

PRAYER IN THE MIDST OF PAIN

by Eugene Wehner, OCD

My original title for this talk was "Prayer in the Midst of Suffering." But, after much prayer and study in the process of preparation, I made a little adjustment. Why? Because pain does not necessarily entail suffering. Pain is simply the absence of pleasure. Whether we suffer with our pain or not depends on how we deal with our painful moments.

To understand the original meaning of the word "suffering," we need to go to Latin from which it was derived. It comes from "suf" + "fer," meaning "to bear up." A word associated with it is "suffuse," meaning "to be overspread." If we are overspread or overcome physically, spiritually, psychologically or emotionally by our painful experiences, we are suffering.

For example, I have some arthritis. It is always present but, if I am not letting it preoccupy my mind or control my emotions, I will usually not even notice it. But, if I allowed it to suffuse my entire being, I would have no peace. I would be suffering.

A man once cheerfully greeted a friend, "How are you doing?" The other replied, "Fairly well under the circumstances." His friend responded, "Under the circumstances! What are you doing there?" If we are not taken under by our experiences, no matter how painful, we are not suffering in the true sense of the word.

Now let us consider the fact that, although Jesus sadly revealed at his Last Supper that Judas Iscariot was about to betray him, he did not flee Jerusalem, but went immediately to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray in the midst of the psychological and emotional pain he was enduring. Why did he agonize there? Because in his humanity he was still considering the possibility that his heavenly Father would allow him to save humanity without going through all the physical pain that his passion would require.

Thus he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." (Mt. 26:39) At that moment, it was a cup of suffering. Why? Because, as he told Peter, James and John, his soul was "sorrowful unto death." (Mt. 26:38) St. Luke writes: "His sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground." (Lk. 22:44) But, when he was able to fully accept his Father's plan for him, he was no longer distressed but able to courageously face his betrayer. When Peter cut off the right ear of the servant of the high priest with a sword, Jesus made it clear that he was not fighting his fate. He responded: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Mt. 26:52)

Jesus did not resist the physical, psychological and emotional pain that he was to soon endure by fleeing it or fighting it. He accepted it wholeheartedly out of love for his Father and us. His example of embracing the pain he experienced because of the evil of all of us should guide us to accept whatever affliction we endure. When pondering our pain, we can ask ourselves the question Jesus asked himself: "Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" (Jn. 18:11)

We followers of the Carmelite reform of St. Teresa of Jesus and her compatriot St. John of the Cross familiarly refer to painful experiences as "dark nights." St. John of the Cross uses this term in regard to a step (actually a two-step) on the way to mystical marriage. But what is this experience for most of us? Not the dark nights of Holy Mother and Holy Father preceding spiritual betrothal with the Lord. Our dark nights are usually on the physical, psychological and emotional level. If spiritual, they are of the "night of sense" rather than of the "night of the spirit," using the terminology of St. John of the Cross. Thomas Merton describes the "night of sense" as that "which brings one to the maturity of the spiritual life" and the "night of the spirit" as that "which brings one to the perfection of the mystical life." (page 184 of *A Course in Christian Mysticism*)

What is happening when we enter the "night of sense" as we pray in the midst of pain? We detach ourselves from any expected result. We surrender ourselves to whatever answer God gives to our prayer. If we don't do this, we may receive this kind of word from the Lord, as found on Day 3 of the Surrender Novena of Fr. Dolindo Ruotolo: "In pain you pray for Me to act, but that I act in the way you want. You do not turn to Me; instead, you want Me to adapt to your ideas. You are not sick people who ask the doctor to cure you, but rather sick people who tell the doctor how to.... I will intervene with all My omnipotence, and I will resolve the most difficult situations."

What is happening when we accept God's admonition through Fr. Ruotolo is that we let our feelings give way to the wisdom and knowledge received when God's grace is accessed through faith, whatever little we may have at the moment. As Jesus told the father of a possessed child, "Everything is possible to one who has faith." (Mark 9:23) This is true even if ours is only mustard-seed faith. When we place absolute faith in God, we will receive what the Lord knows is the best for us, even if we don't receive that for which we are praying.

God may answer our appeals for mercy in one of three ways: "Yes, no, or wait." If the answer really is "No," keep in mind the words of St. Augustine: "When God does not give us what we wish, it is in order to give us what we would love more, if we knew all things." (*Confessions*, V, VIII) But usually, when the result of our intercessory prayer is that our desire is not immediately granted, God's silent reply is more like "Wait and see what I will do in the long run." Praying during such a circumstances is what Scripture calls "waiting upon the Lord." But we are so impatient that we don't want to wait a long time, especially since in our age so much is desired to be instant, whether it is a meal or entertainment.

During this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, we want it to be over with today! If we have lost loved ones and friends to it, we may even feel angry with God, depressed, and therefore not having the urge to pray. But that we exert the effort to pray in circumstances like these is essential for us to deal with the losses we have experienced. This prayerful waiting is not purely passive, like waiting in a doctor's office, but eminently active. It is waiting on the Lord with the total surrender of one's will.

When we look back on our experience, we discover that when we had to wait patiently for our situation to change for the better, all worked out for the best. St. Paul speaks of a God "whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably

more than we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20) and writes: "We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28) Notice that he says that we "know" this. We know it through faith and experience.

When I was a diocesan priest in Western North Dakota in my first pastorate at a small parish with two missions, which was forty-seven miles from the nearest priest, I was experiencing the pain of loneliness and sexual temptation. I was rescued from that isolation by joining a support group of priests. I slowly began to learn that I needed community life.

Providentially my bishop revealed that he was considering the option of team ministry in the Diocese, where two priests would share the same rectory. At that time the priest nearest to me and I were traveling together to our by-monthly support group. I asked him during one trip, "If the bishop opens up team ministry in our area, should we go for it?" He said "Yes" and so it happened.

This was a much better situation than when we were each living alone. But, after a year of praying and planning together, some people of the parish that we left without a resident priest were circulating a rumor that we were planning to sell or rent out their rectory, which had not even occurred to us. To satisfy them, I went to live in their rectory.

However the team ministry continued and a group of people from that parish still had a plan to break up the team. They wrote the bishop to express their dissatisfaction with me, the weakest link in the team ministry. I set up a grievance committee for the purpose of reconciliation by which complaints could be anonymously addressed. But the group never used it because they were not interested in reconciliation. Discerning that this was a problem that could not be solved as long as I was there, after much prayer, I asked my bishop to reassign me at his earliest convenience.

After accepting his assigning of me to another parish for five months and then participating in a program to improve my relational skills, I was back to being an associate pastor again. One Saturday, while putting bulletins into the racks for Sunday, I noticed that the pastor had placed a brochure there about a contemplative religious order. I perused it and saw that, in such an Order, I would have community life, more time for prayer, and a varied ministry. However, their cutoff point for entry was thirty-five years of age and I was already forty-one. But it led me to read a vocation book concerning religious orders. I noted that there were many such orders centered in Milwaukee, so I asked my bishop for a leave of absence so that I could investigate the possibility of joining one of them. He agreed.

So I packed up all my belongings and traveled from Bismarck, North Dakota to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, having arranged to spend some days at one Order while I searched for a job. I considered joining the Order of Carmelites and met with the Province vocation director. On Good Friday, he called me to tell me that their vocation team had decided to not accept priests wishing to transfer from diocesan life or another Order. Rather than being dejected, I said to myself, "It's Good Friday, there has to be a resurrection coming out of this!" I then called a seminary classmate of mine who became a solemnly professed Discalced

Carmelites after he had been a diocesan priest for nine years. I asked him, "Are the Discalced Carmelites still accepting diocesan priests for formation?" He said, "Yes." I met with the nearby Discalced Carmelite vocation director and the rest is more history that I care to bore you with. I have found, after many years of waiting, praying, and actively searching, a deeply fulfilling life as a Discalced Carmelite priest with all the benefits I could not have had as a diocesan priest.

I share this because, when I was going through my crisis and ensuing reactive depression, I could in no way foresee the future answer to my longings. I did not know what the future held, but I did know Who held the future. My past faith-filled life led me to place childlike trust in an unconditionally loving and merciful God. That is *all* we need to get through the tough times in our lives. John Welch, O.Carm. writes in his book *The Carmelite Way*: "What on the surface seems to be an adult crisis, at depth may be a challenge to one's faith.... In the dark we learn to lay down our own arms, put on the armor of faith, and return to battle with renewed strength." (pages 46 and 152)

We would not have so many "adult crises" if we had the dependence on God that we had upon our parents during our childhood. Barbara Dent writes in her book *My Only Friend is Darkness*: "Children are left to wait in all kinds of places by their parents, and since they have neither the strength nor knowledge nor resourcefulness to shift, they just have to wait till they're rescued." (page 32) When an adult practices such childlike dependence on the Lord, Dent states: "He develops a facility in abandoning himself in trust to this state that is God's will for him, even of willing it because God will's it. Strange, but this brings him a queer, passionless joy. He is happy without feeling happiness. He is at peace without experiencing peacefulness.... When at last we have stopped thrusting obstructions in the way of (God's) providence, he is able to direct it in a flood upon us so that we are swept along by it, unprotesting, to what he knows is our destiny." (pages 33 and 123)

Hear now St. Paul's marvelous message to us in his letter to the Romans 5:1-5:

Since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

Our human pain is never without meaning or divine purpose. Such is the conclusion of St. John Paul II in his apostolic letter of February 11, 1984 - *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. There he writes that there is much suffering in the world and each of us must endure our share of it. No one is exempted. Why do we suffer? St. John Paul II is very clear in answering this

question: "Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers because of a good in which he does not share, from which in a certain sense he is cut off or of which he has deprived himself. He particularly suffers when he 'ought' - in the normal order of things - to have a share in this good and does not have it." (page 6)

We can lack what is good because of our own sinfulness or alienation from God or because others have inflicted evil upon us. If we are responsible for our own suffering, we are called to repentance by the suffering itself. John Paul II asserts that the purpose of repentance is to "overcome evil" and "to strengthen goodness both in man himself and in his relationships with others and especially with God." (page 11)

If the words or actions of others have resulted in our pain, we are called by it to strive to be reconciled with them and to at least pray, if not work, for justice to be done. But justice-seeking is not to be done out of revenge or retaliation but because of our sharing in the merciful love of God shown us in the redeeming death of Jesus Christ. As Jesus has loved us, so we are to love one another. As we unite our pain with that of Jesus in his passion, ours also becomes redemptive. We can offer our sharing in his pain for many intentions, but especially for the conversion of sinners and the release of the souls in purgatory.

We should also offer our pain for those who do not believe in Christ's redeeming death so that they come to believe and be saved for eternal life. This was one of the main prayers of St. Therese of Lisieux. She felt severe sorrow for people who were unable to take the step of faith in Jesus Christ. Thus she kept in touch with a priest who was a missionary to the Chinese and prayed fervently for the evangelized and their evangelizers. But her sorrow went a step further. She began to have a crisis faith in the midst of severe physical illness. She was tormented by the thought that she would never get to heaven. These are her words to her Prioress, Mother Marie de Gonzague:

Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who have no faith, and who, through the abuse of grace, lost this precious treasure, the source of the real and pure joys. He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment.... It seem to me that the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: "You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the *eternal* possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.".... While I do not have *the joy of faith*, I am trying to carry out its works at least.... I am happy not to enjoy this beautiful heaven on this earth so that He will open it for all eternity to poor unbelievers.... I ... (am)

happy to have (this trial), if through it I could prevent or make reparation for one single sin against *faith*. (pages 211, 213 and 214 of *The Story of a Soul*)

Through this trial, God gave Therese not only sympathy for unbelievers but also empathy for them.

What is the difference between sympathy and empathy? Sympathy is *sorrow for* another's pain while empathy is *feeling with* the one experiencing it. Edith Stein, who took the name St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and wrote a book entitled *The Problem of Empathy*, had empathized with others of the Jewish race who had gone to their deaths at the hands of the Nazis long before she also was exterminated. Her conversion to Catholicism and practice of contemplation as a Discalced Carmelite nun gave her a new understanding of suffering and death as the deep penetration of a soul into the passion of Christ and the interior of God. Edith wrote: "To attain this (penetration), it would be a comfort and joy to (a soul) to take upon itself all the trials and suffering of the world and it would agree to all that might aid it to this end, however difficult and painful it might be.... In suffering (the soul) finds its greatest delight and its highest gain, because it is a means to penetrate more deeply into the delights and depths of the wisdom of God." (as quoted on pages 25-26 of *The Sacrament of Suffering* by James Aylward Mohler)

Edith came to awareness of her immanent death when she and her sister Rosa were at Echt Carmel in Holland awaiting visas allowing them entry into the safety of neutral Switzerland. The visas never were issued, nevertheless an offer was made to have them escape the Carmel so that they would not be arrested after the Dutch bishops condemned the Jewish holocaust in Germany and the Nazis retaliated. Edith's response was: "Why should I be spared? Is it not right that I should gain no advantage from my baptism? If I cannot share the lot of my brothers and sisters, my life, in a certain sense, is destroyed." (as quoted by Lisa Lickona on page 252 of *The Magnificent Year of Mercy Companion* edited by Peter John Cameron) She is also quoted in "Edith Stein: The Life of a Philosopher and a Carmelite" as saying, "I knew it was (Jesus') cross that was now being placed upon the Jewish people: that most of them did not understand this, but that those who did would have to take it up willingly in the name of all. I would do that." (quoted in *Thoughtworthy* published by the Carmel of St. Joseph in Terre Haute, Indiana)

Thereby, on August 4, 1942, she and Rosa were arrested. As they were being led away, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was overheard to say to her sister: "Come, Rosa; we are going for our people." Mohler describes their experience leading to their deaths:

Taken to Westerbork, they were brutally beaten with rifle butts and given little food. Benedicta in her calm and peaceful manner washed and fed wandering children who had been left by their distraught parents.... Benedicta and Rosa were then taken to Brzezince near Auschwitz (8/9/42) where they were

ordered to undress in preparation for the gas chambers. This is the moment that Benedicta had prepared for all her life. Obediently she removed her shoes, stockings, veil, habit and underwear, placing them neatly in their proper piles. Now naked, Benedicta and Rosa hold hands as they walk confidently to meet their Beloved. (*The Sacrament of Suffering*, page 27)

In Teresa Benedicta's charity towards children on her journey to death, we see that she goes beyond empathy to compassion. Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer note in *The Mindful Self-compassion Workbook* the difference between empathy and compassion: "Empathy says, 'I *feel* you.' Compassion says, 'I *hold* you.' Compassion is a positive emotion, an energizing emotion." (page 139) In the very act of taking compassion on others, Benedicta was no longer being drained of energy, as happens when one empathizes with others' pain but can do nothing about it. Compassion is love in action. Love can be totally interior, but compassion is the exteriorization of love. It is the best way of freeing us for service and reducing suffering.

However energizing compassion may be, it too can drain us if the compassion is always moving away from us rather than equally towards us. For us not to become burnt out in service, we need to have some compassion on ourselves if others are not giving it to us. There is much good sense in the command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" in that we cannot love others *more* than we love ourselves. Kristin Neff writes in *Self-compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*: "Self-compassion is a way of emotionally recharging our batteries. Rather than becoming drained by helping others, self-compassion allows us to fill up our internal reserves, so that we have more to give those who need us." (page 193) For example, if the word "stupid" or "crazy" slips out of our mouths, we can counteract it by self-compassionately saying or at least thinking something like this: "That was just my forgetfulness or momentary confusion. I am not really stupid or crazy. I am God's image and likeness. I will not insult God by saying that his image is stupidity or craziness." We need to be stingy with self-criticism and generous with praise of ourselves as children of God. Then we will also become more compassionate with others also made in the image and likeness of God.

Often, regardless of our generosity in compassion for others, many others will not extend a similar compassion towards us. So we need to give it to ourselves. Such was the case with Job. Of him, God boasted to Satan: "There is no one like him on the earth: a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil." (Job 1:8, 2:3) Yet God tried him by allowing him to be grievously afflicted by Satan. After losing all his children and livestock and acquiring sores all over his body, Job furtherly was mentally tortured by his wife, who told him to curse God and die, and by so-called friends. He did not deserve what he endured, yet those who were supposed to be his consolers actually sided against him. They assumed that he had to be a very serious sinner to receive such "punishment" from God. Despite this oppression, "Job said nothing sinful." (Job 2:10)

Job declared many times to his accusers that he was unduly suffering for his small offenses in life. Gustavo Gutierrez in his book *On Job* writes: "His friends' arguments, which are based on a particular view of justice, only intensify his consciousness of being innocent; as he listens to them, his conviction grows that he is an upright man.... Job's words are a criticism of every theology that lacks human compassion and contact with reality." (pages 24 and 30) Job empathizes with others who are unjustly treated, observing: "They gather their fodder in the field and they glean the vineyard for the wicked man. They lie all night naked, without clothing, and have no covering in the cold." (Job 24:6-7) Job was not among the oppressors of the poor. Speaking of his compassion for them and his struggle against their oppressors, he offers this defense to his accusers: "I was a father to the needy; the rights of the stranger I studied, and I broke the jaws of the wicked man; from his teeth I forced the prey." (Job 29:16-17)

At the end of the story, God commends Job, while he directs his accusers to offer sacrifices for their meanness and to have Job pray for them so that they could escape severe punishment. On the other hand, Job's prosperity is restored two-fold. He again sired seven sons and three daughters.

Job's story has a much happier ending than many who endure undeserved pains in this world. The following is an account by Stephanie Mann in the June 17, 2015 issue of *The Christian Review* describing the martyrdom of a Catholic priest while King James I was the supreme governor of the Church of England: "St. James Garnet, S.J. was hung, drawn, and quartered during the reign of James I.... He would not swear James' Oath of Allegiance denying the Pope's authority. On June 23, 1608, he proclaimed himself the happiest man alive before his execution." It is a wonder that he could say that because he knew that his sentence meant that he would be hung almost to the point of death and then drawn (that is, dragged by a horse) to a place where he was either chopped into four pieces or have his limbs tied to four horses that would pull him apart. Other martyrs during this era were emasculated and disemboweled while still alive. As with Job, fellow believers were the ones to torture St. James Garnet. But he had compassion on himself, having faith that upon his death he would be greeted by the inhabitants of heaven.

Probably none of us will be murdered for our race like St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross or for our faith like St. James Garnet. But there are other trials that we may endure that, if embraced, will add to our eternal reward, whether they be physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual. In the case of St. Therese of Lisieux, we have one who embraced them all. She died at the age of twenty-four from tuberculosis. Her community did all that they could to help her recover, but, at that time in history, tuberculosis could not be cured. Treatment was given to possibly relieve her pain, but nothing doctors did was effective and usually caused her more pain. St. Therese put her trust in God rather than in the marvels of medicine. She heeded the advice of St. Teresa of Jesus: "I am afraid that if we begin to put trust in human help, some of our divine help will fail us." Perhaps one Scripture that helped Therese during her affliction was Psalm 52:8: "I have put my trust in God's never failing mercy."

Her pain was so intense that she confessed: "If I had not faith, I would

have committed suicide without an instant's hesitation." (*Last Conversations*, page 196) On one of her last days, she said, "It's true that I wanted to suffer much for God's sake, and it's true that I still desire this." (*Last Conversations*, page 200) On the day of her death, she continued in the same vein: "I am not sorry for delivering myself up for Love." (*Last Conversations*, page 205)

It might seem odd that anyone would actually desire to experience pain, but St. Therese was merely following the teaching of St. John of the Cross, who declared: "(One) who does not seek the Cross of Christ seeks not the glory of Christ." Yes, we are called by these saints to seek the crosses that the Lord requires of us for the sake of our salvation and that of others. Jesus taught: "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me." (Mt. 10:38)

St. Paul also teaches that we should not refuse any cross that God allow us to experience but endure it courageously: "Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God." (2 Tim. 1:8) His counsel is not only given for our sake but also for the consolation of others: "The Father of compassion and God of all encouragement ... encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction." (2 Cor. 1:3-4) Furthermore, St. Peter counsels us that we should rejoice in our crosses: "Rejoice instead, in the measure that you share Christ's sufferings. When his glory is revealed, you will rejoice exultantly. Happy are you when you are insulted for the sake of Christ, for then God's Spirit in its glory has come to rest on you." (1 Pt. 4:13-14) From the teaching and experience of Jesus and all of his saints, it is clear that any pain we accept as part of God's plan is far more beneficial than when we are resisting it, not only for ourselves but also for others who are inspired by our fidelity in the midst of pain.

Acceptance of one's pain is best done in time of prayer. For some it comes while engaging in contemplative prayer or in the rare case of having a mystical experience. The last part of my presentation will be devoted to the contemplative aspect of prayer. St. Theresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross became one with God or "divinized" mainly through their acceptance of the pain experienced in their mystical dark nights. John Welch, O. Carm. describes what happens in this process of being "divinized.": "The whole personality has been brought into harmony with its center. It no longer wars against itself, or operates in a dysfunctional way. She is *integrated*. There is a self-possession which is so profound that it allows a giving of self, a *self-transcendence*.... In other words, this person loves with a *freedom of heart, a freedom of spirit*. She is free to be the creation God meant her to be and free to love the world as it truly is and for its good." (*The Carmelite Way*, page 168)

The last saint whose story I will share is that of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She, like Carmelite mystics, had a mystical life and dark nights, but is closer to our experience than traditional mystics. We usually do not think of her as a mystic, but her whole call to help the poor and sick of Calcutta was a mystical one. Her first call to religious life was to the Loreto Sisters, being assigned in 1929 to St. Mary's School in Calcutta to teach history and geography to girls of the upper class. A large slum was nearby, but for eighteen years as a

teacher, and then principal, she had never set foot in it, although she encouraged the students to do apostolic work there.

But, on August 16, 1946, mob violence between Muslims and Hindus resulted in the death of five thousand in one day. The St. Mary's compound was under siege and she had a hard time finding food for the 300 girls there. David Stott writes in *The Love that Made Mother Teresa*: "Less than one month later, on September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa was riding the train from Calcutta to Darjeeling, on her way to make her annual retreat, when she heard a voice, speaking in her heart, as she later described it. It was Jesus telling her to quit the convent to live and work with the poor." (page 56)

For four months she spoke to others about her call, but most did not encourage her or even thought she was hallucinating. Finally she wrote to the Archbishop of Calcutta, Ferdinand Perier, S.J. She told him about how Jesus continued to explain her mission to her: "I want Indian Missionary Sisters of Charity, who would be my fire of love amongst the very poor - the sick, the dying, the little street children.... The poor I want you to bring to me and the sisters that would offer their lives as victims of my love would bring these souls to me. You are, I know, the most incapable person, weak and sinful, but just because you are that, I want to use you for my glory! Wilt thou refuse?" (*The Love that Made Mother Teresa*, page 57) But the Archbishop did not fully trust that her call was genuine.

Then, on December 3, 1947, she wrote to the Archbishop about three visions she experienced. This is the last one:

A great crowd - they were covered in darkness yet I could see them. Our Lord on the Cross. Our Lady at a little distance from the Cross - and myself as a little child in front of her. Her left hand was on my left shoulder and her right hand was holding my right arm. We were both facing the Cross. Our Lord said, "I have asked you. They have asked you and she, my mother, has asked you. Will you refuse to do this for me, to take care of them, to bring them to me?" I answered, "You know, Jesus, I am ready to go at a moment's notice." (*The Love that Made Mother Teresa*, pages 58-59)

Finally, Archbishop Perier wrote to Pope Pius XII, who in August of 1948 gave his permission. With five rupees in her pocket, she left St. Mary's on August 17, 1948 - within a week of her thirty-eighth birthday. She took a brief course in basic medicine while living in a convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor. She began teaching the English alphabet to poor children under a plum tree in the center of the slum, visiting their families and bringing them food. By 1950, after former students joined her, the Church recognized her informal group as the Missionaries of Charity.

But in 1957 she confessed to her spiritual director that she was undergoing an extreme dark night in which she, like her patron Therese of Lisieux, felt abandoned by God. As St. Therese experienced the torment of those

who did not have faith, Mother Teresa empathized fully with the rejection that the poor felt and which Jesus felt in his Passion. According to David Stott, "In her dark night, Jesus was claiming Mother Teresa for his own, pledging himself to his spiritual bride, pruning away her self-love and pride, purifying her in heart, mind, and intention, stripping away all that would keep her from total union with him." (*The Love that Made Mother Teresa*, page 110)

She told her spiritual director shortly before her death: "*I have begun to love my darkness, for I believe now that it is a part, a very small part, of Jesus' darkness and pain on earth.*" (*The Love that Made Mother Teresa*, page 111) She died on September 5, 1997, almost precisely 100 years after the death of her patron, St. Therese of Lisieux.

Today consider that, just because you may have not borne a serious "dark night" experience yet, that you will escape that ordeal. If it happens, you will be the better off for it and so will those you might inspire by your embrace of it. Whatever you do, do not fight it or flee from it. It is there for your sanctification and that of many others. C. S. Lewis maintained: "Tragedy is God's megaphone to wake us up." (quoted by John Lennox in a Colson Foundation "Breakfront" interview by John Stonestreet) May Jesus continue to call us to conversion with whatever means necessary for us to acknowledge that he is in control of our lives, leading us into a deeper union with him in faith, hope and love.