

chapter 2

“Home Is Where the Mother Is”

When Agnes was still very young, central Europe was swept by a series of wars. The Balkan Wars fought by the countries surrounding her homeland were soon followed by the Great War (later called World War I), which was instigated in nearby Sarajevo.

Though Skopje was not at the center of the fighting, the upheavals shook the whole region. National boundaries were redrawn yet again, creating a new country that would later be called Yugoslavia. Many Albanian nationalists—including Nikola Bojaxhiu—felt that the Serbian province of Kosovo, where many Albanians lived, should belong to Albania,

Footsoldiers march past a mountain lake during World War I.

which had been independent since 1912.



In 1919, Nikola traveled over 200 miles (350 km) to Belgrade, Yugoslavia, to attend a political dinner where these matters would be discussed. He was brought home in a carriage several days later, gravely ill. He was rushed straight to the hospital for emergency surgery, and Agnes was sent out to fetch a priest. Unable to find the priest of her family's own church, she went to the railroad station, where she spotted another priest on the train platform. He accompanied her to the hospital to give last rites to Nikola, who died within hours.

Since he was just 45 years old and in good health, some of his relatives and even his doctors suspected he might have been poisoned because of his political leanings. This was never conclusively proved, but Lazar Bojaxhiu believed to the end of his days that his outspoken father

LAST RITES

Last rites are the prayers and rituals performed by a Catholic priest before someone's death.



The Shot Heard Around the World

In 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie were shot by a Serbian assassin in Sarajevo. The killer was part of an underground group called the Black Hand (later aligned with Young Bosnia) dedicated to freeing Serbia from the Austro-Hungarian empire. This gunshot sparked a world war that stretched from 1914 to 1918, eventually involving much of Europe, as well as Russia and the United States.

had met with foul play. He and his sisters had learned a hard lesson about the courage it takes to stand up for one's beliefs.

Drana was devastated by her husband's death. Still reeling with grief, she soon learned that Nikola's Italian business partner had claimed all his properties and assets. She and her children still had a roof over their heads, but no source of income. It was a shocking blow, and for many months Drana was too severely depressed to manage the household. Most of the work fell to Aga, who was the oldest child at 15, but 8-year-old Agnes and 12-year-old Lazar felt the burden as well. Their mother had always been the unshakable head of their home, and it must have been frightening for her children to see her laid low by despair. It was also the first time they'd ever been faced with the kind of financial problems that faced their poorer neighbors.

But Drana had a resilient spirit, and the support of her faith and religious community. Tapping into the sewing skills she'd learned as a housewife, she started an embroidery business, at first selling her own handicrafts and eventually expanding her business to include other textiles and carpets. She also consulted with the managers of a local textile factory, offering them advice about which patterns, designs, and materials would be profitable. As soon as the hardworking widow and mother started earning enough money to take care of her family, she also resumed her charity visits. At one point, six orphaned children came to stay for a while in the family house. Drana was such a

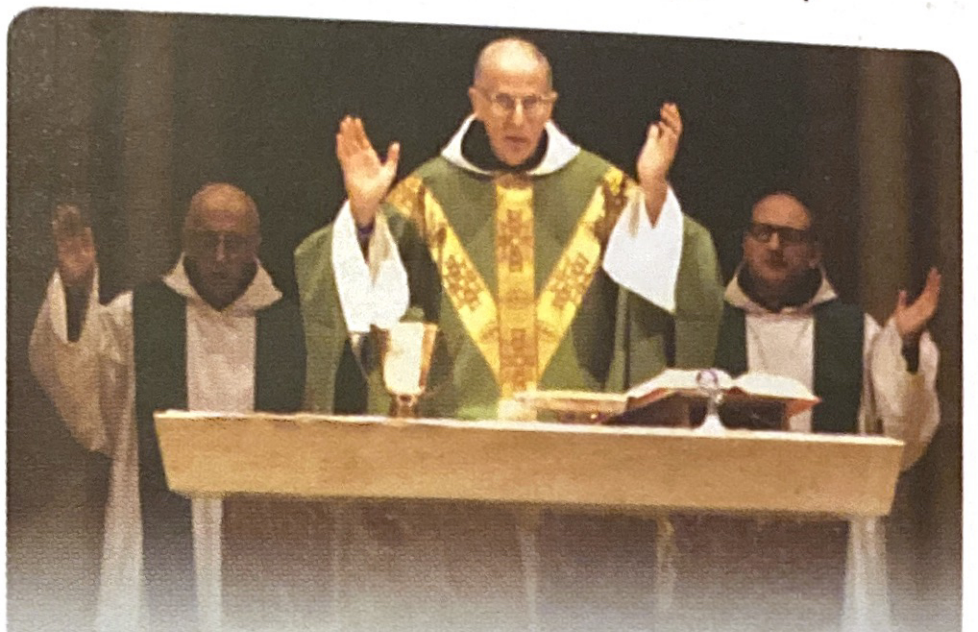


strong inspiration to her daughter that Agnes would later say, "Home is where the mother is."

At the age of 12, Agnes felt strongly that she had been called to lead a religious life. She was deeply private about the details of this calling for the rest of her life, saying only that it didn't involve any vision or miracle.

Nevertheless, she became convinced that religious service would be her path. She made pilgrimages on foot to the Church of the Madonna of Letnice in the Black Mountains, where she prayed alone, hoping to receive further guidance about how best to dedicate her life to her faith.

In 1925, when Agnes turned 15, a Jesuit priest named Father Franjo Jambrekovic became the new priest at the Sacred Heart Church. Father Jambrekovic was well-versed in science, medicine, arts, and



The Catholic Church

In the Middle Ages and after, the Christian church divided into a variety of branches, including Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Roman Catholicism, the largest branch, traces its roots back to Jesus' time. The Christian churches have much in common, but Catholicism is distinguished by its treatment of the sacraments, including Holy Communion and Confession; its missionary tradition; and its religious communities, called orders. Orders may include either women or men, but Catholic clergymen, called priests, are always unmarried men. Only a priest can lead Mass.

PARISH

A parish is the area served by a particular church. People who live in a parish are known as parishioners.

culture, and taught the young people of the parish about many of the things that interested him, including how to conduct an orchestra.

Energetic and inspiring, he offered concerts, walks, and other outings. He also started a library, where the studious Agnes spent long hours reading. Father Jambrekovic also formed a religious society for girls called the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Agnes became an active member of this youth group, which introduced her to Saint Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which included such questions as "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?" She also taught religious classes to younger children, and discovered that she had a gift for teaching.

During this time, Father Jambrekovic told his young parishioners about a group of Jesuit missionaries who were working with the poor in Bengal, India. He shared magazine articles from *Catholic Missions* with the Sodality members. These articles included letters from the missionaries that vividly described the terrible living conditions in the communities they served.

Agnes was stirred by these reports, and by a visiting missionary who told the Sacred Heart congregation more about the Jesuits' mission in India and solicited donations. She even urged a cousin who earned extra money by giving

mandolin lessons to donate his earnings to the poor of India. Ever since she was very young, Agnes had dreamed of doing religious work in Africa or some other faraway place; now India became the place where she hoped to serve. By the age of 18, she had decided to become a missionary nun.

It wasn't an easy decision. Agnes was an excellent student with a strong interest in writing, especially poetry. She always carried a notebook in which she wrote down her thoughts, and had published two articles in a local newspaper. She was also a talented musician, and had thought about following a career in writing or music in addition to working with the church. Father Jambrekovic encouraged her to follow her heart, saying that if the thought of serving God and his people filled her with joy, it was the right path for her. He compared joy to a compass,

The Missionary Tradition

Many religious groups send missionaries into surrounding communities or remote places, where they hope to convert others to their beliefs. The missionary tradition exists among Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moravians, and Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists, to name just a few. Catholic missionaries take their inspiration from the words of Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations: Baptize them . . . and teach them everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19)





Nuns

A nun is a woman who takes vows committing herself to a religious life. Nuns also devote themselves to work such as teaching or serving the poor. They do not marry, though Catholic nuns call themselves “brides of Christ.” The head of a community of nuns is known as the mother superior.



pointing the way to one’s true vocation.

After much reflection and prayer, she decided to join the Sisters of Loreto, an Irish order that worked with the Jesuit brothers in Bengal, India. Finally, she would have a chance to see the places she’d heard so much about, and to make a difference in the lives of India’s poor.

Although Drana had long suspected that Agnes would choose a religious vocation, she did not consent right away to her

daughter’s plans—possibly because she wanted to be sure of Agnes’s determination. An often-repeated story claims that Drana went into her room, closed the door, and stayed there all day and night before giving Agnes her blessing, and urging her daughter to give herself over fully to God. When Lazar, who had already left home to become an Albanian military officer, questioned his sister’s choice in a letter, Agnes replied, “You think

VOCATION

A vocation is a person’s occupation, trade, or calling.

you are important because you are an officer serving a king with two million subjects. But I am serving the King of the whole world.”

The Sodality group honored Agnes with a farewell concert at the church, and friends and family members came to the Bojaxhiu house afterward, bearing farewell gifts. Agnes was especially pleased to receive a gold fountain pen from her cousin—proof that her dreams of being a writer were far from over. For the rest of her life, she would continue to write, leaving an extensive legacy of letters, journals, and books.

Drana and Aga went with Agnes to the railroad station in Skopje. Agnes, who had never been far from her home before, waved her handkerchief and cried as friends and neighbors clustered to see her off. Her mother and sister traveled with her as far as Zagreb, Croatia, where Agnes bid them a difficult good-bye. She would never see either her mother or sister again.

In Zagreb, Agnes and Betika Kajnc, a young Yugoslavian woman who had also applied to join the Sisters of Loreto, boarded another train to Paris, where they would be interviewed by a French Mother Superior to determine their suitability for religious training. Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was 18 years old, and about to begin a new life.

*“I am serving
the King of the
whole world.”*

—Mother Teresa, in a letter
to her brother