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Save us from Mother Teresa

Quite recently I have had to spend some time visiting a friend stranded in hospital in south London. There I sit, eating his fruit, and gossiping about his fellow inmates. What have they got? How long have they got? Where can I get a cup of tea? Down the dirty bumpy corridor that connects a collection of woebegone prefabs and sheds. Turn right through flapping plastic doors into a gothic revival vestibule. Here there are two square formica tables, six slatted-metal chairs and a counter with a tea urn. The two old men in attendance are friends of the hospital, it says so on their plastic badges. They are volunteers, providing cups of tea to patients and visitors alike. The shop selling chocolate and cigarettes, and the tea stall at the front of the hospital, are also staffed by the friends of the hospital. I notice that the easi-clean prints of sunsets and other pleasing scenes screwed securely to the walls have been donated by the friends of the hospital. So too has the portakabin that serves the patients as a hairdressing salon.

Without the charitable impulse this hospital would clearly be even less adequate and even more dismal. This started me thinking about wearing a red nose, donating money to a telethon or perhaps running a sponsored marathon. It may not be 'politically sound', but it does have the virtue of being eminently practical. *Real* people get *real* help they wouldn't otherwise get. You can't knock that, now can you? Look at the Variety Club of Great Britain. Look at Jimmy Saville. Look at Ian Botham's long walks. You don't have to like them to admit they do do good things. Yes, well . . . I suppose so.

If you don't like the showbiz glitz or the sporty personalities there's always Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa has just retired. Soon she'll be dead, and then the prayers and appeals for canonisation will flood the papal secretariat. A committee chaired by a cardinal will be convened and, within an unusually short time (maybe 20 years), Mother Teresa of Calcutta will be declared a saint. She will become the patron saint of all those who wish to help those less fortunate than oneself. Her mission to the 'poorest of the poor' will inspire all charitable endeavour.

And what an inspiring story it is! After being a nun and teacher for 18 years, Sister Mary Teresa of the Christ Jesus was suddenly contacted by God. On 10 September 1946, while she was on the Darjeeling train, God urged her to go into the slums of Calcutta to help the poorest of the poor. Two years later, after getting the permission of Pius XII, she entered the streets of the Motijhil slum in sandals and a sara with five rupees that the Archbishop of Calcutta had given her. Soon known as 'Mother Teresa' and widely publicised by the journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, Sister Mary Teresa became a household name; a by-word for self sacrifice and charitable works.

What really caught the public imagination more than anything else was the well-scrubbed shed known as Nirmal Hriday. Nirmal Hriday is the place where Mother Teresa's nuns bring destitute people whom they find dying in the alleys and middens of Calcutta. Because it is by washing away the filth and dressing the beggars' sores that the nuns can minister to the wounds and suffering of Christ, the dying paupers are privileged to be able to play a vital role in the Roman Catholic drama. The emaciated, ulcerated, stinking and frequently incontinent bundles of rags neatly arranged on stretcher beds provide the nuns with ample opportunities for humanity and sacrifice. Never once have they been tempted to participate in the struggle to bring this nauseating suffering to an end. Instead, the nuns of the Missionaries of Charity thrive among the city's 40,000 lepers, spiritually feeding off the hundreds of thousands of utterly destitute men, women and children.

Of course the charitable ideal has a more political aspect. 'It was a horrifying sight', said Mother Teresa on her arrival in India in 1928, 'if our people could only see all this they would stop grumbling about their own misfortunes and offer up thanks to God for blessing them with such abundance'. What might be called the Pollyanna Factor is indeed very important. Helping those who are less fortunate than oneself enables everyone to look on the bright side. Even the living corpses at Calcutta's house for dying can reassure themselves with the thought that at least their cadavers will not be thrown in the Hoogly river to be chewed over by snuffling dogs and pecked at by scrawny birds. Somebody is always worse off than oneself! It is a useful thought for dampening the spirits of those who might be tempted to whinge, protest, or even hit back.

No doubt this is why during the republican hunger-strikes of 1981 Mother Teresa attempted to persuade those fighting British imperialism in Ireland to give up their struggle. People should accept their lot in life; charity will alleviate their suffering. This is the gospel according to the Catholic hierarchy. Consequently, enormous numbers of people at risk from HIV infection throughout the world must not protect themselves from Aids during intercourse because the Pope says condoms are sinful. A sexual act must have the potential of making a women pregnant or it should not take place. Because of this millions of women must have abortions. And, because the Catholic Church opposes abortion, millions of women must risk death and injury undergoing DIY or amateur abortions.

It would be wrong to imagine that mother Teresa herself is motivated by anything other than a desire for sacrifice. What is repellent about her and her nuns is their sincerity. They do live meagre lives. They do work hard in appalling conditions. By carrying their sacrificial burden of prayer they promote obedience to God, obedience to popes and cardinals, obedience to police chiefs, generals and employers. As Malcolm Muggeridge said of Mother Teresa, 'Ecclesiastical authority is something she accepts in the same unquestioning way that peasants accept the weather, or

sailors storms at sea.' It is in this imperturbable resignation in the face of famine, disease and warfare that Mother Teresa reveals her truly medieval spirit. Charity rightfully belongs to an age when there were no effective remedies against failing harvests and outbreaks of plague. Charity made sense when poverty was unavoidable.

But today the charitable impulse always has the political function of persuading people that we are really doing all that can realistically be done to combat misery. Charity sustains the *Blue Peter* philosophy of life where the nuns of the Missionaries of Charity use their old matchboxes to issue pills to the destitute, and store clean boiled water in old bottles that have been collected by the more prosperous citizens of Calcutta. Invariably charity involves acceptance, if not a defence, of the causes of shortages, misery and poverty.

The charitable seem to think that we'll all feel very much better if we simply accept prevailing conditions. If we collect enough silver paper, build the coin tower on the bar high enough, run as far and as fast as possible, or hang glide over the crater of a lively volcano, we will enhance our sense of community involvement as well as helping the needy. Mother Teresa is there to remind us all that sacrifice is a good idea too, but for most of the time charity can assume the guise of a peculiarly heartening species of family entertainment. The charitable impulse makes us beg for what can and should be ours. It is a thoroughly repulsive feeling. It is a feeling that enables us to accept the unacceptable and, to tolerate the intolerable. Make no mistake about it, charity will pluck your heart strings, blunt your critical faculties, and acclimatise you to the idea that you should thank God, or at least your lucky stars, that you are not one of those who is less fortunate than oneself.