

# FINDING CALCUTTA



What Mother Teresa Taught Me  
About Meaningful Work and Service



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# Introduction

*Telling the Truth About Mother Teresa*



IN THE SPRING OF 1996, I WENT TO CALCUTTA to work for about two months as a volunteer with Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa was eighty-six years old; I was forty-four. It was about a year and a half before her death in September 1997. Two years prior, I was at a monastery in Pecos, New Mexico, when I saw an excellent film by Ann and Jeanette Petrie in which a group had followed and filmed Mother Teresa for five years.<sup>1</sup> Before this, I had not given the work of this small, curious-looking nun much thought, but the film touched me in a way I could not explain. The very force of her work and her life had an inexplicable effect on me.

After that, I found a number of books that were collections of her letters, speeches and interviews; and a book by Malcolm Muggeridge that had been significant in introducing her to the

West.<sup>2</sup> One thing Mother Teresa repeatedly said was that their work was religious work, not social work. I found this statement intriguing and wanted to know what she meant. What could those of us who live and work outside a religious order learn from her religious work?

Therefore I sent a letter to the Mother House in Calcutta in the fall of 1995 asking if I could volunteer during my upcoming spring sabbatical from the private graduate university where I work. For months I received no answer and then, the week before my sabbatical began, a letter arrived saying that I could come. I had asked what to bring to Calcutta. The letter from Sister Priscilla, who was in charge of volunteers, answered, “Come with a heart to love and hands to serve Jesus in the crippled, the abandoned, the sick and dying in any one of our centres.”

While this response quickened my spirit, my “soulish” mind did something else with it. All of my years of secular education and experience—still very much alive in me—fought with the phrase “to serve Jesus.” Surely I had volunteered to serve people. I had just begun to encounter people who talked about Jesus as a living person, someone with whom they had a relationship. While I had attended Sunday school in a liberal Protestant church somewhat regularly during my childhood due to my father’s faithfulness, I had for many years walked far from God. In fact, if the truth were told, I had become quite hostile to what I thought was Christianity. I had tried almost everything to fill the void I unconsciously sensed.

The void and the search to fill it took many forms. First, I was never sure what I was supposed to do in the world. Was I falling into jobs, relationships and philosophies of life randomly? Was I going anywhere or getting anything done? Could I ever contribute? Somehow I was certain that everyone is supposed to contribute something, but I was confused. What exactly was my purpose

for being on this planet? I filled my life with lots of activities, but perhaps this was to avoid the serious questions which I felt had no answers. Second, I was certain that spiritual reality did exist, but I had accepted what many intellectuals believe: that Christianity is not where progressives go for “spiritual action.” Therefore, to fill the void spiritually, I dabbled in feminist theology, various Eastern religions and forms of meditation, drugs, and the New Age movement in its multiple forms.

Intellectually the void was filled by constantly learning, accepting and teaching a wide range of contemporary philosophies and theories as they applied to education. Indeed, I had also come to believe and teach what my fellow leftist intellectual and radical feminist friends believed—that Christianity was oppressive, the root of most social ills in the world. Of course it never occurred to me to raise my head above my radical texts to notice that the places founded on Christianity just happen to be where people are the least oppressed. I also had tested most of what the world has to offer in the way of lifestyles and methods of entertainment and escape. I was, as the song proclaims, “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

In January 1993, I did what I never imagined I would ever do: I opened my life to Christ. It began with an unshakeable dream, followed by a friend’s counsel, and ended (or rather began) with a prayer that was more of a timid request said with considerable measures of resignation, hope and doubt. Much to my surprise, at age forty-one, I knelt down at a communion rail in a tiny Methodist church in Glen Alpine, North Carolina, where my mother had grown up, and said to Jesus, “If you are real, please come and get me.” And he did. I began the lifelong journey of pursuing his presence in my life, trying—albeit clumsily—to follow him. Yet even my newfound commitment to Christ had not prepared me for what I was about to experience at Mother Teresa’s. I should

have been able to foresee this in my uneasy response to the name of Jesus in the letter.

I tell you this before I begin the story about Mother Teresa and the Missionaries because I believe I am not alone in my struggles to understand the truth of her life and work—struggles born of living in a secular age. I can see now that even the church in which I grew up taught more about being a “good humanist” than about living with and for Christ. For the first few years after my return from India, I attempted to write this book in a way I thought would appeal to everyone. Even though I did not personally seek a secular interpretation, I felt that only such a description of her would resonate with our culture and time. After repeatedly starting to write and then laying it aside for long periods, I finally realized: one cannot understand or explain Mother Teresa in secular terms. Indeed that is precisely what she meant when she said, “Our work is not social work; it is religious work.”

My struggle to write this book, to tell the truth about Mother Teresa, and my struggles in the university are a testimony both to a lost public conversation and to a worldview that is very difficult for many in Western culture to comprehend fully, even some of us who profess Christ. As one colleague put it in a recent discussion about Mother Teresa’s “dark nights,” she was like a medieval Christian, which says as much about our current Christian convictions and understandings as about her otherworldliness. She lived her faith more like the mystics who lived in ancient monasteries, believing in penance, daily communion, and a strictly disciplined life of prayer and work. Yet, here she was in the center of one of the world’s most chaotic urban cities.

Mother Teresa was not interested in universities, philosophies, worldviews or public conversations. She was not an intellectual, and yet she had a profound understanding of the Christian life. More astonishingly, she lived it; there was no guile in her. As an

intellectual, I have often convinced myself that I am living something just because I think I understand it.

She was not simply a good humanitarian. When I tried to write about her in this way, I had to concentrate on her work, but dismiss the power of God that brought it into being and sustained her. Rather, she was a devout, simple, strong and sacrificial woman who fully belonged to Jesus. She told us she was called by God (she did not decide on her own) to go into “the dark holes of the poorest of the poor” to do small things with great love in order to bring Christ to the poorest and the poorest to Christ.

Mother Teresa was like a prophet crying in the wilderness, revealing all at once my poverty, my wretchedness and my possibilities. Abraham Heschel once wrote that true prophets of God “ceaselessly shatter indifference.”<sup>3</sup> He believed they reveal the heart of God, imploring us to return to him in “a world that is not so much devoid of meaning as deaf to meaning.” That was Mother Teresa’s life. To see her and the Missionaries serving the poor and living among them simultaneously shatters our indifference to God and humanity, critiques our privilege and disturbs our comfort. This was not what she consciously set out to do. As Heschel pointed out, prophets are often reluctant messengers that simply allow God to speak through them. All prophets and apostles suffer, and Mother Teresa was not immune to this. She said our suffering was nothing compared to Jesus’ who suffered the ultimate sacrifice to achieve our freedom. The supreme injustice is that the perfect man/God was crucified to redeem the world.

In this book I am not trying to convince anyone that Mother Teresa or the Missionaries are perfect. I am certain they have “bad” days (though never a bad hair day). She said herself that the greatest hindrance to their work was that they were not yet saints, not fully able to spread the full love of Christ because of their human weaknesses. Neither is this a biography; others more capable have

written those.<sup>4</sup> Since I cannot write about Mother Teresa from a secular point of view without distorting who she was in Christ, I will leave it to the readers of other religious or secular faiths to translate the stories for themselves.

This, then, is the simple story of my brief encounter with Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity and of my struggles then and now to understand—and more importantly, to live—the lessons in our culture and times. It is an ongoing tale of how I listen to God through her life and through the lives of others who graciously serve as guides to me. It is the story of how God used her and the Missionaries to cause a crisis in my own life which revealed more clearly my purpose and my calling.

Mother called it “finding your Calcutta.”\*

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\*In January of 2000, the name of Calcutta was changed to Kolkata. I use Calcutta in the text because all my experiences and Mother Teresa's life were lived prior to this, and it would be inaccurate to use Kolkata in quotes from her.