

Story about Mother Teresa, taken from Mother Teresa: A Complete Authorized Biography, by Kathryn Spink, HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, pp.188-189.

Mother Teresa had seen famine and death and suffering in a multitude of forms, but she had not to date been subjected directly to the devastation of war. On 10 August 1982, however, shortly after she had made a visit to London and Glasgow, Pope John Paul II chose to send her to Beirut as a demonstration of his solidarity with the war victims there. Mother Teresa attended Mass in the Pope's private chapel at Castel Gandolfo and then set off on a journey which involved a seventeen-hour sea crossing from Cyprus in a battered steamer. She arrived in Beirut at a time when the bombing and shelling were at their worst. The Sisters' house in East Beirut was no more than five miles from the primary target area. There were snipers everywhere and the destruction was nightmarish.

The Petrie Productions' documentary film would record for posterity the stand Mother Teresa made there, in defiance of churchmen and the voices of reason, to convince them of the possibility of going into West Beirut to rescue the victims of the violence and of the importance of doing so irrespective of the small numbers that might be helped in this way. With the patience of one who had manifestly had to make this point on many occasions, she informed them that if she had not picked up the very first dying person from the streets of Calcutta, the forty-two thousand retrieved from the city's streets to date would also have died alone and neglected. Mother Teresa would pray for a cease-fire and there was no doubt in her mind, despite all arguments and sound advice to the contrary, that there would be one. She had brought with her a large Easter candle with an image of the Madonna and the Child on it. At 4 p.m. while the bombing was still at its worst she lit it, and at 5 p.m. suddenly all was quiet. On 12 August Mother Teresa went into the war-torn Western section and brought out thirty-eight mentally and physically handicapped Muslims aged between seven and twenty-one. Some of the staff had fled, and many patients were already said to have died of starvation in the badly shelled mental hospital in the southern Palestinian neighborhood of Sabra. Prior to their evacuation the children had huddled on soiled rubber mattresses, two to a bed, with too few staff to feed or wash them. Above all they were terrified. Mother Teresa went amongst them, comforting and reassuring them. She took command and the thirty-seven were placed in a convoy of cars provided by the International Red Cross and taken to the Mar Takla convent in mainly Christian East Beirut. There she instantly set about organizing the supplies necessary for their care.

Two days later Mother Teresa again crossed the Israeli-controlled checkpoint to evacuate another twenty-seven children. Before her arrival no one had been very keen to take these children, but slowly other people began to respond. Neighbours began to bring food and clothing. Other religious, government officials and doctors arrived to offer goods and services. One of the Red Cross officials who admitted quite candidly that his initial reaction to Mother Teresa's presence had been that a saint was not what he needed most, afterwards acknowledged that he had been astonished at the efficiency and energy which went hand in hand with her spirituality. She was, he said, "a cross between a military commander and St. Francis." All the same, Mother Teresa's experience of man's inhumanity to man had left her in a state of bewildered incomprehension: "What do people feel when they do these things? I don't understand. They are all children of God. Why do they do it? I don't understand."