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The mother who cared for the shunned

*Today is the anniversary of the death of Mother Teresa. **Gëzim Alpion** recalls his own 'encounters' with the woman many are hoping will be canonised.*

In 1985 I was offered a scholarship by the Albanian and Egyptian governments to study English at Cairo University and, of course, I was thrilled. Studying abroad was a dream for any student at Tirana in those days.

I found Egypt a land of tolerance and as welcoming as my native Albania. Egyptians are borne with a smile for each other and foreigners. This is one of the reasons why so many foreigners find themselves at home there and have contributed so much to the glory of this country from the outset of the Pharaonic civilisation.

Egypt is special for me for many reasons, but especially because it was there that in 1986 I was first properly 'introduced' to Mother Teresa – at a time when I was going through a difficult period of religious turmoil.

Egypt was very different. I found religion there everywhere. At the University of Cairo I made friends with everyone, no matter what creed or religious sect

they belonged to. I respected their religious devotion (or lack of it) but was not tempted to convert.

The more religious literature I read in Cairo, the more convinced I was that I could not choose a religion. On the other hand, the passionate studying of the Scriptures brought me closer to God.

Then I visited the Indian Cultural Centre in downtown Cairo. Browsing through the shelves I came across a couple of books and booklets about Mother Teresa. I set on the floor and began reading through them fast and with enormous interest.

I knew that Mother Teresa was an Albanian nun who in 1979 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her charity work for the poor of Calcutta, but had not read anything about her.

The year 1986 marked the beginning of my enormous interest in the nun, an interest that has never weakened since then. I must admit that the fact that she was Albanian is of an enormous importance to me.

In the years that followed she acquired for me another significance.

It sounds profane, but it was Mother Teresa who helped me to decide that I could not belong to one single religion as such and who strengthened my belief in secular humanism.

Mother Teresa helped only those who needed she never made a secret of that, something I learned myself from her in 1992.

A year after completing my BA from Cairo University in 1989 I returned there again to read English as a postgraduate. By 1990 I could not come to England because the diplomatic ties between Albania and the UK were still frozen.

I was progressing very well with my studies but was unable to pay the enormous fees the University of Cairo demanded from me as an overseas student.

I approached the British Council in Cairo more than once only to be told that I did not qualify because Albania was not in the Commonwealth. As for the British Universities that offered me a place in their postgraduate programmes, none of them could waive or reduce the tuition fees.

I decided to write to Mother Teresa in Calcutta for support and advice. In all honesty, considering her busy schedule, I was not sure she would write back. But I was wrong. She did write to me – not once but twice.

I cherish the two small letters in which she expressed her regret for being unable to assist me financially because the Missionaries of Charity help only, and I quote ‘the poorest of the poor’. But she expressed her belief that God would do something for me.

Having read widely about Mother Teresa’s life and work over the past ten years, I have now a better understanding of what she meant by ‘the poorest of the poor’. The recipients of her care were not only financially poor. The poor to whom she had devoted her life were poor first and foremost because they were abandoned, thrown away; stigmatised and vilified by the society.

Mother Teresa was their last ray of hope, a sudden manifestation of what is best in humanity in their final hours.

Eventually, I did secure some financial support that enabled me to start my postgraduate studies in English at the University of Durham – from what someone in the West would consider an ‘unconventional’ source.

The Muslim Word League in Saudi Arabia responded positively to my funding application in spite of the fact that I needed the money to study English literature and not Islam. Mother Teresa’s life and example had shown me prior to contacting the league, that there are religious people who will go beyond narrow and sometimes perverse interpretations of faiths by religious zealots and see people first and foremost as fellow human beings.

Mother Teresa was a living example of a pious Christian who lived her life and practised her religion not dogmatically but as a great humanist.

Does someone like Mother Teresa deserve to be made a saint?

I am the last person to give advice on such a religious issue. But anyone doubting that she was a saint should travel to the slums of Calcutta and see the lepers and other social outcasts who received a smile, love and care, when the rest of the world had shunned them.

As for those who died holding her hand, I am afraid they cannot be interviewed. One has only to imagine what it feels to have your dignity as a human being restored at the eleventh hour.

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