

Nyumbani

Observations by Mrs. Liana Levoir (UK)

Visited repeatedly in 1999-2003 and once again in 2006

My husband and I were posted to the British High Commission (i.e. an Embassy) in Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa, for 3 ½ years and from the very beginning were very involved with Nyumbani. We had heard about a wonderful man who had begun a home for HIV/AIDS orphans and had wanted to meet him and learn about his work.

When we did, it became the most precious experience ever! We met Father Angelo D'Agostino at an official Embassy reception. He was pointed out to us in the distance: a short, rotund, cuddly-looking Father-Christmas type person with a heart as big, so we found out later. He encouraged us to go to Nyumbani and meet the children...from our first visit we fell in love with all of them. Having visited the orphanage on a weekly basis for Mass (which takes place in one of the classrooms) I also went during the week to play with the children, have a cuddle and just be with them. In fact they are all known as "our honorary grandchildren".

The home is really a home: the children are loved, they are cared for, they live in a family atmosphere with "brothers and sisters", and of course, thanks to Father Dag (as he was affectionately always known), have been given the antiretroviral medication they so badly needed. In the years we were in Kenya (1999-2003) there were 900 people dying of AIDS **per day** in Kenya alone. The younger children are taught in classrooms at Nyumbani and Father Dag, with a lot of effort, persuaded local schools to accept the older children assuring them that other children would not catch HIV/AIDS from their new classmates. What struck us about Nyumbani, having heard about other orphanages in Africa, is that the money given goes for the children's good. Other orphanages, I am afraid, often channel funds to the organisers etc and the children carry on suffering. Nyumbani is a success because help goes straight to the source of the problem. The warm atmosphere of love given by the housemothers, the nuns, the teachers and their manager, Protus, is very touching. Love, hugs, touch, warmth, smiles all contribute to allowing these children to enjoy their lives, long or short. These are children who have been literally discarded by families when it is known they are HIV positive, or whose parents have died of AIDS, having passed it on to their offspring.

Mass is a wonderful experience. The children take part, they sing, they dance, they enjoy the Mass. Protus teaches them about the Gospel beforehand and during Mass questions the children with lots of hands up and squeals of mirth when answers are amusing! We remember one Epiphany when the children were acting out the visit of the Three Kings. Baby Jesus was bigger than St Joseph (!), and the "Three Kings" brought Jesus a waste paper basket, a handbag and a mobile phone!!...all rustled up at the last moment from the congregation.

The outreach programme (Lea Toto) in the slums of Nairobi is also very valuable with young social workers going into homes teaching the Kenyans about family health, cleanliness, nutrition and encouraging them to go to free clinics with their problems. I visited some of them with our daughters and it was very touching to see the way the people in the slums welcomed and trusted the Nyumbani social workers. So great strides have been made with this programme in educating families.

Now of course there is the Village of Hope out at Kitui, a dream come true for Father Dag. He worked so hard to raise funds to fulfill his dream and it is sad that he is no longer alive to see it working and flourishing. It was a huge project and many thought it couldn't happen but Father Dag's determination saw it through.

Two and a half weeks before he passed away Father Dag was in Rome, where my husband I live temporarily, and he came to lunch after being interviewed on Italian television and by the Vatican Radio. How fortunate we were to have him with us and see him in such good health at that time. We had seen him 9 months earlier when we paid a visit to Nairobi from Senegal, West Africa, where we were living and working at the time. So many memories, and the knowledge that his work will continue saving lives of unwanted children and helping those in the slums and elsewhere who care for them.