

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Simple Path

Mother Teresa

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

HOW THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT *by John Cairns*

INTRODUCTION *by Lucinda Vardey*

BEFORE READING ON

THE SIMPLE PATH

PRAYER

FAITH

LOVE

SERVICE

PEACE

APPENDICES

IMPORTANT DATES

THE MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY ORDER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Copyright

A Simple Path

Mother Teresa

Compiled by
Lucinda Vardey



RIDER

LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

HOW THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT

'I CAN TELL you about my path,' said Mother Teresa, 'but I'm only a little wire - God is the power. Talk to the others, the sisters and the brothers and the people who work with them. Some are not Christians, talk to them. You will know what it is when you see it. It is very beautiful.'

This book, *A Simple Path*, began several years ago when Omer Ahmed, a film producer colleague, arranged a meeting with Mother Teresa to discuss ideas for a book and film project. Although he has lived in London for 45 years, Omer comes originally from India and his great grandparents used to own land in the Tiljala and Motijheel districts of Calcutta. Tiljala is, today, on the other side of the railway track from Mother Teresa's home for the mentally handicapped, and Motijheel is the area in which she started her first home. Omer's family are Muslim but all of his sisters were educated at Loreto, where Mother Teresa taught in the 1930s and 40s. His family have long supported the work of the Missionaries of Charity.

We had become interested in exploring the extraordinary potency of Mother Teresa as a symbol of love in action. Her impact on the public imagination has been compared to the ripples a stone makes when it is thrown into a calm pool of water. For many non-Christians, Mother Teresa represents a form of Christianity they can wholeheartedly respect.

Yet although most of Mother Teresa's biographical details are now well known, what is not widely understood is why she and the women and men of her Order live in the way they do - and whether, in this age of complication and

confusion, she has anything relevant and accessible to say to those searching for a better way of life at the end of the twentieth century. By listening to what she said, seeing what she did, and why, could we learn more about how to really connect with the people around us? Could Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity offer hope in what seemed like a difficult world?

It was with these, and many other, questions in mind that we came to be waiting at the Mother House of the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, one hot July day in 1994. As in all the houses of the Order around the world, the atmosphere was functional and very busy. Visitors were being dealt with politely but not allowed to distract from the important work of helping the poorest of the poor.

At first, Mother Teresa was unsure at the prospect of yet another book. She said she doubted if any more words would bring anyone closer to understanding the meaning of her mission. It was all so simple, she said. Why should anyone need a guide to her simple path? All we, or anyone else, needed to do was to pray and start loving one another more. First, we should become as familiar as possible with the work of the Missionaries of Charity by visiting Shishu Bhavan (the children's home); Prem Nivas (the centre for leprosy patients in Titagarh, run by the Missionary of Charity Brothers); Nirmal Hriday (the home for the dying and destitute) and Prem Dan (the home for TB sufferers and mental patients).

We visited these, and other homes, several times and the experience made us absolutely sure that a book which would help us learn how to pray, how to love more easily, how best to offer service to others was indeed needed. These questions could perhaps be dealt with readily by the Missionaries of Charity, but in the West we needed a series of clear and coherent steps to help us follow the path.

At this point the religious writer, Lucinda Vardey, was chosen to compile the book and joined us in further

research. During the following months, we were offered more and more support with the project by Mother Teresa and her community and began by talking to Mother Teresa at great length on a wide range of subjects. We then discussed her approach and the work of the Missionaries of Charity with specific sisters and brothers in India and in the West, whom Mother introduced. Next, our research led us to individuals from many parts of the world who had volunteered in the Missionary of Charity homes - and we asked them to share their experiences and feelings about their work too. Finally, Mother Teresa and her Order saw and approved the text and wished it well. The results are laid out in the succeeding pages.

John Cairns

INTRODUCTION

WHATEVER OUR VIEWS of Mother Teresa as a courageous missionary or a living saint, she has made a lasting impression. We all have an opinion about her. She has been recognized as an exponent of world peace and often appears on lists of the world's ten most admired women. Yet, she herself has never claimed to be, or to be doing, anything extraordinary.

But how much do we actually know of her philosophy and her work? When we take the trouble to look beyond the public view, we find that her faith and her clarity of purpose give us powerful lessons in the ways of loving, serving and respecting our fellow human beings, especially those who are poor and deprived. She practises what she preaches. She treads a simple path and it can be followed by anyone.

In the past, we have had extraordinary spiritual leaders sent to us at times when the world urgently needed leadership and spiritual guidance. These people, of vast spiritual strength, were clearly linked to the Divine and in many cases were revolutionary in their teachings. One such figure was the charismatic St Francis of Assisi.

Born in twelfth-century Italy, Francis sold all his possessions to obey Christ's calling to repair his Church. Initially, he devoted his life to living in poverty (wearing only a coarse robe), begging for food and caring for lepers and outcasts. Later, he founded an Order of friars and was influential in reforming the then very rich, and frequently misguided Catholic church. By the time of his death, he had gathered over 5,000 professed monks, priests and nuns to

carry on his work. Today, the Franciscan Order thrives as one of the largest religious Orders in the world.

St Francis was a radical in his day - even perceived as a heretic - because he offered a fresh view of the Christian life by living as a beggar, believing in providence, and closely following the teaching of the Gospels. But what was also unusual about him was that he reformed his own religion from within the institutional Church rather than by breaking away from it. Mother Teresa's life has many similarities with that of Francis. Her path is also through poverty, simplicity and adherence to the teachings of Christ, and because of this she has been viewed as a progressive in the present fundamentalist framework of the patriarchal Church. Yet she preaches her love and peace in action in a world still devoid of strong female leaders and from one of the largest and poorest, and most polluted, cities in Asia.

Mother Teresa received God's call to serve the poorest of the poor in 1946 and began, in a small way, by caring for one sick and dying person whom she found on the streets of Calcutta. Today, she is head of the Missionaries of Charity, a religious Order which she formed with the Vatican's blessing in 1950. Over the last 45 years, when vocations have been slowly declining in the Catholic church, the numbers of the Missionaries of Charity sisters and brothers have been growing and now total more than 4,000 worldwide.

Sisters and brothers of the Missionaries of Charity practise their life of poverty with the absolute faith that this will bring them nearer to God. They trust and believe in His providence and, like Francis, live and work only through the generosity of others. Also, like Francis, they live what they teach including not owning any more than the poor they serve. They eat frugally, possess only two sets of clothes, a pair of sandals, a bucket, a metal plate, the basic utensils and sparse bedding. Their community life is built upon the words of the Gospel - the Christian way of prayer, love,

forgiveness, non-judgement, humility, truth and total surrender to the Word.

A brief look at some of the landmarks in Mother Teresa's life helps to shed light on the many-faceted parts of herself and on the aim of her work. Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Albania, on 26 August 1910, the youngest of three children. She had a comfortable childhood - her father was a building contractor and importer, her mother was strict but loving with a deep faith. After her father's premature death, life became harder and to support her family Agnes' mother set up a business selling cloth and embroidery. In her teens, Agnes became a member of a young people's group in her local parish called the Sodality and through the activities there, guided by a Jesuit priest, Agnes became interested in the world of missionaries.

Her first call to a vocation as a Catholic missionary nun was when she was 18 and she picked an Irish Order to join - the Loreto Sisters - who were well-known for their missionary work, particularly in India. From an early age Mother Teresa wanted to work in India, but she went to Ireland first to learn English and later to be transferred as a teacher to St Mary's Loreto Convent High School in Calcutta. She arrived in Calcutta on 6 January 1929 and when she took her vows as a Sister of Loreto on 24 May 1931 she chose the name Teresa after St Theresa of Lisieux, known as the 'little flower of Jesus'.

Both of the decisions to leave her homeland and go to the other side of the world, and the choice of Teresa as her professed name, are two essential clues to understanding Mother Teresa's strength, character and purpose. The fervour for not just becoming a religious, but wanting clearly to do missionary work - 'to go out and give the life of Christ to the people' is how she refers to this first call.

The missionary life is one of zeal with a clear evangelistic thrust and a strong belief in compassion in action. Mother Teresa's pioneering spirit was there from the start. Yet