MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA
SAINTLY MODEL OF PERSISTENCE IN FAITHFULNESS, PRAYER, AND LOVE

BY ANNE WILSON

Mother Teresa. The mere mention of her name evokes thoughts of praise, admiration, and, most likely, unattainable sanctity. Could any of us ever dream to reach her level of holiness? Honored internationally for her work with the poor, she has much to teach the rest of us who are struggling to just pay attention to this week’s homily.

As the universal Church celebrates her canonization, we take a look back at her life and the inspirational lessons she left behind for all people, no matter their circumstances: lessons in the primacy of prayer, the necessity of a simple and pure love, and a firm persistence in faith.

Family Life
Mother Teresa was born Agnes—Gonxha in her own language—Bojaxhiu on August 26, 1910 to a Catholic Albanian family in present-day Macedonia. Here with her older brother and sister, Agnes first learned about prayer, love, and persistence in faith from her father Nikola and mother Dra.ine.

Family life held a sacred place in her upbringing due to the tumultuous times, both politically and spiritually, in which they were living. Among Albanians in Agnes’ day, Catholics were few in number. As a minority, they clung to their faith as a bedrock of calm in a politically charged cultural environment. Many Albanians, Agnes’ father included, clamored for independence from the seemingly endless revolving door of political entities claiming power. Agnes’ mother Dra.ine clung to her faith, convinced that while violence was outside their door, inside their home the focus would be on prayer and love. Daily Mass attendance and recitation of the rosary, along with outreach to the
needly through the surplus income from her father’s businesses, taught young Agnes about duty to God and neighbor. Agnes’ young life changed dramatically when her father passed away without warning, possibly as a result of the political upheaval of the time. Agnes was about eight years old. The family went from owning two houses to losing almost everything. After a period of despair, Drane carried on and opened her own successful cloth and embroidery business. Agnes and her sister excelled in their studies and were active in their local Catholic parish, where Agnes felt the stirrings of a call to religious life—specifically, a call to be a missionary sister in India.

Religious Vocation

With a firm desire to take on this vocation, eighteen-year-old Agnes bade goodbye to her mother and traveled to Ireland to join the Sisters of Loreto. It was there that she took the name Sister Mary Teresa, after St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose “little way” of holiness Agnes admired. After a brief stay in Dublin, she left for India, where she officially entered the Loreto novitiate and began a successful ministry of teaching. In 1937, after her final profession of vows, she was called—following Loreto tradition—Mother Teresa.

While Mother Teresa physically resided inside the convent, her heart lingered outside the convent walls as she worked her way through the streets of Calcutta (Kolkata) to her teaching and leadership positions at St. Mary’s School. While she loved her students, the poverty and hopelessness of those she passed each day deeply affected her. As she made plans with her students, God had other plans—plans that would require Mother Teresa to dig deep and hold fast to her foundation of prayer, simple love of others, and an unfathomable amount of faith.

‘Inspiration Day’

As she journeyed by train to Darjeeling for an annual retreat in September of 1946, Mother Teresa experienced what she would call her “Inspiration Day.” On this day, it became clear that Jesus was calling her to something beyond working in education. During the following months, she came to understand that his mission for her was to work with the destitute in a most intimate way: to “quench the infinite thirst of Jesus on the cross for love and for souls” by “laboring at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor.” She knew what she was being called to do.

But receiving the necessary permission and beginning a new order on her own? Not so simple. Two years would go by before Mother Teresa was able to act on her inspiration. During this time, she held fast to prayer, her love of Christ, and a faith committed to doing the will of God.

From Classroom to Slums

Taking on a new apostolate meant leaving the world of Loreto behind. When Teresa received permission to leave the convent in August 1948, she dressed simply in the now-iconic white sari with a blue border to represent the Indian people whom she would go forth to serve. After a brief course in basic nursing, Mother Teresa visited the slums for the first time in December of that year. She had no plan for the day and no funds. Armed with the grace from daily Communion, a rosary, and a simple desire to care for the poor in the name of Christ, she both physically and spiritually met the people in the streets where they were living.

“Everything starts from prayer,” Mother Teresa once said. “Without asking God for love, we cannot possess love and still less are we able to give it to others.” This prayer and love she knew deeply. Her persistence in relying on God for the funds and supplies she would need to care for the poor, sick, and dying was yet to come.
Persistence in Faith and Prayer

Few knew, however, about the heavy burden she had begun to experience, a “darkness of the soul”—a deep, empty spiritual separation from God that surfaced as soon as she began her famous work on the streets. She would quietly bear it for nearly fifty years.

While Mother carried her spiritual burden internally, her work flourished externally. Only a few months after her first visit to the streets, several of her former students joined her in mission work. In October 1950, her new Missionaries of Charity congregation was formally established. By the 1960s, her order, with its simple mission to care for the unwanted, had grown enough to be able to send sisters out from Calcutta to other parts of India. As her missionary organization grew to include orders of brothers, priests, and contemplatives, so did worldwide attention to this small religious sister with simple plans. In 1979, she was named the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, which she accepted “for the glory of God and in the name of the poor.”

The Missionaries of Charity expanded exponentially during the 1980s and 90s, thanks to benefactors who supplied what was needed to serve an increasing number of countries and ministries. Yet personally, Mother Teresa saw no growth in her spiritual life. In fact, she experienced nothing at all. Yet she persisted in prayer, love, and faith, relying on what she knew to be true from before.

Spiritual Darkness

“I want to speak [in prayer]—yet nothing comes—I find no words to express the depths of the darkness. In spite of it all—I am His little one—I love Him...” she wrote in her journal. Her faith was so foundational that even a spiritual separation from God wouldn’t cause her to forsake her belief in the work to which she’d been called. The outside world had no idea that, while she served the poor in the name of Christ, she felt absolutely nothing spiritually.

Still, her dedication to serve those no one else wanted continued, as did her dedication to spreading her message of hope for the hopeless. Her homes throughout the world also provided for those suffering from AIDS, women in abusive relationships, and prostitutes.

As she entered her 80s, health problems plagued Mother Teresa, and her interior spiritual life remained its same empty hole. Yet she labored on, opening new houses and serving the poor in countries not previously reached, such as Iraq.
With nearly 4,000 members in 123 countries by that time, Mother Teresa’s congregation was carrying out her mission of helping the poor. By March of 1997, her health failing, she appointed a successor for her order and visited Pope John Paul II before returning to her beloved Calcutta. Until the end of her life on September 5 of that year, Mother Teresa had exemplified to the entire world what dedication to prayer, love, and persistence in faith could accomplish.

‘Put on Christ’
So where does that leave us—the distracted-at-Mass, same-old-sins-in-the-confessional Catholics who feel we can never hope to touch Mother Teresa’s level of holiness? This simple lesson: life in Christ calls us to be close enough to touch yet empty enough to receive.

When she went to the streets, Mother Teresa not only cared for the suffering, she took on their pain. The emptiness of the poor and suffering took residence in her soul. She suffered right along with them, but very few knew. When things are dark either for ourselves or for others, we are called to reach beyond, empty ourselves, and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14). Who among us can say we haven’t had that opportunity?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s life shows us the simple way of holiness. Through a convicted prayer life, a desire to meet people’s most basic need of pure love, and a persistent dedication to God’s will, we can embrace a love of Christ that’s so full and so complete, it’s willing to touch the emptiness of those we meet. Through Mother Teresa’s complete emptiness, she was touched by God and, in turn, continues to touch so many others from heaven now as one of the saints.

A writer, editor, and educator, Anne Wilson enjoys life with her family in southeastern Indiana, where she directs a nonprofit education foundation. Fascinated by the written word, she considers sentence diagramming an art form and the biographies of the saints required reading.

Quoting a Saint

“Holiness is not a luxury for the few; it is not just for some people. It is meant for you and for me, for all of us. It is a simple duty, because if we learn to love, we learn to be holy.”

“It is not how much we really have to give but how empty we are—so that we can receive fully in our life.”

“The more we empty ourselves, the more room we give God to fill us.”

“May God give us all openness to ways leading beyond our own selves.”

“When we have nothing to give, let us give him that nothingness.”

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