

Editorial: Lessons we can learn from Saint Teresa

September 7, 2016

Catholics and Baptists diverge widely on many points of doctrine and practice, but we all can learn from Catholicism's newest saint. We've known her for decades as Mother Teresa.



Marv Knox “Saint” means something different to Baptists and Catholics, of course. Baptists recognize every Christian as a saint. Our position reflects the references to “saints”—still-living, normal believers—in the New Testament books of Acts, Romans, and 1 and 2 Corinthians. Catholics reserve sainthood for Christians deemed most holy. Their path to sainthood involves death, papal advocacy and proof the candidate conducted at least two miracles.

Pope Francis declared Teresa a saint early this month. “Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making herself available for everyone through her welcome and defense of human life—those unborn, and those abandoned and discarded,” he said. “She made her voice heard before the powers of this world so that they might recognize their guilt for the crime of poverty they created.”

Officially, she will be known as St. Teresa of Kolkata. Her name was Agnese Gonxha Bojaxhiu when she was born to Albanian parents in Skopje, Macedonia, in 1910. She became a nun and moved to India as a teenager.

She established her order, the Missionaries of Charity, in 1950.

Mother Teresa committed her life to serving the poorest people on earth in the slums of Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta. She also established hundreds of shelters for the poor around the world.

Along the way, she gained international acclaim and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. She died at age 87 in 1997, but her movement continues. More than 4,500 nuns, priests and brothers from her order operate clinics in many of the most impoverished locations—not only India, but Australia, Guatemala, the United States, Venezuela and Yemen.

She may be a saint, but she had her detractors. Some critics seemed skeptical she would commit herself to poverty and a lifetime of service at God's bidding. Some questioned if she could raise millions of dollars for charity and not siphon much of it off. These complaints ring hollow to the ears of Christians who take seriously Jesus' mandate to serve "the least" among us.

Others criticized her for romanticizing poverty as sacred and thus diminishing the horrors of suffering. Some said Teresa and her co-workers were not trained sufficiently and failed to provide the best medical care. These criticisms have merit, but they fail to take into account the fact Teresa, members of her order and their volunteers ventured where suffering is unavoidable and where other healthcare providers feared to tread.

Baptists don't venerate saints, but we can admire Saint Teresa and learn from her faithfulness. Several lessons come to mind:

- *Jesus loved the poor and disenfranchised, and we must love them, too.*

Jesus preached about and ministered to people on the fringes of society. When you read Luke 4 and Matthew 25, you learn caring for those who

suffer was his standard—for himself and for his followers.

Teresa did all this for almost eight decades. We can do it with the days God gives us.

- *Mercy is universal.*

Teresa did not speak all the world's languages, but people all over know about God's love because they saw it in her actions. One criticism claimed she wanted to convert people to Christianity. Many did, because she first demonstrated Jesus' love. We can speak that language, too.

- *When you can't do everything, do what you can.*

Teresa and her followers bathed and fed and tended sick people with wash cloths, soup and lovingkindness. We may have the means to provide more sophisticated medical care, and we should provide it when we are able. But we must never fail to serve others because we fear we cannot do enough.

- *Think beyond boundaries.*

An observer joked Teresa could have been the saint of frequent-flier miles, because she traveled the globe so often—raising money, advocating for the poor and opening clinics. She demonstrated the value of crossing social, geographic and political borders. She also served as a Christian ambassador to people of other faiths, carrying a message of collaboration for the greater good.

- *Tenacity.*

She stayed at her work her whole life. Emulating her does not mean we cannot retire from our jobs. But it does mean we never retire from ministry and service to others.

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