



The Secret Life of Mother Teresa

DAVID SCOTT

During her lifetime, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was an inspiration to millions. In the years following her death, more information has been uncovered about the Catholic nun's personal life and spirituality. David Scott is the author of *A Revolution of Love: The Meaning of Mother Teresa*.

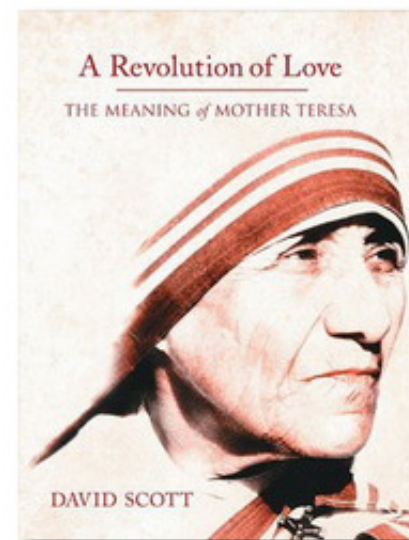
In the course of writing the book, what did you find out about Mother Teresa that you didn't know?

I came at it with a sense that she was a lightweight. Like so many people, she was doing good things, but there was nothing necessarily *that* compelling about her. She was a nun working with the poor, but a lot of nuns and laypeople work with the poor.

That was shattered during the course of writing the book. It blew me away how deeply spiritual her life was. Her whole approach to life, and the hardships she faced, was carried out at a very deep spiritual level.

I came at it very underwhelmed about her; it was a journalistic project. When I walked away, it had become a spiritual challenge to my own life.

Every aid worker encounters difficulties and resistance, and questions why they're there. The anguish she felt was at a much higher pitch, and her response was at a much higher spiritual level of intensity.



There was information in your book about her parents that I didn't realize.

She didn't give people a lot of leads. Eileen Egan was the only biographer to report in any detail about her father's death. He was a financier of the Independence movement for Albania. People used to gather at his house, and they'd sing folk songs and plan an independence movement. It appears he was poisoned by Yugoslav authorities. She was 9 or 10.

Her mother gets reduced to stereotypes in a lot of books—"she was a hard worker, she prayed her rosary." Nobody probed her too much, but her mother seems like an incredible woman and the source of everything in her personality, from her sense of humor to her love for the poor.

Her husband died and all her business partners fled. So she started becoming a seamstress and built a small business. At the same time, almost every weeknight at the table were people Mother Teresa never knew, poor people. [Her mother] had a special kind of love for women in distress. Old, homeless women, unwed mothers in crisis pregnancies would stay with them.

She loved her mother deeply. There were years of correspondence that we never had. We know she tried to get her out of Albania after the Communists came to power.

She left for her vocation at age 18 and never saw her mother again. Ever.



I was surprised to read that for over 10 years when she first came to Calcutta, Mother Teresa worked in a private girls' school with high walls and was not really involved with the poor. Some biographers speculate that her vocation for the poor was germinating inside her. What are your thoughts?

One of the few letters from her mother that we have is just a snippet, reminding her, "you went off to the mission not to be a principal of private school for privileged Indian girls. You're there for the poor."

Her mother brings up this woman, File, who used to live at their house, saying, "You have to remember File." In that letter, the mother says, "the greatest poverty for File was to feel unloved." We hear that repeatedly from Mother Teresa's lips later on.

But we just don't know. I think it's part of her mystery and her meaning. All the biographies have little lines at the beginning that say "Mother Teresa was always reticent about the past," which means "she didn't answer any questions that I asked her." I don't think it's because there's any dark skeleton. It has to do with her overwhelming sense that it wasn't her that mattered, it was Jesus who mattered.



Since her death, researchers have found a cache of letters, correct?

They're not all the letters, but some from the 1940s. There are probably more, but those are the ones we have.



What did letters reveal?

The initial vision from Jesus was, "I want you to serve the poor." The letters detail exactly what Jesus said to her. It lays out the whole program for the Missionaries of Charity, including the name. Jesus tells her, "I want missionaries of charity." The other thing that's frequently in his statements to her is this phrase "Wilt thou refuse?" She often would say to people, "Will you refuse what Jesus is asking?"

In the last of the visions she receives, she has this very strange vision that she's on Calvary with Mary and Jesus. She's told that she's supposed to teach the world how to pray the family rosary. I'm not sure if, in 1946, that was a concept that was widely known or not.

Then, we didn't have any idea of the Fatima visions. The visions she describes are kind of similar—an apocalyptic sense of things. Makes you wonder where that all comes from.



Your book says she only received that one "order" from Jesus—what happened after that?

After that, it seems that for several weeks, at least, whenever she would take Communion and be

reflecting afterwards, the voice would continue and they would be dialoguing. She'd say, "I don't want to do this" and the voice would say, "you've got to do this. She details all of this in letters to her archbishop. Can you imagine being the archbishop and reading this letter and thinking this woman—she's either nuts or she's talking to Jesus.

So these letters described her plans for the Missionaries of Charity and tried to persuade the archbishop?

Yes. She wanted these things hidden, because she said if people knew about the letters they'd think more about this than they would about Jesus. That's why she wanted them destroyed. Apparently the archbishop and her spiritual directors didn't destroy them, and that's why we have them.

What is your response to Christopher Hitchens' criticism of how she handled the charity's finances?

I took the whole Hitchens book really seriously, even though it was written in a tone of derision. I've read almost everything Hitchens has done, even when I don't agree with him. But that book I think he'll live to regret, because it's so shoddy. I respect his journalism, but I think that's a hack job.

I don't see any evidence, any basis to swindling charges or even that the money's wasted. They did not have high-tech operations in Calcutta. This is a woman whose nuns didn't even have fans for the Calcutta heat.

Living in India, what was her attitude toward Islam and Hinduism?

The short answer is that she loved everybody, and thought any part of the truth that those religions contained was a beautiful thing. Everybody knew she was a Christian and that she believed Jesus was the way to salvation, but she would work with anybody and she would love everybody. She was treating only Hindus. There weren't a lot of people who went in Hindu and on their deathbed became Catholic. Which is a remarkable lesson for the missions.

She didn't proselytize?

No, I don't believe there's any evidence of that. She said my job is to make people converts to love. If in the process of loving more and giving yourself more, you become a better Muslim or a better Hindu, then so be it.

What did she like and dislike most about America?

She liked most a certain generosity she saw in the American spirit. Some of her first trips to America were all about gratitude for gifts. Like a local Catholic women's welfare association someplace in Peoria

that was sending small sums of money. She would go and say thank you for that.

But the heart of the culture—she saw a kind of soulless materialism that was sucking the life out of most people. She talked about the desire for more things becoming insatiable.

It's not something peculiarly American; she warned about it in her writings to her own nuns. It's almost a human condition thing, but America as a society seemed to manifest it greatly for her.

If we have to live in a consumerist society, can she give us ideas to combat consumerism in our personal lives?

My favorite story is when an obviously very wealthy woman comes to her. [The woman] loves saris, she spends 800 dollars on a sari. Mother Teresa's, by contrast, cost about 8.

She says to the woman, next time you go to buy a sari, buy a 700 dollar one and take 100 dollars and give it to the poor. And you watch the slow progression of the woman—she's not consuming as much and giving more away. I think that would be her answer: if we have to live in a consumerist society, consume the least amount you can and give all you don't need to the poor.

Your book talks about how Mother Teresa knew how hard it is to love 'close-up.' It says it's easier to hand cup of rice to a hungry stranger than address someone in your own household who's feeling unloved. How can she help us reach out to such people?

That's central to her message. The demands of charity are often the sister-in-law who drives you batty. Those are very real to Mother Teresa. The mission of the Missionaries of Charity still today is that reading a book to a lonely person qualifies as serving the poor. She would say over and over, "Loneliness is the greatest poverty."

She would say, Look around in your own family's lives. She was always asking, do you know the names of your neighbors? Do you know what that neighbor needs? Those are the beginnings. If you're looking to a practical solution to how to love the way she loved, it's to start with the people around you and love at a great sacrifice, as she would say.

A Revolution of Love: The Meaning of Mother Teresa

David Scott's new book, *A Revolution of Love: The Meaning of Mother Teresa* (Loyola Press, \$12.89) is the first to make use of newly discovered letters she wrote to her spiritual directors and superiors beginning in the 1940s.



The letters, unreleased during her lifetime, detail private revelations she received from Jesus and Mary—including instructions for the founding of her religious order, the Missionaries of Charity. In these letters, she also describes a never-before disclosed "dark night of the soul"—feelings of God's absence and rejection that persisted throughout her ministry.

The book, written for a popular audience, explores not only her spiritual struggles, but also her slow and difficult conversion to the poor, her prophetic stance against abortion and the culture of death, and her teachings on prayer and holiness.

"David Scott's book, more than any other, shows us the saint and her significance," said the St. Paul Center's founder, Dr. Scott Hahn. "A *Revolution of Love* belongs in the hands of everyone who loves this most beloved of modern women."

Hear an audio of Mother Teresa "[The Poor in our Own Homes](#)"

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