

I Thirst

Forty Days with Mother Teresa

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Mother Teresa, Saint Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997), the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, was a figure known and loved around the world for her work among the poor. Born in Albania, she entered the convent of Loreto at age eighteen and went as a missionary to India a year later. In 1946, on a train ride to Darjeeling, she had a profound encounter with Christ that led her to a new vocation of serving the very poor. She started going into the streets of Calcutta to bring comfort and help to those most in need. In 1950 she received permission to found her new Society. The Constitutions of the Missionaries of Charity spoke of its aim as satiating the thirst of Jesus by serving the poorest of the poor, and in all the chapels of her sisters, Mother Teresa had Jesus' words from the Cross—*I thirst*—inscribed next to the crucifix.

Fr. Joseph Langford (1951–2010) co-founded with Mother Teresa the Missionary of Charity Fathers in 1984 and was the author of *Mother Teresa's Secret Fire* (OSV, 2008). He recognized in Mother Teresa's encounter with the thirst of Jesus and her emphasis on satiating that thirst a powerful symbol of God's love for each person and a road into experiencing that love more profoundly. The meditations gathered here are from the text of his unpublished notes for the retreat on Mother Teresa's spirituality that he regularly gave both to the Missionaries of Charity congregations and to many other groups.

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Introduction – Mother Teresa and the Thirst of God

In his thirst, the dying Christ seeks a drink quite different from water or vinegar. Now, on the Cross, Jesus thirsts for a new humanity which should arise from his sacrifice in fulfillment of the Scriptures. The thirst of the Cross, on the lips of the dying Christ, is the ultimate expression of the desire of a baptism to be received and of a fire to be kindled on the earth, which had been manifested by him during his life. Now the desire is about to be fulfilled, and with those words Jesus confirms the ardent love with which he desired to receive that supreme “baptism,” to open to all of us the fountain of water, which really quenches the thirst and saves.

—Pope St. John Paul II (General Audience, 1988)

Jesus is God, therefore his love, his thirst, is infinite.

The aim of our [Missionary of Charity] Society is to quench the infinite thirst of a God made Man.

The first words of our Constitutions, the aim, “I thirst”—are we too busy to think about that? The words, “I thirst”—do they echo in our souls?

I do not know whose thirst is greater, his or mine for him.

—Mother Teresa (1950; Instructions, 1980; Letter, 1980)

Everyone associates Mother Teresa with work among the “poorest of the poor,” a mission that she inaugurated among many peoples on every continent. But few have any idea of her real message, of the hidden fire that burned within her and urged her on to do all that she did with such compassion and love.

The message behind all of Mother Teresa’s missionary activity is simple but staggering: in the poverty and Cross of Jesus, God has revealed his thirst for us and for our love. Yet this is more than just a verbal message; it is first of all a reality to be encountered and experienced, over and over again, ever more deeply.

When Jesus was suffering on the Cross, one of the cries that came from his lips was “I thirst!”* What does this cry of “I thirst!” express? First and most importantly, it expresses God’s thirst for us. Jesus, speaking in his divine nature, revealed something about God that we would otherwise not have known: that God thirsts for us and for our love. But speaking in his human nature, Jesus also revealed something about ourselves that we may never have known: that man is a living thirst for God. The cry “I thirst!” refers to both God and man. Ever since the Fall of our first parents, both God’s thirst for humanity and humanity’s broken thirst for

* Jn 19:28.

God has gone unquenched. God had intended there to be a continually quenched communion of thirsts between himself and his human children, but instead there was only distance and separation. On the tree of Calvary, for the first time since the eating from the fateful tree of Eden, the thirst of God and the thirst of man were brought together in complete harmony in the Person of Jesus.

The divine cry “I thirst!” echoes throughout the whole of salvation history. The Old Testament is a careful and magnificent preparation for the full revelation of the Lord’s thirst on the Cross. Jesus had come to fulfill the revelation of God’s thirsting love already begun as a distant echo in Adam and Abraham. Jesus brings all these threads of revelation together in himself. Those Old Testament figures prepared his coming, and, in his light, we can see the fullness of their meaning and beauty.

Creation itself is a spilling over of God’s infinite thirst to love and to be loved, even beyond the borders of the Trinity. It is the fruit of a divine expansiveness to share this love. The creation of the angels, the bringing forth of the material universe, the creation of man and woman, our own unique creation—all are expressions of God’s infinite thirst to love and to be loved.

Think of the thirst that seems inborn in the created universe. Creation ceaselessly thirsts for God the Creator,

without whom it cannot exist. Even inanimate creation is a symbol of this universal thirst for God. Yet man is the greatest reflection of God's thirst, since he alone is created in God's image. If God is a thirst, then so too are we: a living thirst to love and to be loved.

Then think of the Fall. God is life, and when our first parents turned their thirst away from him and toward the self, they brought death upon themselves. Both God's thirst for man and man's frustrated thirst for God were immeasurably increased after the Fall.

God then chose Israel as a symbol and channel of his thirst for, humanity. He traced out their path to restoration by giving them the great commandment to thirst for him. Love desires, thirsts for intimacy: for the opportunity to know and be known by the beloved, and to share life together.

The covenant bond established between God and Israel was spoken of by God as his marriage with his People. He chose the most complete symbol of mutually thirsting love. The Song of Songs symbolically prefigures the wedding of God and humanity; the final chapters of the Book of Revelation portray its fulfillment with the marriage of the Lamb.

When God's thirst is united with human thirst, as it was on Calvary, miracles of grace and resurrection occur. Here we find the secret to the Christian vocation: the union

of these two thirsts in our own heart. Too often, what is missing in this desired union of thirsts is our own thirst for Jesus. If we look closely at Mother Teresa we will find that her single most striking characteristic—beyond her charity, beyond her zeal—was her profound thirst for Jesus. This then is the doorway through which to walk if we wish to deepen our own experience of the thirst of Jesus for us, the same door that opened God's thirst for Mother Teresa: the renewal and the deepening of our own thirst for him. Our thirst for God is the unseen element that completes the mystery of Jesus' cry of thirst as both God and man on Calvary. Our thirst for God is the same element that allows us to recreate the fullness of that mystery in our own lives. If we wish to experience resurrection power and life, both of these elements need to be present as they were at the Crucifixion: Jesus' thirst for us and our thirst for him.

Jesus desires, thirsts for, our own thirst for him, not as mere bit of sentimentality, but as an all-consuming impetus of the soul, through which we open ourselves entirely to him in trust and surrender ourselves completely to him in love.

No matter how far I may have traveled in my knowledge and experience of Jesus' thirst, the only path to deepen that encounter is for my own thirst for him to be renewed. What is equally important, my thirst for him is the

only way to satiate his thirst. Again, we come up against this amazing truth: Jesus thirsts for my thirst.

This is that dual thirst, of God for humanity and of each of us for God, that Mother Teresa experienced internally, and that she sought to communicate to all whom she met and touched. The purpose of these pages, despite their human poverty, is to encourage and assist you in your own encounter with Jesus' thirst—an encounter that can change your life and the lives of those through whom you touch him every day.

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Prologue

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Day 1 | The Woman at the Well, Part I

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.

Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink. . . . If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

—John 4:7, 10

***Our aim is to satiate the infinite thirst of God,
not just for a glass of water, but for souls.
Souls are immortal, precious to God.***

—Mother Teresa (*Instructions*, 1983)

The dynamics of divine and human thirst can be seen with great clarity in John’s Gospel, in the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (see Jn 4:1–30). In this encounter, Jesus carries on a lengthy conversation with a woman of Samaria who has come to draw water from the town’s well. Through this conversation, Jesus leads the woman from a first experience of his thirst, on toward full conversion and zeal.

Mother Teresa was fond of saying that we are made “to love and to be loved.” Everyone thirsts for love. In this gospel encounter there is symbolic importance in many of the details of the meeting. The well of water symbolizes the search for love, the place where people come in their thirst to find relief. Samaria, whose inhabitants were thought by the Jews to be far from God, symbolizes a life of sinful wandering. Jesus has arrived at the well and is sitting by it, tired out. We can see that even before we begin our search for God, even in the midst of our sins, Jesus is already there waiting for us. He has tired himself out in his long search for our love.

The Samaritan woman symbolizes our human poverty. As a Samaritan she had no religious dignity in Jewish eyes, and as a woman of the time she occupied a subordinate social position with little power. We can see her as representing the emptiness, the alienation from God, and the loss of human dignity that has come about through self-centered thirsts. Yet she desires love, and, in her search, she has come to draw water “at the sixth hour” (noon) when the heat, and therefore her thirst, is greatest. At the very moment of her greatest need, at the very place of her mistaken human search, Jesus speaks to her: “Give me a drink...”

The woman is at first reluctant. She replies, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9). She is voicing our own hidden doubts and hesitations

before the invitation of the thirst of Jesus: “Can he really mean me? Does he really thirst for me? Maybe a saint like Mother Teresa, yes, but me? How could I ever satiate his thirst?”

Jesus shows us that “giving him something to drink” is not ultimately our gift to him, but rather his gift to us. Only in the encounter with his thirst can our own desire to love and be loved be satiated. Jesus’ thirst for us awakens our thirst for him. If we ask, if we thirst for him, he will us give another and better “water” than any we have found before: the living water of his infinite love.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life’” (vv. 13–14). Again, the meaning is symbolic. The one who seeks only human love to quench his or her thirst will be thirsty always, for mere human love, especially when it is sought selfishly or sinfully, can never satisfy the depths of the human heart. But those who seek love in God will never lack, will never be empty, and will never thirst in vain. The more they thirst, the more Jesus will fill them with his own thirst for them, which is his love. He does not need exterior means to communicate that love; it will become a living source within them, always growing, until finally it will overflow into the fulfillment of eternal life.

“The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw’” (v. 15). The tactic has worked. For the first time the woman expresses her thirst for what Jesus has promised to give. This is the turning point in her conversion. She had already met Jesus’ thirst for her, but nothing had changed until she allowed his thirst to awaken her own. The thirst of God touched the thirst of the woman, and the miracle of grace began.

The Samaritan woman has taken a crucial step forward. Not only is she moving toward thirsting for Jesus, but she is beginning to make that thirst her one desire. She wants a love that will not need constant replenishment from without. This is important for her transformation. Conversion means the gradual passing from a thirst for Jesus *and others* (persons, possessions, events, and circumstances) to having only *one* thirst—Jesus. The woman has begun to realize a great truth: that all other thirsts will not only fail to satisfy her, but those thirsts tire out her soul. To thirst only humanly drains and fatigues, even in the midst of ease and success. To thirst for God energizes and enlivens, even when accompanied by toil and trial.

Day 2 | The Woman at the Well, Part II

So the woman left her water jar . . .

—John 4:28

We have been created to love and be loved, and God has become man to make it possible for us to love as he loved us. He makes himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one, the sick one, the one in prison, the lonely one, the unwanted one. . . . He is hungry for our love.

—Mother Teresa (Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, 1979)

Let us continue our meditation on the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. After she has requested from Jesus the water that will last, he gives her a seemingly random direction. “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here’” (Jn 4:16). In saying this Jesus is not looking for an opportunity to condemn the woman. He is inviting her to take a final step toward satiating both him and herself by examining her false thirsts. At first, she only acknowledges her general state of infidelity

and illegitimate thirst: “I have no husband” (v.17). But Jesus responds by telling her that she has had five husbands. He wants her to discover in detail the existence of all her false thirsts, one by one, for unless they are acknowledged and seen as false, they will continue to oppress her.

Jesus then said to her: “And he whom you now have is not your husband” (v. 18). Here Jesus is showing her that her false thirsts are not just mistakes, they are infidelities in love to the one who alone is the spouse of the soul. By clinging to our various human thirsts—our desires, our limited hopes, our possessions, our plans and ambitions—in a sense we “espouse” them. And in each case Jesus reminds us that this “is not your husband.” The thirst you have joined yourself to is not your true spouse. If we persist in such thirsts without any effort to examine them, we wound not only ourselves but the Lord.

“The woman said to him, ‘I know the Messiah is coming . . . when he comes, he will show us all things.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he’” (vv. 25–26). It is as if the woman had said: “I have heard about and have felt within me the truth of what you say; and maybe someday, when things are better, when life is less complicated, when ‘the Messiah comes,’ then I’ll be able to do something about all this. Later.” But Jesus is speaking to her now. The time has

come. The Messiah is here. There is no need to wait for a different situation or a better set of conditions. Jesus is present even now to teach us how to satiate his thirst to the full.

Finally, grace triumphs in the woman's heart. She puts down her water jar: she no longer needs her old false thirsts, her previous means of seeking love. She has come to trust Jesus, and, in an act of surrendering her old life with its many thirsts, she goes joyfully to share the invitation of Jesus' thirst with others, an invitation not just to believe, but to experience that thirst for themselves.

The encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well shows us that when Jesus reveals his thirst for us ("Give me to drink"), he is trying to awaken our thirst for him ("Give me this water that I may not thirst"). Once we begin to express our thirst for him, to bring these two thirsts together, our conversion and our satiation begin.

What then is this thirst for Jesus, for God? How is it expressed? It is not simply a feeling, though it may touch our feelings. It is a desire of our will, and therefore it is always possible to us, whether we happen to be experiencing consolation or aridity. Our innate poverty, our weakness, all our needs are already a great thirst. Our interior being is a living thirst that needs only to be directed to God. If this were not so, what hope would any of us have of answering Jesus' invitation? But we have a potent thirst already at work within

us. It needs only to be purified, unified, and focused on God in Christ.

Once we have begun to thirst for God, we become aware of many other thirsts that war against that thirst, secret motives and desires that we may not admit to ourselves nor even be fully aware of. Like the Samaritan woman, we need the courage to allow the Lord to point out to us our “five husbands”; we need to let him reveal our many false thirsts so that we might leave our water jars behind us and pursue the one thirst that can satisfy us.

Jesus is thirsting for our thirst. Let us then, like the Samaritan woman, lay aside all those old water jars, and like Mother Teresa, let us fill the well of our hearts with that “one thing necessary”—our profound thirst for Jesus alone.



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I. The Dynamics of Thirst

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Day 3 | Rivers of Living Water

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

—John 7:37–38

My children, once you have experienced the thirst, the love of Jesus for you, you will never need, you will never thirst for these things which can only lead you away from Jesus, the true and living Fountain.

—Mother Teresa (Letter, 1993)

All of God’s plan is contained in the verses above from John’s Gospel.

To appreciate their context, let us relive the scene. Jesus had gone privately to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, one of the three great pilgrim feasts of the Jewish year. On this joyful feast the Jewish people would celebrate the bringing in of the harvest in a festival that recalled God’s desire—his thirst—to dwell among his People in a simple

tent (“tabernacle” from the Greek) during the forty years in the desert. To commemorate God’s care during those desert years, the Jews would erect small tabernacles and symbolically live in them during the feast. God’s loving presence at that formative time of their history was like life-giving and refreshing water in the dry emptiness of the desert. He was their living water.

The Feast of Tabernacles began with seven days of celebration. On the eighth day, the “great day” as it was called, a magnificent procession was held, led by the high priest. As the procession began, the high priest would take a golden cup and go to the pool of Siloam, a refreshing reservoir of water that represented God’s healing and restoring action among his people. The High Priest would fill the cup with water from the pool and hold it up for all to see; he would then lead the people through the city, singing the verse from the prophet Isaiah, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:3).

The procession would eventually march out beyond the city walls, where the high priest would symbolically pour the water from the pool onto the dry desert ground. This gesture represented not only the renewal of Israel, but the eventual satiating of all the nations’ thirst for God by a universal outpouring of the living waters—the Spirit of Love—as foretold by the prophet Ezekiel. Every human

heart was one day to become a “tabernacle” for God’s living waters.

On this occasion, Jesus was present for the celebration. We can only imagine what was transpiring in his soul as he watched and perhaps participated in the procession. He knew that he was the feast’s fulfillment, that he was the one sent by the Father to satiate man’s thirst for God and God’s thirst for man. He was so deeply moved at the sight that he stood up and cried out in a loud voice: “Come to me all you who thirst!” (Jn 7:37).

This one phrase contains in summary all that God has wanted to say to man from the beginning of time. It expresses God’s thirst for man: “Come to me!” It invites man to focus his thirst on God: “All you who thirst.” And it promises to fully satiate him with “rivers of living waters” (Jn 7:38). Jesus himself is the golden cup; it is he who pours out the living waters of the Spirit upon the thirsty ground of our souls.

Through the symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus is inviting us to rediscover, in salvation history and in his personal dealings with us, all the various manifestations, foreshadowings, and revelations leading up to the full revelation of his thirst in us and for us. We too can celebrate this feast in spirit. We too have been called into the desert, and Jesus has long been with us, and is even now awakening in us the thirst for living waters.