



---

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM MOTHER TERESA'S LIFE: A TRUE SERVANT-LEADER

**Dr. Deepalee Ambalal Mahida**  
Assistant Professor, M. B. Patel College of Education,  
Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat (India)

### 1.1 MOTHER TERESA- THE SAINT OF THE GUTTERS

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is termed as the century of images. Of utmost importance in this day and age is the image one projects to the world. Politicians obscure self-serving motives behind dazzling smiles; super models hide anorexic bodies behind layers of makeup. Today perhaps no figure has come to symbolize undiluted goodness, piety and compassion more than the small elderly Albanian nun Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu known to millions as Mother Teresa (Fosl, 199. p.115)



Her work has opened the hearts of a huge mass of people to the message of Jesus Christ. Her greatest impact on society was to bring an awareness that love is worth nothing unless it is given free. Just over six years after her death, Pope John Paul II beatified Mother Teresa.

What can be derived from an analysis of Mother Teresa as a leader? She has been described as an integral leader who requires a multi-disciplinary, multi-level and developmental approach. She is the global icon of selfless social service. The major life events of Mother Teresa's life are analysed focusing on leadership lessons. The event analysis is given as under.

### 1.2 EVENT ANALYSIS OF MOTHER TERESA'S LIFE

#### 1.2.1 Agnes' Religious backdrop from her early childhood

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was the youngest child of the three children born to Nikola and Dranfile Bojaxhiu. She was born on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1910 in Skopje, capital of the Republic of Macedonia. The meaning of the word 'Gonxha' is 'Flower bud' in Albanian. Although she was born on 26<sup>th</sup> August, she considered 27<sup>th</sup> August, the day she was baptized, to be her true birthday.

Her father who was involved in Albanian politics died in 1919 when she was eight years old. After her father's death, her mother raised her as a Roman Catholic. The Bojaxhiu family was musical. As a child, Agnes was interested in singing, playing on instruments and even, composing music. Agnes joined the church choir and she and her sister became known as the church's two 'nightingales.' Agnes was fond of praying alone in the chapel and the periods spent there appear to have been a source of both physical and spiritual sustenance to her for the remainder of the year. They also gave her the confirmation of her vocation that she sought.

---

**Situation:** Agnes' Early Childhood

**Major Leadership Qualities:** Thoughtful, Religious life

**Expressions/phrases showing emergence of leadership qualities:** Be only all for God, the family that prays together, stays together.

**Association with a Leadership theory:** From the early childhood, Agnes showed various traits like multifarious interest in varied activities, participation in community activities and above all God abiding faith. So it can be associated with the trait theory of leadership.

**Educational Implications:** One does not need money, power, an overbearing voice or a tottering society to change the world. Instead, all that is needed is a conviction, a heart of humanity and a life of devotion.

### 1.2.2 Agnes' confrontation on receiving the call to 'belong completely to God

By age 12, Agnes was convinced that she should commit herself to a religious life. Although at 12, she believed that she had received her life's calling, she did nothing more about it. For the next six years, she continued her schooling and participated in cultural activities.

Fr. Franjo Jambrekovic, a young Jesuit priest was destined to exert a great influence on Agnes. She joined the Sodality of children of Mary established by Fr. Franjo. As a Jesuit, Fr. Franjo passed on to his parishioners the news of the missionary work undertaken by Yugoslavian Jesuits in Bengal, India. The zeal with which he spoke of the Jesuit missionaries in India sparked a renewed series of devotion in Agnes. The more she heard about the mission in India, the more she was drawn to the possibility of working there.

Trying to decide what to do with her life, she turned to Fr. Franjo Jambrekovic for advice. During their discussions, she asked how one knew whether the calling to serve God was genuine. Fr. Franjo explained that if one was truly called that person would feel deep joy at the decision that there could be little doubt. These remarks served as the compass which pointed the direction in her life.

**Situation: Receiving the call to serve God and her confrontation**

**Major leadership qualities:** Reflections over one's thoughts, seeking advice for doubts, dreaming of active contribution to the life of community.

**Expressions / Phrases showing emergence of leadership:** Agnes was fond of praying alone, she was a popular child with an appealing sense of fun, Agnes impressed all those around her, At school she had done well, she had harboured hopes, a passionate lover of poetry.

**Association with a leadership theory:** Agnes' humble beginnings in Yugoslavia and her fervent desire to serve God and humanity can be associated with servant leadership. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. The conscious choice brings one to aspire, to lead. At its core, servant leadership is a long term the transformation approach to life and work- in essence a way of being- which has the potential of creating positive change throughout the society.

**Educational Implications:** Agnes did not ask someone else to go and live life among the poor before she did. She inspired others through her own personal commitment. Sacrifice was necessary; and she had minimal training. Yet her passion was visible and others were drawn to her mission. Leadership is about inspiring others to see the possibilities, sometimes move into the uncertain and embrace change.

### 1.2.3 Agnes' decision to leave her parental home and the reaction of the family to it.

One day after returning home from a visit to the shrine, she informed her mother that she had made up her mind to become a nun. It was at the shrine of the Madonna that Agnes sought affirmation to her decision to become a nun.

When her mother Drana came to know about her daughter's decision, she shut herself in a room. When she came out of her room, she gave her daughter blessing but also warned her that in choosing to become a nun, she must give herself totally and faithfully to God. She initially refused her consent not because she was surprised and disapproved but because she wanted to test the strength of her daughter's conviction.

---

When her brother Lazar came to know about Agnes's vocation, he was surprised. He wrote her a somewhat imperious letter enquiring whether she really knew what she was doing. Agnes's defiant response to her brother was "you are an officer serving a king with two million subjects. But I am serving the king of the whole world".

All too soon, the time came for Agnes to leave the house. As she made her way to the train, her mother and sister returned to Skopje. Waving good bye Agnes bid farewell to her mother and sister whom she never saw again.

**Situation: Parting from the parental home to join Loreto sisters**

**Major Leadership qualities:** Firmness of decision, Love for the humanity, Service to God, Tremendous will power, Perservant, Disciplined.

**Expressions/phrases showing emergence of leadership qualities:** Agnes would not be swayed from her decision, dutifully struggling with a new life, praying that her weight would not be too heavy for the puller to bear.

**Association with a leadership theories:** One of the first principles Mother Teresa lived by as a leader was her vision. She realised that she was the voice of her vision. She believed in her vision and lived it every day in everything she did. Transformational leaders have a clear vision of the future state of their organization. Mother Teresa's vision was clear, understandable, beneficial and energy-creating.

**Educational Implication:** When there is some work to be done, decisions to be taken, these seemed to be no room for sentimental speculation.

**1.2.4 Mother Teresa's initial struggle while serving in the slums of Calcutta**

After receiving a basic medical training in the Holy Family Hospital, Patna, she ventured into slums of Calcutta. Initially, she started a school in Motijhil. The school was an open space among the huts, the children squatted in the dirt. Mother Teresa scratched letters of the Bengali alphabet in the mud with a stick. Soon the number of pupils attending classes multiplied.

She was keeping a record of her early efforts in the slums at the request of the Archbishop. It is still hard to imagine the tremendous loneliness that Mother Teresa would have felt as she made her way through the slums of Calcutta. For someone like her who had been accustomed to the peace of life, the reality must have been jarring. But her faith in God was absolute. She kept up her work despite the exhaustion and pain she fell at the end of the day.

By January 4, 1949, less than two weeks after she first set out, Mother Teresa had a schoolhouse of over 50 students and 3 teachers to help her. Yet the group that assembled around Mother Teresa was not a former congregation. As described by the archbishop Perier, it was a simply a collection of 'pious women living together' who were not entitled to have the sacrament reserved in their convent at Creek Lane. Her work was still subject to the decision of Archbishop as was the application to Rome for the formal erection of the congregation.

**Situation:** Her activities in Motijhil and Creek Lane of Calcutta

**Major Leadership Qualities**

Love for the Humanity, Love/ Compassion, Empathy, Team building, Encouragement.

**Expressions/phrases showing emergence of leadership qualities**

Mother Teresa lived very much in the immediate moment, Rejection of a dying woman opened her eyes to a pressing need placing her trust in Divine providence, Mother Teresa persuaded her to channel her youthful energies.

---

---

### Association with a leadership theory

Mother Teresa saw Jesus in everyone, every wound she bandaged, every hand she held; every dying soul she offered dignity to. So it can be associated with Transformational leadership which emphasizes nobler goals than immediate profit, articulates mission and vision.

### Educational Implications

Each time a person stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. These ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest wall of oppression and resistance.

#### 1.2.5 Leprosy outreach programme in Calcutta

The need to alleviate the plight of leprosy sufferers had long been a concern of Mother Teresa. Leprosy constituted a particularly pressing problems in and around Calcutta where poor nutrition, overcrowding and inadequate medical attention determined the tragic struggle for survival of so many. Mother Teresa realised that combating of the irrational fears and myths associated with leprosy are more difficult than the treatment of the actual symptoms of the disease.

Earlier, the Gobra Hospital which housed many of the city's leprosy cases had closed, leaving thousands of patients with no place to go. As if in answer to her prayers some American benefactors donated an ambulance to the Missionaries of Charity. This was the first mobile leprosy clinic. In time, eight treatment stations were established throughout Calcutta offering hope to the city's 30,000 people afflicted by leprosy.

In 1961, Mother Teresa received a gift from the Indian government: 34 acres of land located about 200 miles from Calcutta . With funds raised by German Children singing at a charity concert, Mother Teresa began construction of Shantinagar- The place of peace for lepers. It was a place where lepers could live and die with dignity, where they could work gainfully and lead constructive lives.

**Situation:** Her experiences and struggle for leprosy patient

**Major Leadership qualities:** Compassion, humility, Community building

### Expressions/phrases showing emergence of leadership

Mother Teresa encouraged her sisters, All I can see is Jesus, Mother Teresa was firmly convinced.

### Association with a leadership theory

Mother Teresa gave everything she had of herself and became a world changer and a history maker. At some point in her life, she decided that the needs of the poor people in India was far more important than her comfort level and it launched her into her work of ministering to the poor, sick and destitute. So it can be associated with social entrepreneurship.

Social Entrepreneurship is defined as the innovative use of resource to explore and exploit opportunities that need a social need in a sustainable manner. (Mair and Marti 2004). Allvord et al. (2004) defined social entrepreneurs as individuals who are catalyst for social transformation.

### Educational Implications

Education implies nurturing young learners to become healthy and helpful social beings. Educational institutions can run successfully /effectively in collaboration with and cooperation from other agencies in the society. So educational leaders need to develop these qualities.

#### 1.2.6: Mother Teresa received the Nobel Peace Prize

By the 1970s, Mother Teresa had emerged as a powerful figure around the world. The article of Times Magazine entitled as "Saints among us" provided an overview of Mother Teresa's work and suggested that many supporters considered her a living saint - a title Mother Teresa herself rejected. By this time,

---

---

Mother Teresa had received numerous accolades and awards. On October 16, 1979 came the announcement that many had waited for. The Nobel Committee awarded the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize to Mother Teresa.

Standing in front of the Motherhouse, she spoke to the gathering media about the news stating "I am unworthy. I accept the prize in the name of the poor. The prize is the recognition of the poor world. By serving the poor I am serving Him." The celebrations had just begun. Letters of Praise and congratulations also poured in. People believed that by winning the Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa had enhanced the prestige of the award.

The usual celebratory banquet was cancelled at Mother Teresa's request. She said that she would rather use the money for those who were really in need of a meal and the £3000 earmarked for it was duly added to the prize money together. With a further £6,00 raised by Norwegian Young people. It was to be used for building 200 houses for lepers.

**Situation:** Nobel Peace Prize Lecture.

### Major Leadership qualities

Capacity to transcend

### Expressions/phrases showing emergence of leadership

Dedicating her life wholly to Christ, she was a counterforce to the power mania, made no compromise on her convictions.

### Association with a leadership theory

Mother Teresa's contribution for improving the lives of the "poorest of the poor" can be termed as transformational approach to leadership. Mother Teresa, as a transformational leader acts as a skillful change agent and empowers the followers by redefining the organization's vision and mission. Uniquely charismatic, Mother Teresa showed unconditional devotion to the higher cause of helping and loving the poor that inspired others to follow her foot steps. Like a true social entrepreneur she improved and gave meaning to life for those at the bottom of the pyramid.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bryman,A. (1992). *Charisma and leadership in organisations*. London. :Sage
- Cantor, D. W., & Bernay, T. (1992). *Women in power*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Chaudhari A. (2001). *Count your Chickens before they hatch*, New Delhi: Vikas publications.
- Covey,S.R.(1990).*Principle-Centered Leadership*. New York: Fireside.