

## **IS THAT REALLY GOD'S VOICE I'M HEARING?**

### **Learning from Mother Teresa's experience**

To many people, Christian and non-Christian, Mother Teresa was the ultimate saint. She gave her life to caring for the poor, smiling serenely through it all, taking fame in her stride and never for a moment letting up on her work. To lesser mortals like myself, she seemed like a mini-version of Jesus himself.

It was a huge surprise for me, then, to see her familiar, wrinkled face on the front cover of Time magazine, September 3, 2007, with a statement beside her right cheek about her 50 year crisis of faith.

The story inside was headlined "Her Agony," which didn't sound good at all, either. But there it was, in her own words, in the book "Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light" by Brian Kolodiecuk, the clear evidence that all was not well behind that smile of hers.

The problem seems to have been this: she hears what she believes is Christ's voice on a train in 1946 telling her to "Come be my light" by serving the poor in the slums of Calcutta, but after she gets there and starts working, Jesus disappears. She doesn't feel the love and personal contact she felt from him before.

It really shook her. 7 years later she writes a letter about the terrible darkness within her "as if everything was dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started the work," and for the next 40 years or so, things didn't improve much, either. So, all that time the world was knocking at her door, thinking she was wonder woman in intimate touch with God and feeling his presence everywhere, she, meanwhile, was feeling abandoned by God. Her prayers were empty and she even admitted that saving souls held no attraction for her and Heaven meant nothing!

How could that be? Well, the article quotes people trying to explain this as something that happens to Christians, and isn't it wonderful that Mother Teresa kept on serving even when God was silent?

To an atheist, however, this is just further proof of how religion twists people into mental knots and turns them into robotic misfits who act as though they're spiritually together but inside their heads they're psychotic wrecks. And now they've got Mother Teresa, of all people, to hoist up the flagpole as evidence!

How on earth do I answer in her defence?

I can't, because I've been where Mother Teresa was at. I thought God had called me to some specific job too, which I must then work myself to the bone doing in order to feel God's favour and approval. After 30 years of slogging away at that life, God was as distant to me as he was to Mother Teresa, and religion became a ritual I came to loathe. But I carried on anyway, just like she did, day after day, smiling in public as if everything was wonderful while pouring out my pain in private year after year to my wife.

There's something sadly wrong about a religion like that, that drives people into carrying on their religious rituals no matter what doubts and emptiness they feel. It's sad because it sets people up for discouragement and disillusionment when, after working one's tail off for God, he doesn't answer as expected. It happened to Mother Teresa.

It didn't happen, however, to the apostle Paul. He experienced pressures as great as any Mother Teresa ever faced, so great in fact, that he thought he couldn't cope one second longer, but God never disappeared on him or left him in constant turmoil and terrible darkness like Mother Teresa experienced. Again and again Christ met his every

need and frustration with all the help necessary to see him through (2 Corinthians 4:8-10 and 12:9-10). God always came through for him (Philippians 4:13,19).

Sadly, that wasn't the God that Mother Teresa experienced.

One has to wonder, then, if it really was Christ's voice she heard on that train, especially when Christ explicitly told those who obeyed him that he'd never leave them unloved and abandoned (John 14:21). He told them he would come and dwell with them (verse 23) - a very different story to that told by Mother Teresa in her letters.

But she did at least write about her pain, and that, hopefully, will free other people up to talk about the pain religion has created in their lives, too. And to those who've been doing their all for God but God seems so distant, perhaps they too might ask, "Is that really God's voice I'm hearing?"