

The Work of Mother Teresa in Belfast

by Fr. Desmond Wilson

The Belfast experiment by Mother Teresa's sisters is over. Suddenly, and to most people unexpectedly, they departed in September, 1973 leaving behind some work completed, some incomplete or merely projected and many friendships bruised by their sudden departure.

The Missionary Sisters of Charity, to give them their proper name, came to Belfast with almost equal suddenness and unexpected by most people. About two years ago Mother Teresa expressed a desire to visit Belfast to see for herself what was happening and to try to help. It was by no means clear what she could do but she had in mind to create some ecumenical project by which she believed that the love of God might soften the antagonism there. She was advised by a number of people that what she had in mind was not possible. This was not simply a counsel of despair; it was advice based upon bitter experience. Already a dedicated community worker who had patiently and courageously worked in Cyprus for the Reconciliation of Greek and Turkish Cypriots had declared that Belfast was not right even for that kind of experiment.

Mother Teresa, however, was told that she should come to Belfast because her coming would give some encouragement to people who badly needed it. She came on a flying visit on a Saturday afternoon and on Sunday morning attended Mass in the church of Corpus Christi in Ballymurphy. The people at once took her to their hearts and into their homes. By Sunday afternoon she had obtained permission from the Bishop of the Diocese to bring some of her Sisters to work there. Soon, with the enthusiastic help of local residents and others, the Sisters were installed in a Belfast Corporation house. There was a great deal of publicity and much expectation. It was the first time members of a religious community had so clearly shown their desire to be with the people.

During the following months the Sisters worked quietly, learning a great deal about the situation and forming many friendships with amazing rapidity. Soon there were classes in needlework, typing, singing, and discussion groups involving young people and their parents. By the end of a year it seemed that the experiment was a happy and successful one.

It came as a surprise to those who were closely connected with the work they were doing that the Sisters' own culture and background seemed so firmly and decisively left behind. When the woman worked under their guidance they produced work based upon Celtic designs. When the children performed they recited and sang the poems and

music of Ireland or of the universal church. Yet to many they were still the Indian Sisters who had come to Ireland with the title 'Missionary'. In a country which had for generations sent missionaries to many countries abroad could such an experiment be acceptable or successful?

Each one of the Sisters had some special qualification. But it was difficult to find out from them just how good their qualifications were. It was difficult to impress upon them that in Ireland the possession of qualifications was very important. They believed in simplicity and humility. They themselves had some doubt about the need for their presence or their work in Ireland. After all there were 32 dioceses in different parts of the world who wanted them and whose needs were very much greater. Yet in Belfast there was a problem of loss of dignity and of a quite terrible denial of the love of God and neighbour. That this was so was enough to convince them that they ought to stay.

Mother Teresa herself was very conscious of the fact that in Belfast the great problem was not so much poverty as impoverishment. That is to say the problem was not shortage of money or of food as in the third world but the misuse and waste of it. True enough there are families in Belfast as there are in many other places who are poor but this poverty could be cured by good government and good government is not so disastrously far away as it is in, say, the Latin American countries. The Sisters, therefore, geared their work to instruction and discussion. They did not have to pick people up from the streets starving but they did have to help them to achieve dignity.

One of the Sisters scripted and produced a pageant based upon the Bible and acted very beautifully by the children. It was so good that some of those who saw it wanted to have it performed in other parts of the city. The Sisters were too modest and in any case nobody outside the area seemed particularly to want it. Perhaps the shadow of the starving children in Calcutta clung too closely to them as they went about their work in Belfast.

The Sisters attracted a great deal of voluntary support. It was a new thing that any religious community should take up residence in so small a house. One of the first things one is told on entering any such situation is of course that the place will be filled with people looking for something. But what the well-intentioned counsellors failed to think of is that such a place may also be filled with people with excellent ideas who have never had a chance before even to discuss such things let alone carry them out. The Sisters' house was never short of painters, decorators, carpenters or anyone else from the district whose services were needed. One got the impression that the people could not do enough for the Sisters. It was probably because the very fact that they wanted to be there was a sign of friendship which was very much needed. After all there are more than 500

vacant houses and flats in the whole area, abandoned by people who can't stand it any longer.

Apart from any possible achievement culturally or by formal religious instruction or discussion the friendship achieved by their coming into such an area in Belfast was sufficient to make the experiment worthwhile.

Why then did they leave so suddenly? One of the tragedies of the whole episode was that the people were not taken into the confidence of those who arranged the affair. If the people in Ballymurphy or Springhill had been told that there was great need of Mother Teresa's Sisters elsewhere they would not only have given them up but would have helped them on their way. But they were never given the chance. There were some few people in Belfast who believed that it was unseemly that Missionary Sisters should come from India or anywhere else; there were others who thought that their being there was a reflection upon the well-established religious communities of whom there are many in Northern Ireland. There were some, again, few, who were afraid of the ecumenical contacts they were making—a small group of Anglican sisters and another of Anglican brothers have arrived since Mother Teresa first came and the support for Mother Teresa has come from Quakers, Presbyterians, Anglicans, etc. There is absolutely no doubt that in Belfast where life had become in so many ways viciously irreligious Mother Teresa's Sisters in the heart of what many people referred to insultingly as a Catholic ghetto were a focal point towards which were attracted many people who very much needed an excuse to work alongside each other. For that reason alone Mother Teresa's experiment was a success and should have been allowed to continue.

As the Sisters left their home in Belfast the people made it clear that they were filled with sorrow and anger at their going. There need be no doubt that whoever was responsible for withdrawing them acted in a manner which was cruel, arrogant, and unnecessarily so.

Whether the person responsible was Mother Teresa or someone else is not the real problem.

The real problem is that such things can still happen in the church.