

## FROM COMPASSION TO JUSTICE: EXPLORING MOTHER TERESA'S INFLUENCE ON MODERN LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

[ESP] *De la compasión a la justicia: explorando la influencia de Madre Teresa en los marcos  
jurídicos modernos*

Fecha de recepción: 13 febrero 2025 / Fecha de aceptación: 3 abril 2025

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DOI: 10.12800/vg.20.7

**Abstract:** Mother Teresa remains a distinguished figure in philanthropy, renowned for her unwavering commitment to marginalized groups, particularly impoverished children, and her dedication to human rights and dignity. Through the establishment of the Missionaries of Charity, homes for the chronically ill, and shelters for abandoned children, she championed social justice, equality, and compassion. Her legacy inspired and continues to influence modern legal and social frameworks that emphasize human rights, dignity, and social equity. This paper explores the intersection of her humanitarian principles with contemporary legal protections for vulnerable groups, advocating for a holistic approach to social justice. Despite laws in place to safeguard human rights, Mother Teresa's work highlights the need for compassionate, hands-on efforts to supplement these frameworks. By analysing her life and contributions, this study suggests a collaborative approach between legal systems and humanitarian actions to uphold dignity, justice, and equality.

**Keywords:** Mother Teresa; human rights; social justice; Missionaries of Charity; dignity; equality; legal frameworks; humanitarianism; vulnerable populations.

**Resumen:** Madre Teresa sigue siendo una figura destacada en el ámbito de la filantropía, reconocida por su compromiso inquebrantable con los grupos marginados, en particular los niños pobres, y por su dedicación a los derechos humanos y la dignidad. Mediante la creación de las Misioneras de la Caridad, hogares para enfermos crónicos y refugios para niños abandonados, defendió la justicia social, la igualdad y la compasión. Su legado inspiró y sigue influyendo en los marcos jurídicos y sociales modernos que hacen hincapié en los derechos humanos, la dignidad y la equidad social. Este artículo explora la intersección de sus principios humanitarios con las protecciones legales contemporáneas para los grupos vulnerables, abogando por un enfoque holístico de la justicia social. A pesar de las leyes vigentes para salvaguardar los derechos humanos, la labor de la Madre Teresa pone de relieve la necesidad de esfuerzos compasivos y prácticos para complementar estos marcos. Mediante el análisis de su vida y sus contribuciones, este estudio sugiere un enfoque colaborativo entre los sistemas jurídicos y las acciones humanitarias para defender la dignidad, la justicia y la igualdad.

**Palabras clave:** Madre Teresa; derechos humanos; justicia social; Misioneras de la Caridad; dignidad; igualdad; marcos jurídicos; humanitarismo; poblaciones vulnerables.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mother Teresa is an iconic figure in the sphere of philanthropy, where she focused on elevating vulnerable groups, especially children of impoverished backgrounds, to have a life of dignity and importance. She embodied kindness, generosity, and compassion for the poor, whom society neglected and despised, stripping them of their dignity.<sup>1</sup> Through her strategic philanthropic initiatives, she orchestrated narratives that challenged the norms, which often neglected and considered vulnerable groups as second-class citizens in society. Despite having limited resources, Mother Teresa's will, dedication, and commitment to human rights and dignity propelled her to inspire positive transformations in society by incorporating the Missionaries of Charity, opening homes for the chronically ill and dying individuals, establishing Shanti Nagar, accommodating abandoned children, and promoting interfaith harmony<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, Mother Teresa's principles and life accomplishments have cemented her name in the history books, making her a saint in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> The abovementioned achievements have also elevated her worldwide popularity, as evidenced by her winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.<sup>4</sup> With the lapse of time, individuals, organizations, and legislations have incorporated her values, principles, and ideals into their roles or functions. Concisely, today's laws, policies, and regulations operate under the principles of human rights, social justice and fairness, morality or ethics, and dignity, all of which informed Mother Teresa's philanthropic initiatives.

## 2. LEGAL PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Mother Teresa constantly advocated for human rights, especially for those who the system often overlooked, neglected, or despised. Remarkably, she championed equality, creating a narrative that counteracted systemic oppression against vulnerable groups, including women

<sup>1</sup> MILI, A. C., «Utopian Thought of Mother Teresa: A Way of Devotion to Human Life», in *Polity, Economy, and Culture of North-East India: Issues and Challenges*, n.d., p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> IVI, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> MORARIU, I. M., «Educational Aspects in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta», in *Astra Salvensis-Magazine of History and Culture* 7 (2019) 14, pp. 307-312.

<sup>4</sup> ALPION, G., «Why are Modern Spiritual Icons Absent in Celebrity Studies? The Role of Intermediaries in Enhancing Mother Teresa's Advocacy in India and Australia Prior to the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize», in *Celebrity Studies* 11 (2020) 2, pp. 1-29.

and children, especially from impoverished backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> For example, she embarked on a noble mission to save abandoned newborns who were left in dumpsters by their mothers.<sup>6</sup> In addition, she gave shelter to people who were struggling and on the brink of dying in the streets.<sup>7</sup> Mother Teresa also nursed the sick as well as provided basic needs to the vulnerable, including offering food, drinks, and medical assistance for those who were dying of thirst, hunger, and diseases.<sup>8</sup> Amidst the harsh living conditions in Calcutta, she acted as a conduit to link the struggling children with nurturing foster parents, creating better living conditions for them. These examples confirm her dedication to offering the fundamental needs to the poor. Her efforts served as a reminder that the legal protection of human rights goes beyond mere formal legislation and requires a social consciousness that recognizes the value of each individual.

In line with Mother Teresa's operational principle and philosophy, the current statutes regulate relationships in society and protect basic human rights enshrined in various local and international documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, global acts and conventions, and the constitutions or individual laws of countries. For example, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) was created to ensure that states respect people's rights and freedoms stipulated in the convention.<sup>9</sup> It offers an alternative for individuals who feel infringed by local statutes to seek international justice against skewed interpretations of the law. Thus, the court sets judicial precedence that elevates human rights and freedom to the next level. For example, in *Christine Goodwin v. the United Kingdom* (application no. 28957/95), the ECHR ruling recognized the rights of transgender people to marry anyone they want as long as it is consensual between the parties.<sup>10</sup> This ruling was a critical milestone that set legal precedence to allow same-sex marriage in the United Kingdom and Europe. Besides, Article 14 of the Slovenian Constitution guarantees equal human rights and fundamental freedoms within the country irrespective of national origin, sex, religion, race, and other differentiating variables

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<sup>5</sup> NIETSCH, J., «Reinventing Health and Social Care in Kosovo in the 1990s: The Role and Legitimation Strategies of the Mother Teresa Society», in *Qualestoria. Rivista di storia contemporanea* 2 (2022), pp. 73-106.

<sup>6</sup> VERACHAI, M. I., *Mother Teresa: A Woman of Prayer*, Lap Lambert Academic Publishing 2002.

<sup>7</sup> KUSHI, S., «A Voice of Peace: Mother Teresa», in *The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research* 9.1 (2007), pp. 8-12.

<sup>8</sup> MORARIU, I. M., «Aspects of Political Theology in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta», in *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 6 (2020) 1, pp. 1-5.

<sup>9</sup> TRYKHLIB, K., «The Principle of Proportionality in the Jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights», *EU and Comparative Law Issues and Challenges Series (ECLIC)* 4 (2020), pp. 128-154.

<sup>10</sup> European Court of Human Rights. «The Case of Christine Godwin v. The United Kingdom», HUDOC, 11 July, 2002.



(Venice Commission, 2000). These examples confirm that legislators designed the laws to protect people's human rights.

### 3. SOCIAL JUSTICE

Mother Teresa's principle message was social justice after realizing the immense disparity in the community that was propagated by socioeconomic stratification. Social justice is a philosophy that advocates for equal communal, economic, and political rights.<sup>11</sup> Mother Teresa's initiatives opened the doors of access and opportunity to the vulnerable population with the greatest needs, especially for physiological necessities. Despite her rank in the Catholic Church, she did not alienate the poor and sick people.<sup>12</sup> She conveyed a message of love to them. For example, she took care of HIV patients and touched the lepers without fear or discrimination<sup>13</sup>. In addition, she established Missionaries of Charity that sensitized the public to respect and support the poor and homeless people.<sup>14</sup> She also coordinated with governments to build schools, dispensaries, and hospitals that offered the requisite services that were inaccessible to the poor people.<sup>15</sup> These initiatives bridged the socioeconomic gap in society, fostering equity.

Despite operational deficiencies, existing regulations are integral for achieving social justice, which includes equality and access to essential goods. For example, the European Union (EU) instituted the Racial Equality Directive (RED) that advocated for fair treatment of all residents irrespective of racial or ethnic origin.<sup>16</sup> Racism is a prevalent issue in Europe and other Western nations. Slavery propagated the notion of equating people of African descent as second-class citizens.<sup>17</sup> The perception has been passed to different generations, explaining the existence of racial discrimination in the contemporary world that is mainly propagated by white

<sup>11</sup> BANKSTON, C. L., «Social Justice: Cultural Origins of a Perspective and a Theory», in *The Independent Review* 15.2 (2010), pp. 165-178.

<sup>12</sup> NOVIKOV, E., «Does Sickness Have a Meaning?», in *International Political Anthropology* 14.2 (2021), pp. 125-139.

<sup>13</sup> MILL, A. C., *Utopian Thought of Mother Teresa*, cit., p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> SWEENEY, J. M., *Teresa of Calcutta: Dark Night, Active Love*, Liturgical Press 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> FENNELLY, D., CLÍODHNA, M., «Racial Discrimination and Nationality and Migration Exceptions: Reconciling CERD and the Race Equality Directive», in *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 39.4 (2021), pp. 308-328.

<sup>17</sup> DAY, T., *A Liminal Citizenship: Race, Slavery, and the Law in the Early Republic, 1776-1813*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 2023.

supremacy ideologies. Hence, RED is a counteractive measure designed to suppress and eradicate systemic racism, which widens social disparity in the world. Besides, the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights spell out the need to treat people equally regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.<sup>18</sup> The Social Security Act of 1935 also created a financial cushion to assist vulnerable populations in the United States, including people from low-income earning families and the elderly.<sup>19</sup> For example, the Social Security and Unemployment clauses provide federal grants that offer a financial cushion to the elderly and low-income earners. Despite these frameworks seeking to ensure equal opportunities at the systemic level, social stratification or injustice is still prevalent in the world. For example, racism is a major issue, showing the institutional discrepancies in implementing the laws to the letter. Hence, just like Mother Teresa, individuals and organizations should take on the role of working on the ground among people, where help is most needed and where the legal system may not fully meet the needs.

#### 4. MORAL AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Mother Teresa's actions embody morality because of her selflessness and her quest to enhance justice, fairness, and equality. She did God's work by serving and nursing the poor. She wholeheartedly sacrificed her own time, effort, and resources to ensure that the community heard and respected the voice of the hopeless. She wanted to create an autonomous system that used collective resources to uplift people in need. When analysed, her initiatives are moral because they prioritize the collective good of the community despite the limited resources.

Similar to Mother Teresa's ideology, the law is grounded on moral and ethical principles of justice and equality. Besides being a tool of social relations, statutes are expressions of communal values, creating a moral compass or norm that maintains order and uniformity in society. The law and Mother Teresa's work intersect in the respect for human life and dignity. Notably, the law seeks to prevent or mitigate the worst situations that Mother Teresa personally addressed. For example, the Social Security Act of 1935 of the United States sets aside a budget to cushion the economic hardships of vulnerable groups, especially the elderly and low-income

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<sup>18</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, *Justice and Fundamental Rights*, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> FETTER, D. K., PESNER, M., *The Expansion of Social Security and the Decline of Elderly Public Assistance. Technical Report*, Michigan 2021, p. 6.



earning families.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Germany's Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion provision qualifies residents over 15 years of age who lack a sustainable source of income to apply for Citizen's Allowance.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Mother Teresa founded shelters that offered food and support to children and people experiencing homelessness. The Equality Act 2010 also protects United Kingdom's residents from discrimination in the workplace and wider society, promoting social justice.<sup>22</sup> Mother Teresa's actions aligned with the Equality Act's principles since she advocated for the rights of neglected and despised populations, promoting fairness. Despite implementation issues, the existing laws aim to promote justice, which is a vital ethical principle.

## 5. COMMON PATH TO DIGNITY

Although the law and Mother Teresa's life stem from different realms, a thorough analysis of her motivations indicates that they share a common goal to foster dignity, justice, and protection for all people, especially vulnerable populations like children, low-income earning families, and the elderly. Society utilizes the judiciary to interpret the statutes and make rulings that respect human rights, freedoms, and dignity. Conversely, Mother Teresa used her influence to directly work with people, organizations, and the government to uplift people in need, especially children and homeless individuals. Therefore, despite the difference in the execution of strategies, Mother Teresa's vision informs the fundamental principles of the law.

## 6. CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE

In order to uphold Mother Teresa's legacy and adhere to her principles to the letter, the government (law) and civil society need to coordinate closely to address the modern world challenges and ensure justice and dignity for all. There are numerous global challenges that require coordination between the government (representing the law) and welfare organizations (embodying Mother Teresa). Discrepancies like global inequalities, migration, climate change, and pandemics are some of the challenges that require a coordinated response from legal

<sup>20</sup> IVI, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Germany – Guaranteed Minimum Resources*, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> GOVERNMENT EQUALITIES OFFICE, *Equality Act 2010: Guidance*, 2013.

systems and humanitarian organizations. For example, the government can curb the issue of illegal immigration in a humane way that aligns with the principle of dignity and human rights, which Mother Teresa advocated for. In most cases, illegal immigrants hail from impoverished countries and backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> They are simply seeking better opportunities to enhance their lives. Hence, instead of inhumanely deporting illegal aliens, which can lead to the separation of families, it would be ethical to create a framework that handles them with dignity before sending them back to their countries if their refugee grounds are inadequate. Besides, Western governments should create more avenues for the workforce, especially from developing countries, to legally enter their jurisdictions. These proposed initiatives would ensure justice and respect for human rights.

Mother Teresa's initiatives portrayed some legal deficiencies, showing that laws cannot work in isolation to address critical social issues like homelessness, racism, and poverty. Concisely, despite the legal frameworks and norms in the 20th century, the government of India failed to protect vulnerable populations, including children and older adults. The discrepancy is still evident in the current society. For example, in spite of the extensive laws and regulations to promote equality, racism is still a prevalent phenomenon in the United States and Europe.<sup>24</sup> This problem calls for collective actions, which incorporate different communities, government agencies, individuals, and organizations in making decisions or taking actions that combat social problems. Mother Teresa's case shows the significance of personal action, awareness, and willingness to help those in need to supplement the provisions of the law. The law can establish a framework for the protection of human rights, but this must be complemented by human or societal actions that are based on the principles of compassion, love, and justice to be effective.

In the future, it is essential to create an inclusive environment that aligns the law with the interests of civil society. Mother Teresa's principles and values informed the subsequent statutes, which instituted human rights laws that prioritized compassion, solidarity, equality,

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<sup>23</sup> LIGHT, M. T., HE, J., ROBEY, J. P., «Comparing Crime Rates Between Undocumented Immigrants, Legal Immigrants, and Native-Born US Citizens in Texas», in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117.51 (2020), pp. 32340-32347.

<sup>24</sup> BONILLA-SILVA, E., «The new racism: Racial structure in the United States, 1960s–1990s», in *Race, ethnicity, and nationality in the United States*, New York 2021, pp. 55-101.





dignity, and justice. Adhering to this framework is the only viable mechanism to build a society that respects human rights and ensures dignity for all, regardless of their social status, race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Through her teachings and legacy, Mother Teresa has left us an indelible mark, teaching us that compassion and love are not just moral duties but also key elements of a just society. Therefore, it is the fundamental duty of the law and the people to ensure that her principles are applied optimally in our communities to create a just and harmonious country.

## 7. CONCLUSION

To summarize, Mother Teresa's initiatives serve as a benchmark for the current laws and regulations in different jurisdictions, which strive to promote human rights, dignity, and freedom. For example, the ECHR court rulings, which are based on predefined conventions, set the precedence for promoting human rights, such as transgender and same-sex marriages. This initiative corresponds to Mother Teresa's programs, as she advocated for the fundamental rights of impoverished children and homeless residents. In addition, statutes like RED and the Social Security Act of 1995 were created to bridge the social gap in Europe and the United States, respectively. Precisely, the Social Security Act of 1995 offers financial assistance to low-income earners and the elderly, aligning with Mother Teresa's programs. The legislation also promotes morality by creating systems to curb vice and assist vulnerable populations. The analysis shows that the laws are inadequate to combat social issues. Hence, like Mother Teresa, people should lead as examples to promote a culture that fosters dignity, respect for human rights, fairness, and justice. The initiative will supplement the law to create positive transformations in society.