

SPECIAL REPORT

New saint's goddaughter

Like St. Teresa of Kolkata, Maria McMurtrie likes to pray, and to hug and serve others

By Richard Szczepanowski
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When Maria Teresa Guadalupe McMurtrie of North Bethesda says her godmother is a saint, she is not exaggerating or speaking with hyperbole. That is because on Sept. 4, Pope Francis – before countless thousands of faithful gathered at the Vatican – officially declared Maria's godmother St. Teresa of Kolkata.

"I remember she liked to hold me and hug me," Maria said, recalling her fondest memory of her godmother. "And she always liked to help people and serve people."

Maria was in Rome for the Mass and participated in the canonization as a gift bearer. She and two of Mother Teresa's grandnieces brought flowers to the altar during the Mass. This was the second time that Maria had such an honor. She was also a gift bearer during her godmother's Oct. 19, 2003 beatification by now-Saint John Paul II.

Prior to departing for Rome for the canonization, Maria said she looking forward to meeting Pope Francis. "I like him. He is really nice," she said, adding that when she

meets the Holy Father, "I will shake his hand."

Maria, who has Down syndrome, used to live in a Missionaries of Charity-run home for handicapped women and children in Mexico City. When she was four years old, she was adopted by Sandy McMurtrie of Bethesda, a longtime friend and close associate of Mother Teresa.

"I went to Calcutta in 1981 for the purpose of meeting Mother Teresa. I read about her and felt inspired to meet her," McMurtrie said in an earlier interview of how she met the famous nun.

After that initial month-long visit to the Missionaries of Charity, where McMurtrie worked with Mother Teresa's sisters at their homes in Calcutta and at a home for lepers, she and the saintly nun became close.

It was while accompanying Mother Teresa on a trip to Mexico – to help open a seminary for Missionaries of Charity priests – that McMurtrie met Maria for the first time. While visiting a Missionaries of Charity-run home for handicapped women and children, McMurtrie encountered Maria who was abandoned at the age of two. The two bonded quickly.

With Mother Teresa's blessing and assistance, Maria became part of the McMurtrie family and moved to North Bethesda.

"I will always remember she (Mother Teresa) came to Mexico and picked me" to be adopted by McMurtrie, Maria said. "I am a lucky person because she picked me."

Once the adoption was arranged, Mother Teresa agreed to be godmother. Jim Towey – the president and CEO of Ave Maria University who formerly served under President George W. Bush as head of the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives – is the godfather. He earlier served as a lawyer for Mother Teresa in the United States. After the necessary paperwork was completed, it was Towey who flew to Mexico to bring Maria to her new family. Maria arrived at the McMurtrie home on Sept. 26, 1987, a date that is celebrated each year in the McMurtrie household as Maria's birthday.

McMurtrie also recalled Mother Teresa as a good and loving godmother and said that while it is "incredible" that her friend and Maria's godmother is now venerated as St. Teresa of Kolkata, she is not surprised.



CS PHOTO BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN

Maria Teresa Guadalupe McMurtrie – Mother Teresa's goddaughter – holds a rosary that the saint gave to the family. McMurtrie helped bring up the offertory gifts at St. Teresa of Kolkata's canonization Mass on Sept. 4.

"We always knew she was a saint," McMurtrie said. "But we see her in a different way than others because we knew her in a different way."

Although Maria was a young teen-ager when her godmother died on Sept. 4, 1997, she said she still has fond memories of the future saint.

"She helped people with no home and no schools and no food," Maria said. "She was a really good person who was also very nice to me."

Also, the bond between the two has not been broken these past two decades.

"I always pray to her, and she still helps me a lot," Maria said.

Maria keeps her saintly godmother's legacy alive by also serving others. She is a regular weekly volunteer at the Catholic Charities-run St. Maria's Meals dinner program for the homeless.

Earlier, Maria used to volunteer taking care of babies at Gift of Hope in Northwest Washington. She also volunteered at Gift of Peace, the home for people with AIDS and

other illnesses that Mother Teresa established in Northeast Washington. It was in the chapel at Gift of Peace that Maria made her First Holy Communion, with Mother Teresa at her side.

In addition to her volunteer activities, Maria has for the past 11 years worked at Our Lady of Mercy School in Potomac. That is the parish attended by the McMurtrie family. Maria is a member of the parish's bell choir and is active with Potomac Community Resources, which offers therapeutic, recreational, social and respite care programs for teens and adults with intellectual and developmental differences.

Maria described as "really nice" her distinction of having a saint as a godmother.

"I remember she (Mother Teresa) liked to help people and she is in heaven right now helping people," Maria said. "Mother Teresa liked to pray and I like to pray, too. She liked to hug people and I like to hug people, too."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MCMURTRIE FAMILY
Mother Teresa attended Maria McMurtrie's First Communion, which was held at the Gift of Peace home operated by the Missionaries of Charity.