

From the archives: David Steinmetz on Mother Teresa

By [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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Shortly before David Steinmetz died last November, I saw him at a wedding that I was officiating. In the homily I told the story of one of my favorite *Century* articles—[an essay that Steinmetz wrote in 2007](#) about Mother Teresa’s struggles with doubt.

Steinmetz claims that sainthood (in this life) is difficult because saintly people are so acutely aware of the reality of sin. It makes sense that God would seem absent to such a person, so certain is she of her shortcomings. But spiritual struggles are actually a sign that the Christian is taking her faith seriously. “From time to time,” Steinmetz writes,

everyone endures a barren period in the life of faith. Prayers bounce off the ceiling unanswered. Hymns stick in one’s throat, and whatever delight one once felt in the contemplation or worship of God withers away.

Martin Luther named this reality as *Anfechtungen*, and later Søren Kierkegaard would call it *Anfaegtelse*. Both terms contain the word *fight*—although for neither Luther nor Kierkegaard is it entirely clear whether the Christian is fighting against the doubts, the devil, God, or some combination of the three. As Steinmetz frequently reminded his students, the line between God hidden and God revealed is flimsy. Often God’s yes sounds strikingly like *no*.

Mother Teresa experienced deep spiritual struggles. She also continued to wash dirty feet, tend wounds, and feed hungry people. During times of doubt, Steinmetz urges,

Christians should “do what is in them”—that is, they should keep on keeping on. They should keep on with their prayers, their hymns of praise and their daily round of duties. . . .

To such people, “God does not deny grace.”

It's not that the hymns and duties *earn* us God's grace. But they're as much a part of the Christian life as are the deep existential questions that keep us awake at night. Surrounding both—the doubts and the acts of love—is the divine gift of sanctity.

Far from being denied grace, [Mother Teresa will be canonized as a saint on Sunday](#). It's unclear what she would have thought of her canonization. But she would undoubtedly agree with Steinmetz on this: although tangible works of love don't always dissipate the troublesome shadows of *Anfechtungen*, for all of us “the grace that was in the beginning will be at the end as well.”