News
Q&As

Our Lady of Sorrows Sr. Delnise Silva shares a light moment with children from Our Lady of Sorrows Primary School in rural Zimbabwe. (Marko Phiri)

by Marko Phiri

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March 25, 2025

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Delnise Silva, a Sister of Our Lady of Sorrows from Italy, has given her life to working with orphans in rural Zimbabwe. Her missionary congregation runs a school and an orphanage that houses children orphaned by HIV and AIDS in Chegutu and Mhondoro, some of the most impoverished districts in the northern part of the country.

The number of AIDS-related deaths in Zimbabwe has eased due to government efforts, according to UNICEF. But Silva says the need to care for orphans remains urgent as many rural children have lost one or both parents and cannot afford school tuition and other essentials.

While her community has been in rural Zimbabwe for three decades, Silva has been there for two and a half years and cared for hundreds of children. She says providing education for the most vulnerable is a calling that has brought joy and pain, as more work remains for the orphans amid limited resources.

Silva, who holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in clinical mental health counseling and is also a certified Catholic school administrator, says working in the school and orphanage has been worsened by poor roads, which presents an added challenge to reaching out to orphans.

***GSR*: The sisters of Our Lady of Sorrows have been assisting children orphaned by AIDS since they came to Zimbabwe. What are the current needs of the children?**

Silva: Our mission in Zimbabwe has significantly expanded since we arrived in 1993. However, our focus continues to be on children and the youth. The orphans have a special place in our hearts and mission because they receive unique attention from God.

The needs of the orphans are similar to those of any child, except that they don't have their parents to take care of them. They are vulnerable, alone and exposed to all kinds of danger. Embracing those children and caring for them is an act of charity that can only be compared to a love beyond limits.

They need education [in addition to] nutrition, shelter and security. We believe in education as the way to change the world.

Our Lady of Sorrows Sr. Delnise Silva teaches a class at Our Lady of Sorrows Primary School in rural Zimbabwe. (Marko Phiri)

How many orphans are the sisters assisting, and has the problem of AIDS orphans changed or improved over the years?

We assist children in different ways. Around one hundred are closely under our care if we include children of the two communities [Chegutu and Mhondoro].

It does not mean that everyone is suffering from AIDS. They are children in need, and this is what matters to us. We cannot provide for them alone. Nevertheless, we count on friends and donors who support our work. Their help is crucial to our mission.

Nowadays, AIDS is not as deadly as it was years ago. Still, the children suffering from it need special attention and a safe environment that promotes healing.

Are the sisters administering the orphanage in addition to running the school? What challenges do you see in your daily work?

We have two communities in Zimbabwe, each with a specific mission. In Chegutu, we run a primary school; in Mhondoro, we administer an orphanage.

The challenges in both missions are similar to those faced by everyone in Zimbabwe. Due to financial hardships affecting the entire country, providing quality education at school and taking care of the daily [needs] of the children is hard.

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Without the proper means, we rely on God's divine providence and the help of generous people who collaborate with us in our service. We suffer with our people here. We also suffer because we often see their needs and don't have the resources to help.

What other areas are the sisters working on in Mhondoro and Chegutu to uplift the lives of vulnerable community members?

To answer this question, I would have to describe our daily lives. From morning to evening, from prayer to the classroom, from the kitchen to the fields, from everyday chores to the most challenging tasks, we are consuming our lives for the love of God and the service of our people.

One of the most significant parts of our lives is collaborating with the pastoral work of the Catholic Church. In our communities, we count on many people who serve the Lord in a hidden way through their missionary service to the church.

Visiting the sick, praying with those who mourn, listening to those in need of a compassionate heart, and praising the Lord with the ones who believe are just a few examples of the many ways we are present to the people in Zimbabwe. The Lord is good and can count on us as his disciples. We belong to him!