

When Charity Kills

By Jacek Rakowski M.Afr

Most people remember very well a moment or an episode in their lives which was a turning point. Like Saint Paul, I too was thrown off my horse, not on my way to Damascus but to Northern Zambia. It happened ten years ago. I had just arrived in the country, from my native Poland, to continue my training with the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) in Kasama.

I was in Cairo Road, looking for an Internet Café from where I could call my family to tell them I had arrived safely. I found one but at the door, lying on the pavement, there was a child. The only way for me to enter into the shop would have been to step over his body. But I couldn't. I froze and I moved to the other side of the street and went back home. That night the vision of that boy came back to haunt me time and again. On the following morning, I went back to the shop and the child was still there. This time he was awake, standing and begging. Unable to communicate, I just took him by the hand, led him to a fast food and bought him something to eat.

Today I would not encourage anyone to do that but that's what happened to me on that fateful encounter which threw open a door on a world I only knew through readings and movies.

Most of us who live in town have the same experience. Whatever our reaction (pity, annoyance, compassion, distrust), we generally agree that we should do something about these children in order to either alleviate their suffering, or to restore public order which they seem to "disturb". But what can we do? Throughout all these years I have learnt that to give them money, food, medicines or clothes is to make matters worse. You may feel good that you've given the boy a couple of kwachas or a loaf of bread but you only see one side of the coin. As newcomers to life on the street, they will be eager to "work" (that is begging, washing cars, carrying loads, selling stuff, etc.) but the money they get from you will eventually be their downfall. Anything you give will be used to buy alcohol, sex and drugs. And once these vices will have made them too weak to go out begging, then they will turn to crime or even to selling themselves in order to get their daily fix to which they are addicted. This is the other side of that coin, which very few of us ever witness. Many of us meet briefly with children on the street when we give them things or when they work for us. Very few of us will accompany them when they get

injured or sick. Even fewer will ever hear of or attend their funeral.

Let me be clear about this point, to the extent of repeating myself: giving alms to a child might be appeasing our conscience and be a self-gratifying gesture but by doing so we contribute to keep these children in the street and we help them down the road to self-destruction and eventually death. Money is the key to freedom, independence and power, but at that early stage in life and with no guidance, it is a time bomb which will blow up in the hands of those who handle it. And don't fool yourself by saying: "Giving money is bad, I just give them food or clothes". Well, in that case I tell you: money they've earned, which would be used to buy food, now thanks to your "gift" in kind will be used to get "sticka", cigarettes or alcohol.

So what can we do? First and foremost stop giving anything at all to street children wherever you meet them. Talk to them, ask them what their names are and where they come from and depart with a smile. I actually hope that, as it is illegal to make children work, so it will also become unlawful to give them alms. Of course it would not stop the problem entirely. But if such a law is going to be introduced and explained by an awareness campaign that shows the evil effects of our thoughtless almsgiving, maybe more people will just stop it, while others will be deterred by the sanctions foreseen for such acts of misguided charity. So to all who blame street kids for being little crooks I say "You are part of the problem".

That brings me to another consideration. Street kids are not the problem but they must be part of the solution. First of all they are children and we should never forget that. Secondly the overwhelming majority ends up in the streets because of broken homes, neglect and abuse. Take Mulenga for example, who was literally whipped by his father to within an inch of his life just because he got home late after playing with his little friends. Or Chanda, an orphan who was brought to Lusaka by an uncle who treated him worse than an animal until he ran for his life and ended up in our church. Or Richard, who came with a little friend to the big city to buy computer games and ended up in the gutters sniffing "sticka".

That is not to say that all the children living in the street originate from dysfunctional homes. Tracing families of hundreds of them, I met many good

people, loving parents and concerned relatives who suffer in quiet desperation because they have tried everything to keep their child at home and they have failed.

So the ideal, radical solution is to nip in the bud the situations that force the children to flee their homes and end up in the street. In the traditional way of life in rural Zambia, every adult was responsible for the upbringing of any child. True, nowadays life is very different in our towns and cities, but don't we opt for the easy way out when we refuse to get involved in our neighbours' domestic problems by saying that we can't even cope with ours? How many of us are capable of talking with (and not to) children, of understanding their aspirations, of listening to their dreams and projects? If not, then we need to be taught. There

are enough well trained counsellors, organizations and people with natural gifts and skills that can help in this sense. So, here we have more practical things that we can do: read, get yourself the right information, listen to children, help your neighbours in need, visit the centres where the children are sheltered and helped. Yes, it is more demanding and time consuming than reaching into your pockets at the traffic lights but definitely more helpful!

Street children are not a huge problem in Zambia, especially if compared with other large African capitals like Nairobi, Kinshasa, Luanda or Kampala. But it's a situation destined to worsen if, for some children, life in the street continues to look appealing, aided and abetted by our superficial, misguided and thoughtless charity.

St. Lawrence's Home of Hope

A centre for the homeless children and youth, where we receive and give shelter to those who are found on the streets of Lusaka.

Our two main purposes:

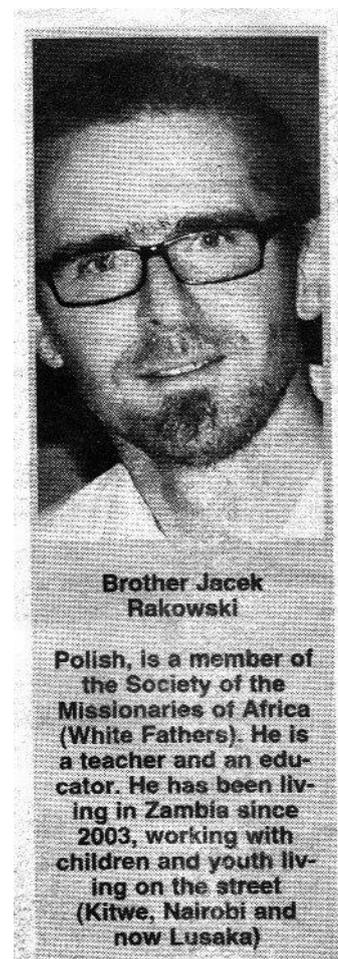
- to offer a new home and a new start for the children.
- to re-integrate the children back in their families, back to their "real" homes and main stream society.

The centre was founded in 1998 by the Catholic Women's League of Lusaka in order to respond to the growing numbers of children living on the streets of Lusaka. They are in charge of advocacy, fundraising and taking care of the running costs. The structures are built within the property of the recently created

St. Lawrence Parish, in Msisi/Kamwala South, which is staffed by The Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers).

Email: homeofhopelusaka@gmail.com

www.stlawrencehomeofhope.org



One hundred and twenty five years ago, Charles Lavigerie, a French Cardinal, launched an Anti-slavery campaign aimed at raising the awareness on that shameful and evil trade.

While commemorating the event, the missionaries that he founded, are intent on keeping high the alert level on contemporary forms of slavery.

This is the third article of the series "Let us break the chains."

Send your contribution or write for more information to: antislavery2013@gmail.com