Sunday, December 23, 1979
THE SUPREME GIFT
John 1:1-5,14; I Corinthians 13:1-7,13; I John 4:7-9,19-21

Of all the gifts that one person can give to another, the supreme gift is love. To give the gift of love is to give a person a part of God. The story of Christmas is above all else the story of God's gift of love to us, which is the story of God's gift of himself. The Gospel of John puts it this way: "The love of God became a human being and lived among us."

The whole story of the New Testament is about this gift of love from God and our response to it. Thus, the Apostle Paul writes that of all the gifts, the supreme gift is love. "If I speak in tongues, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I am an illustrious prophet, but have not love, I am nothing. If I know all there is to know but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all my money and property, but have not love, I gain nothing... so faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love."

The writer of the first letter of John in the New Testa-ment reminds us — "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he or she who loves is born of God and knows God. The person who does not have and give the gift of love does not know God, for God is love. We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God and hate another person,' he or she is a liar; for the one who does not love other human beings who can be seen, cannot love God who cannot be seen."

Love is the supreme gift! The gift of God's love through Jesus Christ is still being given, and when the gift of love is given, miracles occur.

This morning I want to tell you about one person who continues to give the gift of the love of God in very specific ways.

A news story dated December 10, 1979, told about it in part. "Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Roman Catholic nun who has devoted her life to India's poor, accepted the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize on Monday December 16, in the name of the hungry, of the naked, of the homeless, of the blind, of the lepers, of all those who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society. The small 69-year-old woman of Yugoslav birth accepted the Nobel medal and 192,000-dollar award before Norway's King Olav and a capacity audience at Oslo University. She said she plans to use the money for the poor. 'Though I'm personally unworthy,' she went on to say, 'I'm grateful and I'm happy to receive it for the world's poor. Our poor people are great people, a very lovable people. They don't need our pit and sympathy. They need our understanding love, and they need our respect.... We need to tell the poor that they are somebody to us, that they too have been created with the same loving hand of God to love and be loved.'

Mother Teresa believes that being unwanted, unloved, uncared for and deserted by everybody is the worst disease that any human being can experience.

The gift of love, that's what Mother Teresa and her sisters and vo1unteers give to every person they meet. When one meets a giver of love like Mother Teresa, it's a remarkable experience.

One newspaper reporter wrote after a visit — "First impression. She is remarkable in her ordinariness, a small, slight woman with a heavily creased face. She could be one of the Slavic

ladies who clean the offices of Manhattan late at night. Like them, she is a peasant in a big city. But when she smiles and laughs, which she does often, there comes the hint of special qualities. The human clay molds itself in unambiguous joy. The lines of her face become exclamation marks. As with all her emotions, she communicates pleasure purely!"

He went on to say, "When I went to meet Mother Teresa, I was led to the small bare second-floor chapel at the Mother-house of the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. It was 4:30 in the morning. I found Mother Teresa praying with her sisters and novices, as she does at the beginning of every day. Not all the sisters can fit into the chapel at one time. Some were below in the courtyard, washing their single change of clothes in tin buckets. Mother Teresa had already done her own laundry. I spent the next two hours watching the small woman at prayer, sensing that in her communion with God lies the source of her strength L and the heart of her achievements. After all, she has several times made her point saying, 'I am not a social worker. We do it for Jesus.'"

As the reporter sat watching the barefoot nun at her devotions, the obvious questions repeated themselves. How could this slight foreign-born woman have succeeded so remarkably, beginning her work in this now Communist-ruled city in a Hindu country? How had she, starting with almost no following, a mere 5 rupees and no powerful backing, been able to assemble the worldwide organization of love and charity that now operates 158 branch houses in 31 countries? Also, why have she and her sisters been able to work so efficiently among the poorest of the poor when government and international agencies with their far greater resources have generally accomplished far less? Later in the day when the reporter asked her these questions, she replied, "I do nothing, God does it all." She could also have said, it all works because above all we give the supreme gift of love.

Mother Teresa was born in Yugoslavia, in August 1910, of Albanian parents of peasant stock. It is odd, or perhaps not so odd, that in the history of the world so many prophets, seers and saints have come from simple people who lived close to nature.

Her parents named her Agnes at birth and though she had a happy family life, from early days she had the urge to become a missionary. When she was hardly 17, her imagina-tion was fired by some letters received in her hometown from local Jesuit priests who had gone to India. At age 18, Agnes volunteered for missionary duty. In time, she joined the Irish Loretta Order, which was functioning in Bengal, and was sent to Calcutta. Calcutta had previously been the capital of British India and was often called the "second city of the British Empire." But like many large cities, it was a place of deep contrasts; great pomp and opulence, learning, and commerce, living side by side with unbelievable overcrowding and abysmal squalor, misery, disease, and poverty.

At the end of 1928, Agnes was sent to teach geography at St. Mary's high school in Calcutta, where the pupils were daughters of well-to-do families. In May 1931, she took her vows and adopted the name Teresa. She taught almost 20 years at this high school and became its principal.

Agnes, now known as Sister Teresa, left the school because of what she says was a "call within a call," that she heard while on a train on Sept. 10, 1946. The message was quite clear. She was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. She said, "I knew where I belonged, but I did not know how to get there."

Two years later she got permission to leave the convent of Loretto where she had been so happy. She was going to live in the slums and streets of Calcutta. To blend more easily with the people she had set out to love, she adopted a variation of the traditional Indian Sari, as her new habit — a rough white cotton wraparound cloth with a blue border and a cross worn on the shoulder.

While looking for a place to live she wrote, “Today I learned a good lesson. The poverty of the poor must be so hard for them. Looking for a home, I walked and walked unti1 my arms and legs ached. I thought how much they must ache in body and soul looking for a home, food, health. Then the comfort of Loretto came to tempt me, but of free choice my God and out of my love for You, I desire to remain and do whatever your holy will may be in my regard. Give me courage, now, this moment.”

The first person to join Sister Teresa in her new work was a young 19-year-old Bengali girl who had been a student at the Loretto school. She became the first novice and took her old teacher’s original name as her own, becoming Sister Agnes. A year and a half after Sister Agnes’s arrival, the new congregation of the Missionaries of Charity was formally approved and instituted in Calcutta on Oct. 7, 19 50, and Sister Teresa became Mother Teresa and a Citizen of India.

Mother Teresa and the few sisters with her began seeking out destitute and ailing children from the streets and hovels and tending and teaching them. Thus started ·her first little free school. Other women began to join the order. Some money began to come in.

Next Mother Teresa started taking in the very poor and very hungry and feeding and tending them. Unwanted babies were rescued from garbage dumps. Some were given in adoption. Grownup children were given jobs and saved from lives of misery and crime. Doctors and nurses began to come in to help on a voluntary basis. Her workers also began going out into the streets and slums to seek out and bring back living corpses from the city. They were often mutilated and made hideous by maggot-infested sores, and chunks of their dying bodies were already eaten away by rats. They were tended, cleaned, fed, and treated. Above all, they experienced perhaps for the first time the best healing device known to human beings — real, tender, human, or shall I say, divine love. A few survived and lived with the knowledge that they were no longer desperately alone. Many died, but with a memory of loving care bending kindly over them and the vision of a light in front of them.

Mother Teresa next turned her attention to lepers and established her first home for them away from the city. Her girl missionaries from good families with their traditions of caste, still do all the chores. This in itself is an incredible social revolution. The leper’s festering sores are washed, their stumps of limbs treated and cleaned, and they are cared for with transmuting love. In fact, it is this amazing aura of healing love which distinguishes Mother Teresa’s efforts from so many of the world’s charity organizations.

She likes to remind herself and others, “In the silence of the heart, God speaks. How can I love God whom I do not see, if I do not love my neighbor whom I see? If you do not love, you cannot serve. Service without love has no meaning.” Visitors to Mother Teresa’s work all say that so strong’is this light of love that its soft aura seems to pervade and linger in the air of the clean quiet old buildings where she works.

British writer and journalist Malcolm Muggeridge describes what he insists was nothing short of a miracle while he was there making a film for the B.B.C. The light in the leper home was dim

and the camera experts thought it would be a waste of time to take the indoor film they wanted. However, they did film in color as originally planned. When the film was developed, they were amazed to see a beautiful golden light all over the big dormitory where the lepers were lying down — like a painting of a softly illumined cathedral.

The gift of love always performs miracles, and the gift of love is most often given in simple tasks. Mother Teresa and her followers are completely identified with the poor among whom they live. They eat the same food, wear the same coarse quality of clothes, travel the same way, and personally remain nearly as poor as the poor whom the love.

Poverty plays a major role in the life and thinking of Mother Teresa. For her, all people are a reflection of Jesus, but it is the poor, the dispossessed who are particularly in need of love. For her the love of the poor is an adoration of Christ. But she does not love the rich any less. There are never appeals to possible guilts of those who are well off. Hers is a universal love. It's just that the poor have more urgent needs.

The various homes which Mother Teresa operates are remarkably clean, perhaps the cleanest places in Calcutta. All kinds of people volunteer their help. In the home for the dying, for example, one of those emptying bedpans is Hari Shankar Das, a 36-year-old civil engineer. He has come every day for the last three years, working for two hours before he goes to his office. He says he finds it comforting and restful and that he was inspired by Mother Teresa. He is of course a Hindu. There are thousands like him throughout the world who work with Mother Teresa in their own way learning how to express and spread the gift of love.

Mother Teresa is also aware of the suspicion that surrounds Christian missionaries. At the home for the dying, special care is given to ensure that the dead are dealt with according to the rites of their individual faiths.

Speaking about conversion, Mother Teresa says, "I am not afraid to say that I am in love with Jesus, because He is everything to me." She adds that this faith is a gift she would like to share, but one that not even Almighty God can force a person to accept if the person does not want to. She knows that if she continues to give the gift of love, God will take care of the rest.

Her gift of love has multiplied beyond anyone's imagination. IT is difficult to get the exact figures, but according to one source, about a year ago there were about 70 schools with over 6, 200 children, about 258 clinics serving over a million and a half patients, about 58 leprosy centers looking after more than over 46,000 lepers, about 25 homes housing well over a thousand abnormal children, and another 25 homes for more than 5,000 dying destitutes and the love continues to spread. It's the story of God's love becoming flesh and dwelling among us — the story of Christmas in action.

It is ironic that a long feature story about Mother Teresa in the Sunday New York Times Magazine a few weeks ago was on the page opposite another story with the headline--WARRING OVER NEW MISSILES FOR NATO, and the subtitle for the same article said, "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations are now debating where to deplore New American Nuclear Missiles in Europe." The article said that at stake may be the security of the west or another escalation of the arms race. Can we really believe that the arms race is the road to peace? More likely it's the road to hell.

The Christmas message is that the kind of love that Mother Teresa practices and spreads is the only true way to peace within ourselves and in the world at large.

This Christmas, give the gift of love. Most of us cannot go into the slums to practice and give love like Mother Teresa, but all of us can give the gift of love in many ways and places. Here's a little suggestion to help you begin. Within the next three days tell at least five different persons that you love them, and I hope you will give each one a hug as you do so. I want to begin this morning by telling each one of you that I love you.

Let the Love of God become flesh in each one of us so that God's gift of love increases and spreads everywhere. Amen.