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HOW INDIA REMEMBERS MOTHER TERESA

Interview With Spokesman of Bishops' Conference

By Mariaelena Finessi

NEW DELHI, India, JULY 29, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Almost 100 years ago, on Aug. 26, 1910, a baby girl named Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born. The little girl would grow up to be hailed as one of the most influential women of the 20th century: Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Though born in what is today Macedonia, Mother Teresa's influence is perhaps most notable in the land where she founded her Missionaries of Charity: in India.

ZENIT spoke with Father Joseph Babu, spokesperson of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, about how Mother Teresa continues to be a major influence in the nation, now almost 13 years after her death.

ZENIT: Could you evaluate the impact Mother Teresa had on Indian society? And what are the main changes that have occurred since she died?

Father Babu: Mother Teresa has a universal appeal in India; people cutting across religions and cultures give her high regard and even consider her a saint. That is why people of all faiths go to her tomb and pray to her. There are also birth centenary programs organized in different parts of India and in all these, people of all religions participate. Here in New Delhi the CBCI [Catholic Bishops' Conference of India] is organizing public functions to honor her and the president of India is the chief guest of the public function on Aug. 28.

Many changes have occurred in her religious congregation as it continues to grow and attract many young women to join in their work. Sister Nirmala Joshi, who took over from Mother Teresa, being a Hindu convert [has] the distinctive advantage of getting across to all

sections of Indian society, and she [has done] an admirable job of leading the Missionaries of Charity to new heights. She was also awarded the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian honor in India, for her exemplary work.

ZENIT: Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. What remains of her teaching?

Father Babu: Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel prize for her charitable work for the poorest of the poor and she continued to inspire many people to carry on working for those who have been consigned to the margins of society.

She was simple but very inspiring and the Indian Church was proud of her presence and contribution to the society. Many people, including non-Christians, also take inspiration from her life and work; they also associate with her sisters in doing charitable work.

ZENIT: What were her requests to the Church in India?

Father Babu: She was not worried about the criticism of those who said that she was glorifying poverty, or did not work for social change and so on. She would gently say that she was called to do the little she could do; others could do what they are capable of.

ZENIT: What are the main problems that Catholics in India are facing today?

Father Babu: No overseas missionary can come to India for a long stay and work; even those few overseas missionaries left in India are asked to quit India no matter how long they have served here. The depleting foreign aid to some of the Church and institutions is under constant scrutiny, and that makes the going tougher.

ZENIT: Can you tell us some anecdotes of the devotion that people have for Mother Teresa?

Father Babu: Some state governments have named public roads after her, issued postal stamps and commemorative coins in her honor. When she died, the Indian government gave her a state funeral. A Hindu, named Mr. Navin Chawla, currently the chief election commissioner of India, has written her biography, and another Hindu, Mr. Raghu Rai, has

photographed her and published a book in her honor.

ZENIT: There has been a lot of discussion about Mother Teresa's "dark night." It is described in the book "Come Be My Light" as a "martyrdom of desire." What do you think about it?

Father Babu: I would not be able to comment on this point much because it is to do with her interior life. However, it could be presumed that as in the case of every human person, she also went through moments of doubts, fears, uncertainties. It would therefore be an honest admission of her humanness, which is integral to her spiritual life.

ZENIT: Receiving the Nobel, Mother Teresa disconcerted people by expressing her horror at abortion, seen as the greatest destroyer of peace today. Could you describe the work of the sister for mothers with unwanted pregnancies?

Father Babu: What Mother Teresa was emphasizing was the value of human life in the context of rampant misuse of science to terminate life rather than to nurture it. Abortion is always and everywhere a heinous crime against humanity. Mother would never get tired of repeating it, [in accord with] the Church's teaching.

Under the guise of controlling population, when people [would promote] the liberty of terminating life, Mother would oppose it saying, "Give [the children] to me and I will look after them." Rightly so she has taken care of thousands of abandoned children all across the world. And that was her message to all: Human beings are to be loved and cared for; they are gifts of God.