



chapter 9

# Three Homes

Subashini Das may have been Mother Teresa's first postulant, but a month later, another of her former Loreto students joined her. By summer, there would be 10 postulants at the Gomes house. Some of these girls had not yet finished high school, and their parents were not always pleased. Mother Teresa worked with them to help them finish their schooling and prepare for their lives as

future Missionary Sisters of Charity. The young women went begging from door to door, used the money they got to buy food for the starving, and helped at the children's school and the home for the dying. They lived together and prayed together. But they

Mother Teresa's first group of followers included some of her former students.



had not yet been recognized formally as an order of nuns.

Working from Mother Teresa's original notebooks and lists of rules, Father Van Exem prepared official constitutions for

presentation to authorities within the Catho. They were based on the rules of the Sisters of Loreto and the Jesuits, stressing obedience, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and a life of poverty. To these basic rules, Mother Teresa added: "Our particular mission is to labor at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor."

In April 1950, Archbishop Périer took these constitutions with him to Rome, along with photographs of the proposed costumes for postulants (plain white sari over short-sleeved habit), novices (plain white sari over long-sleeved habit), and professed sisters (white sari with blue striped border, as worn by Mother Teresa). Pope Pius XII, then head of the Roman Catholic Church, soon gave his approval to the new order. A small chapel was built on the top floor of the Gomes house, and Archbishop Périer said Mass in it for the first time in October 1950, giving his blessing to the newly formed Missionaries of Charity.

Six months later, the first group of postulants was ready to take their vows as novices. Father Van Exem helped Mother Teresa compose a ceremony in which the

*"We cannot let a child of God die like an animal in the gutter. . . ."*

—Mother Teresa



## Indian Wedding Dress

Indian weddings are full of color, joy, and ceremony. The bride is traditionally dressed in an ornately decorated sari in tones of red and gold, wearing gold jewelry on her head, face, and arms. Her hands and feet are elaborately painted with patterns of *henna*, a herbal preparation that makes a long-lasting dye of reddish earth tones.



girls came to the church dressed as Bengali brides (following the “Bride of Christ” tradition of the Catholic Church).

During the service, the postulants withdrew to a room to have their hair cut by Mother Teresa, and reappeared wearing their order’s white saris and habits. Since Indian women treasure their glossy black hair, which is traditionally worn long, this represented a huge sacrifice for the young novices. With their heads shorn, returning to a secular life would be difficult, so cutting their

hair became a symbol of their commitment to their vocation as Missionary Sisters of Charity.

The new order was growing in other ways, too. By the end of 1952, Mother Teresa had 26 followers, and the living quarters at the Gomes house had become much too crowded. The order was also

### SECULAR

Secular means of the world, as opposed to sacred, or of the spirit.



## MONSOON

The Indian rainy season is called the monsoon.

outgrowing the two small huts where the sisters taught the children of Moti Jihl and tended the dying. In 1953, Father Van Exem and Father Julien Henry convinced the archdiocese of Calcutta to advance Mother Teresa enough money to buy a home for the new order, at 54A Lower Circular Road. This would become known as the Motherhouse, and it is still the center of operations for the Missionaries of Charity's work in Calcutta today.

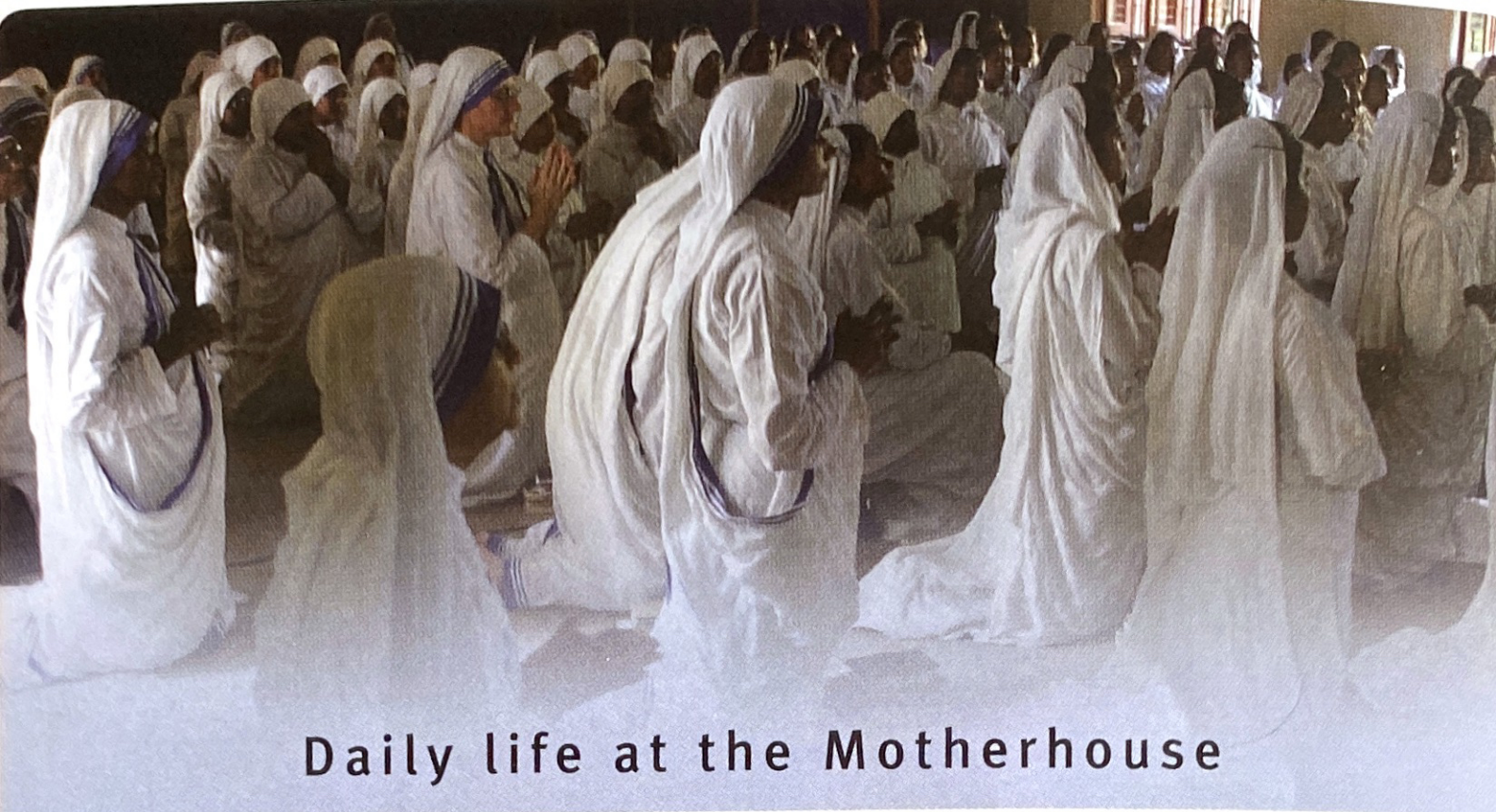
The Motherhouse was a three-story gray building with a central courtyard, just off a noisy main road full of cars, rickshaws, and bicycles. The Missionary Sisters of Charity owned very little, and what they had was often stretched thin. At one point, three novices were taking turns wearing the same pair of sandals. Still others wore habits sewn from bags that had once contained shipments of bulgur wheat, sometimes still bearing the stenciled words "Not For Resale." Their only other possessions were rosary beads, an umbrella to protect them from monsoon rains, a metal bucket for washing, and a thin cloth mattress.

There was no room in the order for disobedience or questions. Mother Teresa

*“Our particular mission is to labor at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor.”*

—Mother Teresa





## Daily life at the Motherhouse

The rigorous daily schedule of the Missionary Sisters of Charity began at 4:40 AM. After rising, the sisters bathed using water from a tank in the courtyard. They used ash from the stove to brush their teeth, and had one small piece of soap for both their bodies and their clothing. They attended morning prayers, meditation, and Mass, and

ate a breakfast of chapati bread, tea or powdered milk, and vitamins. At 7:45, they went into the street in pairs to start work. They returned at noon for prayer, lunch, and rest, then went back to work until 6:00 PM. After a dinner of rice, lentils, and vegetables, they shared their experiences of the day, mended clothes, and went to bed by 10:00.

insisted that every sister ate all that was on her plate, spoke only in English, and shared in the household chores, as she did herself. When one of the novices balked at cleaning the dirty toilet, Mother Teresa got down on her hands and knees and scrubbed it herself, a lesson the girl would never forget. She required not only “total surrender,” but “cheerfulness.” It was a very hard life, and two of the first ten girls left during their training. Some of the others



were criticized or shunned by family members who were ashamed of their poverty, or simply wished they would finish their schooling or marry.

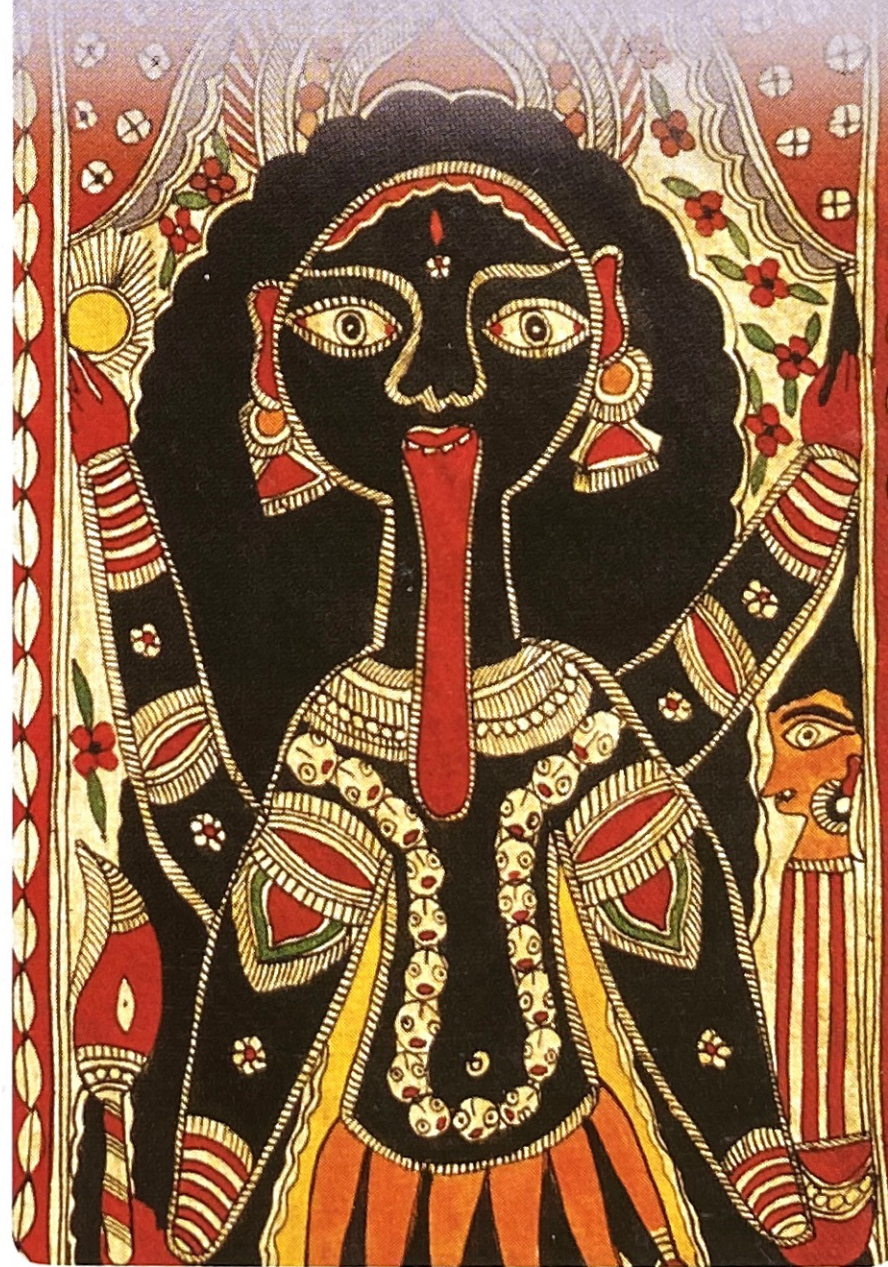
Along with the Motherhouse, the Missionaries of Charity opened two other houses during these years. The first, provided by the city of Calcutta, was a home for the dying that Mother Teresa called Nirmal Hriday, which meant “Pure Heart” in Bengali. “We cannot let a child of God die like an animal in the gutter,” Mother Teresa told journalist Eileen Egan.

The building the city officials offered to her was a large one on the banks of the Hooghly River, a tributary of the sacred Ganges. It was right next to the Temple of Kali, one of the most important Hindu goddesses.

This temple attracted many pilgrims, including some who were ill and wished to die in a sacred

## Kali the Dark Mother

Like many Hindu gods and goddesses, Kali takes many forms. Although she is most often represented as a fearsome figure of death, with jet-black skin, four arms, and a necklace of skulls, she is also revered as a mother goddess.







Nirmal Hriday now bears a sign honoring Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity.

site. Mother Teresa welcomed people of all faiths, but some Hindus were

deeply offended by a Christian order opening a home for the dying so close to their temple. It was rumored that the nuns planned to convert people to Catholicism on their deathbeds. Sometimes people threw stones at the sisters, and once a man even threatened to kill Mother Teresa. Another time, a group of protesters entered Nirmal Hriday with a policeman, hoping that he would evict the sisters, but the protesters were so moved by the way the nuns tended the bone-thin, infected bodies of the dying that they changed their minds.

When a Hindu priest suffering from late-stage tuberculosis was turned away by several hospitals, he was brought to Nirmal Hriday, where the Missionary Sisters

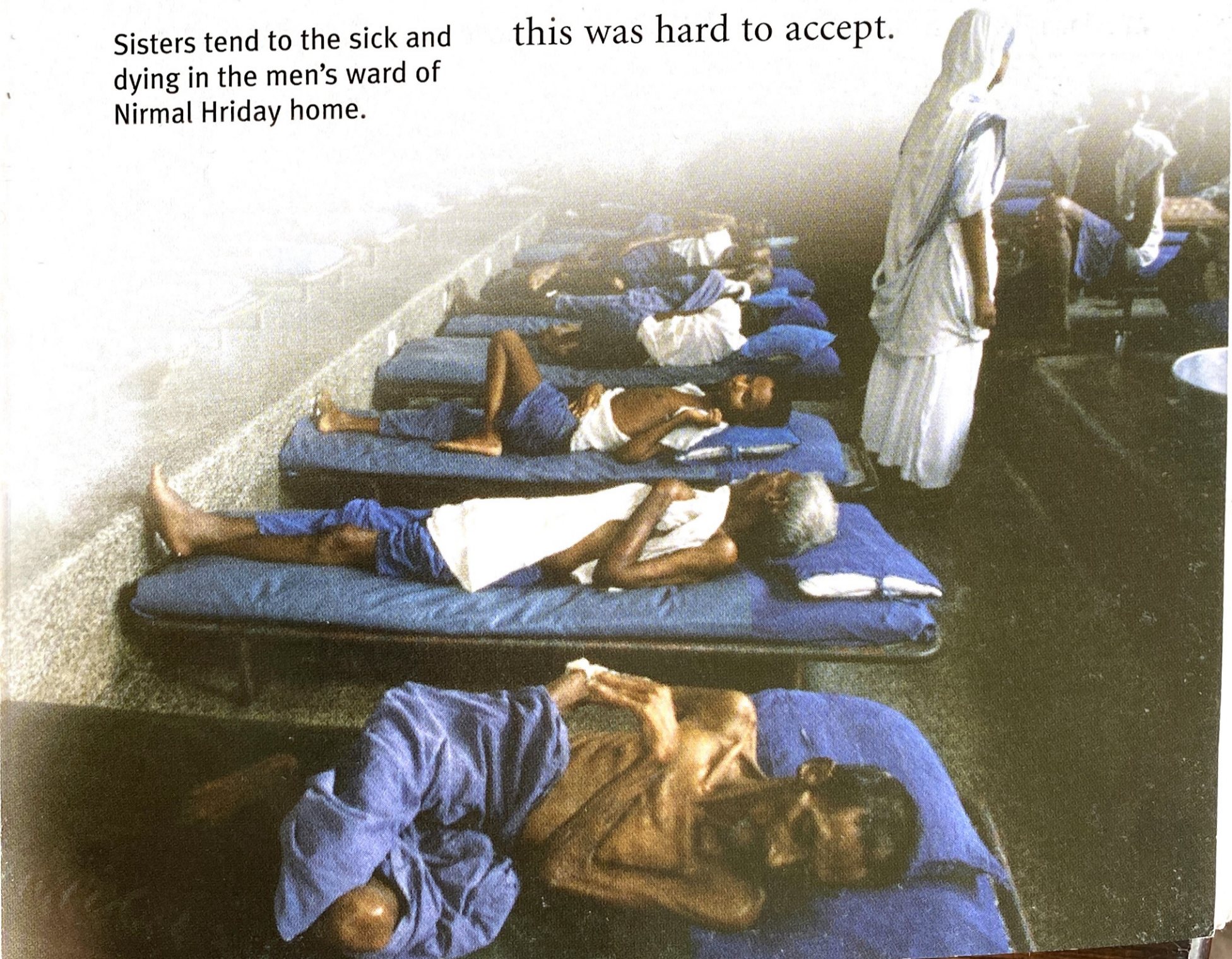


of Charity cared for him until he died. After this incident, the tension between the two groups lessened. Pilgrims to the Temple of Kali sometimes stopped at Nirmal Hriday to make donations, and some Hindu women even came to work there as volunteers.

Still, some volunteers were dismayed that the Missionary Sisters of Charity, while ministering tenderly to dying people, did not focus on saving the lives of others with basic medical care and vitamins. After all, the main health problem of many Indians was malnutrition, not deadly disease. For some people with medical backgrounds, such as Dr. Marcus Fernandes, an idealistic young doctor who worked briefly with Mother Teresa at Nirmal Hriday,

Sisters tend to the sick and dying in the men's ward of Nirmal Hriday home.

this was hard to accept.







## *“I Am Going to Heaven Today.”*

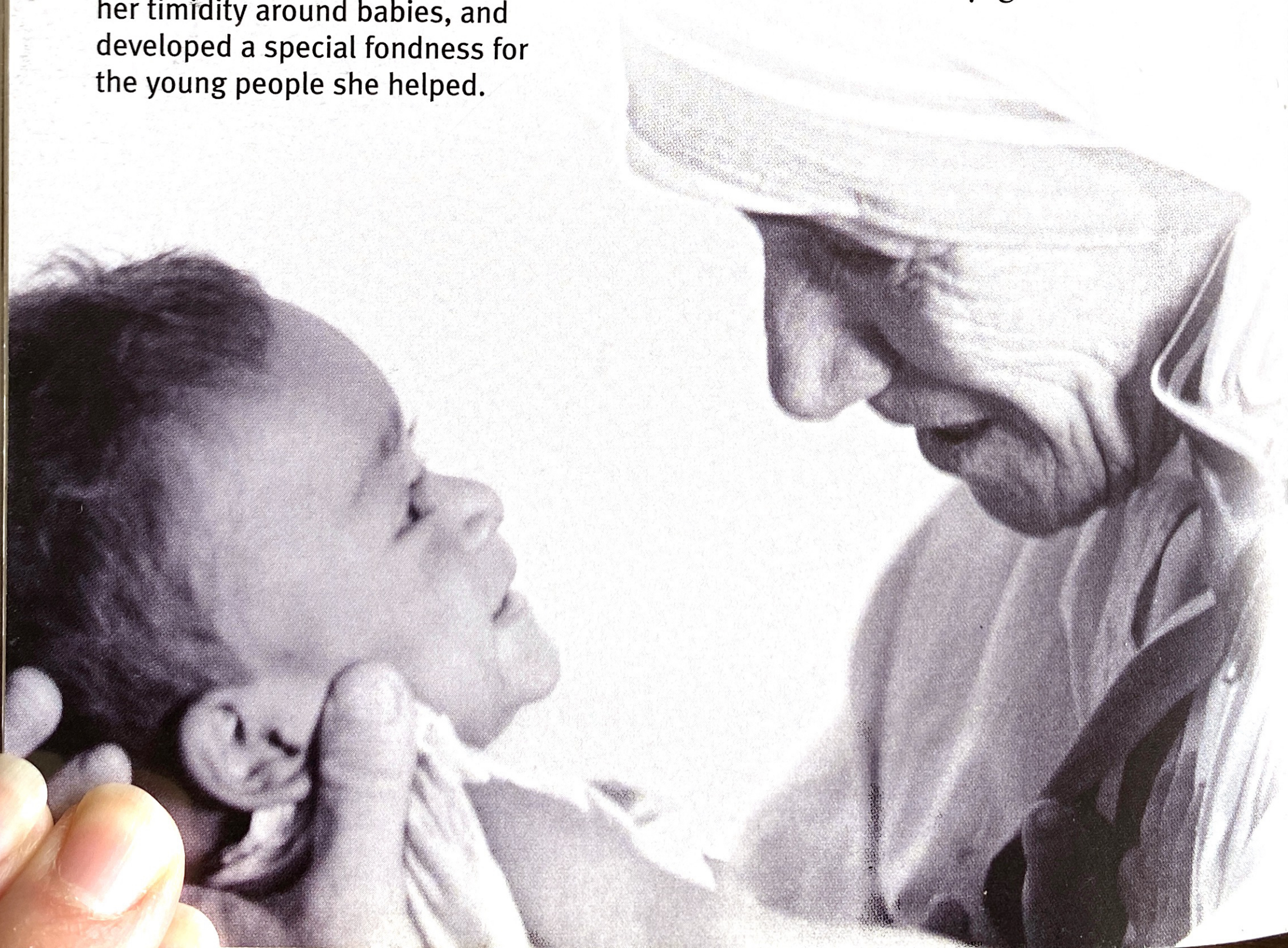
—Inscription on the wall at Nirmal Hriday

The nuns’ attitude towards death was summed up by a sign posted high on the wall: “I Am Going to Heaven Today.”

Mother Teresa’s next project was a home for abandoned babies and children, which she called Shishu Bhavan. In Calcutta, infants were often orphaned, or left to die by desperate parents who couldn’t afford to feed them. Sometimes these babies were premature, disabled, or nearly dead from starvation. Some died within hours of arrival at Shishu Bhavan, but Mother Teresa felt very strongly that they should be cared for and held so that they could experience love, even if only

Mother Teresa quickly overcame her timidity around babies, and developed a special fondness for the young people she helped.

for a brief time. As they grew







stronger, the healthier babies were given to adoptive parents or sent to boarding schools like Loreto Entally that took in orphans.

As word got out in the community about Mother Teresa's new institution, people started bringing babies to the home from the police stations, hospitals, and schools where they had been abandoned. Mother Teresa made it known that at Shishu Bhavan, no child would ever be refused a bed, even if it meant that three or more had to sleep on one cot. Some



The nuns at Shishu Bhavan often put several babies in the same crib, rather than turn any child away.

of the smallest and frailest babies were kept warm by light bulbs hanging over the cribs and boxes where they slept. Many local residents rallied behind Shishu Bhavan, gathering donations of food, money, clothing, and children's toys. It was to be only the first of many such homes, as the Missionaries of Charity continued to grow.