

chapter 13

# Through Doubts and Darkness

In 1988, Mother Teresa met with British media magnate Robert Maxwell, who owned the London tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mirror*. Maxwell, who had already received a lot of negative publicity for his shady business dealings, offered to raise money for a new Missionaries of Charities home in London. Mother Teresa accepted, and

Once shy about speaking in public, Mother Teresa became very comfortable with press interviews.

posed for newspaper photos with him. Nearly half a million dollars was



raised from readers of the *Daily Mirror* and the *Scottish Daily Record*, but the money never reached her, or the poor for whom it was intended: It seems likely that Maxwell, who died a few years after the campaign ended, put the funds into his own accounts.

Mother Teresa suffered a second, near-fatal heart attack in 1989. She had extensive surgery and was fitted with a pacemaker, a small electrical device used to regulate the heartbeat. Again, she stubbornly continued to travel and work as soon as she could. Although she made an attempt to resign as the head of the Missionaries of Charity and even spoke to the pope about it, she was reelected by the order and accepted the position without naming a potential successor.

Her role as a media darling was starting to falter along with her health. Although she still received plenty of good press for her charitable work, she was often portrayed not as a living saint, but as a demanding and difficult woman whose saintly reputation protected her from careful scrutiny.

In 1994, British television premiered Tariq Ali's film *Hell's Angel*, which caused tremendous controversy by claiming that Mother Teresa accepted donations from dictators and questioning her priorities in spreading her resources so thinly around the world. The Pakistani producer made the film with the participation of an Indian-born physician, Dr. Aroup Chatterjee, who had long been critical of Mother Teresa's reputation in the West, and an outspoken journalist named Christopher Hitchens.





A physically frail but undaunted Mother Teresa appears in public with her future successor, Sister Nirmala (left), and others.

Two years earlier, Hitchens had published an article in *The Nation* that accused Mother Teresa and her

organization of having more interest in spreading Catholic beliefs than in actually helping the poor. After narrating Ali's documentary, Hitchens went on to write a book that detailed Mother Teresa's acceptance of gifts from Robert Maxwell, Haitian dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, and American lawyer and banker Charles Keating, whose savings-and-loan fraud was one of the biggest financial scandals of its time. Hitchens called Mother Teresa, among other things,

*"Give Christ to  
the world,  
and in doing so,  
use your hands."*

—Mother Teresa

"a religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer and an accomplice of worldly, secular powers." His well-researched attack was so savage that certain reviewers dismissed it, and



Mother Teresa's supporters simply maintained that she had no interest in worldly politics. As for Mother Teresa herself, she refused to read the book, but told Hitchens that God forgave him for writing it. (He found this especially infuriating, saying that he neither sought nor wanted forgiveness.)

Less extreme voices also sounded notes of criticism. Dr. Robin Fox, editor of the medical magazine *The Lancet*, wrote about the disorganized approach to the dying at Nirmal Hriday, claiming that the Sisters of Charity used no medical procedures to assess the difference between curable and incurable cases, and caused much suffering by their refusal to offer strong painkillers. Others complained that volunteers were given next to no training, and risked contracting infectious diseases themselves because of Mother Teresa's dictum, "Touch them, wash them, feed them. Give Christ to

Mother Teresa delighted in practicing the Missionaries of Charity principle of caring through human touch.



the world, and in doing so, use your hands.” One volunteer wrote of her horror at seeing intravenous needles reused repeatedly at Nirmal Hriday without proper sterilization. When she mentioned this, she was told, “There’s no point. There’s no time.” English-born doctor Jack Preger recalled that “tubercular patients were not simply walking among the others, they were eating together and using the same utensils. I begged Mother for a separate ward so that they would not transmit the disease, but it never happened.” A small number of volunteers did contract tuberculosis and other illnesses, while others (including a few founding sisters) became disillusioned and left.

Throughout the 1990s, Mother Teresa’s own health continued to weaken, though she stubbornly kept working, barely slowing down to recover from each new fall or surgery. In 1997, the Missionaries of Charity finally chose a successor to lead their order. Though the 86-year-old Mother Teresa stayed on as the organization’s spiritual head, a younger Indian woman named Sister Nirmala, who had run the Missionaries of Charity’s first international home in Cocorote, Venezuela, took over the day-to-day operations. The eldest of 10 children, Nirmala Joshi was born into an upper-caste Hindu family, but converted to Catholicism at age 24 because she was so moved by the Sisters of Charity’s work with the poor. “Now I am happy,” Mother Teresa announced from the balcony of the Motherhouse. “Pray so she can continue God’s work.”



However, as the later publication of her private letters to Father Van Exem and other spiritual consultants would show, Mother Teresa was anything but happy during these years. For more than four decades, she had kept a dark secret from the world, a private agony of spiritual despair. The language in her letters is stark and haunting: “Since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart—Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason—The place of God in my soul is blank. There is no

Sister Nirmala became the new head of the Missionaries of Charity in 1997.

God in me—When the pain of longing is so great—I just long and long for God.”

