

A mission of charity



India

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Teresa and see her work. So, I find her house, the "Mother House." It is the main convent for her order, the Missionaries of Charity. It's a very modest, large concrete building — a sanctuary from the numerous disruptions of chaotic Calcutta street life.

There I sit, rehearsing what to say to Mother Teresa.

Wait a minute, I think, what do you say to a modern-day saint?

I wait in line to meet her and as I get closer, I see the people in front of me stand in awe. They struggle to say a few simple words of praise to the woman and then kiss her feet. Is this an Indian custom or is this what every good Catholic should do when approaching a saint?

I rehearse what to say many times and am ready to convince Mother Teresa I am different from any other journalist and worthy to take her picture.

"Yes?" questions the short, hunched-back, 83-year-old woman dressed in a simple white sari with a single blue stripe.

She struggles to peer at my at 6'2" frame as she walks to greet me. I opt not to kiss her feet. Her humble ambience hints she doesn't like celebrity treatment.

For a short, but seemingly hour-long gaze, I swallow and think to myself: Oh my God, this is her, the saint, the Nobel Peace Prize winner. This is Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

It's amazing when life surpasses your dreams.

I freeze for a minute.

"What is it you want?" she asks kindly, yet boldly. I must say something quick. I introduce myself and explain I would like to document her work.

"How can I allow you permission when I have turned away so many others?" she asks.

I tell her I work with a photo agency that caters to humanitarian and religious organizations.

"Put something in writing, and I'll see what I can do," she says.

I write as I've never written before. I explain in the one-page note my struggle to make a difference through photography. "It's my calling," I write anxiously.

At this point I am upstairs, just outside her office. After reading my note, she walks out and writes a note to her fellow sisters telling them to let "Mr. Saheden (even saints make mistakes) take photos if he wants. Mother Teresa, MC."

Sisters close to Mother Teresa tell me how rarely she gives photographic permission to anyone. They tell me I

am only the second journalist to photograph her during a regular mass at her home.

"Mother must see some good in you — in your eyes," a sister explains with a large grin.

The next day I am allowed to photograph her during mass. A sister attempts to chase me away at first because no pictures are allowed. I flash my permission note and say, "Mother gave me permission," as if I knew her on a first-name basis.

Following mass, Mother Teresa places her thumb and index finger on my forehead, makes the sign of the cross, flashes her sparkling smile and says "Bless you, my child."

Anything seems possible at this moment.

The following day I head out to document Shishu Bivau, an orphanage, and Nirmal Hriday, the home for the dying.

At the home for the dying, about 10 Missionaries of Charity sisters and about 15 western volunteers clean wounds, comfort crying women and men, administer first aid and feed frail Indians brought in from the street.

The love and care the volunteers show to the frail and dying people amazes me. At times, the home of dying becomes the home of the living. Sisters and volunteers play flutes, rub patients' temples and sing — pouring out their hearts and disregarding risks to their own health to make the last few hours of someone else's life a little better.

Witnessing such noble acts of personal sacrifice amazes me in a town where the people have little or no hope for the future. Calcutta is suffocating.

"There is no hope for Calcutta," says a 20-year-old hotel manager.

Hopelessness frustrates me because I've grown up with the American dream. If you work hard and keep dreaming, you will succeed. Not in Calcutta.

"I do not dream because I know it

won't come true in India," a rural schoolteacher in Southern India says.

I have gained much respect for the Indian way of life. They don't have the materialistic pressures and rapid-paced lifestyle we do in a 1-900-FONESEX, unisex, drive-by, drive-in, fast-food, Miller-time, convenience

mart, new-and-improved America.

Americans must remain focused on deeply held beliefs. If we don't, the rapid-pace and "what's-in-it-for-me," mass-consumptive attitude of our country can make us what many foreigners already think we are.

