

# ... Letters from India

## Mooney Graduate Works With Mother Theresa

Martha Thompson is a 1975 graduate of Cardinal Mooney High School. During her years at the school she was involved in the Action for People Association, dedicating her time and effort to aiding those less fortunate than herself. After graduation, she attended Toronto University and was looking forward to continuing her education at Edinburgh University in the Fall. Last Spring, however, she heard Mother Theresa speak in Toronto and was profoundly moved. In July, she discussed with her family her desire to give a year to the poor. She obtained a deferment from Edinburgh, worked two months at a hotel for homeless women in London run by the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Theresa's order, and on Nov. 28 left for India.

Martha's family has graciously consented to share her letters with the Courier-Journal and here in Martha's words are her observations, frustrations, efforts and joy caused by her decision to serve her fellowman.

"...I am now on a train to Calcutta and really stunned by India. It is everything everyone said, good and bad, but multiplied ten times!"

"...There was a stopover in Delhi which Martha describes as a city...of long broad avenues off which are narrow swarms of paths and people. Every where there is noise and life and cars. The streets are filled with taxis, people, horsecarts, bicycles, rickshaws, motor scooters and automatic rickshaws, sort of golf carts with roofs.

"...Women wearing saris throng the stalls which are one room buildings (opening into the street) in which vendor and family live as well as sell. Boys are running back and forth with trays of tea and everyone is selling and hawking in oddly melodious chants. The only other foreigners I saw were a few students. Foreigners seem to leave no mark and India has not a real tourist catering that I have seen so far. Incredible faces, an artist's dream; the women are all beautiful as are the children. People are crouching on the sidewalk cooking supper, carrying what seems to be impossible loads on their head and bargaining.

"...I ate 'mildly spice' food that almost enabled me to light everyone's cigarette with my breath. A plate of rice, and curried vegetables was only 25c. Tea is boiled together with milk and sugar making it a whole new beverage!"

After a day's stopover, Martha was on her way to Calcutta.

"...Everyone in my part of the carriage took great interest in me and where I was going and where I was from. I read a picture book to two little boys and ended up interesting the adults who told me the Hindi names of everything. One man kept buying me bananas and saying 'you must eat.' The dust is incredible and at every stop vendors are poking their heads in, shouting their wares.

"...I am now in Mother Theresa's home in Calcutta. I am where I will stay for five months, in Nirmala Kennedy Centre, in Parganos, right outside Calcutta surrounded by 'suburbs' that make the city itself look good.

"...The Centre was built with Kennedy money. During the Partition (Pakistan) there was a yellow fever epidemic and no place to put the stricken refugees. Mother Theresa, desperate, went into the chapel to pray and when she came out a phone call relayed the news that she'd won the Kennedy Prize and that money was just enough to buy Green Park. It is outside Calcutta surrounded by villages and farms, a walled-in compound certainly green but not exactly a park! What insects are left do bite and right now I'm worrying more about the snakes, jackals and rats...in that order!"

"...We are a large compound consisting of a farm, home for abandoned children, (mentally retarded, physically handicapped and normal). There are 400 of them! There are also a home for abandoned men and women, two schools and a home and educational facilities for young girls. It's a huge group!"

"...I live in a room with Jo Eastbrook the woman whom I wrote about coming. She is a super-woman who does everything from laying out blue prints of the land to composing Sister Clare, the Superior's, letters. We have everything on bricks or surrounded by water as protection from insects of which there are hundreds. At night we put up 'tents' of mosquito netting to sleep under. Our bathroom is a riot. Running water we have only if we run while carrying it. The food is an education in itself. Very plain. Rice or chapati maybe and egg or some sort of curried vegetables and always one fruit a day.

"...I shall spend one or two months in a leper colony in the spring, but this is where I'm needed now. Tomorrow I am getting a sari as it is just too hot in my normal clothes.

"...Jo and I rise with the sisters at the ungodly hour of 4:30 a.m. Prayers and meditation at 5 are followed by Mass at 6. We return for breakfast. Then we do our housework and then we go to work about 8:30 to noon. I work with the mentally retarded children. Two nuns and four women work with us; bathe them, give medicine and injections. Some of the children have limbs locked into position, most have physical defects as well as mental and all are at various stages from almost vegetable to epileptic to normal.

"...Lunch is about 12:15. In the afternoon I usually wash my clothes...then rest until 3. We have a cup of tea and then back across the compound to work again until 6. Medicines have to be given out again. At 6 we have Adoration until 7, and then supper. After washing up and putting up mosquito nets and a little talk and letter writing we are in bed about 9.

"...which is the time when the jackals begin to howl. My...that's a blood-chilling sound!! They roam right outside the walls of the compound!! We also boast snakes and I was not too reassured to hear that they had caught cobras!

"...Yesterday I met Mother Theresa. It was incredible. A Mass was celebrated in the chapel and at the Offertory the nuns who were to make their profession, gathered in a semicircle around the altar, each bowed and said 'You have called me, Lord.' They each offered one year of service to the poorest of the poor, obedience, chastity and poverty.

"...Mother gave me the most beautiful smile. I understand the meaning of radiant...and she said 'How wonderful that you are here!' She wanted to know if I was happy and how I came to come.

"...I understand now what Malcolm Muggeridge means about her presence. She summons up such warmth and joy. She responds so fully to people. She really is

a saint. But she looks old now. Meeting her gave me such a renewal!

"...I am trying to think of the sights and sounds here to give you a more complete picture of my life. It is going down to the well and pumping up your own water...the sound everywhere of Hindu singing...the continual chirp of crickets...the view from my window of a huge pond, covered with water lilies and water buffalos and bordered by palm trees and the thatched mud huts...it's the lizards scampering up the wall, the sun streaming in the chapel windows as it rises on our Mass...the dust...the roar of buses and cars and the horns outside the compound and the ever present smokey smell of charcoal fires.

"...There are really daily illustrations of the parable of the poor woman who put two talents in the treasury next to the large gifts of the rich...and hers was the greater gift. The women and girl workers give us small presents that cost them a day's wages, easily, even though they have families to



Dressed in an Indian sari, Martha goes about her tasks with the children of Nirmala Centre. According to her, there are families only able to eat every other day because of the poverty level. "Starvation," she says, "is a pretty scary thing to see." She also relates about the families that come to the compound to give their children up because they can no longer feed them.

feed on \$10 a month!

"...The days are chockful because I am writing the record for the compound plus going to the ward for nursing duties. The Register is an eye-opener. Name after name (of the children) has for an address 'platform 1 or 2' of a railroad station where the child was found and sad, sad histories. Malnutrition runs like a litany through the book. I love my ward work but sometimes I despair because with 50 children and one nun and 5 workers we can get only the basics done. So many of these

children could be functioning human beings if they had one-tenth the care they'd get in the West. When I think of all the things we deem necessary for a child's growth it just doesn't make sense. I am really learning about uneven distribution!

"...I like India more and more, though now and then I would love to sit in a chair, or eat something like a chicken dinner. Yet I have a feeling that my former life, filled as it was with material things, is going to feel kind of empty."

# Life of John Neumann

## ... The Early Years

**Bishop Joseph L. Hogan will lead a diocesan pilgrimage to Rome for the canonization of Blessed John Neumann. The special Courier-Journal tour will depart June 15 and return on June 24. The canonization has been scheduled for June 19. See ad Page 2.**

On a windy January afternoon in 1860 a man slumped to his knees on residential Vine Street in Philadelphia, a few blocks from Logan Square and the new cathedral. Passersby rushed to his aid. Gently they carried him into the nearest house, not knowing who he was. Someone summoned a priest, but before the priest reached the scene, the man was dead. The man was the Bishop of Philadelphia — John Nepomucene Neumann, CSSR.

It had been a long and hurried journey — the 48 years of this little man in the frayed black suit and worn shoes. He had made a private vow never to waste a moment.

As Bishop of Eastern Philadelphia, with Delaware and some of New Jersey included, (such was the Diocese of Philadelphia in the year 1852), John Neumann spent half his days traveling by buckboard, coach and canalboat, on the pastoral visitation of his sprawling diocese, lush farmlands, grimy coal towns, seaside and mountain places.

On his treks, the bishop taught catechism to the children. He sat hearing confessions until the last had gone home. He preached to the adults; and then, on foot, he went to visit the sick.

He walked.

In Philadelphia he walked from Moyamensing to Northern Liberties, walked Market and Mulberry Streets, and down to the Delaware docks. He was walking on Vine Street, on

his way home to Logan Square, the afternoon he died.

Poor men used shoe leather. And, though Bishop of Philadelphia, he was still a religious with a vow of poverty. John Neumann had been an obscure Redemptorist until the March morning of 1852 when they put the crozier into his reluctant hand.

At home, in Budweiss, the diocese had sufficient priests for its needs in the year 1835, the year Neumann completed his studies. Bishop Rudzicka had postponed ordinations indefinitely. Impatiently Neumann waited for nine months. He then wrested a reluctant permission from his bishop and departed for America.

He had already written to several American bishops offering his services. No answers came back.

He arrived in New York with no assurance that anyone would accept him. But he would pray. And make the rounds. He did not have far to seek, however. Bishop John Dubois welcomed him with open arms and ordained him within the month, on June 26, 1836 at St. Patricks on Mott Street in New York.

"I am in need of priests who speak German," said the bishop, telling of colonies from Lorraine, from Baden, the Rhineland, Bavaria. They had settled on the upstate western frontier of his diocese.

Two days after Father Neumann's first Mass at the wooden church of St. Nicholas on Second Street, he was on his way to a pastorate on the Niagara Frontier, a territory as large as his native land. He had gambled on a dream and won the first turn of the wheel. From then on he was to work among peoples from foreign lands taking root in young America.

His first stop was in Rochester, where, on July 4, 1836 he preached his first homily. A few days later he moved on to Buffalo.

Through his parish ran two great routes of America's westward migration: the grand Erie Canal and the main wagon-road to Buffalo, known today as Ridge Road.

Concord coach, canal packet and Conestoga wagon brought thousands of European immigrants to Buffalo where they boarded lake steamers to go further West.

Yet, many also stayed. They bought parcels of the virgin woods around Buffalo. They cleared the land, planted potatoes and corn and wheat. They built themselves log cabins and began life anew. These were the target of Father Neumann's zeal as a young priest, not only settlers of German stock but French Canadians and Irish too. He had field aplenty for his gift of tongues.

Next week: A call to a second vocation.