

Addis Ababa, July - August 2011

I arrived In Bole International Airport on Friday, July 15th where I was met by Sr. Belaynesh of the Daughters of Charity and driven to St. Mary's Convent, a journey of about 50 minutes. My four weeks as a volunteer teacher had begun. I stayed with the Daughters and they looked after me very well. The best food I ate in Ethiopia was from the convent kitchen.

I was fortunate in that my two volunteer colleagues had been to Addis on previous occasions, so they knew how the school worked and I just did what I was told. The Convent of St Mary and its schools are situated in a poor section of the city and even though I had a fair idea of what to expect, I was quite shocked at the level of poverty I witnessed. Many people can be said to *exist* rather than *live*...

The destitute live on the streets and sleep during the day on the paths, under trees, on any available green area and on the grassy strips in the middle of the dual carriage-ways. At night to keep warm they wrap themselves in pieces of plastic and layers of cloths, or huddle together in makeshift lean-to plastic shelters erected between a path and a wall forming a triangle and held in place by planks and stones.

The houses of the poor are very simple consisting of one or two rooms and a cooking area. These homes are built of stones, wood and sheets of corrugated metal. The vast majority have no running water or sanitation. Women and children collect water from communal taps. You could be fortunate to have such a tap near your home. If not you have to walk to the nearest source and carry the water home in a plastic drum on your back. The women also gather or buy firewood and carry it home in a huge bundle across their shoulders. They are bent over in the effort to balance and carry the load.

In some areas there are communal sanitation blocks. I visited one such neighborhood as a guest of the Habitat Organisation¹ where I saw a newly constructed basic sanitation unit. Where these are not present people must make do as best they can. Yet many houses display satellite dishes and so the children were very informed and up to date with the teams and stars of the Premier League.

Daily life is also communal and carried out in public. There are always crowds about - privacy would not be a popular concept, except perhaps in wealthy parts of the city and where there are newly constructed apartment blocks. Many houses open onto the streets as do the shops and all types of workplaces. One road between the convent and the school was given over to the repair and maintenance of taxis and minibuses. It was like one big linear garage. Men were washing, polishing, repairing and respraying vehicles. The latter was the only job done indoors. As most of the taxis are 30+ year old Ladas they are in need of continuous repair and so there is

¹ *Habitat is a non profit, non governmental organization (NGO) founded in the USA in 1976. It depends on donations and volunteers to build and renovate houses for people in need. See www.Habitat.org.*

plenty of work for the mechanics who are very skilled indeed. Keeping these cars roadworthy (?) is some achievement. People also use the fleet of minibuses to get around. These too are old and dilapidated but cheap!

When the weather is dry, cooking and eating take place outside and the house is just used for sleeping. I was there during the rainy season. Rain could suddenly fall in torrents and continue for a few hours, or there could be a steady downpour lasting all day. On dry days, sunshine was intermittent as cloudy skies were frequent. When we did have clear skies it was quite warm but I did not have to use my sun block very often. Since Addis is situated in the central highlands at an altitude of 2,400 m, the weather is temperate enough, but nights can be quite cold. I often wore socks in bed and one of my 'experienced' colleagues had brought her hot water bottle with her!

There are many beggars, cripples, hawkers and taxi drivers clamoring for your attention. The cripples, some with missing limbs, are probably for the most part survivors of the wars which ravaged the country on and off between 1974 and 2000. As well as the tens of thousands killed and maimed in the wars Ethiopia lost about 200,000 in the famine of 1973 and it is estimated that 1 million died in the famine of 1985. The financial toll of the wars is immeasurable. This money could have been spent on economic development - roads, education, housing, health etc. Add to this the devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic which has created and continues to create generations of orphans and street children and one can begin to appreciate the enormity of the task confronting the government.

Beggars, adults and children, will approach you holding one hand to their mouths in a gesture of eating and the other for alms. Even when sitting in a mini bus waiting for it to fill up before departure, or when it was temporarily stopped in traffic, people gathered around peering in the windows knocking on them and seeking alms.

On one occasion my colleagues and I were brought to a supermarket in a better part of the city. We were looking for school supplies and had been driven there by one of the convent drivers. As we got out of the car, we were surrounded by hawkers and beggars. As politely as possible, we made our way through them to the store refusing to buy or donate. Shopping over we had to pass through them again on our way to the car. The original group had been joined by a youth pushing an elderly man in a wheelchair. It is extremely difficult to ignore poor people like these but we were advised not to give money. Giving alms will encourage them to beg. We were told that begging is illegal and that there are plain clothes police about in an effort to stamp it out. An impossible task I'm afraid. People are so desperately poor and there is no system of social welfare. *White* skinned people are the main targets for beggars as it is believed that all whites are wealthy. It's difficult to deny this as compared to them we are very wealthy indeed.

The children in the summer school were lovely - cheerful and lively - just like children everywhere. They ranged in age from 8 to 14 years. Primary school includes the first two years of our secondary school system and continues to the 8th grade.

Then children switch to secondary school for the next 4 years, grades 9 - 12. It is essential to have a good command of English for secondary school and our task was to help the children achieve this. Many of our students were once 'street' children orphaned by AIDS and rescued by the sisters. The nuns find foster parents for them and pay the parents to rear the children on condition that they attend school. Many come to school in shabby, ill fitting clothes and plastic sandals. They have practically no school requisites - pencils, pens, rubbers, rulers, etc. The sisters supplied the copy books and the parents were required to provide biros. However many did not have a pen and some had only the inner tube of the biro.

They were delighted when we gave them pencils and rubbers and biros. These they carried in their hands no matter where they went. They would not leave them on their desk when called out to do some work on the blackboard or to take part in a game or to play a recorder. I had to take the pen and pencil from them and mind them and return them immediately when the task was completed. The school had none of the resources like those we expect to find in an Irish primary school / classroom - educational games, maths equipment, classroom library books, art materials, PE equipment, CD player and CDs etc. Computer and interactive whiteboards are in the realm of fantasy.

Classrooms had bare brick walls, a blackboard, chalk and a duster, a teacher's table and chair. The children had a mixture of tables and chairs and desks which could seat three but were usually crammed with four or five and often you'd find two children sharing a single table and chair (safety in numbers!). The first thing I had to do each day was to sort out the over crowding! The classrooms reminded me of those in which I sat in the 1950's and 1960's. The lighting was inadequate and in rainy weather the rooms were quite dark. Added to that is the fact that the electricity supply is cut for a period every day without warning. You could wake up to find there was no hot water in the shower or you couldn't have toast with your breakfast. The sisters were prepared and always filled flasks with hot water so we never went to school without a cup of tea! If the supply went off when meals were in preparation the nuns switched over to a gas cooker. On evenings when the electricity supply would go off we depended on candles and torches.

It seems that all teaching is done by 'chalk and talk'. We had brought out in our luggage as much teaching materials as we could and supplemented these from local shops. There was a photocopier in the school and this was a great help. There was also a keyboard but it depended on electricity! Even then the connecting wires were 'dodgy' and unreliable. So you make do with what you have and get on with it! I had brought 6 hurling balls, a football, a dozen skipping ropes, a CD player and 4 CDs and ten recorders in my bags and these proved to be invaluable. With 6 balls, 10 recorders and 30 rulers purchased locally I managed to get through quite an amount of language development in English and a broadening of their mathematical language and mathematical concepts. All 180 children learned to play the basic notes on the recorder and a group of 10 children performed *Au clair de la lune* for their assembled school mates on the last day of term.

But you will remember that I had planned to have a recorder for every child. Two

hundred instruments were purchased and 190 of these were sent out by air freight. Also included in the cargo were 150 football kits donated by the GAA, another 50 jerseys bought from funds, a box of library books, some large mathematical instruments, percussion instruments and a piano accordion. However this cargo was held up in the customs depot in Addis airport and 3 weeks of intense effort, which eventually involved the Irish Embassy, failed to have it cleared. I wanted the cargo passed through free of charge as everything in it had been donated or bought with donated funds and all the goods were either going to be presented to the children or given to the school. Customs wanted tax paid on the value of the cargo and eventually I was informed that it would be released on payment of €3660. This was out of the question and so I had to send it all back to Dublin. The cost of transporting it out and back amounted to €1800 approx.

The only way to get these goods to Addis is to have them brought out little by little in travelers' luggage. This will be done eventually and if it can happen in time for next year's summer school when most of this year's pupils will still be there, then perhaps I will be on my way back out also. I have unfinished business in Addis.

If anyone can assist in bringing some of the goods out please contact me at *vincentconway205@gmail.com* or phone 086 3579583 or Mary Hanlon (Vincentian Lay Missionaries) at 8102 570 or 087 1397 069. The cargo is now in storage in VLM headquarters in St.Peter's Parish Centre in Phibsboro'. (VLM is always looking for volunteer teachers, nurses, doctors, health workers, engineers, agricultural advisers etc.)

As I said above, I worked in a very poor area of the city. There are well off areas also and plenty of modern private vehicles on the roads. Addis has its Hilton and Sheraton Hotels both of which would fit in easily into any 'western' city. When I called into them they were quite busy. The first world and the third world exist side by side. There did not seem to be much of what we would call a middle class. The government is faced with enormous problems and is trying to deal with them. In recent years there has been large investment in primary education, road building and in the construction of large condominiums of apartments for rehousing those currently living in squalor. Local people to whom I spoke said they had confidence in the government and thought that it was doing as much as it could.

My contribution was the proverbial drop in the ocean and I could not have done it without your financial support. Last June's non uniform day raised £2300, a tremendous response. I am truly grateful.

Best wishes,

Vincent Conway