

Mother Teresa resigns as order's superior

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II has accepted the resignation of Mother Teresa of Calcutta as superior of the Missionaries of Charity because of her age and poor health, the Vatican announced April 11.

The pope also approved the holding of a general chapter of the missionaries Sept. 8, probably in Calcutta, India, to elect a successor for the 79-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Last December, doctors in India implanted a pacemaker in the heart of Mother Teresa, who was hospitalized earlier in the fall for heart problems.

Mother Teresa wrote bishops and archbishops in late March, telling them of her resignation prior to the Vatican announcement. She said the Sept. 8 date for the general chapter meeting was a "birthday gift to our Lady." Mary's birthday is celebrated Sept. 8.

"I would be very grateful if you would kindly pray for us, that we do all for the glory of God, the good of our society and our poor," Mother Teresa told the bishops.

She also said she would be grateful for suggestions that would contribute to "the good of our society."

In a separate letter to bishops, Mother Teresa said she did not want any fundraising done for her or her nuns.

"In the nearly 40 years that the Missionaries of Charity have existed in the church, we have depended strictly upon divine providence to meet all our needs,"

she wrote in the letter, dated March 25.

"Jesus has cared for us with a tender, generous love. It is his Father's work, and he will provide for it. Yes, we accept contributions from individuals, but we do not solicit them or allow anyone to solicit them for us," she wrote.

She said she shared her request "particularly in view of my enclosed letter" concerning her resignation.

Mother Teresa, considered by many to be a living saint, founded the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta in 1950. Started as a local religious community there, the order now has more than 400 houses in 92 countries.

The Missionaries of Charity are about 1,900 in number, including about 30 contemplative sisters residing principally in the United States.

More than 160 houses are in India. There are about 170 sisters and 28 houses in the United States and five in Canada.

In 1963 Mother Teresa co-founded the Missionary Brothers of Charity with an Australian, Father Andrew Travers-Ball, who left the Jesuits to join in her work. As with Brother Andrew, whose title is servant-general, the few priests in the community are called brother and use their first names only. The male community has grown to about 400 members in 80 countries.

In the United States, professed brothers work in five houses.

In 1969, in response to a growing interest among laity who wanted to be associated with her work, an informally structured, ecumenical and international Association of Co-Workers of Mother Teresa was formed with the approval of Pope Paul VI.

The several hundred thousand co-workers pay no dues and do not engage in fundraising, but support the order through prayer and working with the poor.

The Missionaries of Charity started out as a diocesan community and 15 years later the Vatican recognized it as a pontifical congregation, directly under Vatican jurisdiction.



In this 1979 photo, Mother Teresa ministers to a poor man at her Home of the Dying Destitutes in Calcutta, India.

The members take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but the vow of poverty is stricter than those of other congregations because, as Mother Teresa explained, "to be able to love the poor and know the poor, we must be poor ourselves."

In addition, the Missionaries of Charity

— sisters and brothers — take a fourth vow of "wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor."

Mother Teresa said this vow "means that we cannot work for the rich; neither can we accept any money for what we do. Ours is to be a free service ... to the poor."

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