

## *In The Trenches*

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I just finished the book *THEY CALLED HER THE BARONESS* by Lorene Duquin, the new biography of Catherine DeHueck Doherty, foundress of Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario. Madonna House is a Secular Institute devoted to living the gospel without compromise, and bringing the good news of God's love to the world. Sound familiar? It should. Do we need to join Madonna House to do this? No, but if we really mean it, if we really believe it we must be ready to suffer the way of the cross.

This is a scary thought. I'm not good at suffering; I don't like it at all. But every day when I pray, I ask for it. I don't come right out and say it, as in "Please, Lord, let me suffer terribly today", but every time I ask the Lord to guide me along his paths, to show me his will, to draw me closer to Him, to help me grow in holiness, I ask Him to let me carry my cross, and we all know what happened on Calvary, so following my prayer to its logical conclusion, I am asking to be crucified. And after reading the life of Catherine Doherty, I realize that only a fool would ask for this.

So, welcome to the lunatic fringe.

Welcome to the few, the brave and the foolish. I have to smile as I write these words, because there is a particular joy in being part of this fringe. A sort of chuckle at the expense of the many, the cautious and the worldly wise. I chuckle like a child with a secret, because I want the hidden wisdom of God and it has been offered to me. But as real as the joy is, I also cry like a child in pain, when my prayers are answered and the suffering comes as I am purified and molded into perfection, moment by moment, over days and years.

God is very patient with me, and infinitely merciful, for like a child, I long to grasp and hold tight to the dream of heaven, but shiver in fear when the clouds gather and I have nowhere to run from the nightmares of the cross. I ask for and accept, and run away from and hide, and peek out from and timidly venture forth, always begging "Lord have mercy", even as I sigh "Thy will be done".

It is such a good thing I am not God. I would have given up on me a long time ago.

As I read the life of Catherine, I marveled at the incredible suffering she endured, and how that suffering fine tuned her focus on the gospel and forged an inner strength that gave her the energy to carry on her work. Her work was monumental, done on a grand scale, big and forceful and significant. But it was not that way to her. To her, the work of the Lord was little, incremental, humble. To Catherine, as to Francis, whose spirit she shared, the work of building the kingdom was one living stone upon another, grace upon nature, God's power in her weakness.

Yes, her life was filled with suffering. It seems that she had it all, war, persecution, famine, cruelty in marriage, separation from her only child, terrible jobs, grinding poverty, the misunderstanding of friends and colleagues, oppression by the church hierarchy, and one crisis of faith after another. But the things she suffered most were the things we all suffer on our journey with Jesus.

She knew she was stubborn, proud, at times vainglorious. She was from Russia, with an Eastern slant to her thoughts and actions, and grappled with the culture of the west all her adult life. She was bossy and domineering in many ways, sometimes set a double standard which angered her coworkers, often spoke out of turn, with a passion that both drew people to Christ even as it alienated them from her. In short, she was human, and in the true revelation of the cross carried the burden of her failings every moment of her life.

But she persevered, as we persevere. She worked hard, as we work hard, maybe a lot harder. Her life, like the lives of all the saints was a tapestry woven with both light and dark threads, just like our lives. She did not suffer well. She cried out in her suffering, she asked why, she even contemplated suicide more than once. But every time she was tempted beyond her strength, God presented Himself to her as an irresistible lover, and she fell into His arms in surrender.

As for her work, she believed in the "duty of the moment." To her no task was too humble, no work too insignificant to merit a place in the will of God. If cooking was what was needed, then, cooking was done, or cleaning or organizing files, or lecturing or writing, or even just sitting around talking to her neighbors. Whatever the Lord asked at the moment was sacred and gracious.

She never gave up her grand visions and dreams, though she was thwarted at every turn. The lesson she learned from her suffering was the lesson of the cross. She died over and over so the seed of God's grace could be born in her over and over. She felt she had a mandate from God, and that her mission in the world was to "love, love, love, never counting the cost."

This could be our mission, our mandate. We could read her biography and say, this is for me, this is what I want. Or we could, as she did, turn to God the Lover and surrender ourselves directly into His heart, and allow Love to dictate our own direction, allow God to write our own mandate. It may come to pass that we find ourselves living a life similar to Catherine Doherty's life. We may even find ourselves at Madonna House. But the true test of our surrender will be the suffering of the cross, whatever way we live our lives, whatever "duty of the moment" we find.

We want to know the joy of the Resurrection, how we long for that, how we pray on our knees for that. And it is ours for the having. But we must be brave and foolish, and sadly, few. We must like Francis, embrace not only the leper, but the cross. It is the only way to know the Giver well enough to understand the gift.