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## Challenged to Serve

By George M. Anderson

"Knowing they were going to die, the H.I.V.-infected parents we were visiting in a slum section of Nairobi were worried about the education of their children." These were the words of Joseph Oganda, co-founder of the new St. Aloysius Gonzaga High School for AIDS orphans in Kenya. They were repeated to me by the other co-founder, Terry Charlton, S.J., a Jesuit who has been working in Africa for almost two decades. Father Charlton was in the United States to speak about this new undertaking. During a conversation at America House, he described St. Al's beginnings and goals.

The Christian Life Community and people like Mr. Oganda have been very much involved with the school from the start, Father Charlton explained. C.L.C. members had been spending time in the homes of those with H.I.V./AIDS in Kibera, a huge slum in Nairobi, and the issue of the education of surviving children increasingly came to the fore. As a first step, C.L.C. members raised funds to pay the tuition for 10 teenagers to attend local Catholic high schools. In Kenya, free primary education began only a few years ago; there is no free secondary education. At present, 88 percent of high school age children in Kibera attend no school at all. To send even 10 was therefore a significant beginning.

"But," said Father Charlton, who is chaplain for the C.L.C. in Kenya, "we felt we could do more if we had our own school for AIDS orphans." Since the school year in Kenya begins in January, once this decision was made the co-founders had only a month to prepare and begin. With the Chicago Province of the Jesuits funding the first year's operating budget, teachers were hired, space rented, uniforms and texts obtained, and in December 2003 the school got under way with 56 freshmen and sophomores. For its name the founders looked to St. Aloysius Gonzaga, a Jesuit scholastic who, as a seminary student in Rome in the late 1500's, helped care for victims of a plague then sweeping the city. After contracting the disease himself, he died in his early 20's. He has since come to be viewed as the patron saint of people with AIDS—a plague of modern times.

Some students hear of the school through word of mouth. Good news of this unusual kind travels fast. They also learn of it through parishes and social service agencies. The admissions process involves several steps. A primary criterion for admission is the AIDS-related loss of both parents or the surviving parent's infection with the disease: "We tell young people who want to enroll that they should bring in documentation about the AIDS status of their parents," Father Charlton said. "If one parent has already died, they bring a death certificate showing AIDS-related illness as the cause of death. If the other parent is still living, they also bring in something that indicates the result of an H.I.V. test." It is a stark criterion, and yet one that is now providing hope for dozens of AIDS orphans in Kibera.

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Applicants must also show that they have done well on the government examination given to students upon completing primary school. Then, after an interview and preliminary acceptance, said Father Charlton, “we visit each home to verify that the family does live in poverty.” There is seldom any doubt. With almost a million inhabitants, Kibera is considered the largest slum area in sub-Saharan Africa. Clusters of wooden shanty-like structures crowd together along dirt paths, often with open sewage running in their midst. The gap between rich and poor in Nairobi is extreme: 55 percent of the people in the city’s slum areas live crowded together on just 1 percent of the land. The land, moreover, belongs to the government, which means that residents in these so-called informal settlements live with the fear of possible eviction and demolition of their homes.

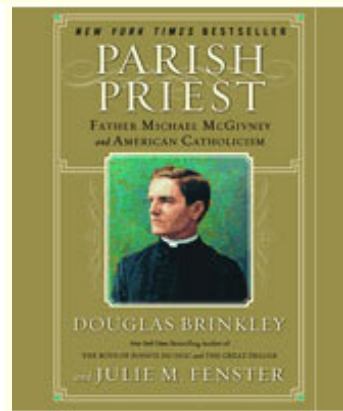
Because of the deaths in their own families, many of the students live with aunts, uncles or older siblings. Most families live in a single room, or two if they can afford it. “The room is usually only 10 feet square, with a separate entrance on a veranda where they cook,” Father Charlton observed. “Nearby is a common toilet and bathing facility.”

One distinctive characteristic of the admissions process at St. Aloysius that girls are favored slightly over boys. “Girls are at a disadvantage in Africa, because if a family can afford to educate only one child, they’ll educate a boy. Because once a girl marries, she joins her husband’s family,” Father Charlton observed; her own family consequently sees the cost of her education as “wasted” on her. Similarly, the eldest child in a family would be accepted into the school before an only child, because the eldest would later be more likely to be in a position to assist younger siblings.

Little food is to be found in the homes of most of the students, so the school day includes breakfast and lunch. There is class on Saturday too, for review and tutoring. “Saturday is optional,” Father Charlton said, “but they all come because they’re so anxious to learn.” For the same reason, there are no disciplinary problems. As to religion, “We don’t ask about their denomination,” he observed. But since Christian religion is a subject on which students can be tested on the standardized government test used at the completion of primary school, the school has a religion class three times a week. “Only about 15 percent of the students begin at St. Al’s as baptized Catholics,” Father Charlton noted; yet of the initial 56 students, a third chose to take a Saturday afternoon course on the Catholic faith. A year later all were baptized. As the school chaplain, Father Charlton celebrates Mass for the students once a month, and even the non-Catholics have no trouble joining in. Because of his white beard, he said, smiling, “they regard me as an elder.” A five-minute prayer is offered each morning in class by one of the students, and once a week a period is devoted to a reflection on faith known as the pastoral program.

When asked what happens after a student graduates, Father Charlton replied: “Not much is available for students with only a high school diploma—a girl might work in a shop and a boy as a day laborer. So we try to provide a four-year college education for as many as possible in government-sponsored universities, which are highly subsidized. We’ll also look into low-interest loans,” he added, “which would enable students to attend the two local universities in Nairobi.”

For graduates who do not qualify for a university education, “there are good two-year diploma programs that provide training in areas like social work, business and information technology,” Father Charlton explained. The cost would be well beyond the reach of the students’ families; as a way of financing these programs, a feasibility study is under way to determine whether a Cristo Rey-type high school would be possible in Nairobi. The Cristo Rey model was begun in Chicago in 1994 to serve poor Hispanic youth, and it has since been



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replicated in a number of other American cities. It is based on a corporate internship concept—each student works in a business office one day a week, with the salary going toward the student’s tuition. At the same time, working in an office setting becomes in itself a valuable learning experience.

Plans are now under way for the construction of a permanent school a short distance from Kibera, with a capacity for over 400 students. Land has already been purchased. In reflecting on his work as co-founder of the school, Father Charlton spoke with particular admiration of the students’ faith. “Their faith challenges me to serve them,” he said, “especially when I hear them pray at Mass: their prayers are full of thanksgiving. Someone like me in their position might feel like cursing God. But for them, it’s a matter of gratitude for the little they have.”

**George M. Anderson, S.J.**, is an associate editor of America. Click here for a sample of author's writings in **America** and for books by author at amazon.com. Link to "sample writings" is slow; link to amazon may list books by authors with similar names.

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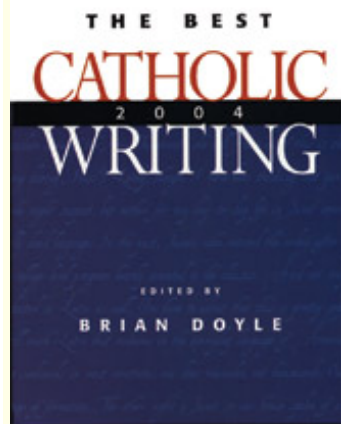


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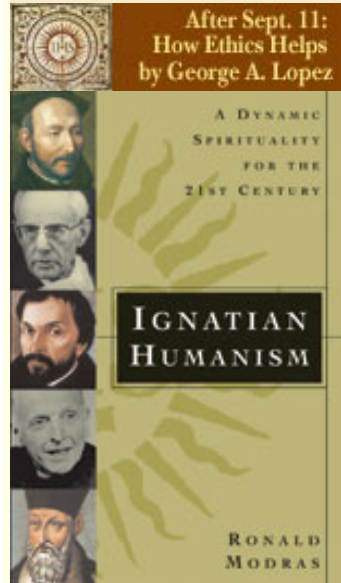


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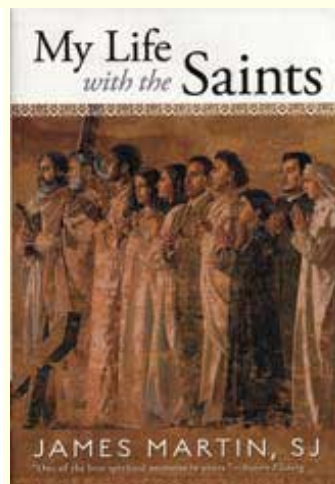


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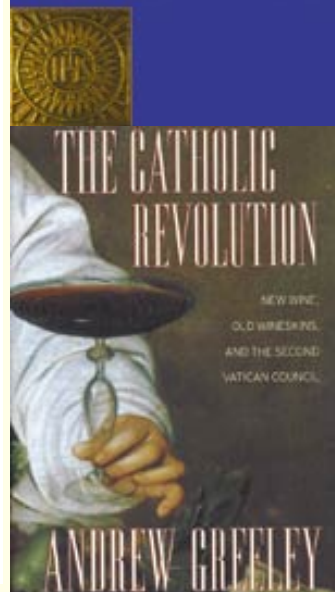
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