

Growing in grace

Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles remind me of Martin Luther's.

by [David C. Steinmetz](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

The recent revelation that Mother Teresa of Calcutta suffered from long periods of spiritual desolation in which she felt utterly abandoned by God has—to say the least—met with a mixed response from the media. Skeptics like Christopher Hitchens took the revelation as further proof that Mother Teresa was an incorrigible fraud, a crypto-atheist who knew that there is no God but who lacked the common decency to admit it. Other critics, more favorably disposed to Mother Teresa, reacted with shocked disbelief at the news of her spiritual struggles, as though saints were never allowed a bad day and the life of faith, properly handled, were a life of unending bliss.

Not that bliss is entirely lacking from the quest for sanctity. Christian mystics over the centuries have reported ecstatic experiences marked by incredible joy, experiences that seem to have eluded Mother Teresa. Her period of spiritual desolation (what St. John of the Cross would have termed her “dark night of the soul”) seems by any measure unusually long and therefore untypical. But not every quest for sanctity is the same.

Still, what struck me most forcefully about Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles was the extent to which her experiences resembled similar struggles by Martin Luther with his *Anfechtungen* or “spiritual trials.” Take, for example, Mother Teresa's sense of having made no progress whatever in the life of holiness. Luther thought it was a fundamental principle of the spiritual life that saints and not sinners were the real authorities on sin. If any inquiring mind wants to know what makes sin sinful, it should ask St. Francis or St. Clare and not a roomful of hormonally charged late adolescents at a college frat party.

The reason for this is very simple. To understand what sin is, one has to oppose it. The more strenuously one opposes it, the more powerful and pervasive it seems.

One barely notices a current with which one is swimming. But one cannot fail to notice what is happening when one struggles to swim against an opposing tide.

Which means that the more one progresses in the spiritual life, the more one may develop a sense of making no progress at all. In fact the would-be saint is often making considerable progress. But “making progress” and “feeling that one is making progress” are two quite separate things.

In some ways the struggle for sanctity resembles the fairy tale about the princess and the pea. The storyteller assumes that royalty would be particularly sensitive to any foreign object left where it should not be, especially if it were left in one’s bed. A genuine princess would therefore notice a tiny object (like one very small pea) even if it were placed under her mattress. The princess in the fairy tale proves her royal lineage to skeptics when she notices an offending pea lodged not only under one mattress, but under a pile of mattresses heaped up to the ceiling.

The genuine saint displays the same sensitivity in the presence of the tiniest sin. The more saintly the saint, the more sensitive he or she is to the least infraction of God’s will. Saints see their own imperfections with a dazzling clarity. The unfortunate effect of this sensitivity is that real progress in the spiritual life may strike the saint as no progress, and a robust faith may feel like hypocrisy or unbelief. Each step forward may feel like a step back. But the motion of saints is in fact forward, however retrograde they may feel.

Luther borrowed from St. Bernard of Clairvaux the dictum that a Christian is always a beginner. Christians are always beginners because they have to stick to what they learned first. And the most elementary and basic of first lessons is that there is no way to grow in grace by trying to grow out of it. In other words, Christians are always beginners because there is no way to grow beyond Christ. In the end, sanctity is God’s gift to Christians and not any Christian’s gift to God.

Medieval spiritual advisers often summed up their advice to Christians experiencing the unsettling feeling of an inexplicable and almost unbearable absence of God with the words: “God does not deny his grace to those who do what is in them.”

The saying could, of course, mean several different things (some of which Luther regarded as positively toxic). But such advice in this pastoral context was meant to be a form of gentle encouragement. From time to time everyone endures a barren period in the life of faith. Prayers bounce off the ceiling unanswered. Hymns stick in

one's throat, and whatever delight one once felt in the contemplation or worship of God withers away.

In such circumstances Christians should “do what is in them”—that is, they should keep on keeping on. They should keep on with their prayers, their hymns of praise and their daily round of duties. Even though it seems like they are walking through an immense and limitless desert, with oases few and far between, they plod on, knowing that obedience is more important than emotional satisfaction and a right spirit than a merry heart.

To such people, “God does not deny grace.” They live in hope, however, that sooner or later the band will strike up a polka and the laughter and the dancing will start all over again. But if it does not—and it did not in Mother Teresa's case—the grace that was in the beginning will be at the end as well. Of that, one can be sure.

Undoubtedly, Mother Teresa would have preferred to walk a less desolate path through life, one marked by inner joy and not just by outer virtue. But as Luther confessed many times, he found more help in the contemplation of the imperfections and limitations of the saints than in a recitation of their heroic achievements. An all too human Mother Teresa was an impressive witness to a grace that brought her through spiritual trials that she had not anticipated and might have failed. She did not abandon the God who seemed to have abandoned her, as she very well might have done. By doubting vigorously but not surrendering to her doubts, she became a witness to a faith that did not fail and a hidden God who did not let her go. That is what sanctity is all about.