News
Ministry



Cynthia Chukwuemeka, far right, and Sister Dorothy Okoli, pose with students on the playground of Hail Mary Nursery and Primary School in Nkwelle Ezunaka, Nigeria, Oct. 5, 2021. The school, which provides free education to orphans and indigent children, is run by the Missionary Sisters of St. John Paul II of Mary. (CNS photo/Valentine Iwenwanne)



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On a quiet, breezy morning, Sr. Dorothy Okoli stood amid schoolchildren ages 6-12 in a classroom, teaching them English. It is a class she says she enjoys teaching, having studied English and guidance and counseling at the university.

"I love to teach, and I see it as another ministry given to me by God," said Okoli, the school's headmistress.

The school serves children between the ages of 3 and 12, with an orphanage where orphaned children and those from indigent homes are sheltered, cared for, and given free education -- a program Sister Okoli describes as a means of contributing to society.

"We established this orphanage home with the aim of giving the children free education, due to the current economic situation in the country. We have a lot of children who are wandering the streets aimlessly, exhibiting and learning all sorts of unpalatable behaviors, and when you'd approach them, you'd find out that they are children who are supposed to be in school but, due to financial constraints on the part of their parents, they end up in the streets.

"Nigeria has a griming statistic of over 10.5 million children who are out of school, and our free school program is just our own way of supplementing the efforts of the government in providing free education to provide a cushioning effect to the overwhelming statistics," she told Catholic News Service.

Since 2019, Okoli, a member of the Missionary Sisters of St. John Paul II of Mary, has been living and working alongside four other sisters and nine auxiliary staff at Hail Mary Nursery and Primary School. It was founded in May 2019 by Okoli, who is also the founder of the Missionary Sisters of St. John Paul II of Mary.

"I realized that children have important roles to play in the society, and that when they are OK or get educated, the society would be safe and conducive for progress to take place," Okoli said.

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The school has 60 students; of those, 12 live in the orphanage. Many of the children from the community relate well with the children in the orphanage. This has helped those in the orphanage adjust more quickly, she said.

Many of the students pray the rosary each day at noon. Okoli told CNS that "this is done to deepen their Catholic faith and increase their love for Jesus, follow Mary our mother's request, help them understand that there is a will of God in their lives, and also give we, the teachers, peace of mind."

A priest brought Ebube Eze, 10, and two of his siblings to the orphanage in 2020, after a fire razed their home. Ebube told CNS his 15-year-old brother accidentally caused the fire when he mistakenly poured gasoline into a kerosene lantern. After losing everything to the fire, Ebube's parents and remaining siblings relocated to a village in a different state.

Ebube was among the few students who received their first Communion in August. He told CNS he hopes someday to become a priest.

The efforts of the Missionary Sisters of St. John Paul II of Mary are being supported by a local Catholic benefactor. Nearby communities and individual donors also supply food, writing materials, textbooks and other items used by the students. Funds from school fees paid by day students are also used in providing for the needy in the orphanage and running day-to-day activities in the school.

Cynthia Chukwuemeka, a teacher in charge of the preschool and first grade, said teaching at the school is "an experience that keeps me going each day I come here to teach -- although we have the stubborn ones among them, but it's expected in a school where you have several children from different homes and communities."

"The beauty of it all is the fact that we impart knowledge into these children to positively impact the society that we live in," said Chukwuemeka. "You can't differentiate between our day students and those in the orphanage; it's sort of an inclusive education that is void of discrimination."