

Mother Teresa at the spa

What's the difference between indulgence and respite? I'd like to ask St. Teresa.

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue



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Last month I had my first taste of spa culture. We were on a week's vacation in Cape Cod in the midst of a brutal heat wave that was more than a match for the ocean breeze. I thought I could recover from the stupor induced by record-breaking heat and humidity (I started to write *humility*, which turns out to be apt) if only I could find a nice swimming pool and splash around in it for a time. The closest pool was at a nearby resort spa, but I had to buy a spa service in order to use it. And so I browsed through a long menu of possibilities: "healing seaweed body wrap," "citrus body polish," "cranberry crush," and other edible-sounding treatments, finally settling on the cheapest item, a "coastal manicure."

When I arrived I was escorted to a posh locker room where I was vested in an enormous terry-cloth robe and flip-flops, handed a glass of cold cucumber water, and treated to a tour of sauna, steam room, and dimly lit relaxation chamber. I

wondered if the staff could tell I was not to the manner born.

The pool was heavenly—a giant swimmable Jacuzzi punctuated here and there with powerful massaging jets. Along the perimeter there were terry cloth-draped lounge chairs. Umbrellas and hydrangea-covered trellises provided shade. A bronze fountain spilled into a Zen-like koi pond which a bright yellow American goldfinch visited now and then. Five or six women sipped cucumber water, nibbled on lettuce leaves, read paperback novels, chatted with friends, or waited to be called for a private cabana massage.

A few bubbles away from me in the pool, two slim, impeccably exfoliated and hydrated thirtysomething women were having a conversation I couldn't help overhearing. "I really think you should have a full living room and dining room outdoors," said one. "Absolutely," said the other, "or else you aren't making use of your outdoors. That would really be a waste!"

In my state of oceanic contentment, I pictured how lovely it would be to entertain guests in an outdoor living and dining room—the image is a little absurd, yes, and a privilege reserved for the rich—but how gracious life could be!

I could not sustain this image very long, however, for my thoughts turned to Mother Teresa, who in a short while—September 4—would be officially declared a saint. What would Mother Teresa's opinion be about the best use for the outdoor property of an elegant country home? For that matter, what would she think of my spending an afternoon soaking in the pool of an exclusive spa? These are naive questions, but that doesn't make them any easier to answer.

I thought back to a speech I heard Mother Teresa give in 1982 to the graduating seniors at Harvard. Tiny as she was (astonishingly so when escorted by the towering John Kenneth Galbraith), Mother Teresa was not shy about exhorting the students to use their gifts to serve Christ in the poor. Poverty comes in many forms, she reminded them. The unwelcome refugee, the child at risk in the womb, the difficult relative no one visits—all may be counted among the poor and served with love, even among the affluent.

But Mother Teresa demanded far more from herself. In 1942, as a nun with the Sisters of Loreto in India, she had made a private vow "not to refuse Him anything." The answer—Mother Teresa's "call within a call"—came four years later, while she was traveling by train to the Loreto retreat house in Darjeeling. Inwardly she heard

Jesus calling her to feed him in the hungry and to quench his thirst—his thirst from the cross—in those who suffer on the streets of Kolkata. The logic of Matthew 25, thus delivered in person by Jesus, was inescapable: “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?”

As for the early Christians (see Gary Anderson’s compelling account in *Charity*), so for Mother Teresa, to serve the poor would be something beyond an act of faith or duty; it would be a sacrament at one with the Eucharist. Every day of her life, Mother Teresa adored Christ in the poorest of the poor as well as in the tabernacle. She refused him nothing, and her reward was 50 years of interior desolation of the sort God seems to reserve for his greatest friends (“no wonder You have so few of them,” Teresa of Ávila famously remarked).

Perhaps there was an element of natural burnout in Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul. St. Teresa, now that your long dark night is over, would you consent to spend a few hours with us worldlings, soaking in a spa pool? Would you condemn it as a luxury stolen from the poor? Now that you are in heaven, can you help us discern the difference between a sinful indulgence and a permitted respite? Pray for us, St. Teresa, and help us to learn the small part we are being asked to play in the drama of God’s infinite generosity.

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