



Perspective

By Jamie Buckingham

Mother Teresa

Etched into the wrinkles of her face is the burden of the poor, the hungry, the homeless. Known around the world as the "saint of the gutters," there is no one more fitting for the Nobel Peace Prize than this year's recipient — Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

I met her once. It was at the giant Catholic Eucharistic Conference in Philadelphia. Dressed in white burlap of the poor, her headdress trimmed in blue, she moved among the people in that huge conference with the same ease she moves among the starving people of Calcutta. When you first see her you don't notice her shortness — she is barely 5 feet tall, nor her lined face — which seems to carry all the sorrow of those starving children in India. Instead, you notice her eyes. Although they are sunken deep in her gaunt face, they sparkle with life. They are the first prelude to the love and joy that bubbles within, which often flashes forth with an irrepressible smile.

"The poor are my parish," the diminutive nun said. Then, sweeping her hand across the great auditorium of obviously well-heeled Catholics from all over the nation, she added: "And many of these are as poor as my little ones in the streets of Calcutta. Real poverty is not judged in lack of shoes, but in the emptiness of heart."

I remembered that this last week when this old woman, now 69 years of age, accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace. Why had they chosen this little nun? Because, the Nobel Committee said, "Poverty and hunger and distress also constitute a threat to peace."

Mother Teresa is the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, a Catholic order of 1,800 nuns and 120,000 co-workers who work in hospitals, orphanages, schools and leprosariums. They wash filthy bodies, clean toilets, empty bedpans, pick up the dying from the streets, and with their hands show the love of God.

Some years ago ignorant Christians accused Mother Teresa and others like her of doing good work to earn enough merits for salvation. It is a charge often leveled against Catholics — a charge which once might have been true among some, but is no longer valid enough to consider. In Calcutta, where Mother Teresa accepted the prize, she answered that charge with her own reasons for serving the poor.

"These people are the body of Christ," she said. "When I touch them, I am touching his body."

There it is. No prize was ever more deserved. Yet this little woman is the first to admit that her crown of glory is far more important than the money she received — with which she will help build yet another leprosarium in India.

"In as much as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me," Jesus said. Mother Teresa has had a full life — touching Jesus.