

The Call Within a Call

Mother Teresa's health had been frail since childhood, and the stresses of dealing with so many wartime crises had weakened her even further. In the weeks following the Day of Great Killing, she became so ill that her supervisors were afraid she might fall victim to tuberculosis, a lung disease that had claimed many lives in Calcutta. When a doctor insisted that she stop working so hard and spend at least three hours a day in bed, she wept with frustration. Father Van Exem would later remember this as the only time he ever saw Mother Teresa cry. Her supervisors decided that she should return

The train journey to Darjeeling includes many tight loops and steep inclines.



to the convent in Darjeeling for a period of rest and meditation.

Mother Teresa left Calcutta for her relaxing retreat. But during the familiar ride on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, something happened that would change her life forever. Over the noise of the rattling train, Mother Teresa heard the voice of God. "I was sure it was God's voice," she would later tell Father Julien Henry. "I was certain that He was calling me. The message was clear: I must leave the convent to help the poor by living among them. This was a command, something to be done, something definite. I knew where I had to be. But I did not know how to get there." As with her first call from God at age 12, Mother Teresa considered this to be an extremely personal experience and said very little about it to others, comparing the call to a hidden treasure.

Mother Teresa knew well that the Catholic Church had strict regulations governing its nuns' activities, and that leaving the convent to work with the poor would not be an

option unless she received special permission from church authorities. During her retreat in Darjeeling, she prayed fervently for further guidance. When she returned to Calcutta, she met with Father Van Exem

MEDITATION

Meditation is the practice of clearing one's mind of everyday thoughts to engage in focused contemplation.

Inspiration Day

The date of Mother Teresa's "call within a call," September 10, 1946, is known as Inspiration Day. It is celebrated worldwide every year by members of the order she founded, the Missionaries of Charity.



Hierarchy of the Catholic Church

A hierarchy is a system of ranking people or things in a specific order. Catholic clergymen follow a specific hierarchy, with the chain of power rising from priest to bishop to archbishop to cardinal and finally to the pope, the highest authority in the church. The word “pope” comes from the Italian word *papa*, or father.

and told him about the experience she described as “the call within a call”—she had been called by God once to become a nun, and now felt herself called to move outside the rules by which all nuns lived. She wanted to found a new order whose members would live and work not in a cloistered community, but among the poor they served. She gave him two sheets of paper, on which she had written down her plans. They outlined most of the basic precepts

for the order she would eventually lead, including a focus on those who were abandoned, unwanted, or without any family. The members of Mother Teresa’s new order would take a special vow of charity for the poor, whom they would serve in a spirit of poverty and cheerfulness without the help of hospitals or other institutions.

Father Van Exem listened with his customary sympathy. He would later say that he never doubted the

ARCHDIOCESE

An archdiocese is the district and population supervised by an archbishop. Dioceses, supervised by bishops, are made up of parishes.

authenticity of her call, explaining, “Mother was not an exceptional person. She was an ordinary Loreto nun, a very ordinary person but with great love for her Lord.” This very ordinariness, he felt, was proof

VATICAN CITY

Vatican City is the seat of the Catholic Church. It falls geographically within the city of Rome, Italy, but is an independent state ruled by the pope.

that this extraordinary call had come directly from God. He advised Mother Teresa to write to the mother general (head of the order) of the Loreto Sisters, asking permission to contact the governing bodies in Vatican City and to be released from her teaching duties at Loreto Entally. He also suggested that she meet with the head of the Calcutta archdiocese, Archbishop Ferdinand P erier.

Mother Gertrude M. Kennedy, mother general of the Loreto Sisters, sent her wholehearted approval. “Since this is manifestly the will of God, I give you permission to write to the Congregation in Rome,” she wrote, adding that Mother Teresa should “tell nobody” of her unconventional plans. But Archbishop P erier was unconvinced. When he heard that “a young nun of the Community had some queer ideas,” he was troubled by the prospect of a lone European-born nun roaming the slums of Calcutta. He also worried about how releasing Mother Teresa from her convent obligations would affect others at Loreto Entally. He decided to postpone the decision for a year.

In the meantime, Mother Teresa was assigned to teach geography and manage the kitchen and garden of a convent

in Asansol, a mining town over one hundred miles (161 km) northwest of Calcutta. From the hills of Asansol, she wrote many beautiful and poetic letters to Father Van Exem, about both her spiritual path and the flowers she tended in the convent gardens.

During this time, Archbishop Périer met with other church authorities. Without revealing Mother Teresa's identity, he discussed her proposal with Father Julien Henry, who supported the idea with enthusiasm and asked his congregation to pray for the "Mother of the Poor." The archbishop also consulted the father general of the Jesuit order, and a specialist in church law.

Eventually Archbishop Périer agreed to allow Mother Teresa to write to the Vatican requesting special permission to leave the convent. However, he stipulated that she must ask for permission not only to leave the convent, but also to give up her vows as a nun.

Vatican City's Piazza San Pietro was designed by the 17th century architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

Although she was convinced that she must separate herself from the





Sisters of Loreto, Mother Teresa was determined to remain bound to Jesus. Still, she never wavered from her conviction that this was what God had told her to do. She agreed to the terms of the archbishop's letter, and prayed for a positive outcome.

It would be a long wait. The letter was sent in February 1948, and no reply came until July. When Father Van Exem told Mother Teresa that he had received word from Rome, she turned pale and went into the chapel to pray before hearing the news. When she learned that she had received special permission to leave the convent for a year without renouncing her vows, Mother Teresa was thrilled beyond measure. She signed all three copies of the letter, then turned to Father Van Exem and asked, "Can I go to the slums now?"



Pope Pius XII was head of the Catholic church in Vatican City at the time of Mother Teresa's "call within a call."

