

Mother Teresa, in My Own Words Study Guide

Mother Teresa, in My Own Words by Mother Teresa

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Plot Summary

Mother Teresa: In My Own Words is a compilation of stories and aphorisms from the famed late 20th century nun, Mother Teresa, widely known for her extraordinary efforts to help the poor in Calcutta, India. Mother Teresa rose to global prominence and her efforts led to her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Mother Teresa did not write her own books or articles. The editor of the book speculates that this was because Mother Teresa was so focused on the activity that Christ required rather than mere writing. She was constantly busy helping the weakest of the weak, the sick, the dying and the abandoned. Mother Teresa did not speak often, but the words she spoke were considered powerful enough by her co-workers, sisters and others that the editor was able to compile them into a book.

Mother Teresa's birth name is Agnes Bojakhui; she was born in Skoplje, Albanian in 1910 and lived until 1997. Inspired early in life to a religious vocation, she joined the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto because she wanted to help the abused and abandoned daughters of the rich and poor. But her order sent her to Calcutta in 1929 to begin her novitiate. In 1937, she became a full nun and took the name, Teresa.

As the years moved forward, Teresa felt called to live among the poor and help them. In 1948 she moved to the slums of Calcutta to do just this. She founded a new religious order known as the Missionaries of Charity, which started working with abandoned children. Teresa would later open a Home for the Dying, and other groups would start up around her own, such as the Missionary Brothers of Charity. Due to her work, Mother Teresa would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

The book is comprised of an introduction and fifteen short chapters. Again, these chapters are not written by Teresa but are transcripts of her words and recollections. As a result, the chapters are comprised of brief stretches of text followed by breaks. There is no continuous text. Each chapter covers a general topic but does not engage in a sustained treatment of any one issue.

The introduction is written by the editor of the book, Jose Luis Gonzalez-Balado, who merely tells the story of Teresa's life and gives context for the various aphorisms and anecdotes in the book. The chapters cover the following general topics: holiness, prayer, generosity, Christ in the poor, love, home and family, virtues, Mary, life and death, smiles, money, suffering, loneliness, God and Christianity and the mission of the Missionaries of Charity. Common themes include the idea that God is present in the suffering of the poor, that spiritual poverty is often worse than material poverty, and that giving to others is not a net cost but a net benefit.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Mother Teresa: In My Own Words is a book comprised of quotes and sayings from Mother Teresa, not her own writing. She never wrote her own work; instead, the editor argues that Mother Teresa was focused on living Christ's word in her daily acts. She aimed to do all she could for the weakest and hungriest of people. She rarely spoke, talking only when necessary; that said, her few words were powerful. The anecdotes and sayings in the book come from various of her co-workers, sisters, and others she challenged.

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Bojakhui in Skoplje, Albania. She experienced a call to religious life under the papacy of Pope Pius XI. In 1928 at the age of 18, she moved to Ireland to become a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto to enjoy membership in a congregation dedicated to the daughters of all, rich and poor alike; she was only in Ireland three months.

In 1929, Agnes moved to Calcutta and then to Darjeeling close to the Himalayas to start her "novitiate" or apprenticeship to full status as a nun. In 1937, Agnes took her permanent vows and a new name, Teresa. Her convent ran the only Catholic girls school in Calcutta. The school was mostly for children of European descent from wealthy families. Teresa knew that even a block away other children were living in shacks.

Teresa then felt a "call within a call" to the impoverished in Calcutta. In 1946 she found in a moment of prayer, her call to live among and aid the poor. In 1948, she left the convent and the sisters of Loreto to live in the slums of Calcutta. After leaving, a few of her students asked to follow her; they would form the core of a new religious order. Teresa named them the Missionaries of Charity.

The order began by working with abandoned children. Teresa picked children up in a park, taught them good hygiene, and the beginnings of the alphabet. At the start, there was no planning; Teresa acted by only feeling out where God wanted her to go. But the aim was always there: to serve the poor. She also opens a Home for the Dying four years later. In fact, many of her abandoned children's parents were residents of the Home for the Dying.

Other groups have arisen out of Teresa's work, such as the Missionary Brothers of Charity. And others began to imitate their efforts to help the poor. After much thought and prayer, Teresa marshaled these individuals into a group, Helpers of Christ, which others called Helpers of Mother Teresa.

Teresa would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and receive a number of honorary doctorates. When she received cash awards, she spent every cent on others.



Chapter 1, Holiness, Chapter 2, Prayer

Chapter 1, Holiness, Chapter 2, Prayer Summary and Analysis

All the chapters of *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words* contain only sayings and anecdotes. As a result, the summaries of these chapters will contain brief explanations of the sayings serially.

On Teresa's view, holiness is a duty that everyone must take on. It won't do to hold simply that only a few are called to holiness. To be a saint, you have to want to be a saint. It is not a mere matter of being chosen. Teresa then cites Thomas Aquinas who argues that being holy requires a resolution made to a heroic act of surrendering the soul to God. We must be willing because our willingness makes us more like God. She also believes that doing God's work for his glory will bring about our own sanctification.

Teresa encourages us to meet people everywhere, those who live far away and those who live close; in particular, seek out those who are poor in means and spirit. She then states that death should not worry us, only our lack of saintliness at death.

Experiencing disgust is natural but being able to overcome it is often heroic, particularly when done for Christ. One must go beyond the natural to be a saint. Saint Francis of Assisi is one such case—when encountering a disfigured leper, St. Francis overcomes his revulsion and helps the leper, kissing the man. The saints are anyone who lives according to God's law.

Chapter 2 discusses prayer. Teresa argues that politicians do not pray enough and that they would be better politicians if they did. She points out next that there are those who claim their lives are too hectic for prayer, but this is wrong. Work and prayer are not exclusive activities. One should constantly pray during work; we should always try to pray to God.

For Teresa, prayer produces faith, which produces love, which produces service to the poor. She also expresses her affection for a popular prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. She believes people of prayer must be silent and those who are of prayer are of silence. She believes the secret to Christianity is prayer. To pray to Christ is to love him, in her view.

Jesus taught the apostles to pray and believes that when we pray the "Our Father" prayer Jesus taught, that God is pleased. Next a prayer is reproduced, where Teresa asks to be made worthy to serve the poor and those who die alone.

Prayer is not asking but putting oneself in God's hands and at his service, listening for his instructions. She then reproduces a popular prayer of Cardinal Newman, which asks God to fill each Christian with God's light. To be saved in Teresa's view, one must love God and pray. She then claims that when communion comes, she expresses both



gratefulness to God and a request that he teach her to pray. She believes that praying the "Our Father" and living it will produce saintliness. She then argues silence is a good teaching, teaching us to speak with Christ and to others.



Chapter 3, Generosity, Chapter 4, Christ in the Poor

Chapter 3, Generosity, Chapter 4, Christ in the Poor Summary and Analysis

We feed ourselves not for pleasure but to keep ourselves healthy to serve the Lord with sacrifice. Following St. Vincent de Paul, Teresa proclaims that the poor are our masters; we must not treat them as trash. The poor have a dignity and are our equals.

Next Teresa recounts feeding a Hindu family with eight children that had not eaten in days. However, the mother took the rice, and gave the food to a hungry Muslim family next door. She shared the rice with others. Teresa took her more rice the next day.

Calcutta had a massive sugar shortage. During the shortage, a four-year-old boy and his parents went to see Teresa to bring her a small amount of sugar. The boy had saved it up for Teresa, eating no sugar for three days so she might give it to her children. The boy could hardly say Teresa's name and she did not know him. He had made the decision on his own.

A Hindu man, when asked what a Christian was, responded that a Christian is one who gives. And Teresa implores us all to never tire of giving. Give until it hurts, until the pain is felt. We should open our hearts to feel God's love. We must always share. What we save, we cannot give and the less we have the more we will learn to share. Ask God to help us be generous.

Teresa laments that the poor in Europe see their poverty as a source of despair, but this is not the case in India. She also reports that a gift from a poor Indian man after her reception of the Nobel Prize meant more to her than the prize. Another day a young couple gave her a large amount of money that they had saved from not having an expensive wedding. The two reported that they loved each other so much that they wanted to share their joy with others.

Teresa implores us to learn how to give—not as an obligation, but as a desire. The poor do not want condescension or pity but only love and kindness. She believes that if we worry too much about ourselves, we will not worry enough about others. She then reports receiving a beautiful letter and a large donation from an Italian child after his first communion. He had saved his first communion for her work.

In Chapter 4, Teresa laments that it is fashionable today to talk about the poor but not to talk to them. She notes that the spiritually poor and desolate need help as well. We should share with our brothers whatever we have. We should also slow down our lives to smile at one another. We should share with the poor, like Jesus shared with us. Christ



is with us in the poorest of the poor. In fact, our food and our dress should be like the poor.

The work of the church in the rich West is harder than in places like Calcutta where the needs of people are reduced to clothes and rice. The problems in the West are problems of the heart. She notes in a quote that the prime minister of Ethiopia wants to expel all missionaries but not her Missionaries because they sincerely love the poor and care for them.

Poor people only die because no one would give them what they needed. We refuse to be instruments of love to the poor on God's behalf. To be happy on earth, we must love as God does and help as he helped. Poverty reigns in a country that allows taking the life of an unborn child.

To love the poor, we must be aware of them. We should be sure to check for the poor even in our own homes, as many hunger for more than bread. To imitate Christ, we have to abandon our riches and live like the poor. We should be like the poor in all things save their misery. We must go wherever the poor are, even on the moon. The demands and needs of all are the same everywhere in the world. Spiritual poverty is everywhere. We must serve the poor and identify with them as well.

Teresa's work, in her view, has helped her to understand that the poor understand human dignity best. Their problems aren't a lack of money but that their right to better treatment is unrecognized. We must be ready to serve the poor in every way, for that is to serve God.

God didn't create poverty; humans did. Before God, all are poor. We must not judge the poor unless we have examined our own conscience. The poorest countries are those who legalize abortion.



Chapter 5, Love, Chapter 6, Home and Family

Chapter 5, Love, Chapter 6, Home and Family Summary and Analysis

The most authentic revolution is the revolution of love. It is significant that Jesus fed the poor before he preached to them. True love causes pain; Jesus showed this by dying on the cross. To love, one must sacrifice.

The poor need our love, not pity. Jesus is the Life she wants to live, the Way to the Father. When faith is scarce, it can be increased by generosity and giving. Love and faith go together. Countries should not concentrate so much on defending their borders; those in poverty feel trapped. These countries should worry more about giving people food.

When we help the poor, we must not be like social workers but like contemplatives. We should not pay attention to numbers, only Jesus. The poor need love, not pity; they need to feel respect for their dignity. Teresa also believes that we will be judged worthy of heaven by how we treat the poor. Christ will transform love itself to generosity.

Loving and serving the poor means not giving mere leftovers but the food we love most. Millions die from lack of bread, and with a little love, this could be stopped. We must not refuse the broken bodies of the poor. Good works are links that form a love chain.

Any sickness has a cure save feeling unloved, so we must be messengers of love. We have been created to love and be loved. We must love to the point of sacrifice, and God will pay attention to our love. We should work excessively until we drop. She reports next that she told a top member of the Chinese community party that she thinks of communists as children of God and nothing more and believes this idea came from God.

Teresa often sees spiritual and material poverty as inversely related, believing that in New York God would have to declare himself bankrupt. Material means leave one utterly dependent on Providence. God wants us to be faithful.

Teresa next tells a story of a novice in her congregation working at the Home for the Dying. She believed she touched the body of Christ by touching the body of a sick man, healing him for three hours.

For Teresa, happiness is a deeper, inner peace that shows in our eyes, faces and attitudes. She notes that a priest once told her that he was so united to God he had no time for other relationships, and she thought this is how he was so effective. She notes that in Mexico, her sisters were first asked not for food or clothes but to be told about



God. She maintains that those who believe in God, he guarantees that they will be able to do greater things than he did.

Teresa believes that if her sisters are faithful to poverty and the Eucharist, their congregation will avoid danger. Love often shows itself in death and we should not let sadness cause us to forget Christ. She then tells a story about a Brazilian man who had been brought out of his sadness by seeing the sisters' work.

God wants us to do small things with great love and it should reach everyone. Our lives will be judged by how we loved.

In Chapter 6, Teresa tells a story of an Indian mother taking care of her children. She didn't want her children taken away due to her love. Teresa wants us to live among the poor in reality, not superficially. Jesus is a good model of familial obedience. The Holy Family is a great example to imitate. We should slow down our lives to give to others, particularly our family. World peace begins at home.

We should understand that the poor are among even our own family. Our love and generosity must begin at home. Selfish parents often worry about poverty in other countries while ignoring the poverty of their own children. Love begins by taking care of family. The old people should not be in nursing homes; this means they are not wanted.



Chapter 7, Virtues, Chapter 8 Mary

Chapter 7, Virtues, Chapter 8 Mary Summary and Analysis

Teresa thinks that we really lack the standing to accuse others. We often do not know why they act and Jesus encourages us to resist this. We must remember that criminals are our brothers and sisters. Humility is true and pride destroys everything. If we have more love, there would be fewer addicts. Joy is the net that catches souls. Teresa prefers to make mistakes because she is too kind rather than to perform miracles without being kind. All must work for peace; orchestrating politics is not her business.

Teresa is a strong believer in Marian piety, or closeness with Mary. The chapter opens with one of her Marian prayers. The Vatican opened a home for the sick and dying in Rome called the Gift of Mary. Teresa then reproduces Mary's short song to God in Luke. Teresa and her Missionaries promised Mary 85,000 remembrance prayers to get the building for her Congregation's motherhouse. She then reproduces the prayer. Mary took care of them.

Finally, Teresa recounts her sisters praying for an end to rain during Pope John Paul II's outside mass in Saint Peter's Square. They prayed a novena to Mary so hard that they didn't notice when the rain stopped.



Chapter 9, Life and Death, Chapter 10, Smiles

Chapter 9, Life and Death, Chapter 10, Smiles Summary and Analysis

Teresa wants humanity to decide that no one will ever feel abandoned. If someone does, they should let the Missionaries of Charity know. Life is God's gift and is present in the unborn. Human hands should never end lives, and war cannot be just. The first person to welcome Jesus into the world was a man in the womb: John the Baptist.

We should not be discouraged by failure and we should give God credit when we succeed. We must not kill children but always care for them. Next, in an anecdote, Teresa reports that the sisters went to pick up abandoned people in the street in serious conditions. They picked up a woman and on the way to the Home for the Dying; she thanked Teresa and died. She gave Teresa more than Teresa had given her. Teresa sees herself as carrying the "last glances" of the dying. She then recounts hearing a woman blame her son for her hunger but forgiving him with her last breath.

Dying in peace with God is the greatest thing in any human life.

Teresa thinks we should accept suffering with a smile. Smiling is an emotional way of giving others shelter from suffering. A smile can do much good and it is sad that we have more trouble smiling at those in our homes than outside of them. She then remembers telling some men she was helping to smile at their wives. They resisted saying that she wasn't married and so she didn't understand. But she replied that she was married to Jesus and found it hard to smile at him when he asked so much of her.



Chapter 11, Money, Chapter 12, Suffering

Chapter 11, Money, Chapter 12, Suffering Summary and Analysis

Mother Teresa does not much care for money. She believes we should have less to give it all the Jesus. She even took her substantial Nobel Prize money and built homes for the poor. She only accepted the prize as a representative of the poor anyway. Those dependent on money are truly poor. We should not be satisfied by only giving money. The poor need the work of hands and hearts. Many can afford to live in luxury and may have earned privilege through their work, but its extravagance that irritates her, that they throw away things they could use.

Teresa again emphasizes how wonderful the poor are. So many poor people suffer with such grace. The materially poor are not the only poor. Someone suffers in every family. She remembers helping a girl who resisted eating because she didn't want to experience food and remain hungry at the end.

Teresa encourages us to share love with those who need it when they are near. We should see Jesus in them all, hiding in the guise of suffering. She next recounts a story of visiting an AIDS patient who identified with Christ's pain during her pain. A young man suffering with AIDS had great love.

Suffering will never disappear, but it gives us a chance to show love to others and become better people. Jesus continues to live his own suffering in the faces of the poor. We must share Christ's love even with those indifferent to us. Teresa finds it odd to be described as a living saint. But she is happy for others to see God in her because she sees God in everyone, especially the suffering. She therefore encourages the sisters to smile when they approach the poor. We must be happy in the face of pain.



Chapter 13, Loneliness, Chapter 14, God and Christianity

Chapter 13, Loneliness, Chapter 14, God and Christianity Summary and Analysis

Teresa opens the chapter distinguishing between material and spiritual poverty, the latter of which she considers worse. The worst suffering is to feel alone and unloved. It is exclusion that pushes people to addiction; drugs help people forget their deprivation. She then tells the story of a woman in New York who had died alone and when she was found, rats had begun to eat her corpse. She considers this loneliness a great tragedy. She then recounts a senior citizens' home in England, and while they were well provided for materially, they were all sad. They want someone to visit them.

The alienation Teresa sees around her in the poor who are socially and emotionally alienated is the alienation Christ suffers. She then notes that many of her Co-workers are responsible for listening to the elderly, to satisfy them. Listening to someone who has no one to listen is beautiful.

Even in the poorest areas Teresa has gone to, the people have asked her to teach them about God and his word. The Eucharist, if properly understood, is the poor's most important food. It is more than receiving Christ; it satisfies spiritual hunger.

Teresa is saddened that Ghandi found Christians so lacking in Christ-likeness. She then states that in Calcutta, they fed ten thousand people today. They must cook every day or many will not eat. The government often provides food, but it is not enough. She then notes that a Hindu man judged her religion to be true because of her devotion.

Teresa argues that everyone has a duty to serve God. We are called to love every human being. Teresa does not believe her calling is to judge institutions and is not qualified to condemn anyone. She cannot think of crowds because it would prevent her from doing her work. If others believe God wants them to change social structures, they must take it up with God.

People expect Christians to be consistent; when they aren't, it hurts Christ. Christ turned himself into bread so we could share him with others. God forgives sin, although we should try not to sin again. Christians are often obstacles to those who wish to know Christ better. It's the main reason people do not believe.

The Church is always the same; even the apostles experienced fear, depression and failure. Jesus comforted them and so he comforts us today. She then comments on a public official who asked her if she wanted him to be a Christian. She said that if someone had a good thing, she would want to show it with others. But faith is God's gift to give to those he chooses.



Chapter 15, Our Mission

Chapter 15, Our Mission Summary and Analysis

Teresa says the sisters always reject invitations to eat out, which gives the impression that the sisters accept payment. No, they eat only in their own house out of respect for the poor. She says to those who admire her courage that she would not have any courage unless she believed that when she touched the poor and the sick, she touches Christ's body.

Poverty is freedom for Teresa and the sisters. They have no property but the things they use. Their saris are not theirs, neither are their sandals. Poverty is strength. Truly following Christ requires giving something up. She believes that when she dies, God will find a person more ignorant and useless than she was and will do greater things through that person than he is doing through her.

Teresa recounts a story of a Brother of Charity who believed he had a vocation to serve the lepers, but Teresa reminded him that his first vocation is to follow Jesus. Teresa then notes that she was given the Nobel Prize because of the poor, but the prize went behind appearance. It awakened consciences world round to draw attention to the poor. We must treat the poor with love.

We must give spiritual and material help to the poor all over the world. To enable ourselves to do this, we must give ourselves to God in prayer and embrace the simple gospel. We must love and serve the poor and recognize in them God himself.

Teresa emphasizes that the sisters only vow the poverty of Christ. They allow the sisters to sew their saris to keep themselves looking dignified. Her missionaries are convinced that when they help the poor, they help Christ. Approach the poor with joy, she advises. The primary aim of the sisters is to offer to reach souls.



Characters

Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa was born August 26th, 1910 and died September 5th, 1997. She was born Agenesë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Albania. As a child, Agnes was always fascinated by missionaries and at age twelve decided she would go into religious life. At age eighteen, she left home to become a member of the Sisters of Loreto. Her first stint as a novitiate was in Ireland, so she could learn English. She is ultimately sent to India to teach children English there. In 1929, she moved to Darjeeling, India to begin her official novitiate and took her vows May 24th, 1931.

Teresa then moved to Calcutta to teach Indian school children, but many of them were the children of rich foreign parents and well-to-do Indians. Nearby Teresa was surrounded with the impoverished, which became particularly acute during a famine in 1943 and Hindu-Muslim violence in 1946. On September 10th, 1946, Teresa believed that she received a further call to live among the poor and do missionary work. Her first years were difficult.

On October 7th, 1950, the Vatican gave Teresa permission to found the Missionaries of Charity, to care for the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, and so on. She initially had thirteen members, but today the order has four thousand members world-wide. In 1952, she opened the Home for the Dying which she built from an abandoned Hindu temple. Her order attracted more attention as time went on, and her work grew throughout the sixties and seventies. This culminated with her Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

The book is a compilation of her thoughts, recollections and aphorisms throughout her later work.

The Missionaries of Charity

The Missionaries of Charity was founded by Mother Teresa in 1950. It is a Roman Catholic religious order for women that today has 4500 sisters around the world, distributed throughout 133 countries. Nuns in the order must take three traditional vows: chastity, poverty and obedience. They must also take a fourth, to give "wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor."

The Missionaries of Charity Brothers was created in 1963, which is a men's branch of the order. Other groups have sprung up around the Missionaries of Charity as well. The missionaries must care for refugees, ex-prostitutes, the mentally ill, sick and abandoned children, lepers, AIDS victims, the terminally ill and the elderly. Their schools educate homeless children, and they have soup kitchens to feed the poor. The Missionaries run nineteen homes in Calcutta alone.



The Missionaries of Charity feature prominently in the book. Often they are named, particularly when Teresa discusses opening the Home for the Dying, or founding the order, or adding the Missionaries of Charity Brothers to their ranks. However, they are also presumably referred to when Teresa speaks of her "friends" or her "sisters" or even when she speaks of charitable action in the plural, such as "we helped them" or "a few of us went to feed the poor." The Missionaries are apparently a constant source of support to Teresa, and it is quite clear that she was a constant source of inspiration to them.

Jesus Christ

The founder of the Christian religion and constant companion of Mother Teresa.

God

Mother Teresa sees herself as utterly devoted to God and finds Him in the faces of the poor.

Mary

The Virgin Mary, mother of God, Teresa maintains an ardent devotion to her, as do many Catholic nuns.

The Poor

Teresa often thinks of the poor as a single class of individuals in whom Christ's grace is reflected particularly strongly.

The West

Teresa sees a profound spiritual poverty in Western countries that is in many ways worse than the material poverty in the undeveloped countries.

Those Who Give

Teresa believes that humans will be judged according to how much they give to others. She has high praise for those who give.

Families

Teresa thinks that helping the poor starts at home by loving one's family and making sure they do not feel abandoned.



The Suffering

Teresa believes that those who suffer have a unique opportunity to grow closer to God.

The Abandoned

Teresa thinks there is nothing worse than being alone and feeling unloved.

Teresa's Critics

Even Mother Teresa had her critics, who often thought she didn't do enough to challenge the oppressive social structures that perpetuate poverty. But Teresa believed this was not her calling.



Objects/Places

Albania

Teresa's country of origin.

India

The country where Teresa did her life's work.

Calcutta

The partly impoverished Indian city where Teresa began her charitable work.

Darjeeling

The Indian city near the Himalayas where Teresa began her novitiate.

Home for the Dying

In 1952, Teresa opened this hospice in an abandoned Hindu temple.

Missionaries of Charity Convent

The Missionaries of Charity did not have one specific convent to speak of, but they did have a sort of home base in Calcutta.

Saris

The Sari is the form of garb that the Missionaries of Charity wear.

Food

Teresa believes that humanity can easily supply the food needs of the world's poor if they only have the will.

Money

Teresa fears money more than anything else because it can prevent people from giving.



Leprosy

Leprosy was common in Calcutta, and Teresa and her sisters often aided the leprous population.

Smiles

Teresa believed that the poor should always be greeted and aided with a smile.

Love

For Teresa, the great good in life is love, the best good is to give and to receive.

Prayer

Teresa believed that prayer should be a constant practice in the life of a Christian.

Generosity

For Teresa, love and generosity are inseparable.

Holiness

Holiness cannot be achieved by itself; instead, for Teresa, one must want it with all of one's heart.



Themes

Christ in the Poor

One of the chapters of *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words* is titled "Christ in the Poor" in which Mother Teresa directly expresses a theme that is present in nearly all the other chapters. Teresa takes the Christian Scriptures to teach that when she performs acts of service for the needy and the poor, she literally performs these acts for Jesus Christ. When Jesus says, "What you do for the least of these, you do for me." Teresa takes him to mean something close to literal, in that Christ is somehow present in a particularly potent fashion within the lives of the suffering and poor.

For example, Teresa discusses a sister in the Missionaries of Charity who came back from caring for a leper for three hours; she claims that she felt as if she was touching and caring for the body of Jesus Christ when she was caring for the leper. For this woman, when she cared for the leper, in some very real sense she cared for God and Jesus.

It is because Teresa is drawn to Jesus Christ that she is drawn to minister to the poor. Once the reader grasps that Teresa believed Christ is present in the poor, the reader can understand how Teresa's devotion to Jesus and to the poor are inseparable. Teresa's love for Jesus grounds her love for the poor. Her love for Jesus demands that she love the poor.

Material vs. Spiritual Poverty

Teresa spent many of her years tending to the material needs of the poor. And it is that ministry, of food, healthcare, shelter, etc. that she is most well-known. But Teresa identified two kinds of poverty both of which had great disvalue. Material poverty is a deprivation of the goods of the body, a lack of food which produces hunger, a lack of healthcare which produces sickness, etc.

But there is a spiritual form of poverty as well. Persons are spiritually deprived when their spiritual needs are unmet. These spiritual needs including needing to feel loved, needing to feel at peace, not being at odds with other human beings or in conflict with them and not being addicted to an external good, such as alcohol or money. Spiritual poverty, Teresa argues, is a much harder problem to solve than material poverty. She comments that material poverty can be cured with a loaf of bread or a vaccine, but spiritual poverty is a much more complicated ill to cure.

Teresa comments that while undeveloped nations are rife with material poverty, they suffer from less spiritual poverty than do the developed countries. In the West, Teresa argues, people are consumed with their dangerously high levels of wealth, careers, and so on. The problem, she believes, gets overlooked because it is easier to hide. People often miss the spiritual poverty among their own family members, something that would



be hard to miss with respect to material poverty. Only attentive and loving people will see spiritual poverty and care enough to try and fix it.

Giving is not Loss

Teresa is a radical altruist, meaning that she believes that the good life consists in total devotion to the good of other persons. In fact, she seems quite certain that any human life which fails to consist in total devotion to the good of others is thereby deeply impoverished and inferior as a whole to a life of total devotion.

The problem with radical altruist theories of the good life is that it seems that individuals who are radically altruistic are too willing to sacrifice their own good to bring about the good of others, and it is hard to see how a good life can consist in being disposed to sacrifice goods for one's self at any time.

One can see from reading the book how Teresa would respond to this objection. She argues that giving is not loss. When we share with others, when we are generous, we express love and become increasingly able to love others. But loving others and experiencing love are the greatest human goods. When one shares and gives love, love is not lost or diminished in anyway. It only grows. And since love is so valuable, expanding one's capacity to an expression of love more than cancels out the loss of value elsewhere from the sacrifice other goods, such as material things.

Therefore, a life of radical altruism is required of all humans to give form to the love of others, the achievement of which makes a life go better than it otherwise could.



Style

Perspective

Mother Teresa's perspective is not subtle at all. She is a deeply committed Christian, altruist and egalitarian. First, Teresa accepts a particularly radical Catholic conception of Christianity. She believes that salvation comes through faith in God, but she has a highly works-oriented conception of merit before God, meaning that one can merit God's favor according to one's service to God's will. She over and over again emphasizes that on judgment day God will judge us according to our service to the weakest among us.

Further, Teresa is a radical altruist. She explicitly states that she fears nothing more than money because it threatens people with becoming attached to their own interests and resistant to sharing, which is absolutely central to a good and happy life. She and her sisters refuse to keep anything for themselves, giving away all but what they need to live a materially basic life. Further, Teresa literally sees the Son of God in those she helps, in the weak, the suffering, the lonely and so on. In that, Teresa sees herself as constantly in God's service in sharing and giving to the poor.

Finally, Teresa is a radical egalitarian. She believes all human lives have equal value. And she believes that through the action and inaction of those who are more fortunate, some humans fail to be treated as equally valuable, particularly the most destitute in the world. Everyone deserves to have a decent life simply by virtue of their being human and made in the image of God.

Tone

The tone of Mother Teresa: In My Own Words is that of a deeply committed Christian nun and humanitarian with an extremely strong series of value commitments. Teresa is absolutely convinced that Christianity is true and that God has called her to serve the poorest of the poor. For this reason, she often speaks with a sense of calm certainty and profundity about her mission and experiences. Her tone is also very loving, containing many expressions of pleasure at seeing love in others and being able to help the sick and the dying.

In many places, Teresa waxes mystical, discussing "seeing" the face of Christ in the poor, or reviewing a petition to Mary she and her sisters engaged in to stop rain from ruining an outdoor Papal mass in Rome when she was visiting. In other cases, she speaks in an extremely stern and matter-of-fact way about the deep immorality of ignoring the poor and the weak, of individuals letting people die alone and ignoring their own families. She is vehement that abortion is the greatest of all human tragedies, besides complete spiritual poverty.

For the most part, however, one could describe the tone of the book appropriately as saintly. Mother Teresa devoted her life to others, particularly to the most unfortunate



members of the human race. She appeared to do so with great joy, conviction and peace and worked with incredible zeal to defend and uplift those she believed Christ had called her to help.

Structure

Mother Teresa: In My Own Words does not have a typical structure for a non-fiction work. It is not an autobiography or a biography, nor is it the reproduction of Teresa's own writings. Teresa never wrote an autobiography, nor did she write any other extended piece. The editor has simply collected a wide range of Teresa's aphorisms, anecdotes, recollections and observations as remembered by Teresa's colleagues, sisters, co-workers and friends. He has then arranged these bits of Teresa's thinking into fifteen distinct categories. Thus, the book does not contain extensive treatment of any one issue, even of Teresa's life. To glean who Teresa is and the major events of her life, the reader must coordinate bits and pieces from different parts of the book and form them into a whole.

Each page will typically display several quotes clearly set off from one another, while longer recollections will take up a single page. But her quotes will never exceed a page, as Teresa was a notoriously sparse speaker.

The editor has arranged Teresa's quotes into fifteen subjects, many of which intersect in various ways. He first produces an introduction explaining a bit about Teresa's life story and how she came to be so influential. The chapters follow.

Chapter 1 covers holiness, Chapter 2 prayer, and Chapter 3 generosity. Chapter 4 discusses Christ in the poor, Chapter 5 discusses love, and Chapter 6 discusses home and family. Chapter 7 covers virtues, Chapter 8 Mary, and Chapter 9 Life and Death. In Chapter 10, quotes about smiling are reproduced; in Chapter 11, quotes about money and in Chapter 12, quotes about suffering. Chapters 13 - 15 present an overview of Teresa's attitudes about loneliness, God and Christianity, and the mission of the Missionaries of Charity respectively.



Quotes

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Introduction, ix)

"Holiness does not consist in doing extraordinary things. It consists in accepting, with a smile, what Jesus sends us. It consists in accepting and following the will of God." (Chapter 1, Holiness, 1)

"Prayer makes your heart bigger, until it is capable of containing the gift of God himself." (Chapter 2, Prayer, 5)

"Without a spirit of sacrifice, without a life of prayer, without an intimate attitude of penance, we would not be capable of carrying out our work." (Chapter 3, Generosity, 13)

"The poor are great! The poor are wonderful! The poor are very generous! They give us much more than what we give them." (Chapter 4, Christ in the Poor, 21)

"The less we have, the more we give. Seems absurd, but it's the logic of love." (Chapter 5, Love, 31)

"Peace and war begin at home. If we truly want peace in the world, let us begin by loving one another in our own families. If we want to spread joy, we need for every family to have joy." (Chapter 6, Home and Family, 48)

"If we were humble, nothing would change us-neither praise nor discouragement. If someone were to criticize us, we would not feel discouraged. If someone were to praise us, we also would not feel proud." (Chapter 7, Virtues, 53)

"Mary is our mother, the cause of our joy. Being a mother, I have never had difficulty in talking with Mary and feeling close to her." (Chapter 8, Mary, 59)

"At the moment of death we will not be judged according to the number of good deeds we have done or by the diplomas we have received in our lifetime. We will be judged according to the love we have put into our work." (Chapter 9, Life and Death, 65)

"Peace begins with a smile." (Chapter 10, Smiles, 73)

"I fear just one thing: money! Greed - the love of money - was what motivated Judas to sell Jesus." (Chapter 11, Money, 77)

"Suffering in itself has no value. The greatest gift we can enjoy is the possibility to share Christ's passion." (Chapter 12, Suffering, 81)



"In the developed countries there is a poverty of intimacy, a poverty of spirit, of loneliness, of lack of love. There is no greater sickness in the world today than that one." (Chapter 13, Loneliness, 89)

"Only God knows our true needs." (Chapter 14, God and Christianity, 95)

"I was hungry and you gave me food ... I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me Our work is based on these words of Jesus." (Chapter 15, Our Mission, 103)



Topics for Discussion

How did Mother Teresa come to live in Calcutta?

What do you think of Mother Teresa's perspective on money? Do you think she is right? Is her opinion practical?

Many have criticized Mother Teresa for only helping the poor with poverty but not challenging the social structures that cause poverty. She responds that this was simply not her vocation. In your view, is her response satisfactory?

How does Teresa find Christ in the poor?

Name two acts of love that particularly impressed Teresa.

Explain Teresa's distinction between material and spiritual poverty. Which is worse in her view?

Teresa believes that in many ways the developed countries are more impoverished than the undeveloped countries. In what sense does she mean? Is she right?