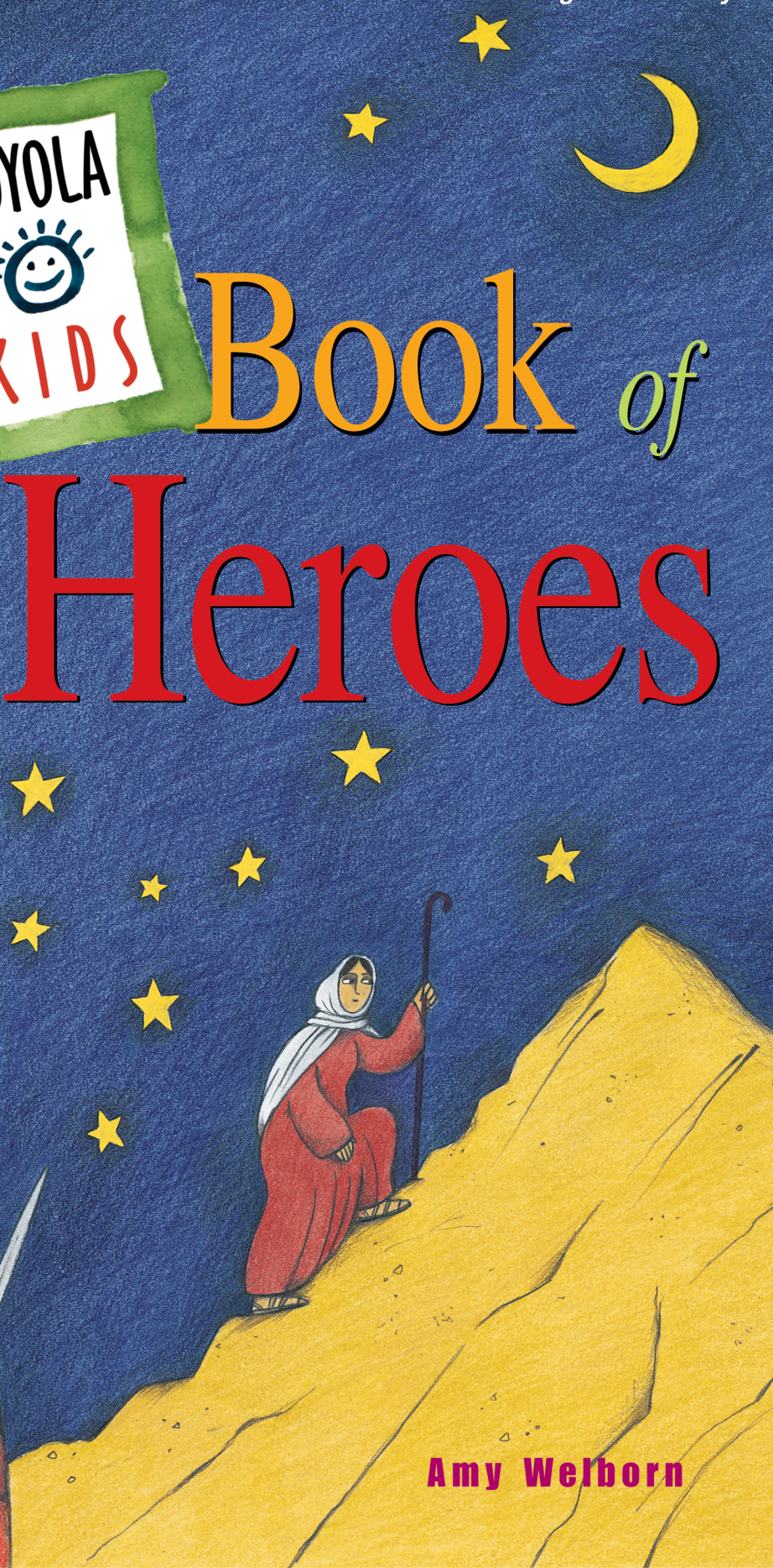


Stories of Catholic heroes and saints throughout history

LOYOLA
KIDS

Book of Heroes



Amy Welborn

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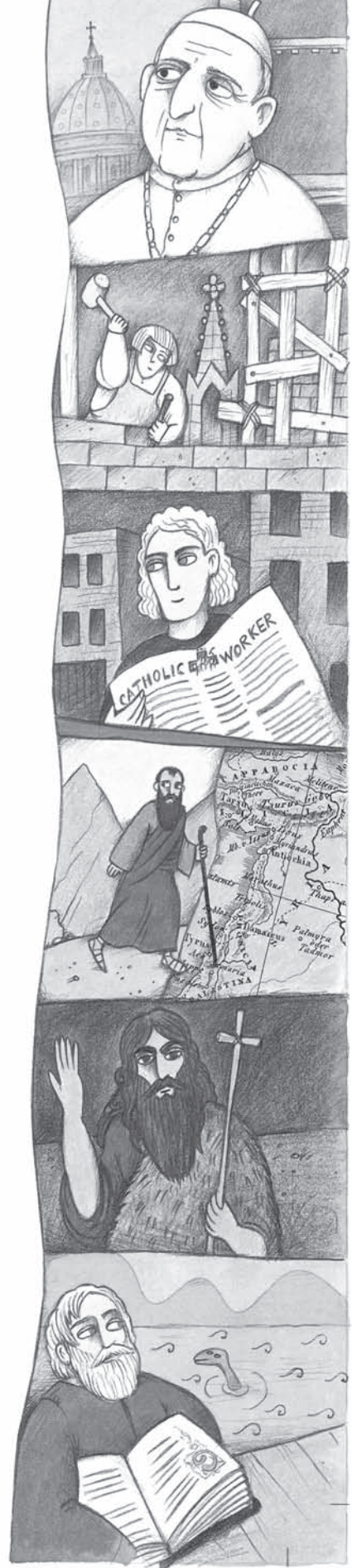
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BLESSED TERESA OF CALCUTTA

A Hero Lives Charity with the Dying

If you had to pick out the most important thing you did this week, what would it be?

Making a B on a test you thought you'd failed? Protecting the goal on that last shot and saving the game? Convincing your mom to buy you that new outfit?

Was that it? Or might it be something else—a different kind of “important”?

Charity

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Sometime, somehow in the last week, you've listened to someone who was sad or angry. You've defended someone who's been picked on. You bit your tongue when you wanted to mouth off to your dad. You thanked your mom for the dinner she fixed. You went through your clothes and picked out some good stuff to send to kids at the homeless shelter.

In other words, the most important thing you've done today, yesterday, and last week is love. One act of love, no matter how quiet, can change a person's day—even his or her whole life! Now that's important.

When we think about the difference that love can make, many people very often think of one person: Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. A tiny woman, just under five feet tall, with no tools except prayer, love, and the unique qualities God had given her, Mother Teresa is probably the most powerful symbol of the virtue of charity for people today.

Mother Teresa wasn't, of course, born with that name. Her parents named her Agnes—or Gonxha in her own language—when she was born to them in Albania, a country north of Greece.

Agnes was one of four children. Her childhood was a busy, ordinary one. Although Agnes was very interested in missionary work around the world, as a child she didn't really think about becoming a nun; but when she turned eighteen, she felt that God was beginning to tug at her heart, to call her, asking her to follow him.

Now Agnes, like all of us, had a choice. She could have ignored the tug on her heart. She could have filled her life up with other things so maybe she wouldn't hear God's call. But of course, she didn't do that. She listened and followed, joining a religious order called the Sisters of Loreto, who were based in Dublin, Ireland.

After two months in Ireland, spent mostly learning how to speak English, Agnes got on a boat (in 1928, hardly anyone took trips by plane), and thirty-seven days later she arrived in the beautiful, busy, complicated country of India.

In India, Agnes took her final vows as a sister and took the name Teresa, after Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower. She

spent fifteen years teaching in a girl's school in Calcutta, a job that she loved and was very good at. But then one day, she heard that call again.

The voice in her heart was telling her that she was to make a very big change in her life—that she should leave her teaching position and go into the streets of Calcutta and care for the poor.

Again, Teresa could have ignored the voice and just gone on teaching the wealthy girls behind the high walls of her school. But you know how it feels to ignore the voice of God in your heart, right? You can't rest easy until you obey that voice. Do you know why?

It's not because God wants to play games with you or test you. No, it's because God created you and knows you better than anyone else does. He knows what all of your talents are and he knows what you can do with those talents. He also knows that he made you, above all, to love. That pull on your conscience is a nudge, giving you a hint about where you're going to find happiness and peace, and where the charity you practice is going to have the greatest impact.

So Sister Teresa listened and said yes. She had lived in India for years, and she knew how desperate the poor of that country were, especially in the big cities. It was these people, the dying poor, that Sister Teresa felt a special call to love. After all, these were people who had absolutely no one else in the world to love them. Not only were they poor, but they were also dying. Why did their feelings matter? Wouldn't they be gone soon enough?

Teresa saw these people differently. She saw them through God's eyes, which means that she saw each of them as his dear child, suffering and yearning for some kind touch or word, some comfort in their last days on earth. She heard that call and chose to live it out—to let God love the forgotten ones through her charity.

As is the case with all great things, Teresa's efforts started out small. She got permission to leave her order, to live with the poor, and to dress like them, too. She changed her habit from the traditional one to the sari worn by Indian women. Her sari would be white with blue trim, the blue symbolizing the love of Mary. She didn't waste time, either. On her very first day among the poor

of Calcutta, Mother Teresa started a school with five students, a school for poor children. That school still exists today. She quickly got some training in basic medical care and went right into the homes of the poor to help them.

Within two years, Teresa had been joined by other women in her efforts, all of them her former students. She was soon “Mother Teresa” because she was the head of a new religious order: the Missionaries of Charity.

The Missionaries of Charity tried to care for as many of the dying as they could. They bought an old Hindu temple and made it into what they called a home for the dying. Hospitals had no room or interest in caring for the dying—especially the dying poor—so the dying had no choice but to lie on the streets and suffer. The sisters knew this, so they didn’t wait for the poor to come to them. They constantly roamed the streets, picking up what looked from the outside like nothing but a pile of rags, but was actually a sick child or a frail old person.

When a dying person came or was brought to Mother Teresa and her sisters, they were met with nothing but love. They were washed and given clean clothes, medicine, and—most important—someone who could hold their hand, listen, stroke their foreheads, and comfort them with love in their last days.

One of the most feared diseases in the world is leprosy. It’s a terrible sickness that deadens a person’s nerves and can even cause their fingers, toes, ears, and nose to eventually fall away. You know that in Jesus’ time, lepers were kept away from communities. Lepers in poor countries like India, where they have a hard time getting the medicines to treat the disease, are often treated the same way.

You can probably guess what Mother Teresa thought and—more important—what she did about this. After all, a person with leprosy isn’t a thing or an animal with no feelings. A person with leprosy is, above all, a person whom God loves and cares deeply about.

So Mother Teresa saw people with leprosy in the same way—through God’s loving eyes. She got the help of doctors and nurses, gathered lepers from the slums, and began treating and caring for them in a way that no one before her had tried to do.

Mother Teresa's work of love started out small, but it isn't small anymore. There are more than four thousand Missionaries of Charity today, living, praying, and caring for the helpless in more than a hundred different houses around the world, including in the United States.

Mother Teresa died in 1997, but even now, when we think about her work, we can learn all we need to know about love: It doesn't take any money or power to love. It doesn't take great talent or intelligence. It simply takes love.

Mother Teresa did wonderful, brave work in caring for the forgotten, but if there's one thing she would want you to remember about love, it's that you don't have to travel to foreign countries to practice the virtue of charity. In fact, love has to start where you live:

It is easy to love those who live far away. It is not always easy to love those who live right next to us. It is easier to offer a dish of rice to meet the hunger of a needy person than to comfort the loneliness and the anguish of someone in our own home who does not feel loved. I want you to go and find the poor in your homes. Above all, your love has to start there. (Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love*, [Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1997], p. 27.)

What do heroes do?

Do they fight monsters? Sometimes, but they also hold the hands of people who are sick and lonely. They build schools. They study the planets. They forgive those who have harmed them. Heroes are people who look at the world around them, see what needs to be done, and through the grace of God find the strength to help others.

In the thirty-six stories in *Loyola Kids Book of Heroes*, you'll meet a Catholic nun who stood up to the most infamous outlaw in the Old West. You'll learn how entire villages of men and women devoted their lives to building great cathedrals to show their love and respect for God. You'll learn about John the Baptist, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Charlemagne, St. Albert the Great, Dorothy Day, St. Patrick, and many others. Most of all, you'll learn that with God's help anyone can be a hero and make the world a better place.

Amy Welborn is the author of a number of books for Catholic children and adults, including *Loyola Kids Book of Saints*, the *Prove It!* series for Catholic youth, and *Parables, Stories of the Kingdom*. She lives in Indiana with her husband and children.



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