

Encounters with a saint

I was skeptical about sainthood. Then I met three people whose lives were changed by Mother Teresa.

by [Dean Nelson](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue



Canonization of Mother Teresa at the Vatican, September 4, 2016. Photo by Dean Nelson.

In September 100,000 people crowded into St. Peter's Square to hear the bells of the cathedral ring out in celebration of the newly sainted Mother Teresa. Many had arrived the night before and had waited behind barricades until the square opened at 7:30 a.m. Three hours and 15 minutes later, Pope Francis officially declared

Mother Teresa a saint.

I sat in the front row of the audience with Gary Morsch, founder and chairman of Heart to Heart International, a medical relief NGO; David Bronczek, president of FedEx; and Helen Barr, a handbag and footwear designer from Manhattan. All three felt that their lives had been changed by their encounters with Mother Teresa.

As for me, I felt the irony of being present at her canonization. I have long questioned the very idea of sainthood, but now I was with thousands of true believers. I was the only one in my row who had never met Mother Teresa.

Morsch remembers the first time he visited her in Kolkata. He was a new doctor and had come to the Sisters of Charity site from Kansas City in order to do good. He chatted briefly with Mother Teresa and asked where he could best be put to use. She wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it in half, and handed it to him. "Take this to Sister Priscilla," she told him in her raspy voice.

Morsch took the note to the nearby House for the Dying Destitute and thought to himself that it was just the kind of place a doctor should be. He thought, "Soon, I will change the sign on this building, and it will be called the House of Hope for the Living." He was going to make a difference.

He handed the note to Sister Priscilla, who glanced at the contents and smiled slightly. "Follow me," she said. They walked through the men's ward, a large, open room with rows of cots cradling what Morsch said were people who were skeletons with skin. Some were tossing in pain, too weak to fight their afflictions or even to eat. "This is where I should work," Morsch thought. "I can relieve some of this suffering."

But Sister Priscilla continued walking, and they entered the women's ward, a room filled with emaciated women who stared at them. "OK—this is where I can be useful," Morsch thought. Then they walked into the kitchen, where a modest lunch of rice was being prepared over an open fire. "Now I get it," Morsch thought. "They want to give me lunch first!"

They walked out of the building and into the back alley. Sister Priscilla pointed at a large pile of garbage that was so revolting Morsch gagged. "We need you to take this garbage down the street to the dump," she said, handing him two buckets and a shovel. "The dump is several blocks down on the right. You can't miss it." Then she

was gone.

Morsch was stunned. Didn't they realize he was a doctor? He dug into the pile and carried the buckets of refuse to the dump. There he was amazed by the number of people who were swarming the area looking for something to eat or something of value. He also wondered how signals had gotten crossed such that he had ended up on garbage duty. By the end of the day the garbage pile was gone, and Morsch was drenched in sweat and stench. He walked back through the kitchen, the women's ward, and the men's ward to tell Sister Priscilla good-bye. That's when he saw the sign over the doorway, in Mother Teresa's handwriting: "You can do no great things—only small things with great love."

"My heart melted," Morsch said. "It dawned on me that serving others is not about how much I know. It's about attitude and availability to do whatever is needed—with love. I learned that shoveling garbage with love is different from just shoveling garbage."

As Heart to Heart International developed into a major medical relief agency, Morsch teamed up with FedEx to bring Mother Teresa a planeload of medical supplies. FedEx employees volunteered to work in orphanages and threw a party for the community of those suffering with leprosy. In 1996 David Bronczek's FedEx division provided the aircraft, along with volunteers and materials. FedEx Europe continues to send planes, volunteers, and supplies to Sisters of Charity sites in Kolkata.

When Bronczek met Mother Teresa, he said he saw the world in a different light. "My appreciation for everything negative got better," he said. "My heart got bigger. Everything was put in perspective." When he was in Kolkata, the volunteers went to morning mass with the Sisters, then separated to work at different sites. Every morning after mass the Sisters would open the doors to the center and find abandoned babies in the doorway. "Every morning," said Bronczek. "It was profoundly shocking."

Bronczek, now CEO of FedEx, tries to extend the work of empathy that he learned in Kolkata to his senior management staff in Memphis. He takes them to visit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, where they meet with medical staff and children with serious physical issues. He wants his staff to see the "real tragedies in the world, so those of us who can help, must help."

Helen Barr's company, Barr + Barr, is on Madison Avenue in New York City. After the company held a Christmas party at an exclusive restaurant in Manhattan, she had second thoughts about the money that was spent. "We were pouring our employees into taxis at the end of the holiday dinner, and I wondered, 'What am I doing?' There must be a more meaningful way to celebrate the holiday season with our staff."

She called the Missionaries of Charity in the South Bronx and asked if they needed anything during the holidays. They told her they could use help with a Christmas lunch for elderly shut-ins in their neighborhood. "I agreed to help, but I quickly found out that when they said they needed help, what they meant was that they were putting me in charge of it," Barr said.

Barr put her employees to work to create a luncheon celebration for nearly 300 elderly people. They found a restaurant offering a special price for the food, encouraged clients to provide "swag bags" for Christmas presents, wrapped gifts, arranged transportation, and learned to sing carols. "At first many of the staff grumbled about it," Barr said. "We had people of many faiths in our company who didn't want to be working on a Christmas party for a Catholic organization. They were annoyed that the restaurant celebration was replaced by a trip to the South Bronx."

But when they got to the hall and saw how the Sisters interacted with the elderly neighbors, the employees started to interact as well. They saw poverty and the ravages of old age among the poor firsthand. "You could see their spirits lift the more they talked and served these older, disabled people," Barr said. "They were swept up into the spirit and charity of the Sisters. When the luncheon was over and the hall was cleaned up, many hours later, I could hardly recognize some of my staff. Everything about them had changed. It changed the vibe of the company."

More than 20 years later, Barr still works with the Missionaries of Charity. "Mother Teresa and her sisters daily turn impossible work into Christ's love," she said. I asked her what Mother Teresa would think of the expensive spectacle. "She would tell us to spend all of this money on the poor," said Barr.

Barr found herself praying to Mother Teresa one night when she was close to death and sensed that Mother Teresa heard her prayers. To the amazement of the doctors, Barr awoke the next morning fully recovered. An Italian woman sitting next to Barr

at the canonization was present because her son was going to have heart surgery. She was praying to Mother Teresa that day for a miracle.

I have never prayed to a saint. At times I've wanted to, because I've been drawn to certain people by their lives and significance. But I was raised in an evangelical Protestant tradition and taught that venerating saints bordered on idolatry. Even today I am still resistant to the idea that saints intervene in believers' everyday lives or that certain people are more special than the rest of us.

On the other hand, St. Ignatius of Loyola fascinates and challenges me. St. Francis of Assisi draws me into the bigger world of all creation. And I am drawn to Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton because of their complicated personalities as well as their spirituality. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints."

That's why I'm drawn to Mother Teresa. Everyone who knew her describes her as cranky and impatient. She accepted stolen money from dictators and businessmen who were trying to salve their own guilt. When she was being cared for in a hospital in San Diego, she lectured the doctors about why they weren't also treating the poor in Tijuana. When she was strong enough to take a shower, she used only cold water because the people she cared for in Kolkata didn't have access to hot water. She lived in solidarity with those she served and never stopped loving, advocating for, and identifying with the poor.

"The saints are models of what our lives could be," writes James Martin in *My Life with the Saints*. "In following the example of their lives, we can be formed by them." That's how Mother Teresa affected Morsch, Bronczek, and Barr. They saw how she served others and followed her lead.

Gazing at Mother Teresa's banner hanging from St. Peter's basilica on the day of the canonization, I sensed that she was looking out with love at the more than 100,000 people present. I also sensed that by being there I was inviting her to fill me with her light. I looked in the sky, which was cloudless and as blue as the trim of the robes worn by the thousands of Sisters of Charity who surrounded me. It seemed that the sun had suddenly become brighter.