

THE SPIRITUALITY OF BLESSED MARY THERESA OF JESUS GERHARDINGER

FOUNDRESS OF THE CONGREGATION OF

THE SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME

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**THE SPIRITUALITY OF
BLESSED MARY THERESA OF JESUS GERHARDINGER,
FOUNDRRESS OF THE CONGREGATION OF
THE SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME**

She stood.

A nun, a dynamic educator and innovator,

a woman of, yet apart from and ahead of her times;

a strong woman who, when faced with social and clerical opposition,

stood for the control and direction of her fledgling community,

for the betterment of the role and status of woman in society,

for the cries and needs of the poor;

a woman who dared to care for the uncared-for,

And so, she stood – the only stance for a woman of courage, conviction, and commitment.

(Fitzgerald)

Who is the woman described in this poem? What story is interwoven in these lines written by one of her sisters in today's times? What challenges did this woman contend with in her every day situations? What gave purpose and meaning to her life? What motivated the choices she made? How was she a woman of and yet apart from her times? How was she a woman ahead of her times? What was her stance?

I believe the answers to these questions are contained in her spirituality. For me, spirituality is a way of living out a personal relationship with God while confronting the challenges of every day life in a particular historical and cultural situation. Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, or Mother Theresa, as she is fondly called, reveals the spirituality of her daily living in the 5,337 letters and documents that were written between 1822 and 1879. Here her own words and example, from the age of 25 until she died at the age of 82, speak to us of her values, her struggles and pain, her strengths, her choices, her deepest beliefs and convictions, her prayer. By reflecting on her attitudes and actions in the letters that extend over 57 years of her journey, and by allowing ourselves to be touched by her words, the motivating energy of her life enkindles our own spirit and gives new meaning to our own life. I hope to demonstrate this by describing the main characteristics and themes of her spirituality found in her letters and to discover the life-giving aspects for today, both for our own life and for others who are touched by her story. My starting point is the phrases that she frequently used in her correspondence. They weave through her letters over the years and create a beautiful spiritual tapestry.



KEY PHRASES OF HER SPIRITUAL STANCE

THE WILL OF GOD

In his book, Moving in the Spirit, Richard Hauser writes that there are four equally valid goals in Christian spirituality. These traditionally “have focused on the responding to the Spirit, imitating Christ, doing God’s will and serving other.” (7) Each approach complements the other goals which must be an integral part of the particular approach a person chooses. The goals are “merely entry points for a personal internalization of the Christian gospel.” (Hauser: 7) Mother Theresa’s particular starting point was her deep authentic desire to do God’s will. This was her all-consuming passion in her choices and actions, her motivation in the way she lived out her call of discipleship to Jesus.

This desire is already evidenced in her retreat notes in 1823. “Conforming my will to the divine will, I will achieve a spiritual life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit ... The earnest wish to love God is the lighting of a fire; the doing of his holy will keeps the fire burning.” (Letter 2)

It is also contained in the words of her prayer written in 1824. “O my God and my all, I desire to do your Holy Will. The petition of your Son that your will be done on earth as in heaven should be fulfilled in me.” (Letter 3)

In 1834, as the superior of the new congregation established on October 24, 1833, she renews her prayer. “O Lord, your call is divine, your mercy without limit ...Grant me to know what I must renounce, what I must learn in order to fulfill your Will in a manner pleasing to you.” (Letter 29)

Mother Theresa’s longing for oneness with the will of God was combined with an active search for the revelation of God’s will in the particular situations and challenges of her life. She believed the will of God was expressed in the commandments, the rules of the Church, in observances of the Rule, in carrying out one’s daily vocational duties, in loving actions toward others, in answering the requests of leadership, in accepting trials and suffering, in the wisdom of others and in her own convictions.

When the people of Schwarzhofen requested sisters for their girls’ school in 1836, she writes to the Bishop of Ratisbon that the request, “coming as it does without any action on my part, with the foreknowledge and consent of your Excellency, convinces me that the matter is God’s will.”

(Letter 55)

The establishment of this first mission house was followed by years of expansion and growth, with the many young women asking to join the congregation as another sign of God's Will. The increase in applicants, the crowded living space, the need to train them in the fundamentals of teaching and religious life, all led to her searching for a suitable place to build a motherhouse. Her personal conviction of the best criteria for such a centre, combined with her long-range vision, sustained her in this search and upheld her against the criticism of others. To the Archbishop of Munich-Freising she writes in 1839, "if I should have placed obstacles in the way of securing a motherhouse by insisting, as I did and do, on what the structure must be, I assure you I have done so only in obedience and I must hold to that." (Letter 154)

Delays and obstacles over the years were also a part of the constant search for God's will. Regarding the request in 1855 to take over a children's home in Aschaffenburg, Mother Theresa writes, "since 1837 we have been asked repeatedly to take over this work, and we clearly recognize in it the will of God." (Letter 2047) But a closed door also revealed God's Will. In a search for a convent she writes to the pastor of Pondorf in 1867, "we really regret that the former assistant's house will not be ours. That would have been the perfect place for our little convent, but if it really isn't available, God's will be done." (Letter 4124)

Mother Theresa's relentless search for the will of God was often filled with painful suffering. The opposition she encountered from the hierarchy as she sought the approval of the Rule, her inability to go to Rome to speak for her congregation, the turmoil of her soul as she struggled between hearing the voice of God in both the external authority and in her own firm convictions about the vital components of their new Rule, were all integral aspects of God's Will for her. She expressed this so movingly in the letters she wrote in 1852 and 1853 to Doctor Schels, her advocate in Rome, "If God is not calling me to Rome I can't go there. As God wills! ... I must yield to the Archbishop; even Holy Mother Church requires this ... May God do with me as He pleases. I am ready for all if only His will guide ... Would our dear Lord let his work prosper so well, and then permit it to fall to pieces ... This I cannot believe." (Letter 1250)

God's will was not an instant process for Mother Theresa. Her unending search for God's will moved her to practice the art of dialogue. "Dialogue is a sacred place, a conversation between equals each willing to uphold absolute respect for the other and each willing to be modified." (Malone) As she responded to new requests for sisters, she always asked for practical details and an opportunity to express her views. To a layman in 1836 she wrote, "First, however, I wish the Reverend Lechner would send a detailed description of the locality, the school, the place and the children to be taught as well as the feelings of the parish toward sisters. It seems to me there should be mutual exchange of ideas to form a satisfactory contract." (Letter 81) She conveyed this same spirit of mutuality to Cardinal Diepenbrock of Breslau in 1851. "Truly it is necessary for us to work together if this foundation is to succeed." (Letter 1080) Her willingness to be modified is revealed in a letter written in 1874 to the pastor of Schweinheim who had requested the transfer of a sister. Mother Theresa said that she is sorry that she can't do this mid-year, but assured him of her willingness to help by sending an aspirant to ease the situation. At the same time, she put in a kind word for the sister. "I assure you that good Sister Bertranda did excellent work in Steisslingen, so the disorder cannot be her fault completely. May the order be restored through your influence on the children." (Letter 4913) Her letters to priests regarding the transfers of her sisters show her willingness to listen to the sisters' interests and needs. "In accord with her wish, Sister Mary Nivarda Wirthmueller is now returning to her former post in Geisenfeld." (Letter 3427) "Sister Hermelanda, after teaching school in the mountains with excellent success for nine years, could not get used to Friedberg; wherefore, I am returning her to the mountains, and I did not wish to resist any longer the desire of the Candidate, Anna Gelhafen to work in a foreign country, and thus have sent her to Hungary." (Letter 3430) The quality care and concern for the person truly comes through in her correspondence. Dialogue was part of her searching for the clear perception of the will of God.

I sense Mother Theresa's spirit of desiring and searching for the will of God in the words describing apostolic obedience in You Are Sent, the Rule of the congregation for our time. "Love urges us to unite our will with God's. Apostolic obedience permeates the entirety of our lives. We are sensitive to God's call, ready to do whatever he tells us. He reveals His will to us in his word; through persons; through the situations of life, the church and the world; and by the movements in our hearts. (27)

Mary's challenge to the servants at the wedding feast at Cana, "Do whatever he tells you", (John 2:6) seems to express Mother Theresa's stance to the will of God - - an open, willing and steadfast surrender. Once she "understood that something was the will of God, she carried it through." (Brandl)

THE WORK OF GOD

The strength of Mother Theresa's stance was rooted in a deep faith vision. She looked at everything as the work of God. This work was part of every request to open a convent in a new place so that sisters could go there to teach and influence young hearts. Every person who was involved in this new beginning was part of God's work. God's work was interwoven in the whole process of a new foundation, in the postponement in the building of the convent, in the money and materials given by benefactors, in the opposition to the sisters coming, and in all the communication involved whether by visits, talks or letters. The phrase, the work of God, weaves through her correspondence. To a priest in Bohemia in 1849, she wrote, "You ask, through the most Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, for Poor School Sisters, and you have invited me to come to arrange this work of God." (Letter 790)

To the pastor of Legau in 1855 she said, "Truly, your suggestion that the Poor School Sisters come to Legau surprised me, because I thought that this work of God had been dropped, the work which once appeared so promising." (Letter 1873)

In answering a priest's request from Ganghofen in 1860 she told him that "the hardships of the beginning do not frighten us. God's work always has obstacles and suffering, but it is through them all the more firmly grounded, and marked clearly as the work of God." (Letter 3118)

At the end of her trip to America in 1848 to establish the congregation there, she wrote, "How difficult parting is. My heart is wounded and I stand like a martyr between two works of God."

(Letter 736) She firmly believed that the congregation and its continual unfolding was the work of God and looked upon the process of the approval of the Rule as another aspect of this work.

Mother Theresa saw the work of God as a dynamic process of growth. She used scriptural images of planting, flowering and fruitfulness. Any beginning for her was like a small seed. Much effort and patience was needed for watering the growth. Contradictions, struggles and suffering helped to make the roots of the new growth become sturdier. She advised that it was better to go slowly, for all growth takes place a little at a time, yet she saw the potential in the seed. To Paster Plank of Freising she wrote in 1850, "this undertaking, like all other works of God, would have to be started very quietly and unobtrusively ... and would then reach culmination gradually with the help of God." (Letter 844)

To Frances Schwarz of Freistadt she wrote in 1856, "All works of God proceed slowly and in pain; therefore, the roots are sturdier and their flowering lovelier." (Letter 2277)

Aspects of this quote are another constant thread in her writings as she tried to encourage those encountering difficulties. She also used the image of growth for new candidates. "Dear Clementine arrived here safely under God's protection. God bless the new plant so it may unfold, blossom and mature to the glory of God, for the salvation of many young souls whom she will lead to the Divine Friend of children by her word, example and prayer." (Letter 2157)

The spread of the congregation too was symbolized this way. To the Cardinal of Vienna, she sent a sketch of the institute in 1861 and said that "the mustard seed has become a tree as you will see from its pages and has by the grace of the Lord, spread its branches into Austria." (Letter 3233)

To a pastor in St. Louis she wrote in 1872, "When I reflect on our beginnings in America, how few successes we could count for all our efforts. Now the work of God rises there in all its strength and beauty and surpasses my most daring hope." (Letter 4664)

Truly Mother Theresa knew how to wait for God's work to come to fruition and how to respond actively during the growth process. "We cannot hang God's work on a nail because of the mistakes and imperfections of one person, " (Letter 5025) she told Sister Caroline in Milwaukee in 1875, as she urged Sister to help the new motherhouse in Baltimore. She certainly carried out the advice of her own words.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

The words Divine Providence is another repeated expression in Mother Theresa's writings. It was her way of describing God's call as people asked for her sisters to take over the local schools. "We are always ready to go wherever Divine Providence calls us," (Letter 2772) she told a priest in Cologne in 1858.

In the request for sisters from bishops and priests in America in 1847, as well as in the willing response from many sisters to go there in spite of suffering, Mother Theresa recognized in "the call for School Sisters to America, an indication of Divine Providence, who mercifully directs us to a field of labour while our hands are being tied." (Letter 701) For Mother Theresa, Divine Providence called new life into being through people who saw the need for sisters. It was also through the requests that she recognized a new direction in God's call.

Divine Providence also guarded the sisters and their work once it was started. In order to help along the cause of a new foundation, Mother Theresa would sometimes lower the salary with the conviction that God would help out. To the Local School Inspection of Hoerstein she said in 1854 that she "agrees to take over the girls' elementary school, for the sum of 243 florins until Divine Providence opens other sources of income." (Letter 1732

When the government threatened to close the convent after years of hard labour, Mother Theresa told the Cardinal Protector Clarelli in Rome in 1868 that "God only knows what the end will be; our consolation rests in the thought that his Holy Providence watches over us." (Letter 4255)

For her, God's Providence meant not only his protection and nearness, but also his care, nourishment, guidance and support. Repeatedly, Mother Theresa saw God providing through others, whether lay benefactors, priests, bishops or sisters. She cherished the presence and guidance of Father Mathias Siegert whose entire priestly life was dedicated to the congregation. She unburdened her heart to him as her letter from America movingly reveal. She also said that God sustained her in trials through Sister Margaret of Cortona who was her assistant for many years. To Frederica Ringseis, one of the generous benefactors at the beginning of the congregation, Mother Theresa said in 1835, "it is a wonderful feeling when, forsaken by all, a new and generous package from you is announced, ... and we find just the things we need so desperately ... your assistance does more than help us in need. It strengthens our trust in God." (Letter 32, 33)

Deep trust in the Providence of God was her stance throughout her life's journey. When the will and honour of God and the good of souls were at stake, she did not flinch from anyone, the king, government officials and archbishops included. She was confident that God's wisdom, power and love would provide the ways and the means for support. "The dear Lord who has helped us thus far will guide us to our goal. We trust in Him" she wrote in 1858 when she hears of obstacles to the sisters going to Eichstardt. (Letter 2645)

It was because of her trust that Mother Theresa was able to continue to fulfill her vision throughout the development of the congregation, but this trust called forth her active participation in God's work. This was very evident in the crisis of losses she suffered just at the foundation of the congregation in 1833. The convent school buildings were only half finished when three deaths within the space of a year crushed all the support on which she depended. The death of Bishop Wittman brought the end of his fatherly support and spiritual guidance and his belief in God's plan for the new form of religious life. Then the death of Father Martin Job meant the loss of local support of the people of Neunburg vorm Wald, the place where the first school and convent opened. Now she could not count on his voice to speak on their behalf, these new religious who were still waiting for governmental approval. The death of Father Sebastian Job added to the financial loss of his promised annual pension. Emotional, spiritual and financial losses all came at this crucial time. Only God remained! Her complete trust in the all-wise providence of God was the star that shone in her darkness and Divine providence was very evident when Mother Theresa sought the help of Louis I, King of Bavaria. He passed over the phrases about the financial assets that a new congregation needed and gave her 1,000 florin as a personal contribution. His sister, the Empress of Austria also gave financial help. Having at this time no one to speak for her, Mother Theresa was forced to take these realistic steps, no matter what the result might be. Her focus was clearly God-centered as portrayed in her words to Lady von Ringseis in 1836, "It is something to thank God for that our beginnings are not too dazzling and that his holy work moves along slowly and painfully ... God will provide that some day it will be manifested as his work before the world." (Letter 58)

The concrete signs of the providence of God through people at the time of these unexpected events must have been a key experience for Mother Theresa's tremendous trust. She experienced first hand that God can and does work even though there seemed at first to be only closed doors.

Mother Theresa's desire to know the will of God, her zeal to cooperate with the work of God, and her ability to recognize people and events, both successes and setbacks, as tools of the providence of God, were strong threads in her spiritual tapestry. She experienced and named the sacred through this focus. These words were central to the recurring principles revealed in her writings. I now want to expand on the principles she cherished.

KEY PRINCIPLES IN HER SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY

PRAYER

The “consistent indication of the faith which dominated her life and actions” and “the love of God which was the touchstone of all she did” (Valentine) were rooted in Mother Theresa’s personal commitment to prayer. She saw prayer as a vital requirement for spiritual life. “As water is the most necessary element for fish, so prayer is the element for our souls.” (Letter 714) she wrote in a circular to all the sisters before she left for America. In a letter written to three newly professed sisters in 1863 she describes prayer as “the hearth through which the fire of the love of God is enkindled and obtained.” (Letter 3537)

Prayer was the expression of her relationship with God and of a deeply felt hunger for union with Jesus. In her retreat notes of 1823, she prayed “Take me entirely. I desire no longer to live for myself, but that you, O Jesus, should live in me, because in you is true happiness to be found.” (Letter 2)

Prayer was nourishment, refreshment, strength and transformation for Mother Theresa. Her “awareness of the presence and role of the Holy Spirit in her interior growth is very evident. “O Holy Spirit, enlighten me, strengthen me, so that I may understand and know my divine call, who I am, what I should be and what I must do, as well as the means by which these ends may be accomplished.” (Letter 29)

She revealed this same conviction to her sisters. “Our hearts remain cold and hard if prayer does not inflame and melt them. Without devout prayer we shall never become united to God because we do not come close to him.” (Letter 714)

In this same circular she shared about her own prayer times and the value and meaning of prayer for her. “There were times when I, too, could find help in no other way ... The Lord never refused to grant a petition concerning his only cause, or for you, my children ... I often complained to him about matters I did not dare mention to you.” (Letter 714)

Mother Theresa modeled fidelity to prayer in a busy active lifestyle and encouraged her sisters to do likewise. In a letter written to Sister Theophilla in Baltimore in 1855, Mother Theresa counseled her to not forget “the interior devotion of Mary and the exterior business of Martha ... to rest at the feet of Jesus. From his Sacred Heart we must drink in the life of love and gain strength and vigor for our work in the classroom.” (Letter 1862)

She supported that same contemplative stance many years later in a letter written to Sister Mary Ignatia in Gugar in 1877. “If we would recognize the hand of God as the guide and teacher in all the events of life, we would see many things in a different light and know that all is for the good of our souls.” (Letter 5235)

In a letter written to Sister Mary Caroline in 1877 she modeled the use of prayer as the context for discerning God’s will as to who is the best choice for superior in the troubled motherhouse in Baltimore. “Only after much prayer and careful consideration could I come to accept (Letter 5230) Sister Theophilla.” When Sister Caroline’s letter asked for the same person and gave the same reasons Mother Theresa was convinced that this “Is decidedly the finger of God” and that “the same spirit works for the Lord on both sides of the ocean.” (Letter 5230)

DEVOTION TO MARY

In her attitude of listening to the call of God and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, full of desire that God's will be done, Mother Theresa took Mary as her model and inspiration. She seemed to have found much consolation in the story of the wedding feast of Cana, both in Mary's words to the servants and in the image of new wine. (John 2: 1–12) In hearing the good news of Rome's initial approval of the Rule in 1859, she wrote to the entire congregation, "We can best show our gratitude in living this Holy Rule as perfectly as possible, striving, as our Blessed Lady admonished, to 'do whatever He tells us' (Letter 2912)

To the confessor of the convent in Neunburg she said in 1871, that Mary will provide as she did at Cana and "The wine of heavenly consolation, enlightenment and strength will not run out." (Letter 4534)

Her confidence also spilled over into the practical aspects of life. "The Holy Mother of God will surely intercede for us so that her spiritual daughters may obtain a house. (Letter 2857) she wrote to the Bishop of Csanad in 1859.

Another biblical story of Mary that strengthened Mother Theresa during her time of suffering was the image of Mary standing near Jesus as He hung on the cross, (John 19:25). Powerless to do anything in Munich to obtain approval of the new Rule, forbidden by the Archbishop to lead the congregation, and worn out by constant criticism and delays, she poured out her soul in a lengthy letter to Doctor Schels in Rome in 1852. "How much I have written, and for the most part, lamentations. You do not see the valiant woman in me, and I beg your patience. I often visualize the Blessed Virgin standing beneath the cross as I meditate on the words, 'she stood'. (Letter 1250) She also used this phrase to describe her pain over the deaths of so many sisters.

Mother Theresa frequently appealed to Mary's intercession and urged others to seek her help and guidance also. To the novices in Gorizia, she advised in 1870 "Take refuge under the protection of our most powerful and gracious Virginal Mother Mary." (Letter 4523)

A new applicant to the congregation in 1858 received this advice, "Place yourself under the maternal care of the Blessed Virgin whose tender love and powerful intercession you will most surely experience." (Letter 2534). In 1875 Sister Mary Afra was encouraged "to tread in the blessed footprints (Letter 5091) of Mary's virtues."

Devotion to Mary was a natural part of Mother Theresa's life. This is seen throughout her letters in the references to Mary's various titles and feast days. The sisters were urged to unite with Mary and to sing God's praises by praying the Magnificat at times of rejoicing at the work of God, such as the erection of a new novitiate in Prussia in 1855 (Letter 1886) or in 1854 at the renewed presence of the archbishop at the motherhouse after many long years of suffering. (Letter 1677)

However, Mother Theresa clearly emphasized that this Marian devotion be connected to everyday life. In 1873, she wrote to Sister Augustine, "Today is the feast of Mary's presentation. Those who can truly celebrate it are they who, like Mary, are willing to bring sacrifices." (Letter 5091) Today we can hear the echo of her voice in the words of our constitution "We honour Mary as mother of our congregation, practicing truest devotion to her when we do whatever He tells us." (You Are Sent: no. 32, p. 31)

EUCHARIST

Mother Theresa did not use the word Eucharist in her letters, but frequently mentioned the words Blessed Sacrament and Holy Communion. In responding to requests for sisters, she always checked out the proposed convent's closeness to the church and the opportunity for mass. The reception of Holy Communion and the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament were innermost sources of strength for her and she wanted to ensure these "rights" for her sisters. In 1834 she petitioned the Bishop of Ratisbon "for the privilege of receiving Holy Communion daily, or at least on alternate days ... Because education is always a burden, we feel the need of frequent reception of Our Lord ... and this need carries a parallel right." (Letter 21). She frequently asked bishops to grant permission for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and for the privilege of perpetual adoration. "It is this which remains the single and highest consolation for us during our deep affliction" (Letter 5037) she told the Archbishop of Munich in 1875 when increasing governmental restrictions threatened the sisters teaching and educational opportunities.

Mother Theresa treasured quiet prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and encouraged her sisters to do the same. "If your cross presses heavily at times, hasten to Jesus crucified in the Blessed Sacrament. Tell Him of your needs and cares, perhaps in the stillness of a nightly hour of prayer. You will never leave Him without light, consolation and help." (Letter 714) Eucharist was central to her life and a support to her commitment to prayer. She saw it as a special source of consolation and protection in times of sickness, trials or danger. But her life was also the living out of Eucharist, the gift of self poured out in enduring love to God and to all whom she served. She was a contemplative woman in action. She had a deep discerning heart which moved her to do God's work.

MISSION

The words of Jesus at the last supper reflect Mother Theresa's life long yearning and work. "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world ... May they be one in us ... so that the world may believe it was you who sent me." (John 17:18,21) Her mission was Christ's mission – to bring God to the people and to bring the people to God. Mother Theresa felt called to being about this "innermost, irresistible urgency of her soul" (Letter 21) by living a vowed life in community and by a ministry directed towards education. Bishop Wittmann, who recognized that God had given her the same urge as he had, passed on to Mother Theresa his special concern for the poor and powerless. Their vision was a new form of religious life – one central government for the religious and educational formation of women religious. From there they would go forth, "content with little, into the tiniest villages, into the poorest dwellings, wherever the Lord calls, to bring the good news of the Kingdom of God to the poor." (Letter 144) Their hope was the deepening and strengthening of family life as a basic renewal of society. In 1846, Mother Theresa assured the Bishop of Speyer that "we on our part, shall do all that is possible for God and the spread of His Kingdom, through the education and training of the little ones ... especially of female youth, so that we shall again have pious mothers, and as far as possible raise up a better and more religious new generation." (Letter 589)

A WOMAN OF HER TIMES

It was her sensitivity to the needs of the 19th century German Society that made Mother Theresa truly a woman of her time. Events like the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars led to the suppression of many convent schools. Hence, there was a lack of opportunity for true Christian education, especially for girls in rural areas. By sending sisters in two's and three's to reach people in these poor parishes, Mother Theresa was able to initiate new educational opportunities. She established elementary, vocational and secondary schools, kindergartens, day nurseries, orphanages, homes for delinquent girls and deaf mutes, and evening classes for girls working in factories. The work of the congregation expanded to North America, Silesia, Hungary, Austria, Westphalia and England. She reached out to all nationalities, all classes and races with the same spirit of love. God's work had sprung into being in Bavaria, but it became international in its ongoing development.

Unity remained Mother Theresa's deep value as the number of houses increased and other motherhouses were established. References to unity among the sisters appear in many of her writings. To the Novices in Gorizia she wrote in 1863, "Unity alone makes us strong inwardly and outwardly ... Let us help one another in love to build together in love! This is what our vocation demands." (Letter 3520) A sister in Dorfen in 1868 received a similar message. "The greatest joy and consolation is mine when I hear that you are living together in holy love of God, in faithful fulfillment of your obligations and sisterly charity, for such love and unity sweeten our vocation and make us string." (Letter 4307)

The correspondence between Mother Theresa and Sister Caroline over the establishment and leadership in the new Baltimore motherhouse revealed the pains of tension and conflict. Mother Theresa encouraged Sister Caroline in 1875, "I thank God that He has given you wisdom and understanding, as our unity is surely most pleasing to Him ... Try to nourish and care for the spirit of unity among the houses and sisters given to your care." (Letter 5071)

A WOMAN APART FROM HER TIMES

Mother Theresa held onto this treasured value of unity in spite of great clerical opposition. By striving to teach in rural areas and establishing many small mission houses, she changed the customary structure of women religious living and working within large formal monasteries. She wanted to sustain a common spirit and goal among the many small communities and provinces as the congregation expanded into other countries and also be free to transfer sisters as different needs arose. A central government under a mother general was the form she believed was right for them. It was also part of the founding vision inherited from Bishop Wittman. Archbishop Reisach of Munich was convinced that each bishop in his diocese should have the authority over religious congregations. Moreover, his view was according to the customs and traditions of that time. Women leading their congregations with independence and freedom to make their own decisions went against the status quo in both church and society.

These different views concerning leadership styles came to a head through an experience at the local mission in Rottenburg in 1851. The pastor there suggested that Sister Rosa be appointed the local superior of the convent. When Mother Theresa could not agree with his choice after prayer and consultation with the sisters there, the pastor appealed to the Archbishop who ordered the same appointment. In a compelling faith response, she did not obey. "The conditions in this regard are against my conscience and against my innermost convictions, against our Holy Rule, and against the design which God Himself has given his work." (Letter 1101, 1102)

Mother Theresa was then forbidden to have any further connections with that house, and the sisters there were ordered to obey the pastor. True to her stance of openness and trust, she responded to this decisive division also as God's work. "I have the utmost confidence that God will bring even this painful work to a happy conclusion as He has so many other times in the past, against all our expectations." (Letter 1101, 1102)

Simultaneously, Mother Theresa had been trying to rewrite the Rule of the Congregation of Notre Dame. Out of eighteen years of daily experiences of living religious life and adapting to the needs of the young congregation, a new document was being compiled.

After her response to the Rottenburg situation, the Archbishop demanded a copy of the finished Rule within a month. During the ongoing struggle, he came to the motherhouse with his own decree about the order's affairs and threatened severest canonical censure for everyone who opposed and disobeyed him. He deprived Mother Theresa of her office as leader of the congregation and ordered that no novices could profess their vows. He went to Rome himself with this own version of a Rule for the congregation and refused Mother Theresa's repeated requests to go there. She sought a hearing for her voice through written appeals to the pope and sent Doctor Schels to speak on her behalf. After two and a half long years of waiting, she finally received the outward confirmation of God's will. It was her version of the Rule which had been approved. Rome upheld unity of the congregation under a mother general. Quickly she sought reconciliation with the Archbishop and he willingly came to receive the profession of vows of the novices.

But more suffering followed. The Archbishop insisted that each chapter of the Rule was to be submitted to him so that he could add his comments before it went to Rome. Once more Mother Theresa objected, saying that this would mean other bishops would have equal rights and thus again the Rule would not be based on the sisters' needs and experiences. Once more, she wrote the truth in love to the Papal Nuncio, "We are most willing to forget what has happened during these two years of suffering. Yet, dear as this reconciliation is to us, we cannot buy it at a still higher price, the price of freedom to compose our own Rule." (Letter 1678) She continued to work on the Rule, asking for the advice and support of the bishops where her sisters ministered. More years of waiting occurred. This time Mother Theresa sent her assistant, Sister Margaret of Cortona to work on their behalf. More opposition came from the Archbishop, now Cardinal Reisach, as well as from other cardinals who "felt that the superior general wanted too many rights that had never before been given to a female congregation and which did not agree with existing ecclesiastical canons." (Dix:120) In the end, Rome once more supported Mother Theresa. Final approval came on August 26, 1865, thirty-two years after she established the first foundation. She had called the Rule the work of God. Her trust in God, "that He who had begun the work will also guide it to completion" (Letter 1765) had been fulfilled.

A WOMAN AHEAD OF HER TIMES

I entered the Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame one hundred years after the approval of the Rule. I had never heard the story of Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger before I came to live in the motherhouse of the Canadian province. Yet, as I began the of reading all of her letters and persevered in doing this during the last four years, I now know that her story touched my own story. I sensed a kindred spirit with her. I felt a life-giving flow of energy within me each hour I spent in her company. Out of my hours of reading, reflecting, praying and writing, her spirit has re-kindled my spirit.

I think Mother Theresa's gentle voice was calling me when I was struggling to know and to do God's will in regards to what lifestyle I should choose. I did much seeking, asking and knocking in faithful prayer, while believing in God's power and light to shine through my darkness. Was that not her spirit of trust in Divine Providence encouraging me to recognize the work of God in my life? I recall a mystical moment of being drawn by the voices of the sisters singing Salve Regina at evening prayer. Perhaps it was her gentle voice guarding my interior response to hear the call of Notre Dame. Devotion to Mary has meant much dialoguing with Mary throughout my life as I faced new challenges to growth. Mary and Mother Theresa have both been mentors for me – women who were life bearers in our world. Through God's goodness I have the life-giving bread and the saving cup of my spiritual and personal gifts to offer through Eucharist and in my daily life. I cherish the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in our houses and know that Eucharist is also central to my life. Mother Theresa's longing for unity and the pain of brokenness in relationships, community and parish situations are also part of me. I believe that she keeps urging me on to experience and to extend the reconciling power of God as I struggle to love anew each day. I sense her educational charism, her gift of empowering others in my ministry. I believe the charism of Mother Theresa is inside me, for I know that the life-giving elements of her spirituality help me to be a life bearer for our times.

I hear Mother Theresa's story also in a new way. She is a woman for our times because her hopes and concerns and suffering are very much a part of our church and societal issues right now. Today we would call her a feminist, a person who takes a stand for women. Her writings to Rome express how keenly she felt that only a woman could lead best the interests of women, that a man could not model womanly virtues to a girl, nor could a girl confide in a man as she would to a woman.

She also upheld the value of women's experiences in the rewriting of the Rule. She could not speak in the church structures of her day. Her voice could have been muffled and silenced, but she listened to her deepest feelings. She sought out other people to be her voice and allowed her voice to be heard through her letters. She had a deep sense of trust in God's work. Her experience of the new vision of religious life and her concern for the poor led her to speak out against the unjust structures of her day. She loved the Church, yet endured deep painful struggles with the Church. Her courage and willingness to challenge the institutional structures while striving to work for reconciliation is, I believe, "our legacy, our heritage."
(Fitzgerald)

In her crypt:
a handful of dust
a cupful of bone –

but we
are aware, each day,
of someone

calling us.
It is herself
we discover

a woman
who makes us one
even as we

make her
our own.

(Eichner)

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