



# Mother Teresa

1910 –

She was born in Yugoslavia in the year 1910. Her name at birth was Agnes Gonxha Bejahiu. In early adult life she knew herself called of God to be a nun. Following her education at Loretto Abbey in Ireland she was posted to Calcutta. Her first assignment was to teach high school geography. She remained at this school as principal for several years.

At the age of thirty-six Mother Teresa became aware of what she speaks of as a “call within a call.” She now knew herself seized and summoned to work on behalf of “the poorest of the poor.” It was not the “ordinary poor”—those who could still beg, wheedle, or even thief—whom she was called to serve. Rather, it was those whose situation was even more wretched: the dying destitute, the leper, the person whose sores are loathsome, and the most helpless and vulnerable of all, the abandoned baby.

She set about acquiring intensive nursing training. Two years later, the authorities in Rome released her from the Loretto order. At age thirty-eight she stepped out into her new life. She was all too aware that her activity would appear pathetically insignificant in the midst of the one million people who sleep, defecate and die on the pavement of Calcutta.

Many things sustain her. Her vocation—her calling—is one of them. Another is her conviction that the wretchedness all around her is

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the “distressing disguise” her Lord wears. (The festering wounds she and her sisters dress are to her the wounds of Jesus; every dirty infant is the Bethlehem baby who was born in conditions less than sanitary.) She is sustained too by her devotional discipline. Awake at 4:00 a.m., she and her sisters pray until 6:30. Every morning there is a celebration of Holy Communion. Mother Teresa insists that if she did not *first* meet her Lord at worship and in the sacrament she could never see him in the most wretched of the earth.

The workday ends at 7:30 p.m. when the sisters gather again for prayer. Midnight frequently finds the little woman still on her feet.

Several years ago she came across an emaciated man near death on the sidewalk. No hospital would admit him. She took him home. Soon she had gained access to an ancient Hindu temple which she turned into her “home for dying destitutes.” To this home the sisters bring the seventy- and eighty-pound adults who would otherwise die on the street. When Westerners scoff at the so-called band-aid treatment she gives to these people she replies, “No one, however sick, however repulsive, should have to die alone.” Then she tells whoever will listen how these people, with nothing to give and with a past which should, by all human reckoning, embitter them forever, will smile and say “Thank you”—and then die at peace. For her, enabling an abandoned person to die within sight of a loving face is something possessing eternal significance.

Of what worth, then, are the cast-off babies the sisters pick up out of garbage cans, railway stations and the gutter? Mother Teresa quietly asks, “Are there too many flowers, too many stars in the sky?”

When the stench from running ulcers embarrasses even a sick person himself as a Sister of Charity cares for him, the sister smiles as she reassures him, “Of course it smells. But compared to your suffering, the smell is nothing.”

Mother Teresa reminds Christians of all persuasions of how readily we are infected with the narcissism (“me-only-ism”) of our age and with its preoccupation with ease. She forces us to face up to those New Testament passages that insist Jesus Christ is to be found in the sick and the poor, the vulnerable and the victimized (Matt. 25). Simply to think of her is to hear anew what Jesus maintains is the truth: We cannot turn our back on the wretched of the earth without turning our back on him.

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Her diminutive body and her vast work (the Sisters of Charity are now in 25 cities in India and in 26 countries throughout the world) illumine and magnify a glorious text of St. Paul: "For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:11,12). In her disease-ridden environment she is plainly courting death. Yet because it is *for Jesus' sake* that she is being given up to death, the life of the Risen One himself is manifested in her. And in a stunning paradox, the life of the Risen One is also manifested in the weakened men and women who are only hours from death themselves.

Mother Teresa and her sisters have proven once more what our society has yet to learn: a preoccupation with comfort does not produce comfort! Rather, we are comforted ourselves, as Paul insists in another paradox, only as we compound our suffering with the suffering of others. For in doing this we share in Christ's suffering and therefore know the comfort only the victorious one himself can impart (2 Cor. 2).

Now eighty years old, yet as resolute as she is wizened, Mother Teresa continues to live and work in the slums of Calcutta, certain that God will permit her to die with the people she has lived among and loved for over forty years. In their fragile humanity she has discerned and embraced the Fragile One himself by whose wretchedness the world was redeemed and through whose risen life fellow-sufferers are made alive forever more.

