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ASIA/INDIA - "Mother Teresa, a miracle for the world" - Interview with Sister Mary, Superior General of the Missionaries of Charity

Calcutta (Agenzia Fides) – It's Jesus who leads the steps of the Missionaries of Charity, who leads them in their missionary spirit and work: 100 years after the birth of Mother Teresa (an event which will be celebrated on August 26, 2010), it is this "trust in Divine Providence" that is one of the essential features that the Congregation of Sisters with the “white sari" live, in respect and memory of their founder, who has been called "a miracle in the history of mankind." This is what has been revealed by German-born Sister Mary Prema, present Superior General of the Order, in an interview with Fides through the mediation of "Missio Austria,” the Pontifical Mission Societies in Austria.

Sister Prema, you are responsible for a religious order in the world that takes care of the poor and sick. Why, in your opinion, does God allow suffering?

Suffering cannot be a punishment. And yet, God allows it. We can take advantage of suffering to approach him and ask him for the grace to endure it and thus be able to live this suffering well. Suffering often comes as the consequence of our decisions. However, it is also a consequence of a passing world/nature that is fragile. Of course, suffering can also be caused by things that are beyond our control. Natural disasters, such as the earthquake in Haiti or floods in Pakistan, are an example. But, I am convinced that God allows suffering because it can transform us into better and more profound people. Thus, we are able to understand that this world and this life are not the ultimate goal, but that there is something more: the life of the soul which - if one really accepts suffering - is purified.

Mother Teresa distinguished between physical suffering and spiritual suffering. Can you tell us a little more about how your work today takes them both into account?

The greatest suffering is spiritual suffering, the suffering of the soul. Here in Calcutta, we see that it is much easier for us to care for physical needs, to carry out corporal works of mercy: wash dying people, provide medical care to the sick, and help the homeless in our homes. The services of spiritual charity require a much larger commitment. We can respond to the suffering of the soul above all with our prayers. It is important that God's grace touches people with such suffering. Likewise, it is also important that we pray for this same reason. Every day we stop for an hour of prayer before the Eucharist. It is crucial for our work. In fact, our work is not a social commitment, but a missionary commitment.

What do you understand with the word “mission”? For Mother Teresa, did this imply "conversion" to the Catholic faith?

Mother Teresa wanted everyone to know and love Jesus. She was convinced that every soul desires Jesus' salvation, whether or not he realizes it. The work of conversion, however, remains a work of God. It is not our task. Only God can convert a soul. Mother Teresa dedicated her own life to the task of loving Jesus and transmitting this love to those around her. That was her only goal. She tried to be faithful to whatever she thought God expected from her in good conscience. Mother Teresa felt that God had called her to carry out a genuine and disinterested service to man, to give her undivided attention to the person who suffers. She was always 100% present and open to the person who she was with at any given moment. She was never interested in big things. She was not concerned with advertising or anything like that. The most important for her was always the

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one-on-one contact with the individual. This, of course, shows her great wisdom.

Can you tell us how Mother Teresa lived in her environment? What was the image that you, Sister Prema, had of Mother Teresa?

She would probably say that her goal was always to convey the experience of Jesus to those around her. This is the legacy she left us. Through her life, her work, her charisma, she brought those around her to God. She did not preach, but she testified with her own life. Even today, many people tell me of their first meeting with Mother Teresa. Perhaps they had seen her for five minutes on the terrace of our motherhouse. But that one moment changed their lives forever. Oftentimes a phrase, a kind word was enough. Many of these people are Hindus. They have not converted to Christianity since they met Mother Teresa. However, they began to see their lives and their work with different eyes and have become other people, living in a different way, based on love and mercy, within their own families. There are many examples.

At 100 years since the birth of Mother Teresa, what do you see as the major challenges for the Congregation in the coming years?

The Missionaries of Charity might seem like a great organization, but we do not make plans for the next ten years. We try to remain open to what God asks of us. Only Jesus will tell me what is the next step. So, in the spirit of Mother, I'm not the one who controls things. God is the one who decides.

Mother Teresa has left indications on the future of the order?

Someone once asked her what would happen when she was no longer alive. Her answer was very dry: "Let me die in peace first!" She never gave us any indications of future plans. Besides the fact that we should always strive to become more holy! This was her constant advice. Today, in the direction of the Order, we work as a group: three other sisters share this task with me. But ultimately, as Superior General, the responsibility for the Order is mine. For this task, I have been able to learn a lot from our founder. The decision process took place in two phases: the first was to discuss and learn about all the possibilities and consequences (decision making), then came the phase for making a choice, in which one makes the decision (decision taking). Mother Teresa listened to all the advice accurately, then withdrew, and then made the decision. She was very good at that.

How are you facing the challenges of the new millennium?

Mother Teresa listened to Jesus and was always open to the new challenges and problems which are found in society. In the 80s, for example, it was HIV/AIDS. She opened a house in New York for the victims of this disease. In the center, she put the accompaniment of patients in a terminal stage. At that time, medicines to control the virus did not even exist. What suffering! Mother Teresa listened to Jesus, but at the same time she also had an open ear to the world's problems. So, we must listen to Jesus and be generous. She was very generous towards God and towards those suffering beside her. In this, we want to imitate her.

What kind of formation do the Sisters receive in preparing for this task?

From the beginning of their formation, the novices have the opportunity to work with the poor in the slums. They receive criteria for caring for the sick and of course, a basic formation in theology, church history, catechism, and Sacred Scripture.

When do you think Mother Teresa will be canonized?

Everyone talks of an acceleration on the path to canonization, for the 100th anniversary of her birth (August 26,

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2010). But I do not think this is so important. Everyone knows that she is a saint - both Hindus and Christians here in Calcutta and in most places where we are present - this is beyond doubt. Everyone expects a miracle...but Mother Teresa was that miracle for the world and humanity. (MS-PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/08/2010)

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