A SAINT FOR TODAY

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Mother Mary Theresa Scherer

(1825-1888)

O ur story begins with the life of a child in Meggen, Switzerland—Katherine Scherer—from a family of hard working farmers who were simple, poor folks. However, she had riches that money could not buy: a loving family, siblings, and a dearly beloved mother and father. Early in life, however, her father died, and she was separated from family and sent to live with an uncle. From that time on she had an inner sense that God had something special in mind for her. As she grew in age and wisdom, she did not have a strong inclination to become a woman religious, but she listened to her heart and deepened her prayer life to find out what God was saying to her. It was under these circumstances that Katherine began a long road to holiness which would eventually lead her to a Capuchin named Theodosius Florentini. He saw in her the possibility of becoming a leader and co-founding the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross.

In the first years of her religious life, she had times of aversion and dislike. Primary among these was the separation of the small community begun by Father Theodosius. The person he had designated as "Mother Superior," S. Bernarda, insisted that she wanted the sisters to work only in the field of education, while Father Theodosius had a dream of helping to alleviate all the needs of the poor. Very soon Katherine, now known as Sister Mary Theresa Scherer, was convinced that she should join the priest to help co-found the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross. She gave her sincere promise to help him realize his dream and sealed her promise with a hearty handshake.

Several books on her life tell us of the pain, joy and sometimes periods of peace that Sister Mary Theresa experienced as she worked side by side with the co-founder. Father Theodosius was gifted with tremendous energy, courage and audacity but he often lacked common sense and went from perceived needs in Switzerland to those in bordering countries as well. He would buy property for the poor without having the necessary funds. Each time, Sister Mary Theresa, now having been named the superior of the new religious community, showed concern and sometimes disapproval, but her male counterpart was bent on carrying out his idealistic pursuits. She soon discovered that he expected her to fill in every gap that he left behind; one month she would be sent to a factory, another time to a school, and then on to running a home for the poor. Each time she was asked to take on a new project, she felt that she was never fully prepared to carry out her duties. Whenever this priest would show up at her house, it was an indication that she would be moving on to a new ministry.

F ather Theodosius often went on begging tours throughout Europe and sometimes came home after months with the much needed money. However, at other times the money was scarce, and Mother Theresa would spend painful, sleepless days and nights in prayer, begging God to intercede. She found it extremely difficult to keep pace with Father Theodosius. But each time the matter was settled she would accept a new assignment and say to herself: "With God we can do many things."

The religious order thrived and grew, so much so that there seemed to be enough sisters to send to each of these new ministries. God's goodness was boundless, perhaps a reward for a strong and courageous woman whose trust was so great! It soon became necessary to find a "motherhouse" as a home for the formation and living quarters for this fast growing community. Father Theodosius found an old run-down farm house situated on a hill overlooking Lake Lucerne. Mother Theresa was entrusted with rebuilding the house and creating a welcoming home for the Sisters. She herself was seen carting stones and building materials via wheelbarrow.

The people in the area were very surprised to see how the sisters worked on the run-down building. All this time, Father Theodosius continued his begging tours, even going to Rome to ask for help from the Holy Father.

> The term **motherhouse** is used by religious institutes to designate the principal house or community for that group. It can be either for the entire institute or for a region.

Years passed and both Mother Theresa and Father Theodosius developed into strong, self-reliant personalities. There were arguments between them and Mother Theresa knew that her religious order was not named "Holy Cross" in vain. Without her endurance, he would never have been able to realize a single one of his plans. He was a priest with all his heart and soul, but she was the manager and banker—a strong hearted leader with an unbelievable trust in God and a passionate love for all she was doing.

Then suddenly, on February 15, 1865, Father Theodosius died and left many unresolved problems behind. He was 57 years old and she was 39. Now her troubles began in earnest, but her trust in God gave her tenacious trust and boundless endurance. Not wanting to deface the name of the founder, she signed an agreement in September 1865 taking on the heavy responsibility of paying the debts he left behind. She was

Mother Mary Theresa with the sisters in Linz, 1876

so overburdened, however, that her health became fragile. Yet she could be heard saying, "God's kindness has no limits." Finally her doctor told her there was no hope for a cure from the liver cancer that she suffered. This was the beginning of a long period of intense suffering. She was finally called home to her reward on June 16, 1888. On October 29, 1995, she was officially beatified and now continues to be a witness of God's love to us who call on her to help as we carry on the work she left us as a legacy. Her deep love now finds a place in the hearts of all who trustfully call on her.

> **Beatification** (from Latin *beatus*, blessed) is a recognition accorded by the Catholic Church of a dead person's entrance into Heaven and capacity to intercede on behalf of individuals who pray in his or her name (intercession of saints). Beatification is the third of the four steps in the canonization process. A person who is beatified is in English given the title "Blessed."

This article gives only a small glimpse of the life of Mother Theresa.