

## DISCOVERING A SAINT-TO-BE IN CALCUTTA

By Joe McGowan

Two years ago, Pope John Paul presided over a beatification ceremony for Mother Teresa, a tiny, humble nun who spent most of her life working with the terminally ill in the slums of Calcutta, India. The next step, if another miracle can be attributed to her, will be sainthood.

It is a little mind-boggling to think that I knew, visited with, had tea with and wrote the first story to be distributed around the world about a future saint!

On one of my frequent trips to Calcutta during my assignment on the sub-continent between 1965 and 1968, I was having dinner with the Associated Press stringer (a newspaper reporter who sent major stories from the Calcutta area to the wire service).

As I kept prying for something that would make a good feature story for AP, he mentioned “the little Catholic nun who moved into a former Hindu temple and takes in people who are terminally ill.”

The next day I took a pedicab (bicycle taxi) to Mother Teresa’s “Home for the Dying.” It was a steamy day and Calcutta’s slums have odors that cannot be described adequately.

Soon, I was inside, holding an interview on the move as she looked over her patients. The temple had been divided into two large rooms, men in one and women in the other.

There were no beds, only thin pads on the floor with barely room for Mother Teresa’s sisters to move between them, offering a patient tea or just words of encouragement.

Each morning, Mother Teresa’s workers, pushing a two-wheeled makeshift gurney, toured hospitals in the city. During the night, hospital patients who were declared terminally ill, were left on the sidewalk if there was no relative to claim them. Beds had to be used for patients who might be saved.

Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity would pick up the abandoned patients and take them to the Home for Dying.

Amazingly, a number of Mother Teresa’s patients, after receiving nourishment, love and tender attention improved to the point where they were able to walk out and rejoin society.

I think I was inspired myself and wrote a story of which I am still proud. It was distributed around the world.

Thirty years later, in 1994, Mother Teresa came to Denver during World Youth Day and established another order of her Missionaries of Charity. I was granted an exclusive interview with her. I had grayed and she had become stooped, probably standing 4 feet, 6 inches or so.

At the end of our interview, she wrote on the back of my business card: “Love others as Jesus loves you. God bless you. M. Teresa.” It is one of the most treasured of the many objects

collected in my life as a foreign correspondent.

News reports said 300,000 people crowded into St. Peter's square for the beatification ceremony. It was one of the largest crowds ever to fill the square.

On hand was Monica Besra, an Indian woman who the Vatican says was cured of a medically incurable abdominal tumor after praying to Mother Teresa—the miracle needed for beatification.

Mother Teresa, born in 1910 in the Macedonian capital, Skopje, was named Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu. She founded her order in 1949 after what she called an inspiration from God to care for the world's most destitute and sick. Today there are 703 houses in 132 countries.

She spent a lifetime amid the horrors of Calcutta, dressed in a white sari of homespun cloth, helping men and women that others had condemned to die alone on a sidewalk.

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