

## Mother Teresa (1910–1997)

### *Humanitarian*

Mother Teresa was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, for her extensive, extraordinary service among the poorest of the poor. She was the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, which are now present in almost every country in the world. Her most remarkable projects included care homes for the abandoned dying, which she called "Nirmal Hriday" (home of the pure heart); a basic public education system that primarily targeted children in slum areas with elementary lessons in hygiene, manners, matters of faith, math, and reading, which she called "Shishu Bhaven" (the children's home in Calcutta for the Sisters of Charity); centers and mobile clinics that ministered to the needs of people with leprosy and AIDS; shelters for single mothers; homes for handicapped children; soup kitchens for the homeless; visits and ministry of love to prisoners; and many others.



*Pope Paul VI blesses Mother Teresa for her work with lepers in India in 1973.*

Bettmann/Corbis; used with permission.

### **EARLY YEARS**

Mother Teresa was born in 1910 in Skopje, Albania. Her father was a successful businessman. He was poisoned in 1919 due to his high profile as a nationalist and a councilman of the city government after Albania gained its independence from the Turkish occupation in 1912. Her mother was a religious, loving housewife. She worked as a dressmaker and weaver in order to provide for her family after her deceased husband's business partner took over their business.

At the age of twelve, young Gonxha (Mother Teresa's original name) started to have a strong desire to pursue a religious vocation, but she was advised by the pastor of her church, the Parish Church of the Sacred Heart, to wait, pray, and ask for light. Six years later, in one of her long, frequent meditation visits to the nearby shrine of Our Lady of Lentic, she heard the divine call and consecrated herself forever to God and his service. She shared her heart with her mother who, in spite of her concerns about her daughter's departure and her weak health condition, fully supported her and encouraged her to take the necessary steps to put her decision into practice.

### **THE JOURNEY**

In a long conversation with the pastor, Gonxha revealed her desire to serve the poor in India. The congregation that worked in India didn't have houses of formation in Albania, so she had to enroll in Ireland. In 1928, Gonxha went to Ireland, became part of the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto, spent two months learning English, and was sent to Darjeeling, India, for two years of training and formation. In 1931, she made her first vows and chose the name Teresa, after Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. After one year, she made her final vows, and was assigned to a teaching position at Saint Mary's High School, which served the wealthy girls of Calcutta.

However, going through the Gandhian struggle for independence in the midforties, Sister Teresa experienced a "vocational crisis," and felt that God was calling her toward something different, "to total self-surrender to the

service of the poor ... to a mission of charity" (Gonzalez-Balado 1997, 37). She left the Sisters of Loreto, where she had been content and happy for nearly twenty years, and pursued her passionate call. In order to best serve the poor, she went to Patna and studied at the school for nurses of the Medical Mission Sisters. Several months later, she returned to Calcutta, and lived with the Little Sisters of the Poor at Saint Joseph's Asylum for the Elderly. Every day she relentlessly worked in the slums among the abandoned. Meanwhile, she started looking for her own lodging, which was eventually furnished by the father of one of her former students. This humble place was the beginning of the Missionaries of Charity. In two years, the community grew to twenty-eight women, many of whom were Sister Teresa's former students, and all of whom adopted her modest lifestyle, distinguished by their blue-and-white saris. Eventually, the priests provided a larger place for Mother Teresa and her followers. This place later became the headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity, which are now present in almost every country in the world, in some cases at the request of government leaders in countries where religious organizations were illegal, such as Cuba, the former Soviet Union, and Albania, Mother Teresa's home country!

## **MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The first and most remarkable project that Mother Teresa embarked on was an attempt to assist the abandoned dying in the streets of Calcutta. By that time, Mother Teresa had received Indian citizenship. She met with the mayor and was granted a location to serve the dying homeless of all religions, which she called "Nirmal Hriday." There, the sisters showed the dying (whom they usually picked from the streets, half eaten by rats) that they are valued and respected, giving testimony to their faith through their love and their actions, and respecting all beliefs and non-beliefs. This place is now a popular tourist attraction, included in the city's official guidebooks. It also attracts a lot of volunteers and medical student trainees, many females of whom decide to join.

Another field where Mother Teresa served the poor was teaching the children in the district of Motijhil, a slum near the high school where she used to teach. She taught basic lessons in hygiene, usually holding her classes outdoors, under a tree. Then, she gradually integrated instructions on manners, matters of faith, math, and reading. Later on, she used a donation that she received to rent a shack and purchase a blackboard. As the number of children grew, she acquired a building and surrounding acreage, which she called "Shishu Bhaven," through which she expanded her small system of public education. Today, such centers operate in many countries.

As the number of sisters grew to more than fifty, another group of the poor was added to their scope of services, people with leprosy. Mother Teresa started her "mobile clinics," which were basically a few sisters carrying small medicine kits and traveling by public transportation into the areas where people with leprosy dwelled. With time, Mother Teresa was able to establish centers that ministered to the specific needs of people with leprosy. The first center was constructed with the money collected from a public raffle of a limousine that was given to Mother Teresa by Pope Paul VI when he visited India in 1964, supposedly to facilitate her tough journeys. Later, Mother Teresa used the money from the Nobel Peace Prize she won in 1979 to construct a self-governing village in Titagarh, India, for the rehabilitation of people with leprosy.

In the mid-1980s, AIDS patients became another area of focus for Mother Teresa and her sisters. Mother Teresa started where ostracism against AIDS patients was strongest, in New York City, asking the mayor for a local site where she and her sisters could serve AIDS patients, despite the severe opposition of local residents. A year later, she was asked by President Ronald Reagan to open an AIDS home in Washington, D.C.

As time went by, Mother Teresa's service expanded in many diversified areas. As unusual as it may sound, Mother Teresa's congregation gave birth to a male congregation, the "Missionaries of Charity Brothers," in 1963. Most of the first members were the biological brothers of some of the sisters. She started looking for a male leader who could handle the responsibilities of this new congregation, and found Father Travers, a young Australian Jesuit priest, who chose to renounce being a Jesuit, and became the well-known preacher, Brother

Andrew. Now, the Missionaries of Charity Brothers are spread all over the world.

## **WORLDWIDE REPUTATION AND PUBLICITY**

Some activities made Mother Teresa known worldwide, and consequently opened doors for her ministry outside India. For example, in 1960, Mother Teresa gave her first presentation at the annual convention of the National Council of Catholic Women of the United States in Las Vegas. In addition to the large, exclusive audience that attended this presentation, Mother Teresa made a lot of contacts during her visit to the United States, and met with numerous well-known religious and political figures on her several stops. Many of these contacts proved important for her future work.

Around the same time, Mother Teresa was also publicly interviewed for the first time on the British Broadcasting Corporation radio program by the British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who proposed and facilitated the production of the first ever television documentary about Mother Teresa, and whose biography of Mother Teresa was translated into more than twenty languages. In 1982, Malcolm Muggeridge and his wife became Catholic.

Moreover, Mother Teresa courageously held to her beliefs, publicly advised politicians to spend more time on their knees in prayer in order to recognize the pain and injustice in their own systems, took the initiative of rebuking them when she felt that they made ungodly decisions, and was outspoken against abortion as the greatest of crimes against children, women, and life. She even took part in marches and demonstrations against the legislation of abortion in Spain and Italy. She met and had conversations and pictures with many distinguished public figures, and was invited to address the world's political elite in remarkable occasions. However, she always showed up as a little Indian woman with her modest white-and-blue sari and sandals, packing her travel necessities in cardboard boxes tied with string, and holding her cloth bag. Even when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1979, Mother Teresa requested that the cost of the customary gala dinner celebration for hundreds of dignitaries from around the world go to the poor. Fifteen thousand people enjoyed a special meal that day!

Due to her failing health, which was aggravated by her hectic lifestyle, Mother Teresa resigned in 1996 as superior general of the Missionaries of Charity. However, she left an army of around four thousand missionaries, from all over the world, many of whom were college students or well-paid professionals, all of whom still wear the white-and-blue sari, live the same life as the poorest of the poor, and absolutely refuse any kind of salary or fixed income that gives them any sense of security, preferring to be completely dependent on divine providence.

## **MOTHER TERESA'S LEADERSHIP**

Mother Teresa had most of the characteristics of charismatic leaders found in Weber's *Theory of Social Organizations*. She was highly esteemed and confident, displayed exemplary qualities, had a strong sense of purpose, articulated the goals and ideas for which her followers were psychologically prepared, secured her followers' unquestioning cognitive and emotional commitment, and had extraordinary moral inspiration, attraction, and influence over her followers. Mother Teresa owned extraordinary gifts. She devoted herself to the service of the poorest of the poor, totally dependent on divine providence, which meant being constantly in a crisismanagement situation. She always developed (or rather received) radical solutions to crises. She had followers who were attracted to her because they believed they were linked through her to transcendent powers. She continuously validated her gifts and transcendence in repeated experiences of success. She was expressive, self-determined, insightful, free from internal conflict, eloquent, and active, even when her followers were not exactly the optimum type of followers that would be easily led by her charisma. A closer look at some of her followers can clarify this point.

Many of Mother Teresa's first followers were her former students from Saint Mary's High School, that is, the wealthy girls of Calcutta. Probably most of these girls' parents and relatives had a high profile politically. At that time, there was much more going on, both in politics and religion, to attract these girls' attention and energies

than this unknown nun, living like the poorest of the poor. Moreover, many affluent, successful people participated as coworkers in Mother Teresa's ministry on a part-time basis. Later, the coworkers became an organization, with its own official identity. So, what attracted, and still attracts, rich, well-educated people to Mother Teresa and her life of poverty? The answer is that most of those people did not only identify with Mother Teresa as a person, but also with her vision, her mission, and her goals. She was able to address a higher level of need inside them, beyond just the need for a personified charismatic leader. Her humility, strong conviction, and worthwhile cause challenged them. She "conceive[d] and articulate[d] goals that lift[ed] people out of their petty occupations, carr[ied] them above the conflicts that tear a society apart, and unite[d] them in the pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts," as Gardner and his colleagues described inspirational leaders (cited in Bass 1990, 207). Mother Teresa was truly a transformational leader. She combined charismatic leadership, inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

According to Choi and Dalton, followers attribute charisma and legitimacy to self-sacrificial leaders, and tend to reciprocate such leaders' behaviors. This presents a further explanation for the faithful followership style of Mother Teresa's sisters, their complete devotion to self-sacrificial causes, and their adoption of a self-sacrificial lifestyle of the poorest of the poor. Due to her exemplary self-sacrificial leadership style, Mother Teresa's followers perceived her as charismatic, even though she lacked the "glamour" that usually accompanies many charismatic leaders. In other words, her charisma was in the eyes of her beholders, and in her cause, rather than just in her own personal attractiveness. This made her followers attribute legitimacy to her, although she hardly had any legitimate power to use in accomplishing her goals. Mother Teresa had nothing to give or to promise her followers, except a tough life of poverty and hard work. She was completely dependent on divine providence. Before she resigned, this Nobel Prize winner suffered from anemia and malnutrition, the diseases of the poorest of the poor.

In their article, "Transformational Leadership and Attachment," Popper and his colleagues introduced an interesting expansion of the attachment theory to the area of leadership, showing a relationship between transformational leadership and secure attachment. Reflecting on Mother Teresa's early years of life, one cannot fail to observe a very secure attachment style, with her parents, her close family that lived for one another, and the pastor of her church. Does Mother Teresa's strong transformational leadership style relate to her secure attachments? Her biographers, as well as she herself, would full-heartedly testify that it indeed did.

—Carolyn M. Youssef

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