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Interview with MOTHER Teresa: A Pencil In the Hand Of God

By EDWARD W. DESMOND

Q. What did you do this morning?

A. Pray.

Q. When did you start?

A. Half past four.

Q. And after prayer?

A. We try to pray through our work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That helps us put our whole heart and soul into doing it. The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved -- they are Jesus in disguise.

Q. People know you as a sort of religious social worker. Do they understand the spiritual basis of your work?

A. I don't know. But I give them a chance to come and touch the poor. Everybody has to experience that. So many young people give up everything to do just that. This is something so completely unbelievable in the world, no? And yet it is wonderful. Our volunteers go back different people.

Q. Does the fact that you are a woman make your message more understandable?

A. I never think like that.

Q. But don't you think the world responds better to a mother?

A. People are responding not because of me but because of what we are doing. I think that before people were speaking much about the poor, but now more and more people are speaking to the poor. That is the great difference.

Before, nobody bothered about the people in the street. We have picked up from the streets of Calcutta

54,000 people, and 23,000-something have died in that one room (at Kalighat).

Q. Humble as you are, it must be an extraordinary thing to be a vehicle of God's grace in the world.

A. But it is his work. I think God wants to show his greatness by using nothingness.

Q. You feel you have no special qualities?

A. I don't think so. I don't claim anything of the work. It is his work. I am like a little pencil in his hand. That is all. He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it. The pencil has only to be) allowed to be used. In human terms, the success of our work should not have happened, no?

Q. What is God's greatest gift to you?

A. The poor people.

Q. How are they a gift to you?

A. I have an opportunity to be 24 hours a day with Jesus.

Q. Here in Calcutta, have you created a real change?

A. I think so. People are aware of the presence, and also many, many, many Hindu people share with us. Now we never see a person lying there in the street dying. It has created a worldwide awareness of the poor.

Q. Beyond showing the poor to the world, have you conveyed any message about how to work with the poor?

A. You must make them feel loved and wanted. They are Jesus for me. I believe in that much more than doing big things for them.

Q. Friends of yours say you are disappointed that your work has not brought more conversions in this great Hindu nation.

A. Missionaries don't think of that. They only want to proclaim the word of God. Numbers have nothing to do with it. But the people are putting prayer into action by coming and serving the people. Everywhere people are helping. There may not be a big conversion like that, but we do not know what is happening in the soul.

Q. What do you think of Hinduism?

A. I love all religions, but I am in love with my own.

Q. And they should love Jesus too?

A. Naturally, if they want peace, if they want joy, let them find Jesus. If people become better Hindus, better Muslims, better Buddhists by our acts of love, then there is something else growing there. They come closer and closer to God. When they come closer, they have to choose.

Q. You and Pope John Paul II have spoken out against life-styles in the West, against materialism and abortion. How alarmed are you?

A. I always say one thing. If a mother can kill her own child, then what is left of the West to be destroyed? It is difficult to explain, but it is just that.

Q. Is materialism in the West an equally serious problem?

A. I don't know. I have so many things to think about. Take our congregation: we have very little, so we have nothing to be preoccupied with. The more you have, the more you are occupied, the less you give. But the less you have, the more free you are. Poverty for us is a freedom. It is not a mortification, a penance. It is joyful freedom. There is no television here, no this, no that. This is the only fan in the whole house. It doesn't matter how hot it is, and it is for the guests. But we are perfectly happy.

Q. How do you find rich people then?

A. I find the rich much poorer. Sometimes they are more lonely inside. They are never satisfied. They always need something more. I don't say all of them are like that. Everybody is not the same. I find that poverty hard to remove. The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.

Q. There has been some criticism of the very severe regimen under which you and your sisters live.

A. We choose that. That is the difference between us and the poor. Because that will bring us closer to our poor people. How can we be truthful to them if we lead a different life? What language will I speak to them?

Q. What is the most joyful place that you have ever visited?

A. Kalighat. When the people die in peace, in the love of God, it is a wonderful thing. To see our poor people happy together with their families, these are beautiful things. The joy of the poor people is so clean, so clear. The real poor know what is joy.

Q. There are people who would say it is an illusion to think of the poor as joyous, that they must be given housing, raised up.

A. The material is not the only thing that gives joy. Something greater than that, the deep sense of peace in the heart. They are content. That is the great difference between the rich and the poor.

Q. People who work with you say you are unstoppable. You always get what you want.

A. That's right. All for Jesus.

Q. What are your plans for the future?

A. I just take one day. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not come. We have only today to love Jesus.

Q. And the future of the order?

A. It is his concern.

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