

How This Book Came to the Light

Thursday, August 1, 1996, was the first day during my visit with Mother Teresa, which I spent with the Leprosy Patients at Gandhiji Prem Nivas Leprosy Centre, in Titargarh, India. The Centre was co-founded by Mother Teresa, in 1958, and run by the brothers of the Missionaries of Charity.

The impact which the Leprosy Patients left on me during that day drastically changed the focus of my life. Should you inquire about my return trip from the Leprosy Centre to Calcutta, I would have little to say as I don't remember the details, because my mind was just as numb as my body. By the time I reached Calcutta in a train waggon, the experience reminded me of a box of sardines placed vertically. My very feet became numb too. In order to get to Mother Teresa's house, I, along with the other volunteers, took a cab. We arrived just on time to get blessed by Mother Teresa, and I can assure you that on that evening I truly depended on her blessings more than at any other time so far.

After the blessing I joined Mother Teresa, the Missionary Sisters and the volunteers for a Rosary prayer in the Chapel. At this time I pleaded to the Blessed Virgin to release the Leprosy Patients from their pain.

That evening, I could not even think about consuming any food. Thinking of the wounds of the Leprosy Patients upset my stomach terribly. I withdrew into the quietness of my room. The only way to sustain myself that night was to pray and meditate, and eventually, to come to grip with my emotions, I started to jot down my experiences of the close encounter with the Lepers. I kept writing until 3:00 a.m., by which time I had written nineteen pages, and with no intent about writing a book.

One would think that after emptying my emotions and pain through my writing, I would be through dealing with it. Instead, much more pain surfaced. I was convulsed with sobs. Being all alone in a hotel room on the other part of the globe, (for so it seemed) I knelt on my bed and wept. It seemed as if someone had scraped off a few layers of my skin without any anaesthetic. This caused me unbearable pain, and at the same time, it made me realize the agony within. At the time I did not understand what was really happening, because I thought that by nature I was

always a happy person and I never knew that in my life I could absorb so much pain. It appeared as if a volcano erupted twisting and burning me inside while covering me with hot ashes on the outside.

My whole life unravelled itself before my eyes. I wept for the pain of my mother and for my father's tortures in the communist prison. I gasped for air of my prematurely first born son, as he stopped breathing and had to be put on a respirator, and I throttled with my second son's asthma attacks. I felt a razor-sharp lance ravage through my chest after the car accident, as I desperately tried to reach my youngest son, who was lifelessly laying in blood on the floor of the passenger seat.

I relived the agony of a refugee who left everything behind, as I escaped from Croatia to flee into the freedom of a refugee camp in Italy, with my husband and two toddler sons. We carried only the possessions we could fit in two plastic bags. I suppose, my family and I could be classified as homeless at that time, and so indeed we were for the next seven and a half months, while we stayed in the refugee camps in Padriciano and Latina. Perhaps, this experience shaped what later became my tender care for the homeless children.

I remembered the pain and the tears on my mother's face when I, her only child told her about our escape. Through my sobs, I discovered that I actually never let go of her desperate embrace. I wept for all the innocent children, the victims of bomb explosions in Croatia, Bosnia/ Herzegovina and the other countries struck by the war. I could identify with the painful torture of those suffering souls beyond any human imagining. I could feel the bullets ravaging through my skin, and hear the bombarding of Vukovar as it was being completely razed to the ground. I heard the last screams of thousands of Croats, the victims of the latest Genocide.

The remnants of the most painful moments of my life surfaced, and I could identify with them in the wounds of the lepers. It was all connected. Their pain was my pain, and my pain surfaced because I experienced theirs. I realized that our encounter was the breaking point for me to tap so deeply into myself. I came face to face with my pain, fear, and losses. I came face to face with Calcutta, and I realized that this was the face of poverty, a face that will remain indelibly etched in my memory.

Blessed are you who are poor.
– Luke 6:20

While still kneeling on my bed, I looked through a large window directly in front of me, and I raised my hands towards the Lord, in complete self-surrender. I felt shivers all over my body, as if a gust of cold wind had engulfed me.

Then an overwhelming sense of joy and peace washed over me. I thanked God for the gift of Mother Teresa, and for bringing me here. I also thanked Him for allowing me to live through so much pain in my life, otherwise I would never have been where I was today, I mean deep inside and faith wise. It was a journey to the core of my soul, a journey of tearful disclosures of my personal pain and grief and my soul's cleansing.

As the messengers of the morning started to pulsate the light through the windows of my room, it left an impression of some thousand of pilgrims holding lit candles on Christmas Eve, at Manger Square in Bethlehem. That beautiful and solemn moment filled me with hope. Christ's hope. Mother Teresa instilled the message of hope. A thought came into my mind, "Today, I will ask Mother Teresa to give me permission to write a book about her work of grace, about her extended hand the sisters and brothers of the Missionaries of Charity, the Missionary Fathers, Co-Workers and volunteers. The complexity of it never crossed my mind. Yet, I realized that fear is not present when you create with God.

I also thought, since the humble circumstances of the poorest of the poor touched me so deeply, perhaps by writing about my experiences, and by enlightening the world about the work of Mother Teresa, and her Sisters, and the dedicated volunteers, I may touch some of you to make some positive changes in reaching out, on a more personal level.

During the day, I prayed and worked as usual, except I returned to the Mother House a bit earlier than usual, around 4:30 p.m. I went to Mother Teresa's office and I asked to see Sister Joel to seek her advice on how best to approach Mother Teresa for permission to write a book about their work. One of the Sisters told me to wait for a few minutes. I sat on a bench on the balcony and waited. However, when Mother Teresa heard that I was there she came out. She greeted me and asked me, "Is everything

okay?” when I responded that I was fine, and that I am waiting to see Sister Joel, she continued, “Can I help you with anything?”

As she sat beside me on the bench, I said, “Actually, I wanted to see Sister Joel to ask her how to go about asking you for permission to write a book about your work of grace. She looked at me and asked again, “So, you like to write a book about our work?” I responded that I did, she said, “I like that you asked me to write a book about our work, since through our work we serve Jesus in the abandoned, the homeless, the sick and the dying, and the lepers.” Then she asked me to tell her a little bit about the book which I am planning to write, and what had prompted me to write it.

Then I shared my experience of the previous day from the Leprosy Centre and my hotel room during the last night. She stood up, went to the window of her office, which could be spoken through from the balcony, and asked, from a Sister who happened to be there, for a piece of paper and a pen, and then she wrote: ‘Dear Sister, I agree that Ana Ganza may write a book about our work. God Bless, Mother Teresa MC.’ While I thought, this is all God’s work, she handed to me the authorized note, and she said,

“This book will be a great homage to the courage of the poorest of the poor.”

Then she blessed me while saying,

“May God Bless you and your future work. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Mother Teresa also told me to ask her and the Sisters for whatever I need for this book. I also asked her to allow me to interview the sisters and to take the pictures in the Convent and her house, and in the centres, which she gladly approved.

Yet, our official picture taking, which was planned for her Birthday, August 26, 1996, with the framed poem I gave her, unfortunately, never took place, because she was in the Woodlands Hospital on her 86th Birthday.

As far as the book is concerned, it was my labour of love for four years. The chapters were coming to light along with my spiritual growth, and my journey of hope. Through it all, I may say that it was a life enhancing journey. Not only did I analyze and deliver Mother Teresa’s inspiring messages, but I also found the

way to incorporate them and apply them into my life and charity work. This is something that I struggled with and wanted to do for a long period of time, especially for my students.

One time when I used the saintly Mother as an example in my classroom, a student responded, “But, Miss! What is this going to do for me? She is very holy. She is a Saint. How am I going to use her example and apply it in my life?”

I believe that through this book I was able to unveil Mother Teresa’s spirit, and through remembering her spirit we may remember our own, as well as the spirit of others around us. It was a voyage into the euphoria of soul cleansing in some beautiful, profound, yet simple way. Through her saintly vocation Mother reminded us of a complex task to keep our values and perspectives intact, regardless of the fast pace of life and the equally fast growing pace of science and technology.

Mother Teresa will remain the voice of the homeless children. She provoked humility and charity. She showed us that we can get in touch with God through self-surrendering, or we can get in touch with God through our spirituality.

I had a vision for some time that I wanted something more than what life was offering me. My spiritual growth was developing slowly through the years, but the biggest self-examination took place during my stay with Mother Teresa, and it continued after my return to Canada. I struggled for some time until I found the Kingdom of God, here on Earth.

My spiritual search has increased my love for God, purification of heart, and God’s presence in my daily activities. Based on my experience, I felt that spirituality was worth pondering and writing about. The blessing I received from Mother Teresa pervaded my soul with vigour, prudence and holiness.

The spirit travels beyond known horizons, and not everyone is able to follow it, and redeem it. I had the privilege of Mother Teresa’s priceless guidance on my spiritual journey. Nothing can ever blemish the inside beauty born out of holiness and natural allure. Those who are not aware of their inner beauty may have a harder time to appreciate the beauty outside.

At the time of my visit with Mother Teresa I did not understand why did beautiful spiritual experiences happen to me, since I am only a simple mortal person. Yet, I realised that God knows the reason.

Journey of Hope

According to my knowledge, Mother Teresa never talked about her mystical experiences, except that the Lord was with her all the time. I believe that Mother Teresa was “withholding” some of her experiences, her power and knowledge. Some believe that His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, and some of the spiritual masters, such as; Tenzin Gyatso, or the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, who is considered a living Buddha “withhold” some of their power.

I am sure that countless future scholars will be looking into Mother Teresa’s phenomenon and legacy. My approach was only one of the ways to show the beauty of her soul, the power of her faith, and the richness she left behind. I am still not done. There is plenty more that she has left behind for us to emulate, to learn from, and to draw inspiration from. I found hope, yet my journey did not end in Calcutta, as she gave me a new vision to continue.