



What Cops Can Learn from Mother Teresa

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The officer morale issues plaguing law enforcement agencies across the country in recent years have been well-documented. Rank-and-file officers, and those tasked with leading them, often experience **a profound sense of futility in the face of the addiction, mental health issues, homelessness, and criminality that cops face every day.** The challenges they face in their work, and the lack of meaningful political support in times of crisis, have historical precedents in American policing, but the level of scrutiny may well be greater than ever before.

So, what model should law enforcement professionals look to, as they struggle to find the fortitude to continue to do their jobs each day? What about a model from outside of the policing profession? **Mother Teresa, whose feast day is celebrated on September 5, dedicated nearly 50 years of her life to confronting problems she knew she could never solve—and nevertheless found meaning and showed quiet heroism in her work. She may well provide a helpful model for cops who are asked to do the same thing in their work every day.**

Mother Teresa (1910-1997) was an Albanian-born Catholic nun who became famous for founding missions of charity, primarily in Calcutta, India. Her missionary work focused on the sick, the poor, the disabled, the widowed, and the orphaned. Her religious order grew to include over 4,500 nuns across 133 countries. Although Mother Teresa did not carry a gun or a badge, she nonetheless represents the kind of steadfast commitment to doing good that cops need today. Her life and work can serve as a model to those in the policing profession who are searching for inspiration to combat a sense of futility. The five-

foot-tall nun, who spent most of her life in city slums, was admired throughout the world during her lifetime for her works of charity, selflessness, and compassion. Her legacy, solidified by her canonization as a saint by the Catholic Church in 2016, continues to inspire countless people, both Catholic and non-Catholic.

Mother Teresa felt called to serve in the slums of Calcutta precisely because it was a place of hopelessness. She felt called to serve the poorest of the poor and the most hopeless of the hopeless. She did it for half a century, and amazingly, she did it joyfully. So, what can cops serving in the United States today learn from her example?

Accept Your Limitations

Any veteran cop, jaded by years of experiencing society at its worst, might sum Mother Teresa's life up in a more pessimistic way. In a way that cuts to the core of the sense of futility that many officers so often experience. They might say, *"When she went to the Calcutta slums, it was a hole. She was there for 50 years, and when she died, it was still a hole."*

By most objective measures, this sentiment seems reasonable. **At the time of her canonization in 2016, the former mayor of Calcutta, who criticized her work, claimed, "she had no significant impact on the poor of this city."¹ *No significant impact.* If we are critical enough and cynical enough, we can also make the same assessment of any cop. **Look at the continued presence of crime and disorder in any jurisdiction and you can easily conclude that the men and women who have served as cops there have utterly failed for generations.****

If the continued existence of suffering in the slums of Calcutta proves that Mother Teresa failed, then the continued existence of crime in a jurisdiction proves that every police officer who ever wore a badge failed. Never once has there been a law enforcement officer's retirement ceremony during which it was honestly claimed that the retiring cop ended crime, disorder, and useless suffering in the town, city, county, or state. No matter how much good work the officer did, eventually there were new victims, new crimes, and new gangs. So, what was the point? *What was the point?*

¹ Bengali, Shashank. "Was Mother Teresa a saint? In city she made synonymous with suffering, a renewed debate over her legacy" The Los Angeles Times, September 2, 2016. Accessed: <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-india-mother-teresa-snap-story.html>

Once, when asked if she and the sisters she worked with were able to accomplish all that they would like, Mother Teresa did not sugar-coat the reality of her limitations. “Unfortunately, the needs are always greater than our ability to meet them.”² That frank and honest assessment is also applicable to law enforcement officers and agencies who see the high volume of calls for service and need for proactive enforcement activities, compared to their staffing levels.

Mother Teresa also warned against a stats-driven outlook so familiar to those in law enforcement: **“Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.”**³

It is important to note that she was *not* blind to the enormity of the tasks before her. Rather, she accepted them and kept pushing forward without the naïve hope that she and her fellow nuns would somehow put an end to all pain, poverty, and suffering. **Without ignoring the brutal realities of life and of her work, she resisted focusing on the enormity of the whole problem and instead focused on what could be accomplished that day—one person at a time. She accepted her limitations and worked in spite of them.**

Help the Person in Front of You

For someone like Mother Teresa, it seems that accepting her own limitations was an important precursor to throwing herself into what *can* be accomplished, instead of focusing on what *cannot*. “I never think in terms of crowds in general, but in terms of persons. Were I to think about crowds, I would never begin anything. It is the person that matters. I believe in person-to-person encounters.”⁴

How many law enforcement officers have had an immeasurable impact on a person’s life because of something they did in the line of duty? And yet, as genuinely inspiring as many of those individual stories may be, their actions inevitably did not result in putting a permanent end to crime and disorder in a neighborhood, let alone an entire city or county. **If the focus is on eliminating crime entirely, rather than what positive impact can be made in each and every encounter, disillusionment and burnout are nearly guaranteed. Much more is accomplished, Mother Teresa asserted, if the focus is on the person-to-person encounters.**

² Sri, Edward. *No Greater Love: A Biblical Walk through Christ's Passion*. West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2019, p. 164.

³ Sanders, Alice. *Mother Teresa: Greatest Life Lessons and Best Quotes*. Seattle, WA: CreateSpace, 2015.

⁴ Sri, *No Greater Love*, p. 69.

In the spirit of humility that defines a saint, Mother Teresa reminds us that we cannot possibly know the impact that our efforts will ultimately have on people's lives: "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."⁵ Law enforcement officers who regularly encounter a toxic mix of societal ills could benefit from adopting this mindset for making an impact.

Mother Teresa also spoke to the leadership crisis that many experience within their agencies and see in their local elected officials. Officers also become frustrated when they believe people above them are unwilling or unable to address the problems they see. To people in situations like the ones these officers face, Mother Teresa said, **"Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person."**⁶ **Much of the vital work officers perform does not require a new policy, procedure, or directive from above.**

Always Remember Your WHY

A sense of purpose—or lack thereof—may be the most significant factor in the outcome of individual and organizational endeavors. This is not a new concept. In fact, author Simon Sinek famously wrote a book on the subject from a broader secular perspective than anything professed by a saint like Mother Teresa.⁷ But the need for consistent reminders on the importance of purpose only indicates how universally true it proves to be.

If the *why*, or the purpose, is to solve all of the world's problems, then we have created a surefire path to the frustration and disillusionment that is all too prevalent among law enforcement officers. Mother Teresa's *why* was not to solve the world's problems. It would seem impossible to make sense of her life—starting with decades of work in the slums of Calcutta *before* the world began taking notice of her—without understanding *why* she did it. Her *why* is what drove her in the face of insurmountable societal ills and heartbreaking suffering that she knew she could never eradicate.

When asked about the constant difficulties in carrying out her work, she once responded, "Of course it would not be easy without an intense life of prayer and a spirit of sacrifice."⁸ As one would expect for a nun who felt called by Christ at a young age to serve the Church, Mother Teresa's Catholic faith was the

⁵ Sanders, *Mother Teresa*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sinek, Simon. *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. New York, NY: Portfolio, 2009.

⁸ Sri, *No Greater Love*, p. 163.

driving *why* behind everything that she did in her life. Daily prayer and daily Mass were ways in which she continually reminded herself of her *why*.

Your *why*, as a cop, does not have to be the same as Mother Teresa's. You don't have to share her Catholic faith. But you *do* have to possess a *why* that is more important than stats, and it must not be the doomed goal of eliminating crime and disorder entirely. You should know your *why* and remind yourself, and those around you, of that purpose as often as possible to keep it firmly in the forefront of your mind.

There are many admirable role models in the realm of law enforcement that we can look to for inspiration in discussing the challenges facing law enforcement officers in the United States today. But we may want to look beyond the profession for role models who have more in common with today's cops than we would have thought. Mother Teresa is a good start in the wake of her feast day on September 5. Decades after her death, she shows us the importance of accepting our limitations, helping the person in front of us, and remembering our *why*.

About the Author

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Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management, and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies, procedures, and practices as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

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