

Planting Seeds

A Seminarian's Dream to Help Educate the Children in Kapeeka, Uganda Becomes an Alliance of Hope

By Deacon Michael Scherschel

What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it with? It's like a mustard seed which a man took and threw into his garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air sheltered in its branches. Luke 13:18-19

Fourth year seminarian, Deacon Hilary Muheezangango is getting ready to return to his home diocese of Kasana-Luweero in Uganda. He'll be ordained a priest this coming August. But when he leaves the States, he'll leave a little bit of himself behind. He'll leave having planted seeds of hope for the people of his diocese--those struggling to build their lives after years of dealing with the effects of war, disease and poverty. Of primary concern are the children. Hilary knows they are the hope for Uganda.

Appreciating the Gift of Life

Hilary came to Mundelein Seminary in the fall of 2003. If someone would have told him he'd have that opportunity twenty years ago, he never would have believed it.

"I was born in 1972 during the government of Idi Amin. At that time, Uganda was in a mess and continued to be so for a number of years. A series of wars had taken place. Lots of presidents came to power by gun and left by gun. A lot of people were killed. Our infrastructure was destroyed. Things like hospitals and clinics were destroyed. Some of the schools were destroyed.

"As I grew up, we spent most of the time in the bushes hiding from the military who were hunting to kill us. I mean there was no life as such. We lived outside. The rain would rain on us, the sun would shine on us, no blankets, no mat to lie down on. As a child, that's something. On a few occasions, we would run over dead bodies into the brush just to save our lives.

"There were people who would be searching for food. They would have eaten the grass around them where they slept, left with just minutes to die. But then you can't do anything. You just have to find a way to survive.

"In the 80's, I remember when we were in the refugee camp in Kapeeka. We stayed there over a year. And here we saw a lot of things happening. Many people were sick. Many people were dying. Most people were picked up by the military and taken to be killed. Life for us was really alarming."

At this point, Hilary talks about the help that organizations such as the Red Cross, World Vision, the World Food Program and UNICEF provided in terms of giving food and assistance. He would never forget how they helped.

"We used to see the trucks coming. They would bring food to us, but even how to get the food was a challenge. You would line up; you would fight for the food. Sometimes you got beat up. So as a child of around 8 years old, these are things that I lived through. I never had an education until I was 12 years old. That's when I first went to school." Hilary first attended classes in the refugee camp. The buildings were demolished, so classes were conducted under the trees. His family was allowed to move home in 1985. But during their absence, their home became an overgrown forest. They had to rebuild the home and gardens only to face another scare of war and hiding in the bushes. But in January 1986, with the formation of a new government, things began to stabilize in Uganda. It was a turning point for Hilary.

"That's when I was able to start the second grade, but I was close to 14 years old. By the time I entered fourth grade, I was already 17. And that's when I started seeing priests coming in, giving us aid, praying for us. My dad was a catechist so we had good close connections with the priests. That's when I applied to the junior seminary and received support from Father Francis Xavier."

When his funds for schooling were just about gone, Christ the King Parish began supporting him. He never forgot their kindness. "I always thought, 'what can I give back to them?' because, since they started helping me, I never had the same problems I did before. And now I'm here in the United States on a scholarship to study theology in order to become a priest. So having the opportunity to be educated changed my life. I felt compelled to do something."

As Hilary reflects on his past, the conversation seems to center on the precious gift of life. "When I think about the graces God has given me as a person, I first think about the grace of life itself. Life is something I value greatly. But we must remember that it's not our life. We are stewards of the life that God has given us. We must use our life and our gifts to help others."

A Desire to Help Others Plants a Seed

In 2005, when he began his pastoral internship at St. Mary of Vernon in Vernon Hills, Illinois, Hilary began to share with parishioners his story of life in Uganda and the challenges that still face the people there, especially the children. "I talked with them. I told them my dream of wanting to do something to help support these children. I didn't ask them for money. I asked them for help. And from there things started to happen. It just grew. Every time we met, it kept growing and changing."

What grew from Hilary's desire to help is what has become the COVE Alliance, a not-for-profit US-based organization. COVE is an acronym for Children's Outreach and Vocational Education. And like the name implies, the target group is the children in Uganda, specifically in Kapeeka. Parishioners from St. Mary's helped create it along with their neighbors and friends out of the generosity of their hearts.

Mundelein English as a Second Language instructor, Annette Cowart, a member of the board of directors, is one of the many who became involved. "I've never seen a group

like this before. We feel like we are part of something really wonderful. And it has so much to do with who Hilary is as a person. He constantly inspires us and re-inspires us. Because we know him, we know we are helping the children in a direct way." Based on Hilary's observations, the COVE Alliance team felt the key to making a difference for the children was education. But they realized that education is futile if the children struggle because they don't have basic necessities for living or medicine to fight disease.

The situation in Uganda is challenging. HIV/AIDS has significantly affected the general population. "Right now, 65% of our population are children," Hilary explains. "Most of them are orphans whose parents, if they didn't die in the wars, are dying now because of AIDS." He adds, "Some of the children are infected with AIDS, too. Others suffer from malaria or typhoid. Children are dying because they are too poor to survive. Poverty can't buy medicine or food."

The COVE Alliance outreach program tackles three areas. The first is education. Children who are sponsored by US benefactors receive a primary level education. In the future, they will also be able to attend a vocational school to learn life and trade skills that will help them earn a living for themselves and their families. The future vocational center will be called the St. Jerome COVE Center and, interestingly, will be built on part of the refugee camp where Hilary and his family stayed.

The second area is health care. The organization is working on a plan for a medical clinic with a nursing staff and access to doctors so that the students will be able to be treated appropriately. An added benefit is that the clinic will also be able to serve the larger community, who also desperately need medical services.

The third area deals with nutrition and housing. The children receive a proper lunch, and the organization is working on a plan to ensure that the sponsored children will have basic household needs, such as a mat to sleep on at night.

The overall vision reflects Catholic social teaching: "Our vision is a world of hopeful, responsible human beings who respect human dignity and are in a position to sustain themselves and their families in the future." It also sounds a lot like Hilary.

A Priestly Identity

As Hilary reflects on the role COVE Alliance has played in his priestly formation, the conversation immediately moves to those outside himself. "When you live with and for others, your life is better. God blesses you through others and how they give back. The first job of a diocesan priest is to save someone else's soul. I will never forget that for the people I will serve.

"But we must remember that serving others is not isolated from prayer. When I think of our people in Uganda and the state of poverty, I know we can't solve every problem. But at the same time we can't simply just pray either. We have to do something."

Hilary's desire to help ended up engaging a parish and a larger community to make a difference in one corner of the world. But Hilary is very clear to point out that COVE Alliance is not about him. "When you create something, it doesn't have to die when you do. You can empower people to help you out. What we created is not about a personal project. It's for the people. Others can carry the work forward. The important thing is that the goal, the dream, is fulfilled."

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