

Vulnerable Children - Ebola orphans

'Do you want me?'

Early this year the above headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (3-4 Jan., 2015) jumped out immediately. It was accompanied by a photo of a small four-year-old child sitting alone on an unmade bed in a temporary group home for orphan children who have lost parents to Ebola in Sierra Leone. In its bare, dim hallways she now wanders alone. She addressed her question to a recent visitor to the home. No child should ever have to utter these words! The overwhelming poignancy of this cry impels us to find out more of her story.



Few details were known of the child except that her father and sister had died of the Ebola virus and her mother was delirious and fading fast. She accompanied her mother in the ambulance into the red zone of an Ebola clinic and spent more than two weeks there in this biohazard area with no protection. She spoke very little to anyone, and no one knew her real name. "Sweetie Sweetie" was the name given to her by health care workers, moved by her efforts to look after her mother, trying to feed her, urging her to take her pills, dealing with her soiled clothes, and generally keeping her spirit's up. After the mother died, the young girl stood outside the clinic's gate, alone. No one was looking for her! Eventually she was picked up, put on the back of a motorbike and taken to the group home. We have to ask the question: what does the future hold for her?

REFLECTION ONE

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa is predicted to be the largest Ebola epidemic ever recorded. Thousands of cases have been reported. It has infected up to 22,000 and killed around 9,000. More deaths are predicted according to the WHO.

Ebola has been wretched for children. More than 3,500 have been infected and at least 1,200 have died United Nations officials estimate. Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, are the most-afflicted countries. Schools have been shut down and legions of young people are now being drafted into hard labour by impoverished parents. But the worst off, by far, are the Ebola orphan, including babies.

Unlike the AIDS orphans, most of these Ebola orphans are stigmatized and shunned by their own communities and aren't being taken in even by extended families fearful of being infected. According to UNICEF there are at least as many as 10,000 in that region alone like "Sweetie Sweetie". The vulnerability of these children being picked up by traffickers is one danger among many others that is very real. (1) [MORE](#)

We know Jesus' special love for little children and their secure place in the kingdom:

"Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Matthew 19:14

This month let us pray fervently and with confidence to our compassionate and loving God that the Ebola Orphans like "Sweetie Sweetie" will find a safe and loving home where some of the trauma and loss experienced in their short lives can be turned around.

REFLECTION TWO

Tragedies like the Ebola disease crisis in Sierra Leone can quickly disappear from the headlines of our newspapers and become 'yesterday's stories'. But for the Ebola orphans the consequences are ongoing. They can last a long time, bringing with them their own challenges like grief and trauma.

We cannot read all this without feeling deeply moved, but does an emotional response have any value? Might heart-felt tears themselves be a prayer, leading to further supportive action?

Perhaps Pope Francis' words below help to answer that question. You are invited to reflect on them.

Pope Francis provides us with the beginning of an answer when he tells us *"If you can't learn how to weep, you're not a good Christian."*



He was speaking on a stage in front of some 30,000 young people as part of a meeting between Francis and Filipino youth, when a young girl 12-year-old Glyzelle Palomar came on to the stage. She sobbed and covered her face as she put a simple but profound question to the pontiff. Referring to the devastating typhoon that hit the Philippines last year, where many children suffered, she asked *"Why did God let this happen to us?"* and *"Why are so few people helping us?"*

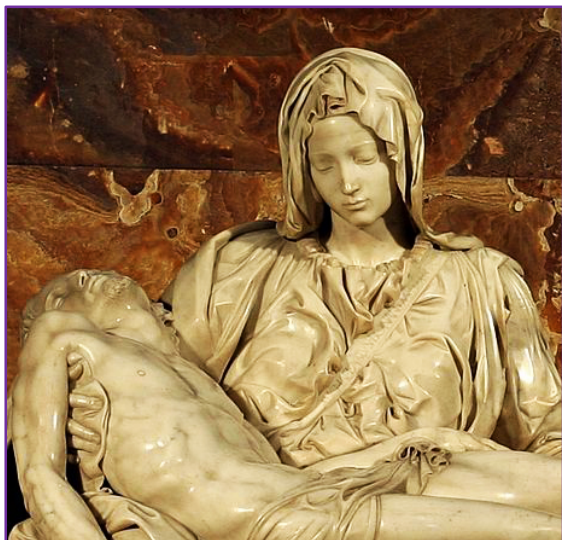
The Pope was visibly moved and applauded the girl for expressing her grief so courageously. He told the vast crowd of young people to pay attention because she *"asked the only question that does not have an answer . . . why do children suffer?"* But he finds an answer not in the head, but in the heart. "Only when the heart is able to ask the question and weep can we understand something and come close to answering the question.

Pope Francis noted that Christ cured the sick and fed the hungry, and so should we. The world needs also to respond with aid and money. But, he adds, *"it is only when Christ wept that he understood our dramas."*

Francis then presented a challenge by asking the young audience - and us.

“Have I learned to weep when I see a hungry child, a homeless child, an abandoned child, and abused child, a child used as a slave by society? Do those of us who lead a life more or less without needs, know how to weep? Or do we only weep when we want something for ourselves?”

Christ wept on many occasions in the Bible but nowhere do we find an explanation for the mystery of evil. God’s way is to join us in our suffering. Instead of preaching from the sidelines, he gets down in the dirt and suffers with us.” (2)



The mother of Jesus weeps at the foot of the Cross.
She lost a child.
She understands.

We turn to you, Mother of Sorrows
and ask that you bring comfort to the parents
who have lost their children to this deadly Ebola disease.

You understand,
for you cradled your dead Son in your arms,
and knew the feeling of intense grief.

This was indeed a sword that pierced your heart.

(3)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

(1) Source:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/africa/an-ebola-orphans-plea-in-africa-do-you-want-me.html>

(2) Source URL (retrieved on 01/23/2015 - 16:12):

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/pope-francis-if-you-dont-learn-how-weep-youre-not-good-christian>

(Adapted from NCR article by Thomas Reese Jan.23, 2015, Faith and Justice)

(3) Photo: Section from Michelangelo's Pietà - 5450 cropncleaned edit

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