

A Tourist and a Landmark

by Caleb Rosado¹

Within a week of each other,² the two most loved and admired women in the world died. One was an earthly princess, the other a heavenly one. One was young and beautiful, the other was old and plain. One was royalty and a fashion icon, who left a vast wealth estimated at 65 million, the other was a simply dressed servant of humanity who left only two saris and a pair of sandals. The first lived a life of posh royalty amidst the rich and the famous of the world, the second a life of abject poverty amidst the poorest of the poor—the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for—the untouchables of the earth. One was tall and stately and had to look down on people even if with love and a warm smile, the other was short and stooped and “it may have been one of God’s subtle jokes that his exalted child spent her life looking up to everyone else.”³ The first was a representative of the First World—the economically advantaged world—with all its pomp and socioeconomic privilege, the second a self-identified representative of the Third and Fourth Worlds—the worlds of want, need and death—with their sense of destitution, disprivilege, and despair. One took up the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised as a cause, the other the needs of the same as a life calling. The first one’s life of ministry to the poor and dying came to an end at the age of 36, while the age of 36 for the second was when she began her long life of ministry to the poor and dying. One was taken abruptly from us as her star was rising, the other came to her end after a long, full, and meaningful life of dedicated service.

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² August 30 and September 5, 1997

³ Peggy Noonan, “A Combatant in the World,” *Time*, September 15, 1997, p. 84.

This is how they differed; here is how they were similar. Both came out of the house of privilege with wealthy upbringings, but one stayed in the house of privilege and from there served human need, while the other left the house of privilege and became poor to minister to the poorest of the poor. Both were so famous that the world knew them by their first name only, Diana and Teresa, Princess Diana of Wales and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Both were sensitive to the needs of others from early childhood. Both embodied compassion in their own unique way, consistent with their character. Both were of such renown that their respective countries gave them state funerals. And finally, it is rather symbolic that both were buried on the Sabbath, God's day of rest, and their day of final rest.

To these contrasts and similarities we may add the response of the media. For two weeks after the tragic accident the leading news story in all television networks was the death of Princess Diana. The media's coverage of Mother Teresa in comparison to Diana, seemed more like to an appendage and a footnote. From the moment of her death there was a non-stop coverage of Diana's life; for Mother Teresa only scattered news reports. Diana graced the cover of just about every major news and entertainment magazine for several weeks after her death, Mother Teresa just one (*Newsweek*). In one magazine alone the report on Diana took up 40 pages, the report on Mother Teresa only four.⁴

Why such disparity in media attention, especially when one considers the latter's contribution to making our world safe for differences? Many reasons can be given, psychological, sociological, political and theological. One important one was that Princess Diana was primarily a media creation. Her connection to royalty, her beauty, her youthfulness, her contagious personality, were all excellent material to feed the media's voracious appetite for ratings. The media sustain their own creations and, if

⁴ *Newsweek*, September 15, 1997.

deemed marketable, will give them a life of their own, because the media need such creations in order to survive in a competitive market. Diana was indeed a marketable commodity; she sold much copy both print and film. And now after her death, books about her have been literally sold out. Elton John's "Candle In the Wind," subtitled, "Goodbye England's Rose," has far surpassed Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" in sales, to become the biggest single hit song of all time, and possibly ever. Mother Teresa, on the other hand, because of her values, lifestyle, age, region of the world where she lived, lack of external physical beauty, and the people with whom she identified and served, these made her appeal to the media of lesser value.

Perhaps the best and the most honest reason, however, is the personal one, as given by a female caller on the Rush Limbaugh radio talk show, who declared: "We wanted to be like Diana and not many of us wanted to be like Mother Teresa. And that's sad."⁵ And I agree.

Diana represents a life of both/and, having your cake and eating it too. Mother Teresa's life is symbolic of either/or, "no one can serve two masters." Thus, Diana could choose her causes at will. Just before she was killed, she went from some 100 causes she supported down to six. Mother Teresa, on the other hand, had just one cause, being faithful to Jesus Christ, by seeking to meet the needs of the poorest of the poor—the dying, the diseased, the unwanted, the untouchables of world society.

In the end, the legacy of Mother Teresa may very well be the more lasting, significant, and far reaching in its scope and impact on humankind. While Diana's life and death have touched the masses worldwide, in the final assessment the impact of her legacy, while emotionally felt, may end up being merely transitory and superficial on those who were not close. By contrast, Mother Teresa's legacy has challenged millions and touched us at the very core of human existence, the need to be loved and to love

⁵ <http://www.ccnet.com/~suntzu75/pirn9773.htm>

others no matter their station in life. The headlines from the Indian weekly magazine, *Outlook*, best captured the difference between the two women. “Mother Teresa was a landmark. Diana, a concerned tourist.”⁶ This I believe is the essential difference. Diana was a tourist in life, albeit a most concerned one, compassionate to the core. Mother Teresa was a landmark of human history, not just the 20th century, whose life and ministry pointed the way to Jesus Christ and how to practice the Christ-life in an age of poverty and affluence.

Such a life is exemplary of Jesus Christ, the ultimate landmark. Because of her love for Jesus and understanding of the Gospel, Mother Teresa saw in every human being she encountered, the person of Jesus Christ. Mother Teresa gives us the correct understanding of the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these [read: the poorest of the poor], who are members of my family, you did it to me” (vs. 40). In a real way, one that many of us Christians cannot grasp, “she saw a form of Jesus in each human being, and administered to each person in this light. She did not see a human being who should be judgementally shunned because they are diseased, poor, gay, of a different race or religion, or even a murderer—she saw a manifestation of Jesus in need of our love and assistance. If we learn nothing else from this saintly woman, I hope we learn and uphold this vision”—that in Mother Teresa our world had a remarkable, holy manifestation of the person of Christ.⁷ “I see God in every human being,” she declared. “When I wash the leper’s wounds I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?” How many of us could say the same? How would the world be different if in every person in need we encountered we saw Jesus Christ in person?

This raises an intriguing question. With which of the two women do we identify, would have felt more comfortable in their presence, would want to be like? Princess

⁶ *Newsweek*, September 22, 1997, “Perspective” section, p. 21.

⁷ Cyndi Russell at <http://members.tripod.com/~ZenCyn/mteresa.html>

Diana or Mother Teresa? My sense is that Mother Teresa's presence would prick our conscience and conduct. Thus, I think, Terry, the woman caller on the Rush Limbaugh radio talk show was correct. We prefer to be more like Diana than Mother Teresa. Or as one of my students said after hearing this message. "I know I'll never be as rich as Diana, but I don't want to be as poor as Mother Teresa."⁸ The first we admire close up, and the media cannot seem to give us enough of her; the second we admire from an emotional distance. Part of the reason is that Diana was more like us, flawed but trying. Mother Teresa was a "living saint," almost flawless in her love, dedication and commitment to Christ, and a life of ministry to the Other that is not like us. This I feel, in part, explains the contrasting approaches of the press and media toward both women. For if we allow Mother Teresa to get too close, we may be challenged to re-examine our Christian malpractice.

How can we live the Christ-life? Mother Teresa has given us some helpful suggestions that challenge our walk whether or not we are Christians.⁹ I share a few:

- "The dying, the cripple, the mental, the unwanted, the unloved—they are Jesus in disguise."
- "It is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing. It is not how much we give, but how much love we put in the giving."
- "There is a terrible hunger for love. We all experience that in our lives—the pain, the loneliness. We must have the courage to recognize it. The poor you may have right in your own family. Find them. Love them."
- "Calcutta can be found all over the world if you have eyes to see."
- "In the developed countries there is a poverty of intimacy, a poverty of spirit, of loneliness, of lack of love. There is no greater sickness in the world today than that one."
- "You will be surprised to know that in the poorest neighborhoods in many of the cities where we live and work, when we get close to the people who live in

⁸ Carrie McGaughey,

⁹ <http://www.lollie.com/teresadiana.html>

shacks, the first thing they ask for is not bread or clothes, even though often they are dying of hunger and are naked. They ask us to teach the Word of God. People are hungry for God. They long to hear his Word.”

- “In the West, there is loneliness which I call the leprosy of the West. In many ways it is worse than our poor in Calcutta. In Calcutta the poor, they share.”

Both women sought to make a difference in the world. They were thermostats, not thermometers. A thermostat alters the temperature around it, a thermometer merely records it. A thermostat is active, a thermometer is passive. Thermostats are active agents of change; they influence their environment. Thermometers, on the other hand, as passive elements, do nothing to alter the conditions around it. Both women were thermostats.

At the Last Judgment, when God separates the sheep from the goats, the difference will be that the sheep, as thermostats, are involved in active, selfless service for others, bringing about change in their lives, service which glorifies God. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matt. 25:35-36). The goats, on the other hand, the thermometers, are self-seeking, concerned only with themselves and their interests, and thus do nothing to bring about a change to the situation around them.

Both Mother Teresa and Princess Diana were thermostats, especially Mother Teresa. In the Gospel of Mark 14:9 Jesus declares the following about the woman who anointed his feet. “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” If there ever was a woman, other than the one here in the text, to whom these words can apply it would be Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa was laid to rest in Calcutta, India, in the largest state funeral since the death of Mahatma Gandhi, another of God’s thermostats, who died just short of 50 years before Mother Teresa. At Gandhi’s funeral the following

words were spoken by a news reporter covering the proceedings, which same words could very well have been spoken about Mother Teresa, as well as of Jesus Christ before her, whom she and Gandhi so faithfully loved and served. I have adapted the words to Mother Teresa.

The object of this massive tribute, died as [she] always lived, a private woman, without wealth, without property, without official title or office. [Mother Teresa] was not the commander of armies, nor a ruler of vast lands. [She] could not boast any scientific achievement or artistic gift. Yet humans, governments, dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little [wrinkled woman in a sari, who sought to transform the world's attitude toward the poor.] In the words of General George C. Marshall, the American Secretary of State, “[Mother Teresa] has become the spokesperson for the conscience of all humankind. [She] was a[woman] who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires.” And Albert Einstein added. “Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”¹⁰

Mother Teresa truly lived the words Jesus spoke to challenge our Christian practice. “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to God who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

¹⁰ From Richard Attenborough's film, *Gandhi*, (1982).