



## A Saint for the Year of Mercy

In December 1948 a 38-year-old nun stepped out from behind the walls of her convent into the teeming streets of Calcutta. For the rest of her days, in the words of Pope Francis, she “bowed down before those who were . . . left to die on the side of the road,” in profound reverence for the Christ Who had made Himself one with their suffering. A half-century later, at the time of her death, 1,000 Sisters served with her in the order she founded; they number over 5,000 today. “Our special mission,” states the Constitution of the Missionaries of Charity, “is to work for the salvation and holiness of the poorest of the poor.”



We can trace the inspiration for this remarkable mission of mercy to the devout Catholic home of Kole and Drana Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Serbia. A prosperous, much-traveled merchant and a generous benefactor of the Church and the poor, Kole Bojaxhiu died suddenly when his third and youngest child, Agnes, was eight years old. She always remembered her father’s good counsel: “My daughter, never take a morsel of food that you are not prepared to share with others.”

Agnes’ widowed mother supported her son and daughters by sewing and embroidering fine clothes. But the skilled hands that produced elegant garments for the wealthy also prepared regular meals for people dressed far more humbly. “We had guests at table every

day,” her younger daughter later remembered. “When I was older, I realized that the strangers were poor people who had nothing and whom my mother was feeding.”

There were others outside the home whose needs did not escape Drana Bojaxhiu’s charitable gaze. She “moved among the dirty and the physically repellent,” one writer noted, “washing their bodies and tending their wounds, and she treated each person as a unique individual.” Twice a day she visited File, a very ill alcoholic woman nearby. Agnes often accompanied her mother and helped clean the sores that covered File’s body.

Years later, in a letter to Agnes, Drana drew out a deeper lesson in those visits: “Dear child, do not forget that you went out to India for the sake of the poor. Do you remember our File? She was covered in sores, but what made her suffer much more was the knowledge that she was alone in the world.” The lesson was not lost on her daughter. Mother Teresa was often heard to say that “The greatest poverty is to be unwanted.”

The deep faith exemplified in her mother’s and father’s outreaching charity prepared the ground for the decisive event of their daughter’s life, in 1946. “I was travelling to Darjeeling by train,” she told her spiritual director, “when I heard the voice of God. . . . I must leave the convent to help the poor by living among them.” Jesus said to her, “I am sending you into the dark holes of the poor. Come, be my light.”

Two years later Sister Teresa set out to bring His light to the slum right next to the convent where she had lived and taught for two decades. Though she had often gazed out her

window upon the area, she had never learned its name--Motijhil. It was not long before she knew its dark holes very well.

As news of her work spread beyond India, new Sisters and volunteers came to her from around the globe (her order now has 758 houses). Volunteers in Rome had long known of the city's slums, but until they worked with Mother Teresa's Sisters, it never occurred to them to learn the name of Motijhil; that is, to see the poverty around them as a challenge to themselves to help the poor personally.

Are we like those Roman volunteers, you and I? Do we see the poverty around us but overlook the poor it entraps? If so, then we have much to learn from St. Teresa of Calcutta. "You can find Calcutta anywhere," she tells us. "I can't do what you can do, and you can't do what I can do; but together we can do something beautiful for God."