

The Road to Perfect Happiness

Perfect happiness is within the reach of every one of us, if only we will strive for holiness in love. And since Jesus is Love incarnate, it is from Him that we must learn to love. Perfect happiness is achievable by those who strive for holiness in the love of Christ.

Mother Teresa often said: "You must be holy where you are, while I must be holy where God has sent me. So there is nothing extraordinary about being holy. Holiness is not a luxury for the select few. It is our normal duty, yours as well as mine. That is what we were made for". May Mother Teresa's story and example prompt us to quicken our desire for holiness and to advance boldly in the dim light of faith toward full happiness in heaven.

Mother Teresa's childhood

Mother Teresa was born into a well-to-do Albanian Catholic family on August 27, 1910, in Skopje, Macedonia. Her parents christened her Gaxhe – Agnes. (Mother Teresa's real name was Gaxhe Bojaxhiu.) Her father, Nicola Bojaxhiu, was a wealthy businessman and proprietor of a construction firm. He owned many houses and villas, and built the first theater in Skopje. Her mother, Drane, also came from an affluent Albanian family. After marrying thirty-five-year-old Nicola at the age of seventeen, Drane gave birth to a son, Lazar, and two daughters, Gaxhe (Agnes, the future Mother Teresa) and Agatha. Each child was welcomed with great love as God's most precious gift.

Gaxhe's parents lived out their faith in a very concrete way. They remembered the words of Jesus: As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25.40). Mother Teresa's family home welcomed all visitors, especially the poor. Prayer was a central part of their family life. Every evening they prayed together. They also attended Holy Mass regularly. Nicola was both a joyful and demanding man, devoting much

time to the raising of his children. Often he said to them: *You must be generous to all, since God has been generous with us. He has given us much, and that is why you must show kindness to everyone. Do not take a morsel into your mouth, if you have not first shared it with others. Selfishness is a disease of the soul. It makes slaves of us, prevents us from living with dignity and serving others! Once a week their mother took them into town to visit the sick, or bring food and clothing to the poor. She wanted her children to be sensitive to human need, and love their neighbor. Often she said to them: You are lucky. You live in a nice house, have food to eat, clothes to wear, and want for nothing. But you must not forget that there are many people who suffer from hunger. There are children who have nothing to eat or wear, who have no money to pay for a doctor in case they fall ill.*

A gifted student, Gaxhe had a happy disposition, was companionable, and ready to help others. She took an active part in her parish, sang in the choir, played the guitar, wrote poetry; in short, the parish was her second family. She considered a career in music or literature.



Gaxhe Bojaxhiu (right) with her brother and sister

She had a flair for writing, and even published articles in the local newspaper.

Her father's sudden death in 1919 was a dramatic event for the entire family. It appears he was poisoned by the secret police, in Belgrade, for supporting the anti-Turkish liberation movement. The years immediately following his death were especially hard for the family, but eventually their mother, who was a woman of strong faith, was able to take matters in hand. She set up her own shop, selling clothes and embroidery.

Mother taught us to pray and to help those who suffer hardship. Even after my father's death we were a happy family. We learned the meaning of prayer and work – recalls Mother Teresa. Many beggars in Skopje and the surrounding district knew our house. No one ever walked away from it empty-handed. Every day there was someone having dinner with us. [...] These were beggars, people who had nothing.

Discerning her vocation.

Mother Teresa movingly describes the moment she first heard the call to religious life: *I was 12 years old, when for the first time I felt the desire to belong totally to God. I heard a clear summons from Our Lord to devote my whole life to Him as a religious sister. My mother was a woman of deep faith, and her example, her love of the poor, had a decisive influence on me. At the time, however, I put these thoughts aside; I did not want to be a nun. Only later, when I was 18 years old, did I respond to the Lord's call.*

God wishes to bring everyone to full happiness – to heaven. Our earthly life is a painful road toward maturation in faith, toward liberating ourselves from the slavery of sin and selfishness, and learning to love unconditionally. For each of us God has prepared and mapped out



Ganxhe before entering the convent

“Selfishness is a disease of the soul. It makes slaves of us, prevents us from living with dignity and serving others.”

the best possible path of life. To discern this plan through prayer, to accept it, and courageously to follow it, is therefore a matter of the utmost importance. At first, Agnes (Mother Teresa) balked at the prospect of being a religious sister. Later, she would pray and fast for the

grace of discerning God's will. On referring the matter to her confessor, she received the following reply: The best sign that you have correctly read God's will is the deep sense of joy you feel at the thought of following the path that He has called you to take.

In August of 1928, Ganxhe attended a retreat at the Marian shrine in Letnica. It was there, after several days of prayer, that she made her final decision to become a missionary and devote herself entirely to God in a religious order. It was not an easy decision to make. A long internal struggle preceded it. Devoted to her family, she had dreamed of children and a home of her own. When at last she said “yes” to Christ, her heart was filled with an indescribable sense of joy. On sharing this news with her mother, she received the following advice: *You must belong to Jesus alone... You must be a holy nun... Put your hand in Christ's and go boldly forward... Good, my daughter, join an order and become a missionary, but you must devote yourself entirely to God and prayer...* Ganxhe applied to the Loreto Sisters in Ireland, where elementary school teachers were trained and sent to India. Her application was accepted. On September 26, 1928, Agnes departed for Dublin, where on 12 October 1928, she began her novitiate. She received her nun's habit, and adopted the name Maria Teresa of the Child Jesus after Saint Therese of Lisieux, who had been canonized in 1925. On January 6, 1929, Sister Maria Teresa embarked on the long journey by steamer to Calcutta. The next two years she spent at the novitiate house in Darjeeling, magnificently situated at the foot of the Himalayas. She made her first profession of vows on May 24, 1931. *Those were the most beautiful days of my life – Mother Teresa would later recall.*

After making her final profession of vows on 24 May 1937, she was ordered by her superior to return to Calcutta, where she was to teach history and geography at St. Mary's School for girls. In 1944 she was appointed the school's principal. The students adored Mother Teresa (as she would henceforth be called) not only because she treated them like her own children, but also because, like a truly loving mother, she expected much of them.

Called to a special mission

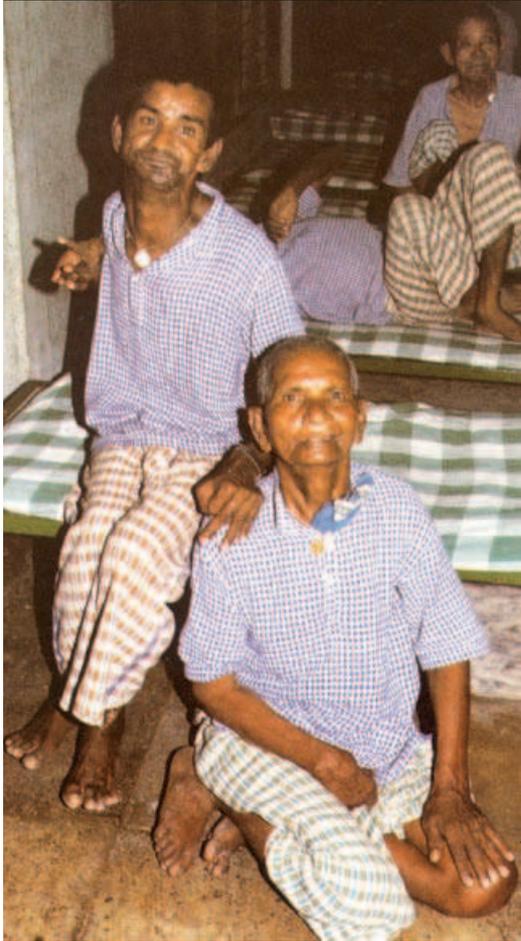
On August 27, 1946, Mother Teresa turned 36. This was a very difficult time for the people of India. Impoverished and four hundred million strong, they had enough of British colonial rule, which had lasted for over three centuries. They wanted freedom, and sought to achieve it, by armed struggle if necessary. Despite Mahatma Gandhi's great movement of peaceful resistance, numerous groups of Muslim fanatics fomented riots that led to the slaughter of defenseless people, incendiary attacks, and terrible destruction. The sight of man's moral and material poverty



Ganxhe as Sister Maria Teresa of the Child Jesus

caused Mother Teresa to ask herself the question: *What if the Lord expects something more of me – a greater involvement in the lives of these suffering people? A dramatic struggle arose in her heart. Later she was to recall this period of her life: I never had any doubts about my vocation to the religious life. Deep in my heart, however, I sensed that God had yet another calling for me, another task, but I did not know what; nor did I understand why.*

In September of 1946, Sister Teresa



IOA photo archives

**“If we pray, we believe.
If we believe, we love.
If we love, we serve.”**

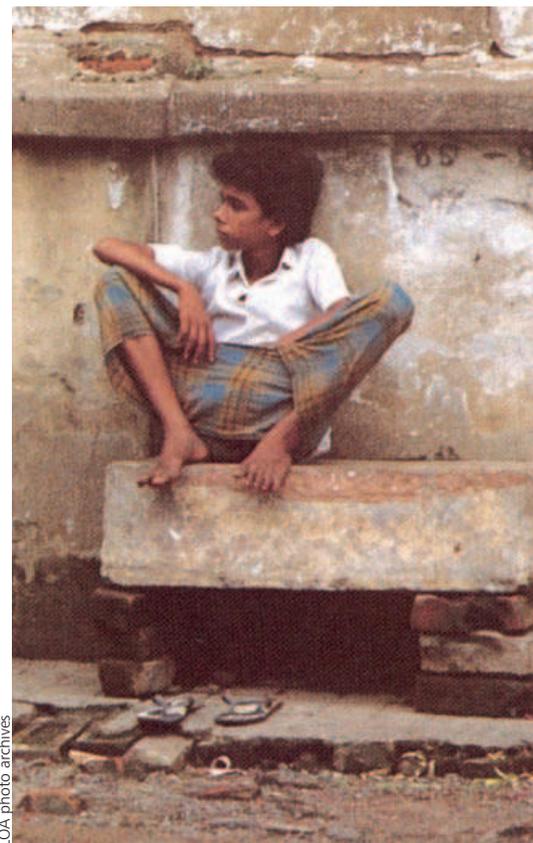
went to attend an annual retreat at the novitiate house in Darjeeling. She traveled in a slow-moving, overcrowded train, which stopped at every station. On the train she was able to observe multitudes of malnourished people in abject need. The intuition of faith flowing from the love of Jesus told her that these, the poorest of the poor, were God’s beloved children every bit as much as were her students, who came from affluent homes. She observed the young mothers tenderly embracing their children. She saw them suffer at the sight of their children wasting away from hunger. These appalling pictures of human suffering moved Mother Teresa strongly. Once again Christ’s words went to her heart: *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me* (Mt 25.40). It became clear to her that in taking her religious vows, she had betrothed a suffering Jesus. The poor and suffering she saw around her – these were her Beloved. To care for Him was to care for them. Thus, after

ten years of missionary work in Calcutta, Mother Teresa became conscious of an ever more insistent “call within a call”. She no longer had any doubts that it was Christ Himself urging her forward: You must go out and serve the poor! At first she shrank from the prospect, begging Jesus to find someone better able, more worthy. But in her heart she could not escape Christ’s summons that she begin a new mission among the poor. She heard Jesus’ agonized voice from the cross: I thirst! She understood that what Jesus thirsts for is human love. He waits for us, provides us with opportunities to love Him and give solace to the poorest of the poor.

I felt – wrote Mother Teresa years later – that Our Lord expected me to give up my peaceful life in the convent and go out into the streets to serve the poor. The summons was loud and clear: I was to leave the convent walls and live among the poor. But not just any poor. He was calling me to work with the most desperate, the poorest of the poor in Calcutta: people who had nothing and nobody, whom no one would go near, since they were a breeding ground for disease, were filthy and infested with worms and microbes; people who could not go out and beg for alms, since they were naked, without a shred to cover their nakedness; people who had stopped eating, since they were too wasted and lacked strength to do so; people who were at the point of death, who had collapsed in the street, and knew that they were dying; people who no longer wept, for they had run out of tears. These were the people Jesus pointed out to me during that trip, and whom I was to love. While carrying out my spiritual exercises in Darjeeling, I reflected on the message I had received, and by the time I returned to Calcutta, I had resolved to leave the Loreto Sisters and devote my whole life to the poor. I knew that God wanted to make use of my poverty, my weakness, my life, in order to show His love to the poorest of the poor...

For two years the archbishop of Calcutta refused to allow Mother Teresa to leave the order. Finally, in January 1948, he granted permission for her request to be forwarded to Rome. A positive reply arrived from the Vatican six months later. Mother Teresa exchanged her nun’s habit for a white sari, the most common garment worn by poor Hindus. As she walked out of her beloved Loreto

convent on 16 August 1948, panic fear seized her. Alone, without a roof over her head, penniless, unemployed, she had no idea where to find food or shelter for the night. She found herself in the same situation as those who had nothing in life. But she was still a religious sister bound to God by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. All she had so far received was the pope’s permission to live outside the convent walls for a period of time, and found a new religious community.



IOA photo archives

Real love must hurt

Mother Teresa often said: *real love must hurt. God did not create poverty. You and I did, since we do not share our goods.* The poor she most sought to help were the sick, sore-covered lepers. They needed medical care. To be able to render them first aid, administer injections, and dress wounds, Mother Teresa took a nursing course with the Missionary Sisters of St. Agatha in Patna in the central Ganges. After completing the course, she returned to Calcutta. On Christmas Day, she began her work of service with the poor. It was on Christmas day, after all, that the Son of God, becoming true man, united Himself with humanity and invested it with a special dignity and value. Henceforth our dignity could not depend on accidentals such

as intelligence, skin color, pedigree, financial status, but on our humanity alone, which is holy, because Jesus Christ united Himself with it. A mentally handicapped person, a beggar, a child in the mother's womb enjoy the same dignity, the same right to life as a Nobel Prize laureate, a millionaire, and a grown man respectively. Mother Teresa brought to bear on her work that most joyous – and for many, shocking – truth that in all our fragility and poverty, we are all worthy insofar as we are the children of God. The beggars, whom Mother Teresa resolved to serve, enjoyed the same royal dignity as every other human being, since they too – no less than others – were children of God.

Leaving the Loreto community – recalled Mother Teresa – was a painful experience for me. As long as I lived in the convent, I knew no hardship. I lacked for nothing. Now it was all different. I slept wherever I could, on the floor; often in vermin-infested slums. I ate whatever I could provide for my charges, and only when there was something available. But I chose this life to realize the Gospel to the letter; especially where it says: “for I was hungry and you gave me food... I was naked and you clothed me... I was in prison and you came to me”. In the poorest of the poor in Calcutta I loved Jesus; and when you love you do not count the suffering or hardship. In any case, in those early days I did not have time to complain. The number of children I took in on that first day of my work in the slums of Motijhil grew quickly. Within three days the number had jumped from 5 to 25. By year's end I had 41 children in my charge. Some years later I would have a school there, numbering 500 children...

My mission was to serve the poorest of the poor. With the help of the children I was able to reach the most derelict corners of Calcutta. At that time the city had about a million homeless people. I went from house to house, trying to be useful. I helped those who slept on the sides of the street, who lived on scraps and refuse. I encountered the great suffering of the blind, the crippled, lepers, people with grotesquely shaped faces and deformed bodies, people unable to use their legs, who would crawl after me on their knees, begging for something to eat. Once I found a woman half-dead on a trash heap. Her body was being eaten alive by mice and ants. I took her to the hospital, but they refused to admit her,

claiming there was nothing they could do. I became angry and told them I would not leave until they took her in. After much consultation, they agreed. The woman eventually recovered. Later, thanking me for what I had done, she said, “Imagine, it was my son who threw me on that heap”.

One day I was in urgent need of finding shelter for a number of homeless people. I searched for hours under the scorching sun. By day's end I could hardly stand on my feet. I thought I would faint from sheer exhaustion. It was only then I realized just how exhausting it was for the beggars in constant search of food, medication, or a roof over their head. I lived completely resigned to God, and He led me by the hand. Every minute I felt His presence.



photo Agnieszka Dzieduszycka

There were times I experienced His direct intervention. Once, as I was tramping the streets, a Catholic priest approached me for an offering toward a Catholic publication. That day I had left home with every penny I owned on me – 5 rupees (worth roughly a quarter). During the day I had spent 4 of those rupees on the poor. That left me with one rupee to tide me over until the next day, or beyond, depending on when the next help arrived. Trusting in God, I gave the priest the last of my money. In my thoughts, I said to God: “Lord, that leaves me with nothing. Now You have to care for me”. That evening a stranger came to my house. He handed me an envelope, saying, “This is for the work you are doing”. I was stunned, since I had begun my apostolic work only a few days before that, and there was no one who

knew me yet. I opened the envelope and found 50 rupees. To me that was a clear sign of Jesus' approbation of all that I was doing.

In Calcutta the poor died on the sidewalks in total desolation. Mother Teresa saw in them the suffering Jesus in need of assistance. To her, all of these people that society rejected – the elderly, lepers, those deformed by disease – were children of God, her dearest brothers and sisters. For this reason, she wanted them to leave this world knowing that someone loved them. They would die in a bed, having a caring person at their side. They are children of God, – she used to say – and they should die with a smile on their face. That is why she founded her hospice for the dying.

“Our task is to show to the poor and suffering the love that God has for them.”

The house for the dying – she observed – was an initiative that lay very close to my heart. It has become a holy place, since every day it is where heaven and earth come into real contact. Many people end their earthly lives here, to be united with God. On one occasion our sisters brought in a man from the street. His body was covered with worm-infested wounds. He was at the point of death. We began washing and dressing his wounds. With half-dimmed eyes he watched my every movement. Gradually his face began to



LOA archives

“I chose this life to live out the Gospel to the letter.”

brighten. “Are you suffering?” I asked him. – “Yes, very much,” he replied in a very weak voice. Then, he added: “But I am happy. All my life I have been without a home, and now, surrounded by great care and love, I die like an angel”. On another occasion they brought in a woman who showed no signs of life. I washed her; lavished care and tender words on her. Then, as I was putting her carefully to bed, she took me by the hand, and smiled. Never on any face had I seen a more beautiful smile. In a barely audible whisper, she said “thank you” and closed her eyes for ever.

During his visit to India, Pope John Paul II also paid a visit to the house for the dying. He stayed a good while, feeding several patients and attending the death of three of them. Throughout his stay he never said a word. He was deeply moved and shed tears. To date our house for the dying has admitted some 80,000 patients, of which over half have died. One cannot remain indifferent in the face of death, knowing that it is the most important moment of everyone’s life. Each time

someone dies in my arms, it is as though Jesus had died. I am present to that person in love, which I offer up to God. Our home for the dying has become a holy place. God is present here. The dying are brought to us by ambulance, in wagons and handcarts. The sisters wash them, dress their wounds, care for them, and pray for them as they pass into eternity.

There was a Hindu political leader who vowed publicly that he would drive us out of the house for the dying. He arrived to inspect the premises and gather information against us. He walked up and down the aisles, saw the patients, and the sisters caring for them. Their attitude made a strong impression on him. He saw the great love with which the sisters carried out their work: washing the wounds of those poor wasted bodies; feeding those who were not strong enough to eat. On leaving the house, he said to those waiting outside: “I told you I would drive the nuns from this place, and I will do this, but only on the condition that you will bring in your mothers, wives, and sisters to take over the work they are doing. Your shrines contain goddesses of stone. Here you have goddesses in the flesh”.

Missionaries of love

In early 1949, the first group of young women seeking to serve the poor joined Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa recalled the beginnings of the community: 1949 saw the arrival of the first vocations. The first ten girls to respond were my old students from the school where I had taught. One after another they devoted themselves to

God and the poor... On 7 October 1950, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, Pope Pius XII formally ratified the Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity. The aim of this newly founded community was to satisfy the Crucified Christ’s infinite thirst for human souls, by vowing chastity, poverty, obedience, prayer, hard work and toil in saving and sanctifying the poorest of the poor. Our most important task is to pray, love, and serve. This is the only way of bringing the love of God to life and activating it for the benefit of our neighbor. We do this by serving Christ, who is present in every suffering beggar. If we pray, we believe. If we believe, we love. If we love, we serve – writes Mother Teresa. Our special mission consists in saving and sanctifying the poorest of the poor. Jesus sends us, filled with the Spirit of His Love, to preach the Gospel of love and compassion to the poorest of the poor throughout the world. We are called Missionaries of Love, because “God is Love”. Our task is to show to the poor and suffering the love that God has for them. The results are always magnificent.

Once in India, I was dressing a cripple’s wound, which had become gangrenous. An American journalist watching me said: “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars”. “I wouldn’t do it for that either – I replied. But I do it out of regard for God’s love. By touching this suffering person’s body, I touch the suffering body of Christ”. Only then did the journalist understand what it was that motivated our work among the poor.

In 1959 the Missionaries of Charity took charge of the more than 30,000 lepers



LOA archives

Mother Teresa with her sisters during an audience with the Holy Father

living in Calcutta. They opened leper clinics and founded the City of Peace, a settlement where lepers could live together with their families. For Mother Teresa, the lepers were children of God. Jesus had died on the cross for them as well. The fact that they had been marked by such great suffering and appalling conditions of life made them, even more than others, participants in the mystery of Jesus' redemptive suffering. *When I touch a leprous body, every part of which exudes a foul smell, I touch the body of Christ, just as I do when I receive the Eucharist. Leprosy is without a doubt a terrible disease, but it is less of a misfortune than the feeling of being unloved, unwanted, abandoned. The extreme loneliness I have seen in people in rich countries is worse than leprosy* – observed Mother Teresa.

In India alone Mother Teresa's sisters care for 150,000 lepers, whom they must feed, dress, and provide with medical care. The sick require costly surgical procedures and medication. The sisters have nothing. They live like their charges, the poorest of the poor. Their discipline is extraordinarily severe. They are allowed to own only the bare necessities: a white sari and a pair of simple sandals. When being transferred to another location each sister is ready for the road within ten minutes. Everything they own fits into a small bag. *The underlying reason for this poverty – explains Mother Theresa – is love. Those whom we help are poor against their will. Our poverty, on the other hand, is freely chosen. We wish to be poor to imitate Jesus, who, being rich, chose to be born, to live and work among the poor. The sisters trust completely in Divine Providence.*

Every day God works real miracles for us – recalls Mother Teresa. – We experience them in concrete ways. If it were not for these “everyday” miracles, we could not continue our work; we could do nothing. Providence is generous in providing for my sisters, our charges, and me. God works through business people, firms, institutions, petroleum corporations, and governments. But mostly He works through the small contributions of people with modest financial resources. These offerings have the greatest value, since they require that people deny themselves. Their gestures are therefore authentic acts of love. None of our sisters responsible for the running of a house could sleep easy if she did not have strong faith in God. It



LOA photo archives

is rare that we have enough resources to last a week, and often we do not even have what we need to last through the evening. But a solution always presents itself, even if it is at the last minute. God prompts all kinds of people, sometimes for the strangest reasons, to bring help, which for us is a matter of survival. If it were not for this help, we would be in trouble.

Every day in Calcutta we have to prepare meals for nine thousand people. One morning a sister came in to tell me that we were fresh out of food. It was a Thursday. The prospect of a grim weekend faced us. Never before had I found myself in this situation. “We ought to warn the patients” suggested the sister. “Let’s wait a bit – I replied. In the meantime, you go to the church and present our needs to Jesus”.

I also prayed, then waited for events to unfold. At nine o’clock Friday morning, a truck pulled in. It was full of bread, jam and butter. I am convinced that God intervened here to help us. Such marvels of Divine Providence are a daily experience at every house run by the Missionaries of Charity.

In 1959, after ten years in Calcutta, the Missionaries of Charity began working throughout all of India. In 1965, having secured papal entitlement from Paul VI, the congregation took its work to every continent. Today over 4000 Missionaries of Charity work together with some 4 million laypeople in 600 mission houses in 127 countries of the world. Besides feeding half a million families, the sisters provide 20,000 children with schooling, and care for 90,000 lepers.

Mother Teresa died on 5 September 1997. On September 13 the world's leading networks provided live coverage of her

“Jesus sends us, filled with the Spirit of His Love, to preach the Gospel of love and compassion to the poorest of the poor throughout the world. We are called Missionaries of Love, because God is Love”.

funeral. Hundreds of millions watched as her body was borne through the streets of Calcutta on the same gun carriage that had carried the remains of Mahatma Gandhi. By her total dedication to Christ, this tiny, wrinkled nun from Calcutta has become for all of us a living emblem of Love – the one hope of the world.

A few years before she died, a journalist asked Mother Teresa the question: Are you afraid of death? She replied: *No. Absolutely not. To die means to go home. Are you afraid of going home to your loved ones? I look forward to the moment of death. Then I will meet Jesus and all the people I have tried to give love to in this life. I will meet all the children I have tried to save, those who, dying in my arms, looked on me as their mother. I will meet all the beggars I helped, the dying who breathed their last in the house I built for them in Calcutta. In short, I will see all the people who were dear to me on this earth. So it will be a wonderful meeting, don't you think? And saying this, her face shone with peace and joy.*

Fr. M. Piotrowski S.Chr. ●