

WHAT'S UP WITH SMART?

Two months have passed since I arrived in Kenya. I already know that work in Kithatu Health Centre is not boring at all. Every day is different from the previous one. New patients and their cases and stories. That day also brought something new.

Sister Claire of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Family, who keeps watch over the children in Day Care, asks me if I could visit a woman who is the grandmother of Smart, a three-year-old girl. Apparently that woman has a wound which has not been healing for a long time. I don't even hesitate for a second. After all, I came to Kenya in order to help people. So we take some disinfectant, gauze, bandages and little Smart. We get into the car and set for a trip. This is going to be my first "home visit" in Kenya.

The road in the equatorial bush is bumpy, so the journey takes a while. I have some time to ask Claire about the case. She tells me that Smart has been under the Sisters' protection for a year. During the day she spends time with other thirty children in Day Care, which is an institution similar to a kindergarden. She gets three meals daily, she is dressed and bathed. However she needs to go back home every night, which is unfortunate.

Smart lives in the outskirts of a village with three of her siblings and their grandmother. Her father is a criminal. He used to abuse their mother and left the family. The mother has abandoned the children because of poverty and out of fear of her husband. Sister Claire knows that at least one of her children starved to death. Right now she lives in another village and supposedly she sometimes sends some money to the children. In this way those little ones were left in their grandmother's care.

The word "care" might actually not be very accurate in this situation. The woman is old and sick and she hardly ever leaves home. She doesn't work. The family supports itself of what they can find in the forest and harvest on a tiny plot. Sometimes their neighbours or the Sisters bring them food and other supplies.

Eventually we park our car. The rest of the way we have to go on foot. We get to a little wooden hut placed in the middle of nowhere. In front of it there is a fireplace – the kitchen. Three hens are strolling around. A few pieces of children clothing get dry on strings. There is no one at home. Sister Claire tells me that when she was here for the first time a year ago, this place looked even worse. The chief of the village asked her for help. The children were naked and the youngest one – Smart, was undoubtedly sick and malnourished. The Sisters took care of her right away.

At last some people show up. The children at first, and then their grandmother. The old lady limps. On her left ankle she has a dirty bandage. We say hello to her. The woman doesn't seem to be surprised or embarrassed by our visit, although we haven't announced it. I think to myself that perhaps it's all the same to her. I get to work. Firstly I chase away flies that circle around the woman's leg. Then I take off the filthy bandage, disinfect the wound and put on a new dressing. I am very precise because I don't know how soon there will be a chance to change it. She needs hospital care for sure, which unfortunately is unobtainable for her.

Patients have to pay for any medical procedure in Kenya. If there is not enough money for basic needs, how could she afford treatment? Apart from this, if she left home for a couple of days, the children would stay without any care. It looks like I will have to visit that woman regularly...

I wrote and published this essay in one of Polish newspapers eight months ago. The reason was to help Smart rather than her grandmother. The fact is, that however extreme their story may sound, it is not that special. I spent three months in Kenya, from July to September 2017, working as a medical volunteer in Divine Mercy Kithatu Health Centre. During my stay I managed to witness many families struggling just as much as that of Smart.

So what was our way to help them? In this case we, the Redemptoris Missio Humanitarian Aid Foundation, decided to support and develop Day Care – the Sisters' initiative that we believe is doing much good for children like Smart. Since June 2017 we were collecting money in order to build Children's Centre – an institution based on Day Care, big enough to house over one hundred children. With help from private donators, other organisations and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, we completed the fund-raising. In January 2018 the construction of the new Children's Centre in Kithatu was finished and it started operating. At this moment there are thirty-seven children in Day Care and another twenty stay in the Centre day and night. They are fed, washed and most importantly safe. We hope that thanks to this help, they will have happy lives.

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