Columns
Ministry



Elderly residents at the facility of the Little Sisters of the Poor in Nairobi, Kenya, where the economically disadvantaged receive essential services such as food, shelter, clothing and health care (Adelaide Ndilu)



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In a world that often overlooks the plight of the poor, inspiring individuals and organizations are striving to make a difference. One such group is the Little Sisters of the Poor, a religious congregation dedicated to serving the most vulnerable members of society.

In Kenya, the sisters have been an embodiment of compassion, tirelessly working to alleviate suffering and provide hope for those in need. In my endeavor to understand the sisters' work more deeply, I make a deliberate decision and walk to their one and only convent, situated on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya's capital city.

As I enter the gate, my eyes, at a distance, meet people in wheelchairs busking in the warm afternoon sun. The tranquility and atmosphere of solitude grip my attention as I wait patiently to be attended to. Within the twinkling of an eye, the Irish-born Sister Anthony of Mary comes along, and we dive into a conversation.

"Mother Philomena, our superior, and two other sisters are out there. They went begging," she says.

"Begging?" I inquire curiously.

"Yes, we beg, we collect. We live on divine providence; we live on charity," the 79-year-old sister replies. Her physical age I would be tempted to doubt. She looks like a 60-year-old.



Sister Anthony of Mary and a member of the staff at the Little Sisters of the Poor convent in Nairobi, Kenya (Adelaide Ndilu)

Sister Anthony set foot in Africa for the first time in 1977. Since then, she has served in Algeria, Kenya, Nigeria and Congo-Brazzaville. She is currently in Nairobi with seven other sisters from different nationalities.

Having been professed for 57 years, Sister Anthony believes that when the Lord calls, he gives the necessary grace. "Only God is our strength and our rock," she stated.

Upon waking up every morning, the soft-spoken *Mama* — as the poor call her — whispers a morning offering to God followed by the words *a nous deux Jesus* — "You and I, today, Jesus."

At the heart of the sisters' work is their commitment to empowering the poor. They provide essential services such as food, shelter, clothing and medical care to those who would otherwise go without. By meeting their basic needs, the sisters not only alleviate immediate suffering but also restore dignity to the lives of the poor.

For those willing, a catechist guides them in the Catholic faith, after which they receive the sacraments.

"Caring for the poor is an apostolate. What you do to others, you do to Jesus." Sister Anthony emphasizes.

In Kenya, where access to health care can be limited for the economically disadvantaged, the sisters ensure the sick among the poor are taken care of according to their needs. Through partnerships with local hospitals and health care professionals within Nairobi, they ensure that even the poorest individuals receive the health care they deserve.



Sister Anthony of Mary tends to sick, elderly people at the convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor in Nairobi, Kenya. (Adelaide Ndilu)

When one of the patients is very sick, they inform the family members. However, it's unfortunate that some of the poor and elderly do not have families. They are abandoned for the sisters to take care of.

"When the Lord decides to call them to himself, we arrange for the burial and make sure they are given a befitting funeral," Sister Anthony remarks.

She says she feels happy and a certain fulfillment serving the poor, that if she were to be reborn again, she would still serve the poor. "May I be at the feet of the people I serve," she remarks.

She advises all to love what they do and to love Jesus, Mary and the church. "I love the church; the church is our mother. Fill the church with humility. We serve the poor within the church. The church must be served in humility and simplicity of life," she notes.

Her wish is to die and be buried in Africa, but adds, "God's will be done." She believes that if God is with us, God will fulfill our desires.

Notably, she has a special liking for Pope Francis. "I love Pope Francis. He lives a poor life, very humble, very simple and very close to the poor people and the elderly," she explains. She places a rose next to his photo every morning, she says.

The Little Sisters of the Poor in Kenya exemplify compassion and selflessness. Through their tireless efforts, they demonstrate that no act of kindness is too small and that every individual, regardless of their circumstances, deserves love, care and compassion.

The first time I met the Little Sisters of the Poor was in Mombasa, Kenya. I was inspired by the way they treat the poor. I admire the selfless efforts, the dedication, the love that accompanies the service. It is little wonder that the late archbishop of Nairobi, Cardinal Maurice Otunga, chose to spend his last years among the sisters.

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There are times when one is tempted to look at the poor differently, mistaking them to be people who are not hard-working. However, in the majority that I have met, the opposite is true. They are very hard-working but, as they will always tell you, they lack jobs.

It is unfortunate that the number of the poor in Kenya and probably in Africa seems to be increasing year after year. More than ever before, while walking in the streets of Nairobi, young poor people run toward me with one cry:

"Sister, please assist me; I have not eaten."

"Why haven't you eaten?" I ask.

"Sister, I do not have a job. "

My inability to offer jobs, my incapacity to assist apart from offering a day's meal, noticing real need with the real people leaves me broken. Then I think of people like the sisters of the poor, who deal with such cases on a daily basis.

Jesus, in Mark 14:7, says we will always have the poor with us, but the question is: How do we treat these less privileged souls who will always be with us? Jesus started by listening to them. We can do the same.

Often, their stories are sorrowful, needing a listening ear. Whenever we give them our time to empty themselves, whenever we listen to them with the ear of the heart, they go back breathing a sigh of relief. The look on their faces tells it all.

This is what Jesus calls us to do, to which the sisters of the poor respond each day. They show kindness to the poor by lifting them up with a helping hand. As we respond to the call of Jesus to help others, He reminds us, "You did it to me."

May our actions echo the empathy and kindness exemplified by the Sisters of the Poor, leaving an indelible mark on the lives of those in need.