There Is Now A Brighter Future Ahead For Child Victims of Ebola

The situation in Ebola-ravaged West Africa is truly heartbreaking. Already, an estimated 5,000 precious girls and boys have lost one or both parents to Ebola – and the numbers are only expected to rise. Even those children who are perfectly healthy face discrimination and abandonment by their families and communities, as misunderstanding of how the disease is spread unfairly demonizes them.

Recognizing their plight, Salesian missionaries have stepped in to comfort and care for these children, with the goal of helping them rebuild their shattered lives. Currently in Sierra Leone, 120 orphans live at the Salesian Centre in Freetown. In Liberia, missionaries are caring for 300 children who have lost their parents.

“We are deeply concerned about the futures of the children who manage to survive this brutal epidemic,” says Father Mark Hyde, director of Salesian Missions. “In addition to the stigmatization and attacks they face, they have very few opportunities for education. Most of the schools have been shut down, and children are losing crucial time in the classroom. We know from experience that youth who are out of school for an extended period of time often never go back.”

For this reason, Salesian missionaries have prioritized classroom study in the orphanages – an otherwise ordinary activity that has become extraordinary in countries struggling for their very survival. In Sierra Leone, in fact, the Salesian Centre is the only “school” still open in the country. Each morning, students receive lessons in basic subjects consistent with where they left off before the epidemic.

In order to extend this opportunity to more children across the region, Salesian missionaries are also exploring ways to facilitate home study. This is especially critical since schools aren’t expected to reopen until March or April of 2015 at the earliest.

One potential method involves using the radio to broadcast school lessons – a kind of distance-learning approach that has proven effective during other emergencies around the world. Another would enlist students and teachers to hand-deliver books and lessons to pupils’ homes, and return to collect any homework for correction.

Whatever the specific interventions may be, the goal is always the same – to ensure that, amid the immediate and necessary assistance we are providing in West Africa, we keep the long view in focus – a much brighter future for the children deeply affected by Ebola.

This Month’s Child

For two days, little Rahul had nothing to eat.

His desperately impoverished parents had sent him from Kolkata to Delhi, in the hopes he could find work and help ease the family’s suffering. Instead, his first days in a new city were marked by intense hunger and fear.

Soon, however, an unscrupulous adult made Rahul an offer: In exchange for picking through garbage and collecting plastic bottles, his “employer” would provide fair pay – money Rahul could use to buy meals, with even a little extra to send home.

Rahul had never been to school, yet he quickly realized something was wrong. Despite his job, he was still living in a slum, forced to eat whatever scraps he could find. His employer was paying him for far fewer bottles than Rahul had actually collected, but Rahul had no way of proving it because he couldn’t count.

So when teachers from the nearby Salesian school reached out to children in the slum, Rahul quickly responded by asking “Will you teach me numbers?”

Today, thanks to caring friends like you who support our work, Rahul excels at math and is able to calculate his own earnings. The local Salesians also check in on Rahul to make sure he is safe, and Rahul is thankful that he has someone to watch over him.

This Month’s Call For Prayer

With a new year upon us, please pray that your generosity in 2015 brings hope, health and happiness to all the children and families who suffer from hunger, poverty, disease and disaster. You are their savior.
In the Dominican Republic...

In Santo Domingo, it’s not unusual to observe clusters of youth hawking newspapers, shining shoes, or selling small trinkets for just a few spare coins.

Many of these boys and girls – known locally as camillitas – face escape problems such as violence, broken families, substance abuse or neglect at home. Others have been sent by their desperately impoverished parents, in the hopes they can contribute to the family’s meager income.

The majority of these youth never complete their primary education – which virtually guarantees long-term negative effects on their work prospects, income and health.

But there’s hope. For 30 years, the Muchachos y Muchachas con Don Bosco (Boys and Girls with Don Bosco) has been engaging these camillitas in worthwhile activities with the ultimate goal of re-enrolling them in school. To date, more than 65,000 youth have achieved new dignity, and ensured themselves a better future, through the program.

In France...

Today, a highly successful Salesian model of youth intervention is making a big difference.

Established 20 years ago in the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil, the Le Valdacco association aims to assist impoverished youth that are lured into gangs and vice.

Le Valdacco offers many activities – social, educational and recreational – centered around a common goal: to improve the future prospects of marginalized and at-risk youth. Special effort is made to support these youth to remain in school.

Similar centers have been replicated in Lyon, Nice and Lille. Most recently, Le Valdacco launched the Institute for Vocational Training, which offers specialized coursework for social workers, teachers and business leaders. This will hopefully help improve both their understanding of the specific challenges youth face as well as their ability to address these challenges.

For our online friends, please visit the link below to see how Salesians are helping children in France through this special program: www.salesianmissions.org/youth-in-france

In the Democratic Republic of Congo...

Recently, the Salesian-led International Voluntary Service for Development (VIS) hosted a special workshop. Its goal was to empower farmers to envision a viable and sustainable agricultural framework, and to develop their own confidence in bringing it to fruition.

The farmers’ ideas helped draw a blueprint for a new agricultural service center. This center will ultimately provide essential resources and expertise to help improve crop yield, profitability, and the overall quality of life for farmers and their families.

Missionary of the Month: Fr. Francis Robewno

Growing up in Myanmar (Burma), young Francis was profoundly influenced by Catholic missionaries serving in his village of Moby.

At the age of 16, Francis recognized his call from God and considered entering the diocesan seminary. In the meantime, family friends introduced him to the Salesians of Don Bosco and that, as he says, “was how it all started!”

Now 29, Fr. Robewno is in the unique position of being the first-ever Salesian missionary from Myanmar – a country that, until now, has only been on the receiving end of such work.

After having finished the first two years of his practical training at home, he is currently completing his final year in Juba, South Sudan where he is assisting Salesian pre-novices explore their own vocations.

And after that?

“I am open to whatever God wants of me,” Fr. Robewno says.

“I have received so much from the missionaries in my country that I have a sense of gratitude. I want to give something back to the church that has done so much for us.”

Offering Our Hearts Around the Globe

Dear Friend,

You’ve read about the efforts of our faithful and brave missionaries on behalf of the precious children who have been orphaned due to the Ebola outbreak. Their heartbreaking and tragic stories have riveted the world’s attention, and rightly so.

Yet we must not forget the millions of other children living in adversity around the globe.

Last year was difficult for these boys and girls. Brutal wars, widespread famine, the inability to afford or attend school ... all of these things have bruised their souls and threatened their futures.

They, too, captured the attention of our missionaries serving in more than 130 countries worldwide.

While I have no doubt that 2015 will present its own unique set of challenges, I pray these desperate children will continue to hold a special place in your heart as they will in ours. Thank you for your continued kindness and prayers. May God bless you!

F. Mark Ayres, SCJ

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