

Mother Teresa's life was one of complete service to the poorest of the poor. She worked to build up the strength and dignity of the "least of these" in India's cities and worked toward eradicating one of the constant causes for violence and shame in our human society, abject poverty. Her humanitarian work and advocacy for the rights of the poor and helpless became well known internationally in the 1970s. Over her lifetime she received numerous awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for "work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress, which constitutes a threat to peace" (Spink, 1997, p. 165). She founded the Missionaries of Charity, a Catholic order of nuns dedicated to helping the poor. Begun in Calcutta, India, the Missionaries of Charity grew to help the poor, the dying, orphans, lepers, and AIDS sufferers in over a hundred countries. Her selfless effort to help those in need has caused many to regard her as a model humanitarian.

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu ("the Saint of the Gutters") was born 26 August 1910 to Nikola and Drana Bojaxhiu as their 3rd child in Skopje (Mother Teresa of Calcutta Center). When she was only 8 her father died unexpectedly (Spink, 1997, p. 5). At 12 she felt called to serve God as a nun, and by 17 she had made the hard decision to become one (Spink, 1997, p. 10). Being raised in a family and community of piety and devotion fostered her religious upbringing (Teresa, 2007, p. 3). When she turned 18 she left her family and begun the two-year process of learning English and history before she took her first vows as a Loreto nun on 24 May 1931 (Spink, 1997, p. 14). It was on 24 May 1937 that she took her final vows and formally took the name Mother Teresa (Teresa, 2007, p. 23).

It was Tuesday 10 September 1946 that Mother Teresa received the “call within a call” (as she said) to leave the Loreto convent and help the poor by living among them (Teresa, 2007, p. 39). “I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith.” (Spink, 1997, p. 22). After two years of petitioning her superiors she left the convent on 16 August 1948 for her provisional year (Spink, 1997, p. 31), a move that was harder for her than leaving her biological family (Spink, 1997, p. 32). Her first step was to gain some medical knowledge with the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna (Spink, 1997, p. 32). A year after starting her work in Calcutta Mother Teresa was joined by a former pupil from Loreto, who sought to support her work with the poor (Spink, 1997, p. 39). After her provisional year she petitioned to start her own order, the Missionaries of Charity, which was granted Vatican approval on 7 October 1950 (Spink, 1997, p. 41). The mission of the Missionaries of Charity “is to satiate the thirst of Jesus Christ on the Cross for Love and Souls ” (Teresa, 2007, p. 41). Once the order was formed, Mother Teresa wanted all documents pertaining to her inspiration destroyed, but this never happened (Teresa, 2007, p. 5). Mother Teresa and the other sisters of the order started opening houses for the poor. First there was Nirmal Hriday (“Place of the Immaculate Heart”) on 22 August 1952, a place for the dying (Spink, 1997, p. 54). Then came Shishu Bhavan in 1955, a home for orphaned children (Spink, 1997, p. 58). Over time this order would become a measurable force throughout India and the world in assisting the poor, with Mother Teresa at its head.

Mother Teresa was both admirable and remarkable in many ways, here are just a few examples. She put her own comfort and life aside to help the poor and needy. She never took personal credit for her accomplishments; instead she always talked about herself like she was "a pencil in God's hand" (Teresa, 2007, p. xi). She instilled a "quiet sense of community and humility" in everyone who worked with her and "was a walking embodiment of her philosophy to do the smallest of things with the greatest of care" (G. Celeste, personal communication, September 10, 2011). "This woman was not only a spiritual force but a mother simply enjoying her children" (Celeste, 2002, p. 108). Her children consisted of both the poor residents and the sisters themselves. One sister once said, "Mother [Teresa] is not perfect! She is just a saint!" (Celeste, 2002, p. 109). "God does not expect us to do great things perfectly, just little things with great love." (Celeste, 2002, p. 109); That way of thinking is quite admirable. When Mother Teresa thought about her potential sainthood she would exclaim, "If I ever become a Saint—I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth—" (Teresa, 2007, p. 1).

For sex and gender to play a role in her work would have meant focusing more on one gender than the other, and hence not accomplishing the work she'd been set out to do. With the divine playing a huge role in her actions throughout her life the differences between religious and lay people played a bigger role, though still not one of much importance to her work. But by the very nature of being a nun, gender played a solid role in shaping the life she ultimately gave over to serving the poorest of the poor, so sex and gender did play a role for Mother Teresa. In general,

though, when it comes to working with the poor, the roles sex and gender play are less important than those of class and wealth.

Given the scope and breadth of the work Mother Teresa did I don't think there is a single lesson we can learn from this remarkable servant, but rather many. First of all, the best ways to do the most good will inevitably require you to sacrifice everyday comforts that you currently don't even think about. "To discover blessing in the distressed and to discover Jesus in disguise is what Mother Teresa taught those who came to learn with open minds and broken – or at least breakable – hearts" (Celeste, 2002, p. 108). The next lesson comes from my grandmother, who had the privilege of working with Mother Teresa, both before and after she gained international attention: "Over the years I have come to realize that as long as there is life there is hope not to mention that the dying deserve care, comfort and compassion and . . . we never know what is hopeless, in fact even after death there is reason to continue to hope. Perhaps that is one of mother's most significant messages." (D. Celeste, personal communication, September 10, 2011). Lastly, especially given the timing of when I first read it, the last line of Mother Teresa's "philosophy of life" seems like a good message in these times: "Life is too precious, do not destroy it" (Spink, 1997, p. xiv) along with the rest of that poetic document.

Not seven weeks before my own brother was to be born, and not even 24 hours before Princess Diana's funeral, "Mother Teresa's exhausted heart finally beat its last" on Friday 5 September 1997 (Spink, 1997, p. 283). Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu died of heart failure at age 87. On 13 September her body was borne through the streets of Calcutta on the same carriage that once carried the bodies of Mohandas

Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru upon their deaths through streets packed with the poor, many of whom had been touched by the Missionaries of Charity, to the state funeral given to her (Spink, 1997, p. 283). Numerous dignitaries from all over the world attended the funeral, after which she was buried underneath the first, and to this day central, home of the Missionaries of Charity (Spink, 1997, p. 283). After her death Pope John Paul II beatified her (second of four steps to becoming a saint) and gave her the title Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (Teresa, 2007, p. xi).

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