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A BIOGRAPHER'S TRIBUTE

Navin B. Chawla looks back on his twenty- three-year-long association with Mother Teresa



Mother Teresa, with whom I had 23 years of association, was a multi-dimensional figure, both simple and complex at the same time. Mother Teresa's work — indeed the continuing work of the Sisters and Brothers of the Missionaries of Charity — became possible because she saw in each person she ministered to a manifestation of her God. So, whether it was taking care of an abandoned infant on a Calcutta street, or a homeless destitute sleeping on a cold wintry night in a cardboard box under London's Waterloo Bridge, or the hungry standing in silent queues in a Vatican Square, awaiting their only hot meal from Mother

Teresa's *sashram* adjoining the papal audience chamber, all this could become possible only out of her deepest conviction that she was ministering to her God.

Mother Teresa, once described as a "religious imperialist" and more universally regarded as a saint, was at many levels a very ordinary woman, yet someone who led one of the most extraordinary lives of her century. Armed with an abundance of faith, she proceeded a small step at a time; by the time she passed away in 1997, she had established a multinational organization in 123 countries that served her special constituency of the homeless, destitute, hungry and dying. In the process, she became one of the world's principal conscience keepers.

Although she herself remained fiercely Catholic, her brand of religion was not exclusive. Convinced that each person she ministered to was Christ in suffering, she reached out to people of all faiths. The very faith that sustained her infuriated her detractors who saw her as a symbol of a right-wing conspiracy and, worse, the principal mouthpiece of the Vatican's well-known views against abortion. Interestingly, such criticism went largely unnoticed in India, where she was widely revered.

As her biographer, I confronted her with the stinging accusation that she accepted money for her work from some rather dubious characters. Her answer was concise: "I have never asked anybody for money. I take no salary, no government grant, no church assistance, nothing. But everyone has a right to give. I have no right to judge anybody. God alone has that right." The Missionaries of Charity remains perhaps the only global charitable organization that explicitly forbids fund-raising. "I do convert," she once said to me when she was accused of converting Hindus to Catholicism. "I convert you to become a better Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist or Protestant. When you have found God, it is up to you to do with Him what you wish."

She once told me that leaving the Loreto Convent at Entally in Calcutta (where she was a teacher and then principal of a school for orphans and poorer children within the convent), was even more difficult than leaving home. A European woman wearing a cheap *sari*, with neither money nor helper, must have presented a strange sight in 1948, when she stepped out of the convent. This did not deter her from entering a slum, gathering a few children around her, picking up a stick and drawing the letters of the Bengali alphabet on the ground. People recognized goodness when they saw it. Soon, someone donated a chair, another a blackboard, teachers volunteered their services until her little school became a reality. From school to dispensary to a home for the dying where the poor could die in peace and some dignity, within two years, Mother Teresa became a well-known name among her chosen people, the poorest of the poor.

I once called her the most powerful woman in the world. She replied: "Where? If I was, I would bring peace to the world." I asked her why she did not use her undeniable influence to lessen war. She replied: "War is the fruit of politics. If I get stuck in politics, I will stop loving. Because I will have to stand by one, not by all."

The large bequests and donations were gratefully received and immediately ploughed into wherever the need was most pressing, from leprosy stations spread across Asia and Africa to homes for orphans and disabled children all over the world. Yet, it was the “sacrifice money” that she never forgot — the Calcutta beggar who emptied his day’s earnings of a few coins into her hands; the young Hindu couple who loved each other so much yet refused a marriage feast so that they could offer her the money they thus saved.

When Mother Teresa was alive, I had expressed concern to her whether the organization she had built from scratch had not overly grown and whether it would be difficult to sustain after she passed on. I had seen several other organizations begin to wither away soon after their charismatic founders became either physically debilitated or died. Why would this Order be any different, I asked? The first time I posed this question to her, she merely smiled and pointed her fingers heavenwards. The second time I asked, she set my question aside with a smile saying, “Let me go first.” On my persistence, some weeks later, she finally answered, “You have been to so many of our ‘homes’ (branches) in India and abroad. Everywhere the Sisters wear the same *saris*, eat the same kind of food, do the same work, but Mother Teresa is not everywhere, yet the work goes on.” Then she added, “As long as we remain committed to the poorest of the poor and don’t end up serving the rich, the work will prosper.”

There were so many things that Mother Teresa would say or explain to me in her simple unaffected way during my association with her that have become more meaningful to me as time passed. My relationship with her grew into trust and confidence in the way that a *guru-shishya* relationship develops, often deepening with increased understanding. In the beginning, when Mother Teresa spoke to me, or spoke in public, it seemed to me that she spoke everyday truths, and they seemed much too simple. My mind accepted them largely because of the respect in which I held her — a respect intensified because there was no difference between her words and her deeds, between her precepts and her practice, and the fact that she could understand the poor because she was poor herself. But, over the years, the deeper meaning of her words in their spiritual sense gradually began to be applied by me in my day-to-day life, and began to affect my inner being.

The last time I met Mother Teresa was in Delhi a few months before she died. She was on her way back from America to her beloved Calcutta and stopped for a few hours to change planes. She spoke then of simple things, of loving, caring and sharing. She held my hand in hers and said, “You must always work for the poor and the good of all people. You must continue to touch the poor.”

John Sannes, then chairman of the Nobel committee, summed up her work with these words: “The hallmark of her work has been respect for the individual and the individual’s worth and dignity. The loneliest and the most wretched, the dying destitute, the abandoned lepers, have all been received by her and her Sisters with warm compassion devoid of condescension, based on her reverence for Christ in man... In her eyes, the person who, in the accepted sense, is the recipient, is also the giver and the one who gives the most, Giving — giving something of oneself — is what confers real joy, and the person who is allowed to give is the one who receives the most precious gift.... This is the life of Mother Teresa and her Sisters, a life of strict poverty and long days and nights of toil — a life that affords little room for other joys but the most precious.”

The author is the chief election commissioner of India and his book, *Mother Teresa: The authorized biography*, was first published in 1992