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Abstract

The President of Fordham University introduces this book by discussing the dedication to Mother Teresa and comments on her life's work.

IN DEFENSE OF THE HUMAN

*Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J.**

I was both pleased and surprised when I learned that the Editors of the *Fordham International Law Journal* intended to dedicate this special issue to Mother Teresa, whose death in Calcutta, on September 5, 1997, had united an often divided international community in a moment of mourning. I recognize that Mother Teresa, in pursuing her special mission, could seem indifferent to issues of international law. Her critics, often in a suspicious and mean-spirited manner, complained that, while attending to the poorest of poor, Mother Teresa did not address the unjust social and economic structures that victimized the poor.

Mother Teresa was not troubled by the criticism. "If people feel it is their vocation to change structures, then that is the work they must do," she said. But it was not her call, or as she put it, "the call within a call" that she received in September 1946, on a train carrying her from Calcutta to Darjeeling in the Himalayas to make her annual retreat.

At that time, Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, as she had been baptized, was thirty-six years old and had been a member of the Sisters of Loreto for nine years. Born in the town of Skopje, in what was to become Yugoslavia after World War I, she was of Albanian descent and had entered the order in Dublin in 1928. Sent almost immediately to India, in 1946 Mother Teresa was principal of St. Mary's High School in Calcutta, a city ravaged by famine and bloody conflicts between Muslims and Hindus. The young nun had been exposed to the abandoned poor dying in the city's streets as she sought food for her boarding school students.

It was this experience that led to Mother Teresa's decision to leave the relatively sheltered life of a teaching sister to work directly with the poor on the streets of Calcutta. In the words of the constitution of the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order she was to found, "Our religious family was started when our foundress, Mother M. Teresa Bojaxhiu, was inspired by the Holy Spirit on the 10th of September, 1946."

Mother Teresa had no desire to start a revolution, even a

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religious one. She began her work alone, exchanging the conventional habit of a sister of Loreto for a simple cotton sari, and ministering to the needs of the children she found in a slum close to the school where she had been principal. Two of her former students joined her a year later. Others followed, and soon Mother Teresa and her companions were opening schools in other slums. From those simple beginnings, with complete trust in God's providence, Mother Teresa sought to do "something beautiful for God," the title of Malcolm Muggeridge's celebrated tribute to this tiny woman, whose work for the poorest of the poor on the back streets of Calcutta was to compel the attention of the entire world.

At the time of her death, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity numbered more than four thousand sisters and novices, as well as four hundred Missionary Fathers and Brothers, working in over one hundred countries. Mother Teresa's mission, so free of any political pretensions, had been recognized by many international institutions. She received the Ceres Medal of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize, and the John Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. In 1979, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Some of these awards brought with them financial support for her work, and for this Mother Teresa was grateful. But she remained indifferent to the personal honors she received. "I am not the centerpiece on prize-giving day," she said. But she did allow "that to bring all these people together to talk about God is really wonderful."

At the center of Mother Teresa's commitment to the poor, the abandoned, and the suffering of the world was a profound belief in the sacredness of human life and the inviolable dignity of the human person. She was sensitive to the spiritual as well as the material needs of the human person. In fact, her criticism of the materialistic culture of wealthier societies was unsparing in its simplicity. "The worst disease today is not leprosy; it is being unwanted, being left out, being forgotten. The greatest scourge is to forget the next person, to be so suffocated with things that we have no time for the lonely person, even a person in our own family who needs us."

The special vocation of Mother Teresa was personal rather than institutional, the direct care of the suffering person rather than the search for legal or constitutional remedies that would

address the social conditions of that suffering. For this, as was noted above, Mother Teresa was sometimes criticized, unfairly in my judgement. Her uncompromising belief in the transcendent dignity of each human person, without reference to power, privilege or possessions, should inspire all those who seek to build an international community where justice is the sovereign rule and the rights of the human person are protected against the violence of powerful individuals and powerful institutions.

Recognition of this common bond between Mother Teresa and those who work for human rights around the world has prompted the Editors to dedicate this special edition of the *Fordham International Law Journal* to this saint of the twentieth century, and I salute the Editors for the wisdom of their choice.