

Homily - Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

If there is one Catholic in modern times who is best known for their love of the poor and forgotten, it would be Saint Teresa of Calcutta, or as she is most often known, Mother Teresa.

It may go without saying that she was, by every account, an icon of Christian charity and a beautiful model for total and unconditional love of the most broken and downtrodden members of society, especially as she put that love into action in her apostolic work in the slums of India.

As her fame spread, however, some were surprised to hear her speak of a poverty that afflicted not only Calcutta, but the most wealthy and prosperous nations.

In the book *A Simple Path*, Mother Teresa explains that for so much of the Western world, a poverty has taken root that goes beyond material needs.

“The greatest disease in the West today,” she wrote, “is not tuberculosis or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for.

We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love.

There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.”

The scriptures we heard just moments ago are, in different ways, complementary windows into the human experience of poverty - not just hunger, or even material destitution, but the true spiritual affliction that wounds not only the impoverished of society, but even its most wealthy and powerful members.

The story of Job is, in a word, the story of suffering, and reveals the heart of a faithful follower of God who struggles with despair as he watches every good thing in his life being torn away.

This is poverty in every sense: a fight to hang on to faith when every exterior light has gone out, and things don't show signs of getting any better.

Job's experience is at once both timeless and relatable, familiar to anyone who has struggled to find God in a time of pain and doubt.

In fact, it was that same desperation that drove so many crowds to seek Christ's healing, even in the dead of night, so that they and their loved ones could finally experience freedom from illness and spiritual confinement.

For those in our own society who are afflicted with their own kind of spiritual poverty, the same hunger for healing is there - but why, we might ask, do we not see a similar response?

Why are our parishes not overrun with souls in search of the freedom Jesus Christ offers, when he is present here just as truly as he was present there in Galilee?

I think the answer is, simply, that they do not know where he is, and they do not know what they are looking for.

According to Mother Teresa, the cure they need is simple:

"What they are missing, really, is a living relationship with God."

As Christians, our role in proclaiming the Gospel is to help that relationship grow by answering both of those questions.

This is the same challenge the Church has faced since its earliest years, and it requires that we have the humility to meet this poverty where it's at.

Saint Paul, perhaps the greatest preacher and teacher our faith has ever known, understood this implicitly.

Think about what he is saying in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it.”

Often, when we fail to share our faith in a way that is convincing or compelling, it's because we don't do what Saint Paul did.

We skip over that key step of meeting each other in our poverty, whatever that poverty looks like.

What would happen, instead, if we began by meeting that suffering where it is at?

Building relationships, meeting concrete needs, offering encouragement in times of despair - so that they can start to understand what it means to proclaim, as the Gospel does, that God is love.

It's a harder challenge than it sounds, because often the people that Jesus is calling us to love in their poverty are the last ones we want to serve.

These are the difficult friends, the ungrateful family members, the hostile members of our community who are just as likely to push you away as receive that love.

And yet, we are called to love in this poverty as well.

We do so, most of all, because if we ourselves have grown into the full maturity of our relationship with Jesus Christ, we will realize that without him, we are just as impoverished.

Saint Paul, the repentant sinner and persecutor of the faith, knew this better than anyone.

He preached the Gospel with a heart full of gratitude for the mercy the Lord had shown him, considering himself - as he put it in his letter to his friend Saint Timothy - foremost among sinners.

This awareness, and this same gratitude, should fill us with the same fire to go out and live out this call to mission, to meet the poverty of our world and community wherever it is found.

We should bring that question to prayer: where have we seen that poverty?

Where can we bring the love of God into their lives, even in the simplest ways?

Whatever the answer may be, our mission should begin, as always, from this place of encounter at our Lord's altar, where he fills the emptiness we carry with the presence of his love, given to us here in his beautiful sacrament of charity.

Here, he will meet our hunger, our need for healing, and our longing for true love.

We pray that through the grace of this Mass, his love won't stop here, but will touch the hearts of the weak and strong alike, that each one of us, free from the poverty of our souls, may together have a share in his Gospel.