News
Ministry



Anand and Ayyappan (far left) and their peers are pictured with Gleaners of the Church member Silvy Lawrence Pazherickal, in front of BOSCO Yuvakendra, a youth center for street children in Bengaluru, southern India. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Bengaluru, India — April 8, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In the past three decades, a tiny secular institute of consecrated laywomen has changed the fate of hundreds of street children in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru.

"We are only 12 members in India, and three of us work among street children with the Salesian fathers," said Silvy Lawrence Pazherikal, a member of the Gleaners of the Church.

An Italian secular institute with the charism of "reaching out to the periphery," the Gleaners of the Church — like all secular sisters — live like common women in the world (either individually or in groups) and engage in various jobs, unlike religious sisters in this region who are often bound by dress code and live in community. With a pontifical status, members of secular institutes also take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Dressed in the Indian dress of salwar kameez, Silvy heads the BOSCO Yuvakendra ("youth center"), a home for street children, orphans and school dropouts.



Gleaners of the Church member Silvy Lawrence Pazherickal (right) interacts with her children at BOSCO Yuvakendra, in Bengaluru, southern India. (Thomas Scaria)

According to a study by the Bengaluru-based National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, about 80,000 street children live in the city. Every day about 60 children are found at bus stations alone, most having run away from home; others are with their parents in slums.

Through her work directing a rehabilitation residence for these children, Silvy said she has become "the proud mother for thousands of children."

While most Gleaners are social workers or health professionals, two others join Silvy working in BOSCO — or "Bangalore Oniyavara Seva Coota," an association founded by Salesians: Sheeba Thomas, who directs BOSCO Vatsalya Bhavan, a home for girls, and Susan Thottali, who's in charge of health and hygiene of children in BOSCO Mane.

The Gleaners were the first women religious to join the BOSCO project, said Salesian Fr. Varghese Pallipuram, the executive director of all 10 BOSCO centers. The priest also said he finds secular institutes more effective in continuing the church services in India where nuns are targeted for their religious habits by right-wing groups.



A view of BOSCO Mane ("home"), another center of Salesians in Bengaluru, southern India, where Gleaners of the Church member Susan Thottali has worked the past 20 years. (Thomas Scaria)

At BOSCO Mane ("home"), Thottali was seen dressing the wounds of a boy, who was injured while playing.

"I enjoy giving a healing touch to the children," said Thottali, who's been with BOSCO for 20 years.

Thomas, the third Gleaner with BOSCO, has completed 33 years with the Salesians and heads BOSCO Vatsalya Bhavan ("loving care"), which opened in 2014 as a transit center and shelter home for girls. Street children, especially girls, fall victim to trafficking, kidnapping, begging and sexual abuse, she said.

Around 80 children live in her center and study in a government school.

"Our center helps the girls to come out of their trauma and lead a holistic and integral life," Thomas said.



Gleaners of the Church member Susan Thottali, in charge of the health and hygiene of children in BOSCO Mane, in Bengaluru (Thomas Scaria)

Yuvakendra

Silvy's youth center was founded in 1985 as the first of BOSCO's ten homes in Bengaluru, serving as a rehabilitation residence that accommodates street children, finds them jobs or returns them to their homes.

"We have around 40 children, above 15 years of age, who undergo psychological and career counseling, vocational skills training," Silvy said of her youth center, Yuvakendra.

According to UNICEF data published in 2000, the latest data available, India had an estimated 18 million street children, the highest in the world.

Before the federal government introduced stricter child protection laws in 2018, children used to migrate to Bengaluru in big numbers for employment, Silvy explained. The same 2018 laws also strengthened every district's Child Welfare Committees, which are responsible for rescuing and rehabilitating children who run away from home.

But when BOSCO began about 30 years ago, no such laws were in place. When she joined the BOSCO as an intern in the early 1990s, Silvy's main job was to stand at railway stations or bus stops to identify street children and motivate them to come to the Salesian shelters.

"Somehow, I could do the task well, as I made quick rapport with the children and they trusted me," said Silvy, who rescued more than 3,000 such children from the streets in the initial years.

Silvy also coordinates with firms in the city to find jobs for her boys after their training.



The boys of BOSCO Yuvakendra undergo a value education session at their center in Bengaluru, southern India. (Thomas Scaria)

"My goal is to make sure that every boy from Yuvakendra is settled with some jobs after they move out from our center," she said, adding that she has found jobs for more than 1,000 boys as screen printers, automobile workers, office boys, and hotel managers.

One of them, Venkatesh (single name), told GSR that Silvy helps him find a new job each time he completes four years in an occupation, including at a printing press, as an office assistant, and now in the corporate sector.

Silvy said her work does not end with just finding jobs for the boys. "We need to periodically visit them to ensure they are on the right track," and convince the employers that they have a social responsibility toward these boys.

Under Silvy's inspiration, Calistus Thaivelikakathu, general manager of a hotel group in Bengaluru, has employed more than 100 boys in hotel management after training

them.

"I see it as my responsibility to help as many youths as possible, because the nuns and the Salesian fathers have rescued them from the streets and formed them as responsible citizens," the Catholic layman told GSR.

Silvy said her center has to settle boys outside the center after they turn 18 years, the maximum age to stay in children's homes or orphanages. One such arrangement — referred to as "room replacement" — placing them in some rooms in the city outside the center for rent.



Veeresh, a former resident of BOSCO Yuvakendra in Bengaluru, southern India, where he now works as a screen-printing instructor, proudly shows his motorbike. (Thomas Scaria)

Veeresh, a former Yukavendra resident who just shifted to an outside room, said the new life in the center gives him more responsibility and a sense of independence. He pays the room rent from his earnings as a screen-printing instructor at Silvy's center.

Veeresh told GSR that Silvy "periodically visits us and continues to guide us to keep everything in order."

Silvy said they also try to send the boys to their families' homes wherever possible. "Our teams often accompany the boys to their villages and ensure reunion with their parents or siblings," she said.

The BOSCO centers also marry off the boys, as well as organize an annual family day for former residents with their spouses and children.

Deepu, a hard-of-hearing orphan and a former resident of BOSCO Mane, came to the youth center to greet Silvy with his wife and child in September of 2023.

"When Deepu came to me, he could not say where he was born or his age. So, I gave him my birthday," explained Silvy, who proudly calls him "my son."



The staff of BOSCO Yuvakendram Bengaluru, southern India, hold birthday celebrations for Silvy Lawrence Pazherickal and a former boy of the center, Deepu, wearing blue, Sept. 21, 2021. (Provided by Silvy Lawrence)

Rajshekhar Arokyaswamy, the area coordinator of the center, said they conduct awareness campaigns on child rights for the neighborhood and organize tuition for their children.

He told GSR that the center's former residents cover tuition for some 100 children as their social responsibility.

"That is how they return their love and respect to their mother house," Silvy said with a smile.

One of them, Manjunath Anand, who was rescued as a 7-year-old from a railway station, now serves as a volunteer at the center.

He said he would have been lost if the BOSCO team had not "pulled me out of that dirty world, identified my talents and set a goal for my life," he told GSR upon returning from a football practice with the boys.

"I feel happy and gratified when I coach the boys because sports can instill more confidence and team spirit among those at risk."

He and the boys now work "hard for creating a football club, a dream of Silvy aunty."



Salesian Father Prasad (black shirt in the middle), the director of BOSCO Mane, conducts a game for the center's boys with an Austrian intern.(Thomas Scaria)

Silvy said her children are talented and can "withstand all negativity and become big achievers."

Some residents shared with GSR their dreams for the future.

The 17-year-old Anand and 16-year-old Ayyappan, both orphans, were referred to the center by the government's women and child welfare department. Ayyappan said he wants to work in the information technology sector, while Anand aspires to become a graphic designer.

For his part, Pallipuram commends the Gleaners for getting "fully immersed" into whatever they undertake.

"The Gleaners are a tiny group in India, but their services are yeomen."