

Mother Teresa elevated to sainthood by pope

Soon after her death in 1997, Mother Teresa was put on the 'fast track to sainthood' by Pope John Paul II

By Tom Hundley
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

VATICAN CITY — Mother Teresa, the diminutive nun who dedicated her life to caring for the destitute of Calcutta's slums, was elevated to the threshold of sainthood Sunday during a festive mass celebrated in a jam-packed St. Peter's Square by one of her biggest fans, Pope John Paul II.

More than a quarter of a million people filled the vast esplanade in front of the basilica as the Polish pope praised the Albanian nun as "an icon of the Good Samaritan."

The pope, whose failing health has become a matter of serious concern, became weary during the two-hour beatification ceremony. He faltered while reading the prayers in Latin and relied on aides to deliver his sermon in English and Italian.

He did, however, proclaim the words that made Mother Teresa "blessed," a moment that brought tears of joy to hundreds of nuns from Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity.

Portraits of the wizened but ever-smiling nun blossomed in every corner of the immense gathering, and flags from every nation fluttered. For once, it seemed, the red and white Polish flag was outnumbered by the red flag of Albania.

The ceremony had a distinctive Indian flavor. Sticks of incense burned as young women in green and saffron saris danced to the rhythms of a tabla.

James Nicholson, the U.S. ambas-

sador to the Vatican, said he was not surprised that the pope had chosen to elevate Mother Teresa.

"In this age of sports heroes and entertainment heroes and celebrity heroes, he feels the world needs to have other kinds of heroes," Nicholson said. "She captured the attention and love and respect of people universally."

Mother Teresa, whose birth name was Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, was born in 1910 to ethnic Albanian parents in Skopje, the capital of present-day Macedonia. She founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1950 with 12 nuns and spent most of her working life among the poor of India.

As her fame grew, so too did her religious order. Today there are about 4,500 Sisters of Charity in more than 130 countries.

She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 and died in 1997, a few days after the car crash that killed Britain's Princess Diana. The nun's humble life drew pointed comparisons to the media excess that was heaped on Diana.

Normally, the process of becoming a saint in the Roman Catholic Church takes decades, even centuries, but Mother Teresa had a special intervener in the pope.

Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa met on numerous occasions and developed what papal biographer George Weigel described as a "deep and intuitive" friendship.

The pope put Mother Teresa on the fast track to sainthood in 1999 when he waived the rule that requires a waiting period of five years after a candidate's death before the process of sainthood can even begin.

To reach the first stage of sainthood - beatification - there must be one proven posthumous miracle attrib-



Vicki Valerio KRT

Thousands of people witnessed the beatification of Mother Teresa by Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square.

uted to the candidate. Mother Teresa is credited with the miraculous cure of a peasant woman in India who had a stomach tumor.

According to the church's investigators, the woman was cured on the first anniversary of Mother Teresa's death when she prayed before a photograph of the nun and noticed rays of light coming from the picture's eyes. The next morning, the tumor was gone.

Indian doctors who treated the woman dispute the miracle, saying the cure was the result of convention-

al medical treatment. Other doctors who examined the woman say there is no medical explanation for her cure. The pope has accepted the findings of church investigators.

A second miracle must be authenticated for Mother Teresa's canonization as a saint to be finalized.

During John Paul II's 25 years as pope, he has beatified 1,319 persons and canonized 474 saints — a total that far exceeds the output of several centuries of his predecessors.

Some critics have said the pope has

made too many saints, diminishing the meaning of sainthood. But Cardinal Francis George, Chicago's archbishop, disagrees.

"The reason the Holy Father is doing this is because the Second Vatican Council said the call to holiness is universal," said George, who attended Sunday's beatification. "There are a lot of holy people in this world. I meet them all the time in Chicago."

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