

# Lessons Learned from the Mental Sufferings of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta

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One of the iconic images of the twentieth century is a tiny woman in a white and blue sari walking the slums of India, caring for the sick and dying. Blessed Teresa of Kolkata (August 26, 1910–September 5, 1997), or Mother Teresa of Calcutta as she is more commonly known, was proclaimed a living saint long before her death from heart failure.

As the foundress of the Missionaries of Charity, her work took her around the globe. Wherever she went, she brought attention to the plight of the least, the lonely, the impoverished, and the unloved. Many of her sayings, such as “Loneliness is the most terrible poverty” and “Love is a fruit in season at all times,” have become bywords for those who work for social justice and compassionate treatment of the poorest of the poor.

One of the hallmarks of Mother Teresa’s life was her almost constant smile. Virtually everyone who met her noticed the joy and peace that emanated from her. She seemed to have perfect faith and trust in God and his will throughout her entire life. Many openly talked about how they wished they could have the kind of faith that characterized her life.

However, after her death, her postulator, Fr. Brian Kolodiejchuk, revealed that for nearly fifty years, she did not feel the presence of God in her life. For most of that time, she suffered from what St. John of the Cross called the “dark night of the soul,” a sense of profound desolation, loneliness, and abandonment shared by other saints, including St. Thérèse of Lisieux. This is how Mother Teresa described her suffering:

“Where is my faith?—Even deep down, ... there is nothing but emptiness & darkness... . I have no faith... . If there be God, please forgive me... . When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven—there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like

sharp knives and hurt my very soul.—Love—the word—it brings nothing.— I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

“What do I labour for? If there be no God—there can be no soul.—If there be no soul then, Jesus—You also are not true.”

About ten years into her pain, she experienced a short reprieve during which she was relieved of “that long darkness, ... that strange suffering.” However, the darkness and doubt returned and, so far as anyone knows, remained with her until the day she died.

Mother Teresa’s mental pain and suffering come as a surprise to many people who assume that saints never have to endure the mental and emotional anguish that so many of us “ordinary” people have to face. From her experience, we can draw several lessons that can help us as we progress on our own journey to understand and deal with suffering and adversity.

One of the first is that love of God and devotion to faith don’t automatically eliminate the pain of mental suffering. Mental suffering isn’t the same as mental illness, which is another kind of suffering altogether. Mental suffering is the pain that comes with doubt, fear, and anxiety. Often it appears disguised under the cloak of “worry.” While it might be a bit presumptuous to suggest that a holy woman like Mother Teresa worried, the writings that she had not wanted to be revealed lest “people will think more of me—less of Jesus” hint that she did indeed worry. She worried that she had not heard God correctly when he told her to serve the poorest of the poor; she worried that her life might have been spent in vain; she even worried that there might not be a God.

Worry is one of those forms of suffering that is so common that we almost assume it is a universal condition of being human. However, one of the few direct commands given by Jesus in the New Testament forbids it: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matthew 6:34).

### **Don’t Wrestle with Worry**

What is key here seems to be the difference between the emotion of worry, which arrives on the threshold of our minds unbidden and unwanted, and deliberate wallowing in our fearful fretting. I believe that Jesus was admonishing us against the latter, not the former. If that’s the case, then Mother Teresa gives us an insightful example of how we should treat suffering that is the result of the emotion of worry: Release it and get on with the next right thing in our lives. We are not to wrestle with it over and over, like a dog with a stuffed toy. Instead, we are to recognize it, accept it, and go on with our duties.

Now, I realize that when you are “worried sick” about something, such advice is easier said than done. But in the end, worry accomplishes nothing. It merely gives the illusion

of action when in reality, it is a way of remaining stuck in your misery. It may feel as if you are busy doing something when you worry, but all you are actually doing is wasting your time, energy, and emotional resources. Mother Teresa seemed to intuitively understand this because even when she was experiencing her most profound darkness, she continued to pray, serve the poor, beam that radiant smile, and go about her daily routine.

That is exactly what we need to do when we are in the grips of mental suffering—keep on with our lives. You may be worried about your financial situation, but if the dishes need to be done, do the dishes instead of stewing and fretting about what might happen tomorrow. You may be facing a troubling medical diagnosis, but if dinner needs to be made while you wait for the phone call, make dinner. You may be pacing the floor, wondering if a loved one has been in an accident, but if the cat needs to be fed, feed the cat. Do the right thing, then the next right thing, and then the next one. In short, what Mother Teresa's example teaches us is that we should take concrete action when we are in the grip of suffering generated by worry. Sometimes as we continue to do the next right thing, our troublesome situation is resolved on its own. Even if whatever is worrying us can't be completely resolved, doing what is right in the present moment makes it much easier to bear the pain that accompanies the emotion of worry because it takes the emphasis off ourselves and our situations and places it on our God-given duties and responsibilities. When we aren't thinking about ourselves, it's much more difficult to worry, and it's almost impossible to become overwhelmed by worry when we leave the situation in God's hands.

One more lesson we can learn about mental suffering from Mother Teresa is to keep it private. It's tempting to want to talk about your pain in the hope that by telling everyone, you can somehow dissipate it. The opposite is actually the case. The more you talk about your worries and suffering, the greater they will seem. Now, certainly it can be beneficial to talk with a counselor or spiritual director—Mother Teresa did that herself—but sharing your worries with the whole world isn't wise. It's far better to select your confidante with care, choosing someone who can advise you and not merely commiserate with you. In the absence of such wise counsel, journaling about your concerns, as Mother Teresa did, is often one of the better ways of dealing with this particular type of suffering because it allows you to examine the issue more objectively (although if you are planning on becoming a saint, you can't be sure that your private journals will always remain private!).

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