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The miracle of faith

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"The work goes on," Mother Teresa answered when asked what would happen to the Missionaries of Charity after her death. "As long as we remain committed to the poorest of the poor and do not end up serving the rich, the work will prosper."

Once described as a 'religious imperialist' and more commonly regarded as a saint, Mother Teresa was at many levels a very ordinary woman, yet someone who led one of the most extraordinary lives of her century. Armed only with an abundance of faith, she proceeded one small step at a time. By the time she passed away 10 years ago, she had established a multinational organisation in over 123 countries that served her special constituency of destitution: the aband oned, homeless, hungry, and dying. In the process, she became one of the world's principal conscience keepers.

Although she herself remained staunchly 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 was largely unnoticed in India, where there has always been great reverence for holiness, and where people admired and respected her irrespective of her faith or their own.

My first meeting with Mother Teresa, in 1975, left the experience indelibly printed on my mind. That morning I had accompanied Delhi's Lieutenant Governor, with whom I was then attached, to her home for the destitute. I was taken aback when I came face to face with her. She was smaller than I had imagined, dressed in a spotless, hand-woven sari that was neatly darned in several places. Her back even then was bent. I noticed that her feet were twisted and her hands were gnarled, testimony to her arduous life in the streets and slums.

Her words moved me profoundly. She spoke of simple things, of loving, caring and sharing. She seemed at many levels a very ordinary woman. Yet she was a powerful communicator and reached straight into the heart of those who were listening to her. Within a short while I realised that she was no different from those she served, for she and her Sisters seemed to be as poor as those surrounding us.

About two weeks later there was a knock on my door. It was Mother Teresa. She was there to petition the Lieutenant Governor. She spoke to him about the stigma that the leprosy affected faced. If she could be given a little land, she could build a centre to house, treat, and rehabilitate them. Before she left that morning she had secured his approval for ten acres of land!

She was an excellent administrator. She had the unerring instinct of realising who could help her in her task in the shortest possible time. For she had little time to waste. She was always well organised. When she started her first little school in 1948, she had no help, no companion, no money. But that didn't deter her from going to the slum adjoining the Loreto Convent, where she had taught for 17 years as a teacher, then the Principal, now to teach the children there who had no access to a school. She simply picked up a stick and wrote out the letters of the Bengali alphabet on the ground. Gradually more children gathered around her, followed by their parents. People recognised goodness where they saw it; someone contributed a chair, another a blackboard. The Loreto teachers volunteered to teach. Soon her little school became a reality.

Many years later but in much the same spirit, she wanted to start a soup kitchen in North London. The bishop offered her a derelict church. The Sisters went from shop to shop in the neighbourhood to beg for vegetables and food. Within a week shopkeepers themselves came forward to offer their surplus. On an average day the Sisters fed 500 of London's poorest their only hot meal of the day.

The biography I wrote on Mother was a complete accident. I had known her for a number of years and helped her with her concerns in Delhi. In all that time it never struck me to write a book. One day when we were in conversation she said something enormously funny and we both laughed. It was then that I remarked that none of the books that I had read about her had brought out that side of her personality. Perhaps I should write a book, I said. She was not inclined to agree: "So many books have already been written." I blurted out: "Why, Mother, does one have to be a Catholic, can't a bureaucrat and a Hindu write?" I immediately regretted my words and fell into an embarrassed silence. However, she took that seriously and said: "All right, but don't write about me, write about the work."

She cooperated fully except in areas of her personal life. Whenever I visited, she would pick up the thread and continue. She would proceed to answer my questions and give me letters of introduction. I met her early associates and contemporaries and from them put together her early days and her two decades as a Loreto nun. But attempts to draw her out on her childhood and her family met with little success. Her reason was summarised in the words: "I am nothing but a pencil in the hands of the Lord. I am an imperfect instrument." Invariably, she would nudge me towards her current occupations.

She had critics. There was criticism about her accepting money from some dodgy characters. I asked her about it. She said without a moment's hesitation: "I accept no salary, no government grant, no church assistance, nothing. But how can I refuse anyone who chooses to give money in an act of charity? How is this different from the thousands of people who each day feed the poor? My task is to give peace to people. I would never refuse." The large bequests and donations were gratefully received and immediately ploughed into wherever the need was most pressing, from leprosy stations spread over Asia and Africa to homes for orphans and disabled children all over the world. Yet it was the "sacrifice money" that she remembered — the Kolkata beggar who emptied his day's earnings into her hands; the little boy who did not eat sugar for three days and pressed into her hand the rupee he had saved.

She was also criticised for conversion. Yet in all the 23 years I knew her she never even whispered such a suggestion. However, I asked her if she did convert. Her answer was direct. "I convert," she said. "I convert you to be a better Hindu, a better Muslim, a better Protestant, a better Sikh. Once you have found God, it

is up to you to do with Him as you wish." She believed that conversion was God's work, not hers.

It was also said that the children given for adoption were baptised. Yet, only those children intended for Christian families were and are baptised. Ninety per cent of children continue to go to middle class Hindu families. For Mother Teresa, baptising such children would have been a sin she would never have committed. In the Home for the Dying, the last rites continue to be performed on those who die according to their known faith. Muslim bodies are handed over to the local anjuman for burial. Christians are buried by the Christian rites. All other bodies are cremated at Kalighat.

What would happen to her mission when she passed away, I asked her. She laughed and said, "Let me go first." I asked again and this time she replied: "You have been to so many of our 'homes' [missions] 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 do not end up serving the rich, the work will prosper."

I once called her the most powerful woman in the world. "Where?" she replied, and added, "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 very last time that I met Mother Teresa was in July of 1997, two months before she died. Because she passed through Delhi unexpectedly, very few people knew of her transit, which is why I was able to spend several hours with her. During those hours, she recapitulated simple things: loving, caring, and sharing. She reminded me of my promise that I would not leave government service, as I had wanted to do some years earlier. She reminded me that I must work for the poor and the good of all people. "You must continue to touch the poor," were among her last words to me in private. This was a part of the legacy she left to me.

(Navin Chawla, an Election Commissioner of India and a former IAS officer, is the author of Mother Teresa*, a biography first published in 1992 and available in 14 languages round the world. This article commemorates Mothe r Teresa's 97th birth anniversary, August 26.)*