

Bl. Teresa of Calcutta

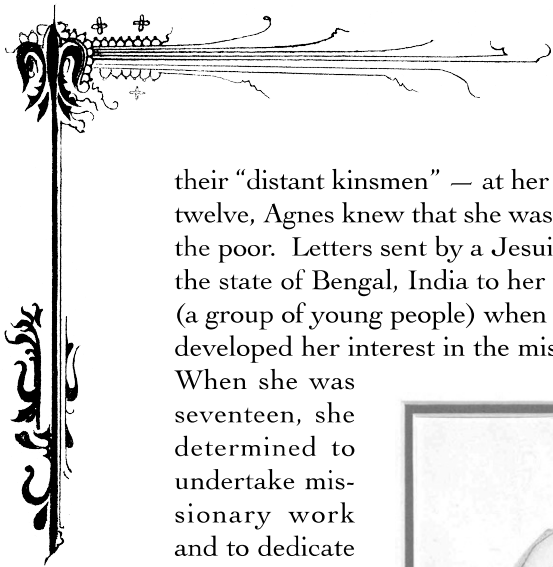


BORN 1910; DIED 1997
VIRGIN, RELIGIOUS, AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: SEPTEMBER 5

IN THE GOSPEL, Jesus says that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable: “*Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?*” And the King will answer them, “*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*” (Mt 25:37-40). In the twentieth century, no one more exemplified the call of Jesus

to love him in every person in need than Bl. Teresa of Calcutta.

Agnes was the youngest of three children, a son and two daughters, of Nikollë Bojaxhiu, a grocer and building contractor, and his wife Dranafille Bernai, Albanians who had settled in Skopje (now the capital of the Republic of Macedonia), a city with few Catholics. Skopje underwent military conquest in World War I when Agnes was five. When she was eight her father died, and her mother supported the family with an embroidery and fabric business. A deeply faithful Catholic, Dranafille created a happy home and taught charity to her children, often feeding the poor —



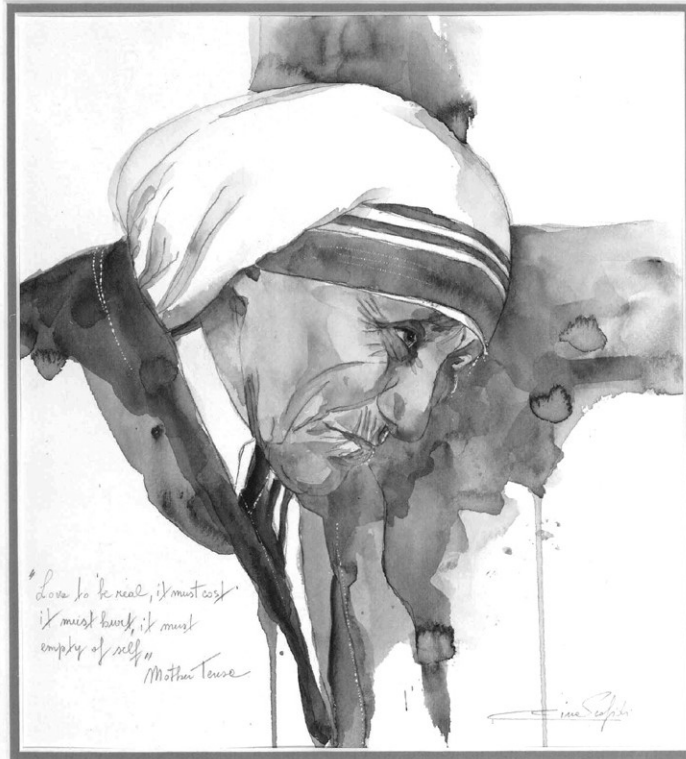
their “distant kinsmen” — at her own table. By twelve, Agnes knew that she was called to assist the poor. Letters sent by a Jesuit missionary in the state of Bengal, India to her parish sodality (a group of young people) when she was fifteen developed her interest in the missions in India. When she was seventeen, she determined to undertake missionary work and to dedicate herself completely to God and to serving souls. Her mother told her to “put your hands in his hands and walk all the way with him.” Her pastor put her in touch with the Irish Branch of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (the Loreto Sisters), which operated schools in Bengal.

Several months later, Agnes traveled to Ireland, where she learned some English. A few months later, she was sent to Bengal, where she took the name Teresa in honor of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, named a few years earlier the patroness of foreign missions. In addition to English, she mastered Bengali. For fifteen years, she taught geography and catechism at St. Mary’s Bengali Medium (high) School in Calcutta, a largely Hindu city with a sizeable Muslim population but few Catholics. Although Calcutta was not within a war zone in World War II, it was a military headquarters and her convent became a hospital. A terrible war-induced famine in 1942-1943

killed between one and two million people in Bengal.

In 1946, when Teresa, then thirty-six and principal of St. Mary’s for two years, was traveling by train, she heard God’s voice asking her to help the poorest of the poor, a call strengthened over

the next several months by interior visions and God’s voice. (This was also a period of increasing agitation for India’s independence from British rule, which culminated in late 1947 in the establishment of the states of India and Pakistan. The partition of the subcontinent between Hindu and Muslim populations cost a million people their lives and ten million their homes, brought a

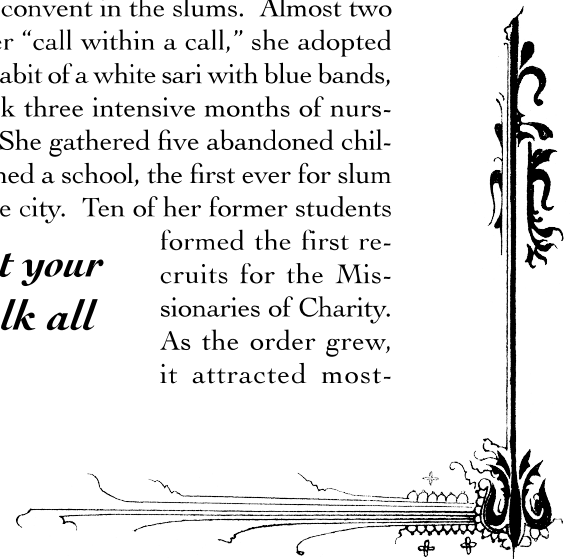


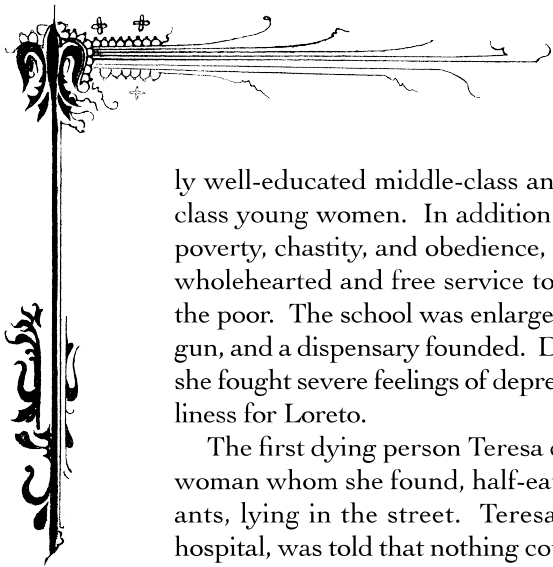
Mother Teresa, by Rina Scafidi

flood of Hindu refugees to Calcutta, and caused a collapse of the city’s services.) In 1948, she laid the foundation of the Missionaries of Charity (MC), and then waited for permission to be released from her vows as a Loreto nun and to live outside a convent in the slums. Almost two years after her “call within a call,” she adopted the religious habit of a white sari with blue bands, and undertook three intensive months of nursing training. She gathered five abandoned children and opened a school, the first ever for slum children in the city. Ten of her former students

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formed the first recruits for the Missionaries of Charity. As the order grew, it attracted most-





ly well-educated middle-class and some upper-class young women. In addition to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, each nun vows wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor. The school was enlarged, a second begun, and a dispensary founded. During this time she fought severe feelings of depression and loneliness for Loreto.

The first dying person Teresa cared for was a woman whom she found, half-eaten by rats and ants, lying in the street. Teresa took her to a hospital, was told that nothing could be done for her, and stayed at her side until she died. She raised funds for a shelter where people could die with dignity, and in 1952 opened Nirmal Hriday Home for Dying Destitutes. Taking only those whom hospitals refused, the emphasis was on providing gentle care and cleanliness in an atmosphere of dignity and love. Another notable project was the community of Shantinagar, where on land granted by the Indian government lepers built their own homes and undertook gainful work. As the number of Missionaries of Charity grew, she was able to extend their services to other parts of India. In 1965, the Pope allowed the order to expand outside India. Today the Missionaries of Charity consists of not only the working nuns but also working brothers, contemplative nuns and brothers, and priests. The International Association of Co-Workers of Mother Teresa and hundreds of thousands of lay volunteers supplement the work of the over four thousand nuns, and four hundred brothers and priests, at over seven hundred sites of service worldwide.

The wide variety of assistance for the poor and sick, including homes for the poor, schools, orphanages, mobile leprosy clinics, homes for alcoholics and drug addicts, AIDS hospices, and care of physically and mentally handicapped people, is financed by private donations, foundations, and the one hundred twenty-four awards given to Teresa, including the Nobel

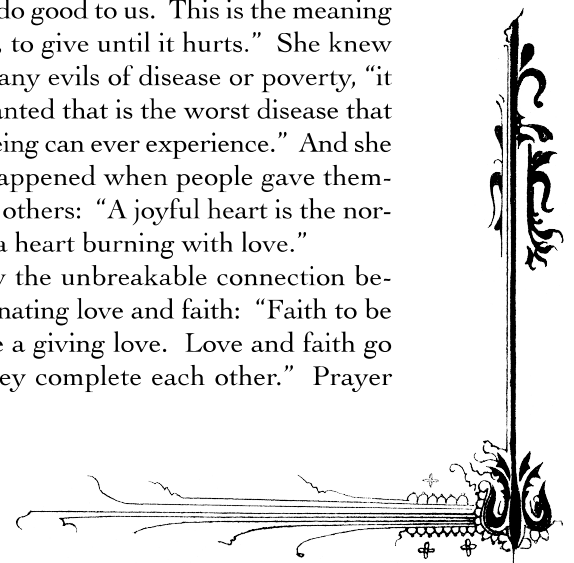
Peace Prize in 1979. She explained the special nature of their work thus: "Without our suffering, our work would just be social work, very good and helpful, but it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the Redemption... [A]ll the desolation of the poor people, not only their material poverty, but [also] their spiritual destitution, must be redeemed, and we must share it, for only by being one with them can we redeem them, that is, by bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God." The work of the Missionaries of Charity is most notable for the transparent joy it produces in the lives of Teresa's followers, obvious to all and understood by few.

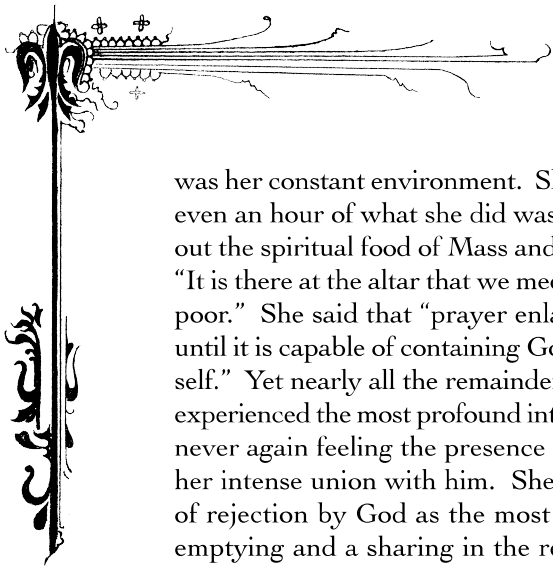
In her work, Teresa focused on the witness of action, but over the years her fame made it possible for her to spread the Gospel message by teaching as well. Her long experience in the classroom enabled her to catechize the entire world. She knew from whence evil came: "When a

"She knew what happened when people gave themselves to love others: 'A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love.'"

poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she wanted." She lived in a world of people starving, most of all, for love: "When he was dying on the cross, Jesus said, *I thirst.*' Jesus is thirsting for our love, and this is the thirst of everyone, poor or rich alike. We all thirst for the love of others, that they will go out of their way to avoid harming us and to do good to us. This is the meaning of truest love, to give until it hurts." She knew that, beyond any evils of disease or poverty, "it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience." And she knew what happened when people gave themselves to love others: "A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love."

Teresa saw the unbreakable connection between self-donating love and faith: "Faith to be true has to be a giving love. Love and faith go together. They complete each other." Prayer





was her constant environment. She said that not even an hour of what she did was possible without the spiritual food of Mass and the Eucharist: "It is there at the altar that we meet our suffering poor." She said that "prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself." Yet nearly all the remainder of her life she experienced the most profound interior darkness, never again feeling the presence of God despite her intense union with him. She saw her sense of rejection by God as the most complete self-emptying and a sharing in the redemptive suffering of Christ, and surrendered to it with complete trust and even a radiant joy. For her, holiness was not a matter of feelings but of a complete response to God's will: "We must become holy, not because we want to feel holy, but because Christ must be able to live his life fully in us." Great deeds are not required: "Holiness does not consist in doing extraordinary things. It consists in accepting, with a smile, what Jesus sends us. It consists in accepting and following the will of God." Nor is success the measure of sanctity: "God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful." And following God's will requires dying to self: "Our progress in holiness depends on God and ourselves — on God's grace and our will to be holy. We must have a real living determination to reach holiness. 'I will be a saint' means that I will despoil myself of all that is not

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God; I will strip my heart of all created things; I will live in poverty and detachment; I will renounce my will, my inclinations, my whims and fantasies, and make myself a willing slave to the will of God." Love makes it possible to live heroically: "People sometimes ask me how I can clean the stinking wound of a leprosy patient. They say to me, 'We cannot do it for love of all the money in the world.' I tell them, 'Nor can we. But we do it for love of [Jesus]'. "

Teresa was a reproach to the "culture of death" that has overtaken today's world. She taught that no person should live or die unloved. She saw the world's acceptance of abortion as destitution: "A nation that destroys the life of an unborn child, who has been created for living and loving, who has been created in the image of God, is in a tremendous poverty." And she saw the selfishness that lay beneath the destitution: "It is a very great poverty to decide that a child must die that you might live as you wish."

Teresa pointed to Someone beyond herself. The words she uttered came from the depths of her heart and were charged with power. They sprang from a heart that lived for God alone, finding him in the "distressing disguise" of every person who needed her love: "I see God in every human being. When I wash a leper's wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?"

