

Dark nights: Mother Teresa's struggle

From the Editors in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

There are few greater icons of Christian faith in our time than Mother Teresa, whose work among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta epitomized the mission of the church and the power of Christian faith. With the publication of *Come Be My Light* (Doubleday) arrives new evidence that Mother Teresa had doubts about her faith and struggled with a sense of spiritual emptiness for some 45 years—almost the entire time that she directed the Missionaries of Charity, the order of Roman Catholic nuns she founded.

Come Be My Light presents letters Mother Teresa wrote to a series of spiritual advisers over the decades that describe her haunting sense of divine absence, interrupted by only occasional periods of consolation. While she restored the hope of countless others with her radiant joy in service, her own hope often lay in ruins. “In my heart there is no faith—no love—no trust—there is so much pain—the pain of longing, the pain of not being wanted. I want God with all the powers of my soul—and yet there between us—there is terrible separation.”

She frequently asked her confidants to destroy the letters in which she revealed her struggles. Many ignored her wishes. The letters have been assembled by Brian Kolodiejchuk, a priest in charge of advocating that Mother Teresa be made a saint. (She was beatified in 2003.)

Contrary to what some media reports have suggested, Mother Teresa’s experience of spiritual darkness does not diminish her evident holiness, and in some ways it enhances it, as Kolodiejchuk repeatedly stresses. Many of history’s greatest praying saints suffered similar periods of divine absence, though not normally for so long. News of Mother Teresa’s struggles is not so much disconcerting as consoling. For who among us has not also felt, at times, a hole where God should be?

Several years ago *Century* editor-at-large Carol Zaleski reflected on this dimension of Mother Teresa’s life. “One can better understand . . . why she insisted that

adoration of Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament should occupy the center of the Missionaries' daily work," Zaleski noted in *First Things*. For Roman Catholics, Christ is objectively present in the Eucharist and in the reserve sacrament. God's presence is not dependent on a believer's feeling or lack of feeling.

Though Mother Teresa longed for joy in her faith, she knew that her feelings were not the point. Perhaps in an age of prosperity preaching and happy-clappy worship, in which faith is so often equated with feeling, Mother Teresa's example again brings us the word we need.