

Educational Aspects in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

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Abstract: *Despite of its importance and of the multiple possible outcomes, spiritual autobiography has not been enough valorised until now by the theological, philological, philosophical or historical research. Conscious on this fact, we will try there to bring into attention an important work of the genre, namely the spiritual autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-2003), founder of the famous Congregation of Catholic sisters, "Missionaries of Charity." Moreover, we will investigate there a relevant aspect not only for the style and content of her work, but also for the contemporary society, namely the education and its role. We will try to emphasize there the multiple forms of education that can be found and to see what is the relationship between education, revelation and act according to the Catholic religions. We will also try to see the similitudes and differences between the investigated text and other coming from the same or from different confessional backgrounds and to create, where it will be possible, bridges between spiritualities.*

Keywords: "Missionaries of Charity," love for poor, India, Catholic spirituality, vision.

Introduction

In the Catholic space, spiritual autobiography knows, as it has been already mentioned in another researches,¹ an important role. Works like the one of Saint Augustine, Saint Teresa of Avila, but also many other of medieval mystical writers can be considered as part of this genre. In the recent history of the Church, together with Faustina Kowalska² and Saint Pope John Paul the Second, Mother Teresa of Calcutta can be for sure considered a representative author. Reading her notes, an author can find, like in the ones of Dag Hammarskjöld from the Lutheran Swedish space,³ or Nicolas Berdiaev⁴ and Saint John of Kronstadt⁵ from the Orthodox one, aspects of political theology,⁶

¹ Like: Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The Spiritual Autobiography in the Eastern space in the second half of the XIXth and XXth century", in rev. *Astra Salvensis*, III (2015), Supplement no. 1, p. 166-174; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "An interdisciplinary genre in the Theological Literature: the spiritual autobiography and its landmarks for the Orthodox space," in *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, VIII (2018), no. 1, p. 145-150.

² Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 233.

³ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Dag Hammarskjöld," in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, LXXIV (2018), no. 4, a4857, p. 1.

⁴ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Saint John of Kronstadt (1829–1908)", in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, LXXIV (2018), no. 4, a4993, p. 1-5.

⁵ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiography of Nicolas Berdiaev," in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, LXXV (2019), no. 4, a5316, p. 1-4.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta can be surely considered an important writer that provided such a text. Entitled simply, *My life*,⁷ her autobiography was destined to be useful to the sisters in their activity of formation inside the congregation, but it was also to represent a testimony of the authenticity of her call and work. Due to the fact that in the biography entitled *Come be my light*⁸ contains a rich amount of unpublished letters where she describes not only her work, but also the call, the mission entrusted to her and presents aspects related with her interior life, we consider that this work can be considered too as her spiritual autobiography or, at least, as an appendix to it. Therefore, those two texts will constitute the main sources of our approach. We will try there, by using them, to present the way how education is reflected inside her notes and to speak about its role for the mystical and practical life of the aforementioned religious.

Educational Aspects in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

As Father Brian Kolodiejchuk underlines in the foreword of the biography dedicated to the religious, Mother Teresa, "considered herself only a pencil in God's hands and she was convinced that God used her by her "nothing" to show his Majesty."⁹ Therefore, when one wants to speak about the role of the education for her spiritual autobiography, must surely start from the revelation and its role.

She was, as it is already known, a woman to whom Jesus spoke directly,¹⁰ transmitting a clear message. This was in fact, the source of her trust in God, when she started the work with the pours, as she underlines:

"I have just leaved Loreto Congregation and found myself on the street, with a total lack of a place that is mine, without company, help, money, occupation, promises or any material certitude of warranty.

Therefore, on my lips, it came this prayer:

"You, My God! Only You! I trust Your call and Your inspiration. I am sure that You will never abandon me."¹¹

⁶ Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Aspects of political theology in the spiritual autobiographies of the Orthodox space?: New potential keys of lecture?," in *Astra Salvensis*, V (2017), no. 10, p. 129-134.

⁷ Teresa di Calcutta, *La mia vita*, Milano, Rusconi, 1990.

⁸ We will use there the Italian version of the book. See: Madre Teresa, *Sii la Mia luce*, a cura di Brian Kolodiejchuk, Milano, M. C., Rizzoli, 2007.

⁹ Brian Kolodiejchuk, "Prefazione," in Madre Teresa, *Sii la Mia luce*, a cura di Brian Kolodiejchuk, Milano, M. C., Rizzoli, 2007, p. 9.

¹⁰ "Mother Teresa is among the Saints that Jesus chose to speak directly, asking them to realise a special mission among His sons. Since the beginning of this extraordinary experience, Mother Teresa has not had even the minimum doubt that Jesus spoken her. Therefore, speaking about those supernatural messages, in the most of the situations used the expression "the voice." Madre Teresa, *Sii la Mia luce*, p. 55.

It was this revelation that it must surely be seen as a form of education. In other words, God educates young sister Teresa speaking to her, presenting His plans and giving her the strength to follow all the instructions. It will be thanks to this education that the Albanese nun will see the superiority of the spiritual aspects over the material ones and, although she will work apparently more with the body weakness and poverty,¹² she will note that the spiritual poverty of the Western World is much profound that the material one of the poor states:

"The spiritual poverty of the Western World is much greater than the physical poverty of our people. You, in the West, have millions of people who suffer so terrible loneliness and emptiness. They feel unloved and unwanted. These people are not hungry in the psychical sense, but they are in another way. They know they need something more than money, yet they don't know what it is. What they are missing, really, is a living relationship with God."¹³

This conclusion of somebody who known so well the realities of the Western and Eastern World, is for sure the result of a real revelation, and the one of a revelation that surely helped the sister to develop a special way of thinking, educated her.¹⁴ Of course, like it usually happens in the educational process, God, called "The Voice" by Teresa, sometimes scarred her. Like Saint Paul in the 12th chapter of Saint Paul's First Letter to Corinthians, she will be not only amazed by the mission entrusted, but also scared. The fear will come from the fact that she was aware of her possibilities, the minuses that she had, but also about the context of her work. Therefore, as she will note in one of the days after the revelation:

"Those words, or better, this "Voice" scarred me. The thought of eating, sleeping, living like in India, gave me great fear. I prayed for a long time, I prayed so much, I ask to Mary our Mother to ask Jesus to remove all these from me. The more I prayed, the more the "Voice" in my heart became clearer; therefore I started to pray that he makes me what he wanted. I asked and asked this again, repeatedly."¹⁵

Of course, it would be the same education, manifested towards new dialogues with the voice, that will help her to overcome the inside difficulties

¹¹ Teresa di Calcutta, *La mia vita*, p. 29. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 235.

¹² David Paul Deavel, "Preface," in *Logos – a Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, XXII (2019), no. 2, p. 6.

¹³ Teresa di Calcutta, *La mia vita*, p. 108-109.

¹⁴ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 237.

¹⁵ Madre Teresa, *Sii la Mia luce*, p. 60.

and to accomplish her mission, bringing Christ in the souls of the abandoned ones and providing love, care and education to them.

Another aspect related with the education that should surely be mentioned there is her activity. Educated person, Teresa of Calcutta will study and in Loreto Congregation will teach topics like religion or geography. In fact, the congregation that she firstly joined was through her mission dedicated to this aspect. The mission was the one to provide education in areas where this was not a fact that could be ensured by the state. After her departure from there, her commitment to education and her ideas about the relevance of the study and the teaching process did not change.¹⁶ She will continue to teach the poor children that didn't have this possibility and, she will study too, being very conscious of the value of a concept that become just recently important, namely the "*long live learning process.*"/*long live learning process.* The first school of the "Missionaries of Charity" will be under a three trench and later, when the number of pupils will increase, she will move it inside of a room. The education will be also important for ill children and thanks to this reason, her first school will be dedicated to the ill people and will be founded in Moti Jihl.¹⁷

It would be also interesting to say the fact that she took education in serious being a very good teacher. This fact helped her in the mission. The first sisters that will join her and will offer a precious help in the activity, will be her previous students.¹⁸

And it surely must be said that the education was an important element for the Congregation life not because was one of its "products." Mother Teresa, as it also does it now¹⁹ will not only help and teach only children, but also the sisters inside her congregation. The understanding of the mission of the sisterhood and the efficiency of its work where, like are in most of the situations, related with a good education. Therefore, for the noviciate, she prepared a very good education process. A non-formal one, based rather on the understanding of the value of the virtues and on the relevance of a deep relationship with Christ, but still an educational one. Therefore, speaking about the constitution of the "Missionaries of Charity," after describing the main vestimentary elements, the mission and other aspects, she will speak about the process of receiving new potential vocations, showing that:

"We try to teach from the first moment all the young ladies that wish to become part of our congregation to transform work in prayer, to understand Christ and to do it for him. This work wakes up inside her the love for Jesus and

¹⁶ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Saint Faustina Kowalska and Saint Teresa of Calcutta – two authors of spiritual autobiographies from Catholic space of the 20th century" in *Astra Salvensis*, VII (2019), no. 13, p. 241.

¹⁷ Teresa di Calcutta, *La mia vita*, p. 31.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁹ Cf. J. M. Silveyra, "Lo spirito di Madre Teresa mi ha aiutato nella sofferenza," in *Asia News*, XXXIII (2019), no. 321 (2), p. 20-21.

brings them the possibility to discover him under the face burdened by pain of the poorest poor, just as we meet it under the image of the Eucharistic Bread."²⁰

The wish for God and God alone²¹ inside the own life was the purpose of Mother Teresa and it must be the one of all the sisters that are part of the congregation that she founded. But in order to dedicate yourself to Him and to accomplish His mission, a good education is needed. And it is not only the formal and practical education that matters. Education regarding the spiritual life and spiritual aspects is also very important. This is the reason why Saint Ignatio of Loyola left a handbook of exercises that are meant to guide the one who want to make progresses in the spiritual life.²² This is the reason why, Saint Teresa of Avila and many other spoken about their spiritual experience focusing not on the way how they arrived to the revelations, but on the road, the temptations and the middles that can be used in order to avoid them. Mother Teresa of Calcutta does the same,²³ in order to help the sisters. She is conscious that education creates sensibility and this is a main task in understanding God and the faith, in going deep in the relationships with others:

"I cannot forget it anymore: once arrived to our house of moribund from Calcutta an atheist. A few moments before his arrival, diverse people have brought inside a man collected from the street (maybe they had collected him in a sewer or in a garbage dump, since it was covered with worms). Here there was a sister that was sitting nearby him, without seeing that one was watching how she was touching the inferno, was watching her, was smiling and all the rest. By chance, I also was there in this moment. The atheist was sitting and observing the sister. In one moment, he came nearby me and told me: I have arrived there without God. I could see the love of God in action.³⁰I saw Him in the hands of that sister, in her face, in her youth attitude, in her love for this sick people. Yes, Mother, now I believe!"²⁴

Either that in order to see the inner dimension of the spirituality, or to understand Christ and accomplish the mission, or for other reasons, education was therefore important for Mother Teresa and this is proved by the fact that inside her spiritual autobiography there can be found many references to the topic.

²⁰ Teresa di Calcutta, *La mia vita*, p. 45.

²¹ "I want only God inside my life. The work is truly and only His. He asked for it, He told me what I had to do, He guided each of my steps, coordinated each of my moves, put His words on my lips, made me teach the road to the sisters. All these and everything in me is His. It is this the reason why when everybody prays me, in reality, this does not touch even the surface of my heart. Regarding the Work, I am convinced that all of it comes from Him." Madre Teresa, *Sii la Mia luce*, p. 217-218.

²² Saint Ignazio de Loyola, *Exerciții spirituale*, Iași, Polirom, 1996.

²³ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The Spiritual Autobiography in the Eastern space in the second half of the XIXth and XXth century", în rev. *Astra Salvensis*, III (2015), Supplement no. 1, p. 169.

²⁴ Teresa di Calcutta, *La mia vita*, p. 78.

Conclusion

As we could see, education is a very important topic for the mystical life and for the notes of the investigated religious. Not only for catechetical reasons, as somebody may be tempted to think as a first glance, but also for reasons of understanding, changing life and opening the heart in front of Jesus, education is an indispensable element. This is the reason why, Mother Teresa often speaks about it.

It is also interesting to see the complexity of the concept and the multiplicity of the dimensions of education that can be found in her work. As we have tried to show, the main important face of the education in her biography is the revelation. Christ speaks and educates her, teaches her what she needs to do and she is a good disciple. In the same time, sometimes He frightens or encourages, depending of the context. And she is a model of disciple because she understands that all her work, all the activity of the congregation belongs to Him and was realized thanks to him. In the same time, she underlines the role of the education both for the noviciate, because it offers the possibility to understand Jesus, to love him and to find the inside vocation to the sisters, but also for people and children. For them, education represents the gate to a new and better world, because it can change their way of understanding things or their way of life. In the same time, it is an useful tool for understanding Gospel and the future of the society.

Therefore, like in many other spiritual autobiographies,²⁵ in the one of Mother Teresa, educational aspects have a very important place and thanks to this aspect, she emphasizes there multiple aspects of them. If the contemporary theology would use them in the educational process and the educational sphere would use them not only for their theological content, this would surely create a bridge between theology and spirituality and will help both sciences to find new possibilities to solve their problems or contribute to the creation of a better world.

²⁵ Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "Educational aspects in the spiritual autobiography from the Orthodox space of the 19th and 20th centuries", in Ion Albulescu, Adriana-Denisa Manea, Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Education, Religion, Family in Contemporary Society - Proceedings of the Conference*, Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017, p. 113. Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, "The Spiritual Autobiography in the Eastern space in the second half of the XIXth and XXth century", in rev. *Astra Salvensis*, III (2015), Supplement no. 1, p. 171.