



*Encountering*  
MOTHER TERESA

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Holy Mass at St. Mary's Church in Calcutta following the Profession of Vows ceremony. Hundreds of sisters were present for the holy occasion. (November 1995)



# Introduction

I first met Saint Teresa of Calcutta in Atlanta, Georgia on June 15, 1995, on the tarmac of the airport. I was with a group from the archdiocese awaiting her arrival to see in person a new AIDS hospice. When she exited the private jet, I had my first experience of being awestruck by this living saint. She came up to me through the crowds, enfolded my hands in her own, and in my heart I heard her say, “Come and see.” At that moment, for the first time in my life, I experienced a sense of total surrender to God, and I responded with a “Yes.” Just two short months later, I would be on a

flight to India. Little did I know then that encountering this saintly mother figure would lead me to my life’s purpose for the next twenty-three years. Since my first exchange with her at the Atlanta airport, I have been on a quest to interview people who worked with her since the formation of the Missionaries of Charity in 1950. In this book, I share some of those stories.

I could not know on that fateful day in Atlanta that I would in time attend both the beatification and the canonization of Mother Teresa. In between those two events, I would enter the Catholic Church along with

Mother Teresa poses with the author at the Mother House in Calcutta. (October 1995)



## This tiny woman, who was and is so revered by the world, communicated one simple message: “Love until it hurts.”

my son. Her influence changed the direction of my whole life, including my work as a photographer and writer, and guided me as a mother.

Over the years, I have tried to put my Mother Teresa work aside, but I simply can't. In fact, I was told on my first flight to Calcutta that this would become my purpose. A man who sat next to me on that 1995 flight told me, “Never, ever stop doing this work.”

My journey with Mother Teresa continues today. In October 2018, I traveled to Calcutta to visit the Missionaries of Charity and photograph their work. On this short trip, I fully recognized Mother's spirit present through her sisters, who have carried on the work since her death in 1997. On the day of my departure, the superior general, Sister Prema, held my hands and simply said, “Linda.” Once again, as on the occasions when I encountered Mother Teresa, I was at a loss for words. I felt as if Mother Teresa herself was holding my hands in her own.

Like so many others, I have known a saint in my lifetime who continues to inspire me to be a better version of myself. More than twenty years since her death,

Mother Teresa — now recognized as a saint in the Catholic Church — remains an important and timeless figure. Mother Teresa walked with a heavy stoop, yet still she carried the burdens of so many. She continues to bring consolation and assistance in our darkest hours. She continues to be a mother who points us on our way to God. She teaches us the Gospel of Jesus. She teaches us, as she taught her sisters in the Missionaries of Charity, to develop an intimacy with Our Lady and respond to our unique calling, just as Mary once responded to the angel Gabriel when she consented to be the Mother of God. For all of us, Mother Teresa remains an iconic, motherly figure, inviting each of us to experience our own humanity through acts of joyful service. This tiny woman, who was and is so revered by the world, communicated one simple message: “Love until it hurts.”

...

This book contains photographs I took of Mother Teresa and her sisters over the course of many years. It also contains interviews I conducted with people who

Mother Teresa steps off a corporate jet at Atlanta's Hartsfield Airport. A red carpet was rolled on the tarmac for her arrival, and two grounds crew members held up umbrellas to shield her from the drizzling rain. (June 15, 1995)





## Everyone who was drawn to Mother Teresa, and inevitably transformed by her touch, has a story to tell.

knew Mother Teresa personally and were privileged to share in her work in some way. Everyone who was drawn to Mother Teresa, and inevitably transformed by her touch, has a story to tell. Whatever our interaction with her looked like, all of us simply refer to her as “Mother.” I pray that through the stories and photographs in this book you will also encounter Mother Teresa in a deeply personal way, and that she will have a transforming impact on your life.

This book contains an extensive interview with Father James McCurry, currently serving as minister provincial of the Our Lady of the Angels Province of the Franciscan Friars Conventual. I met him on my flight from Rome the day after Mother Teresa’s beatification. Father McCurry told me that the foundation of his many talks to the Missionaries of Charity was devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary along with Mother Teresa. In addition, this book includes portions of my interview with Father Michael Van Der Peet, SCJ, to whom Mother Teresa confided the spiritual darkness she experienced — something most of those closest to her never knew. I also include an interview

with Father Flavian Wilathgamuwa, a priest from Sri Lanka whom I met in a Los Angeles hospital not long before he died. Another priest, Monsignor John Esseff, had a long relationship with Mother Teresa. His position as a pontifical appointee to Lebanon led to his first meeting with Mother Teresa and his role as spiritual director to the contemplative branch of the Missionaries of Charity.

This book also includes the stories of two significant women whose lives would become intimately tied with Mother Teresa and the work of the Missionaries of Charity. Dr. Anita Figueredo was one of the first female surgical oncologists in the United States. She was working in San Diego, California, when she first met Mother Teresa in the 1960s. I had the opportunity to interview her on tape in 2005. Huldah Buntain is a Protestant missionary who accompanied her husband to India in the early 1950s to begin their service to the poor. The couple met Mother Teresa in the early days of their work and partnered with the Missionaries of Charity in assisting those who needed medical attention. The stories of these two women, living in different

Archbishop John Donoghue was elated as he led Mother Teresa by the hand through packed crowds to Sacred Heart Church in downtown Atlanta.

## The touch of Mother Teresa's hand was enough to transform lives and alter their direction forever.

parts of the world, are much like the thousands of others who were linked to Mother Teresa through charitable work. As they would attest, the touch of Mother Teresa's hand was enough to transform lives and alter their direction forever.

I also had the rare opportunity to interview Sister Tarcisia, the eighteenth sister to join Mother Teresa's order. These stories, along with several other brief interviews, make up the content of this book. Each of our unique stories is woven together with a single thread: We were all drawn into the orbit of "Mother."

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I have been on a personal quest for a mother figure since I was a child. Illness was very much a part of my life from an early age, as my mother suffered breast cancer in her mid-forties and then severe aftereffects. I was thirteen years old when my father came back from the hospital in Rome, Italy, and gave my siblings and me the news of our mother's surgery. The devastation unfolded day by day, year by year, until newer illnesses led to blindness, a stroke, a coma, and her

eventual passing at seventy-eight. My father also suffered two severe heart attacks and chronic congestive heart failure. I became largely responsible for raising myself. Fear of abandonment and anxiety over the ever-present threats of illness were a constant companion and shadow.

I found my greatest relief from the darkness of life through the lens of my camera. When I first discovered photography in the darkroom at the University of Michigan in 1975, the realization came instantly: This would become my medium and the art form through which I could best express myself. Following my intuition, I walked into the Star Bar, a seedy barfly gathering spot, and I took photographs of people who had chosen to live on the margins of society. It was in these faces that I found an authenticity that was hard to label — people whose lives had lost any sense of direction or those who had long been forgotten by life itself.

After graduating from Michigan in 1978, I moved to New York City, where I toured largely unknown corners of the city, seeking refuge from my feelings of

Author's family sharing some last moments with her Norwegian grandparents aboard the Norwegian America Cruise Ocean Liner *MS Oslofjord* in the 1960s. *From left to right:* Karen, Liv, Magnhild and Gabriel Gausland, John, Linda, and Frank Schaefer.







*Left:* Author with her siblings, Karen and John, in front of their home in São Paulo, Brazil, where their father worked as an executive for General Motors.

*Center:* Author with her mother in the early 1970s.

*Upper right:* Homeless men on the Bowery in New York City, c. 1978.

*Lower right:* John the poet in Coney Island, New York. John, who had a pet monkey from the Amazon, was instrumental in encouraging the author to begin a Master's program in journalism at New York University.



*Left:* Johnny, a regular at the Star Bar in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In photographing him, the author found her calling that would later be realized through her work with the Missionaries of Charity.



*Right:* Mother Teresa greets a group of volunteers at the Gift of Grace House in Atlanta, Georgia. The home is a hospice for women with AIDS. (June 15, 1995)



isolation. When I photographed the homeless dwellers on the Bowery, I discovered the compassionate side of God. He surely loved these men as much as he loved those who traveled to work in fancy cars and lived in luxurious high-rises. I found the Holy Spirit alive in the most broken areas of the city. I befriended street gangs, homeless people, and an eccentric poet who lived in Coney Island with his monkey from the Amazon. This made sense to me. God was present in the poor. This is where the compassionate Christ resonates for me. I believe it is where we all can find him — in the

depths of our personal spiritual poverty and in serving those most in need.

For several years I worked for commercial photographers as an assistant and then landed a position as a photographer for the New York City Police Department. Within a year, I applied and was admitted to the graduate school of Arts and Science at New York University to study journalism. Shortly after graduation in 1984, I was offered a job with Cable News Network in Atlanta, Georgia. Before long, I was also freelancing for the Associated Press and other clients,



## She was a mother to the poor, the destitute, the mentally ill, and the broken.

Mother Teresa kisses the hand of Archbishop John Donoghue, who greeted her at the Atlanta airport. (June 15, 1995)

including the Archdiocese of Atlanta and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center.

For fifteen years, beginning in the mid-1980s, I photographed for the Archdiocese of Atlanta and received many invitations to join the Catholic Church. I politely refused each time, but enjoyed attending weekly Masses to photograph. Having grown up in Catholic countries and attended a Catholic kindergarten, I was accustomed to Catholic rituals and culture. I felt privileged to work for the Catholic community in Atlanta, but organized religion did not appeal to me. Mother Teresa herself never asked about my faith, but twice on my trip in 1995 she told me, “Pray, my child, pray.” While working for the archdiocesan newspaper, *The Georgia Bulletin*, I often told the editor that the only person left in the world that I wanted to photograph was Mother Teresa. What I could always see with the help of my cameras became unimportant once I actually met Mother Teresa in Atlanta on June 15, 1995. Her presence was a holy one, and meeting her was the first time I did not need the camera to feel whole.

I found in Mother Teresa the embodiment of Christ’s teachings, and for this reason I knew that it was my calling to follow her, so that I too could develop a closer relationship with Jesus. It was the main motivation for following her to India and why I have continued my research on her life and work for over two decades. She was a mother to the poor, the destitute, the mentally ill, and the broken. In the home for the dying in Calcutta, not only those who are sick, but also the many volunteers and workers find redemption. It is where life begins — with death. It is in cutting down the ego that we are reborn — not in the evangelical sense, but in the reality of the down-and-dirty, smelly, filthy, rotten core of our deprivation, where we are invited to open our hearts and to be of service.

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When I first met Mother Teresa that auspicious morning on the tarmac of Atlanta’s Hartsfield Airport, the anticipation of her arrival on a small jet from North Carolina was high. Archbishop John Dono-





## She spoke about the work in Calcutta, but her presence transcended her words.

*Left:* Mother Teresa's crippled feet, squeezed into a pair of old leather sandals.

*Right:* Crowds spill out onto Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia, as Mother Teresa passes by.

ghue was surrounded by a small contingency from the archdiocese. I was poised and ready with my camera. When she began her slow walk toward me, however, I completely lost my usual precision. At her silent command, I put down my camera as she embraced my hands in her own. My will surrendered to her extraordinary presence, and for the first time I encountered the spirit of "Mother." She gazed into the depths of my soul, and all my fears and pain dissolved in an instant. I was in a heightened state of joy and peace the entire day as I followed her with my cameras — first when she placed a garland of flowers around a statue of Our Lady of Fatima at the Gift of Grace House for women with AIDS, and then at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I sat at her feet in the sanctuary as she addressed the packed church and could only stare at her crippled feet squeezed into a pair of leather sandals. "Why don't they buy her new shoes?" I thought to myself. She spoke about the work in Calcutta, but her presence transcended her words. That day is forever carved in my heart, and it led me on a quest not only to be with Mother Teresa, but also to experience

motherhood myself.

Less than two months later, in August 1995, I boarded a flight to India with enough camera materials and money for a potential four-month trip. The last day I saw Mother Teresa in January 1996, nearly six months later, I knew that I would be bringing a new life into the world. When she blessed me for my return trip home, I felt the blessing travel through





The white stucco headquarters for the Missionaries of Charity are located on the Lower Circular Road — one of the busiest, most congested streets in Calcutta. In this image, police are blocking traffic because of a political demonstration. (1995)





## I found in Mother Teresa the authenticity of a work ethic and desire to serve God that I had never before witnessed.

my body to my baby. One year later, I had a dream in which Mother Teresa was rocking my son Paul in her arms. I knew that he would always be protected by her intercession. Today, at twenty-two years old, his empathetic nature and kind heart are clear indicators that Mother Teresa still carries Paul in her arms.

• • •

I found in Mother Teresa the authenticity of a work ethic and desire to serve God that I had never before witnessed. The Missionaries of Charity give of themselves wholeheartedly to the poor, and I wanted to be part of that by working as a volunteer and using my journalism skills to document the homes in Calcutta. Mother Teresa did not urge or command me to leave my successful career in Atlanta to commit to another calling, but an inner voice guided me to abandon everything I had known in order to respond to a deeper call. This was an opportunity to fulfill a lifelong desire to find deeper meaning through my work and to assist the abandoned members of society, people who had no voice of their own.

In August 1995, I drove up to the headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity on AJC Road. I did not have an appointment and did not even know if Mother Teresa was in Calcutta at the time. I knocked on the door and asked to speak to her, and was admitted into the building. Within minutes I was ushered up the stairs and, to my surprise, Mother Teresa herself, in her distinctive blue and white sari, called me over to a concrete bench. I asked her permission to photograph the work. Instead, she sent me to work at the nearby orphanage, Shishu Bhavan. It was there that I began my volunteer service for the Missionaries of Charity. Within a month, Mother Teresa gave me rare permission to document the work.

I will never forget that meeting. She had first asked me for a written proposal of my intentions. She barely read the first paragraph before saying, “No.” I was aghast and began crying. Mother Teresa embraced me as my tears dripped onto the crucifix pinned to her sari. I was horrified that I was spoiling Mother’s sari with my salty, hot tears. Looking at me with the tender eyes of a saint, she said, “I have a great idea. Why



Mother Teresa and the author share a personal moment at the Mother House in Calcutta. (1995)

don't you go home and pray about this tonight and I will also pray. Then you come and see me tomorrow." I went back to my hotel and prayed. The next morning after Mass, I informed one of the sisters that I had an appointment with Mother Teresa. She called me over to that familiar concrete bench, and within moments

Mother Teresa was seated next to me.

She told me, "This work is very hard."

I responded, "Yes, I know, Mother."

Peering into my eyes, my soul, she continued, "You must have total commitment."

"Yes, I am totally committed, Mother."

## She invited me to “come and see,” and I did. The journey continues today.

*Left:* Mother Teresa's note, granting Linda Schaefer permission to photograph the work of the Missionaries of Charity. (1995)

*Right:* A view of the Bandra railway station in Mumbai, India. Crows perch on electrical wires in the midst of a colorful display of life in this city of over 18 million people. (2015)

“Very well, then you come try the program ‘Come and See.’” I realized she was inviting me to become a nun.

“No, Mother, I am not here to be a nun; I am a journalist.”

“Oh yes, of course,” she said. And with that, she

pulled out a pink piece of paper and wrote the date, the names of the homes, and the following short note:

Dear Sister,

Let Linda Schaefer take photos of the work.

God bless you,

Mother Teresa, MC



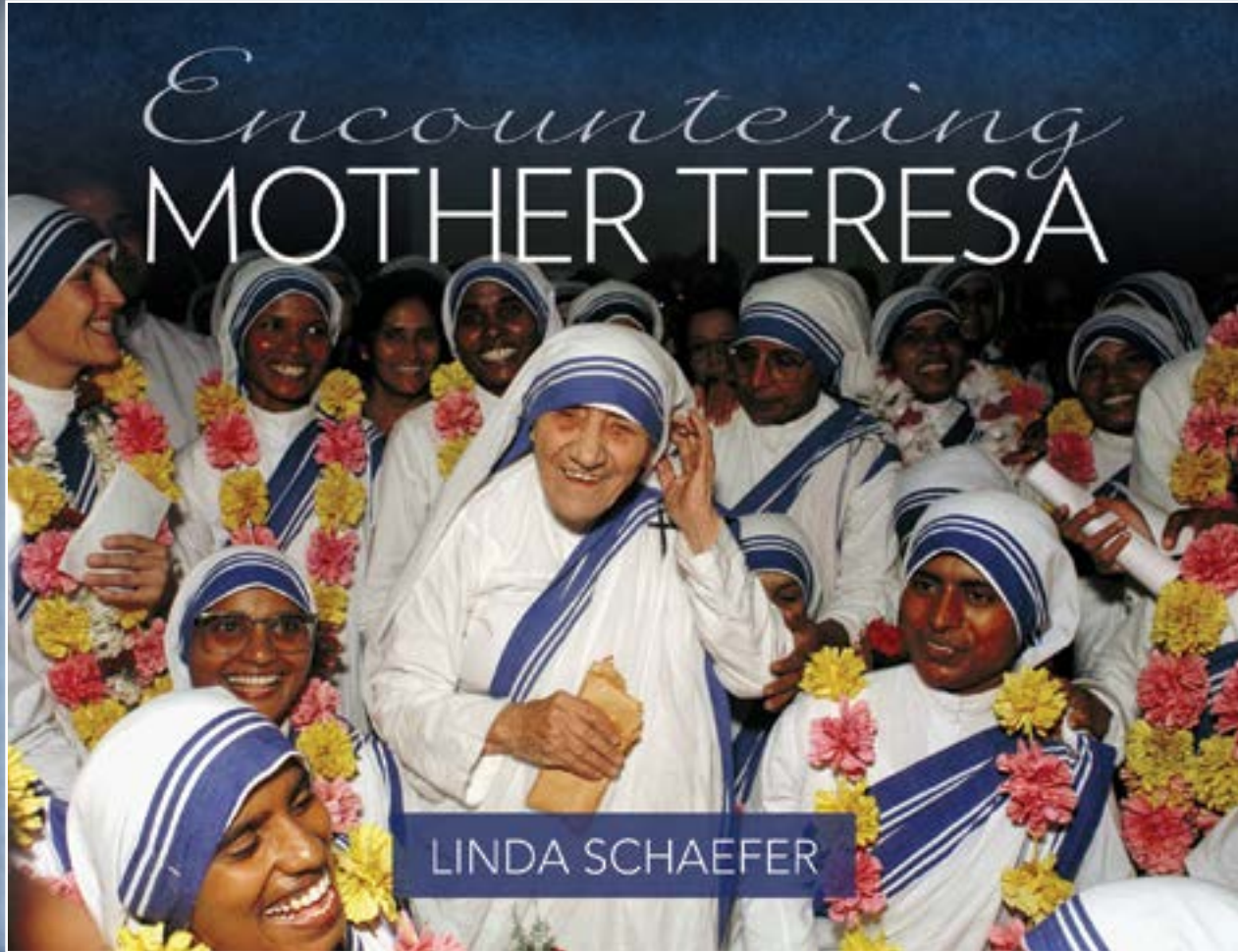
That piece of paper meant more to me than my diploma from New York University.

My future approach to photography would follow this pattern of responding to a call, not knowing what to expect but seeing with my heart that it was meant to be. That is how I responded to Mother Teresa's insightful gaze at the Atlanta airport. She invited me to “come and see,” and I did. The journey continues today.





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