

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time—The Canonization of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Sept. 4, 2106—She was born in 1910 to an ethnic Albanian family in Skopje in what was then the Ottoman Empire. She was given the name Gonza Agnes Boh-Aju. Her father was a businessman, a partner in a successful construction company. After his sudden death when she was just 7, her widowed mother raised her and her siblings alone. When beggars would come to the door of their home her mother would never let them leave hungry instead, telling young Agnes and the other children that they were their brothers and sisters, too.

In 1929 at the young age of 18 she left home and went to Dublin, Ireland to join the Sisters of Loretta. Her superiors sent her to Novitiate in Darjeeling, India and in 1931 she took her first vows there and was given the name Mary Teresa. After 17 years of teaching history and geography in Calcutta, in what she called a wonderful and fulfilling life at a school for children of the wealthy on Sept. 10, 1946 while on a train heading for her annual retreat in Darjeeling, she received what she referred to as a *call within a call*—a powerful divine inspiration. Some 2,000 years since Our Blessed Lord spoke those words of the Gospel that we just heard [Luke 14:25-33], Sr. Mary Teresa said this, “I heard the call to give up all and follow Christ into the slums to serve Him among the poorest of the poor.”

Thus began the work, the journey, and the inspirational life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Saint of the slums.

My friends, in a world that has grown weary through violence, terrorism and division, we will take a refreshing breath of great joy today as Mother Teresa of Calcutta is canonized by Pope Francis as a saint of the Catholic Church. She was one of the best known women of the 20th century and her life story is worthy of celebration in every way.

You know, some years ago, while serving as a Chaplain at Travis Air Force Base in San Francisco, we received the news that Mother Teresa would be visiting the city and the Archbishop invited all of the priests to come to meet her and hear her speak. We gathered in the sprawling hall of St. Mary’s Cathedral and without fanfare she walked onto the stage with Archbishop (John R.) Quinn, who was to introduce and welcome her. It was the scene of her very first miracle as she got 1,000 priests quiet without saying a word! Silence fell upon us as we watched her walk out for we knew that holiness was before us. It was a striking contrast: the Archbishop standing over 6-feet-tall in his meticulous Episcopal robes and Mother, just over 4-feet-tall in her familiar white- and blue-trimmed habit with a small crucifix pinned to the shoulder and a well-worn sweater over her.

There she stood for over an hour telling simple and often humorous stories of her love for the poor and the dying and the work she and her Sisters were privileged to do. At the end of the talk she asked us if we had any questions and one of the Auxiliary bishops seated down in front raised his hand and asked, “Mother, how do we achieve holiness in this life?”

She paused and looked perplexed for a moment and then a smile brightened her sun-worn face and she said, “Your Excellency, let the Lord use you without consulting you.”

I don’t think I will ever forget that answer and, in fact, that day there were no more questions.

My friends, today millions will watch as our beloved Pope Francis elevates her to sainthood. Her religious order begun some 70 years ago almost to this day, the Missionaries of Charity, have grown to be a worldwide community always seeking to live with and serve the poorest of the poor. They now have soup kitchens, homes for the dying, refuges for orphans, clinics for lepers, and centers for alcoholics. They minister to the sick, the elderly, street people, ex-prostitutes, and the most forgotten and abandoned. Their Sisters leave all behind to serve Christ in the very Gospel mandate that we just heard.

As the Church honors this great woman and assures us that she has merited a place in heaven, it gives us a stark but important reminder that in our present-day world where evil forces reign terror upon the innocent with their misguided belief that killing others merits a place in a heavenly realm, St. Mother Teresa and all Christians follow the example of Our Blessed Savior who gave His life and asks us, if need be, to give ours for others to gain the ultimate and eternal prize of heaven. The difference could not be more glaring.

My friends, on the occasion of her canonization let us be reminded of our duty every moment of every day and take notice of her words when she said,

“It is not the magnitude of our actions, but the amount of love that is put into them that matters.”

Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us and guide us each day to be more like you and more like the Lord whom you served with your very life when you let HIM use YOU without consulting you!

God love you.