

Historical Context

In these reflections, however, I hope to highlight just one facet of her character. She was a woman of the Word of God. This was a major source of her strength, especially in following the difficult call by God to educate women within a patriarchal society and church. In studying her life it is clear that she found strength in Eucharist, in her experience of partnership between men and women in society and the church, in her involvement in parish life, in her vision of an international community under the leadership of a woman, and in her reflection on the Word of God.

During the celebration of the Eucharist, her generation would have listened to the Epistle and Gospel read in Latin from a lectionary unchanged since the Council of Trent. The synoptic gospels would have been repeated, with particular texts used very often. This standard procedure resulted in her hearing a few selected texts over and over again.

In studying her letters I noted that her use of scripture was not limited only to those texts mentioned in the lectionary. In a sample of her 5000 letters there is evidence that she was well acquainted with the Bible. In letters to public officials as well as to sisters, clergy, friends and benefactors, she quotes scripture with the familiarity of one who has pondered another's words and makes them her own. She had put on the mind of Christ to such an extent that Christ seemed to be telling her how to negotiate with irate townspeople, or mentor her use of funds for the purpose of real estate, or decide about which horses were acceptable for the Poor School Sisters.

She was rooted in the Word of God: this guided her administration, organization, and understanding of God's will for her and for the congregation. In her last letter to the sisters before she left for the United States in 1847, she speaks of the essentials that form the spirit of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. In it she alludes to 53 different scripture texts.(1) Theresa's love for Christ and her self-confidence as a woman are rooted in her formation in the Word.

This formation in the Word of God gave her courage and determination to negotiate difficulties within the patriarchal church of Bavaria. John's Gospel is especially prominent in the Spirit animating her new congregation.(2) This devotion to John's Gospel is noteworthy when we realize it was used only rarely in the liturgy before 1960. C.H. Dodd opened up this gift of the Spirit for our age. And Mother Theresa seems to have understood the treasure hidden within it, especially for women.

At the age of 25 she wrote: "In Jesus - He has given me a part in his unspeakable mercy, his poverty, his hardship, suffering, anxiety and need. To him, now, I write this: I cannot describe my interior peace. Now I am in Jesus. May he do what he wants withme. Him will I trust. He will remain in me and I in him; on him I will build."(3)

Footnotes:

1. Hester Valentine, SSND, ed. Letters of Mother Theresa Gerhardinger: Of Spiritual Matters, (Winona: St. Mary's College Press), Letter # 714, May 30, 1847, pp.47-65.
2. "They shall, moreover, bear a special devotion to Joachim and Anna, to St. Joseph, to St. Elizabeth and to all the saints with whom the blessed Virgin had intimate (conversation) intercourse during her lifetime, especially to the Holy Apostle and Evangelist, St. John ." Holy Rule of the School Sisters Of Notre Dame , 1865, p. 68. Honoring his memory it is an SSND custom to have wine with dinner on the Feast of St. John, December 27.
3. HesterValentine, SSND, ed. Letters of Mother Theresa Gerhardinger: Of Spiritual Matters, (Winona: St. Mary's College Press), Retreat Notes, March 15, 1822, p. 13.