

Bless the Women and the Children



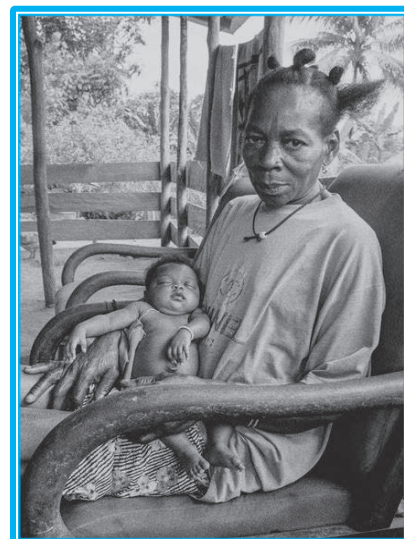
Dear Mission Friends:

We have collaborated with and supported various missions of the Congregation of Dominican Sisters of Christian Doctrine, the most recent being in the village of Ayene in Equatorial Guinea, Africa. We wrote about the sisters after they had just arrived and were confronted with keeping a school of 250 students open and running, without funding for even bare-boned classroom supplies or meager teacher salaries, let alone direly-needed repairs and improvements. That was over a year ago and, as you'll read in Sr. Margarita's letter to follow, the school is still alive and running, due in large part to your answering our pleas for assistance.

As you know, you can rest assured that we do what we promise, seeing to it that your donations go directly to your designated mission or project, or, if there is no designation, to that of the current greatest need. The government of Equatorial Guinea, however, is not so transparent or principled.

The country has been blessed with several unique benefits that should have allowed it to break away from the model of government corruption, rampant poverty, and horrendous human rights violations that has long been the rule in most African countries, and to all appearances, it has. But appearance and reality are vastly disparate here because greed, authoritarianism, and purposeful mismanagement have concentrated any benefits such as the following among a small elite:

1)Under Spanish control for almost 200 years, Equatorial Guinea gained its independence in 1968 and became a democracy, but in name only. It is generally understood that the country's many elections since its independence have been rigged, allowing for no opposition. Its first president has been described as creating a "reign of terror," and its second and current president has been called one of Africa's "most



An unsuspecting Madonna and Child in Equatorial Guinea.

brutal dictators" and uses government money to buy luxury homes and cars in France. The numerous human rights laws that have been voted in, such as those involving child labor and human trafficking, have yet to be enforced, and the number of child prostitutes, for example, is in fact increasing.



Left, son of the president (and his probable successor) at a photo shoot handing out Christmas gifts. (Note the president's picture on the shirts of his entourage.) Above, what most of the Christmas gift handouts look like.

2)Vast oil reserves were discovered in the 1990s and overnight the country had one of the world's fastest growing economies. Today it is the richest African country per capita! How is it, then, that it still ranks near the very bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index and has one of the worst human rights records in the world? For one, decent oil-related jobs are filled by skilled, well-paid foreign workers or relatives of the president, while three-quarters of the country's population still lives below the poverty line; malnutrition is widespread; less than half of the population has access to clean drinking water; the average life expectancy is 51; twenty percent of children die before reaching the age of five; the growth of half of those who live is stunted due to high levels of HIV/AIDS; forty-five thousand grow up without their parents; and countless numbers are sold or recruited for prostitution.

3)Two-thirds of the country's citizens have the advantage of speaking Spanish, one of the world's most widely spoken languages and Equatorial Guinea's official language, used in both education and government. It is generally useless to them though, because, among other factors, most families cannot afford to send their children to school and they would never be considered for a government job.

4)The government's expertise in 'smoke and mirrors' paid off well when, in 2011, the country's image had so improved that it was given the honor of co-hosting with Gabon the Africa Cup of Nations in 2012, and of hosting it alone in 2015. But both events were held in the country's capital, Malabo, most of which is made up of slums and empty, deteriorating buildings from colonial days, encompassing large sections of



town which were effectively kept from the eyes of visitors.

As we celebrate the birth of Our Lord this month, let us train our eyes and our hearts to see Him and His blessed mother in such human connections as that on the front page—not the Madonna and Child we are used to seeing, but surely evoking just as much adoration and love. And like Mary, this mother is also terrified of losing her baby—fearful that the baby will be taken from her by the father's family; tormented and guilty that it will die from the HIV/AIDS it was born with; in anguish that it may eventually have to be sold to traffickers so that the mother's other children may eat.



And so during this season of birth and salvation, let us not only help the sisters provide a safe environment in which to impart a high quality education to as many children as possible, but let us also follow their example of doing whatever is in our power to render dominance and cruelty and greed helpless by not looking away, by taking action, and by helping to restore self-respect, strength and dignity to the abused of the world, particularly women and children, beginning with our own individual worlds.

In the peace of the Blessed Mother and her Holy Son,

Lesley Warnshuis

Above, Sr. Margarita (left) and Sr. Monica (right), provincial superior, welcoming students at morning assembly.

Just below they pose with some of the faculty and staff members. Bottom, students using flashcards in their math "classroom."



Dear Friends:

Being a missionary is a beautiful calling and I praise God for allowing me to be one. After leaving Nigeria behind in the hands of God, I answered his calling to come back to Africa once more. I feel especially at home here in Equatorial New Guinea, where I currently serve, as it is actually the first foreign place I was sent to as a missionary twenty years ago when I was only a student in the Congregation.



Far left, Sr. Aracely with her beloved students. Left, Sr. Margarita with recent proud graduates (though it seems at least one is not thrilled about leaving.)

Saint Dominic was the inspiration for my vocation and has continued to inspire my ministry. He was known for his great compassion and love for the poor, the least, and the vulnerable. We too, besides being preachers of the Word, are also examples of it, particularly with those whose dignity has been stripped from them. Saint Dominic used to walk long distances, barefooted, in silence and prayer. As a daughter of Saint Dominic, I can only take off my shoes and place them on the footprints of the poor, the least, and the vulnerable in an attempt to engage in their suffering experience.

Since the last time I was here, in the late 1990s, I can see that many improvements and changes and have been made—proof of the hard work of my fellow sisters. But after being back a year, I also see that our mission still faces many challenges. As missionaries we can't make cultural changes overnight—it takes an understanding of long-held traditions and values, it takes tenacity and resilience, and it takes time.

Through our words and deeds, we can only plant the seeds of love and forgiveness in the hearts of those we serve, trusting in God to do the rest.

One area that has made a major impact in my calling here concerns the quality of life for women and children. Because of certain cultural traditions, life for them is harsh here. Many believe that children are only products to own. Girls are more lucrative than boys, who are often forced into early labor or the military, but without much return; females generate income for the whole family because they can be sold quite young into marriage in exchange for money and food. If the husband is abusive, an accepted cultural trait, the girl must stay in the marriage anyway. The only way out of a marriage is if he grows tired of her, but she must leave the house empty-handed. The court forces the girl's family to return all the money they received for her and all that the husband spent in preparing her. Worst of all, she must hand over her children who were born during the marriage—they are now the property of the father's family only.

Children are sometimes allowed to stay with their mother until the age of seven, when their father will claim them for good. For this reason, the school that we run, Anuarite Nengapeta, is often the only place where the children feel welcomed and loved and loveable. Some children walk 8 or 9 kilometers just to get here in the morning, and then must do the same to return home.

Government schools are supposed to be free and open to all, but education is not a government priority and there is a dire need for teachers and supplies. The education of many of our students is sponsored by generous donors who make it possible to attend our school. This allows them to have a good education not only in knowledge but in values and virtues.

I truly believe that where ever we sisters are sent, we can be God's hands. Here, though, I see myself as being God's heart as well. Indeed, on the school playground one can always find a child looking for a hug or some expression of love.



Many are at their happiest and feel the most loved at school, though this little guy looks to also have a bit of the Old Nick in him.

We somehow become that close mother figure that many of them no longer have in their lives. I hug them tightly, give their cheeks a pinch, and pat them on the back. This is when I become God's heart.

Right now our worries go to the maintenance of our place. Our preschool roof is breaking down and each raining season makes it worse. Our budget is tight and \$6,000 is what we need for it.

We have a small library where the children come to read—under a hut that is also falling apart, but as bad as it looks, they don't seem to mind. At the playground we don't have shade so the sun goes directly to their heads when they go out on recreation. Many fall sick because the sun debilitates them when they have malaria. At school we give treatments for malaria and worms.

Having a good shade would help them not get sick as often. I see that in America many schools have shade in their playing ground to protect them from sunburn—here we only want them not to get very ill. One of my greatest pleas to God is to send a maintenance man from anywhere who is willing to donate one month or two of work in fixing and repairing all the breakdowns.

I'm happy serving the Lord and his people and having the occasional chance to be His heart. If any of the readers feel touched by God to collaborate in our Mission, we appreciate it greatly. Let us keep the Dominican Spirit going in the next 800 years of existence in the church.

***Muchas Gracias y Feliz Navidad,
Sister Margarita, O.P.***

The Sisters' Mission: "We firmly believe that education is an invaluable contribution to a country's progress, and we hope that eventually a better future for these children can be achieved—one where they can be allowed to grow in every sense, where they learn to live with mutual respect, where their dignity as human beings is acknowledged."

**Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.**

**Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.**

**Ring out the grief that saps the mind
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.**

**Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.**

**Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
But ring the fuller minstrel in.**

**Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.**

**Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.**

**Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.**

~Alfred, Lord Tennyson

We have registered with

AmazonSmile,

a simple and automatic way for you to support us every time you shop at Amazon, at no cost to you. Just type in our link once, (<http://smile.amazon.com/ch/94-3086454>) instead of Amazon.com, and Amazon will donate 0.5% of the purchase price of all your future purchases (you may stop or change at any time) to the ***Dominican Mission Foundation***. Know that your Amazon account is the same, you use the same username and password, and your shopping cart, Wish List, and other account settings are also the same. Most of what you already buy is eligible, but you will see eligible products marked "Eligible for AmazonSmile donation" on their product detail pages. With the holidays approaching, 0.5% could really add up and be a tremendous help to our missionaries, and ***we thank you!***