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Mother Teresa a true servant-leader: The Statesman columnist

Among Mother Teresa's great strengths was her relentless focus on the core mission of her organization -- helping the poorest of the poor.





MG Devasahayam, The Statesman/Asia News Network

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The world is rejoicing the sainthood of its celebrated icon, Mother Teresa of Kolkata, who had built-up and sustained a massive infrastructure of love and compassion that is spread over the length and breadth of this universe

I had the great honour of knowing, moving and working with the Mother from the mid-1970s to the mid-Eighties. As District Collector of Chandigarh and later as a volunteer I was closely associated with the Mother in building a beautiful 'Home' in the city. Beneath the veneer of physical beauty, Chandigarh hailed as the "City Beautiful", and its neighbouring areas had their share of the wretched, the poor, the unwanted, the mentally retarded, the abandoned, the leprosy patients and the dying destitutes.

The City needed a “soul” to go beyond the physical beauty, a “soul” that touched the poor and the unwanted, and a “soul” that would give meaning and content to a body that is called “beautiful”. ‘Shanti-dan’, at the heart of Chandigarh, has indeed become a ‘soul’ to the city as evident from the kind of people’s participation in providing for the upkeep of and feeding the several hundred inmates.

On 3 October 1977, at a function to launch the work on ‘Shanti-dan’ I had the privilege of sharing the stage with the Mother. Her words on the occasion still ring in my ears:

“You and we together are going to do something beautiful for God. We shall do something for our brothers -- the sick and hungry, unloved and uncared for, helpless and lonely -- but who like us love and like to be loved....”

Mother Teresa’s life was dedicated to serving ‘the least of God’s brethren’ as the Bible describes in the Last Judgment. This brought out the ‘Saint’ in her:

“Then the King will say to those on his right hand, Come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; naked and you covered me; sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.

Then the just will answer him saying ‘when did we see thee hungry, and feed thee; or thirsty and gave thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and take thee in or naked and clothe thee? Or when did we see thee sick or in prison and come to thee?’

And answering the King will say to them, ‘Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me’”

My close association with Mother Teresa lasted for more than a decade and I found in her qualities of a great leader. She was the embodiment of servant-leader defined thus by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977): “A servant leader is servant first...it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first.

The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of a need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve-after leadership is established.

The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them are shadings and blends that part of the infinite variety of human nature.”

A servant-leader sees himself or herself as a servant first. From there the desire to lead emerges. In a sense, for them leading becomes a form of serving.

Servant-leadership is a state of mind and way of being rather than a concept that is defined. The true measure of the servant-leader “will be the positive growth of the people he or she leads.”

Out of these definitions flow the key characteristics of servant-leadership -- Listens respectfully to what others have to say; accepts others and empathises with them; possesses foresight and intuition; is aware and perceptive; possesses highly developed powers of persuasion; conceptualises and communicates concepts; exerts a healing influence upon individuals and institutions; builds community in the work place; practices the art of contemplation and recognises that servant leadership begins with the desire to change oneself.

Servant-leaders falling in this category exercise very high levels of moral authority that has the capacity to overshadow leader-servant contemporaries who occupied topmost positions of power and authority. Mother Teresa was one such leader.

That Mother was a natural leader comes out from this quote of hers: “Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail...” And that is exactly what she did. To many Mother Teresa has been an icon of love and care.

To others she may have been someone who worked for the unprivileged. She is an ultimate example of transformational leadership, a model for helping others aspire to, and attain high levels of performance for themselves and the organization.

Transformational leadership is a type of leadership style that leads to positive changes in those who follow. Such leaders are generally energetic, enthusiastic and passionate.

Not only are these leaders concerned and involved in the process; they are also focused on helping every member of the group succeed as well.

Mother Teresa motivated her followers to achieve the vision and mission of her association which is helping people who need help. She could influence people to transcend their personal interests for the sake of the group.

Mother Teresa was also a charismatic leader. She inspired people in the world to help the ones who need help without seeing their status or races.

She was highly esteemed and confident, displayed exemplary qualities, had a strong sense of purpose, articulated the goals and ideas for which her followers were psychologically prepared, secured her followers' unquestioning cognitive and emotional commitment, and had extraordinary moral inspiration, attraction, and influence over her followers.

Furthermore, she was able to move people to act with only simple words.

Among Mother Teresa's great strengths was her relentless focus on the core mission of her organization -- helping the poorest of the poor.

She spent much of her own time helping individuals in extreme need. Her personal example still serves as the model for the Missionaries of Charity.

She did not have big plans which she may not have executed. Her idea was simple -- treating all her people, indeed those in need with the same dignity and respect. Mother Teresa had great listening skills. She was also a great listener and focused a great deal on helping others grow.

Humility was the greatest quality I found in the Mother. In the words of John Keble: “God has sworn to raise on high he who sinks himself in true humility.”

True to these words, God has indeed raised Mother high on to the pantheon of Saints. Combining in herself humility and humanity, she is a true saint-leader. Working and walking with her on the ‘beautiful voyage’ has been the greatest joy of my life.

The writer is a retired civil servant.

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