

MOTHER TERESA'S CRITICS UNDONE

Thomas C. Reeves

In 2003, Pope John Paul II beatified world-famous Mother Teresa. On September 4, she will be canonized. Bill Donohue, long-time president of the Catholic League, examined the extensive literature on the topic and discovered nothing that directly supported Mother Teresa's critics. Donohue, as always, is careful with his research (the footnoting is extensive), and he is articulate and persuasive.

The author of *Unmasking Mother Teresa's Critics* is a champion of the woman born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in 1910, in a town that is now part of Macedonia. Donohue describes her heroic work in the slums of Calcutta among the poor and dying to the subsequent founding of the Missionaries of Charity, and her discovery and leap to fame in 1968 by British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge.

Donohue is unimpressed by her critics (who seem remarkably few in number). "It is one thing to point out her shortcomings, quite another to misrepresent her work and disparage her efforts," he writes. "After reading their failed accounts, I am convinced more than ever that Mother Teresa is a role model for the entire human race."

Her most voracious critic was British writer Christopher Hitchens, whose campaign against the nun began with a television documentary in late 1994. Hitchens was a leftist, an atheist, and a practicing bisexual who hated Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church. He was also brilliant and articulate.

Hitchens claimed that Mother Teresa was dishonest, that she associated with crooks and dictators. He also accused her of

denying the sick proper care. He attacked her personally, calling her the "ghoul of Calcutta." He also mocked her lack of physical beauty, and heaped scorn on her by saying that she was "a presumable virgin."

Donohue and Hitchens crossed swords in public debates on numerous occasions (some of the televised debates are available on YouTube). Donohue charged that his opponent was guilty of using half-truths and slander based on little or no research. His brief and devastating analysis of Hitchens' book, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, is definitive.

The Left in general has opposed the sort of selfless charity practiced by Mother Teresa and her nuns, favoring government action that prohibits any religious emphasis. The Catholic idea of redemptive suffering is, of course, entirely out of bounds for Leftists. Moreover, the Church's opposition to contraception and artificial birth control (not to mention sodomy) makes the Missionaries of Charity seem even more the enemies of "progress."

In 2002, atheist Aroup Chatterjee joined the assault on Mother Teresa with his book, *The Final Verdict*. His cynicism was such that his book received little attention. Fellow atheist and screwball Hemley Gonzalez later joined Chatterjee in charging that the Vatican "manufactured" the nun to raise funds and advance its power.

In 2013, three left-wing Canadian professors published "The Dark Side of Mother Teresa" in a scholarly journal; they repeated earlier allegations against the sisters and the Vatican. They were especially critical of voluntary service to the poor. "Such a model of charity overshadow[s] the urgency of taking our collective responsibilities and getting organized with regards to social justice."

The academics also criticized the lack of financial

transparency by the sisters (they have in fact accepted donations that later proved to be of criminal origin), suggesting, without evidence, that donations often failed to reach the poor. Mother Teresa told a biographer, "I need money to use for my people," not for investing. "The quite remarkable sums that are donated are spent as quickly on medicines (particularly for leprosy and tuberculosis), food and on milk powder."

The Canadians also wrote of "the deplorable lack of hygiene on the premises" in Calcutta. As it turns out, a physician, quoted by the professors to substantiate their charge, actually undercut their bogus claims. Donohue reports what the doctor said. "So the most important features of the regimen are cleanliness, the tending of wounds and sores, and loving kindness."

Donohue also discusses how a former volunteer and ex-Catholic wrote of Mother Teresa in the leftist Huffington Post: "Her fundamental belief is that everyone, absolutely everyone in this world deserves love and care. She cherished every single life on this planet more than anyone ever did, and that's why she created the Missionaries of Charity: to help and welcome the poorest of the poor, those whose life had not been judged worthy to live and who had been rejected by everything and everyone."

Donohue quotes an assortment of witnesses who evaluated the work of Mother Teresa and her sisters. They all declared their praise for the work that they did in India and elsewhere. One, atheist Prabir Ghosh, exclaimed, "If she is bestowed with sainthood for her service to mankind, that will be a great thing."

Navin Chawla, one of Mother Teresa's biographers, wrote admiringly of the many professionals—physicians, dentists, nurses, and others—who generously volunteered their time and talents. He estimated that in Calcutta, Hindu workers

outnumbered Christians ten to one. Chawla thought that the work with children (which often included help with their education as well as physical needs), the dying, and lepers were the crowning achievements of the Missionaries of Charity.

Mother's labors even extended to the United States, where in the 1980s she founded New York's first AIDS hospice in Greenwich Village. New York Mayor Ed Koch was astonished by the nun's compassion. "She said that when AIDS patients were near death, she would sit at their bedside. Often they would take her hands and place her fingers on their faces wanting her to feel their lesions and to close their eyelids for the last time."

Why pay any attention to people who are about to die? Mother Teresa's response to this question was indignant, "For me, even if a child died within minutes, that child must not be allowed to die alone and uncared for." One of her most famous quotes was, "If there is an unwanted baby, don't let it die. Send it to me." Of AIDS victims, she said: "They were asking for a ticket to heaven, and I gave them that ticket."

Mother and her sisters were themselves extraordinarily austere. An American reporter wrote, "They own only three saris, sleep on thin mattresses, wash their clothes by hand and sit on chapel floors....In the kitchen, the food continues to be cooked on a charcoal fire, the fuel of the very poor." The food comes from volunteers who collect it for that purpose.

The nuns were not social workers and considered themselves outside the pale of the state. When British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher boasted to Mother Teresa of her country's welfare system, the nun replied, "But do you have love?"

In 1979, Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize and used the occasion to defend the lives of the unborn. She declared, "The poor people are very great people," adding that "they can

teach us so many beautiful things.” Abortion, she said, was the greatest enemy of peace. Mother spent the prize money on the poor in India.

In 2007, after her death, private letters exchanged between Mother Teresa and her confessors became public. They revealed that for 50 years the nun did not feel God’s presence in her heart or in the Eucharist.

Critics had a field day, going so far as to claim that she was insane. But wiser heads knew that many saintly Christians over the centuries have experienced the “dark nights” of the soul, and that overcoming them was a sign of sanctity. Donohue handles this issue wisely and thoughtfully, noting Mother’s continued faith and devotion despite the spiritual handicap given to her by God.

And so, after the Church carefully authenticated two miracles (causing a flutter among her atheist critics), Mother Teresa will soon be canonized. Her legacy is one of love and service to countless numbers of people, by her deeds and her spoken and printed words.

Today there are 4,500 Sisters in the Missionaries of Charity, continuing the work of their founder. One way to get better acquainted with this remarkable saint is to read this book by America’s most courageous and active champion of the Catholic Church.

Thomas C. Reeves is a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. An historian, he is the author of several books, including ones on Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, John F. Kennedy, and Joe McCarthy. He serves on the advisory board of the Catholic League.

“Mother Teresa’s detractors have met their match. In this devastating response to persistent critiques, Bill Donohue corrects the record and turns the tables on Mother’s attackers. The truth within is a powerful antidote to the lies

that have dogged Mother for too long.”

Raymond Arroyo

New York Times* bestselling author and host, *The World Over Live

“What Donohue has done is expose and analyze the fever swamps of ideological bias from which scattered attacks on this holy woman now and then arise. Unmasking Mother Teresa’s Critics is a valuable and enlightening book.”

Russell Shaw

author of *Catholics in America*