

N.C.C.W. NATIONAL CONVENTION - LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

S P E E C H

By

Mother Teresa

This is the way we greet the people in India. I have come from India to thank you and every individual family throughout the States for the kindness and for the love you have shown for the work of God which is being done through the Missionaries of Charity. For many years I have been praying with the Sisters that we may be able to do something for the mother and the child in the slums. But as you know, we work only for the poorest of the poor. The amount of things we got was just enough to meet the needs of the day. We had no place, we had no doctor, we had no money to start the work for the mother and the child. And the whole Convent and the children in the slums prayed and it was very strange that in the same week, so to say in the same day, we got the answer. By the morning mail I got a letter from Mrs. Macketich to say that her group had vowed and promised to start the work in India for the mother and the child, The Madonna Plan.

In the afternoon I had the letter from a lady doctor, an English lady doctor who had seen the work, and she wanted to join the congregation and do the work for the mother and the child. Next day I got a letter to say that the land that I had been looking for can be ours. So the place, the money, and the person to do the work came as an answer to a prayer and today we have seven such clinics where the Sisters, with the lay doctors, Bengali and Mohammedan, work for the same idea, with the same love, with the same devotion for their own people- the people of the slums. Last year, ending December 31, we had treated 74,000 people that passed through the dispensaries, that have been cared for and helped. Now we have three other Sisters who will be soon finished as doctors and will be able to go further in - into the hearts of the slums that up till now we have not been able to go because of want of Sisters who could do the work. I'm sure most of you, through I think, Miss Egan, my friend, know how the Congregation of the Missionaries of Charity began.

We are only ten years old now and we have 119 Sisters, among whom we have one from San Diego, one from Germany, one English, one from Yugoslavia and myself from Albania. And the rest are all Indian women that come from the best families. That is the beauty of the thing which the Hindu people do not understand - how such girls as these give up their university degrees, give up their home, they give up their social standing and they come down to help to sanctify those people that are created to the image of God. A government high official said once: "You and we do the same social work. But the difference between you and us is one that we cannot pass over. You work for somebody and we work for something." He knew that Somebody is Jesus in distressing disguise of the people, which the Sisters, on their rounds in the streets and the slums pick up daily and take to Nirmal Hriday, the Home for the Dying.

Up to now in this six years we have picked up over 13,000 people of which over 5,000 have gone to God. They died a beautiful death - a death that only

people who have suffered much and have loved much can have.

There was the young boy of 23 who was picked up from the streets - the only son of an old father. His name was Dilip. His back was broken in two or three places and was one big wound. And this boy was brought by his father to Nirmal Hriday. When he came he used to scream with pain! Nothing would take away the suffering from that young boy and then the Sisters went to him. They washed and cleaned him and they spoke to him of One Who had suffered just like him -- Jesus on the Cross. And on the next day when I went to the Home I found the boy lying there. He was suffering and he would not take any morphine or anything to stop the pain. He wanted to suffer! The third day I saw him and I knew he was going to die and I told him: "Dilip, you are going to die very soon and I'm very glad you are going to God and all your suffering will be finished." He looked up and said: "No, I'm very sorry to die because I've learned to suffer for the love of Somebody Who has suffered for me first." And in one voice he cried out: "My God, I love You with my whole heart and soul," And he died! That was a beautiful picture of what the grace of God can do in a life filled with suffering.

And, also, they brought the mother with two children, little Nirmal and Shunil. One was two years old and the other four. She had walked for several miles to come to the Home, but as she was in the last stages of T.B. she collapsed on the way and then the ambulance came to pick her up. She asked: "Take me to Mother's home." Everybody in Calcutta knows the Mother's home. So they brought her there and I happened to be in. The mother was gasping. She took the little hands of her two children, put them in my hands, and she died. That's all she wanted - to make sure that the two little ones would be with us.

Examples such as this happen daily and the joy and the happiness these people feel - it is you who shared in it! It is through the help I have received from the States, from the Catholic Relief Service, that has enabled me to bring so much happiness to so many people. In the dispensaries and the clinics that we have throughout the city, hundreds of people come with their little children. They know the Sisters love them, and also they need, it is true, the medicine. But much more they need love and affection! We give it to them freely. Many people in Calcutta also help us with our groups around the city. Hindu ladies wash bottles for us, gather match boxes for us, empty tins, etc. Also old clothes and shoes and bring them to us for the dispensaries. The people in the slums use the empty tins to drink and to eat from. The little match boxes we use to distribute the medicine to the people. And so everybody shares in the work.

We have a home for crippled children. We pick up children from the streets and very often when we pick up the mother or the father, there is always one or two children with them. We bring them to this home for crippled children. Those who are not sick, we try to find homes for them. A family adopts them, and so up to now, we have about 35 children who have been adopted by Bengali Catholic families and once a month they bring them to the Motherhouse to see the Sisters. In this home for crippled children we have children that have been picked up from the slums and also children that we bring up every Tuesday - about 40 children from the slums and get them screened. This x-ray machine was given by the American Women's Group of Calcutta. They raised the money and they bought the machine and from that time

thousands of our slum children have been screened and treated, if the disease has been found with them, and kept in this Home for Children until such time that they get cured and are able to go back to the slums. Through the clinics also they find the families. Young mothers come to us and those who are a little bit better educated we give them commercial training in shorthand and typing and then we get the Sisters to go around the town and find jobs for them. In that way we help the whole family by getting work for the young mother. And those who are not able to learn that, the Sisters teach them tailoring and they are able to get work and provide for their families. In this way the Madonna Plan has done its work and it has done the mothers of India the good which you all have in your minds and the desire to do.

We in India love our children. The mothers, as poor as they may be, as sick as they may be - they cling to their children. A leper woman living far away from Titaghur, that is one of our leper centers, had heard that the Sisters are taking care of the leper patients. She had it herself, and she had a little child of two, Bhakti was her name. "Bhakti" means "love." She walked eight miles to the clinic just to make sure that her little Bhakti didn't have the disease. She thought that she saw on her body a white spot, the sign of the disease. And though her feet were half eaten away, and her hands were without fingers, still this brave woman, this loving woman, carried the child all the way for eight miles to the Sisters to make sure that her child did not have leprosy. And when Sister examined her and found that the child was safe, she was so happy she was not afraid to walk back all the way! If the mothers don't care for their children in India, after an example like this, I don't know!!

Two or three weeks back, before I came here, a Mohammedan woman suffering in the last stages of T. B. came with her little son, Islam. Islam is a Mohammedan name. When I went there she only asked: "Mother, as I have got a terrible disease and my days are counted, take my child, get him a home, love him." I took the child and I told her: "Well, as long as you are alive, come twice or three times a day, if you like, and see the child. I will keep the child with me as long as you are alive. And there was this woman walking at least two or three miles every day, and she loved the child in such an heroic way. She would not touch the child and begged me: "Mother, take my child in your arms; you love him and by seeing you love him that will give me pleasure, because if I touch the child I may give him the disease." This is what the Madonna Plan has done for India. It has helped the Sisters to draw out of those good mothers the best in them.

The mothers in India have very little pleasure indeed. They have to work - not the work like you have to do this side of the world - but the work they have to do is a work hard to human nature and they have to work very often starving, and they have to work very often for long hours. And yet, all these years that I have been working in the slums, I can, in all sincerity, say I have never heard a single woman complain. I have never heard one of them say: "Why have I to suffer?" I have never heard!! They are happy in their suffering.

We have many schools in the slums. Over 4,000 children come to the schools, and our schools are not in a building, but under the tree - in the street - in the family - anywhere we can get a place to gather about 150 or 200 children. We gather them up and we teach them, and when the Sisters do not turn up, their mothers take their place. Some days back, four little children didn't come to school and I

went and asked their mother: "It is 10 o'clock already, why don't your children come to school?" "They are fast asleep," was her answer, "I make them sleep, I force them to sleep, because if they are awake they will cry for food and I haven't anything to give." Children suffer much. But they, too, they are the happiest children I have ever seen! They wake up at night and they ask their mother: "When is it tomorrow, when will Sister come?" They don't think it is something wrong for them to go to bed without food. They are thinking about tomorrow when Sister will come.

In the work for the lepers, we have clinics also and we take care of the mother and the child just as well as we do in the ordinary clinics. 3,800 we have at present in our hands and we can get there with a mobile clinic. The ambulance was donated by the Catholic Relief Services, and it has been working for the last five years. That ambulance is used for everything - carrying the dead and the living - to carry medicines and the Sisters and everybody else. In these clinics we help them also in the streets. We go to a center where the families get together. One such is in Titaghur. In that center alone we have over 900 people that come very regularly every week. In Calcutta itself we have over 30,000 leprosy cases and at present it is the Sisters that care for them, with the help we get from the Government - in that they train our Sisters. Every year they train two Sisters for the medical work among the lepers. The Sisters are as you see the Sister here. (Holds up a picture). This is Sister Shanti. She is a girl from Bombay. She is in charge of the leper work there and she does the work very happily. She, like all the other Missionaries of Charity, give their whole-hearted free service to the poor. We make a vow of surrendering ourselves to the poor in this way, and that is why we and our work and every person that we come in contact with in the slums, we wholly depend on Divine Providence. And in that Divine Providence, the Madonna Plan has worked and has played its part beautifully! When I go around, when I need things, I don't beg. I have not begged from the time we have started to work, but I go to the people - the Hindus and Mohammedans, and to the Christians, and I tell them: "I have come to give you a chance to do something beautiful for God." And the poor people, they all want to do something beautiful for God and they come forward!

More than things and money I need the people themselves to come to the people, to come to the poor, that the poor may see they are loved. And that is what is happening in Calcutta!

We may not have done much work, but we have broken the wall between the rich and the poor - between the highest social standing of Brahmin, and the poorest of the poor in the slums. We have Brahmin of the highest social standing who, as you know, the Caste system forbids them to come in touch with the poorest of the poor. And yet, those ladies and those gentlemen come regularly to the home for the dying to wash them and feed them. And we give work to the gentlemen to shave the men and they feel so happy that somebody can come and sit near their bed and touch them and love them! It makes all the difference, and that is why, whenever you go to any of these places where the Sisters are working, the people are always smiling. You never hear them complain. As much as they suffer, they never say anything - they are happy!!

For me, I have never spoken in public. This is my first time, and to be here with you and to be able to tell you of the love story of God's mercy for the poorest of the poor, it is a Grace of God. And as the Holy Father has said "These Works of Love" I am glad to say that with my whole heart I offer you to share in These Works of Love.