

Lost in faith and faith lost

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Hope Endures by Colette Livermore (2008), is published by William Heinemann Australia, \$34.95.

Eleven years in service to Mother Teresa's order was meant to be God's will, but was "almost like brainwashing" for Colette Livermore, writes Jenny Tabakoff.

Malcolm Muggeridge's documentary about Mother Teresa, *Something Beautiful For God*, changed at least two lives: his own (the journalist famously converted to Catholicism afterwards) and that of Southern Highlands teenager Colette Livermore.

Livermore was a studious, confident and not especially religious school captain type, bent on becoming a doctor. But seeing *Something Beautiful For God*, and television images of the famine in Biafra soon after, changed all that. In 1972, at the age of 18, Livermore shocked her family by donning the blue-bordered white sari of Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity.

"Trust me to express teenage rebellion in such a submissive way," she says wryly.

As a nun, Livermore lost her name, her possessions and nearly all contact with her family. For 11 years, she helped the poorest of the poor in places as diverse as Manila's "garbage mountain", Bourke, Papua New Guinea and Calcutta, receiving notes from Mother Teresa bolstering her faith or admonishing her "pride". In 1983, Livermore left the order, driven by a crisis of faith and a frustration at its methods, especially the way it discouraged independent thought.

Soon after, she began to write down some of her experiences, based on her diaries and letters. She gives the impression that the act of writing was part memoir, part therapy.

"I found the whole thing so paradoxical, and so confusing, because I'd given my best to Mother Teresa's order and it had just gone pear-shaped," Livermore says.

Twenty five years after Livermore left the order, her book has been published. *Hope Endures*, Livermore believes, is the first inside story of a Missionary of Charity. "There are quite a lot of people that have left and I don't think their stories have been told, really. I just wanted to talk about it, and to talk about the difficulties and the constraints and the paradoxes within the order."

MCs are expected to love and serve the poor, live like them and, in Mother Teresa's words, obey commands from superiors "promptly, simply, blindly and cheerfully". Livermore found

it increasingly hard to equate unquestioning obedience with goodness, especially when orders were wrong or illogical.

From the start it was a hard life. After catching the train from Moss Vale to Melbourne to begin her training, Livermore was handed a bucket (for washing, bathing and housework) and ordered not to talk between meals. Every day began with prayers at 4.40am. As she progressed towards becoming a full, "professed" Missionary of Charity, she was given a new name, Sister Tobit, and haircut, a ragged crew-cut, a blue-bordered white sari - and a wire chain with inward-pointing spikes to wear around her waist ("to share the sufferings of Christ and the poor").

The MCs' individual identities, even individual thoughts, were stripped away. Reading her book, I venture, anyone who wasn't aware of the order's good works and Christian philosophy might think ...

She finishes the thought for me. "You'd think you were in a cult," she says.

These days Livermore is a GP on the Central Coast but she says she had trouble settling into civilian life. She originally wanted to call her book *Emerging From Mother Teresa's Shadow*. Even 11 years after the death of "Mother" (as Livermore calls her), her shadow looms large. Livermore has proved her resourcefulness and intelligence working - as a nun and more recently as a doctor, in some of the most difficult places on Earth - but she speaks softly, in sentences that often trail off or end in nervous laughter.

She flips through photo albums full of brown-eyed children, sisters in saris and missives from Mother Teresa. "That's the one when I left saying that she thought it was the devil going as an angel of light and all that sort of thing," she says. "This one's, 'Come back home and I'll send you to Africa, where the suffering of the people will help you ... I'm sure it's the devil, the father of lies, with his lies trying his best to destroy your beautiful vocation.'"

It's odd to read such sentiments, written in the strong, round hand of the woman most likely to become a saint, while sitting on a Central Coast sofa beside their mild-mannered recipient. Some of the letters are a far cry from Mother Teresa's "angel of mercy" image. So was Christopher Hitchens's diatribe, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa In Theory And Practice*, right?

Livermore bristles. "I thought his book was quite unfair. I think Mother was a woman of integrity ... He thought she was a hypocrite and she was dishonest and all that sort of thing. I don't think she was at all. I think she thought that God could use anybody to do good: God can use Judas and God can use Pilate, so God can use the guy in Haiti [Baby Doc Duvalier, from whom Mother Teresa accepted contributions].

"I don't think she was disingenuous at all. I think she was very sincere and I think she was following the maps as she saw them, but - I know it sounds presumptuous - I thought those maps were wrong."

Those maps also led Mother Teresa to "a very lonely and dark place", a trial of faith. "She talked about the terrible pain of loss, of God not being God, of God not really existing," Livermore says. "She said that there were so many questions but she couldn't really explore them because of the blasphemy ... She was scared to explore them."

Livermore was suffering her own crisis as she worked with the poor, saving some and watching helplessly as others died of dysentery or tuberculosis.

There were "amazing moments" but also frustrations. She came to resent the lack of training; rules that frowned on going for solitary walks or reading newspapers (MCs had to maintain "custody of the eyes") - and, especially, how any questioning was criticised as "pride".

"You had to keep quiet, you had to suppress your intellect. Mother said that God uses the weak to confound the strong and the unintelligent to confound the knowledgeable, so it was almost lack of faith to try and use your head."

When Livermore was working in Manila, a rule was introduced that no new admissions could be made on a Thursday. When a desperately ill child turned up on a Thursday, Livermore was rebuked for trying to help. Her agonised letter to Calcutta got a reply telling her it was her duty to say yes to her superior and no to the person in need.

Livermore begs to differ: "To me, you have to always keep the inner self in there, you have to have a life congruent with your beliefs, your own moral compass."

She was working in Bourke when she resigned. Her mother picked her up in Dubbo and took her home. It took Livermore a long time to feel comfortable in Western clothes, especially trousers, even when she enrolled at university in Queensland to study medicine.

The book makes it clear that Livermore had doubts from the start. So why didn't she leave the MCs earlier?

"That's been a bit of a mystery to me," she says. "I think it was because I was in a place where I couldn't have access to outsiders to give me my bearings. It was almost like brainwashing, that I thought that this was God's will for me, that God called me to do this, and that if I left I'd be somehow cut off from God's will or something ... I don't really know. Maybe I just didn't have enough strength of character to leave."

Afterwards, her faith fell away gradually. She was in Rome when Mother Teresa was beatified - a "catalyst" in her decision to write a book. She thinks there needs to be a discussion about the Missionaries of Charity "because if Mother Teresa becomes a saint, it will be solidified in stone. Everything will be hard to change because she's a saint. I just thought it should be discussed or examined or talked about, because it seems to me there is such a paradox between the image of compassion and the fairly non-compassionate attitude within the order."

Mother Teresa requires another miracle to be eligible for sainthood. "And I'm happy for her to become a saint," Livermore says. "We just need to explore the paradox a bit."

Today Livermore is an agnostic who retains a sense of wonder. She believes she did good work as a nun and that the MCs continue to do much good. Although she regrets not having children, she says she had gained much from her 11 years in the order. What sort of things?

"The suspicion of too much materialism and too much consumerism ... and the fact that I think we have to keep on looking beyond our gate, beyond our comfort zone, to the other side. I think we're all getting a bit insular and looking after No.1," she says.

"Belief is a sort of catalyst to get you beyond yourself."

She still admires the order's idea "that the sacred is in the poor and the marginalised" and worries that, if society as a whole loses belief, it will lose its sensitivity to such people.

"I did quite feel my loss of belief, actually, because to me that's what gave me hope - hope that there'd be ultimate justice and hope that these kids that died, that there'd be some justice for them."

What form does hope take for her now?

"It takes the form of just trying to enjoy what beauty there is. I think you find hope in the people you love and who love you, and beautiful things, and making differences in small ways."