Mother Teresa

BORN: August 27, 1910 • Üsküb, Kosovo
DIED: September 5, 1997 • Calcutta, India

Kosovar nun

“In these twenty years of work among the people, I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience.”

Mother Teresa was a Catholic missionary nun who became known for her work with the poor. Although she assisted poverty-stricken people throughout the world, she is most closely identified with her work in the crowded slums of Calcutta (modern-day Kolkata), India, which earned her the informal title “Saint of the Gutter.” In 1982, during the siege of Beirut, Lebanon, she negotiated a cease-fire between Israeli and Palestinian forces. This cease-fire allowed her to evacuate mentally handicapped patients from a hospital on the front lines of the battle. During her lifetime she received several major awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize. After her death she was beatified (blessed) by the Catholic Church. Beatification is an early step in the canonization process, after which one becomes recognized as a saint. She is now formally referred to as Blessed Mother Teresa.
Early life

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu on August 27, 1910, in the town of Škoplje, in Kosovo, which at the time was a province in the Turkish Empire. (In modern times the town is called Skopje and is the capital of the Republic of Macedonia.) She was the youngest of three surviving daughters born to Nikollë Bojaxhiu, a successful contractor, and his wife, Dranafile. Both parents were Albanian. Although most Albanians are Muslims (followers of the Islamic faith) and most of the people of Kosovo Province were Christian and members of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Bojaxhiu family was Roman Catholic.

Agnes's early years were relatively uneventful and her family life happy. She later noted that she felt a strong religious calling at age twelve and wanted to help the poor by becoming a missionary. A missionary is someone who undertakes a religious task. At age eighteen she received permission from the Vatican, the seat of authority of the Roman Catholic Church, to join the Sisters of Loreto, more formally referred to as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Sisters of Loreto, located in Rathfarnham, a residential suburb of Dublin, Ireland, was an order of nuns whose chief mission was the education of girls. When Agnes completed her training, the order sent her to Darjeeling, India. At this time she was a novice, or a person who has received religious education but has not taken her vows to the order. She took her first vows in 1931, when she adopted the name Sister Mary Teresa in honor of Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and Thérèse de Lisieux (1873–1897), both Catholic saints. In 1937 she took her final vows and became Mother Teresa.

Mother Teresa began her career at St. Mary’s High School in Calcutta, where she taught catechism (the teachings and principles of the Catholic faith), history, and geography from 1930 to 1944. From 1944 to 1948 she served as principal of the school. The people she worked with at St. Mary’s would later recall little about her, stressing that she seemed ordinary, quiet, and humble. During these years she would look out upon the streets and slums of Calcutta and think about her early goal of performing missionary work among the poor. In 1946 she was riding on a train when she experienced a calling from God to serve among the poorest of the poor.

Founded the Missionaries of Charity

In 1948 Mother Teresa petitioned the pope, Pius XII (1876–1958), to live as an independent nun. She resigned her position at the high school and traveled to Patna, India, where she completed a course with the Medical
Mission Sisters. She then returned to Calcutta, where she took up residence with the Little Sisters of the Poor. She established an outdoor school for poor children, and in time she attracted both volunteer help and financial support from church groups and city officials in Calcutta.

Mother Teresa’s next step in her mission to help the poor was to petition the Vatican in 1950 for permission to establish a new order of nuns. The Vatican agreed, at first calling the order the Diocesan Congregation of the Calcutta Diocese. (A diocese is a district.) Soon the order took the name Missionaries of Charity. The goal of the Missionaries of Charity, according to Mother Teresa, was to provide care for the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, and those affected by the skin disease leprosy. She sought to assist all those people who were unwanted, unloved, and uncared for by society. She located an abandoned Hindu temple and, with the help of local authorities, converted it into a hospice called the Kalighat Home for the Dying. A hospice is a facility that provides care to the dying. Later she opened three additional institutions: another hospice, called Nirmal Hriday, which means “pure heart”; a hospital for lepers called Shanti Nagar, which means “city of peace”; and an orphanage.

Continued growth

By the 1960s Mother Teresa’s order had attracted numerous financial donations and recruits, and maintained a full network of charitable institutions throughout India. The humble and soft-spoken nun had become, in effect, the chief executive officer of a large and growing organization in India, one that was destined to become international in scope. In 1965 Mother Teresa received permission from the pope, then Paul VI (1897–1978), to expand her order of nuns to other nations. The first Missionaries of Charity house outside of India was established in Venezuela. It was followed by houses in Tanzania and Italy. Soon the Missionaries of Charity had houses throughout Africa, Asia, and western Europe. In the early 1990s Mother Teresa was also able to introduce operations to eastern Europe. The first such house in the United States was established in the Bronx section of New York City.

As the organization’s charitable work expanded, so did its influence as a religious order. In 1963 the Missionaries of Charity Brothers was established. (In the Catholic Church, brothers are members of religious orders who are not priests; usually, orders of brothers, like nuns, perform work in schools, hospitals, missions, etc.) In 1976 a contemplative branch
of the nuns was formed, in which members devote themselves to prayer and penance, often maintaining silence and living in convents. Lay workers (people who were not members of the clergy) and volunteers were organized into three groups: the Co-Workers of Mother Teresa, the Sick and Suffering Co-Workers, and the Lay Missionaries of Charity. In 1981, with the support of the pope, Mother Teresa launched the Corpus Christi Movement, a movement to create spiritual renewal among diocesan priests, or priests attached to local dioceses rather than to specific religious orders. As part of the movement, nuns spiritually “adopt” priests, something Saint Thérèse de Lisieux had done in nineteenth-century France.

Mother Teresa and her work became more familiar to people throughout the world due to the 1969 documentary film *Something Beautiful for God*, which was produced by the well-known British writer and social critic Malcolm Muggeridge (1903–1990). A book by the same title followed in 1971 and remains in print in the early twenty-first century. One story told about the production of the documentary concerns filming that took place at an Indian hospice. The film crew believed that the lighting in the building was so poor that the footage they shot there would turn out to be of little use. When they developed the film, however, they found that everything appeared brightly lit. Muggeridge, who later converted to Catholicism, claimed that the lighting was the product of “divine light” from Mother Teresa herself. Some members of the crew argued that it was simply the result of a new, improved type of film. Muggeridge was not alone in his belief, however, as throughout her lifetime many people testified that they witnessed a mysterious light associated with Mother Teresa.

**Awards and prizes**

The 1970s and years following brought many awards and much recognition for Mother Teresa and her work. In 1971 Pope Paul VI awarded her the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize. She sold the Lincoln Continental automobile given to her by the pope and used the money to help the poor. Mother Teresa also won the Kennedy Prize in 1971, the Nehru Prize in 1972, the Albert Schweitzer International Prize in 1975, and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, “for work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress, which also constitute a threat to peace.” She donated all of her prize money to the poor of Calcutta. Also in 1979, she won the Balzan Prize, given to those who promote brotherhood and
peace among nations. Later awards included the U.S. Presidential Medal
an act of the U.S. Congress made her an honorary citizen of the United
States, a gesture of respect extended to only six people throughout U.S.
history.

Decline and death
The 1980s marked the beginning of the final stages of Mother Teresa’s
life. In 1983, while visiting Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) in Rome,
Italy, she suffered a heart attack. A second heart attack followed in
1989, and in 1991 she was stricken with pneumonia while traveling in
Mexico. She offered to resign as head of the Missionaries of Charity,
but when a vote was taken among all members of the order, the only bal-
lot supporting her resignation was the one she cast herself.
Mother Teresa’s health continued to decline through the 1990s, and she eventually became unable to continue with her work. On March 13, 1997, she resigned as the head of her order, which by then included 4,000 nuns, 100,000 lay volunteers, and 610 missions in 123 countries. The next month she fell and broke her collarbone. Later that year she contracted malaria and also had to undergo heart surgery. She died on September 5, 1997. The Indian government gave her a full state funeral, an honor usually reserved for such dignitaries as prime ministers. Religious and political leaders around the world commented on the sadness of her passing.

The twenty-first century: beatification

Mother Teresa’s story continued after her death, with her beatification (blessing) and the drive mounted by Catholics to persuade the Vatican to name her a saint. In the Catholic faith a saint is a person whose admirable life makes it certain that his or her soul is in heaven. Members of the Catholic Church are said to “venerate” saints, meaning that saints are honored and are thought to be able to speak with God on behalf of the living. Catholics do not worship saints, however, as worship is given only to God.

After the death of a person such as Mother Teresa, a local bishop or other church authority begins the process of canonization (the process leading to sainthood) by conducting an investigation into the person’s life. The first step toward sainthood is to be regarded as a servant of God; the second is to be regarded as venerable, or commanding of respect and reverence. Then the Vatican takes over the investigation. According to church law, for the next step, beatification, to occur, the candidate for sainthood has to have performed one documented miracle. Historically, the church has beatified many people who were not later made saints, including the emperor Charlemagne (742–814), of France. For the final step, canonization, to occur, at least one additional miracle has to be documented. The chief difference between beatification and canonization is that while beatification represents the church’s “permission” for the faithful to venerate the person, canonization transforms that permission into a matter of universal church law. Therefore, beatification typically involves veneration by members of a local community, such as a region or a country, while a canonized saint is venerated worldwide as a matter of church principle.

The miracle attributed to Mother Teresa concerned a woman named Monica Besra, who is said to have been healed of cancer when a locket
containing a picture of Mother Teresa was applied to her tumor. The issue of the miracle became controversial when Besra and her husband later denied that she had been healed by a miracle, and when her hospital records could not be found. Later, however, the husband supported the claim of the miraculous healing, and Mother Teresa was formally beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 19, 2003.

**Controversy**

Mother Teresa’s life was not without controversy. Many people, including Catholics and non-Catholics alike, criticized her for her strict opposition to artificial birth control, especially in consideration of the massive overpopulation of such places as Calcutta. She also attracted some criticism for her uncompromising opposition to abortion, or terminating pregnancy. Others found fault with a statement she made in the mid-1970s, after the Indian government suspended civil liberties in the country. She said the people were happier without their liberties because there were more jobs and no strikes. Comments such as these led some observers to believe that Mother Teresa was more interested in maintaining a close relationship with the Indian government, which provided her with financial support, than in speaking out against its abuses.

Other criticisms include financial mismanagement of funds, with donations not going to the projects for which they were intended, and the number of people served by the Missionaries of Charity. Some investigators claim to have found that the largest of its missions served a few hundred people at most. While Mother Teresa received worldwide praise for her work, other religious organizations in India serve up to tens of thousands of people each day and receive little attention. Such criticism has created a level of controversy about Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, but she continued to carry out her lifelong goal of working with the poor.

**For More Information**

**BOOKS**


WEB SITES


