

Letter to a Prisoner

A Report of the Ministry trip to Kenya

01/29/2019

(Note: this letter was written in Kenya, and sent to the many prisoners that I see in the many Texas prisons that I visit, via an online service. It turned out to be two pages, which is "two stamps" – a buck a letter. Online at http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2019+report-of-ministry-trip-to-kenya.pdf, http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2019+report-of-ministry-trip-to-kenya.doc)

Dear in Christ Brothers, and sons in Christ,

I am in Kenya, far away, but you are still very near, and I think of you many times a day, and pray for you every day. I will return for sure the first week of March. I am in Kenya till Feb 21. I want to keep you updated about goings in here. I wish everyone could experience being around 170 children, very poor in terms of worldly things, but rich in other ways. Some are street children. Some have been literally brought in from begging, like one boy who was begging for 100 Bob, equal to one US dollar, to get some food because he was starving, and Father Methodius told him "I can take you to place where you can get food every day and go to school. Would you like that?" The boy agreed, and has flourished in the school and the orphanage, and has now become a reader in the church. One boy was picked up at a police station because he was abandoned, and many are orphans.

Kenya does not have many of the social support services we have here, so the child is an orphan if a person wants to, they can take care of them. There are also many at-risk children who along with the orphans that Father Methodius is not able yet to give lodging to are in tenuous circumstances, sometimes being boarded by families who treat them as slave labor or worse.

Like all children who have not been cared for in families, and endured hunger, abuse and loneliness, they are emotionally needy, but they respond to love very easily.

I am helping in St Barnabas Orthodox Orphanage and School (www.africamission.org), rough by US standards, but a sanctuary and place of refuge, and learning for these children. They are taught in small rooms, with rough walls and tiny benches, and is unheated (and amazingly, it can be cold here in Kenya, on the central rift, 1.5 miles above sea level). There are often holes in the walls, which are only thin, unpainted plywood, patched together, so that you can easily look out and see the grass when you're standing in front of the blackboard teaching the children.

For breakfast, the children get a half cup of "porridge" - a staple in Africa consisting of maize flour (like corn, but not as sweet), and sorghum flour, with some sugar. It forms a gruel, and is served to hungry children as they line up outside amongst the sheep grazing in the yard (seen everywhere here, usually tied up to graze by the road) near the kitchen, which is a smoky wood shack with a big wood stove, fed by a wood fire. The cooking is done in huge vats, and they also fry bread in giant griddles. It is called "mandazi". The gruel is simple, but full of protein and fiber, and good. They eat it by drinking it out of the metal or sometimes plastic cup. The mandazi is better to me than a donut. It is simple fried wheat, which has been mixed with milk. I call it an "African donut". This breakfast is small by American standards, but I have become quite accustomed to it. Marina and I usually serve it, by dipping a cup into the porridge, which is in a 5-gallon bucket, and pouring half a cup (we get in trouble for giving more, because if too much is given, the food runs out, and they only have funds for so much food. In America, we can go to McDonald's and buy a hamburger and only eat half of it if it were out and throw the rest away, and we will always have money to buy another hamburger. Here in central Africa, food is very valuable, and not wasted), then giving it to the children. One of us also hands them a piece of mandazi.

I am trying to learn Swahili, so I say to most of the children "Mungu a kaburiki" - "God bless you", when I am serving them breakfast or lunch. I think it is funny that they wear heavy jackets in conditions that would be shorts and t-shirt weather for us Texans, so sometimes I ask "Moto ama baridi?" - "Hot or cold?" Today, a day that is probably in the 70's, with a warm sun and gentle breeze, I was happy to hear all of the ones I asked say "moto" - even the ones wearing winter jackets!

Their lunch is more substantial, and it is also vegetarian. Meat is very expensive here, and eaten very rarely. For Christmas, one of the sheep was slaughtered, and the children are very happy to have a feast. The lunch is rice and a staple dish called gigheri which consists of maize and beans and onions, in a broth. This is the children's last meal of the day at the orphanage, and it is not for certain that they would eat again in the evening, because they go to many different homes, and not all homes take care of them. In some of these homes, the children are not allowed by the adults to go to church on Sunday, but are made to work all day. In one case, a child was forced to fill a 55-gallon barrel with water, from the river, carrying it in a small plastic container, and making countless trips. Many of these children are exhausted on Monday, with hungry bellies.

In America of course, if someone wants to foster a child the state will check the home and will find some of the abuses. Of course, the child protective services system in our country is far from perfect, but there is at least some oversight. In Kenya there is no child protective services, and if people are somewhat discrete in their abuse, nobody will know. Of course, I believe that many families care for the children because of being decent human beings, but if you have so many children and so many foster homes, the percentages are that some of them have very difficult lives when they get home, and when they come to the school, it is their sanctuary and refuge.

The vast majority of the children are bused to and from school. This is a gigantic expense in time and petrol and money. They have only one bus, and must take three trips. It takes 2 ½ hours to get all of the children home or to school. The total mileage is only 50 km each way, but those are hard kilometers! Even the paved roads have a lot of potholes that you cannot dare go over at highway speed, and the majority of roads that we go on our dirt with many rocks and ruts. Sometimes the wrong side of the road is the better part, so everybody drives on it except when a car is approaching, and then they get over to the rutted part. It is curious that none of the dirt roads are marked with names. We go a long way away from the orphanage, and the driver and all the teachers just know where they are. Even GPS, which I have tried, may show a road but it doesn't show the name.

The teachers here work for a pittance. Their food is provided, but very little else. Their salaries are something that no American would put up with. And yet many of these teachers that been at this orphanage and school for many years, and love these children and are very dedicated to their craft of teaching them.

There are many contrasts in the teaching of children in Kenya versus America. First of all, religious teaching is mandated by the state. If a person is Christian there is so-called "CRE" - Christian religious education, and for the significant number of Moslems, "IRE", and there is also religious education for the many Hindus that happen to be in Kenya. I looked at the CRE education, and it is based on the Bible and of course does not know about the church, but it can be used quite easily to talk about topics about the Orthodox church. Students must pass an exam at the end of the year from the CRE material, so we do not ignore it, but I have been teaching using it and then talking about the things that I want to. So far, I've taught them about the sign of the cross and how to hold their fingers and about the holy Trinity in about Jesus Christ being God and man and about the reason that Jesus was baptized, and the purpose of life, and many other things. Of course, I've talked to you about those things, because this is all I know how to talk about. This is all that I care about.

Another contrast in the teaching in Kenya, is that when you enter the room, the teacher says hello, and they answer all in unison "hello teacher so-and-so, how are you?" And the teacher answers something, and they continue with the lesson. There is a sort of formal politeness, but you don't see that as often in American schools.

Another big contrast is that in this school, the students are in tiny rooms on tiny benches and pay attention rather well. When they get out of class they run and play. They have at least three play periods during the school day. When I worked in the school taking care of special-needs children, they would cancel recess for the flimsiest reasons such as it being too hot, meaning 94°, or too cold, meaning 40°. If it was raining just a little the children would not go outside. The only recreation they got was recess which was too short, and gym class, which they did not have every day. These children are not regimented

when they're out of class. They run and they play and they joke. In an American school nobody can talk in the hallway and sometimes the students are not even allowed to have their hands-free. They are told to put their hands behind their back and make a "bunny tail" or a "pony tail", and in order to not talk they are told to purse their lips and inflate their cheeks so it's like looks like they are making a bubble. Our regimented ways seem cruel compared to the freedom in education at the school.

Another contrast is that in this school since the walls are so thin, it's very loud. Is very quiet in American schools, and the students there are also quieter. Here the students clamor for your attention when you ask a question, saying "cha, cha, cha", which is shorthand for "teacher". By contrast, the students often answer very softly and I have to get right next to them to hear what they say. I think they are still a little bit intimidated by me. Sometimes I think it's because I am a "muzungu" – a white man. The first white people I've seen here were when we went to the restaurant with Father Methodius' family, and we drove perhaps 20 km to a larger city. Father's nephew was visiting, and he ate pizza for the first time. He was very amazed and happy and had a big smile on his face. We are the only white people that I have seen anywhere in this area, and when I'm walking along a road, the younger children giggle and call out to me "how are you", and then stare at me as I pass them, and the majority of the adults are friendly, but there are some that seem guarded around me. I can't really blame anyone that is a little unsure about what a white man is doing around here, since in colonialism, the white man took great advantage of the local Kenyans.

I think that'll be enough for now. I am pressed for time. Today I'm going to drive 500 km to attend the funeral of Bishop Anastasios. He was a good and holy man revered by all of his people, but unfortunately, he got cancer and, while in America trying to get medical treatment, he died. The funeral is Wednesday, and I expect it to be an important life experience for me. At this moment, Kenya has only one African bishop. This is a big country, with over 300, and it might be for hundred priests, and have one African bishop, and a greek bishop from the Alexandrian patriarchate, who is the ruling Bishop.

I would appreciate it very much if you would add father Methodius, and the St. Barnabas Orthodox orphanage and school to your daily prayers. Mungu a kabariki!

In Christ, Priest Seraphim Holland – seraphim@orthodox.net