

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 23, 2009 at 10:55am

The wrenching choice: field or classroom

by Paul Wilkes



Girls work during outdoor study hall at Auxilium School in Guntur, India. (Photos by Paul Wilkes)

Part 2 of Two Parts

Guntur, Andra Pradesh, India -- Under an unforgiving afternoon sun, the women hoeing unwelcome weeds between rows of tiny seedlings seem to shimmer in the distance. Their bright saris sending out bursts of color over the drab landscape, at first they appear fairly uniform in size. Only on a closer look, when a merciful cloud passes overhead, is it apparent they are not.

Among them are girls, girls who appear as young as 6 or 7, alongside a mother or auntie, each earning the equivalent of 50 cents for 10 hours of backbreaking work.

Field after field, punctuated by mammoth brick buildings -- the warehouses that will store the product of these fields -- mark the heartland of one of southern India's most prized crops, the mouth-numbing chilies that will spice dishes across the country and around the world.

The fields gradually give way to outskirts of the city of Guntur as we drive on, then to a labyrinth of

twisting streets, and finally, on Toofan Nagar, a sign atop a low stone wall, 'Auxilium School' rises out of the churned road dust. It marks the entrance to an unimposing three-story school and a small hostel that offers a dramatic alternative -- albeit sometimes a very difficult alternative -- to a life in those fields.

For part 1 of the story: Gentle persuasion in the slums of Secunderabad

Here in this poor rural area, six Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco administer a school of over 1,500 students, with sometimes over 80 of them in crowded classrooms, offering the best education they can. By most standards, it might be considered barely adequate if not substandard. Electricity is a luxury, so classrooms are unlit and evening study hall is outdoors under streetlights to maximize illumination. The computer lab holds 12 old units, only a few of them working. The principal handwrites everything; she has no computer. The school is sustained with a pitifully small budget, cadged from fees that a few can pay and from the occasional donation.

The hostel is home to 140 girls who attend the school and come from some of the poorest neighboring villages. The alternative would be a few years of education in one of the few rural government schools that are actually functioning on more than paper. The absentee rate for government teachers is a troubling 40 percent. Sooner or later, the girls would be resigned to a life as day laborers in the fields.

The fate of Indian girls

'These are girls and young women with intelligence and the desire to learn,' explains Sr. Ruby Korah, the Salesian superior at Guntur, 'but without this school, there is little doubt that they would continue to live in poverty, as their families have done for generations. Those families are eking out an existence every day, so it is our job to provide the children with as good an education as our humble means can provide. First we must convince the parent or parents that education for girls is worthwhile.'

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Here in India, the birth of a girl child is not always considered a happy event. She will need a dowry to be married some day. She will not be as good a wage earner as a son would be. Some men simply walk away from marriages and daughters, leaving destitute women behind who are plunged into even deeper poverty.



As I spend time with the sisters and the Auxilium students, it is

as inspiring to see the determination of sisters and lay staff to teach and the girls to learn as it is sobering to realize the difficulty of their task.

In section A, third-standard class, there are a mind-boggling 83 students, some of whom take turns sitting on the floor, as there are not enough desks. Mrs. Victoria is the brave teacher, enthusiastically belting out, "The grass is green. The trees are tall," in her English period. She also teaches Telugu, social science, mathematics and crowd control.

Section B, third-standard meets al fresco in an alcove tucked next to an exterior stairwell. The former science lab has been subdivided into three makeshift classrooms, with a flimsy screen demarking the upper kindergarten from two lower kindergarten groups, who in turn are separated by but 3 feet of cracked tile flooring.

"Yes, we could limit enrollment, have smaller classes and admit only those with the ability to pay," says Sister Ruby, who is 67 years old, and was the first provincial superior when the Bangalore Province, embracing the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala, were split from the Chennai Province in 1993. "But that is not the Salesian way," she adds with a look in her eyes that underlines each word. "We follow the example and the vision of Don Bosco and our foundress, Mother Mary Mazzarello, to educate the poor. It may not be the easy way, but it is our way."

Don Bosco started what he called the "Preventive System of Education." Education to him was not just a matter of brains, but a matter of the heart. Students needed to be loved and to know that they are loved. His Preventive System had three tenets: reason, religion and kindness. And he emphasized that music and games were as important as hours in the classroom.

Smiles and shrugs

That evening with the Salesian sisters, as I share a dinner of white rice, breadfruit curry, dal and freshly made curd, the litany of that day's agonies is related, yet without a touch of self-pity or a hint of retreat. The well is going dry and the government is threatening to shut the school. The dial-up modem in the convent prevents even the most rudimentary communication with the outside world; an Internet search is beyond imagining. Fees are late, as usual, as is the small government subsidy; bills will have to be pushed still further back for payment.

There is a deep sense of both solidarity and commitment, combined with a kind of in-the-trenches, deep-in-the-battle determination and sense of humor, all spiced with sprinklings of Indian fatalism and Christian faith that things probably can't get much worse and will, some way or another, work out.

When I visited, the Guntur community was temporarily bolstered by five young Salesian sisters in their late 20s, here for their final year before making final, perpetual vows. They defer to the older sisters during the meal, but afterward, alone with me, are animated about their calling and future.

"My friends tell me I am crazy," says Sr. Diana Rodrigues Bazil, "that life is for having fun and that I am throwing my life away." She smiles shyly with the thought. She is 29 years old, and has a beautiful, radiant complexion and bright eyes that seem at once present in the thought and probing it still deeper. "But when you work with the poor you receive something the world can never give you. It is a satisfaction, something deep inside that this is what you must do. Not just because God wants it, but you want it as well; it is an agreement."

She paused when I asked why she had chosen this life. Scanning the faces of the other young sisters, who nodded in agreement with her train of thought, she was encouraged to go on. "I saw my Indian people suffering. It was not a difficult decision to join the Salesians. I knew I could help my people in this way. I feel lucky to know my purpose in life."

The Salesian school at Guntur, even with its crowded classrooms and lack of equipment, maintains an impressive record of graduating students who are able to pass the 10th-standard exam, which is necessary to go on to higher education. Indian education is a study in rote memorization of state-mandated curricula, and the study periods with students mumbling textbook questions and answers over and over again (the low, rhythmic monotone was like a Buddhist chant) are hardly on the cutting edge of inquisitive learning. The end result, however achieved, is impressive.

Like their sisters in Secunderabad (*NCR*, Nov. 13), the Salesians at Guntur struggle not only to provide the best education they can, but to continually convince girls' parents -- or more and more likely a single mother who has lost her husband to AIDS or alcoholism or has been abandoned -- that allowing their girls to go to school makes eventual economic sense.

On weekends, the sisters travel in pairs by bus or on foot to outlying villages. "Our first job is to listen," says Sr. Leema Joseph Kempuraj, another of the junior sisters, who is 28 years old. "Failed crops, a drunken, abusive husband, an illness -- they long for someone to sit with them. They have no other outlet." Meeting in the marketplace or sitting over chai in the one-room mud or stone huts of fieldworkers, the sisters encourage mothers who have not yet sent their girls to school to do so, and report back on the progress and hopes of the girls who stay with them.

"A few rupees a day a child will earn may seem like very little," says Sister Ruby, "but it is often the difference between eating or not eating. These women want what is best for their children, but they face a battle every day just to survive; it is not easy to send their daughters off."

Girls like Akhila and Durga and Mary, who arrived malnourished and pitifully thin, whose family backgrounds are laced with beatings, alcoholism and AIDS, yet who struggle to keep up in their studies, who try to find the brightest spot on the schoolyard so they might be able to read.

No girl is ever refused a place at the hostel, which was built to barely contain 100 residents. Today 140 girls between the ages of 10 and 18 are shoehorned into a single dormitory and sleep on straw mats on the concrete floor. They are provided with a simple, adequate diet and uniforms, and are given additional tutoring if needed.

I watched as the girls went through their school day, walking with perfect posture, tattered books carefully cradled in their arms, or sitting lotus-style on the hard dirt of the schoolyard in nocturnal study hall. And then in the morning, dozens of them, after a cold-water bath, gathered outside the hostel in the soft early light to carefully part and weave their dark, damp hair into perfectly sculpted, long braids.

For today, the fields and the burning sun were far away.

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