

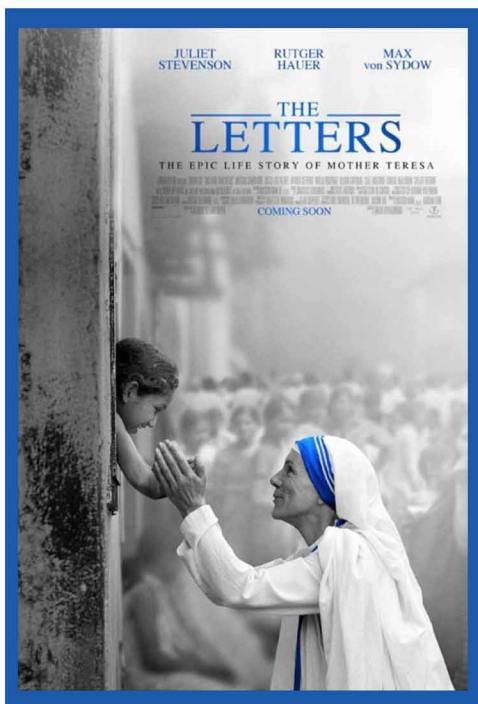


THE LETTERS

Discussion Guide

Introduction

In 2007, both religious and non-religious observers were shocked to learn that, throughout much of her life and ministry, Mother Teresa experienced crushing doubt and a feeling of separation from God. For decades, Mother Teresa wrote letters to her spiritual advisor, Father Celeste van Exem, expressing these feelings and dark nights of the soul experiences. The new film, *The Letters*, offers an unprecedented, revealing look into the life of Mother Teresa over a forty year period as she navigated these emotions while ministering to the poorest of the poor in India. Her letters form the basis of an extraordinary story about a woman the world thought they knew and provide a unique glimpse into the life of one of humanity's greatest and most humble servants.



As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
~ Ephesians 4:1-3

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The Call within the Call

Before she was Mother Teresa, Anjeze Gonxhe Bojaxhiu heard the call to become a nun. As she walked that path, she began to hear another call, to live with and serve the poor. She frequently refers to this as “the call within the call.”

We might not use the same language, but most of us know what it feels like to be called. We have a favorite activity, we decide a major in college, or we love our job. These feelings and experiences are part of what it means to be living a life fully. Yet, no matter our preferred hobbies or the jobs at which we excel, we all, as people of faith, share a similar calling.

This can be defined in a variety of ways: to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly (Micah 6:8); proclaim the good news (Luke 4:18); and be completely humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love (Eph. 4:1-3). No matter what we do, whether we are an accountant, a mechanic, a chef, or a doctor, we can all answer this call in our daily lives. Every day, we encounter countless opportunities to serve others, to stand by them in suffering and, perhaps, help make their lives better.

Questions for Consideration

1. What have you been called to do? How did you hear and follow that call?
2. How can you practice what Mother Teresa called the “call within the call” in your daily life?

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.

~ Proverbs 14:31

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God's Option for the Poor

In *The Letters*, there's a tension between Sister Teresa and her Mother Superior who believes that Teresa is distracting the other nuns from their appointed work with her passionate service to the poor. This tension frequently takes place in institutional religion. Oftentimes, we let protocol and doctrine or practice override the very simple command(s) that God has given us.

Liberation theologians often refer to "God's preferential option for the poor." This refers to the frequent references in scripture for God's people to care for the least of these and Jesus' own self-identification with the hungry, poor, and imprisoned. Mother Teresa's life was a symbol of God's preferential option for the poor. Giving up her safe place in the convent, she entered into the lives of the poor, much like God incarnated God's self in the messiness of humanity.

Questions for Consideration

1. Where have you seen tension between "caretakers" of institutional religion and people following God's call?
2. How do you enter into the lives of those in need and show a preference for them?

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
~ Romans 12:15

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An Empathetic Life

Mother Teresa began her religious life in Ireland, no stranger to poverty. Relocated to India, she was exposed to a greater intensity of it. Leaving the convent to live in poverty herself, she came to know it on an even greater level. This changed her life, making her more empathetic to the suffering of those around her. Thus, she looked on the dying people in the streets and created a hospice for them, when the authorities would simply be content to let them die in the gutter.

Questions for Consideration

1. Have you ever felt like you were stuck in a rut? How did you fall into it and how, if you did, did you get out?
2. Where do you see diversity in your community? How do you celebrate and live into it?

It is very easy to get caught in the routine of life. This isn't intrinsically bad or evil. We enjoy being around familiar friends and in familiar places that bring a sense of peace and comfort. Yet such insularity can blind us to the suffering in our world and prevent us from experiencing the beauty inherent in other cultures and the ways in which we can learn from those who are different from us. Diversity surrounds us. All we need to do is look for it and move deeper into it. As we do, we might find fresh, life-giving experiences of the Divine.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free [...].
~ Luke 4:18

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Compassion not Conversion

Questions for Consideration

1. Where have you seen differing beliefs or opinions erode community or prevent service to others?
2. How have you partnered with people who believe differently in order to improve your community? If you haven't, how might you do so?

The Letters is not a shocking film, but it might surprise some viewers. Mother Teresa lived a life worthy of sainthood, yet it wasn't for leading people to the faith. Unlike so many Christians around the world today, she was obsessed with compassion, not conversion.

Today, many Christians are obsessed with being right, with making sure that others share in their right beliefs. But this doesn't find much parallel in the life of Jesus, who defined his purpose as proclaiming good news and freedom and healing. Consider the account in Mark where John complains about someone not with them driving out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus responds, in part, "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).

Mother Teresa didn't let differing beliefs deter her from her mission. When she opened a hospice in a derelict Hindu temple, her Hindu elder counterparts were enraged and would rather have stoned her and her sisters than care for the dying around her.

Be merciful to those who doubt [...].
~ Jude 1:22

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Doubt is the Spouse of Faith

Questions for Consideration

1. Does doubt have a place in your community of faith? How do you interact with participants that have crippling doubt?
2. When have you experienced doubt in your life of faith? How did you move through it or live in it?

Much of the world (Christian or not) was shocked in 2007 when it was revealed that Mother Teresa experienced crushing doubt and a feeling of separation from God. This was the subject of her letters to her spiritual advisor, Father Celeste van Exem. How could this be? How could this saint of a woman living a Christ-like life more intensely than many of us feel these emotions? Perhaps it was a cause of despair for many observers, but it should also give people of faith hope.

To be honest, doubt doesn't catch a break in scripture. Numerous verses tell us to, quite simply, not do it. We are to have faith. Yet, thankfully, many leaders in the faith, like Mother Teresa, have caused us to re-examine its role in the life of faith. Doubt can be viewed as the spouse of faith. If we don't doubt, then our faith is on auto-pilot, so to speak. When we doubt, we think, and when we think, we are forced to choose. Doubt presents us with the opportunity to choose God, to choose faith, and to say yes to the call that God issues to all of us to love and serve others.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another.”
~ John 13:35

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How Will They Know

Mother Teresa's move to the slums from the convent wasn't an easy one. She had no belongings and the equivalent of \$1. More than that, even though she entered with a heart full of love and a desire to serve, not everyone welcomed her. They were suspicious of her and feared she was there to simply convert their children from Hinduism to Christianity. Gradually, however, she received a broader, warmer welcome as they realized she was simply there to love and serve them. Once again, her life echoes the teachings of Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, as Jesus prepares for his crucifixion and departure, he gives lengthy parting words to his disciples, many of which outline how they are to be in the world. His command is that they love one another and that, in doing so, the world will know who they are.

How do people know us? Do they know (or remember) us by our hard work, success, accolades? These aren't necessarily bad grounds for a good reputation, but are they enough? Unfortunately, today people know, or recognize, Christians by their judgment and hatred. Love seems to be far down the list of identifying factors for Christians. Perhaps the life of Mother Teresa can inspire us to practice an old, defining characteristic.

Questions for Consideration

1. How do people know you? Have people ever had a bad perception of you? Was it warranted?
2. How can you reclaim the defining characteristic of love?

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
~ Matthew 19:21

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Faith Needs Patrons

As Mother Teresa moved out from the convent and into the slums, she may have been poor herself, but she was not without patrons. She benefited from relationships with business and civic leaders that devoted spaces in which she could conduct her ministry. For decades, her ministry endured through the financial support from people of a variety of faiths (or none at all) around the world.

Jesus' commandment to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21 has been a tough verse for people of all tax brackets through the history of the Christian church. Unless we are the poorest of the poor, we are all comparatively wealthy. We can all give a little more in the service of others. Whether or not we take Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler as a universal directive, we should all be patrons of those that have dedicated their lives to the service of the poor.

Questions for Consideration

1. When have people served you or contributed to one of your endeavors? How did that energize you?
2. How can you be a stronger patron for those serving the poor in your community?