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## Mother Teresa: Sainthood comes, despite a crisis of Faith

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on MARCH 20, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, INDIA

Come September, Mother Teresa will be a Saint. The canonization will take place on September 4, probably in Rome — the sainthood coming 19 years after she died in Kolkata (or Calcutta, an eastern Indian city) in 1997.

For much of her life, Kolkata was her home, where her organisation, Missionaries of Charity, cared selflessly for the dying and the destitute. Living as I did very close to it in the city's Kalighat area — where Kolkata's most important temple, that of Hindu goddess Kali, and crematorium were located — I have seen the tireless dedication of the Albanian nun as she and her fellow missionaries went about picking up the gravely ill from the streets and giving them love and shelter in their last days or hours.

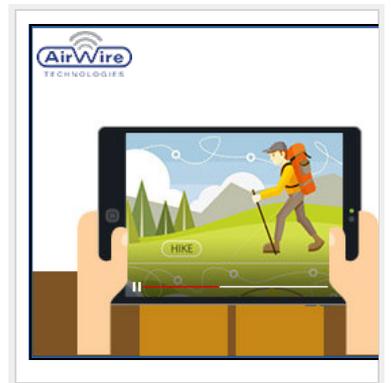


Mother Teresa

Although a staunch Catholic, having been baptized on August 27, 1910, at Skopje in Macedonia, Teresa never differentiated between communities, and strongly believed that disease and death and suffering were not selective about whom to strike. And she had no queasiness about lifting a sore-infested beggar or a disease-ridden man/woman or even a bleeding leper from the sidewalks of the city and taking them to her home, Missionaries of Charity.

During my long years in Kolkata — where I went to school and college — I have seen her sacrifice and selflessness, which she conveyed through her beatific smile and stoicism. And, of course, it seemed incredulous that while King Alexander from Macedonia came to India around 326 BC to conquer and subjugate people, a Christian missionary also from the same country would arrive in India many centuries later for a completely different kind of conquest. She won over hearts with a kind of goodness the world rarely witnesses.

Equally incredulous is the fact that this daughter of Christ was troubled by a crisis of faith throughout her life — as some of her letters published after her death revealed. However, Teresa never allowed such misgivings to stand in the way of her work — which began in 1928 in Ireland.



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Beatified in 2003 by Pope John Paul II after recognizing a claim that she had posthumously cured a critically-ill Bengali tribal woman, Teresa got the nod for sainthood in 2015, when the Vatican credited her with inspiring the recovery of a Brazilian man suffering from multiply brain tumors. She had to have two certifiable miracles to be declared by the Church as worthy of Sainthood.

The seeds for this honor and greatness were perhaps sown by her mother, Dranfile Bojaxhiu. After the death of her father, Nikola — a trader and construction contractor whose involvement in the Albanian freedom movement was suspected to have been the cause of his death by poisoning — Teresa grew close to her mother, who instilled in her eight-year-old daughter the values of charity.

Dranfile always told her daughter never to eat a mouthful of food unless she shared it with others, and although the family was not wealthy at all, the mother always invited the city's poor to dine with her. When Teresa — then called Agnes — asked her mother who these people were, she said that some were their relatives, but all of them were their own people. A sense of commitment to benevolence was firmly planted in the young girl's heart and head that day.

In 1928, when Agnes was just 18, she decided to become a nun and became part of the Sisters of Loretto in Dublin. It was there she changed her name to Sister Mary Teresa. A year later, she travelled to Darjeeling in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal for the novitiate period. Later, she went to teach at Kolkata's Saint Mary's High School for Girls, dedicating her time to coaching poor students. Teresa learnt Hindi and Bengali, and became Mother in 1937.

But her heart was restless, and after what she felt was a call from Christ to give up teaching and take up the cause of the poorest of poor, she walked into the streets of Kolkata, wearing a white sari with a blue border — an outfit she donned till the very end. The year was 1948, and after a brief training in basic medicine, she began her voyage of looking after “the unwanted, the unloved and the uncared for”. So many times, men and women have died in her arms. That was Mother Teresa.

Soon, she found a shelter in Kalighat and established the Missionaries of Charity in 1950, a new congregation which tended to the needy, irrespective of their religion, caste or creed. In the course of the next two decades, she opened a school for the poor, an orphanage and a home for lepers. And the Missionaries of Charity grew, and when she died, it had 4,000 members worldwide.

But despite widespread praise for her work and even a Nobel Peace Prize, Teresa was often criticized, especially for upholding the Vatican's controversial views on and opposition to contraception.

“I feel the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion,” Mother Teresa said in her 1979 Nobel lecture. In 1995, she advocated a “no” vote in the Irish referendum to end the country's constitutional ban on divorce and remarriage.

The most scathing criticism of Mother Teresa can be found in Christopher Hitchens's book, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, in which he argues that she “glorified poverty for her own ends and provided a justification for the preservation of institutions and beliefs that sustained widespread poverty”.

More damning than these have been some of her letters that speak about her lack of Faith. In one letter of distress, she told a confidante: “Where is my Faith—even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness and darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my heart— and make me suffer untold agony.”

Such despair and doubt may shock all those countless thousands of men and women who worshipped her as an epitome of Christian values and as a saint of the suffering, but Teresa's revelations also tell us that she was, above all, a human being like you and me.

*Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.*

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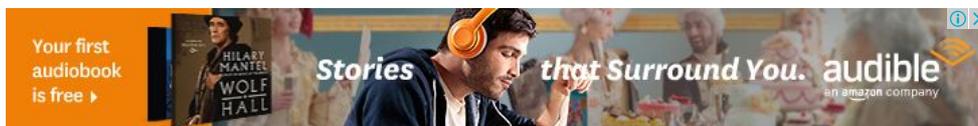
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