

# FINDING CALCUTTA



What Mother Teresa Taught Me  
About Meaningful Work and Service



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## A Day in the Life of a Missionary of Charity



I ARRIVED IN CALCUTTA ON TUESDAY, and on Thursday, I walked in to report for volunteer duty, naively thinking I had come to answer a simple and somewhat academic question. Inside the Mother House, a tremendous sense of peace filled the space in sharp contrast to the chaotic street. The Mother House was where Mother—as she is always called here—lived with a group of finally professed sisters (those who had taken final vows that at that time took nine years) and a larger group of novice sisters. The administrative work of the Missionaries of Charity is largely conducted here. Inside a small room off the dining area, Sister Bethany and a volunteer were speaking with newly arrived volunteers.

I immediately discovered that the Missionaries ran many centers in Calcutta alone—including a home for the dying, two children's homes, two homes for disabled adults who were not able to live alone and many others. Sisters lived at each of the other

centers. I volunteered to go wherever I was most needed, assuming it would be with the adults at Nirmal Hriday (Pure Heart), the Home for the Dying. However, Sister Bethany told me they had many volunteers for adults at that time and few for children. Would I please go down the street to Shishu Bhavan (Children's Home), to help with the sick and handicapped children there? Unbeknownst to them, I had begun my career teaching handicapped children. I agreed and was given a little handwritten assignment card and instructions to report the next morning after Mass to Dana, the volunteer in charge of volunteers for that center. Dana had served in Calcutta for about nine months while on a year's leave from teaching in inner-city Chicago. She was one of the most faithful volunteers.

The first few days, I took a cab from Goudi's flat. I soon discovered that the route to the Mother House was quite simple and began to memorize it. A cab strike the second week set me to walking probably before I would have otherwise. It was just turning light when I would start out at about 5:20 a.m. Sleeping people littered the street; some were just rising and bathing at public water spigots. Goats followed their owners who stopped by residences and businesses to deliver fresh milk.

By the time I reached the Mother House each morning, the sisters had already had early prayers and begun the chores of cooking and preparing for the day. They had also washed and hung to dry the saris worn the day before by drawing water in buckets from a single spigot in the courtyard and beating the saris on the pavement. At 5:50, we all met together in the chapel for Mass, the official beginning of our day.

The chapel was a long, rectangular room with a concrete floor on the second story of the Mother House. It was sparse, like everything else. We took off our shoes before entering and sat or knelt on the floor like the Missionaries. The back, right section

was reserved for volunteers and visitors. Two small, woven stools in the middle section of the back were for Mother Teresa and some of the older sisters to sit on, except when kneeling. A couple of benches behind the volunteers allowed guests to sit if needed. The chapel contained no other chairs or benches. My weak Protestant-raised knees became Catholic quickly; we knelt much more than is typical in Catholic churches in the United States, and kneeling cushions were nowhere to be found.

A crucifix hung in the middle of the long wall that faced onto the street. The words “I thirst” were written over it. Even at 6:00 a.m., Calcutta traffic was heavy and noisy, and the chapel’s ancient public address system of little effect. A statue of Mary stood off to the right. Fresh, handpicked flowers graced the altar area. Two chairs behind the altar and to its left were reserved for priests from all over the world who presided on different days. English is the official language which unites the Missionaries around the globe. Yet they also speak the languages of the people they serve in each location. Additional prayers recited before and after Mass were typed on a card, a copy of which we were given as a gift when we left. A board outside the chapel announced prayer requests for ill families, sisters abroad and other special requests.

Mother Teresa often urged volunteers to come to Mass and special sessions led by a priest one evening a week. We also could attend Adoration, an hour of prayer, in the evenings between six and seven o’clock. I attended Mass almost every day and Adoration on occasion. After Mass, Mother Teresa frequently spoke with us and handed out religious medals, rosaries and especially little cards with prayers on them—Mother called them her “business cards.” I still have my turquoise and black plastic rosary she handed me one day and a number of her “business cards.” A small but constant stream of visitors appeared at Mass and the centers.

There were some days when for no explainable reason and without thinking, we spontaneously lowered our heads as Mother Teresa passed. On these days, she would touch our heads lightly and bless us. Her black eyes were intense and undistracted when she spoke to you. I wondered if in her later years, when she was less able to do the hard labor at the various centers, she increased her attention on the volunteers. I would often see her during Mass look out over our motley group and bury her head in her hands to pray.

Following Mass, we ate a small breakfast of a slice of bread, a tiny tropical banana and a cup of hot tea. Then, at seven, the Missionaries spilled out into the streets two-by-two or four-by-four to go to various parts of the city. They carried plastic bottles of water recycled and refilled after collecting them from the volunteers. We followed them to the centers we had been assigned. Even in the short blocks I had to walk from the Mother House to Shishu Bhavan, I noticed that the Missionaries were not always appreciated. Most of the time people simply stared at them as oddities; occasionally someone would insult them by word or expression. A man in whose store many of the volunteers bought water would tell us that “they should let those people die. India has too many people.” The Missionaries gently ignored the insults, choosing instead to smile, fold their hands and bow their heads in a gesture of blessing. Some people would timidly return the greeting.

Every morning additional, temporary centers sprang up in streets all over Calcutta. The lack of a building did not deter the Missionaries from serving where needs were greatest. Sisters would carry heavy bags filled with supplies. Several sisters in a moment could turn a street corner into a medical or food dispensary, or a school for children. They taught by drawing in the dirt if necessary. The “schools” were not really schools; they existed only to prepare children for school. They were daytime places of refuge and joy for street children. Mother said of them,

They are nothing, they are just little primary schools where we teach the children to love the school and to be clean and so on—if we didn't have these little schools, those children, those thousands of children would be left in the streets. So we have to choose either to take them and give them just a little or leave them in the street.<sup>1</sup>

Upon arriving at Shishu, a man opened the compound doors to inquire of the visitor's intent. I walked in easily beside Dana who was now well-known. A couple of ambulances were parked just inside the gates, donated by groups around the world to take children to the hospital or doctor, or to carry the infirm or dying on the streets to the appropriate center. Across the front of the largest building in the complex where children for adoption live was a large sign: Do Something Beautiful for God. This was one of Mother's favorite expressions. To the right was a large, covered patio where the hungry from the streets were fed, and a medical dispensary was set up each day.

The three-story building above this patio is where I spent most of my time. The ground floor contained rooms for an office and medical supply storage; children with tuberculosis lived on the second floor; and children with other illnesses and handicaps lived in the large room at the top. We left our shoes outside and took plaid aprons from the hooks. Forty to fifty children ranging in age from newborns to ten-year-olds lived in this top room. It was bright and sunny and always very warm despite the work of ceiling fans, but the children seemed not to notice. They greeted us by calling us "auntie." The older and more verbal children would often try a few foreign words on us. *Bonjour* and *hello* were frequent favorites. They giggled at our responses. Giggling was the universal language since so few volunteers spoke any Bengali. Most of the children were Muslim, though Calcutta is about half

Hindu and half Muslim. It is estimated that slightly over 2 percent of Indians are Christian.<sup>2</sup>

The children and infants had various handicaps and illnesses ranging from serious deformities to mild forms of retardation. The illnesses varied from intestinal viruses to malaria, hepatitis, tuberculosis and other diseases. Sometimes we nursed children who were ill and not for adoption; we simply kept them until they recovered. Other times, we cared for healthy babies whose parents were ill. Whatever the need, there was always a way to meet it and always enough room for one more.

Off to one side of the large room was a laundry area with showers and bathrooms for the children. Laundry, done by hand in large tubs, was endless; the soiled, plaid, cotton diapers multiplied before your eyes, like autumn leaves while you rake them. Another crude bathroom (by Western standards)<sup>3</sup> served the adults, and a staircase led to the roof where older children sometimes played with volunteers. Next to the laundry and bathroom was another small room for food distribution, and on the other side of the same wall was a room for preparing infant formulas.

At one end of the spacious room were infants in bassinets and at the other end, large cribs and youth beds for older children. A space along the wall facing the street provided the children a place to play. At the infants' end were wooden benches under more windows where we sat to feed them. The older and ambulatory children roved through the room playing their made-up games. Their jovial antics went unnoticed by sleeping infants who were accustomed to the noise of Calcutta.

No air conditioning relieved the heat in the centers because of the Missionaries' commitment to living like the poor. The only place I saw fans was the children's home. The temperature outside rose above 110 degrees Fahrenheit; I doubt it ever fell below 100 during the day while I was there. The children and Missionaries seemed

unaffected. Nights offered little relief from the sweltering heat and oppressive humidity. I read that Calcutta has the most serious air, water and sound pollution of any city in the world. The depth and breadth of poverty in Calcutta is difficult to describe. The lack of sanitation for those who live on the streets, and the cows and other animals that roam freely, creates even more problems.

Volunteers worked every day except Thursdays. On this day the novices ran the centers while the other sisters took care of business, confession, reconciliation, inducting new volunteers and extra prayer. Except a few days when suffering with a cold or stomach flu, I worked six days a week. I would feed, wash clothes, clean, change diapers and play with the children. I was assigned most “tall” cleaning tasks because at five foot eight inches, I towered above most of the sisters. Since many of the volunteers were very young and not as comfortable with babies, I soon found myself primarily working with sick infants while the younger volunteers helped keep the older, handicapped children fed and entertained with imaginative, spontaneous games.

Most of the volunteers were young, in their twenties, and came from all over the world. While I was there, the majority were from Europe, followed by Asia and North America; fewer were from Africa and South America. Frankly, some volunteers needed more care than they were capable of giving, and they were not always dependable. There were a few days when only two or three of us showed up at Shishu Bhavan. Many of the young volunteers arrived in India in search of ashrams, temples, mosques, meditation centers and even the small street vendors with charms, spiritual advice and tattoos. Mother Teresa was just one stop on their journey. They were often taking a year off college or deciding whether to go to college, searching for what to try next. They had come primarily to “find themselves” and secondarily to “help others.” I often just listened to their conversations over breakfast.

Some of these young volunteers seemed lost in a world that offered them more choices than direction. They wanted to be countercultural, but did not know why or how. They wanted to believe that all religions make people good, and they desperately wanted to be good. They often described themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” I believe Mother Teresa drew them because they already had become disillusioned with the world, and their lives felt uncertain and meaningless. She was someone who knew her purpose in life. They admired her work but had little understanding or teaching about the Christ that led and sustained her. Some ignored her talk of Jesus and pleas to attend Mass, chalking it up to an old woman who did not understand their world. They were unaware that this was the most important thing they could learn from her. Her simplicity, certainty, notoriety and commitment to the poor drew them. Dana, the teacher from Chicago, was one of the few volunteers I met who was there largely because of her commitment to Christ. She was an evangelical Protestant. There must have been others, but they were the exception and not the rule.

It was painful for me to see the young seekers as they mirrored my not-so-distant past. I knew the indefinable pain they suffered—the uncertainty, the constant moving from one thing to another in hopes of finding a formula that would make them feel and be good. I knew some found Mass boring. I knew some were wandering while they rebelled against their parents (yet depended on their parents’ money). They, like me, had come to distrust all authority, not yet realizing that authority, like anything else, can be good or evil. I also had gone in search of what I believed were more exotic or intellectual religions because I did not understand the depth of Christianity. To be honest, I avoided Christianity because I knew that if Christ were real, he would not have approved of my life and I would have to change. It was much later that I

realized his disapproval was really because he wanted so much more for me.

I also observed that those of us volunteers from the more technologically developed nations were physically weaker. We were much more prone to catching colds and stomach viruses, and much less able to maintain our vigor in the humid heat. We were used to air conditioning, antibiotics, antibacterial soaps and purified water.

Other men and women from poor communities also worked alongside the Missionaries as paid helpers. The children called them *Mashi*, which means “aunt” in Bengali. They performed incredible amounts of work at the centers. Some were committed Catholics and very faithful to that work as well.

Our shift lasted from early morning until after the children had finished their lunch. We helped feed the infants and children their breakfast, lunch and a midmorning snack, usually fresh fruit. The lunch was generally rice, vegetables and dal (a mixture like lentil soup). Occasionally we had boiled eggs to crumble over the food. We fed, changed and played with the children, and helped the Missionaries and *Mashis* with daily tasks. After lunch, the children rested in their beds or on large mats on the floor. Then it was time for us to go. Another group of volunteers would arrive in a couple of hours and work from three to six. Such was the day of a volunteer.

Back at Goudi’s home, I would eat a delicious vegetarian lunch prepared by the servants. It was disconcerting that I was not allowed to do the work I did at Mother Teresa’s, and even in my own home—here it was the work of servants. Though I washed children’s clothes in the morning, I was not allowed to wash my own in the afternoon. After lunch I would take notes in a journal or study the Scriptures and other books about Mother Teresa that I found in Calcutta. Occasionally I also would read English story-

books or work mathematics with the young boy of the house. He was the son of one of the servants and was being sent by Goudi to the private schools where she had sent her own sons. I often fell into naps during the hottest part of the afternoon. For the Missionaries, their schedule continued.

At 12:30, the Missionaries ate lunch and did their own housework. Then for a half an hour, every sister rested, followed by a time for examination of conscience and prayers. At 2:00, they had spiritual reading for half an hour and then tea before going back to work from three to six. Adoration was from 6:00 to 7:00, at 7:30 dinner and then a few minutes to prepare for the next day.<sup>4</sup> From 8:30 to 9:00 was recreation and time to visit one another. Night prayers were said at 9:00.

It was after night prayers on September 5, 1997, that Mother Teresa said goodnight to the sisters and to Jesus. Then falling on her cot, she took her last breath. The sisters tried to revive her with a breathing machine, but at that moment both of the two independent electric supplies in the Mother House went out.<sup>5</sup> She worked full days to the very end, arising in the middle of the night to answer letters and write to the sisters.

Such is a typical day in the life of a Missionary of Charity “doing something beautiful for God.”<sup>6</sup>