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By Susan Conroy



In honor of the 100th anniversary of Mother Teresa's birthday (August 26, 2010), I would like to share a few personal memories of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

I first met Mother Teresa in 1986, when I spent a summer in India helping to serve the poorest of the poor. Mother Teresa had invited anyone with "hands to serve and a heart to love" to join her in her work among the destitute and dying – and I showed up at her doorstep in Calcutta with my hands, my heart, and a willingness to serve. During my very first conversation with Mother, I was struck by her profound humility. I was stunned by it actually. I knew before arriving in India that she was world famous, and I never imagined that fame and humility could go hand-in-hand. That is usually not the case with celebrities. Mother Teresa was one of the most humble people I have ever met – as humble as the dying, emaciated and desperately poor men whom we would lift out of the gutters of Calcutta. The word "*humility*" comes from the Latin word "*humus*," meaning "ground." I like to think of it as meaning down-to-earth. When I first laid eyes on Mother Teresa, that is exactly where she was – on the *ground*, kneeling on the floor of the chapel beside me in prayer.

Every afternoon, I volunteered in the Home for the Dying. I watched Mother Teresa reach out to the sick and poor people in the rows upon rows of stretcher beds. She made personal contact with each dying person – holding hands, touching feet, conversing with each one in their own native language, hand-feeding those who could no longer feed themselves. When a destitute gentleman died in my arms, Mother Teresa came to my side and helped me to close his eyes, fold his hands, and take care of him. Then she looked into my eyes and said: “you have received many graces for this.” I still ponder the meaning of those words in my heart. Mother Teresa truly considered it to be a sacred privilege and an honor to serve those who were most in need of mercy.

Anytime I had personal contact with Mother Teresa throughout the eleven years that I knew her, she treated me like gold. I was not a princess, a pope or a president. I had no power or prestige or claim to fame. I was just



Susan from America. And yet she treated me with extraordinary kindness and care. She was like a mother to me. I was very touched by that. It seemed to me that she treated everyone this way. She was always looking at each person the way God looks at each person – looking through the eyes of love. She used to say: “We are precious to Him. That man dying in the street – precious to Him. That millionaire – precious to Him. That sinner – precious to Him. Because He loves us.”

The first time I visited Mother Teresa at her convent in the South Bronx, New York, she brought me tea and cookies. I was 22 years old at the time, and she was 77, and yet *she* was serving *me*. When I wrote letters to her, she took time to reply. I have been sharing her humble words of love ever since, and they have filled the pages of my book: **“Mother Teresa’s Lessons of Love & Secrets of Sanctity.”**

Mother Teresa used to say that: “holiness is not the luxury of a few – it is not meant for a few nuns and priests. Holiness is the simple duty for you and for me. We are all called to be holy.” I love to ponder the meaning of holiness, especially since it is the ultimate duty and destiny of each one of us. Holiness consists in the perfection of Love. It consists in being what God wants us to be. It means being filled with the fullness of God. Saint John the Apostle said that: “God is love.” Every single one of us is created to be filled with divine Love, divine Life, divine Light. Mother Teresa used to say that we must first “empty our hearts of all useless desires and distractions,” so that in the silence of our hearts we can listen to what God is calling us to do and so that He can fill us. She would say that: “even God Almighty cannot fill what is already full.” If we are full of ourselves, there will be no room for love. We must become humble of heart, on the ground, empty of all that is not God, so that we will be able to accomplish our personal mission of love and attain the greatest heights of holiness to which we are called.

Susan Conroy made her first trip to Calcutta to work with the Missionaries of Charity in 1986. She and Mother Teresa kept in touch until Mother's death in 1997. Susan is a resident of Southern Maine. For contact information, visit www.susanconroy.com.

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1. *elizabeth*

August 26, 2010 • 11:28 am

What a beautiful and inspiring post – thank you for writing it. It does seem that we spend so much (too much) of our time filling ourselves up, building our ego, our self, our identity that we have room for nothing and no-one else. Your example of Mother Theresa's entire life is a reminder to shift the focus away from ourselves and on to others – and if the ideal of Holiness seems too difficult a goal, a characteristic of saints and not sinners, then perhaps this small shift in focus can be the start of the practice of living not for yourself, but for others. (In other words, drop the quest for perfection and aim for emptiness, jettison "all useless desires and distractions" which prevent us from living as we are called to live. We have to begin somewhere, yes?)

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2. *Apologia*

August 26, 2010 • 11:32 am

Thank you Susan for this lovely piece on Mother Theresa. She was truly a good and faithful servant!

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