

An inspiration in life, nun serenely faces death

By H. JAMES TOWEY

Mother Teresa of Calcutta has taught the world how to live and love, and now she is teaching the world how to approach death with dignity and fearlessness. At 86, and after several death-defying, if not miraculous, recoveries, Mother Teresa knows that her days on Earth are drawing to a close. She



Towey

has told her Missionaries of Charity nuns and her attending physicians that she does not want any further extraordinary means used to prolong her life. Mother Teresa is readying herself and others for the fact that she may be going home to God soon.

I have known Mother Teresa for 11 years, and to this day I do much of the legal work in the United States for her, her congregation of nuns, and her 30 homes for the poor. When I first met Mother Teresa in Calcutta in August 1985, she bounded out into the reception area with the energy of a school girl — and at that time she was 75. I have never known anyone with such zeal and such limitless joy and energy. Indeed, her indefatigable, cheerful presence in the midst of lepers and AIDS sufferers and the wretched has won over the heart of the world.

But while she is saintly, she is no less mortal than the rest of us. I had the exquisite opportunity to go to Calcutta two months ago to visit Mother Teresa in Woodlands Hospital. She had been taken there after a debilitating bout with malaria and recurrent cardiac arrest. She was not expected to live, and her heart had actually stopped twice in the span of 10 days. Yet Mother Teresa was tranquil and prayerful, clutching her rosary beads like a paratrooper might his ripcord. While flat on her back, Mother Teresa pointed above and said, "I am going home. I am going home to God."

So when doctors suggested that she undergo a risky electric shock treatment to get her heart beat regular, Mother simply said, "No thank you. My heart belongs to God." She said to them, "If something is going to happen to me, I want to be home, not here."

It was not that Mother Teresa was renouncing modern medicine, for in her life she had under-

gone numerous medical interventions. She was simply saying that she was accepting her mortal condition, knowing that her tired body was giving way to the natural process of dying. She was renouncing any further extraordinary medical procedures.



Mother Teresa

Advances in medical technology and treatment have extended human longevity to new lengths in this country. But the problem with modern medicine in America is that we don't know when to stop, and we don't know how to say "no" to procedures which will not lead to a cure, or a quality of life worthy of a human being.

There are no simple formulas to apply to the question of when to say no to modern medicine. However, there is a clear consensus in America that care at the end of life has been "over medicalized." So many people die in hospitals, in intensive care beds, with tubes up their noses and down their throats, even though their prognosis was nil. A full 17 percent of the Medicare budget is spent on so-called "terminal care." Countless families have lingering, unpleasant memories of their loved ones' last days. It is small wonder the assisted suicide movement, which Mother Teresa finds repugnant, has found sympathetic ears. Americans know that our current systems of care at the end of life are often inhumane.

But as Mother Teresa has shown, dying doesn't have to be this way. What is significant in this part of her journey is her acceptance of death as part of her life. She does not fear it, and she does not think she will escape it. She realizes that death is the gate that leads to the eternal love of God, and that death has not ended life, but merely changed it.

While poll after poll indicates that Americans believe in God and believe there is life after death, we often approach death as though we believe in neither. It is true that dying can be a frightening and fearful journey. But our Judeo-Christian tradition has always taught that death does not have the last word on life.

Mother Teresa is prepared to die because she has spent her life helping others to die, and preparing herself as well. Her home for the dying in Calcutta has seen 58,000 people breathe their last, and her AIDS homes in the United States have helped hundreds do the same.

God only knows when Mother Teresa will breathe her last as well. America would be wise to learn from her about how to approach death, and how to journey home to God. Natural death is not the enemy of life, but part of it.

The author spent 22 months heading the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. Readers may write to him in care of the Commission on Aging with Dignity, 215 South Monroe St., Suite 620, P.O. Box 11180, Tallahassee, Fla. 32301. He wrote this article for the Sun-Sentinel.

■ TOWEY

From Page A4

That was the way it was with Mother Teresa. She was like Our Lady. She had such trust, she believed without understanding, she lived Our Lady's pronouncement at the Annunciation: Nothing is impossible with God. It has been said of St. Francis of Assisi that he was the most Christ-like person since Christ. I think it will be said of Mother Teresa that she was the most Mary-like person since Mary, living as a virgin mother for so many.

In the 12 years that I have been privileged to serve Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, I came to see Mother as she described herself: As a pencil in the hand of God with which he wrote love letters to the world. Now the world has lost its mother, but she has left with us lasting memories and many whose lives God has changed through her.

Mother loved to laugh. When I saw her two months ago in the Bronx, she was with

her successor, Sister Nirmala. I had to discuss a legal matter with them dealing with someone who was making money selling T-shirts with Mother Teresa's image on them. Mother laughed and said, "I am no longer superior. Put Sister Nirmala's picture on the T-shirts!"

She was in a wheelchair at the time, and yet she played that day with Mary and my children as if she herself were a little child.

Whenever Mother Teresa spoke publicly, she always ended by quoting Matthew 25, and the great account of judgment day where Jesus related, "Come. You have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the cre-

ation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink." No doubt when she went home to God, those very words which she spoke so often to others, were at last spoken to her.

Jim Towey is the president of the Commission on Aging with Dignity based in Tallahassee, a private, nonprofit organization.

'Whenever Mother Teresa spoke publicly, she always ended by quoting Matthew 25: "Come. You have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink."'

**Missionaries of
Charity in Florida
727 N.W. 17th Street
Miami, FL 33136**