

CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF BLESSED TERESA OF CALCUTTA

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL 26 August 2010

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP VINCENT NICHOLS

Many years ago now I visited Albania. I remember passing through the town in which Mother Teresa was born one hundred years ago as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu.

It was not very remarkable.

What was remarkable, however, were the many signs of devastation that I saw. They are still vividly in my mind. There were acres of destroyed glass houses, once used for the production of vegetables. The glass was taken to fill empty window frames. There were miles and miles of forests, cut down to stumps, the trees taken as firewood to warm cold homes. Once the central authority of the oppressive Hoxha regime had gone, not only did the central economy fall to pieces, but there was nothing left to replace it. Somehow the people had suffered a loss of communal responsibility. They had become forgetful of mutual dependence and, of course, of the need to look ahead rather than simply meet immediate, personal, needs.

This was a tragic lesson in a failure of humanity. The potential for future prosperity destroyed out of immediate need. The capacity to work together lost by a long period of utter dependency. This, I believe, sprang from a profoundly mistaken notion of the human person. We are more than units in a centralised economy, more than units in a greater ideological plan.

I have other memories of Albania, too.

We travelled north and there met an elderly mother in her home. On the wall was her prize possession: an icon of Mary the Mother of God. She told us that throughout the forty years of the regime she had kept her icon hidden under the floor-boards of her house. Never once had she dared to bring it out. Never once had she dared to speak of it, even to her own daughters, such was the level of fear in which she lived. She was fearful indeed, but not forgetful.

In her we glimpse the stock from which Mother Teresa came. This was her family of faith, a family that formed and nurtured her in those early years.

From this one lesson is clear: when we forget God we will quickly forget the well-being of each other. When an entire system marginalises God, then a sense of the common good of all is likely to be reduced to a collective selfishness: we will do together simply what serves our own needs. The pursuit of the common good is no longer the pursuit of a good that goes beyond my own needs. It is no longer an expression of love.

Mother Teresa's greatness is her life as an enduring expression of love. She displayed for us the love spoken of by St Paul in the reading we have just heard. This love, she knew, is rooted in God, nurtured by God and given as a gift in response to God. Right

throughout her life and her words – which form the basis of so much of what is being sung during this Mass – is a simple conviction: ‘I do it all for you, Lord.’

What is also so remarkable about her is that she sustained this love even when her sense of God was dimmed, hidden or lost in darkness.

Here is her lesson for us today: that we are to persevere in faith, even when its consolations are no longer experienced. We are to persevere in love even when no love is forthcoming in return.

This is what Blessed Teresa has to teach us today, for which we thank God on this her birthday.

This lesson a faithful love comes down to us across all the ages. There is a 7th century saint, St Fulgentius, who expresses this same truth in words which appeal to me very much indeed. He writes:

‘Love is the origin and source of all good things. Whoever walks in love can neither stray nor be afraid. Love guides, love protects, love leads to the end.’

And then he adds this: ‘Christ our Lord set up for us this ladder of love and by it every Christian can climb to heaven. You must, therefore, keep a firm hold on love; you must show it to one another and by progress in it climb up to heaven.’

May the Blessed Teresa of Calcutta help us to climb this ladder of love each day.

Amen.