

# MINISTERING IN MOTHER TERESA'S HOME FOR THE DYING DESTITUTES, CALCUATTA, INDIA

Personal Observations and Experiences

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I had the opportunity to travel to India and serve as a missionary volunteer in May, 1988 in Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying Destitutes, Nirmal Hriday in Calcutta. Nirmal Hriday means "Place of the Pure Heart". As a missionary volunteer, I worked with the nuns of Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity and the Missionaries of Charity Brothers and served the poorest of the poor in Calcutta.

As I first approached the door of Mother Teresa's home, I was shocked at the poverty that surrounded the stark, stone building. There were dirty, crowded streets. Calcutta is a city of 18 million people, 1 square foot per person. There are 750 million persons in India. There is no mass electricity, water, sewage, or refrigeration. The democracy of India is a third world country in the earliest stages of an industrial society with few factories or machines. Most labor is still done by hand. It is predominately a Hindu country. Many people live on the streets, on the sidewalks, huddled together on straw mats. The people wear rags or bits of clothing. Other people crowd into hundreds of little makeshift shacks or huts that are merely hovels along the streets. There are rows and rows of little dark shops and street tent bazaars.

Piles of human waste and debris fill the gutters of the streets. Women tend small open cooking stoves on the sidewalks. Cattle, sheep, pigs, and dogs run freely. The streets are not only full of people, but they are also full of bicycles, cars, taxis, oxen carts and rickshaws pulled by men. Children bathe naked in common water pumps along the sidewalks that flow into the gutters. Mothers often comb children's hair and pick the nits of lice out right in plain sight on the streets. Old men, wrapped in white cloths called *dhotis*, around the waist often sleep curled up on their little straw mats on the street curbs in the midst of the noise. The poor can live on one rupee or ten cents a day. The average annual income is about \$300.00.

Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying Destitutes serves the poorest of the poor of Indian society. In India, these people are the "untouchables", the persons at the bottom rung of the Hindu caste system. Although the caste system has been abolished as law since 1947, the time of the democratic policy of Gandhi, it still flourishes in the minds of Indian people. Therefore, these poor people are often neglected by society, rejected by hospitals and left with nothing and no one to care for them. They are sick, dying, and destitute. Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity pick up these people from the streets and

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bring them to Nirmal Hriday for proper medical care, nourishment, treatment, and love.

At Nirmal Hriday, they die in dignity, or they recover and go out to live a better life. Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying Destitutes is situated near the temple of the Hindu Goddess, Kali, who symbolizes destruction and death. The sign at the entrance of Mother Teresa's reads in stark contrast: "Welcome to Mother's First Love. Let every action of mine be something beautiful for God." Mother Teresa started Nirmal Hriday in 1948 as her first ministry to the dying in Calcutta.

I enter the hospital. It is clean yet stark and functional. There are three main areas: the kitchen and washroom, the men's ward and women's ward with three rows of iron cots, 15 beds in a row in each ward. In the kitchen there is a huge open coal stove. Beside the stove there are two big troughs of water where dishes are washed. There are also two large stone tubs with running water used for beating, washing, and rinsing clothes. The gutters open into a common drain on the floor. Upstairs there is a lovely white stone chapel with a simple plain wood altar. Above it are the words of Jesus, "I thirst," a trademark of Mother Teresa's life of prayer and work for Christ. Each day there are services of prayer, singing, and silence.

The women helpers cook huge pots and kettles of rice, eggs, and vegetable curry on the stove. For meals the patients eat boiled eggs, vegetable curry, and two pieces of bread or traditional flour cakes, *chappatis*, mashed in their metal pan with their hot tea poured on it. The people eat with their hands. I assist the Missionaries of Charity Sisters and Brothers in distributing food. While I am here I work as they do: distribute medicine, clean and dress wounds, and offer love and care to the sick and dying.

The men and women patients of Nirmal Hriday are so fragile. They are frail and thin. Some can barely sit up or speak. Some can no longer walk but only crawl along on their hands and knees. Their bodies are just literally skin and bones, no flesh or fat on them whatsoever. Their limbs are just like sticks.

After meals I help wash dishes. On the floor, I use coconut palm for the brush and wet ashes from the coal for soap and scrub the metal sauce dishes, pans, and pots. Then I rinse them in the trough. There is no ventilation in the kitchen and the heat is sweltering, each day averaging 110 degrees.

In the later morning, the Missionaries of Charity van brings about 50 children from a nearby neighborhood slum to Nirmal Hriday. The sisters bathe each of the children under the big pump of cooling clean water in the kitchen. It is refreshing for the children to get the filth they live in cleaned from their little bodies. The nuns douse them with powder for delousing. The children are quite deprived yet joyous, open, and loving. I lead them in singing songs and saying numbers and the alphabet in English. Mother Teresa's Home represents for them love and hope in the midst of squalor.

I care for women patients and tend to their wounds and needs. As a sister dresses an oozing wound of one particular blind woman, I hold her hand. She grasped at my hand so firmly and so lovingly. This little woman is so emaciated, yet her smile radiates from her face and brightens the room. She calls me by

the familiar "Auntie." Although I can't speak Hindi, Bengali, or her native Indian tribal dialect, I enjoy just being with her.

I minister to some of the patients who are victims of leprosy. This I have never seen before. The effects of the disease are devastating. One woman's face is not longer distinct. Her nose is half gone and appears to have been eaten away. Her eyes are not in their proper place but appear to be sunken into her nose and cheeks. This woman has beautiful long thick black hair and a smile on her face. It is amazing to see such a look of contentment on her face in the midst of her trying life.

I also assist the brothers as they care for the male patients. I tend a very sick old man near death. He is literally wasting away and dying before my very eyes. We huddled around him and pray. He quietly passes away. The brothers close his eyes, undress him and wrap his body in a white clean sheet and tie knots in it to secure the body, which will be taken to the crematorium later in the day. The man has gone to God in the peace and love of Nirmal Hriday. He died in dignity instead of the gutters of the street.

The brothers and I then tend another man who has a huge, open, oozing sore on his back. The man's wound is about one foot wide and one foot long. The outer skin is gone. It is open to the flesh. The flesh is full of green and yellow pus and maggots that live in the wound in the pockets and folds of the inner skin. The brother lovingly scrubs each portion of the wound with a cotton swab and antiseptic as a mother would swab a newborn baby. As I help, Mother Teresa's words came alive to me: "Let my touch heal thy broken body."

Some of the patients who came to Nirmal Hriday do not die, but through proper care and love, recover. They either go home to start a better life or become converts to Christianity and remain to help others. While I am here, one lady recovers and is released to go home. She is so happy. She takes off her simple bed clothes, washes and puts on a beautiful, orange silk sari. She looks lovely. She walks up and down the rows of beds and gives the words and sign of greeting, *namaste*, the folded palms raised to the level of the chin.

Another woman whose name was Hazel becomes a Christian and remains to help at Nirmal Hriday. She is a tiny person, doll-like. She is full grown, yet no bigger than an eight year old girl. She helps with cooking the food, dispensing the medicine and the general intake of patients. She wears a blue American dress and a big cross. There are some 16 million Christians in India.

At Nirmal Hriday I found intense suffering and deprivation comingled with faith, joy, and an outpouring of love. The human suffering is taken up into Christ's suffering on the cross. Human suffering is made redemptive in union with Christ's suffering. As I ministered to the poorest of the poor with the brothers and sisters and with other volunteers from all over the world, I could see that we were actually ministering to Christ in his distressing disguise of the poor. We gave his joy and love through giving care to others whom the world has cast aside.

In this humble service there is the love of Christ. We minister to him, and

for him and through him to the poor at Nirmal Hriday. Christ came not to be served but to serve. We are called to do likewise; to say "yes" to Christ wholeheartedly for service and devotion in his name. At Nirmal Hriday, there is a sign with Mother Teresa's words on it "Let us pray the work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus." In serving the poor I felt one with him. I experienced inner peace. Jesus' words to God the Father from the Gospel of John for the world spoke to me: ". . . that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:26b RSV)

I found that the love of Christ transcends the misery of the world. His divine love seeks to transform the world. In the midst of poverty and suffering there is joy and peace in Christ. In loving the poor, I am loving Christ and in their love, Christ is loving me. We are called in life to radiate the love of God to others in all we do, for all persons are children of God.

### Biography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

After working at Nirmal Hriday, I began to study more about Mother Teresa, her life and work and her Order, the Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa received the Nobel Prize for Peace in Oslo, Norway in 1979 for her work with the Missionaries of Charity among the poor in Calcutta, India, and all over the world.

Mother Teresa was born in Skopje Albania (Yugoslavia) on August 26, 1910 as Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. At the age of 12 she began to experience the call of God. At age 18 she decided to be a missionary nun. Mother Teresa remembers: "I was still very young, no more than twelve years old, when, in the heart of my family, I first experienced the desire to belong completely to God. I thought and prayed about it for six years. At times, I had the impression that my vocation did not exist. But finally I was convinced that God called me."<sup>1</sup>

Mother Teresa first joined the Sisters of Loreto, a teaching order of nuns and was assigned to a girls' school in northern India. During her novitiate, Mother Teresa studied the works of Therese Martin who was St. Therese of the Child Jesus, St. Therese of Lisieux. Mother Teresa's name comes from this, her patron saint. She was deeply moved by Therese's commitment to mission and charity in love and service to the church.<sup>2</sup>

Mother Teresa remained a Loreto nun in the teaching profession for 20 years before she had a second call. On September 10, 1946 Mother Teresa received "a call within a call." She has to be God's instrument to serve the poor while living among them. Mother Teresa states: "In quiet intimate prayer with our Lord, I heard distinctly a call within a call. The message was quite clear: I was to leave the convent and help the poor whilst living among them. It was an order."<sup>3</sup>

On December 21, 1948, Mother Teresa started in Calcutta an open air school for poor children from the streets. She took off her traditional European garb of the Loreto nun and put on a plain white cotton sari, the garb of the poor women of India. On the veil she put two blue stripes, the sign of her Order,

the Missionaries of Charity.

She continued her outreach to the poor. By 1949 some of the Indian women students from her school where she had been teaching came to join her in her new work for the poor in Calcutta. After becoming a citizen of India, Mother Teresa began to draft a constitution for her new religious order.<sup>4</sup>

### The Work of the Missionaries of Charity

In 1950 the Constitution of the Order of the Missionaries of Charity was brought before the Pope in Rome. It received permission to begin official work in India. The four vows of the order would be: poverty, chastity, obedience, and "to give wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor."<sup>5</sup> In 1953 a large and gracious estate home in Calcutta on Lower Circular Road was given to Mother Teresa to be used as the Mother House for the Missionaries of Charity. The Missionaries of Charity began their multi-faceted work to the poor, the sick, the abandoned, the leprosy, the destitute, the dying in Calcutta.

Besides Nirmal Hriday, where I worked, which serves the dying destitutes of Calcutta, Mother Teresa's order has other centers of outreach. Mother Teresa comments that in 25 years she has picked up from Calcutta's streets some 36,000 people of which 17,000 have died in dignity while the others have gotten well.<sup>6</sup>

The Missionaries of Charity also have a huge ministry to the lepers. Mother Teresa started Titagarh, a leper community outside of Calcutta, as a haven of care and medical treatment for them. A whole town was later established for families of lepers and a sister-doctor was put in charge there. The town is named Shanti Nagar, "Town of Peace." Throughout the city, the Missionaries of Charity take mobile units to dispense medicine to the lepers. Their vans read "Touch the leper with your compassion." In the Calcutta area, they work with over 55,000 lepers.<sup>7</sup>

The Missionaries of Charity also have mobile food units that dispense rice daily to the hungry. They feed 7,000 people a day in Calcutta. Another outreach is to children, orphaned, sick or dying. Mother Teresa began a children's home or orphanage in Calcutta named Shishu Bhavan. This home offers care, shelter, hope, and love to abandoned babies and orphaned children. Sisters nourish and tend the sick, dying and abandoned little ones, often picking up neglected children from the streets or babies still alive that have been discarded in trash cans on the streets.<sup>8</sup>

In 1965, Mother Teresa gained approval to establish homes and centers for ministry outside Calcutta. The first house was in Cocorote, Venezuela.<sup>9</sup> In 1963, Brother Andrew began the Missionaries of Charity Brothers. A group of men would carry out the same work with the poor performed by the Missionaries of Charity sisters. Their work began in Calcutta alongside of Mother Teresa's and then it too branched out worldwide. By 1983, the Missionaries of Charity Brothers had 401 members with 25 nationalities represented. They worked in 51 hours in India and overseas. As of 1986 there were about 1,000 sisters in Missionaries of Charity. There are about 60 centers in Calcutta and

40 houses in other parts of India and more than 150 houses in other countries all over the world, with a total of 330 houses worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

### Mother Teresa's Theology

Three aspects of theology form the core of Mother Teresa's life, spirit, and ministry: her concepts of love, the significance of Christ's suffering and the Mass, and the power of prayer. Mother Teresa defines her concept of love in the words from her acceptance speech given after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. She states that the heart of her ministry is to love as God loves. She comments:

It is not enough to say I love God but I do not love my neighbor. St. John says you are a liar if you say you love God and you do not love your neighbor. How can you love God whom you do not see if you do not love your neighbor whom you see, whom you touch, with whom you live. And this is very important for us to realize that love to be true, has to hurt. It hurt Jesus to love us. It hurt him.<sup>11</sup>

On love, Mother Teresa further states, "Love. Love Jesus in people. Serve him in them. Love until it hurts. Real love is always painful and hurts: then it is real and pure."<sup>12</sup>

The Mass, the Eucharist, brings us into oneness with Jesus and his suffering and brokenness on the cross. In his redemption, there is redemption for the suffering of humanity. Mother Teresa writes, "In the Mass, we have Jesus in the appearance of bread, while in the slum's we see Christ and touch him in the broken bodies and in the abandoned children."<sup>13</sup>

Mother Teresa's life, ministry and vision are sustained by the power of prayer. Mother Teresa calls us to pray with a clean heart, a simple heart, and a humble heart. For Mother Teresa, prayer is "oneness with Christ"<sup>14</sup> To pray means to listen in silence, to find God, to hear him and speak with him in our hearts. In the fullness of our hearts, we are able to speak to God.<sup>15</sup> Mother Teresa says, "Jesus and I are one. He prays in me. He thinks in me, He works with me and through me, He uses my tongue to speak he uses my brain to think, He uses my hands to touch Him in the broken body."<sup>16</sup>

Mother Teresa in serving the poor is actually serving Christ, the hungry Christ, the naked Christ, the forsaken Christ, the dying Christ. Mother Teresa describes who Jesus is for her: "The Leper — to wash his wounds, the Begger — to give him a smile, The Blind — to lead him, the Crippled — to walk with him . . . To me Jesus is my God, Jesus is my Spouse, Jesus is my life, Jesus is my only Love, Jesus is my Everything."<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, Mother Teresa exemplifies supreme devotion to Christ, complete self-surrender and total obedience to the will of God in total service to him for others. She continues to inspire me each day that I live. Hear her humble words: "I am nothing. He is all. I do nothing of my own. He does it. That is what I am. God's pencil. A tiny bit of pencil with which he writes what

he likes.” She aptly concludes, “God writes through us, and however imperfect instruments we may be, he writes beautifully.”<sup>18</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *My life for the Poor*, ed. Jose Luis Gonzales-Balado and Janet N. Playfoot (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Eileen Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street: Mother Teresa-The Spirit and the Work* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 20-21.

<sup>3</sup>Mother Teresa, *My life for The Poor*, 7.

<sup>4</sup>Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street*, 43-48.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 48-49. For further discussion of the vows of the Missionaries of Charity, see Edward Le Joly, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 251-252.

<sup>6</sup>Mother Teresa, *My Life for the Poor*, 90.

<sup>7</sup>Georges Goree and Jean Barbier, *Love Without Boundaries: Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, trans. Paul Speakman (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1974), 38-43.

<sup>8</sup>B. Srinvasa Murthy, *Mother Teresa and India*, (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Publishing, 1983), 47-49, 80.

<sup>9</sup>Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street*, 498.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 498-502.

<sup>11</sup>Kathryn Spink, *The Miracle of Love: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Her Missionaries of Charity and Her Co-Workers*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 231. Reference includes the complete Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

<sup>12</sup>Mother Teresa, *My Life for the Poor*, 103-4.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>14</sup>Egan, *Such A Vision of the Street*, 495.

<sup>15</sup>Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: Contemplative in the Heart of the World* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1985) 93-104.

<sup>16</sup>Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street*, 496.

<sup>17</sup>Mother Teresa, *My life for the Poor*, 106-7.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 95.

