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Jan. 5, 2006

**Author recounts life-changing experience with
Mother Teresa***Nun taught then-student how to care for sick, dying*By [Cindy Crebbin](#)

Special to the Catholic Herald

MILWAUKEE —Ruth Conroy, who is dying of cancer, first brought Mother Teresa into the life of her daughter, Susan Conroy, then a 21-year old student at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

The younger Conroy, speaking at a Menomonee Falls breakfast meeting Dec. 10 for the West Bend Chapter of Magnificat, an international Catholic women's organization, said her mother sent her a photo of Mother Teresa with some of her words on joy. Later, when she went home to Maine, she found three other small books on Mother Teresa left on the coffee table by her mother.

She returned to college in 1986 as an economics major, but nine weeks later headed for Calcutta, India for a summer to work with Mother Teresa's "poorest of the poor."

Prior to her talk, Conroy told the Catholic Herald that Mother Teresa's diminutive stature was striking. She stood just 4 feet 11 inches tall and had memorable hands.

"Even though they were wrinkled and gnarled, they were so soft. Often when I was discussing things with her I realized she was holding my hand. She must have reached out to me. It's the power of the human touch all of us have," she said.

That power to touch other people in love made Mother Teresa a "living saint," said Conroy.

Calcutta's culture, with thousands of people sleeping and dying on the streets, was shocking to Conroy.

"Whatever I had experienced in Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying, I had never experienced with the poor in my home of South Portland, Maine," she said.

When she arrived at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying, Conroy recalled, "I just stood there waiting to be told what I should do. I had never seen anyone



BLESSED BY THE BLESSED —As a student at Dartmouth College 20 years ago, Susan Conroy spent time working alongside Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, India. Conroy is the author of "Mother Teresa's Lessons of Love and Secrets of Sanctity." (Photo provided)

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die before. There were rows and rows of beds with emaciated people. I realized I had to learn by example. I'll never forget bathing a skeleton of a woman, who had just been picked up out of the gutters. It was a moment of 'eureka' for me — a realization I could do the work with the sick and dying."

Conroy is author of a best-selling book, "Mother Teresa's Lessons of Love and Secrets of Sanctity," and a second book on praying with Mother Teresa.

She told her audience that she quickly learned that the Missionaries of Charity judged distances by rosary beads. She once asked how far Mother Teresa's motherhouse was from a certain place and was told "three decades of the rosary. They were always carrying their rosary beads."

While Conroy was in India, she, like the sisters, got up early for Mass. On her way to Mass from the local YWCA where she stayed, she'd walk the streets because the sidewalks were full of dying people.

"I had no special skills when I went to India. But, I remember, as a college student, looking down at my two hands and thinking, maybe I could change the diaper of a baby," said Conroy, one of 10 children.

Conroy said she learned from Mother Teresa that one only needs "hands to serve and hearts to love, as well as to be willing to smile. She explained to me people we're serving are suffering, and if we don't come to them with a smile, we'll make them feel worse."

During the morning, Conrad worked in the children's orphanage. While the children were well fed, they were hungry for love.

"In the orphanage there was a little 8-year old boy called the 'little terrorist' because he'd attack anyone who was near him," recalled Conroy.

Most volunteers and children tried to avoid him. One day, though, when Conroy was painting inside the orphanage, she noticed the little 8-year old approaching her. Putting down her paint brush, she prepared for a confrontation.

Before the boy could reach her, she said, "I grabbed him and pressed him to me. He looked up at me with his big brown eyes. He had never been hugged before. Everyday since that time, he'd come up to me and gently wait for a kiss from me."

Another difficult, but inspiring moment came to Conroy one afternoon when she worked at Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying, helping people dying from tuberculosis, malnutrition and leprosy. They would reach out to Mother Teresa with their bony arms calling her mom and mother.

"There was a dying man so emaciated you could see his bones," she said. The man couldn't sit up to be fed, so Conroy sat on his bed and held him while the other volunteers fed him.

"The whole afternoon I held him he kept looking up at me and caressing my hand. He died that night after he had given all of his love to me."

Only later Conroy learned the older-looking man was her age.

"He was only 21," she said.

Toward the end of her talk, she recalled Mother Teresa describing herself "as a contemplative in the heart of the world."

"I had known she was famous and had won the Nobel Peace Prize, but I was struck by her humility. She was so approachable. I longed to be with her. She was radiant, there was like a light glowing from her," she said. "And boy did she love to laugh. She was full of one-liners," said Conroy laughing.

Conroy, who attended Mother Teresa's beatification in Rome, said her book has also been sent to prison inmates and members of the military in Iraq.

"Some of the most touching letters on my book have come from Iraq," she said. "One soldier in charge of a number of men said he could identify with

Mother Teresa's 'Calcutta as hell on earth' in Iraq." However, he said, "like Mother Teresa, I'm trying to bring love to my soldiers I'm in charge of."

Mother Teresa did not believe people needed to come to Calcutta to serve the poor.

"Once a woman wrote her offering to come to Calcutta," recalled Conroy. "Mother Teresa wrote her and told her to stay home and serve the poor, the suffering and the lonely in her own community, as well as her family. What she called people to do was recognize Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor."

Conroy's said her time with Mother Teresa changed the course of the former's life.

"I came back to Dartmouth College and finished my degree in economics. But, I had no desire to enter the corporate world," she said.

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