Mother Teresa

**BORN:** August 26, 1910 • Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

**DIED:** September 5, 1997 • Calcutta, India

*Macedonia-born Roman Catholic nun*

“We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty.”

Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 and accepted it on behalf of the “unwanted, unloved, and uncared for.” In 1950, she founded an order of nuns called the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, India. She served as its director for nearly fifty years. Teresa founded five additional branches of the Missionaries of Charity that included the Missionary Brothers of Charity, the Contemplative Brothers, the Mission of Charity Fathers, the International Association of Co-Workers, and the Contemplative Sisters. Her order’s work for the poor expanded across the globe and could be found in more than one hundred countries in the early twenty-first century.

Born in the Republic of Macedonia, Mother Teresa adopted Calcutta as her home and became an Indian citizen. Her personal mission was to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of the poorest of the poor while living among them. Her efforts earned her the name Saint of
the Gutters. Although she was Roman Catholic, Teresa showed no discrimination (treating some people differently than others or favoring one social group over another based on prejudices) as she worked with Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and those having no religious beliefs. Much of her early work focused on giving comfort to the dying, but she soon added orphanages, soup kitchens, and medical clinics as others joined her order. At the time of her death, the Missionaries of Charity included more than three thousand members.

From Macedonia to Calcutta

Mother Teresa began life as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. She was born on August 26, 1910, to devout Roman Catholic parents in Skopje, Macedonia. Agnes was the youngest of three children and was called Gonxha, or flower bud, by her elder sister Aga and brother Lazar. Religion played an important part in the family’s life. Agnes was christened into the church on August 27, a date which later would be confused with her actual birth date. As she grew up, Agnes and her sister took part in many church activities including the choir, religious services, and missionary presentations. Agnes had a passion for music and poetry and had a real gift for communication as well. She threw herself wholeheartedly into every activity she undertook and became a central figure in organizing activities with her parish.

Agnes’s parents, Nikola and Dranafie (Drana) Bojaxhiu, were both Albanian (see box) but had been drawn to Skopje because it was a commercial (trade) center. They were prominent (active and important) members in the community and took a keen interest in their children’s education. The family home was a happy place. It was always open to anyone who needed help, especially the poor. Nikola was a successful businessman who spoke five languages and sat on the town council. Agnes was only eight years old when her father died suddenly. Drana was left without financial security and took work as a seamstress to support her family. Despite their circumstances, the family home continued to be a gathering place for those even poorer than themselves. Drana repeatedly instructed her children to “be only all for God.”

Agnes received her early education at a convent-run primary school. However, after her father’s death, she attended a state secondary school in neighboring Croatia, which was also largely Roman Catholic. It was there that Agnes first learned about the work of Catholic missionaries in India and was inspired to the mission field herself. The Bojaxhiu family had
participated in the annual pilgrimage (spiritual journey) to the chapel of the Madonna of Letnice on the slopes of Skopje’s Black Mountain for many years. Groups of the faithful would make their way up the hillside in what became the highlight of the church year. Because of Agnes’s delicate health as a child the family would go in a horse-drawn carriage and visit the shrine when it was less crowded. When she was twelve years old, Agnes spent time once again praying in the chapel on the annual pilgrimage. She informed her mother that she felt herself called to a religious life. She intended to be a missionary and to give the life of Christ to the people.

The pursuit of her dream began with an application to join the Sisters of Loreto, the Irish branch of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Agnes chose this community of nuns because she had heard of their work among the poor in Calcutta, India. In 1928, she joined the pilgrimage to Letnice for the last time and left her family behind to join the Loreto Order in Rathfarnham, Ireland (near Dublin). She would never see her mother again.

Agnes had inherited her father’s gift for languages and quickly learned English, the language in which her spiritual studies were conducted. Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu took the name of Sister Mary Teresa of the Child Jesus after the French Teresa of Lisieux. The French Teresa had been known as the Little Flower because it was said she did no great things, only small things...
with great love. On December 1, 1928, Teresa left Ireland and traveled by boat on her long voyage through the Suez Canal, across the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal before finally arriving in Calcutta, India, on January 6, 1929. One week later, she boarded a train to the Himalayan station of Darjeeling where she would begin a two-year course of studies. It was there that Teresa was made a Loreto novitiate (see box) and received her nun’s black habit (uniform) and veil. Her preparation for the religious life included the practical task of learning the Hindi and Bengali languages of her new home.

**The call within a call**

Sister Teresa made her first vows, known as temporary vows, on May 24, 1931, and began teaching in the Loreto convent school of Darjeeling. For a brief time, she was able to work helping the nursing staff at a small medical station in Darjeeling as well. Sister Teresa was soon sent to Loreto Entally, one of six schools operated by the Sisters in Calcutta. In the same compound at Loreto Entally was St. Mary’s high school for Bengali girls, where lessons were conducted in Bengali and English was taught as a second language. Teresa taught geography and history in English. The Loreto nuns believed the best way to overcome the problems of poverty in India was through education, and so Teresa also taught at St. Teresa’s primary school outside the compound of Loreto Entally. The slum children she taught at St. Teresa’s lived in poverty-stricken conditions but were eager to learn. They called her Ma, which means Mother. Sister Teresa took her final vows of poverty, chastity (sexual purity), and obedience as a nun on May 24, 1937. She became Mother Teresa in accordance with the tradition of the Loreto nuns. She eventually became the principal of the school at St. Mary’s.

Beyond Loreto Entally’s protective walls was the worst slum in Calcutta, Moti Jheel (which means Pearl Lake). Every Sunday, Teresa visited the poor who lived in the slums and the patients in a local hospital of Moti Jheel. She had little material wealth to offer but she shared her faith with Christians, Hindus, and Muslims alike. Millions died and many more sought help during the war years of World War II (1939–45) and the famine (mass starvation) of 1943 in India. Orphans and “war babies” were left on the doorsteps of Loreto in increasing numbers. Hundreds of children were evacuated to convents outside the city for their safety while Japanese forces occupied nearby Burma during the war.
After the war, Teresa returned to the convent with her charges but found a shortage of teachers and food for the children. She continued to teach and daily went outside the convent to beg for food. The year 1946 brought increasing conflict between Hindus and Muslims and eventually ended in the partition and independence of India. However, its immediate effect was bloodshed in the streets of Calcutta where Teresa went to beg. On August 16, 1946, the Muslim League declared Direct Action Day. The city witnessed more than five thousand citizens killed and another fifteen thousand wounded before it was over.

Teresa’s health had never significantly improved and she was directed to take a summer retreat for a period of spiritual renewal and a physical break from work. She boarded a dusty train for Darjeeling on September 10, 1946. It was then that she received her “call within a call.” Teresa heard the call of God to leave the convent and help the poorest of the poor while living among them. She took it as an order. To deny the call would have been to break the faith. The date was celebrated later by the Catholic Church as Inspiration Day.

Returning to Entally in October, Teresa sought permission from her superiors to leave the convent school and begin a new congregation that would care for the unwanted and abandoned in the slums of Calcutta. She waited patiently for permission to begin her new order. It was granted two years later by Pope Pius XII (1876–1958) on April 12, 1948. Mother Teresa would call her religious order the Missionaries of Charity.

**Home for the dying destitute**

To prepare for her mission, Mother Teresa received training in medicine at Holy Family Hospital northwest of Calcutta. She studied with those who specialized in obstetrics (care of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the recovery period), emergency medicine, and infectious diseases. Returning to Calcutta, she exchanged her nun’s habit for a simple white cotton sari with a blue border and left the convent to work alone in the slums. Without any funding, Teresa started an open-air school for slum children and began to teach them the Bengali alphabet and basic hygiene (cleanliness). The school soon grew in numbers and she was joined by several of her former students. Local people saw her work and donated school supplies, a house to teach in, and financial support.

Every day, Teresa saw tragedy in the lives of the dying in Calcutta. Those too weak to move were being eaten by rats in the streets. The bodies of those who died during the night were hauled away in the morning by garbage collectors. Teresa sought help from Indian government officials to
secure a place for the dying to end their days with dignity. In 1952, she secured a house in an abandoned Hindu temple to Kali, the Goddess of Death. Teresa renamed it Nirmal Hriday (Place of the Pure Heart) and began gathering the deserted and dying that she found on the streets.

Those with Hansen’s disease, or leprosy, suffered an especially cruel fate in Indian society. People afflicted with leprosy were shunned by family and strangers alike for fear of contracting the mysterious and dreaded disease. Leprosy is a bacterial disease that attacks the skin and results in the loss of soft tissue and bones such as noses, ears, and lips. Although it is only a slightly contagious disease, the physical deformities it inflicts make it a frightening disorder for both those who suffer from it and those who witness it. For the poor, the rotting flesh that marked a leper resulted in a life of separation and begging. Teresa committed herself to gathering the lepers to Nirmal Hriday. She obtained a mobile medical clinic to reach those too ill to travel to the home. She arranged for the latest anti-leprosy treatments that could contain the disease and ensure it would not be passed on to others. In Calcutta, Teresa
became known as the Saint of the Gutter because of her work with the poorest of the poor who were diseased and dying.

Seeking the heart of God

Mother Teresa was joined by a number of Sisters and in February 1953, the Missionaries of Charity moved into a building that became known as the Mother House. Everyone began addressing Teresa simply as Mother. In the fall of 1955, Teresa founded her first orphanage for abandoned babies and children. She called it Shishu Bhavan (Sowing Joy). The home also had a soup kitchen, clinic, and shelter for expectant mothers who had been rejected by family and society.

In 1965, the Indian government offered Teresa land to start a leper colony that would be entirely self-sufficient. She named it Shanti Nagar (Place of Peace) and used it to teach those who came to stay the practical skills necessary to restore their dignity and confidence. She would eventually give the same human face to those who suffered from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) around the world. Teresa also set up centers around India to provide emergency aid to survivors of natural and human disasters such as floods, epidemics, and riots.

Teresa had the ability to gain attention and support for her cause of helping the poor from both ordinary citizens and world leaders. People around the world heard of the work done by the Missionaries of Charity and wanted to help. They offered material supplies and financial donations that eventually allowed Teresa to establish branches around the globe. In 1967, Teresa established the Missionary Brothers of Charity, who supplemented the work done by the Sisters. Teresa eventually founded four more branches of the Missionaries of Charity. They consist of the Contemplative Brothers, the Mission of Charity Fathers, the International Association of Co-Workers, and the Contemplative Sisters.

Mother Teresa received numerous awards and honors (see box), including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, for her work with the poor and suffering. She experienced declining health but continued her life’s work until her death in 1997. She received a state funeral in India with dignitaries from around the world in attendance. Tens of thousands of Christians, Hindus, and Muslims lined the streets of Calcutta to pay their respects to Mother Teresa as her body passed by. In 2003, Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) beatified Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the initial step toward sainthood in the Catholic Church.
Awards and Honors

The following is a partial list of the awards and honors bestowed upon Mother Teresa.

- 1970: Good Samaritan Prize and the Kennedy Foundation Prize, in the United States.
- 1972: Pandit Nehru Award for International Understanding.
- 1975: Albert Schweitzer Award for humanitarian work, in the United States.
- 1979: Balzan Prize, by the Italian government.

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