A Legacy of Light:  
Mother Teresa’s Mission of Love

By Lisa Yarkony

Mother Teresa has been called a living saint, the most caring person on the planet, and the advocate of the sick, disabled, and poorest of the poor. Although she died in 1997, Mother’s legend lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of people. Her secret was that she saw the face of her beloved Jesus in each human being she met and extended them all total and unconditional love.

Photo by Michael Collopy
hey came from Tokyo and Topeka, from New Delhi and New York. There were Hollywood stars, heads of state, and billionaires alongside the barefoot paupers she loved and served. For hours, most of the 12 million people of Calcutta, India flocked around TV sets, and over 100,000 crowded the streets hoping to see the nun’s open white casket as it traveled a three-mile procession in 90-degree heat. At the ceremony, Pope John Paul II praised her as “a light of conscience” coming “at the close of a century which has known terrible extremes of darkness.”

Her legacy of light lives on throughout the world, especially in the teeming city she called home. Calcutta is a place of hand-pulled rickshaws, rich culture, and soaking rain in the summer when monsoon season storms in. Some visitors from the developed world are disturbed by the fetid air, the choking crowds, the open-air toilets and baths. It’s all part of the experience for the many people from around the world who go there to volunteer at the Catholic order Mother Teresa founded in 1950. The Missionaries of Charity is still thriving, and its sisters and brothers welcome the volunteers’ help in providing care for the poorest of the poor.

The first stop for these volunteers is the Mother House, the order’s headquarters where they get their assignments. They might be sent to Prem Dan, a convalescent home where they prepare meals, feed patients, and bend over tanks of water hand-washing laundry. They might also assist at Nirmal Hriday, a hospice for the dying that houses perhaps 150 patients in closely spaced beds. It’s a beehive of activity as volunteers join in bandaging wounds and rubbing ointment on sores. The sisters who serve there come from around the world, and they are known for their kindness and efficiency. So are those who serve at Shishu Bhavan, an orphanage where hundreds of children sit in cribs as volunteers and sisters bustle about feeding them, changing their diapers, and giving them hugs.

It’s taxing work that demands stamina and moral strength. Many of those in Mother’s homes are diseased or disabled, even the kids. The smell of decay and death fills some of the rooms, along with cries of grief and pain. The sight of the patients’ wounds and the sound of their wails can leave volunteers feeling distraught and frightened. After helping out for a few hours, they stagger through the heat and pollution and, exhausted, collapse in their hotel rooms. How do the nuns do it day in and day out? The answer is that long after Mother Teresa’s death, her indelible spirit and resolve live on in her sisters. “We feel her spirit is present with us,” says Sister Dorothy, who’s spent 38 years serving in the order in New York’s South Bronx. “In our work and in our religious life, we feel Mother’s presence.”

And her sense of mission still guides the order, according to Sister Nirmala, who was Mother Teresa’s successor for over 10 years. “Mother Teresa is not far away,” the nun explains. “She might have changed her residence from earth to heaven, but I can feel her presence and guidance all around me,” as do the 5,000 sisters and brothers of her order. “The Missionaries of Charity,” Sister Nirmala says, “is continuing with its work and going on. It continues to be in the same spirit as it was when it was founded by Mother” — even though no one can truly fill her sandals. “I can never be Mother. I cannot live her life. I have my life, and I am living it the way Mother wanted me to.”

Life among the other sisters also remains very much the same as it was when Mother Teresa was alive. They take the normal vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, in addition to a fourth vow of “wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor.” As missionaries, they can be sent anywhere at a moment’s notice, so they don’t collect things that would hold them down. Each sister has two blue and white saris, sandals, and an apostolate bag that holds rosaries, religious medals, holy cards, and holy water to give to the poor when they visit them. They don’t own property or receive personal gifts. They live modestly without modern conveniences such as air conditioning, home appliances, computers, or cell phones.

The sisters have taken no steps to modernize because they “prefer to keep it simple,” according to Nirmala. “We follow our tradition. We follow our spirit,” she says, and this spirit has led them to grow their founder’s global network of homes, as she herself never stopped striving to do. “I have plenty of work to do, and I will be here until my last breath,” Mother once remarked. “We have to pull on. We have 568 homes all over the world in 120 countries. [Ed.note: The total is now 757 homes in 134 countries] We will continue God’s work,” she promised as she laid out her plans to establish a base in China.
“You can come with me,” she joked with reporters. But Mother Teresa never made it there, and the sisters are still awaiting Beijing’s official permission to serve its country’s poor.

Elsewhere, however, the nuns have made strides in adding to the legacy their founder left behind. “We have expanded to 14 new countries,” Nirmala notes, “and we are striving hard to expand further. The Missionaries of Charity has set up 166 new homes across India, and the number of nuns has increased too. People are still sending donations. They’re helping us in many ways. We have more than we need. Mother’s blessings are there with us. People still appreciate what she has done.” And she still lives on in their hearts. “It is her love for them” that explains her ongoing influence, Nirmala says, adding, “The words of love that she spread are still carved in people’s hearts.”

And their meaning is clear in the many countries where Mother Teresa’s order does its work.

There are now 134 such countries, filled with people of every race and religion. The sisters serve them all — regardless of their creed — because Mother taught her sisters always to see the face of Jesus in those of the poor. “There is only one God,” she said, “and He is God to all; therefore it is important that everyone is seen as equal before God.” It’s a belief she first put into practice in predominantly Hindu India, where Christians constitute a small minority. Recently, Mother Teresa’s sisters followed her example in Tajikistan, a mainly Muslim country where civil war had left hospitals short of medicine and equipment.

Patients smiled there at the sight of the women in blue-bordered white saris as they walked through government facilities that reeked from the stench of urine and sickness. Many patients couldn’t afford their medicine and were grateful when the nuns took their prescriptions and brought them back filled. They blessed the nuns when they came to feed them and assist them with chores. “The sisters are the only ones who help me,” one patient said. “The sisters help us a lot,” another remarked, “not only by buying the medicines we need but also by showing somebody cares about our lives.” Yet another summed it up by saying simply, “God bless them and their work.”

It’s a feeling that’s echoed in southwestern Bangladesh, where the Missionaries of Charity Brothers empower abandoned boys. “Every person living in Shanti Bhaban [Home of Peace] has a grieving past,” according to Brother Joseph Murmu, who’s in charge of the center for disabled boys. Some of their families “refused to take care of them,” he says. “Other families could not afford the cost of treatment and other expenses for the children and brought them to the home. We nurture them with love and care because we believe that they are children of God and have the right to live a full life. We live with them like family.” And a person will risk anything for family; thus you’ll find the order serving in some of the most wretched places on earth.

Last year, six sisters of the Missionaries of Charity remained in Gaza City despite bombings and the Israeli ground-force incursion into the Gaza Strip. The six sisters — from India, Malta, the Philippines, Rwanda, and Slovakia — continued to bathe, feed, and care for incapacitated elderly women and severely mentally and physically disabled children as well as they could. “We are okay. The bombings are not so near,” one sister said while admitting that the noise was loud enough to scare some of the kids. “We will stay here, and if something happens to our people, we will be with them.”

The sisters have also showed this unwavering sense of devotion in the midst of war in Afghanistan. The order has been there for three years ministering to handicapped children and their impoverished moms. “Many of them are widows,” one sister explains. “They live in terrible conditions, and the landlord throws them out during the winter. Many have five to eight children. We help with rent and food distribution.” They also teach literacy classes for teenage girls, putting them at risk from extreme insurgents, while another nun worked for a time with her class to translate the Koran from Arabic into English. “The students did enjoy it,” she says. “It was a way to speak about God.”

An even better way to “speak” about God is through actions,
People around the world celebrated the centenary of Mother Teresa’s birth on August 26. There were symposiums, holy masses, novenas, concerts, cultural programs, and much more. The Missionaries of Charity chose Mother’s favorite quote, “God created us for greater things — to love and to be loved,” as the theme for the occasion.

No birthday is complete without candles, so perhaps not surprisingly, New York wasn’t the only place where there was something special about the skyline that night. Saint Peter’s Cathedral in Belfast, Ireland was ablaze in blue and white, and members of the public were invited to join in by putting blue and white candles in their windows. In Calcutta, India, Benedictine College illuminated campus buildings in blue and white and has decided to rename its new nursing building the Mother Teresa Center for Nursing and Health Education.

In addition, Calcutta marked Mother’s birthday with movie showings and a photo exhibition. The three-day Mother Teresa International Film Festival screened films on the nun from 18 countries. They included Dominic Lapierre’s “In the Name of God” and “Mother Teresa,” Ann and Jan Petrie’s documentary about her travels around the world, and an animated feature on her by Spanish filmmaker Christobel Guierrez. Two painters, Ritu Singh and Sunita Kumar, exhibited a special series of works and rare photographs of the nun.

For those who want to get even closer to Mother, there’s a traveling exhibit of her relics: a rosary, crucifix, worn sandals, and hair — even some of her blood. These precious items are making the rounds of North American churches, and they’ve received a saintly reception from the crowds who’ve already seen them in Baltimore and Boston. “They are amazed,” says Sister Ajay, a nun with the Missionaries of Charity in Boston. “They’re praying, weeping,” and wishing in vain that they could take a bit of Teresa home. Fortunately, those who want their own memento of Mother have some other options.

On August 26, the U.S. Postal Service issued a new stamp, for instance, featuring a portrait of her painted by award-winning artist Thomas Blackshear II of Colorado. “With this stamp, the U.S. Postal Service recognizes Mother Teresa,” the USPS announced in a statement. “Her humility and compassion, as well as her respect for the innate worth and dignity of mankind, inspired people of all ages and backgrounds to work on behalf of the world’s poorest populations.”

One of those she inspired was Pope John Paul II, her dear friend and supporter. He embraces Mother Teresa on the reverse of a new five-ounce gold coin France is minting to commemorate the 100th anniversary of her birth. It depicts the touching moment that took place during John Paul II’s Feb. 2, 1986 visit to the Missionaries of Charity order in Calcutta. The obverse of the coin shows a scene of Teresa carrying a child, encircled by this sentence: “Chez nous, il y a toujours un lit prêt pour un enfant de plus.” Translated to English, it means: “In our house, there is always a bed ready for one more child.”

They’re words that Mother Teresa’s nuns are embracing with ever more passion this year as they honor their founder’s centennial year. “Mother Teresa continues to inspire us all to open our eyes to see the dignity of a child of God in the poor and to bring peace and joy to them through our humble services,” says Sister Prema, worldwide head of the Missionaries of Charity.

1 Boston Herald, Renee Nadeau Algarin, June 18, 2010
2 Expressindia, Mohana Dam, Aug. 27, 2009

“The Best Gift of All”

Sister Prema, worldwide head of the Missionaries of Charity.
as Mother Teresa did when she set up an orphanage and hospital in Port-au-Prince. The sisters still serve in the same halls their founder once walked, and they’ve been busier than ever since January, when an earthquake reduced the Haitian capital to rubble. Life for the sisters there has changed, although their house — unlike many nearby buildings — withstood all the magnitude 7 earthquake could muster. “It’s different because there is more need,” one sister said a few weeks after the quake. “Every day, we still have to take people to the hospital. We are trying to provide covering, tarps for the people.” And they also collect food so they can continue feeding the thousands left destitute by the disaster.

Haitians showed their gratitude this March when the Saint Therese School in Port-au-Prince received a very special guest. Sister Prema, the new worldwide head of the Missionaries of Charity, emerged from a narrow corridor and sat on the bleachers of an outdoor basketball court filled with 300 eager children. The children sang for her, danced to drum beats, and laid gifts of flowers at her feet. Like many Catholic leaders from around the world, she had come with a message of solidarity for earthquake-wrecked Haiti. “You have suffered, and your families have suffered, but you are not alone,” she told them. “All the sisters are praying for you.”

They also pray for those who suffer thousands of miles away amid the bright lights of New York City. Mother Teresa brought her mission there because she felt called to serve the poorest of the poor in one of the richest cities of all. The sisters in the Bronx run food pantries and visit the disabled in their homes. “No one ever visited them,” Sister Dorothy observes based on her many years in the Bronx. “Some of them called the sisters ‘angels.’ They said, ‘Angels are coming to visit us’” — angels who also answer the prayers of the needy by operating a shelter, soup kitchen, and summer day camp for inner-city kids. Similar ministries are in place in Harlem. In Greenwich Village, they run a hospice for AIDS patients called Gift of Love.

Indeed, love was Mother’s great gift to New York, as it was to the rest of the world. Like many cities, New York honored her contributions on what would have been her 100th birthday. On August 26, blue and white lights were lit all night at the Hutchinson Metro Center, a 14-story office complex in the Bronx that counts among its tenants the Visiting Nurse Service of New York — a fitting tribute to someone who described herself as a home care nurse. The USS Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum was similarly lit. Plans were also under way to illuminate the Brooklyn Borough Hall, and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn asked New Yorkers to light blue and white candles in the windows of their businesses and homes.

Quinn also urged them to ensure that Mother Teresa’s work “is not just alive and well in image” and instead to “make sure that her work is alive and well — and continues.” So Quinn declared August 26 a citywide day of service in Mother Teresa’s honor. “We ask that you take part of that morning, afternoon, or evening,” she said at a recent press conference, “and give back to those who are less fortunate. We ask that New Yorkers consider spending some time that day volunteering at a soup kitchen, mentoring a young person, visiting a senior center, or signing up at the city’s volunteer website where you’ll find many, many places in NYC where you can participate.” Mayor Michael Bloomberg led the way for city leaders by being one of the first to agree to volunteer.

But you certainly don’t have to be a wealthy mayor to take part in Mother Teresa’s mission of love, nor do you have to live in New York to keep her legacy alive. There’s a way we can all follow in the steps of this extraordinary, caring woman who lit up the darkness of our time. And we don’t have to brave bombs, earthquakes, or battles as her stout-hearted sisters and brothers have done; we don’t have to accomplish any great deeds. In the end, “it is not how much we do,” Mother Teresa said, “but how much love we put into the doing.” So long as we hold that love within and strive to apply it — even when the way gets weary — there’s a little bit of Mother in us all. When we show it by serving those in need, we beam our own light of conscience through the dark.

Endnotes
2. *Catholic Online*, Sept. 6, 2007
5. EWTN Global Catholic Network, “Her Words: Quotes of Mother Teresa”

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