

WHY MOTHER TERESA SHOULD NOT BE A SAINT

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by Christopher Hitchens -- In the good old/bad old days, the procedure for making a former human being into a saint was well understood. There had to be an interval of at least seven years after the death before beatification - the first stage in the process - could even be proposed. (This was to insure against any gusts of popular enthusiasm for a local figure who might later prove to be a phoney)

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There had to be proof of two miracles, attributable to the intercession of the deceased.

And there had to be a hearing, at which the advocatus Diaboli, or Devil's Advocate, would be appointed by the Church to make the strongest possible case against the nominee.

I am not a Roman Catholic and the saint-making procedures of the Vatican are really none of my business. But it strikes me as odd that none of the above rules have been followed in the case of the newly-beatified woman who called herself "Mother" Teresa of Calcutta.

She was first put forward for beatification only four years after her death. Only one miracle has been required of her, and duly found to have been performed.

And, instead of appointing a Devil's Advocate, the Vatican invited me to be a witness for the Evil One, and expected me to do the job pro bono.

Their reason for asking was that I made a documentary called Hell's Angel, and wrote a short book entitled The Missionary Position, in which I reviewed Mother Teresa's career as if she had been an ordinary person.

I discovered that she had taken money from rich dictators like the Duvalier gang in Haiti, had been a friend of poverty rather than a friend of the poor, had never given any account of the huge sums of money donated to her, had railed against birth-control in the most overpopulated city on the planet and had been the spokeswoman for the most extreme dogmas of religious fundamentalism.

Actually, it's boasting to say that I "discovered" any of this. It was all there in plain sight for anyone to notice. But in the age of celebrity, nobody had troubled to ask if such a global reputation was truly earned or was simply the result of brilliant public relations.

"Wait a minute," said a TV host in Washington a few nights ago, when I debated all this with Mr John Donahue of the Catholic Defence League. "She built hospitals." No, sir, you wait a minute.

Mother Teresa was given, to our certain knowledge, many tens of millions of pounds. But she never built any hospitals. She claimed to have built almost 150 convents, for nuns joining her own order, in several countries. Was this where ordinary donors thought their money was going?

Furthermore, she received some of this money from the Duvaliers, and from Mr Charles Keating

of the notorious Lincoln Savings and Loan of California, and both these sources had acquired the money by - how shall I put it? - borrowing money from the poor and failing to give it back.

How could this possibly

be true? Doesn't everyone know that she spent her time kissing the sores of lepers and healing the sick? Ah, but what everyone knows isn't always true. You were more likely to run into Mother Teresa being photographed with Nancy Reagan, or posing with Princess Diana, or in the first-class cabin of Air India (where she had a permanent reservation).

You could see her in Ireland,

campaigning against a law which would permit civil divorce and remarriage (though she publicly defended Princess Diana's right to be divorced).

You could encounter her

on the podium in Stockholm, accepting yet another huge cheque and telling the Nobel audience that the greatest threat to world peace was... abortion. (Since she added that contraception was morally as bad as abortion, she essentially held the view that condoms and coils were a deadly threat to world peace. The Church does not insist on that degree of fundamentalism.)

And when she got sick,

she would check herself into the Mayo Clinic or some other temple of American medicine. As one who has visited her primitive "hospice" for the dying in Calcutta, I should call that a wise decision.

Nobody would go there except to check out, in one way or another.

"Give a man a reputation

as an early riser," said Mark Twain "and that man can sleep till noon." Give a woman a reputation for holiness and compassion and apparently nothing she does can cause her to lose it.

Of Albanian descent and

a keen nationalist, she visited the country when it was still a brutal dictatorship and "the world's first atheist state" to pay tribute to its grim Stalinist leader.

She fawned upon her shrewd

protector Indira Gandhi at a time when the Indian government was imposing forced sterilisations. Above all, she urged the poor to think of their sufferings as a gift from God.

And she opposed the only

thing that has ever been known to cure poverty - the empowerment of women in poor countries by giving them some say in their own reproduction.

Now, so they tell us, a

woman in Bengal has recovered from a tumour after praying to Mother Teresa. I have received information from both the family and the physicians that says it was good medical treatment that did the job. Who knows?

I must say that I don't

believe in miracles but if they do exist there are deserving cases which don't, in spite of fervent prayers, ever benefit from them.

When Mr Donahue was asked

if he believed the statutory second miracle would occur, he said that he thought it would. I said that I thought so, too.

But I have already seen

a collective hallucination occur as regards Mother Teresa, though it was produced by the less supernatural methods of modern, uncritical mass media.

Christopher Hitchens

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DO YOU THINK MOTHER

TERESA SHOULD BE A SAINT?

YES: PHONE

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NO: PHONE

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Telephone calls cost 10p

Or send us your views:

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