

Memorial Mass for Mother Teresa of Calcutta

In the first reading Isaiah lifts up a prophetic vision of how God will save his people. He describes a God who opens the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, gives new strength to legs and speech to muted tongues. This saving God, Isaiah tells us, can also turn arid desert land into places of flowing waters and of new growth. In the gospel passage Jesus dramatically fulfills the prophecy in part, as he restores hearing and speech to a person who lacked both.] This week the news brought stories of the deaths of two renowned women, Princess Diana and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Their deaths and their interaction remind us of the challenges of our culture and the opportunities presented to us in the world of faith. Mother Teresa had the gift of seeing and of calling forth the best in every person. In a notable way she and Princess Diana who died tragically at age 36, could interact for the good of others. Mother Teresa was 38 years old with many years of service as a teaching religious sister when, in 1946, she received her “call within a call” and began to consider how she might guide herself and others to serve Jesus in “the poorest of the poor.” In 1950 her Missionaries of Charity were approved by the local bishop as a diocesan community and fifteen years later the Holy See granted it pontifical status, a world-level recognition. Mother Teresa called her sisters to a commitment to prayer and to the poor but, even more, to living the poverty of the poor among whom they worked. As the years went by, some who did not know her attacked her and her work. But, because she knew that they had not come to visit her or to see her work at first hand, she herself could respond to what they said with the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Personal recollections of Mother Teresa are vivid indeed: In 1976 she spoke to many of us from around the country at the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. The theme of

the Congress was “The Eucharist and the Hungers of the Human Family.” Mother Teresa considered both spiritual and physical hungers when she addressed the Congress. A priest friend of mine, Monsignor Philip J. Dowling of Philadelphia, had arranged for her to attend the Congress and, in the midst of it, his own father died. Mother Teresa interrupted her schedule to join in praying the rosary for the happy repose of Mr. Dowling, earning the abiding gratitude of the family and teaching all a lesson of concern for those who mourn. On the Saturday afternoon of the Congress, she agreed to go across the Delaware River to a church in Camden which served the poorest of the poor. I remember vividly that afternoon: It was very hot and Mother Teresa was late, but somehow people kept their patience. Later we learned that she had stopped on her way to the church to visit and to pray with a young woman critically ill with cancer. As always, she spoke to us very clearly, heart reaching out to heart, about the need for us to pray and to learn to see Jesus in the poor. In 1985, at the Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi, I met Mother Teresa again. Quietly she spoke of her great love for the Church, for the way in which the living body of Christ offered worship to God and also was an instrument of God’s care for the poor. Six years later, when we learned here in Baltimore of the special need for a home for men dying of AIDS in the inner city, and I did not know where to turn, a call came to me from a priest who served as a spiritual guide to Mother Teresa’s sisters in New York. In Mother’s name he asked, “Is there a place for the Missionaries of Charity in Baltimore?” And so began the discussion which brought Mother Teresa here. She was a patient in a coronary care unit in La Jolla, California, when she accepted my invitation to establish the home here in Baltimore for men dying with AIDS. It came to fruition the following summer, when Mother Teresa herself came for the dedication of Gift of Hope. Man