

This Day in History... August 26, 1910

Birth of Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu on August 26, 1910, in Skopje, then part of the Ottoman Empire and now the capital of North Macedonia. Decades later, the teacher-turned-missionary would build a religious order devoted to caring for people facing poverty, illness, abandonment, and death.

Agnes was raised in an Albanian Catholic family. By her teens, she had decided to become a missionary. At 18, she left home and traveled to Ireland to join the Sisters of Loreto, a religious community that operated schools in India. There she learned English, the language used by the Loreto sisters in India. Within months, she continued on to India.

She entered the Loreto novitiate in Darjeeling and took the name Sister Mary Teresa, after St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She made her first religious vows in 1931 and her final vows in 1937. For much of the next two decades, she taught geography and catechism at St. Mary's High School for girls in Calcutta, now Kolkata. She became the school's principal in 1944.

Mother Teresa later said that a train trip changed the direction of her life. On September 10, 1946, while traveling from Calcutta to Darjeeling for a retreat, she experienced what she called a "call within a call." She believed she should leave the convent school and work directly among people living in extreme poverty.

Leaving Loreto required church approval, which she received in 1948. She then spent several months receiving basic medical training with the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna. Returning to Calcutta, she wore a simple white sari with a blue border and began visiting families in the Motijhil slums. She helped the sick, gathered children for lessons, and opened a small school and dispensary. She had little money at first and depended on donations and volunteers.

Other women soon joined her. On October 7, 1950, the Archdiocese of Calcutta formally established her new congregation, the Missionaries of Charity. Its members took the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, along with an additional vow of "wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor."

In 1952, Mother Teresa opened Nirmal Hriday, often translated as "Pure Heart," near the Kali temple at Kalighat. The home took in destitute people who were seriously ill or dying. The Missionaries of Charity later expanded their work to children, people with leprosy, the homeless, and others without regular care or support.

The organization continued to grow. Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity Brothers in 1963. In 1965, Pope Paul VI granted the congregation pontifical status, allowing it to expand more easily outside India. Its first foreign house opened in Venezuela. Houses later followed in Rome, Tanzania, and many other countries. By the time Mother Teresa died, the congregation had nearly 4,000 sisters working in hundreds of houses around the world.

Her work brought international recognition, along with criticism of some of her views and the medical standards in facilities associated with her order. In 1979, she received the Nobel Peace Prize "for her work for bringing help to suffering humanity." She accepted the award on behalf of the poor and used her Nobel lecture to emphasize service, family, prayer, and what she described as love put into action.

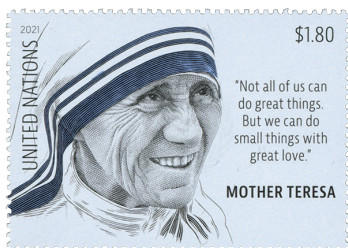
President Ronald Reagan presented Mother Teresa with the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House on June 20, 1985. Although she was not an American, Reagan called her one of the few true "citizens of the world." The award citation referred to her as the "saint of the gutters" and praised the worldwide work of the Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa accepted the medal in the name of the millions of poor people she served.

Her health declined during the 1990s after years of heart problems. She stepped down as head of the Missionaries of Charity in March 1997 and died in Calcutta on September 5, 1997, at age 87. India honored her with a state funeral.

Pope John Paul II waived the usual five-year waiting period before opening her cause for sainthood. He beatified her on October 19, 2003, after the Catholic Church recognized a healing attributed to her intercession. A second miracle was later approved for her canonization. On September 4, 2016, Pope Francis declared Mother Teresa a saint of the Roman Catholic Church during a ceremony in St. Peter's Square.



Stamp issued on the 13th anniversary of Mother Teresa's passing.



2021 UN stamp honoring Mother Teresa

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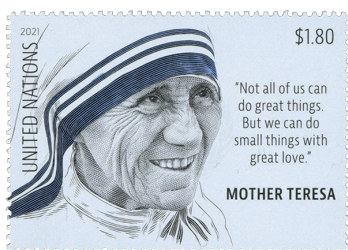
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