

Do Not Spit. Holy Place.

Visiting the Mother House for the Missionaries of Charity

Recently I had the opportunity to travel in India. Because of a glitch in connecting flights, our group ended up in Kolkota (historically Calcutta) for a few hours, and this afforded us time to see the Mother House for the Missionaries of Charity. This is where Mother Teresa worked tirelessly for so many years caring for those who were dying in the streets. The abject poor—of which there are millions in the city—still come to the Missionaries of Charity.

Others come as a sort of pilgrimage. Mother Teresa’s tomb, encased in marble, is also in this building. With a steady stream of visitors, it seems out of place for the modest premises, but it is a place of pilgrimage for many who choose to kneel and pray there.

And then there are visitors curious about the place where Mother Teresa lived and worked, people like my fellow travelers and me with a bit of time on their hands.

The building, which now includes a tiny museum commemorating Mother Teresa’s life, is a simple structure. As one would expect, Mother Teresa lived with a minimum of comforts. Her narrow room, visible to visitors now, has only a single bed, a rough wooden table, and a few pictures on the wall. Another room displays a few of her belongings—her glasses, a toothbrush, a typewriter, her sari and sandals, handwritten letters. At one point, an older nun lifted a blanket on top of a small bookcase and revealed Mother Teresa’s Nobel Prize for Peace. It was visually unimpressive, just a sheet of paper and a medal.

After a few minutes I walked outside. The streets of Calcutta were right before me. People were begging and trying to sell me Mother Teresa memorabilia. I

knew that just a few blocks away was poverty beyond my understanding.

Then my eye caught a sign above the main entrance to the building. A



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blue sign with large block letters read *Missionaries of Charity*. The second sign,

yellow, was the one that made me think twice. Printed in both Hindi and English, it said, “Do not spit. Holy place.”

At first it struck me as funny, an odd juxtaposition of instruction and information. People in India spit all the time just out of habit, though, so the sign was appropriate on a practical level. For me, it also grew to be profound on a spiritual level.

“Do not spit. Holy place.”

Isn’t that what we do all the time? We spit on what we do not understand is holy ground. We spit just out of habit, without thinking, without giving a second thought to the possibility that the place where we stand might be holy ground.

I don’t know very much about Calcutta. I do know about Memphis. I see us spitting every day on what I am sure is holy ground. We do it in our work, in our homes, in the streets, all without realizing we are dishonoring sacred space.

“Do not spit. Holy place.”

We need to think a little more before we do this in our own communities. We need to recognize that the place God gives us is indeed holy precisely *because* God has led us to this place. It is holy, and to spit on it makes no sense.

I left India enthralled with the complexity of their society. It’s a vast country with an enormous population and ancient religious traditions. Indian life is constantly enmeshed with the life of the spirit. We in the US should learn how to live this way better. We do indeed walk on holy ground every day.

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