

"We Cannot Do Great Things..."

...only small things with great love." —Mother Teresa

Interview with Karin Wiking, a Swedish woman who became one of Mother Teresa's closest collaborators in northern Europe...

by Alberto Carosa

Few know how Mother Teresa began her mission to help the "poorest of the poor." It began when Mother Teresa worked in a beautiful convent in Calcutta's wealthiest neighborhood, and one day saw a dying woman lying in the gutter half-eaten by rats and ants. Greatly dismayed, Mother Teresa picked up this woman and brought her to a hospital, which would not admit her because she was extremely poor and ill.



Above, author Lois Lindstrom (left) with one of Mother Teresa's closest collaborators in northern Europe, Karin Wiking (right). Center, a view of St. Peter's Square on October 19 during the Mass of Beatification of Mother Teresa of Calcutta

At that moment, she decided to start taking care of those people who were close to death but had nowhere to go.

After much effort, Mother Teresa managed to obtain a place for the dying and destitute from the local city authorities. They allowed her to use half of the Kali temple for her work.

But the public was upset with that decision. Following violent public protests that Christians should not be allowed to work in a public place in their city, the protesters were at some stage confronted by the mayor, who told them: "If your wives, your sisters and your daughters will do this work, I will tell her to leave." The protesters quietly left.

This episode of Mother Teresa's life is recounted in the fascinating interview-biography, *Memoirs of a Swedish War Nurse: A Life of Adventure, A Journey to Spirituality*, by US-born journalist Lois Lindstrom.

It is the story of **Karin Wiking**, a beautiful Swedish nurse who served in the Swedish Red Cross in the 1940s and in the United Nations just after the war ended. The book details the friendships and associations she had with famous people, including a most significant chapter on Mother Teresa.

Wiking has been a co-worker for Mother Teresa and her order in Scandinavia for the past 27 years. Since 1976, she has volunteered and worked for Mother Teresa in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, and at her Home for the Dying in India. All the more intriguing is that this Swede, one of Mother Teresa's staunchest disciples, comes from a place where one would have least expected — Sweden, reputed to be one of the most secularized regions of the world. Yet, Wiking is there to prove an exception to the rule. Despite being over 80 years of age, her relentless and unselfish service to others, to the sick and suffering, the imprisoned and the lonely, remains unparalleled. She is "Mother Teresa's angel in Scandinavia," as the author

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loves to call her. (Lindstrom, a native of Richmond, Virginia, earned a BA at Southern Methodist University and moved with her husband and children to Stockholm from McLean, Virginia, in 1994. Her articles have appeared in the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*. Those who are interested in her book can email her directly at: loislindstrom@hotmail.com, loislindstrom@yahoo.com or visit www.Amazon.com.)

Wiking, along with Lindstrom, was a guest of honor at the beatification of Mother Teresa on October 19 in Rome. Despite an earlier interview with *Radio Vatican*, Wiking was also so kind as to accede to ITV's request to answer a few questions.

Can you recall your first meeting with Mother Teresa?

KARIN WIKING: I first met Mother Teresa in 1976 when she was in Sweden. She was speaking in a church and was so tiny that she had to stand on a box in order to be seen over the pulpit in the church. I was in a small group which met her for a talk afterwards. She made a tremendous impression upon me and she wrote on a little piece of paper, "God bless you," which I have cherished to this day.

We started a co-worker group in Stockholm and collected children's clothes which we sent to Calcutta. Also, we made leprosy bandages out of old sheets. We sent 20 tons of children's clothes and leprosy bandages to Calcutta each year for many years.

And now?

WIKING: Now I am mainly busy with one branch of Mother Teresa's work, which is dedicated to the sick and suffering co-workers. People have not heard so much about this branch of her organization. It started with a Belgian nurse, **Jacqueline de Decker**, who went out to Calcutta to work with the poor. She heard about Mother Teresa and looked her up and wanted to enter her order. But she became ill and was sent back to Belgium and since then she has been operated on 46 times. She thought life had no meaning any more when she could not get back to Calcutta. But then she got a letter from Mother Teresa in which Mother Teresa asked her to be her special "pray-er" – that she should pray especially for Mother Teresa and offer up her sufferings for Mother Teresa and her work.

So, she was the first sick and suffering co-worker and Mother Teresa regards, or regarded, this branch as their pow-

erhouse, because every one of Mother Teresa's sisters is linked with one of these sick and suffering people, who prays for them.

They pray and they offer their sufferings for the sisters and brothers' work and that is very important.

I had one of my sick and suffering in Scandinavia who died and then the brother for whom he'd been praying sent me a letter, saying, "Please, arrange for me as soon as possible a new sick and suffering prayer partner because I feel dryness in my prayers, and I don't have the same inspiration in my work since my sick and suffering prayer partner died."

So, it really means a lot for the sisters and the brothers and also for the sick and suffering, who have been feeling or felt inferior before, but now they have a goal in life, they have a mission: they pray and offer up their sufferings for each of Mother Teresa's sisters or brothers.

And what about Scandinavia?

WIKING: As I am the link for Scandinavia, I have 89 sick

and suffering prayer partners in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. Most of them are in Sweden, about 50, and then the rest in the other countries.

These are people who are either physically disabled or mentally disabled. I stay in contact with them: they telephone me quite often; there are two mentally disabled persons in Finland who need somebody to call. And they telephone me often. I have a lot of correspondence with all of these people, and I visit them. Last sum-



A Missionaries of Charity sister kisses the hand of Pope John Paul II during the beatification of her order's founder, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Opposite, the dome of St. Peter's Basilica and priests distributing Communion are reflected in a puddle of water during the beatification Mass for Mother Teresa of Calcutta October 19. Some 300,000 pilgrims attended the ceremony with Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square. (CNS photos from Reuters)

mer I visited people in Norway and next summer I will visit people in Finland.

Did you ever intend to join Mother Teresa's order?

WIKING: Well, at a certain moment in my life I was thinking about it, but I think my current work is very gratifying. It gives me a lot of fulfillment. I also visit prisoners in jail once a week, and I work at the Caritas office one day a week, where I take all the incoming telephone calls from all over the world; it takes quite some time with these sick and suffering. Caritas has different projects in the developing countries and in connection with this we receive calls from Latin America, Africa, Middle East and even East Timor.

Any special experience with these prisoners, in terms of rehabilitation, repentance, release and even conversion?

WIKING: I can recall two cases that were rather remark-



able. A couple of years ago I visited a man from Lebanon who had been sentenced to four years. He was weeping when I met him, but he saw my miraculous medal around my neck and asked me: "Are you Catholic?" I replied: "Yes," and he said: "I am too."

So then he asked me to light candles in church and pray for him. I lit 10 candles with the money he gave me and prayed for him. Next time I returned to him, he was much happier, his lawyer had been more positive, so he asked me to light more candles. I lit 10 more candles and prayed again for him. The next time I returned he was free.

I visited another man who was very depressed. His fiancée was expecting a baby and he wanted to be present when the baby was born, but he was in jail. When he asked me how I could always be so happy, I said I was following the Thessalonians letters where it is said, "Always be happy, pray continuously, and thank God for everything," also for difficulties.

If one does this, I said, you shall get happier. I do and I am always happy. He asked: "Do you want me to thank God for sitting here?"

And I said: "Try."

So, next time I saw him, he had tried and was much happier. He asked me to light a candle in church, which I did, and I also prayed for him. He was also released from prison and wrote to me: "You have taught me to pray and given me back my life." Subsequently, I was invited for the baptism of his little daughter. He started attending Catholic Mass in my church with his little daughter in a pram.

Were you also successful in praying for people to receive better health?

WIKING: It would seem so. For instance, in Finland I have a sick and suffering person who is Orthodox and her confessor has diabetes and for months and months he had a wound in his foot that would not heal. So she asked me please, pray that his foot would heal. I prayed for that and very soon his wound healed.

The daughter of this sick and suffering person had a fiancé who was an atheist, but both the mother and the daughter were believers, Orthodox, so the mother asked, please pray for this fiancé of my daughter that he would get faith. I prayed for him and all of a sudden he wanted to be baptized. Then he started reading the Bible all the time, also at meals, and I think he was

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PHOTO / GRZEGORZ GALAZKA



really converted. Now they are married and expecting a child, whom they would call Karin like me if it's a girl.

Can you remember any other particular stories during your stay with Mother Teresa?

WIKING: I was working in the Home for the Dying in Calcutta, which was a tremendous experience! The first day, I scrubbed the plastic mats that were lying on their beds and hung them up on the roof to dry. And gradually, I was doing other tasks. I was feeding them and holding their hand when they were going to die. I also dressed the wounds. It was wonderful work! I remember one of my patients — the youngest girl. She had several diseases, including asthma, tuberculosis (TB) and a third, I forget what it was. Her name was Magdalene and every morning when I came to the house, she put her meager arms around me and was very loving.

It was December and she knew a few words in English, and she asked me, "Christmas Day here?"

I said yes. I asked her: "What would you like for Christmas?"

She was about 30 years old and answered: "A doll."

I suppose she never had owned a doll in her life.

She used to put her hands on my hair. She thought I was so blond because they were all dark in India, of course.

So I bought her a blond doll and a comb and a brush and she was really happy about her doll.

But you also had a chance to see Mother Teresa in Rome, didn't you?

WIKING: I was going to Rome in 1986 and the same day an Indian friend from Stockholm, Kalyani, who was studying there, was going to Rome to talk to Mother Teresa to ask her if she could enter her order. She had polio and was rather handicapped. I asked Kalyani if she could arrange that I could speak to Mother Teresa. She said she would try, and I phoned her when I arrived in Rome. She said she did not know whether that was possible, since there were many people who wanted to talk to Mother Teresa, but she told me to come to her convent. I was sitting waiting there and all of a sudden Mother Teresa was beside me. At first, she said to me, "Come and say hello to the Master of our house, Jesus." So we went into the chapel and prayed. She took her time. We talked for more than a hour. I had problems in my family. Mother Teresa always says that when she has a person in front of her, that person is the only one in the world for her. She really took her time with me — for more than a hour! She said



Opposite, Sister Nirmala Joshi, superior of the Missionaries of Charity, smiles during an event in honor of Mother Teresa, the order's founder, October 18 in Rome. Pope John Paul II declared Mother Teresa blessed during a service the next day in St. Peter's Square. (CNS photo from Reuters)



whenever a person troubles you, you must love this person. She said I should love this person even more.

Did you meet her other times in Sweden?

WIKING: Yes, besides 1976, she also came in 1989, and I was at (Stockholm's) Arlanda Airport to meet her with our bishop. She had come to open up an ecumenical Christian meeting which they have, I think, every sixth year in Sweden. She opened up the meeting and her speech was very articulate, clever, beautiful and very well-spoken, and she was always very humble. She said we cannot do great things, we can only do small things with great love. She used to say: "I am a little pencil in the hand of God."

I remember she told me about a special occasion in Calcutta, where the sisters were giving food to 7,000 people every day. She said there was always enough and they never had lack of anything, but one day one of the sisters came and said to her: "Mother, tomorrow we have no food for all these people."

So there was nothing they could do, but then the municipality the following day for some reason or another closed all the schools and all the bread which used to go to the children was donated to Mother Teresa for her people. God was looking after them.

In Amsterdam, where I go every Christmas to visit my daughter, I also visit the Sisters there. They have a house for homeless women and their children. They have 300 homeless "down and outs" who come there for a meal. They serve 150 people at a time as they must wash the dishes and prepare for the second group of 150 people.

Can you recall some other episodes where the providential help seemed evident?

WIKING: Yes, another incident I remember. A man came to her and said that his son was suffering from a special illness and the medicine for that disease was only available from abroad. So he asked Mother could she possibly arrange for this medicine to arrive. Immediately afterwards somebody came with all sorts of medicines and precisely on top of this basket was the medicine he wanted.

Didn't she also say that she was much concerned with the materialism in the West?

WIKING: Yes. She said that it's easier to give a plate of rice to somebody hungry in India, than to relieve the terrible

feeling of unwantedness and loneliness which people in the West often feel. She said that the mental and spiritual poverty in the wealthy countries is worse than the material poverty in the poor countries.

There have been also those who have criticized Mother Teresa for not giving rods to fish instead of giving just fish for them, in other words, rods for them to catch their own fish.

But they are so weak, Mother Teresa used to say, that they have to have fish first before they can hold a fishing rod.

For example, when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, she was the first one to tell them not to have this big meal and feast afterwards.

Instead, she wanted the money for the poor people and the homeless, and she got it. With the money, she further expanded her activities.

