

We Doubt It!

It has become commonplace in recent years for us to hear Mother Teresa of Calcutta linked with extraordinary faithfulness. “She’s a regular Mother Teresa!” someone might say of an individual who displays great kindness or constancy of devotion. In fact, so widespread was Mother Teresa’s reputation for selflessness, goodness, and faithfulness, that she virtually became synonymous with the modern vision of sainthood.

So what’s going on? Not long ago a book of Mother Teresa’s letters, written over the course of many decades, was published, and it set off a great controversy. Mother Teresa’s letters make clear that she had, over the course of her long and stunningly significant life, some serious questions and even doubts about matters of her faith. This has led some gleeful detractors to claim that Mother Teresa was a secret atheist, a hypocrite, or a deeply troubled soul. That seems, to us, a tragic misunderstanding of the woman – and of faith!

Is faith really to be measured by a total absence of doubt and wonderment, questioning and bewilderment? If it is, then there are very few who could claim to be faithful. Even the Bible itself is full of moments (as author Chris Marlin-Warfield notes) in which its heroes are shown despairing, lonely, and hopeless. To succumb to such feelings, and to cry out in doubt in the face of them, is not a sign of disbelief. On the contrary, it is precisely because these heroes of the faith *DO* take God and God’s goodness so seriously that they struggle with the tough questions!

Faith is not glib, bedrock certainty. It is something far more soul-stretching than that. It is, as the Apostle Paul notes: “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is, as Job shows, unprovable trust and improbable confidence, that allows him to proclaim from the ash heap of his ruined life, “I know that my redeemer lives!”

So now we know that Mother Teresa, like so very many marvelous ancestors of our faith, also had her times of darkness and despair. Does that make her life less valuable as a model of faithfulness and devotion for us? Certainly not. It only demonstrates, once again, that those who are truly committed to living as God’s people will need, at times, to set aside their inner conflicts, their all-too-human doubts and misgivings, to live as they are called to live before God – selflessly, graciously, compassionately, and faithfully.

Will this revelation that Mother Teresa occasionally harbored some doubt, lessen her lasting legacy to the world? We doubt it!