

Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa was born Gonxha (Agnes) Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Yugoslavia, on August 27, 1910. Five children were born to Nikola and Drona Bojaxhiu, yet only three survived. Gonxha was the youngest, with an older sister, Aga, and brother, Lazar. This brother describes the family's early years as "well-off," not the life of peasants reported inaccurately by some. "We lacked for nothing." In fact, the family lived in one of the two houses they owned.

Though so much of her young life was centered in the Church, Mother Teresa later revealed that until she reached 18, she had never thought of being a nun. During her early years, however, she was fascinated with stories of missionary life and service. At 18, Gonxha decided to follow the path that seems to have been unconsciously unfolding throughout her life. She chose the Loreto Sisters of Dublin, missionaries and educators founded in the 17th century to educate young girls.

In 1928, the future Mother Teresa began her religious life in Ireland, far from her family and the life she'd known, never seeing her mother again in this life, speaking a language few understood. During this period a sister novice remembered her as "very small, quiet and shy," and another member of the congregation described her as "ordinary."

One year later, in 1929, Gonxha was sent to Darjeeling to the novitiate of the Sisters of Loreto. In 1931, she made her first vows there, choosing the name of Teresa, honoring both saints of the same name, Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux. In keeping with the usual procedures of the congregation and her deepest desires, it was time for the new Sister Teresa to begin her years of service to God's people. She was sent to St. Mary's, a high school for girls in a district of Calcutta.

Here she began a career teaching history and geography, which she reportedly did with dedication and enjoyment for the next 15 years. It was in the protected environment of this school for the daughters of the wealthy that Teresa's new "vocation" developed and grew. This was the clear message, the invitation to her "second calling," that Teresa heard on that fateful day in 1946 when she traveled to Darjeeling for retreat. During the next two years, Teresa pursued every avenue to follow what she "never doubted" was the direction God was pointing her. She was "to give up even Loreto where I was very happy and to go out in the streets. I heard the call to give up all and follow Christ into the slums to serve him among the poorest of the poor."

Technicalities and practicalities abounded. She had to be released formally, not from her perpetual vows, but from living within the convents of the Sisters of Loreto. She had to confront the Church's resistance to forming new religious communities, and receive permission from the Archbishop of Calcutta to serve the poor openly on the streets. She had to figure out how to live and work on the streets, without the safety and comfort of the convent. As for clothing, Teresa decided she would set aside the habit she had worn during her years as a Loreto sister and wear the ordinary dress of an Indian woman: a plain white sari and sandals.

Wisely, she thought to start by teaching the children of the slums, an endeavor she knew well. Though she had no proper equipment, she made use of what was available—writing in the dirt. She strove to make the children of the poor literate, to teach them basic hygiene. As they grew to know her, she gradually began visiting the poor and ill in their families and others all crowded together in the surrounding squalid shacks, inquiring about their needs. Teresa found a never-ending stream of human needs in the poor she met, and frequently was exhausted. Despite the weariness of her days she never omitted her prayer, finding it the source of support, strength and blessing for all her ministry.

Teresa was not alone for long. Within a year, she found more help than she anticipated. Many seemed to have been waiting for her example to open their own floodgates of charity and compassion. Young women came to volunteer their services and later became the core of her Missionaries of Charity. Others offered food, clothing, the use of buildings, medical supplies and money. As support and assistance mushroomed, more and more services became possible to huge numbers of suffering people.

From their birth in Calcutta, nourished by the faith, compassion and commitment of Mother Teresa, the Missionaries of Charity have grown like the mustard seed of the Scriptures. New vocations continue to come from all parts of the world, serving those in great need wherever they are found. Homes for the dying, refuges for the care and teaching of orphans and abandoned children, treatment centers and hospitals for those suffering from leprosy, centers and refuges for alcoholics, the aged and street people—the list is endless.

Until her death in 1997, Mother Teresa continued her work among the poorest of the poor, depending on God for all of her needs. Honors too numerous to mention had come her way throughout the years, as the world stood astounded by her care for those usually deemed of little value. In her own eyes she was "God's pencil—a tiny bit of pencil with which he writes what he likes."