

The Second Miracle of Mother Teresa

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This story, gentle reader, is full of lies, but facts should not be allowed to come in the way of reportage, so I will tell you what I saw in the first week of March in a dark room in Kolkata, India.

On March 1, the Vatican decided to confer sainthood on Sister Alphonsa, a nun from Kerala, making her the first Indian to be canonized. Marco Tosatti, Vatican correspondent for the Italian daily *La Stampa*, declared, “Having a 100% Indian saint is a source of pride and shows that Christianity is now deeply rooted in India – it is not something that comes from outside.”

The miracle that made Alphonsa eligible for sainthood – one is required for beatification, two for canonization - was the healing of one-year-old Ginil, whose father Joseph placed him on Sister Alphonsa’s tomb and prayed for hours. That night, Ginil, who was born a cripple, began to walk, and the miracle was subsequently approved by the Vatican.

Catholics in Kottayam, where Sister Alphonsa was born, were ecstatic at the news. Unfortunately, I was not in Kottayam that day but in Kolkata with Sister Shanti of the Missionaries of Charity (MoC), who have been anxiously awaiting sainthood for their founder, Mother Teresa. After a first miracle ensured her beatification, the Mother’s canonization has been delayed by the absence of a second one. Sister Nirmala, the head of MoC, has often said that the MoC is in no hurry, and that God will choose his own time for the second miracle of Mother Teresa.

Sister Shanti, however, was distraught that day in March. She grumbled, “Mother Teresa is a Nobel Laureate, yet she has been beaten to sainthood by a nobody. How many people outside Kerala have heard of Sister Alphonsa?”

Sister Shanti (name changed, because her views do not reflect the MoC position, and neither do her actions, as you will soon see) was born in Dangram, 460 miles north-east of Kolkata, where she made the acquaintance Monica Besra, the woman whose tumour was miraculously healed by a medallion of Mother Teresa in 1998, leading to the Mother’s beatification.

When I reminded Sister Shanti of the two-miracle rule followed strictly by the Vatican, Sister Parvati, who had just joined us, complained, “Every pandit in my village claims a dozen miracles. A fakir in Kalighat can cure asthma, diabetes and heart-disease by hugging, touching or chanting. Even Sai Baba produces gold chains from his sleeves, and

millions in Kolkata saw stone idols of Ganesh drink milk. Is Mother the only saint in this country who cannot perform miracles?

Sister Shanti said, “The Pope should consider the geography of India – it is not a small city like the Vatican. A large country needs two saints - one in the south and one in the north.”

Sister Parvati (name changed) whispered, “This is discrimination.”

“We liked John Paul II,” said Sister Shanti, reminding me that under the rules instituted by the previous Pope, martyrs – those killed because of their Catholic faith - could be beatified even if they did not perform a miracle. “Who can argue that Mother Teresa is not a martyr? Granted, she was not attacked for her faith, but did she not suffer for it? It is a pity that the Monica Besra miracle was wasted on beatification, when it could have been used to canonize her.”

“Could you help us move the Vatican?” Sister Parvati asked.

I earnestly took up their cause and published their views in *La Stampa*, taking care to conceal their identities. The response from the Vatican was swift and stern. The Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, the office that oversees sainthood applications, issued a statement:

Mr. Sai Baba of India is able to inspire awe among the poor, the ignorant and the gullible with his magic tricks, but the Catholic population of the world is educated, intelligent and skeptical, and its miracles are strictly scientific. Every miracle is certified by the Consulta Medica, which comprises more than a hundred doctors, not all Catholic, who examine CT scans, x-rays and medical reports. Only when they agree that the hand of God has prevailed where science faltered is a miracle believed to have occurred.

Back in Kolkata, I found Sister Shanti unfazed by the rebuke. She showed me a thick sheaf of papers. “The Consulta Medica has a hundred doctors, and here I have applications from a thousand – from Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai. They all have medical degrees, and they will certify any miracle that the Mother chooses to perform. They are ready to examine CT scans and x-rays, blood, stool and urine samples, hair follicles, anything you give them.”

Sister Parvati added, “But we have promised that they will be taken to Rome for the canonization ceremony.”

“Has a miracle already occurred?” I asked, disappointed that I had been in Rome and missed the moment.

“It will occur soon,” Sister Shanti replied.

I was amazed at her prescience, and said so.

In response, Sister Shanti led me to a peepul tree behind the Kalighat temple, passing a patch of dirt full of beggars. After shooing them away, she carefully pulled away a branch and revealed a small door in what looked like a solid white-washed wall. We bent over and entered a dark, stuffy room. Inside, thirty-five beds were arranged in neat rows, a beggar lying in each. The sounds of their coughing filled the room. Sister Shanti handed me a mask. “Pulmonary tuberculosis,” she warned, even as she herself strode down the aisle fearlessly, face exposed.

I will not tax your sensibilities, gentle reader, with a description of what I saw. The men lay sprawled in their beds in various stages of decay – cheeks taut, eyes set in deep hollows, frames reduced to skeletons.

“Perhaps a doctor might cure some of them?” I asked, being unfamiliar with the prognosis for such a disease.

“No doctors,” Sister Shanti said firmly. “The Vatican is very strict about the rules. Those cured must not have sought medical care, or at least must have given it up well before the miracle.”

“The rules also require the victim to pray for the saint’s intercession,” I pointed out. “Do these men ever pray?”

“Yes, but not with words,” she said. Sitting down on a bed without any concern for her safety, she gently turned to his side the bundle of bones sprawled on it. The beggar smiled and proudly pointed to his waist, where a medallion bearing Mother Teresa’s likeness was tucked into his dhoti. Sister Shanti looked at me with tears in her eyes. “This was exactly how Monica Besra sought the Mother’s intercession in 1998.”

A worrisome thought clouded my mind. “The Mother does not cure everyone who prays. Won’t many of these men die?”

“Most, perhaps all,” she allowed.

“What will you do then?”

Sister Shanti opened her arms wide. “There is no shortage of beggars in Kolkata. If we run out, we will bring them from all over Bengal, Bihar, even from UP or Delhi. We will not rest until we see the second miracle of Mother Teresa.”

About The Author

Sujit Saraf’s novel, *The Peacock Throne*, was published recently by Sceptre.