They promise daily meals, a place to sleep, and the security of “family.” Instead, the para-military groups fighting Colombia’s decades-long civil war have stripped the innocence, dignity and rights of thousands of vulnerable children.

According to official estimates, as many as 250,000 girls and boys under the age of 18 forcibly serve as armed combatants in war-torn countries around the world. In Colombia, especially, the problem is particularly acute: since 1964, tens of thousands of them have been recruited and trained to fight. Inexpensive to feed and easy to manipulate, they make perfect soldiers: compelled to fulfill some of the most brutal roles of violent conflict.

Widespread poverty and the lingering effects of the country’s drug wars routinely tear families apart – leaving far too many children homeless and alone. Compared to the violence, hunger and despair they experience on the streets, joining the army sounds like a dream.

At Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellin, Salesian missionaries are determined to help these girls and boys reclaim their youth, and futures, through a targeted program focused on social reintegration.

Catalina was just 13 years old when she began carrying, and using, a machine gun. Manuel was even younger – around eight or nine – when he did the same. Within a heart-breakingly short period of time, the atrocities they witnessed, and endured, forever wounded their psyches. Fortunately, both children have discovered refuge at Ciudad Don Bosco’s “Specialized Protection House – Building Dreams” project.

Children enter “Building Dreams” through an official referral process. Once there, they progress through a holistic program that provides psychological assistance, interpersonal skills development, basic education, and advanced training to prepare them for long-term employment. Missionaries also offer family reconciliation support for those who seek it – and job placement opportunities at partner companies in the area. The program has already helped return more than 2,000 youth to normal lives.

Looking forward, missionaries hope the program will become unnecessary as Colombia’s government negotiates to end the war. Until then, they will continue to help boys and girls recover their lost childhoods, with the loving support they need.

Learn more at: SalesianMissions.org/patio13
In Burkina Faso...

Salesian missionaries have launched a new program to help girls and young women learn the skills they need to pull themselves out of poverty.

The Women’s Promotion Center, located in the central city of Kouba, represents one phase of a long-term, comprehensive project. It will ultimately comprise a nursery school, primary and secondary schools, a girls’ shelter, a sports complex and community gathering space. Once completed, the center will offer professional training in catering, tailoring, information technology and hair dressing. Students may also access literacy courses, job placement support, and opportunities to develop the soft skills necessary to thrive in the workplace.

Salesian Missionaries expect construction for the center to be completed within a year. In the meantime, its first training course, in horticultural techniques, has meantime, its first training course, been launched with more than 100 enthusiastic enrollees.

Missionary of the Month: Fr. Wladislaw (Ladislau) Klinikii

He once spent five years imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. On February 8th, Fr. Ladislau Klinikii celebrated his 75th anniversary as a Salesian priest.

Despite an inauspicious start – he was a young seminarian when the German army arbitrarily arrested him in 1942 – Fr. Ladislau’s decades of faithful service have been steeped in joyful piety. Known for his devotion to Saint Faustina Kowalska (like she, imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp), he especially shines in the ministry of confession: a role he first assumed while serving as chaplain to Salesian aspirants in Lavrinhas, Brazil. Today, he remains committed to sharing God’s forgiveness with all who seek it.

“Fr. Ladislau pours into the souls of penitents, the balm of divine mercy,” say his confreres.

Now 103 years old, Fr. Ladislau ranks as the second-oldest living Salesian. At his anniversary celebration, attendees received a medal of Merciful Jesus and a copy of his memoir, One Step from Death, that details his harrowing experiences during WWII.

Cultivating Brighter Futures

Dear Friend,

St. Paul says, “… if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (5 Cor 5:17).

Writing to you just after Easter, and at the dawn of Spring, these words particularly resonate. From the warbling birds to the blooming trees, a spirit of rebirth surrounds us – reminding us that Jesus triumphantly rose to give us new life and new hope.

Today, I invite you to rejoice and celebrate with us: because your kindness truly helps our missionaries resurrect the spirits of those in need around the world. In this issue of our World Bulletin, you can read some examples of their work – and see, first-hand, how the “old has gone,” and a new, brighter future has emerged in its place.

Thank you for being such an integral part of our life-giving mission. Together, we will continue to sow the seeds of positive change! May God Bless You!

Fr. Michael Hayes, SdB