

“Bidding Farewell: Mother Teresa’s Witness of Suffering as the Path to Finding Heaven”

Homily for the Mass in Celebration of the Canonization of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year “C”

September 4, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Introduction

There could be no more appropriate time to set for the canonization of Mother Teresa of Calcutta than during this Jubilee Year of Mercy. We are grateful to Pope Francis for both proclaiming this year a special Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy and for raising Mother Teresa to the honors of the altar at this time. As he says in his opening sentence in the decree by which he proclaims this a Year of Mercy, “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.”

The legacy of charity left to us by Mother Teresa, and continued through her daughters, makes this personalized face of mercy visible to us all. It is a great joy for me to welcome our Missionaries of Charity in our Archdiocese here to our Cathedral, and to celebrate with you this happy occasion. Mother must be very happy with her view from heaven upon the assembly gathered here in our Cathedral today, seeing those whom she loved so much and served so well in so many different ways together worshipping Jesus Christ, whom she loved above all things.

The Transformation of Human Relationships

The power of personal encounter was a reality that Mother Teresa understood very well. It is a very biblically-based insight, and one that St. Paul understood as well, as indicated in our second reading. From our perspective today, it may seem troubling that St. Paul sends the runaway slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon rather than set him free, and all the more so that he does not take advantage of the opportunity to condemn the institution of slavery.

Of course, a simple decree of condemnation at the time would have fallen on deaf ears, and perhaps even seem bizarre, given how deeply woven the institution of slavery was into the fabric of the society of the time and accepted as morally legitimate by even the most enlightened thinkers. It would, indeed, take many centuries for Christians to work the effect of eradicating slavery from their land. St. Paul, instead, focuses on the power of Jesus Christ to transform relationships. Now Philemon has Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. Who, legally, is a slave and who is free is now irrelevant, as their brotherhood in Christ transcends such questions of legal status. How much we today can learn from this lesson! The transformation of the human heart, of human relationships, is the necessary groundwork to begin the work of transforming a society.

Sadly, slavery is still with us, in fact even on the rise in the literal form of human trafficking, as well as in its many other forms figuratively speaking, such as addictions of all kinds. Mother Teresa was well aware of all of these types of enslavement and knew that the power of Jesus to transform people’s relationships is the only way to break out of it. She always looked for that encounter with Jesus in the one who suffers; she

taught us repeatedly that we must look for Jesus in the many disguises that he wears, the disguises of the poor, in the many different forms that poverty takes, both material and spiritual. As Pope Francis said in his homily at the Canonization Mass at St. Peter's Basilica earlier today, "it takes a certain daring and courage to recognize the divine Master in the poorest of the poor and to give oneself in their service," and those who do so do it "because they have discovered true love." They have discovered the love of the Lord Jesus Christ who "has come to meet [us] and has stooped down to [our] level in [our] hour of need," and so they bow before the Lord who wears the many disguises of the poor: "bending low before those who have lost faith or who live as though God did not exist, before young people without values or ideals, before families in crisis, before the ill and the imprisoned, before refugees and immigrants, before the weak and defenseless in body and spirit, before abandoned children, before the elderly who are on their own."

Yes, when the Lord Jesus is recognized in the poorest of the poor, the encounter brings about a personal transformation. Of countless examples in Mother Teresa's own life is one which she shared right here in this Cathedral during her visit to our Archdiocese in 1982:

I'll never forget one day I was walking down the street in London and I saw a man looking so terribly lonely, sitting there all alone. So I walked up to him and I took his hand. And I shook his hand and my hand is always very warm. And he said, 'Oh, after so long, it's the first time I feel the warmth of a human hand.' And then his face brightened up. He was a different being. A small action. The warmth of a human hand. He felt that there was somebody who really wanted him, somebody who really cared. This I never realized before, that such a small action could bring so much love.

The Cost of Discipleship

This transformation, though, comes at a cost, a personal cost that she knew well. There is first of all the death to the ego: for most of her life Mother carried out her heroic acts of charity with little or no recognition. Of course, we can all be sure that this was of no consequence to her; it certainly wasn't for recognition that she lived her life the way that she did! But we also learned from her personal writings after her death about the very deep sense of loneliness and abandonment by God that she felt after having had experienced a period of deep communion with the person of Jesus Christ, even to the point of enjoying mystical experiences. Ironically, the sense of absence of God started shortly after she began her work in the slums of Calcutta, and this period of "darkness," as she described it, would continue for the rest of her life. Her darkness was the price she paid to be a light to the world.

Yes, the cost is very personal, as our Lord teaches quite clearly in the Gospel for today's Mass: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." *His own cross*, not anyone else's; the cross God has uniquely prepared for each one, so that each one may arrive at eternal salvation. This cost, then, is that of self-renunciation. But the payoff is greater, for it is the price of heaven.

Yes, this is how a tower to heaven is built. Our Lord also speaks of building a tower in today's Gospel: "Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion?" To construct an earthly tower one has to have a lot of money, that is, one must gather earthly goods; but to construct a heavenly tower, one must *give away* earthly goods. This is how we reach the heights of heaven.

Perhaps Jesus had in mind here the teaching of rabbinic wisdom, which tells the story of a wealthy man who, in accordance with his stated will, was buried with all of his money when he died. As the story goes, he thought this would gain security for him in the afterlife, only to be told when he arrived at the gates of heaven: "No, nothing of what you brought with you has any currency here. Here we don't look for money, we look only for receipts." I think it is safe to say that Mother Teresa arrived at the gates of heaven with a freight train load of receipts!

Bidding Farewell

Each act of self-renunciation yields a receipt. This is the cross, each one's personal, custom-fitted cross, which Jesus speaks about here. Notice how later in this Gospel passage he repeats the teaching on who cannot be his disciple, making more explicit what he said before: first, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me *cannot be my disciple*"; then, "anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions *cannot be my disciple*."

To renounce all possessions: the word "renounce" that is used here literally means, "bid farewell to"; and "possessions" refers to more than material things – it is whatever attachments we have to the passing things of this life. Yes, we will sooner or later have to bid farewell to them, there is no way around that. But by bidding farewell to them voluntarily, now, we make ourselves ready for heaven. And, we expand our so-called "comfort zone," stepping outside of the people, places and circumstances we find so agreeable. Mother, indeed, had a very wide comfort zone. In fact, it was a comfort zone so wide that it even included heaven – at least a glimpse of it – here on earth. Are any of us really comfortable with heaven? The vision of heaven may surprise us, even shock us. And, perhaps, even worry us. It worries me when I think about the way she described it when she spoke here during her visit to us:

One day one of our sisters picked up a man from the street. He was very near death. When she picked him up the skin on his back came off of his body and he was covered with worms. He died after a while but with the most wonderful smile on his face. I asked the Sister what she felt when she was washing that man. She said, 'the presence of Christ.'

Not the vision of heaven we would expect! Or would describe if given the choice! This is why she could call suffering a gift from God. "It is not a punishment," she said. "It purifies us. Especially today, when the world is suffering so much, the passion of Christ is present." She lived this deeply, and so she could teach us about it. She persevered through her own tremendous suffering, and even darkness, because she kept her vision fixed on Jesus: her prayer, her love of the Eucharist, her insistence on

purity and respect for life – *all* life, no matter how small, no matter how unwanted, no matter how unseen. Suffering is purifying, it helps us to bid farewell to all that holds us back from expanding our comfort zone to include heaven. I still remember the talk she gave at my seminary when I was doing my theology studies; it was the only time I had an in-person contact with her. Now, here she had done so much to help the poor, to alleviate suffering; she had built a global network of charity and mercy. And what did she tell us? She exhorted us – when, God willing, we would be become priests – to always take care to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with clean hands and a pure heart. “Clean hands and a pure heart”: that sort of purity, integrity and self-offering is the truest expression of love for the poor, for it imitates the one who became poor to make us rich in his love, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Thirty-four years ago there were no Missionaries of Charity carrying out their works of mercy in San Francisco, and Mother didn't promise any, but she did say “maybe”: “maybe one day we will be able to give you sisters – to find the poor and to serve the poor.” How far we've come since then! On behalf of the entire Archdiocese of San Francisco I wish to thank you, our dear Missionaries of Charity, for your presence, prayer and work for the poor among us – even if words cannot come close to expressing the gratitude we feel for the abundant blessings God has lavished upon our Archdiocese through your witness and charism. Perhaps the one gesture of gratitude we can promise you is an assurance of our prayers, and especially that the Lord will send you many more fervent and holy vocations to carry on the legacy you have started here. And so I also speak a word of challenge to the young people here today and throughout our Archdiocese: listen to the Lord's call in your life with an open mind and open heart, be ready to respond to His call to leave all and follow Him in this extraordinary vocation!

I could do no better than to conclude with the words Mother Teresa herself spoke in this Cathedral on that fateful visit of June 4, 1982, words which we still need to hear and take to heart and put into action: “Let us make a resolution in this this beautiful City of St. Francis ... to bring love where there is disturbance, where there is hunger, where there is darkness. Let us always pray and love.” Yes, let us do so. Nothing would make Mother happier. And nothing will bring us closer to heaven.