

On September 4, Pope Francis will canonize Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Catholics and humanitarians everywhere will rejoice in this recognition. Mother Teresa founded a movement to care for the “poorest of the poor.” She gave them the dignity they deserve as human beings, created in the image of God.

Others will scoff. Christopher Hitchens claimed that “she was a fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud.” A Canadian paper published in 2013, the year of her beatification, suggested she glorified human suffering instead of relieving it.

Yet, her simple act of answering Jesus’ call to serve the destitute and abandoned, which she received on a train on September 10, 1946, has transformed the face of charity. Her example has inspired more than four thousand sisters and a congregation of priests called Missionaries of Charity to take up the cause.

Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. In her acceptance speech, she described her motivation, what makes her order unique, and how to advance peace in the world:

“I believe that we are not real social workers. We may be doing social work in the eyes of the people, but we are really contemplatives in the heart of the world. For we are touching the Body of Christ 24 hours. We have 24 hours in this presence, and so you and I. You, too, try to bring that presence of God in your family, for the family that prays together stays together. And I think that we in our family don’t need bombs and guns, to destroy to bring peace—just get together, love one another, bring that peace, that joy, that strength of presence of each other in

the home. And we will be able to overcome all the evil that is in the world.”

Her presence electrified Catholics and the wider community when she visited Ottawa in September 1988.

I had the privilege of celebrating Mass at her Motherhouse in Calcutta and giving Mother Teresa Holy Communion. It was a year before her death on September 5, 1997. Although she was frail and in a wheelchair, she bounded up the aisle to receive her Lord. After Mass, she gave us words of encouragement to see Christ in every person we encounter.

In Jamaica and in Ethiopia, I saw the Missionaries of Charity in action. I was touched by the joy they bring to those who have only a few days to live or a lifetime to carry the burden of disabilities.

Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, a Canadian member of the Missionaries, is the official promoter of Mother Teresa’s cause for canonization. He has spoken often of the inner spiritual suffering that Mother Teresa experienced for the close to fifty years of her service to the poor and needy. It was the “dark night of the soul” revealed in her diaries. He suggests why Mother Teresa speaks to us today:

“We know that saints are raised up for a particular time, for the times in which they are living. So that’s one of the reasons why Mother had that experience [of darkness]. Was it because of such a widespread phenomenon, this way of spiritual poverty? Even if you’re materially rich, or in any class of life, it is a really common experience of modern life. We go so fast, and family life isn’t the same, so it is much easier to

have that kind of experience of loneliness, of being unwanted and uncared for, seemingly.”

Catholics will be able to celebrate a Mass in St. Mother Teresa’s honour the day after her canonization. Her feast day is September 5.