

Simple and beautiful 'saint of Calcutta' marks 100th

Imagine each day seeing and working with people who are incredibly poor, dying and alone – people few others in the world are willing to touch, much less love. Two people who were canonized last year epitomize this spirit: St. Damien of Molokai, who ministered to those with Hansen's Disease (leprosy); and St. Jeanne Jugan, foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who serve the elderly poor.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta fits that mold. The diminutive nun from Albania – who rocked the world with her ministry to the poorest of the poor in India – was born 100 years ago this week.

She received many honors throughout her life, including the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, though she did not seek accolades. In some ways, she appreciated the attention such recognition brought to her work and that of the Missionaries of Charity, but was uncomfortable with the attention. She was no “rock star,” though everywhere she went, thousands flocked to see her, filling churches and arenas for the chance to be in her presence and hear her speak.

In 1989, just eight years before her death in 1997, Mother Teresa visited Phoenix, where I worked as editor of the local Catholic newspaper. She came to town with several sisters of the Missionaries of Charity, a few of whom would stay to start a convent there. A simple home was found for the sisters, between downtown and the state capitol, in an area where many services were provided for the poor and homeless, but not nearly enough. The home was quite spartan, but even so, it was too much. Mother Teresa asked that the carpets be removed and the fixtures be taken away from the lights in the building. She and her sisters would have no “luxuries” that those they served would not have.

The only “luxury” they needed in that home was the Eucharist. During a Mass celebrated for the sisters and their co-workers (lay helpers of the Missionaries of Charity), Mother Teresa knelt in front, near the altar, surrounded by sisters from her order. It was a sea of blue-and-white saris, with Mother in her recognizable, added

navy blue sweater. They put Christ at the center of their home in the “renovated” living room, so that they could take his love into the streets.

It was Mother Teresa’s tradition to give to those she met a Miraculous Medal, a depiction of the Immaculate Conception as seen by St. Catherine Labouré. While visiting Phoenix over several days, she ran out of the medals. One of the sisters alerted the diocese, and it was reminiscent of the wedding feast at Cana, but instead of “they have no more wine,” the cry was, “Mother has no more medals.” What did they wish us to do? Find some.

We called every religious goods store in the area, finding only one that had them in stock. “We’ll buy them all,” we told the store clerk – several thousand. Mother Teresa asked the local bishop to bless the medals, and a crisis was averted; she could continue to spread devotion to Jesus through Mary as she encountered people in her travels.

During her visit, each person she touched was inspired, either by the small woman’s big challenge to “Do something beautiful for God” or her admonition that in a country of such riches, it was a crime that any person should go hungry or be unloved.

And so it was everywhere she went. Her three visits to Baltimore engendered the same kinds of entreaties to embrace the lonely and the poor in Christ’s light and love.

Those who had a chance to see Mother Teresa’s relics on tour in Baltimore this summer understand the simplicity of her life; she had little of substance, but the Lord – a crucifix and well-worn sandals, a couple of saris. She gave away all that she received. She had little that we would consider “riches,” but she was rich indeed.

As with St. Damien and St. Jeanne Jugan, Blessed Teresa continues to inspire the world as we celebrate the centenary of her birth. Soon, God willing, we will celebrate her canonization, recognition of what so many of us who met her already know: She is a saint we can emulate as we strive to live the Gospel, the Good News of the Lord.

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