

# Mother Teresa — a myth, a celebrity or a hero?



Mother Teresa's followers are preparing to celebrate her canonization today in impoverished neighborhoods of Tijuana and Rosarito Beach, amid the destitute, dying and spiritually thirsty who were her life's passion.

By **Dean Nelson**

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**O**n Sept. 4, sitting in the 90-plus-degree heat in St. Peter's square in Rome with 100,000 others as the bells rang to celebrate the sainthood of Mother Teresa, one word kept popping in my head like a yellow caution light:

Paradox.

The setting was spectacular. In a cloudless sky, the sun hit the square like a celestial spotlight. A banner with Mother Teresa's portrait hung from the cathedral as if she were looking out over the masses, bathing us all with love, radiating the same compassion and mercy she showed millions over her long life of service. The variety of races, countries and colors was a microcosm of all humanity.

But for a woman who served the poor for nearly 50 years, lived among them, started a religious order to soothe, feed and educate them and provide comfort as they died, this was a production that cost plenty. People paid a lot of money to travel from around the world for this ceremony. Nations sent high-level representatives.

Cardinals, bishops, priests, sisters from every order and every continent were there. Some had made it a pilgrimage, traveling by foot for months.

People wanted to honor her, yet she probably would have lectured all of us for not spending the time and money on serving others instead of going to this expense and effort.

A paradox can seem like a contradiction, but within it might be a greater truth. The physicist Neils Bohr said, “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.”

I have read several books about Mother Teresa. Two stand out as coming to opposite conclusions about her. Malcolm Muggeridge’s 1971 book, “Something Beautiful For God,” was an outgrowth of the television program he did for the BBC in the 1960s. “I can only say of her that in a dark time she is a burning and a shining light; in a cruel time, a living embodiment of Christ’s gospel of love,” he wrote.

Muggeridge’s book was a kind of valentine to Mother Teresa.

Christopher Hitchens’ 1995 book, “The Missionary Position,” was also an outgrowth of a documentary. Hitchens described her as a demagogue, similar to money-grubbing televangelists, providing PR cover for dictators and criminals by accepting their stolen money, and criticized her stand against abortion and contraception.

Hitchens’ book was more like a well-footnoted grenade.

To some, she was a devoted follower of God’s. To others, she was a fraud. A myth created by a church that needs a hero.

She was also a woman of profound doubt, the depth of which was revealed only after her death, in the letters compiled in the book “Come Be My Light.” In one letter to her bishop she wrote, “Every time I have wanted to tell the truth — ‘that I have no faith’ — the words just do not come — my mouth remains closed. And yet I still keep on smiling at God and all.”

What role does doubt play in a person’s faith? The philosopher Paul Tillich said, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”

Another paradox for me, as I sat among Sisters of Charity from around the world — an order started by Mother Teresa in Kolkata in 1950 that is now in 133 countries — is that she was known for taking in the unwanted. Yet this ceremony was taking place on a continent that was turning away refugees and putting up razor-wire fences to keep them out.

When Mother Teresa was in Tijuana in 1991, she fell ill and was rushed across the border to Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, where procedures by top cardiologists saved her life. The irony of this was pointed out by Hitchens, who noted that she had access to the world’s best medical care, but her own facilities in Kolkata lacked basic hygiene.

And yet, I spoke with one of the nurse-practitioners who helped care for her during her time at Scripps Clinic. “Whenever the doctors would come by to examine her, she lectured them about how they should be spending some of their time serving the poor in Tijuana,” the nurse told me. Also, when she was strong enough to take a shower, according to this nurse, Mother Teresa took only cold showers, because she knew that the people she lived among didn’t have access to hot water.

My final paradox was in pondering whether Mother Teresa was a celebrity or a hero. Remember, she died just a few days after Princess Diana died. The differences in their funerals were revealing.

I didn’t have my copy of Joseph Campbell’s book “The Power of Myth,” with me in Rome, so I downloaded it and read this description: “One of the many distinctions between the celebrity and the hero is that one lives only for self while the other acts to redeem society.”

When the canonization ended, I talked with the people around me as we slowly made our way out of the square (which is actually a circle — yet another paradox). One was an Italian woman whose son was having open heart surgery the next day and she was praying for a miracle. Another was a women’s handbag designer from Manhattan who volunteers with the Sisters of Charity in the South Bronx. Two were nuns from Ukraine. One was the head of a major worldwide corporation. Another was the head of an NGO who had worked alongside Mother Teresa since the 1980s. To them, she was both celebrity and hero.

And now, officially, a saint.

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