

# Mother Teresa of Calcutta is declared a saint

She gave her life to the poor and yesterday was declared a Catholic saint. Yet to her critics she was 'Hell's angel' and ran a 'cult of suffering'. Can they be talking about the same woman?



**Mother dearest:** A huge force of nature but physically tiny, just four foot ten tall.

Nineteen years ago, on September 5th 1997, the world was deep in mourning for the death of Princess Diana. But in **Kolkata, India**, another remarkable woman was slipping away. She left behind just **two saris** and a bucket.

Despite her lack of possessions, by that time Mother Teresa was idolised across the globe as a 'saint of the slums'. And yesterday the nickname became official: at a ceremony in Rome, Pope Francis proclaimed her 'Saint Teresa'. She had spent her life 'bowing down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road,' he said. By caring for the most desperate members of society, she 'made her voice heard before the powers of the world.'

After a moment of inspiration in 1946, she worked tirelessly for the 'unwanted, unloved, uncared for'. She opened orphanages, schools, and homes for the dying. They were all staffed by fellow nuns and monks who had joined her Missionaries of Charity, a congregation which now has **5,500** members working in 139

countries.

But not everyone accepts this beatific image of Mother Teresa. In the 1990s, the late British journalist Christopher Hitchens launched a fierce attack on her reputation. Her homes were dangerously **unsanitary**, he said. She praised **dictators** in exchange for donations, and her hatred of contraception and abortion — which she called the 'greatest threat to world peace' — helped to trap women and children in the very poverty she claimed to fight.

'She was a fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud,' he concluded.

Hitchens was joined by Aroup Chatterjee, a doctor from Kolkata who accused her of creating a false image of his vibrant city as a 'black hole'. Her 'cult of suffering' denied patients proper painkillers and refused any modernisation, even if it could have saved lives. Things have now improved, he admits. But her 'myth had to be challenged.'

The **complexities** of Catholic sainthood are one thing. But does Mother Teresa deserve her

reputation as one of the world's most beloved do-gooders?

## Nun too pleased

No, say critics. She told the poor that their suffering was 'a gift' because it brought them closer to God, but she did nothing to tackle the root causes of their poverty. She took money from unsavoury characters. And she kept homes for the sick in squalid conditions while receiving modern healthcare for herself. We have all been duped.

How ridiculous, say her supporters. You do not have to be perfect to make a difference to people's lives, and Mother Teresa showed infinite kindness to people in the most need. What could be more miraculous than that? All our heroes have faults — they would not be human otherwise — but that should not take away from the amazing things they have done.

## Q & A

### Q: Why are people being so critical of a poor old woman?

A: For good or bad, Mother Teresa was hugely influential — her opposition to contraception strengthened the Church's stance against it,

for example, a stance that some have accused of helping to spread diseases like HIV/AIDs. And there are over 5,500 followers still working in her name, meaning her attitude and legacy towards the poor very much lives on.

### Q: What was she like as a person?

A: In public, she was very strong and

determined, and a little bit crafty; she once convinced a reluctant Ethiopian minister to convert a government building into an orphanage live on television. In her private letters to friends and confidants, she struggled with religious doubt. 'The smile,' she once wrote, is 'a mask' or 'a cloak that covers everything.'

## YOU DECIDE

1. Does Mother Teresa deserve to be a saint?
2. Do we admire or love a person despite their flaws or because of them?

## ACTIVITIES

1. List five other inspirational leaders who deserve global recognition for their work.
2. Read some of the contradictory assessments of Mother Teresa's legacy under Become An Expert. Then write a 300-word biography of her, with as much balance as possible.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

*'Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent.'*  
George Orwell

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## WORD WATCH

**Kolkata, India** – At the time it was known as Calcutta, but the city changed its name back to the original Kolkata in 2001. It was once the heart of the British Empire's Indian territories. In 2005 around a third of its population lived in slums.

**Two saris** – One for wearing, the other for washing in the bucket. The distinctive white

and blue design is still used as the uniform of her missionaries.

**5,500** – According to *Rome Reports*, there are 5,161 sisters and 416 brothers working for the Missionaries of Charity.

**Unsanitary** – In 1994, the medical journal *The Lancet* criticised her Calcutta Home for Dying Destitutes for not keeping enough medicine in stock. One former volunteer said that needles would often be reused without sterilisation.

**Dictators** – In particular, Hitchens criticised her praise of Jean-Claude Duvalier, a brutal ruler of Haiti from 1971 to 1986.

**Complexities** – To declare someone a saint, the Catholic Church must confirm that they have performed two 'miracles'. Their lives must be examined in great detail by an official panel and the pope must decide if they had 'heroic virtue'.

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