

*Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary*

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*Dear Friends*

*We in Liberia are looking longingly to the day when we will be declared 'Ebola Free'. It has eluded us so far but the end, we pray, is in sight.*

*For the past eleven days we have been without a new Ebola case in Liberia. Sadly the last person admitted to the Ebola Treatment Unit (ETU) in Monrovia died four days later. Prior to her death we were living without a new case for days and our expectations were high that before long we would be declared 'Ebola free'. However that was not to be. Our spirits plummeted when the new case was confirmed and the woman later died. We sadly turned inward and reflected again on the hard lessons of Ebola. It was a wakeup call to us not to grow lax, not to grow weary of our good practices - washing our hands and calling the health team to bury our dead. The call echoed around the country: every village heard the news and like soldiers in battle heeded the call to arm once again.*

*Our schools are open. Our children line up every day to wash their hands and have their temperatures taken before entering the classroom. A telltale bucket of chlorine/water graces every door in every classroom and serves as a reminder that we are not free; our careful practices are our friends and will lead us safely to the day what we can all rejoice!*

*The families shattered by Ebola are many and are widely scattered in remote places and barely accessible by very bad roads. Yet Ebola found its treacherous way into the lives of these villages and left its trail of fear and desolation. We have completed a two week intensive workshop for facilitators working in the most devastated towns and villages. We are presently working with 380 families all shattered by Ebola. Thanks to your generosity each family received USD 150 to send the orphaned children and their own to school. By making it available to all the children in the caretaker's home no child is left out due to lack of support. This gesture has brought a sense of normality back in their lives. The families are extraordinary in their response to the children. We regularly visit the caretaker family and monitor the care being given to the orphaned children. We met Fatu who sits with her husband and her family of six. She and George had their first child just*

three months ago. Now they have six. George's parents both died from Ebola and left five children ranging in age from 14 years to five. He welcomed all his brothers and sisters into his and Fatu's home. They are a very young couple now suddenly responsible for teenagers and infants. Fatu speaks in a soft voice - 'they are all ours' and that is their attitude to the children. This approach is repeated throughout the three districts. Many were managing to provide for their own children before the crisis. We met Hawa, the only surviving wife of John. John had two wives - each with four children. He and one wife died of Ebola. Hawa managed to protect her children and the children of the other woman. Now she, a single parent for all practical purposes, has all eight children under her care. Sometimes well meaning 'do-gooders' come asking to take some children to an orphanage. The children start to cry and hide lest Hawa decides they should go. She asks the 12 and 10 year olds what they want - they make it clear they want to stay with Hawa. She is so pleased that they made that choice and in spite of the financial hardship she tells them with tears 'you are my blessing.'

We are working with 1,400 children orphaned by Ebola. Using drawing, coloring, storytelling and role play to gather the broken pieces of their lives and to find a safe place to gradually explore their loss and pain in a supportive context. Little Ana saw her entire family of 18 members - mother, father, siblings and extended family members wiped out in Monrovia. She alone survived. Her Auntie from a remote village in Lofa County got the news and went to get her. Now she can't let Auntie out of her sight lest she too vanish. In one village we met a grandmother with three small children. The oldest is nine, the next child is six and the youngest is two years old. For 21 days the three children were quarantined, after the death of their parents, in a school completely alone day and night in total darkness; the villagers would leave food and water outside and hurriedly run away. The oldest little boy looked after all of them - alone at night they cried for the life they knew and the tender loving faces that once surrounded them. Finally their grandmother found her way to the village and with the help of one of our team rescued them. They look at their world with haunted eyes full of pain and fear. Their grandmother holds them close to her and talks about the loss of her daughter. She had collapsed and died on the roadside. Then the villagers became afraid of her three children and quarantined them in the school. The three children never caught the virus. Their trauma is what they are struggling with every day.

We meet Princess who had three children of her own prior to Ebola. Her mother and her sister, Amy, died in the Ebola treatment unit. All of Amy's children were taken to the center. Two were positive, three were negative. The three negative children came back to live with Princess; the two in the treatment center survived. They too

returned to Princess. She thought, maybe, the worst was over. The children were all safe and at home with their family. However, that was not the case. Little Rosaleen aged seven wakes up at night feeling warm and sick. She shakes her small brother, Paul, who is sleeping beside her. She urges him to go to Princess and tell her that she is sick and adds 'don't come back to sleep with me'. The next day they are both taken back to the treatment center. Rosaleen dies there but thanks to her foresight, wisdom and care her little brother lives. When Princess shares with us tears well up in her and in us. The heroism of one small seven year old calls us all to a different place deep in our hearts.

The symbols/images the children have to work with are sad and desolate. The ambulance that carries their entire family and never brings them back; the health workers dressed in protective gear careful not to touch them; the extreme weakness that characterizes their own fight back to health; the desolation and terrible confusion that comes from seeing those who are to protect you leave and never return.

We know that Liberia needs better health care services if we are to live securely in our post Ebola world. We need improved sanitation and safe drinking water. We are advocating for more pumps to provide safe drinking water. In many villages the number of pumps is grossly inadequate. Our teams motivated the villages to dig latrines. We learned about the engineering involved and participated in discussions about construction that was new to us but not new to our colleagues. In the end approximately 1,500 latrines were dug in the local way. Your contributions facilitated the provision of necessary cement and steel rods to make them safe and durable. People organized to come and transport the cement and they constructed the slabs for the latrines. The villages who participated were really grateful for the support.

In the devastated villages we gather women and men who have lost their husbands or wives to form support groups. Repeatedly we hear people acknowledge the gift that the group gives to each one in just knowing that you are not alone in the struggle. Our neighbors, Guinea and Sierra Leone are making progress slowly in the fight against Ebola. We are one region. We are only safe if all are safe. No one can stand alone. We rise and fall together.

It is the season of Easter for Christians around the world. We are conscious of the pain and suffering in so many parts of our world at this time. Our people here in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone have tasted the bitterness of death that we call

*Ebola. It makes no distinction between the young, small children, infant at the breast; mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, rich and poor. It cares not for color, race or creed. It seeks no credentials. It disregards all status. In its wake it leaves tears, fears, desolation and hopelessness!*

*We know our Easter Sunday is still ahead and we will sing Alleluia and the world will hear. In our own community of Holy Rosary Sisters in Voinjama we are able to sing our Alleluia in harmony as we are gifted with two new members, Sisters Felicitas and Loretha.*

*We thank all of you for your concern, prayer and financial support during these hard times. Without you, we felt helpless. You gave us the heart and hope to stay the course. As President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf told the people 'we have stood tall in the struggle against such a deadly virus.' We say to each of you 'you have stood tall in your generosity and concern for Liberia. Thank you.' (The Voinjama Sisters)*



*Ebola is everyone's business!!*



*Ana, only survivor of her family.*