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Mother Teresa (RNS file photo)

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How do you get Mother Teresa to stop praying? Even as I asked myself the question, I knew it had potential implications for the health of my eternal soul. Yet such was

my predicament that I dismissed such qualms without a thought. I needed an answer. Fast.

The place was Mother Teresa's private chapel at the Little Sisters' Rome house, the date sometime in the summer of 1995. As well as me and Mother Teresa, the only other occupant of the chapel was Diana, the Princess of Wales. We had all three been praying in contented seclusion for about five minutes. So far so good: The experience of sharing even a moment of prayer in such company might bring the most skeptical agnostic to the verge of a Damascene epiphany. I was no skeptic and, after five whole minutes and counting, a big part of me was on the brink of ecstasy.

Yet there was the rub. *And counting*. As Princess Diana's private secretary, I was responsible for the split-second punctuality of her program — a precision on which she insisted with religious zeal and on successful delivery of which over seven eventful years I had built my reputation as Diana's most trusted aide.



Mother Teresa holds hands with Britain's Princess Diana in 1997 after the two met briefly at the Missionaries of Charity home in the Bronx section of New York. (CNS/Reuters)

Yet now the precious seconds were ticking away, and my intricately contrived timetable of private jets, limousines, ambassadors and protocol officials (not to mention security men, media rotas and the omnipotent hairdresser) was unraveling fast. Mother's prayer invitation was the kind of unplanned spontaneity of which lifelong memories are made, and yet it was eating deep into the contingency margin I had allowed for unplanned magic moments. (Such a margin was essential in Diana's programs, as she attracted magic moments as a porch lamp attracts moths.)

The trick was to know when and how to bring these magic moments to a tidy and timely conclusion. My courtier's practiced schmooze was usually well up to the task but now, as I peered through the fingers of my devoutly clasped hands, I could see the slight figure of the world's most famous nun, still resolutely bent in prayer. My earthly wiles would be powerless against such invincible humility.

Glancing furtively to my right, I saw the kneeling Diana in saintly profile. Her internal clock was famously accurate but perhaps, swept up in the eternity of the moment, it had paused its relentless whirring …

No such luck. Feeling my glance, she swiveled a bright blue eye in my direction. Now what? it asked, in unmistakably regal tones.

I suppressed a stab of helpless panic and instead deployed a combat-proven piece of nonverbal communication. At such moments, I learned the extraordinary power of the enigmatically raised eyebrow as a means of averting — or at least postponing — thunderbolts of royal displeasure. So now I cranked up my starboard eyebrow as high as it would go and had the satisfaction of seeing my boss's one-eyed glare soften into a simple question, albeit one in which a hint of amusement had begun to twinkle (she was Diana, after all).

What are you going to do now, Patrick? it asked.

My eyebrow replied: You don't seriously expect me to reach forward, tap Mother Teresa on the shoulder and demand that we pick up the pace?

Maybe she did. A great and often necessary perk of being right hand man to the planet's most recognized and beloved princess was that I could usually rely on my politely phrased requests being treated as nonnegotiable demands everywhere we went, from presidential palaces and government offices to leper hospitals and

semiconductor factories. But here? In the sacred twilight of this candlelit sanctuary? My best courtier’s blarney would be worse than useless. It would surely shatter the fragile friendship that had slowly yet unmistakably grown between the two women over recent years.

As so often during my palace service, I took refuge from the implacable forces of royal expectation in the blessed tranquility of prayer. During the turbulent and inexorably stressful years I spent in Diana’s service, there were whole days that I seemed to spend in constant prayer. It became not my last but often my first resort in a royal world turned increasingly on its head by the disintegration of Charles and Diana’s marriage and the spreading pool of unhappiness and poison it released.

It didn’t seem an unreasonable response to the peculiar pressures of a palace career, given the British crown’s admirably close terms with the Almighty (the monarch is, after all, the head of the Church of England). It also neatly fitted my own simple belief that God had put me in the middle of the biggest constitutional crisis in 60 years to serve a greater purpose, even though I still only dimly understand what that might be.

I duly transferred my attention away from the expectant royal eye and back to the frail figure kneeling in front of me. Anybody who met Mother Teresa will tell you of the spiritual power that seemed to radiate from that slight yet wiry body, the force projected by a beady look from beneath that familiar blue-bordered veil. So it was in some trepidation that I resumed my earlier, rather haphazard prayer of thanks that I had been allowed to be even a tiny part in her mission, and of hope that it would be blessed in all its vital work for the world’s poorest and most deserving people.

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To which I now added, please Lord, might this whole unscheduled prayer business stop pretty soon because — as you know — we have a long and complicated program to fulfill this day, and my life is tough enough without an angry princess on my tail. Again.

Some prayers are answered more quickly than others. Hardly had that jumble of hopes and fears ascended from my anxious mind than Mother Teresa appeared to stiffen and then slowly get to her feet. Diana also rose, and the two women moved

together out of the dim chapel and out into the golden sunshine of a Rome afternoon. I trailed a couple of paces behind, struck once again by the infinity of differences between them: age, wealth, destiny and what the world sees as beauty. Yet their closeness was real, as I saw with my own eyes, and their divine purpose perhaps not so different.

I like to believe their closeness continues. After all, they left this world within days of each other, as if in obedience to the same heavenly schedule.

All in God's good time, as they say. All in God's good time.

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