

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Tambi Brown Swiney

Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light – The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta”

Edited and with Commentary by
Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C.

Before you read . . .

“The General End of the Missionaries of Charity is to satiate the thirst of Jesus Christ on the cross for love and souls by the Sisters [through] absolute poverty, angelic chastity, cheerful obedience. The Particular End is to carry Christ into the homes and streets of the slums, [among] the sick, dying, the beggars, and the little street children” (p. 341).

As a 12-year-old girl growing up in Skopje, Macedonia, Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu sensed that God was calling her to serve the poor. Six years later, in the fall of 1928, she said goodbye to her family and set off for Ireland, where she joined the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Five months later, she set foot in Calcutta for the first time, the city that would become not only her mission field, but also her home for the rest of her life.

When she made her profession of perpetual vows at the age of 27, the young woman gained a new name – Mother Teresa. Five years later, she made a private vow to God not to refuse Him anything. On September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa was inspired to found the Missionaries of Charity while on a train ride to Darjeeling, and for the next half century she burned brightly as God’s light, as she served the poorest of the poor, inspiring countless others to do likewise.

For group reflection and discussion . . .

- Mother Teresa begged those who possessed her notes and correspondence to destroy them. Were people like Father Van Exum and Archbishop Périer wrong to have refused her repeated requests?
- In April 1942, Mother Teresa vowed to God that she would not refuse Him anything (p. 28). Would you be willing to make such a vow to God? Why or why not?
- Mother Teresa wrote, “Cheerfulness is a sign of a generous and mortified person who forgetting all things, even herself, tries to please her God in all she does for souls. Cheerfulness is often a cloak which hides a life of sacrifice, continual union with God, fervor and generosity” (p. 33). Mother Teresa’s smile masked deep, interior spiritual pain. Should we seek to display a similar cheerfulness, or is it spiritually inauthentic to wear a smile in the midst of suffering?
- Although Mother Teresa was eager to carry out God’s call to minister to the poorest of the poor, she encountered frustrating delays when she sought approval to found the Missionaries of Charity. When have you experienced a similar frustration – sensing God’s call to act yet finding the path blocked?
- After founding the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa invited people who would not have been able to serve the poor in a conventional way – like those who were sick, crippled, or paralyzed – to become “sick and suffering co-workers” who would offer prayers and suffering on behalf of the mission (pp. 146-7). What are the benefits of such an initiative? How could a similar plan be carried out in your community?

- Describing her prolonged experience of spiritual darkness, Mother Teresa wrote about feeling unwanted and forsaken, full of emptiness and darkness. At one point she confessed, “I have no faith” (p. 187). Do you find these words to be shocking? Can you identify with Mother Teresa’s experience of spiritual darkness?
- In a letter to Archbishop Périer, Mother Teresa wrote, “Pray for me – for within me everything is icy cold” (p. 163). Do you have someone in your life with whom you can reveal the true state of your soul? Why is it important to have such relationships?
- Over time, Mother Teresa came to view her spiritual darkness as a gift. “I have come to love the darkness,” she wrote to Father Neuner (p. 214). How is that possible?
- In a letter to Father Michael, Mother Teresa wrote, “I pray for you that you let Jesus use you without consulting you. Do the same for me” (p. 272). What do you think she meant?
- “Very often I feel like a little pencil in God’s Hands,” Mother Teresa declared in a speech in Rome in 1979. “He does the writing, He does the thinking, He does the movement, I have only to be the pencil” (p. 363). Do you think this is an apt description of a follower of Christ? Why or why not?

Relating to our mission . . .

- In “Hearing the Call,” CBF-endorsed chaplain Joanna Harris recalled how her home church, First Baptist Arlington, raised up leaders and supported those who felt called to ministry. How does your church nurture those who sense God’s call?
- Lindsay, one of CBF’s field personnel serving in Southeast Asia, observed, “I have a great passion for seeing the world’s weakest and most neglected set free to experience life in rewarding and liberating ways.” Does a person need to have unique qualities in order to serve among people living in extreme poverty?
- Eric and Julie Maas, CBF field personnel in Belize, discerned God’s call in completely different ways. Do you identify more with Eric’s or Julie’s experience? When have you heard and responded to God’s call?

Tambi Brown Swiney serves as a Leadership Development Specialist for Tennessee CBF. A native Tennessean, Tambi lives in Nashville with her husband, Paul, and their son, Chaney.

next month:

Reading Groups will engage Henri J. M. Nouwen’s classic, *The Wounded Healer*, to discover how caring for ourselves leads to the healing of others. This book will help readers connect with CBF’s model for providing care for field personnel.