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POST POLITICS

Rosa Parks and Mother Teresa -- Justice vs. Charity

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On Thursday the Washington National Cathedral [dedicated](#) a new stone carving of Rosa Parks. It will be displayed in the Cathedral's Human Rights Porch.

The area already includes likenesses of Oscar Romero, the brave Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, who spoke out against the U.S. for giving military aid to his country's military junta and was killed in 1980 for his activism with workers and peasants fighting the regime; Eleanor Roosevelt, who came from a privileged background but used her position as first lady to be an ally with unions, civil rights groups, feminists, and other progressive movements; and John T. Walker, the first African American bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington and an activist who was an ally of South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu and was once arrested at a protest rally against apartheid at the South African Embassy.

In a [piece about the event](#) broadcast on Saturday, National Public Radio's Scott Simon reported that the statue of Parks was commissioned along with a carving of Mother Teresa that will be dedicated later this year.

"They may have much to talk about," Simon proclaimed at the end of the four-minute segment.

A conversation between Rosa Parks and Mother Teresa would indeed be interesting. But it would probably not go along the lines that Simon's glib comment implied, as if the seamstress and the nun shared a common approach to addressing the world's ills. In fact, the [statement](#) on the National Cathedral's website, that Parks and Mother Teresa belong in an area honoring "those who struggle to bring equality and social justice to all people" is incredibly misleading. Parks certainly fits that description, but Mother Teresa most certainly does not.

Mother Teresa (1910-1997) dedicated her life to providing comfort to society's victims, primarily neglected children, the sick, and the very poor. She founded the Missionaries of Charity, a Catholic order that now has 4,500 sisters and 610 missions in 123 countries that include orphanages, soup kitchens, hospices for the dying, homes for people with HIV/AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis, and schools. Members take vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, and "wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor."

This is worthy work for which Mother Teresa deserves praise and received the Nobel Peace Prize. But it is a far cry from any "struggle to bring equality and social justice to all people." Mother Teresa raised millions of dollars for her efforts, but she never challenged the system that caused such widespread suffering. To the contrary, Mother Teresa believed, according to people who worked with and wrote about her, that suffering would bring people closer to Jesus.

Colette Livermore, a former Missionary of Charity, admired Mother Teresa's courage and dedication, but ultimately left the order. As she describes in her book *Hope Endures: Leaving Mother Teresa, Losing Faith, and Searching for Meaning*, Livermore did not agree with what she called Mother Teresa's "theology of suffering."

According to Mother Teresa's philosophy, it is "the most beautiful gift for a person that he can participate in the sufferings of Christ."

In an article in *Free Inquiry*, writer Judith Hayes reported that Mother Teresa once approached a dying cancer patient not with pain killers but with a bit of theology. "You are suffering like Christ on the cross," Mother Teresa [allegedly told](#) the patient. "So Jesus must be kissing you." According to Hayes, the patient replied, "Then please tell him to stop kissing me."

The British newspaper *The Guardian* noted the "charges of gross neglect and physical and emotional abuse" in her orphanages. Two highly-respected medical journals -- *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal* -- reported that the quality of care in the Homes for the Dying was "haphazard." Patients endured poor living conditions. Staff failed to use modern medical techniques and volunteers lacked basic medical knowledge. The staff didn't distinguish between curable and incurable patients, putting some patients, who might otherwise survive, at risk of dying from infections. Sanal Edamaruku, President of Rationalist International, [criticized](#) her practice of failing to use painkillers. In her Homes for the Dying, one could "hear the screams of people having maggots tweezered from their open wounds without pain relief. On principle, strong painkillers are even in hard cases not given."

Rather than reduce suffering, in other words, Mother Teresa's approach may actually have increased it.

But even if Mother Teresa's hospices, orphanages, and other institutions had been models of modern medicine and social work, the reality is that her approach to suffering was that of charity and pity.

Mother Teresa accepted the economic and social conditions as they were and sought to relieve the immediate suffering of a

handful of society's victims. There was not even a pretense of seeking more "equality and social justice" -- that is, a redistribution of economic resources or change in institutional practices and public policies, like land reform or more resources targeted for improved public health, education, and job creation.

Rosa Parks (1913-2005) had an entirely different approach to suffering and injustice. Parks is often portrayed as an exhausted middle-aged seamstress from Montgomery who, wanting to rest her tired feet after a hard day at work, simply violated the city's segregation law by refusing to move to the back of the bus. She is therefore revered as a selfless individual who, with one spontaneous act of courage, triggered the Montgomery bus boycott and became, as she is often called, the "mother of the civil rights movement."

What's missing from the popular legend is the reality that [Parks was a veteran activist](#) whose defiance of segregation laws was not an isolated incident but a lifelong crusade. Also downplayed is that Parks was part of an ongoing movement whose leaders had been waiting for the right moment to launch a campaign against bus segregation. In Parks' worldview, society's victims required neither pity nor charity, but dignity and empowerment.

Parks recalled, "I had almost a life history of being rebellious against being mistreated because of my color." Discussing her grandfather, Sylvester Edwards, she wrote, "I remember that sometimes he would call white men by their first names, or their whole names, and not say, 'Mister.' How he survived doing all those kinds of things, and being so outspoken, talking that big talk, I don't know, unless it was because he was so white and so close to being one of them."

In the 1930s, she and her husband, Raymond Parks, a barber, raised money for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young, black men falsely accused of raping two white women. Involvement in this controversial cause was extremely dangerous for southern blacks.

In 1943, Parks became one of the first women to join the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and served for many years as chapter secretary and director of its youth group. In the 1940s and 1950s, the NAACP was considered a radical organization by most southern whites, especially politicians and police officials. Joining the NAACP put its members at risk of losing jobs and being subject to vigilante violence.

Also in 1943, Parks made her first attempt to register to vote. Twice she was told she didn't pass the literacy test, which was a Jim Crow invention to keep blacks from voting. In 1945, she passed the test and became one of the few blacks able to exercise the "right" to vote. As NAACP youth director, Parks helped black teenagers organize protests at the city's segregated main public library because the library for blacks had fewer (and more outdated) books, but blacks were not allowed to study at the main branch or browse through its stacks.

During the summer of 1955, Parks attended a ten-day interracial workshop at the Highlander Folk School, a training center for union and civil rights activists in rural Tennessee. Founded by Myles Horton in 1932, Highlander was one of the few places where whites and blacks -- rank-and-file activists and left-wing radicals -- could participate as equals. At the workshop that Parks attended, civil rights activists talked about strategies for implementing integration.

For Parks, "One of my greatest pleasures there was enjoying the smell of bacon frying and coffee brewing and knowing that white folks were doing the preparing instead of me. I was 42 years old, and it was one of the few times in my life up to that point when I did not feel any hostility from white people."

The Highlander experience strengthened Parks' resolve, showing her that it was possible for blacks and whites to live in "an atmosphere of complete equality" and without what she called "any artificial barriers of racial segregation."

Parks and other NAACP leaders had frequently talked about challenging Montgomery's segregated bus system and the bus drivers' abusive treatment of black riders. Bus segregation had long been a source of anger for southern blacks, including those in Montgomery, the state capital. "It was very humiliating having to suffer the indignity of riding segregated buses twice a day, five days a week, to go downtown and work for white people," Parks recalled.

In 1954, soon after the Supreme Court's Brown decision outlawing school segregation, Jo Ann Robinson, an African American professor at the all-black Alabama State College, and a leader of Montgomery's Women's Political Council (WPC), wrote a letter to Montgomery mayor W.A. Gayle, saying that "there has been talk from 25 or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of buses." By the following year, the WPC made plans for a boycott and was waiting for the right person to be arrested -- someone who would agree to test the segregation laws in court, and who was "above reproach."

In 1955, two teenage girls -- Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith -- were arrested in separate incidents for refusing to give up their seats, but NAACP leader E. D. Nixon decided that neither of them was the right person around whom to mobilize the community. Parks, in contrast, was a pillar of the black community. She had graduated from high school, which was rare for a black woman in Montgomery then. At forty-two, she had a wide network of friends and admirers from her church and civil rights activities.

On Thursday, December 1, 1955, Parks finished her work at the Montgomery Fair department store, boarded a city bus, and sat with three other blacks in the fifth row, the first row that blacks were allowed to occupy. A few stops later, the front four rows were filled with whites. One white man was left standing. According to law, blacks and whites could not occupy the same row, so the bus driver asked all four of the blacks seated in the fifth row to move. Three acquiesced, but Parks refused. The driver called the police and had Parks arrested.

"People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true," Parks later explained. "I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. . . . No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Because of her reputation and web of friendships, word of Parks' arrest spread quickly. What followed is one of the most amazing examples of effective organizing in American history. The bus boycott lasted for 381 days, organized by the Montgomery Improvement Association, a coalition of churches and civil rights groups. Throughout the year, MIA leaders successfully used church meetings, sermons, rallies, songs, and other activities to help maintain the black community's spirits, nonviolent tactics, and resolve against the almost monolithic opposition of the city's white business and political leaders who

harassed the boycotters using every economic, legal, and police tool at their disposal. The segregationists also resorted to violence. They bombed the homes of boycott leaders, including Rev. Martin Luther King. On December 20, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that the segregated bus system was unconstitutional. That day, an integrated group of boycotters, including King, rode the city buses.

During the boycott, Parks and her husband lost their jobs. In 1957, they moved to Detroit, where Parks continued her quiet involvement in the civil rights movement. She worked for several years as a seamstress at a small factory in downtown Detroit. From 1965 until her retirement in 1988, Parks worked as an assistant in the Detroit office of U.S. Representative John Conyers, a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

A deeply religious woman, Parks did not believe that human suffering -- whether from racism, low wages, or police abuse -- was either inevitable or holy. She was part of a movement -- network of organizations and activists who, over many years, battled segregation and injustice in the streets, churches, and courts. She believed in justice, not charity.

As Martin Luther King once said, "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary."

Rosa Parks deserves to be in the same human rights pantheon as Bishop Romero and Eleanor Roosevelt. But not Mother Teresa.

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