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HOME



Susan Conroy is shown with Mother Teresa in this 1986 photo taken in Calcutta, India.
 Courtesy photo

Serving the 'Poorest of the Poor' - Author to speak on life with, teachings of Mother Teresa

By Anne Moore

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Editor's Note: The writer is a member of St. Theresa's Parish in Rye Beach, and a volunteer with Mother Teresa's SHARE, a parish mission that raises funds to help support Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Haiti.

"Stay Where You Are. Find your own Calcutta."

This had been the response of Mother Teresa to thousands of would-be volunteers for her Home for the Dying in Calcutta. What was it that inspired her to accept the request of Susan Conroy, a Dartmouth College student, in 1986? The result has been Conroy's lifelong commitment to live her life by imitating Mother Teresa as closely as she can, and to use her writing and artistic skills to spread information about this diminutive and humble nun who was the recipient of the 1979 Nobel Prize for Peace, and who many believe to have been a living saint.

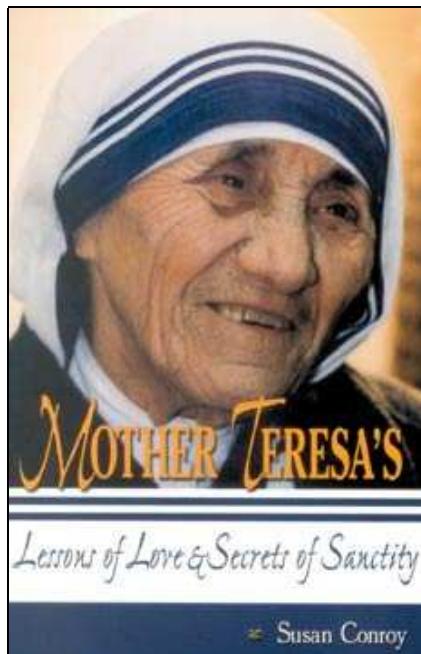
Now in its fourth printing, Conroy's "Mother Teresa's Lessons of Love and Secrets of Sanctity," is a bestseller. Published by Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, in 2003, the book includes intimate photographs of Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity at work, and describes in vivid detail the wretched existence of so many in Calcutta. The sick, the dying, the maimed, lepers, babies and young children diseased and deserted, living in filth and poverty, present an immediate challenge to anyone arriving in this city that has been described as "the Black Hole." But Conroy's first challenge had been to convince the Tucker Foundation at Dartmouth that her program would fit with the mission of the foundation, which was to assist students in reaching out to serve the needy.

At that time, the foundation had no experience with sending volunteers to India, but Conroy was told that if she could set up her own program, with sufficient

information to support it, she could apply for funding. She did just that, and then became the first recipient of a Tucker Foundation grant in India. Since then, hundreds of others have followed.

Another challenge was to hold her course in spite of her own fears, the disapproval of her parents, the dire warnings she received from experts on health and safety, and the terror of her arrival in Calcutta. Her acclimatization was trial and error, from locating the YWCA where she was to live and, from there, finding Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying.

From the beginning, every aspect of her life was a challenge - tolerating the sights and smells, managing the food that sometimes moved on her plate, sharing living quarters with insects and vermin and predatory black crows, learning how to make the water safe to drink.



Courtesy photo

On her first morning at the Home for the Dying, when she stepped into the main room, no one was prepared to welcome her or tell her what to do. The volunteers were all too busy. She just observed what they were doing, and began to do the same.

There, and in the Children's Home for orphans, most of the work involved hands-on care. Bathing, cleaning wounds (which often involved picking out maggots), washing and disinfecting clothing, feeding the children and giving water to the dying, massaging aching limbs, all were done with a spirit of love and caring following the example of Mother Teresa. Conroy spent much of her time simply holding patients, young and old, giving them love and the knowledge that someone cared about them. The response of the children and the dying was her reward. The volunteers felt themselves privileged to serve the "Poorest of the Poor" and considered their work to be

a labor of love.

Conroy describes this experience in her book.

"Since I had been prepared to encounter a hell on earth, I was not overwhelmed when I came face-to-face with the poverty, suffering, disease and death I found in Calcutta. I was expecting these things. But I was brought to tears by the incredible beauty I found amidst the ugliness of this city, the joy amidst the terrible suffering, the peace amidst the noise and confusion, and the life amidst the constant death. In this 'hell on earth' I really experienced heaven."

Her book sends a strong message that the hospitals and homes operated by the Missionaries of Charity were places of beauty and love. There was a lot of joy, and humor.

Asked during a recent interview what Mother Teresa was really like, Conroy chuckled. "She had a great sense of humor. She was very quick with one-liners that would leave us in stitches. She was always making us laugh."

She went on to describe her own relationship with Mother Teresa.

"She was more beautiful than I had imagined, and genuinely humble. She didn't seem to be aware of her fame. We laughed together, and when I cried, she helped me with whatever I was crying about. She was like a real mother to me."

Conroy's biggest challenge, however, was re-entry into the United States. Unlike

many other volunteers, she returned with no health problems, no disease, no scabies or tuberculosis.

"My toughest culture shock was coming back," Conroy laughed.

"Dartmouth was such a perfect little world, so beautiful, and I had just experienced something so intense, I didn't know how I could fit in again."

She was helped by immediate invitations from her high school, groups at Dartmouth, and various other organizations to speak about her summer experience.

"I was able to process it as I shared it," she explained. "From the moment I came back, I was sharing on a monthly basis. I never had to keep it bottled up!"

It was partly because of the popular reception of Conroy's message, and the support it generated for the Missionaries of Charity, that Mother Teresa gave permission for this book to be written. She died soon afterward in 1997.

Conroy, who lives in South Portland, Maine, accepts speaking engagements all over the country. One hundred percent of the author's proceeds from the book go to charity, she said, with the Missionaries of Charity in Haiti receiving half of that amount.

Following the success of her first book, Conroy has written a second, which will come out in the spring of 2005. "Praying in the Presence of Our Lord with Mother Teresa" will present an outstanding collection of the prayers, insights and wisdom of Mother Teresa along with more never-before published photographs.

Susan Conroy will present an illustrated talk about her experiences on Thursday, Oct. 28, at 6 p.m., in St. Theresa's Parish Center, 815 Central Road, Rye Beach, and will sign copies of her book. Selected items and services will be raffled and a light supper will be served. Tickets are \$25 per person, and all proceeds go to help support the work of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Haiti. Tickets may be obtained by sending your check, made payable to Mother Teresa's SHARE, to PO Box 252, Rye Beach NH 03871 before Oct. 20.

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Susan Conroy
Courtesy photo