

## PEOPLE

# There by the grace of God

MOTHER Teresa said she must seek prior consultation when I asked her if she would agree to an interview. "We will see what God decides."

Accustomed only to the vacillations of earthly agents, there was not much I could say in response to this. But when I called her again, this time from Calcutta, she told me to come to the Mother House that afternoon. Neither of us mentioned the intermediary, and I hoped He had decided in my favour.

The convent itself is no haven of tranquillity. Set in a busy six-lane road, the hubbub of noise is relentless and the stench of the filthy street overpowering. Cars blare their horns and people shout their wares from the fruit stalls lining the pavements. The poverty is as tangible here as in any other part of the city. A dank bundle of rags outside the convent staggers to its feet and shuffles away. Opposite, an open doorway reveals an emaciated man in a torn grey T-shirt hunched on a makeshift bed.

The four-storey Mother House stands out by virtue of its cleanliness. The sky-blue walls with their ochre shutters are spotless. Instead of curtains, threadbare blue-and-white gingham cloths blow gently in the monsoon breeze, careful stitching covering the bigger holes.

A small sign "Missionaries of Charity" points down a narrow alleyway to the entrance of the convent. The words Mother Teresa MC are simply carved beside the bellchain. A sister dressed in a white sari opens the door and ushers me into a dazzling white courtyard with high walls surmounted by tangled barbed wire. Mother Teresa is "at prayer" and I am shown into a small room dominated by a picture of The Last Supper in lurid colours.

She appears through a curtain in the wall, a tiny, hunched woman with sunken eyes and a beatific smile. Her large wizened hands are clasped together and her broad brown feet are bare, unlike the other sisters who wear brightly-coloured flip-flops. The second and third toes on each foot are flipped over but she walks with ease for a woman who has just turned 84.

"Thank you so much for coming," she says, taking my hands and sitting down with me on a wooden bench. She talks very softly and her voice, still with a trace of an Eastern European accent, is almost drowned by the din of the traffic outside. She describes herself as "a little pencil in God's hands" and I ask her why. "Because I am giving God free hand to do as he pleases with me."

Mother Teresa talks about her work with the enthusiasm of a young child. "Do you know, we now have sisters working in 123 countries in the world, all giving tender



INTERVIEW by  
Helena de Bertodano

Why is there so much suffering  
in the world? On this, as  
on more personal matters,  
Mother Teresa remains evasive

loving care to the suffering." Over the next three days, I see her on four occasions and each time she quotes this figure to me with immense pride.

The cornerstone of her faith is that the poor and the sick are earthly manifestations of the suffering of Jesus. Hence her dictum that it is a "privilege" for her, her sisters and her volunteers to work with the poor. "It is as Jesus said," she says, folding my fingers over one by one as she utters each syllable: "You do unto me." Seeing my puzzled look, she explains: "It is as he said: 'Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.' If they are hungry, we give them to eat, if they are naked, we clothe them, if

**'In your country, more difficult poverty. People are lonely and unloved, unwanted and uncared for'**

they are sick we visit them, and if they are homeless, we give them a home. Love in action."

She pauses for a moment and then adds: "You must have true heart to see Jesus in the dying, in the crippled, in the mental, in the lepers; they are all children of God." It is irrelevant to her, she says, whether the people she helps believe in God. "We don't know, we are not bothered as long as our action is good."

WHAT about the question that has been asked down the ages: why, if there is a God, is there such suffering? "Because Jesus suffered," she replies. But why does that mean people have to suffer? "The people that we pick up from the streets do not suffer. They receive love and care and they die happy. It is as one man said to me: 'I lived like an animal in the street, but I die like an angel in your house.' He died with a big smile."

Mother Teresa is more accomplished than any politician at side-stepping questions. She does not wish to talk about her own life and

when I ask why, she says: "My life is other people." Any questions verging on the personal she deflects back onto her work. Does she ever think about her parents' homeland, Albania? She nods. "We are doing very well in Albania now. Our sisters are serving the poor there as well."

She says that all children need love and I ask her if she received a lot of love herself as a child. "Oh, plenty, plenty." And then her kind face loses its smile and for the first and only time her voice becomes hard. "Children need a lot of love because there is so much evil through abor-

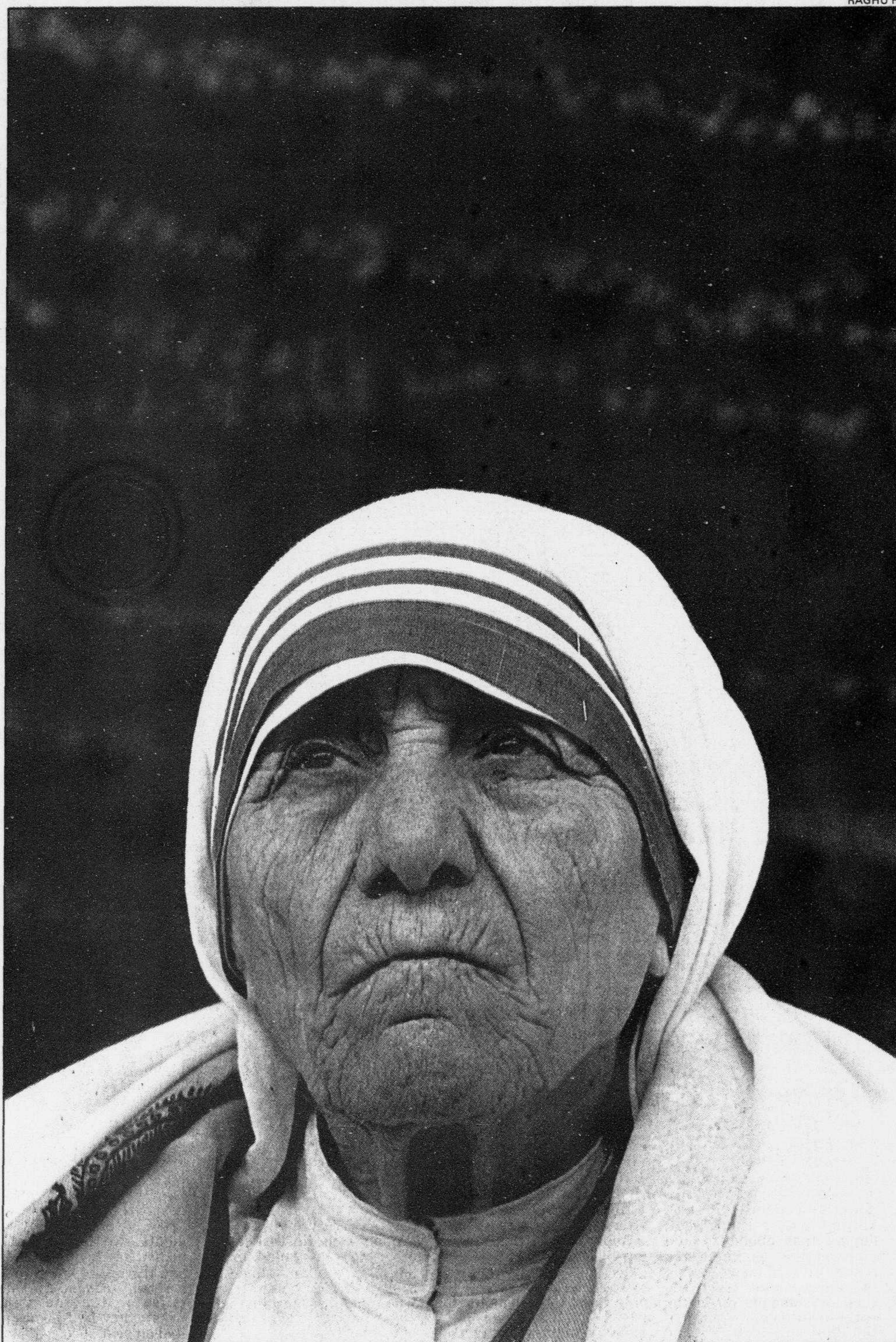
tion. If a mother can kill her own child, what is there for our children? That's why we are fighting abortion by adoption."

Shishu Bhavan, the home she set up for orphaned children, has given 3,000 children for adoption, she says, and tells me to go and see it before continuing our conversation in the evening. I do so and it is a depressing experience. Resources are limited but the sisters do everything in their power to make the children comfortable and happy. On the day I visit, a tiny baby has been retrieved from a bin. A two-year-old girl has to have her head shaved so that the maggots which have burrowed into her scalp can be squeezed out. She is held to the floor, screaming, as the sisters perform the gruesome task.

When I return in the evening, Mother Teresa says she does not visit the homes in Calcutta so often these days. "I go out sometimes, but I have a lot of work here organising the houses in other countries." Her diary is open on her knee and most of the days are filled with her large, circular handwriting. "Argentine people from God," reads one entry. And then, the next day: "Blood donation." It seems incredible that this frail old woman, who has been close to death herself on occasion, is giving blood.

Since meeting her last month, people keep asking me: "Was she very holy? Did you feel you were in the presence of a saint?" It is very difficult to answer this. Her unsentimental, down-to-earth approach to life and her total lack of self-consciousness were more striking than any sense of otherworldliness. Perhaps this is best illustrated by her laughing response when asked a few years ago how she felt about becoming a saint. "Just let me die first!"

I ask her what she remembers of her family. "All my family has gone up," she says, pointing at the sky. What memories she has are very distant. She left home at 18 to become a nun and never saw her mother or elder sister again. When her mother was on her deathbed decades later, she longed to see her daughter but Mother Teresa could not return as she



Mother Teresa in Calcutta: 'I am a pencil in God's hand... giving him a free hand to do as he pleases with me'

feared she might not be let out of the country again.

Born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu into a devout Catholic family of Albanians in Skopje, Serbia, she was the youngest daughter of a successful businessman. But when she was eight, her father, an ardent Albanian nationalist, suddenly died. It is thought he was poisoned at a political dinner in Belgrade. His business partner took all the assets and the family was left with nothing.

Agnes's mother set up a business selling cloth and

her daughters were sent to the local state school. A picture of Agnes at the age of 14 shows a plump, pretty girl fashionably dressed in high-heeled shoes.

As she approached her 18th birthday, she became fascinated by the missions in India and determined to follow them. She joined the Irish Order of the Sisters of Loreto who served that area and, after a brief training in Ireland, sailed to Calcutta.

For 19 years, Sister Teresa lived the enclosed life of a Loreto nun. But on a trip to

Darjeeling, she became convinced that God wanted her to leave the convent walls and work in the filthy slums outside. She called it her "call within a call".

She began her mission but had no money and found things hard. Michael Gomez, who owned the house she lodged in, would find scribbled notes saying: "Mr Gomez, I have nothing to eat. Please give me something to eat." The Gomezes, a Muslim family, supported her through those first months and gave her free lodgings.

She had asked me to attend

RAGHU RAI

the six o'clock mass that morning before speaking to me again. A thoroughly modern American priest officiates, advising any new volunteers to "chill out" on their first day. Mother Teresa kneels at the back of the long low chapel, which resembles a warehouse. Every time the other nuns, many of them a quarter of her age, stand, she determinedly staggers to her feet, using her fists to lever herself up. When she leads the congregation to communion, only the blue stripes at the top of her veil are visible as she disappears behind the lectern, which barely reaches the priest's waist.

After mass, the house erupts into a frenzy of vigorous scrubbing before the nuns begin their visits to the slums. Large wicker baskets of bananas are carried into the kitchen. Mother Teresa insists that the sisters eat well before embarking on a difficult day's work among the poor.

A couple of fat businessmen with gold Rolexes are waiting for an audience with Mother Teresa. As an assistant takes photographs of them posing with her, it crosses my mind that she is being unfairly exploited. But she is a canny woman and seems to know that the publicity and benefits are two-way. She even has her own small yellow businesscards, which she happily distributes among them, chuckling at their surprised faces.

She fetches some letters for volunteers to send when they return to their respective countries, explaining: "It is very expensive for us to

**'Argentine people from God,' reads one entry in her diary. And then, the next day: 'Blood donation'**

send letters. We have no salary, no Government grant, nothing." She grins: "We're like the birds and the flowers."

When she has time to speak to me again, the conversation turns to poverty. "In your country, much more difficult poverty," she says, thumping her hand over her heart. "People are lonely and unloved, unwanted and uncared for. Here, if people are hungry, you give them bread but the hunger for love you cannot remove with a piece of bread."

I ask her if she will travel at all this year. "Please God," she replies. She says she will probably only visit Rome. Her doctors have advised her to take care, as in recent years she has had bacterial pneumonia, heart disease and several operations. Earlier this year she was bitten by a rabid dog as she patted it outside the convent.

Before I leave, I try one more personal question on her. Is she happy? She smiles quizzically before side-stepping this one, too: "The more you are happy, the more I'll be happy." Then, relenting, she adds quietly: "Naturally I am happy."