TRIBUTE TO MOTHER TERESA

On Tuesday, 14 September 2010 at 6 p.m.
UNESCO House, Paris 7

Beatified by Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa (1910 – 1997), Roman Catholic nun and missionary, founder of the order of Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, devoted her life to the poor and the needy. She received a number of awards and distinctions, including the Nobel Peace Prize (1979) and the Nehru Prize for her promotion of international peace and understanding (1972). She left a testament of unshakeable faith, invincible hope and extraordinary charity as a « mother of the poor ».

Organised on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of her birth by the Permanent Delegation of India to UNESCO, this tribute would help to further disseminate globally Mother Teresa’s universal message.

On Tuesday 14 September at 6 p.m.: Tribute to Mother Teresa *
Room I

· Screening of a documentary film on the life and work of Mother Teresa, produced by Doordarshan, India. Original version in English with simultaneous translation in French (16 mn)
· Tribute by the Maîtrise de Notre Dame de Versailles. Choir of the Petits Chanteurs de Versailles
· Testimonials: Mr Navin Chawla, former Chief Election Commissioner of India, author of Mother Teresa, a biography
· Mgr Francesco Follo, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to UNESCO
· Sister Joanne, Councillor of the Missionaries of Charity, Kolkata

Miró Rooms

· Visit of the photo exhibition, Mother Teresa: Life and Message

From 14 to 30 September: Exhibition Mother Teresa: Life and Message **
Miró Rooms – Photo exhibition on Mother Teresa’s life

* Entrance free upon invitation, subject to availability: evenements@unesco.org - T.: 01 45 68 17 47
125 avenue de Suffren, Paris 7

** Entrance free from Monday to Friday from 9.30a.m. to 5.30p.m., on presentation of proof of identity
7 place de Fontenoy, Paris 7*

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Mother Teresa who was at one level a very simple person and at another a complex enigma was a diminutive figure who strode her century like a colossus, and in the process made her name a synonym for goodness and compassion the world over. She was invariably received in the halls of power, but her mission lay in the meanest streets and slums in all continents. She built brick by brick, a global infrastructure with the help of five thousand Sisters and Brothers of her Order, and also had the capacity to enjoin millions of ordinary people, who came forward to help her in her mission to alleviate loneliness, hunger and suffering. By the time she passed away in 1997, she had established a multinational organisation that operated in over 123 countries and served her special constituency of the destitute, the abandoned, homeless, hungry and dying. In the process she became one of the principal conscience keepers of her time.

Mother Teresa could well be projected as a management guru to the world’s best business schools for her uniquely evolved model for success. She would however have rejected such a proposition because her model was not based on material achievement, but on its spiritual quotient that sprung from and was nurtured by her faith. It required no banks of computers, no army of accountants, no bureaucrats. Her Order was rooted to a unique vow of “wholehearted free service” to the abject poor and marginalised.

As her biographer, I found there were several mysteries that lent themselves to no easy answers. Mother Teresa was hardly qualified in academic terms. She never went to university and her studies were largely confined to the scriptures. And yet she set up hundreds of schools that lifted poor children from a desolate life on the streets. She provided a safety net for the homeless by opening feeding centres and soup kitchens and also started Shishu Bhawans for infants her Sisters found abandoned in the streets. There were homes for the terminally ill, so that they were not alone when they died. Not all these centres were in the poorer parts of the world; many were in the affluent West where loneliness and despair was a sickness she likened to leprosy.

Her coming to India itself was a mystery, a word I use in its mystical sense. Born in 1910 in Skopje, then a small town in what was Yugoslavia at the time, Agnes was raised in relatively frugal circumstances by a fiercely Catholic mother, the youngest of three children. As a young girl, her imagination was stirred by stories of Yugoslav Jesuit priests who worked in distant India in the Province of Bengal. At the age of 14, barely a teenager, she asked her mother for permission to join the Church and work in India. At 18, she had her way and when she bade her mother goodbye, she was never to see her again.
We might well imagine Kolkata from an Eastern Europe standpoint in 1929. The journey from Albania to India would itself have seemed inconceivable to most. In those days missionaries hardly ever returned home and India was a world apart. To leave her tightly knit family for a most uncertain future in a land of whose language, customs and traditions she knew nothing was, at the very least, foolhardy. But young Agnes never recorded any doubts about this decision, even in her later years.

She had learned that the only way to India was through the Loreto Order of teaching nuns head quartered in what was then Calcutta. Her route however lay through the heart of the Order in Ireland. From Zagreb she travelled by train and ship to Dublin, where she spent six weeks learning a smattering of English, a language unknown to her but which she would need in India. Her ship journey to India would have exposed her for the first time to peoples and climate so different from her own. And, finally, when the Bombay Mail steamed into Howrah station in Calcutta on a January morning in 1929, an 18-year-old had taken a major step that covered geography and time zones into a world that would gradually unfold itself. But of her decision, she was even then not in doubt.

She had said to me, as she had said to others before, that it was a lesser wrench for her to leave mother’s home than it was for her to leave the Loreto Convent. In her 20 years as a Loreto nun, first a teacher and later Principal, she developed the discipline of an Order; in its most simplistic sense, her life was regulated by the ringing of the school bell. Here there was order and security, but also some exposure to the disadvantaged, as many of her wards were orphans and children of poor parents, with whom she could by now speak in the Bengali language with ease.

She was happy in her work, but restless too. The world she glimpsed from her classroom window was made up of slums and abject poverty; it seemed to be the real world, and she slowly sensed that her vocation belonged there. She began to attempt this almost impossible transition from convent to street, but with her vows intact: a Catholic nun within the Church order, yet outside of it. This was inconceivable in the Church’s rigid framework. Her Superior General of Loreto gave her the nod to try. But the Archbishop of Calcutta was naturally cautious, and wanted time to think before he permitted what could have been a hazardous decision.

In these many divides of life, she resorted to prayer that deepened her faith. I often found that she faced dilemmas by first a retreat to prayer, and then renewed attempts, until the object was achieved or otherwise. Two years later, surprisingly but perhaps not, the Vatican made her its first exception of this kind.

Her early steps, too, were a mystery. What a strange sight she would have presented on the streets of Kolkata in 1948. A European not-in-a familiar western habit of a nun, but in a cheap sari similar to what the municipality sweepresses wore, her feet encased in a pair of rough leather sandals: a nun in her belief but not in appearance.

She was alone. She had no helper, no companion and carried no money to speak of. She stepped into a city in which she had taught long years but of which she knew nothing. She taught herself to beg, the ultimate humiliation for one whose life had not been luxurious but it had been secure. In her only diary, which I was privy to, she wrote of her struggle between her faith and the temptation to return to the security with convent walls.

Between occasional bouts of tears and longing to get back to the Loreto Convent, she set up her first school in the very slum she saw each morning outside Convent walls. It had no classroom, no table, no chair, no blackboard. She picked up a stick and before a group of curious children who had never seen the inside of a school, she began to write the Bengali alphabet on the ground.

Within a few days, some rickety furniture appeared; someone donated a blackboard and chalk. Lay teachers from the Convent soon volunteered to teach. Her little school in the Motijhil slum became a reality. And soon there was a school in the neighbourhood slum of Entally. A tiny dispensary followed, stocked with a few basic medicines coaxed from chemists. Bengali-speaking Teresa discovered she could multitask, and her disarming charm and directness moved people to want to help her.

Her early admirers included family members of legendary Chief Minister RC. Roy of West Bengal. In later years the equally legendary Chief Minister Jyoti Basu lent her his shoulder. In the years in between, the then leading newspaper The Calcutta Statesman began to follow her activities. Her name became known outside Calcutta when the then Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru’s Government awarded her the Padma Shri (Order of the Lotus) at a ceremony in the Presidential Palace where she arrived matter-of-factly in an ambulance of her Order, and at which she moved many to tears.
Although she herself remained fiercely Catholic, her brand of religion was not exclusive. Convinced that each person she ministered to was Christ in suffering, she reached out to people of all faiths. The very faith that sustained her infuriated her detractors, who in later years saw her as a symbol of right-wing conspiracy and, worse, the principal mouthpiece of the Vatican’s well-known views against abortion. Interestingly, such criticism went largely unnoticed in Hindu-dominated India, where she was and where her memory continues to be widely revered.

She had critics. As her biographer, I confronted her with the stinging accusation that she accepted money for her work from some rather dubious characters. Her answer was concise: "I have never asked anybody for money. I take no salary, no government grant, no church assistance, nothing. But everyone has a right to give. I have no right to judge anybody. God alone has that right." Hers remains the only charitable organisation that explicitly forbids fund-raising. Mother Teresa depended on providence. She believed if the work was intended the money would come. If money did not come the reverse held true.

I once said to her that she was the most powerful woman in the world. She replied: "Where? If I was, I would bring peace to the world." I asked her why she did not use her undeniable influence to lessen war. She replied: "War is the fruit of politics. If I get stuck in politics, I will stop loving. Because I will have to stand by one, not by all."

She was criticized for conversion. Yet in all the 23 years I knew her she never once whispered a suggestion regarding conversion. However, I asked her if she did convert. Without a moment’s hesitation, she said, "I do convert. I convert you to be a better Hindu, a better Muslim, a better Protestant, a better Sikh. Once you have found God, it is up to you to do with him as you wish." She believed that conversion was God’s work, not hers.

Yet Mother Teresa’s work - indeed the continuing work of the Sisters and Brothers of the Missionaries of Charity - became possible because she saw in each person she ministered to a manifestation of her God. So, whether it was taking care of an abandoned infant on a Calcutta street, or a homeless destitute sleeping on a cold wintry night in a cardboard box under London’s Waterloo Bridge, or the poor and hungry standing in silent queues in a Vatican square, awaiting their only hot meal from Mother Teresa’s centre adjoining the grand papal audience chamber, all this could become possible only out of her deepest conviction that she was ministering to her God. Otherwise, as she often told me, "You can look after a few loved ones at the most, it is not possible for you to help everybody. Our work becomes possible because to me and my Sisters, they are all God." And so the work that I witnessed over long years; dressing the ulcerated hands of leprosy patients in Titagarh (an industrial town outside Calcutta), or the comforting of those at her home for the dying in Kalighat adjacent to the famous Hindu temple, or simply reaching out to one’s neighbour, became not merely possible, it was often joyful. It also helps to explain the ease with which the Sisters of her Order smile.

"I am unworthy" was her reaction when she was named the recipient of the ultimate accolade, the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979. She sent word to the organisers that she should accept the award "in the name of the poor." Many people had earlier been disappointed by some of the awardees, for not all were doves of peace. There were many who believed that it was Mother Teresa who had, with her acceptance, enhanced the stature of the award.

At the ceremony in Oslo, the then Chairman of the Nobel Committee, John Sannes, summed up her work with these words: "The hallmark of her work has been respect for the individual and the individual’s worth and dignity. The loneliest and the most wretched, the ‘dying destitute, the abandoned lepers, have all been received by her and her Sisters with warm compassion devoid of condescension, based on her reverence for Christ in man ... In her eyes, the person who, in the accepted sense, is the recipient, is also the giver and the one who gives the most, Giving - giving something of oneself - what confers real joy, and the person who is allowed to give is the one who receives the most precious gift ... This is the life of Mother Teresa and her Sisters - a life of strict poverty and long days and nights of toil, a life that affords little room for other joys but the most precious."

The biography I wrote on Mother was a complete accident. I had known her for a number of years. In all that time it never struck me once to write a book. One day when we were in conversation she said something very amusing and we both laughed. I then remarked that I should write a book to bring out her joyful side and her wonderful sense of humour that went alongside her world of destitution and despair. She replied, "No, no, you must not. So many books have already been written." To which I replied, "Why, Mother, does one have to be a Catholic, can’t a Hindu and a civil servant write?" I felt I had said too much and immediately became silent. However, she took that seriously and said "All right, but don’t write about me, write about my work."
As a Hindu, armed only with a certain eclecticism, I found it took me longer than most to understand that Mother Teresa was with Christ in each conscious hour, whether at Mass or with each of those whom she tended. It was not a different Christ on her crucifix and a different one who lay dying at her hospice in Kalighat. Neither existed without the other; they were both one. There could be no contradiction in her oft-repeated words that one must reach out to one’s neighbour. For Mother Teresa, to love one’s neighbour was to love God. This was what was essential to her, not the size of her mission or the power others perceived in her. She explained this to me simply but meaningfully when she said, "We are called upon not to be successful, but to be faithful." In her life, Mother Teresa exemplified that faith: faith in prayer, in love, in service, and in peace.

What will happen to her mission when she goes, I asked her. She did not answer but instead only pointed her finger towards heaven. But I persisted. She laughed and said, "Let me go first". I asked her the third time and this time she replied, "You have been to so many of our missions in India and abroad. Everywhere our Sisters wear the same saris, eat the same kind of food, do the same kind of work. But Mother Teresa is not everywhere. Yet the work goes on." Then she added, "As long as the mission remains committed to the poorest of the poor and does not end up serving the rich, the work will prosper."

There were so many things that Mother Teresa would say or explain to me in her simple unaffected way during my long association with her, that have become more meaningful to me as time goes by. My relationship with her grew into trust and confidence in the way that a guru-shishya relationship develops, often deepening with increased understanding. In the beginning when Mother Teresa spoke to me, or spoke in public, it seemed to me that she spoke everyday truths, and they seemed much too simple. My mind accepted them largely because of the respect in which I held her - a respect intensified because there was no difference between her words and her deeds, between her precepts and her practice and the fact that she could understand the poor because she was poor herself. But over the years, the deeper meaning of her words in their spiritual sense gradually began to be applied by me in my day-to-day life, and began to affect my inner being.

The last time I met Mother Teresa was in July of 1997 in Delhi (about two months before she died), when she was on her way back from America to her beloved Calcutta. That morning we spoke of simple things, of loving, caring and sharing. She held my hand in hers and said, "You must always work for the poor and the good of all people. You must continue to touch the poor." This then was her legacy and the world will always remember her for her special definition of the words 'compassion' and 'love'.