

Mother Teresa, John Paul II, and the Fast-Track Saints

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During his 26-year papacy, John Paul II elevated 483 individuals to sainthood, more saints than all previous popes combined, it is reported. One personage he beatified but did not live long enough to canonize was Mother Teresa, the Roman Catholic nun of Albanian origin who had been wined and dined by the world's rich and famous while hailed as a champion of the poor. The darling of the corporate media and western officialdom, and an object of celebrity adoration, Teresa was for many years the most revered woman on earth, showered with kudos and awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her "humanitarian work" and "spiritual inspiration."

What usually went unreported were the vast sums she received from wealthy contributors, including a million dollars from convicted savings & loan swindler Charles Keating, on whose behalf she sent a personal plea for clemency to the presiding judge. She was asked by the prosecutor in that case to return Keating's gift because it was money he had stolen. She never did. She also accepted substantial sums given by the brutal Duvalier dictatorship that regularly stole from the Haitian public treasury.

Mother Teresa's "hospitals" for the indigent in India and elsewhere turned out to be hardly more than human warehouses in which seriously ill persons lay on mats, sometimes fifty to sixty in a room without benefit of adequate medical attention. Their ailments usually went undiagnosed. The food was nutritionally lacking and sanitary conditions were deplorable. There were few medical personnel on the premises, mostly untrained nuns and brothers.

When tending to her own ailments, however, Teresa checked into some of the costliest hospitals and recovery care units in the world for state-of-the-art treatment.

Teresa journeyed the globe to wage campaigns against divorce, abortion, and birth control. At her Nobel award ceremony, she announced that "the greatest destroyer of peace is abortion." And she once suggested that AIDS might be a just retribution for improper sexual conduct.

Teresa emitted a continual flow of promotional misinformation about herself. She claimed that her mission in Calcutta fed over a thousand people daily. On other occasions she jumped the number to 4000, 7000, and 9000. Actually her soup kitchens fed not more than 150 people (six days a week), and this included her retinue of nuns, novices, and brothers. She claimed that her school in the Calcutta slum contained five thousand children when it actually enrolled less than one hundred.

Teresa claimed to have 102 family assistance centers in Calcutta, but longtime Calcutta resident, Aroup Chatterjee, who did an extensive on-the-scene investigation of her mission,

could not find a single such center.

As one of her devotees explained, “Mother Teresa is among those who least worry about statistics. She has repeatedly expressed that what matters is not how much work is accomplished but how much love is put into the work.” Was Teresa really unconcerned about statistics? Quite the contrary, her numerical inaccuracies went consistently and self-servingly in only one direction, greatly exaggerating her accomplishments.

Over the many years that her mission was in Calcutta, there were about a dozen floods and numerous cholera epidemics in or near the city, with thousands perishing. Various relief agencies responded to each disaster, but Teresa and her crew were nowhere in sight, except briefly on one occasion.

When someone asked Teresa how people without money or power can make the world a better place, she replied, “They should smile more,” a response that charmed some listeners. During a press conference in Washington DC, when asked “Do you teach the poor to endure their lot?” she said “I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people.”

But she herself lived lavishly well, enjoying luxurious accommodations in her travels abroad. It seems to have gone unnoticed that as a world celebrity she spent most of her time away from Calcutta, with protracted stays at opulent residences in Europe and the United States, jetting from Rome to London to New York in private planes.

Mother Teresa is a paramount example of the kind of acceptably conservative icon propagated by an elite-dominated culture, a “saint” who uttered not a critical word against social injustice, and maintained cozy relations with the rich, corrupt, and powerful.

She claimed to be above politics when in fact she was pronouncedly hostile toward any kind of progressive reform. Teresa was a friend of Ronald Reagan, and a close friend of rightwing British media tycoon Malcolm Muggerridge. She was an admiring guest of the Haitian dictator “Baby Doc” Duvalier, and had the support and admiration of a number of Central and South American dictators.

Teresa was Pope John Paul II’s kind of saint. After her death in 1997, he waved the five-year waiting period usually observed before beginning the beatification process that leads to sainthood. In 2003, in record time Mother Teresa was beatified, the final step before canonization.

But in 2007 her canonization confronted a bump in the road, it having been disclosed that along with her various other contradictions Teresa was not a citadel of spiritual joy and unswerving faith. Her diaries, investigated by Catholic authorities in Calcutta, revealed that she had been racked with doubts: “I feel that God does not want me, that God is not God and that he does not really exist.” People think “my faith, my hope and my love are overflowing and that my intimacy with God and union with his will fill my heart. If only they knew,” she wrote, “Heaven means nothing.”

Through many tormented sleepless nights she shed thoughts like this: “I am told God loves me-and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.” *Il Messaggero*, Rome’s popular daily newspaper, commented: “The real

Mother Teresa was one who for one year had visions and who for the next 50 had doubts—up until her death.”

Another example of fast-track sainthood, pushed by Pope John Paul II, occurred in 1992 when he swiftly beatified the reactionary Msgr. José María Escrivá de Balaguer, supporter of fascist regimes in Spain and elsewhere, and founder of Opus Dei, a powerful secretive ultra-conservative movement “feared by many as a sinister sect within the Catholic Church.” Escrivá’s beatification came only seventeen years after his death, a record run until Mother Teresa came along.

In accordance with his own political agenda, John Paul used a church institution, sainthood, to bestow special sanctity upon ultra-conservatives such as Escrivá and Teresa—and implicitly on all that they represented. Another of the ultra-conservatives whom John Paul made into a saint, bizarrely enough, was the last of the Hapsburg rulers of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Emperor Karl, who reigned during World War I.

John Paul also beatified Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, the leading Croatian cleric who welcomed the Nazi and fascist Ustashi takeover of Croatia during World War II. Stepinac sat in the Ustashi parliament, appeared at numerous public events with top ranking Nazis and Ustashi, and openly supported the Croatian fascist regime.

In John Paul’s celestial pantheon, reactionaries had a better chance at canonization than reformers. Consider his treatment of Archbishop Oscar Romero who spoke against the injustices and oppressions suffered by the impoverished populace of El Salvador and for this was assassinated by a right-wing death squad. John Paul never denounced the killing or its perpetrators, calling it only “tragic.” In fact, just weeks before Romero was murdered, high-ranking officials of the Arena party, the legal arm of the death squads, sent a well-received delegation to the Vatican to complain of Romero’s public statements on behalf of the poor.

Romero was thought by many poor Salvadorans to be something of a saint, but John Paul attempted to ban any discussion of his beatification for fifty years. Popular pressure from El Salvador caused the Vatican to cut the delay to twenty-five years. In either case, Romero was consigned to the slow track.

John Paul’s successor, Benedict XVI, waved the five-year waiting period in order to put John Paul II himself instantly on a super-fast track to canonization, running neck and neck with Teresa. As of 2005 there already were reports of possible miracles attributed to the recently departed Polish pontiff.

One such account was offered by Cardinal Francesco Marchisano. When lunching with John Paul, the cardinal indicated that because of an ailment he could not use his voice. The pope “caressed my throat, like a brother, like the father that he was. After that I did seven months of therapy, and I was able to speak again.” Marchisano thinks that the pontiff might have had a hand in his cure: “It could be,” he said. Un miracolo! Viva il papa!

Michael Parenti’s recent publications include: Contrary Notions: The Michael Parenti Reader (City Lights, 2007); Democracy for the Few, 8th ed. (Wadsworth, 2007); The Culture Struggle (Seven Stories, 2006). For further information

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