

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

(A Woman for Our Time)

REFLECTIONS FROM FR. ROSS



I received in the mail the book *Do Something Beautiful for God, The Essential Teachings of Mother Teresa (now St. Teresa of Calcutta)*. It contains a short yet powerful reflection and/or challenge for each day. We celebrate her feast on September 5. Below is a brief biography of this very special woman.

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Bojaxhiu in Serbia on August 26, 1910. Agnes grew up in Albania, surrounded by wealth and prosperity. Despite their wealth, her parents were models of virtue. They loved each other deeply, and that love overflowed to Agnes and her sister. At the age of eighteen, Agnes left home to join an Irish order of nuns. Later that year, in December 1928, she set sail for India to begin her work as a novice for the Loreto Order. Now Sister Teresa, she spent most of the next twenty years teaching. In 1937, she made her permanent vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and as was customary adopted the title of Mother.

By 1943, India was torn by war and famine. Mahatma Gandhi's great success in freeing India from British rule had become tainted by civil war between Muslims and Hindus living in India. More people than ever descended upon Calcutta. It finally became necessary for the Loreto Convent to move the children and the school outside the city. At this time, many nuns and whole orders decided to leave India and close their schools, but Mother Teresa stayed and worked tirelessly. As others left, she taught more and more classes, eventually teaching two subjects to eight grades.

She was happy in her work and well liked. By the mid-1940s, her mere presence already had a power that had been born through hours of prayer and reflection. Soon Mother Teresa was appointed headmistress, and she wrote to her mother, "This is a new life. Our center here is very fine. I am a teacher, and I love the work. I am also head of the whole school, and everybody wishes me well." Her mother's reply was a stern reminder of her original intentions for going to India: "Dear child, do not forget that you went to India for the sake of the poor."

Kipling described Calcutta as "the city of a dreadful night." Mother Teresa was in the capital of poverty, a poverty that most people never even witness firsthand. This was the world that surrounded the school and this was the world that was crying out for help.

In 1946, Mother Teresa became very ill herself and was ordered by doctors to have bed rest for three hours every

afternoon. It was very hard for her to rest and not do her work, but this period of enforced rest culminated in the directive to go away on retreat for a month. The intention was that in the interests of her health she should undergo a period of spiritual renewal and a physical break from the work.

On September 10, 1946, she boarded a train for Darjeeling, where she was to retreat. Aboard that train, Mother Teresa had a supernatural experience that changed the direction of her life forever. She referred to it as "the call within the call." Many years earlier she had been called to religious life (the call). Now she was being called to something more (the call within the call). The retreat provided the perfect period of silence, solitude, and prayer to follow the experience God had given her on the train.

The next couple of years were filled with dialogue between her spiritual director, the Bishop, and Rome. By 1950, at age forty, Mother Teresa had left the school and the Loreto Order, founded the Missionaries of Charity, and was living among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. At this time she began a new life, dreamt a new dream. She stepped into the classroom of silence, sat down with her God, and said, "How can I help?" Over the next twenty years, she would capture the imagination of the whole world simply by living the Gospel. There are currently over 4500 members in the community she founded, living and working in 133 countries.

Eventually, Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the United States Medal of Freedom, and the United Nations Albert Schweitzer Prize. She is one of the most beloved women of all time. She attracted the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, irrespective of race or creed.

Where did she get the power and strength to love so deeply and serve so selflessly? Before everything else, Mother Teresa was a woman of prayer. Each day, she would spend three hours in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. She placed Jesus at the center of life. She knew that action without prayer was worth nothing. I would add that prayer without concrete action is worth the same.

In the midst of all that is going on near us and around us, I believe it would do us all well to turn to Mother Teresa as a model and example of how we should approach each day, making sure we don't lose sight of what matters most and not get absorbed in what matters least. I believe that we should also direct our cares and concern to her, asking her to intercede for us, along with those closest to us and all our sisters and brothers throughout the world who are struggling in so many different ways. May we continue on together in hope, close to Jesus and each other.