

**SAINT TERESA
OF CALCUTTA**

The Secret of Her Holiness



BRANDON VOGT

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JIMMY AND JESUS

Sometime during my college years, I began meeting with a group of homeless men and women at a local lake. I'd visit them once or twice a week, usually with food in hand, and we'd chat for hours about life, faith, football, and whether flight or invisibility was the better superpower.

But one day, as we sat at our picnic table, a strange man walked up whom I had never seen before. He looked tired and disheveled, probably homeless, and he sat down directly across from me.

He stared but said nothing.

I wanted to break the ice, so I extended my hand and said, "Hi, I'm Brandon!" But again, nothing. He just sat there, stoic, unmoving, staring deep into my eyes. Finally, after about ten seconds of awkward silence, he bellowed out of the blue: "MY NAME IS JESUS CHRIST AND I DIED FOR YOUR SINS!"

I didn't know what to say. That wasn't what I had expected. I sat for a few more seconds, stunned. But then he continued: "Aw, I'm just playing with you. My name's Jimmy."

After that strange introduction, we hit it off pretty well and had a great conversation. But I remember driving home that day, reflecting on the exchange, and thinking how true Jimmy's words actually were.

One of my favorite biblical passages is in Matthew 25, where Jesus identified himself with the poor and marginalized. "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine," Jesus explained, "you did for me."

Though Jimmy thought he was only joking, his words rang with deep and lasting truth. Sitting across from me at that picnic table, he really was Jesus in a mysterious sense, because Christ identifies precisely with people like Jimmy — those without jobs, without hope, and without anyone to talk to. That day he reminded me of an important truth, that all people carry within their soul the *imago Dei* — the image of God.

What Jimmy revealed, however, a small, vivacious nun would help me see with much sharper clarity.

THE WOMAN IN THE STREET

In the summer of 1948, as Sister Teresa wandered the streets of Calcutta, the stifling heat tempted her to return home. The convent was nice and cool, and she wasn't even sure what she was doing in the streets.

But then she spotted a woman lying in the road. The woman was half-eaten by rats and ants. She looked almost dead. People passed by on either side, few taking notice.

Yet the small Albanian nun walked over and carefully lifted the woman, cradling her like a precious work of art.

It was the first time she had touched someone in the street.

The nun carried her to a nearby hospital, and when the attendants saw the woman, they apologized and said there was nothing they could do; she was beyond saving.

But Sister wouldn't accept that. She refused to leave until they gave the woman a bed, and after much bickering, the hospital staff finally

relented. The obstinate nun got her way, as would become her custom in the following years. She helped the woman die with dignity.

What prompted her to help that woman in the street? We can find the answer on a small train two years earlier.

On September 10, 1946, Sister Teresa of Loreto traveled from Calcutta to Darjeeling for her annual spiritual retreat. With the Himalayans passing by her window she sat and prayed quietly. Suddenly, she felt jolted by an interior summons:

"I clearly felt a call within my calling. The message was very clear. I had to leave the convent and consecrate myself to helping the poor by living among them. It was a command. I knew where I had to go."

In that moment, and through her "yes" to its call, Sister Teresa of Loreto passed away and Mother Teresa of Calcutta was born. On April 12, 1948, she received permission to live outside her convent. She quickly set out for the slums of Calcutta where she first met the woman in the road, and eventually thousands of others who she helped serve, feed, and die with dignity. Her "call within a call" also led her to found

the Missionaries of Charity, whose purpose was to care for “the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, and uncared for throughout society.”

Over the next two decades, word spread about the nun’s extraordinary work. In 1969, British reporter Malcolm Muggeridge profiled Mother Teresa in his acclaimed documentary, *Something Beautiful for God* (later a book by the same name). The film captivated the world as people fell in love with the steel-willed and golden-hearted saint.

In 1979, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. And in 1999, two years after her death, Americans voted her the “Most Admired Person of the Twentieth Century.”

Few saints have matched the global popularity Mother Teresa achieved during her lifetime. Although many claimed her as a saint even decades before her death in 1997, Pope John Paul II officially named her “Blessed” on October 19, 2003 and then Pope Francis canonized her on September 4, 2016, forever making her Saint Teresa of Calcutta.

YOU DID IT TO ME

The Church has a long history of saints who helped the poor, sick, and dying. And like so many others, Mother Teresa devoted herself to this vital work. But what sets her apart is the way she not only served people in need, but dignified them. She's a model of the first and most important principle of Catholic social teaching, namely the life and dignity of the human person.

From the time of her birth in 1910, Agnes Bojaxhiu (Mother Teresa) was trained to respect the dignity of others, even those who society ignored.

She learned this from her family. Each weeknight Agnes' mother invited poor people into their home for dinner and conversation. She especially welcomed in women in distress: old widows with no caretakers, homeless women with no roof, and unwed mothers shunned by family and friends.

Agnes' brother later commented that, "[Our mother] never allowed any of the many poor people who came to our door to leave empty handed. When we would look at her strangely, she would say, 'Keep in

mind that even those who are not our blood relatives, even if they are poor, are still our brethren.’”

It was through serving these visitors that Agnes first discovered “Jesus in his most distressing disguise.” She came to value the poor not because of what they could do or produce, not because of their job or credentials, but because they radiated the image of God.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God” (CCC 1700). Thus, from the beginning until now, every man and woman bears the divine image and so bears within an inestimable dignity.

People often asked Mother Teresa why she loved the poor so much, how she could honor dignity in such difficult situations. In response, she liked to grasp their hand, slowly wiggle one finger at a time, and explain: “You-did-it- to-me.”

In her mind, you could count the whole Gospel on just five fingers. She was, of course, alluding to Matthew 25 where Jesus teaches about the final judgment. The Lord explains that at the end of the world he will

judge people by their deeds of mercy. To the kind and giving, he will say, "Come you who are blessed by my Father.... For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." But his surprised listeners ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?" Jesus replies, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

For Mother Teresa, this passage wasn't just a pious metaphor. It described reality. The secret to her infectious joy and boundless compassion was that in every person — every paralytic, every leper, every invalid, and every orphan— she recognized Jesus.

A Hindu gentleman once approached Mother Teresa and pointed out that while both he and Mother were doing social work, the difference was that he and his coworkers were doing it for *something* while Mother Teresa was doing it for *someone*. The compassionate nun didn't help people simply because "it was the right thing to do." She helped them because she knew, deep in her bones, that by serving others she was serving Jesus himself.

SAINT TERESA'S SECRET

Learning to see Jesus among the poor, sick, and dying was no accident. Mother trained herself to do this each day. A young priest once prayed the rosary with her, and when they finished, he spontaneously asked, "Mother Teresa, what is your secret?" She looked at him with a quizzical twinkle in her eye and replied, "That's very simple: I pray."

Like all Christians, Mother Teresa found strength and sustenance through prayer. It brought her close to Christ and helped her know him in a personal way.

She especially valued one form of prayer, the Liturgy, for another reason: it helped her recognize Christ in others. Mother and her sisters celebrated Mass every morning at 4:30 a.m. For them, the liturgy, the Eucharist in particular, was key to living out Matthew 25 — to seeing Christ in the poor.

In the Eucharist, Jesus becomes present under the form of ordinary bread and wine. When the priest says the words of consecration, Christ becomes substantially present even if he's not evident to our senses. Thus our faith helps us transcend sensory experience to spot the divine

image in its most ordinary form.

Mother Teresa knew how crucial this was. Seeing Christ in the Eucharist enabled her to see him in the streets. "If we recognize [Jesus] under the appearance of bread," she explained, "we will have no difficulty recognizing him in the disguise of the suffering poor." This is why Mother Teresa could say, "I have an opportunity to be with Jesus 24 hours a day." Whether in the chapel or the slums, the pew or the hospital, she recognized the Lord everywhere she went because she trained herself each morning at the altar.

FOCUS ON THE ONE

Another key to Mother Teresa's dignifying work was her focus on individuals. "If I look at the mass [of people]," she said, "I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." Along the same lines, she noted, "Jesus said love one another. He didn't say love the whole world."

One story illustrates this point. Her Sisters once discovered a man on a reservation in Australia, completely ignored by his fellow Aborigines. The man never left his house, and when the Sisters visited they found it extremely dirty and disordered.

Sometime later, Mother Teresa arrived. And when she did, she begged the man, "Please let me clean your house. Let me wash your clothes and make your bed."

The man declined. So the nun persisted: "You will be better if you allow me to do it."

Eventually, the man agreed. While Mother Teresa cleaned his house and washed his clothes, she discovered a beautiful lamp. It was covered with dust and looked as if it had not been lit for years.

"Don't you light that lamp?" she asked the man.

"Why would I?" he answered. "For whom? No one ever comes to my house. I spend days without ever seeing a human face. I have no need to light the lamp."

Mother Teresa replied, "Would you light it every night if my Sisters came?"

"Of course," the man said.

From that day on, the Sisters committed themselves to visiting him every day, and they did so without fail.

Two years later, they received a letter from the lonely man, which he asked they pass on to Mother Teresa. It said, "Tell my friend that the light she lit in my life still continues to shine."

To the casual observer, lighting a dusty lamp in a forgotten home might seem insignificant. What impact could that possibly have? What would that change? But that simple move meant the world to that one man. In his dark loneliness, Mother lit a light that continued to shine, and in

doing so, she illumined his dignity.

We're often tempted to dismiss small acts of charity. But these acts have enormous potential. As Mother liked to say, "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, I think the ocean will be less because of that missing drop."

SMALL THINGS WITH GREAT LOVE

The great twentieth-century Doctor of the Church, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, from whom Mother Teresa took her name, taught that God doesn't always call us to do great things, but small things with great love. It's most often through small things, not big things, that we promote the dignity of others.

Mother once walked down a street in London and spotted a tall, thin man in the corner, huddled up and looking miserable. She walked over to him, smiled, shook his hand, and asked how he was.

He was stunned. He looked up at her and with a smile creeping across his face, said, "Oh! After such a long, long, long time I feel the warmth of a human hand!"

Mother later explained, "Just shaking [that man's] hand made him feel like somebody." She always held that the easiest way to honor someone's dignity is through small acts: shaking someone's hand, flashing a smile, taking the time to listen. Though simple, these small gestures loudly proclaim, "You matter. You're important. You're worth my attention and affection."

3 LESSONS FROM ST. TERESA OF CALCUTTA

It's easy to disregard Mother Teresa by thinking, "I'll never be able to do what she did. I can't help thousands of forgotten street people," or, "I'll never serve someone dying of leprosy or hunger." Yet Mother's witness provides several ways that we can recognize and promote dignity in our ordinary, everyday lives.

First, we can cultivate our ability to see the image of God, to recognize and reverence the infinite value of each human life. The more we train the eyes of our hearts to spot Jesus in the Eucharist, the clearer we'll recognize him in the poor. During Mass, and throughout the day, pray the words of the blind beggar: "Lord, please let me see" (Lk 18:41). We can let that phrase bubble-up spontaneously whenever we're tempted to ignore or dismiss another person in need. Likewise, when we encounter someone in whom the divine image is clouded, we can remind ourselves that by helping this person we're helping Jesus — not in some vague, indirect way, but directly and literally. Remember: "You-did-it-to-me" (Mt 25:40).

Second, we should look for ways to do small things with great love. Perhaps next time we encounter a homeless beggar, we can address his

material needs, but also look into his eyes and smile. Mother maintained that “love begins with a smile.” Even more, we can introduce ourselves. Ask his name, shake his hand, promise to pray for him and then actually do it. (It’s best to say a silent prayer immediately after you meet, before you forget.) In one of her disconcerting aphorisms, Mother noted, “Today it is very fashionable to talk about the poor. Unfortunately it is very unfashionable to talk with them.”

Finally, we must focus on individuals. Mother once said:

“I never look at the masses as my responsibility; I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time — just one, one, one. So you begin. I began — I picked up one person. Maybe if I didn’t pick up that one person, I wouldn’t have picked up forty-two thousand.... The same thing goes for you, the same thing in your family, the same thing in your church, your community. Just begin — one, one, one.”

We don’t need to travel to India to honor dignity like Mother Teresa. We can do so right in our own homes and workplaces, with our family, friends, and coworkers. In fact, Mother was fond of telling visitors to go home and find their own Calcutta. In every city, countless individuals

suffer the cruel fate of loneliness and indignity. The elderly woman living three houses down from us who nobody checks on. The janitor who washes the halls each day, never receiving eye contact. The forgotten man living out his last months in the nursing home. All of these people cry out through silent urges: "Notice me! Consider me! Help me!" We may not be able to serve the poor in a third-world country but we can honor the dignity of those who live and work around us.

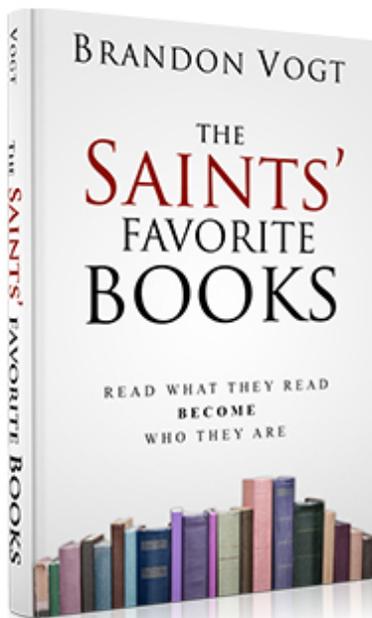
Saint Teresa of Calcutta helps us see that it's not our job to help millions at a time. We can only help individuals, and we do that first by recognizing and reverencing the image of God marked on their souls, and by serving Jesus in them through small acts of dignifying love.

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