls us to live, to love, and to belong.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/04/europe/mother-teresa-canonization/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> DAVID VAN BIEMA. “Mother Teresa’s Crisis of Faith.” *Time Magazine*. Thursday, Aug. 23, 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html>