
Missionaries of Charity: her entire existence at the service of the least

On Friday September 5, 1997, twenty-five years ago, Mother Teresa, the nun who devoted herself entirely to the poorest of the poor, died in Calcutta surrounded by the love of 'her' Missionaries of Charity, the religious sisters of the congregation she founded in 1950. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, beatified on October 19, 2003 by John Paul II, to whom she was united by fraternal affection and esteem, canonised by Pope Francis on September 4, 2016 during the Jubilee of Mercy, the Mother, as her nuns refer to her still today, embraced all the sufferings of humanity, sharing the daily life of every poor person she met, bowing down to the those suffering various forms of poverty. Today, September 5th, the Church celebrates the feast day of St Teresa of Calcutta. Liturgies will be recited all over the world, anticipated in recent days by a novena to the "little pencil in the hand of the Lord", as she liked to define herself. "I am a little pencil in God's hands - she would say - He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it. The pencil has only to be allowed to be used." Holy Mass will be celebrated this evening also in Rome's San Gregorio al Celio church, near one of the houses of the Missionaries of Charity, the second one opened by Mother Teresa herself in the capital and where she would be staying at least twice a year. The congregation's first house in Europe, inaugurated in 1970, is located in the district of Tor Fiscale, precisely at vicolo Torre del Fiscale 73. It is a low-rise building, painted white and surrounded by a grapevine pergola. The Mother of the Poor and the nuns constructed it themselves and lived there until 1973. It now houses the Missionary Fathers of Charity, a religious community founded by the Saint in 1984. The room where Mother Teresa lodged during her visits to Rome is intact. It is a small room with all the essentials, a bed, a desk, a chair, a crucifix and other precious relics. A similar room can be found in the house in San Gregorio al Celio, a stone's throw from the Circus Maximus, where the Sisters in white saris trimmed with three blue stripes - symbolising the vows of the order: poverty, obedience and service to the poor - shelter and care for the homeless. "Our charism is to serve the poorest of the poor", they say with overwhelming simplicity, unwilling to be interviewed, preferring to carry out their mission far from the public eye. A few days ago, during the novena, they prayed "that the Mother may assist and help all the Missionaries to live this charism and apostolate as Jesus asked her to do. May she watch over us and intercede so that we may be a reflection of her actions and experiences on the streets of the world. It is the Spirit that makes the difference, we follow her example to reach Jesus." There are about seventy Sisters in Rome, spread out in various communities from the city centre to the suburbs, even on the outskirts of the Rome. They care for the disabled, single mothers, the homeless, anyone in need of help. In addition to the Celio shelter home, they run shelters in Rome's quarters of Tor Bella Monaca, Primavalle and at the Vatican, where is located 'Dono di Maria', the home in the Piazza del Sant'Uffizio donated to Mother Teresa by John Paul II. The Sisters undergoing formation, are housed in the Via Casilina home, while the contemplative branch of the Congregation is housed in Dragoncello, in Rome's metropolitan area. The Missionaries of Charity's service is not 'confined' to shelter homes. "It is important to go out and reach out to our neighbour, to the poor who stand on the street corners of every city in the world," they say. "Just as Jesus came to us in the flesh with the Incarnation, it is our task to reach out to our fellow other. This too is a reflection of God's love." The day of a Missionary is "an interweaving of prayer and service," the nuns say. "We start in the early morning hours with prayer, then we go out to carry out our service outside. We then return to pray to be God's love and compassion through service." In this too, the Sisters pursue the teachings of the Mother who, as those who knew her tell us, "would switch from contemplation to action in the space of a few moments". The Missionaries of Charity houses have a small chapel with a crucifix beside it bearing the inscription 'I thirst', the words of Jesus on Calvary, the same words that Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, Mother Teresa's birth name, felt in her heart on September 10, 1946.

"Prayer is the source of strength,"

the Sisters remark. "It is only by bowing down to Jesus that love can be drawn and borne witness to through service to neighbour, just as Mother Teresa did. A love that humbles itself, serving others, capable of transforming people, for no one can remain indifferent to love".

Roberta Pumpo