

St. Teresa of Calcutta

(Blessed Mother Teresa)

Known in Life as "Mother Teresa"

b. 1910

Albanian missionary

Her feast day is celebrated on September 5th.

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Introduction

Mother Teresa is among the most well-known and highly respected women in the world in the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1948 she founded a religious order of nuns in Calcutta, India, called the Missionaries of Charity. Through this order, she has dedicated her life to helping the poor, the sick, and the dying around the world, particularly those in India. Her selfless work with the needy has brought her much acclaim and many awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

She was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in 1910 in Skopje, Yugoslavia (what is now Macedonia). Her parents, Nikola and Drona Bojaxhiu, were Albanians who settled in Skopje shortly after the beginning of the century. Since her father was co-owner of a construction firm, her family lived comfortably while she was growing up. In 1928 she suddenly decided to become a nun and traveled to Dublin, Ireland, to join the Sisters of Loreto, a religious order founded in the seventeenth century. After studying at the convent for less than a year, she left to join the Loreto convent in the city of Darjeeling in northeast India. On May 24, 1931, she took the name of "Teresa" in honor of St. Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century Spanish nun.

In 1929 Mother Teresa had been assigned to teach geography at St. Mary's High School for Girls in Calcutta, south of Darjeeling. At the time, the streets of Calcutta were crowded with beggars, lepers, and the homeless. Unwanted infants were regularly left to die on the streets or in garbage bins. On a train back to Darjeeling in 1946, Mother Teresa felt the need to abandon her position at St. Mary's to care for the needy in the slums of Calcutta. After receiving the consent of her archbishop, she began her work.

Founds the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta

In 1948 Pope Pius XII granted Mother Teresa permission to live as an independent nun. That same year, she became an Indian citizen. After studying nursing for three months with the American Medical Missionaries in the Indian city of Patna, she returned to Calcutta to found the Missionaries of Charity. For her habit she chose a plain white sari with a blue

border and a simple cross pinned to her left shoulder.

Mother Teresa initially focused her efforts on poor children in the streets, teaching them how to read and how to care for themselves. In 1949 she was joined by her first recruit, a young girl from the city of Bengal. Many of those who joined her order over the next few years were former students from St. Mary's. Each recruit was required to devote her life to serving the poor without accepting any material reward in return.

In 1952 Mother Teresa began work for which the Missionaries of Charity has been noted ever since. Her order received permission from Calcutta officials to use a portion of the abandoned temple to the goddess Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction. Here Mother Teresa founded the Kalighat Home for the Dying. She and her fellow nuns gathered dying Indians off the streets of Calcutta and brought them to this home to care for them during the days before they died.

Establishes a Leper Colony

In the mid-1950s, Mother Teresa began to help victims of leprosy. The Indian government gave the Missionaries of Charity a 34-acre plot of land near the city of Asansol. Under Mother Teresa's guidance, a leper colony was established here, called Shanti Nagar (Town of Peace). For her work among the people of India, the Indian government gave her the *Padmashree* ("Magnificent Lotus") Award in September of 1962.

In 1965 Pope Paul VI placed the Missionaries of Charity directly under the control of the papacy (the office of the pope). He also authorized Mother Teresa to expand the order outside of India. Centers to treat lepers, the blind, the disabled, the aged, and the dying were soon opened worldwide, including one in Rome in 1968. Mother Teresa also organized schools and orphanages for the poor. The Brothers of Charity, the male companion to the Sisters of Charity, was formed in the mid-1960s to run the homes for the dying.

Receives Nobel Peace Prize

In 1971 Pope Paul VI honored Mother Teresa by awarding her the first Pope John XXIII Peace Prize. The following year the government of India presented her with the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. In 1979 she received her greatest award, the Nobel Peace Prize. Mother Teresa accepted all of these awards on behalf of the poor, using any money that accompanied them to fund her centers. By 1990 over 3,000 nuns belonged to the Missionaries of Charity, running centers in 25 countries.

Mother Teresa was a living saint and she is greatly missed.

FURTHER READING

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