

Saint
**Mother
Teresa
of Calcutta**

The Life
& Legacy of
a Saint for
Our Time

THE DAILY PRAYER OF MOTHER TERESA'S MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY

Dear Jesus, help us
to spread your fragrance everywhere we go.
Flood our souls with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly
that our lives may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through us, and be in us so that
every soul we come in contact with
may feel your presence in our soul.
Let them look up and see no longer us,
but only you, O Lord.
Stay with us and then we shall begin
to shine as you shine,
so to shine as to be a light to others. *Amen.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mother Teresa" followed by a small cross symbol.

(adapted from Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman)

For more information about Mother Teresa, see:

Mother Teresa, *In My Own Words* (Publications, 1996).

Mother Teresa, *Essential Writings* (Orbis, 2001).

Eileen Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street* (Doubleday, 1985).

Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (Walker and Company, 1984).

Kathryn Spink, *Mother Teresa: A Complete Authorized Biography* (Harper San Francisco, 1997).

*“You are God’s love in action.
Through you, God is still loving the world.
Each time people come into contact with us,
they must become different and better people
because of having met us.
We must radiate God’s love.”*

—St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta



On September 5, 1997, one of the most popular and widely-admired persons of the twentieth century, known to all as Mother Teresa of Calcutta returned home to God. Although her origins were humble and her life-work focused on the mundane daily service to the “poorest of the poor” in the slums of Calcutta, nevertheless she became world famous as an example of the kind of loving service that we are all called to do if we wish to follow in Jesus’ footsteps.

HER FIRST CALL: TO BE A MISSIONARY SISTER

Born on August 26, 1910 of Albanian descent in Skopje, then part of the collapsing Ottoman Empire and now capital of Macedonia, and baptized the next day as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, Mother Teresa was the youngest of three children (with her brother Lazar and sister Aga) born to Nikola and Drane Bojaxhiu, Her father, a prosperous businessman, died when she was

about eight years old, which caused financial hardships for the family, but her mother raised the children with loving care.



As a teenager Gonxha was active in her parish's youth activities and choir and even from age 12 felt called to be a missionary to spread the love of Christ to the people. So at

age 18 (1928) she left home to join the Irish Sisters of Loreto in Dublin, which sent missionaries throughout the world. After a brief period of training, she was sent to India where she began her novitiate in the northern city of Darjeeling near the Himalayas where she professed her first religious vows as a Sister of Loreto on May 24, 1931. She chose the name Teresa after St. Thérèse of Lisieux, "the Little Flower" whose "little way" of spirituality had resonated deeply with Sister Teresa.

SISTER TERESA: DEDICATED TEACHER

From 1929 when she arrived in India until 1948, Mother Teresa was intensely involved with teaching young women, first at a school near her novitiate convent in Darjeeling until 1931 and then at St. Mary's High School for girls in Calcutta. For many years she taught a variety of subjects, including arithmetic, religion, and geography. Although the school was close to the slums, the sisters were not allowed to venture out without special permission. However, from 1935 to 1937 Sister Teresa spent part of each school day teaching impoverished children from the nearby neighborhoods at St. Teresa's Primary School and beginning to learn first hand about the lives of the poor. On May 14, 1937, 26-year-old Sister Teresa took her final vows as a Loreto Sister again in the chapel at Darjeeling. Upon returning to St. Mary's, she continued to teach and also began to assume the duties of principal of the school. From this time on she was known as Mother Teresa.



HER SECOND CALL: TO SERVE THE POOREST OF THE POOR

Over the years, Mother Teresa had become more and more aware of the tremendous suffering of the

poor in Calcutta, which had intensified during the second world war years (1940-1945) and the subsequent struggle for India's independence from Great Britain (1945-1947), with its murderous conflict between Hindus and Muslims. On August 16, 1946 bloody riots in Calcutta left 5,000 dead, 15,000 wounded and 100,000 homeless. In September with her health deteriorating from trying to deal with the overwhelming needs of her students, Mother Teresa was sent to Darjeeling to recuperate. As it turned out, this journey from Calcutta to Darjeeling would be one of the major turning points of her life because on this trip she experienced for the first time a new and more urgent call from



Jesus to leave her teaching vocation with the sisters of Loreto and found a new religious order to serve “the poorest of the poor” in the Calcutta slums.

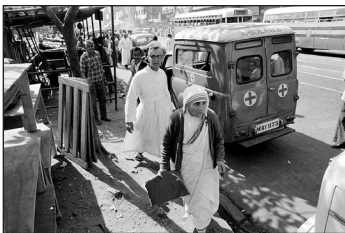
After months of prayerful discernment, Mother Teresa sought and was granted permission to leave the Loreto sisters, and the Archbishop granted her permission to remain a religious sister as she gathered fellow-workers who could become the new members of her proposed new religious order. In 1948, after a short course with the Medical Mission Sisters to receive some basic medical training about how to care for the

sick (and also to care for herself regarding diet and rest) which she knew she would need for her new ministry, she dressed for the first time her trademark white, blue-bordered sari to enter the world of the poor.

She began her new work caring for those in the slums who were suffering from almost every imaginable problem. She visited families, washed the sores of some children, cared for an old man lying sick on the road and nursed a woman dying of hunger and tuberculosis. She started each day in communion with Jesus in the Eucharist and then went out, rosary in her hand, to find and serve him in *“the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for.”* Through her tireless work and her unselfish example, she quickly attracted both volunteers who would help her care for the poor and financial supporters who would help support her many ministries.

FOUNDING THE MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY

In 1949, several of her former students from St. Mary’s High School joined her to help with the work of teaching the young, caring for the sick, feeding the hungry and praying with the dying and bereaved. Mother Teresa also knew from her many years as a teacher how important education was for the poor,



so she spent time teaching poor children first on the streets and then, after having collected enough money, in a rented schoolroom. This was the first of many elementary schools she would establish in Calcutta. She also realized the need for medical dispensaries to distribute medicine and soon established several of these using donated medicines from local pharmacies.

But true to her call from Christ to serve the poorest of the poor and found a religious order, Mother Teresa sought to transform the group of about a dozen volunteers into a true religious order of sisters, which meant seeking permission from the Holy See to start her own order and writing their religious rule or constitution.



One unique feature was that Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, as she named her proposed order, would not only profess the traditional religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but also would add a fourth vow "to give wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor."

On October 7, 1950, the group was officially established by the Archdiocese of Calcutta as a Diocesan Congregation and within two years had attracted over thirty more applicants. And as the group grew in the coming years, so did the ministries that Mother Teresa created to meet the needs of Calcutta's poor.

EXPANDING HER MINISTRY TO THE POOR

To fulfill their Order's mission to love and care for those persons nobody was prepared to look after, Mother Teresa created a house for the dying in space made available by the city of Calcutta so the sisters could care for the helpless men, women and children whom they found dying in the gutters alone and uncared for "without dignity and love."

When in 1953 the Sisters moved into a larger house that would become their convent, Mother Teresa was busy establishing another home for abandoned and orphaned children. Located in a renovated house just one block from the mother house, by 1958 it was home to nearly 100 boys and girls. Next Mother Teresa turned her attention to the plight of the 30,000 lepers who languished in poverty and received no medical treatment even though medicines had been discovered that could greatly help. She created a mobile clinic that went on weekly missions into Calcutta's slums, bringing drugs, disinfectants, bandages, food, and other essential supplies to leprosy victims. But this was not enough. Eventually, the Missionaries of Charity founded a leper colony outside Calcutta, where the lepers could feel that they belonged to a productive and largely self-sufficient community, living



in their own homes, receiving medical treatment and working to support themselves.

ENLISTING NEW GROUPS TO HELP HER MISSION

As these ministries to the dying, orphaned and abandoned children and lepers continued to flourish in Calcutta, the Missionaries of Charity began to attract lay volunteers from India and Europe who shared their spirit of prayer, simplicity, sacrifice and ministry of humble works of love. This prompted Mother Teresa in 1952 to form a new branch of the Missionaries of Charity, the Sick and Suffering Co-Workers, which would link an ill or disabled person who wished to support Mother Teresa's work with a Sister from the Missionaries of Charity as prayer partners. Another lay volunteer group, the International Association of the Co-Workers of Mother Teresa, were people of many faiths and nationalities who wanted to help Mother Teresa by supplying whatever she needed—collecting toys and clothing for slum children, making bandages from old sheets and knitting blankets.

But besides these lay volunteers, Mother Teresa also expanded the spirit of her Missionaries of Charity to create other religious orders. To include men to help with her work for the poor, she founded the Missionaries of Charity Brothers in 1963 under the leadership of an Australian priest, Fr. Ian Travers-Ball. In 1976

came a contemplative branch of the Sisters, in 1979 the Contemplative Brothers, and in 1984 the Missionaries of Charity Fathers. In answer to the requests of many priests, in 1981 Mother Teresa also began the Corpus Christi Movement for Priests as a “little way of holiness” for those who shared her ideals.

CREATING A WORLD-WIDE MISSION

In 1960, after ten years in existence, the Missionaries of Charity were allowed to begin establishing houses outside of the Calcutta diocese. Before long they had a presence in more than twenty-two Indian cities. In February 1965, Pope Paul VI declared the Missionaries of Charity to be under Papal jurisdiction rather than under the Archbishop of Calcutta, which meant that they could now establish houses in other nations outside India. This also began many journeys abroad by Mother Teresa to establish foundations and to invite financial support for her many and growing ministries.



Soon Mother Teresa visited other countries where she was invited to open missions such as Venezuela (where her first house outside India was started), Australia, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Jordan, England and the United States. In 1968 she was invited by Pope Paul VI himself to come to Rome and work with the poorest

immigrants who were flocking there for jobs and in 1986 she persuaded President Fidel Castro to allow a mission in Cuba.

By the early 1970s, Mother Teresa now had some 80 houses in locations all over the globe and was becoming a major international celebrity as the media be-



gan to pay greater attention to her impressive ministry. Impressed by her example, Catholics around the world began contributing to support her work. By 1979 Mother Teresa's groups had more than two hundred different operations in over twenty-five countries around the world, with dozens more ventures on the horizon.

Over the years, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity grew from the initial twelve to thousands serving the "poorest of the poor" in 450 centers around the world. She was also one of the pioneers of establishing homes for AIDS victims.

EMBODIMENT OF GOD'S LOVE

Because of her fame and her popularity, her loving service began to be recognized with various honors beginning with the Indian Padma Shri Award (1962) for distinguished service to India. Pope Paul VI presented her with the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize (1971), which honored those who worked to promote peace,

love, justice and truth among individuals or nations. The same year she was awarded the Good Samaritan Award of the National Catholic Development Conference, the John F. Kennedy International Award, and an honorary degree from the Catholic University of America. The Indian government honored her with the Nehru Award for International Understanding (1972), and Prince Philip of England awarded her the Templeton Award for Progress in Religion (1973). She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace (1979) for her “work in bringing help to suffering humanity. This year the world has turned its attention to the plight of children and refugees, and these are precisely the categories for whom Mother Teresa has for many years worked so selflessly.”

HER HIDDEN INTERIOR LIFE

But as with all the saints, there was another hidden side of this holy woman that the world and even her closest companions did not know about. It was revealed only after her death when her letters to her spiritual director were made public. These extremely personal writings chart the path by which she was drawn deeper and deeper into her relationship with Jesus. But it was a extremely painful journey, the “painful night” of her



soul, an experience of a deep and abiding feeling of being separated from God, even rejected by him, along with an ever-increasing longing for his love. This inner experience of dying to herself, “*the darkness*” when “she felt no presence of God whatsoever” actually began around the time she started her work for the poor and continued to the end of her life. Yet, as with other saints, it led Mother Teresa to an ever more profound union with God. Through this darkness she experienced not only the hopeless desolation of the poor who feel so unloved and forgotten but also the insatiable thirst of Jesus to lavish his love on them.

HER FINAL YEARS

In the 1980s and 1990s Mother Teresa’s health problems became a concern when she suffered a heart attack while visiting Pope John Paul II in 1983. She



had another serious heart attack in 1989 and was fitted with a pacemaker to regulate her heartbeat. In March 1997, Mother Teresa handed over the leadership of the Missionaries of Charity to

Sister Nirmala who had been selected by the community. Although Mother Teresa had been trying to decrease her responsibilities because of her health, she still continued to serve as an advisor to Sister Nirmala.

In August Mother Teresa celebrated her eighty-seventh birthday, and died nine days later of a heart attack on September 5, 1997. At the time of her death, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity had over 4,000 sisters, and an associated brotherhood of 300 members, operating 610 missions in 123 countries.

THE ROAD TO SANCTITY

Less than two years after Mother Teresa's death, in view of her universal reputation for holiness, Pope John Paul II permitted the opening of her cause of canonization as a saint. Once the proper certification of her first miracles was completed, Mother Teresa was formally beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 19, 2003 and canonized by Pope Francis on September 4, 2016.

Perhaps we might conclude by recalling the words of British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge in his book about Mother Teresa titled *Something Beautiful for God*, which summarize well what we all can feel now that Mother Teresa's sanctity has been officially recognized by the Church:



“In a dark time she was a burning and a shining light; in a cruel time, a living embodiment of Christ's gospel of love; in a godless time, the Word dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. For this, all must be eternally grateful.”

You and I have been created for greater things.
We have not been created
to just pass through this life without aim.
And that greater aim is to love and be loved.
Give yourself fully to God,
who will use you to accomplish great things
on the condition that you believe
much more in his love than in your weakness.
Never think that a small action
done to your neighbor is not worth much.
It is not how much we do that is pleasing to God,
but how much love we put into the doing.

—*Mother Teresa*

