Have you ever heard of Kibera?

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There are many slums and shanty-towns, favelas and bidonvilles spread around the world. Kibera is one of them. It is a slum. But not just any slum. They say that Kibera is the second largest slum on earth, the biggest in Africa and still continually growing in population. It is just one of five slums within the city of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, and only a few kilometres from Spiritan House where I live and work.

Though geographically so close to the city-centre, socially, Kibera is a different planet compared to downtown Nairobi, a city of 4 million people, where a socio-economic apartheid flourishes. Kibera offers one of the rawest experiences you can ever imagine of what it means to be a human being. If you can picture just one small district of your own home-town cramped with 800,000 to 1,000,000 people trying to survive next to each other, then you are beginning to get an idea of what life can be like in Kibera, an illegal slum that does not even exist on the city maps of Nairobi.

Refuse, rubbish, raw sewage
It is very hard for Westerners to visualise Kibera with its poverty and destitution. But just try and think of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children packed together in an unplanned, higgledy-piggledy patchwork of shacks and huts, and make-shift dwelling places of wood, plastic and cardboard, on rough hilly terrain, with no tarmac roads, mountains of refuse and rubbish strewn all around, with raw sewage cascading down the sides of every path. The one-

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roomed shacks often have just an earthen floor, with walls made of crumbling clay or dried mud, full of holes, and, if lucky, a second-hand galvanised or corrugated tin roof which inevitably allows rain to leak in.

Easily an average of 6 or 7 people live in each one-roomed hut, sleeping on the same bed which also serves as a sofa and even a table. Obviously, with so little space it is very hard for anyone to enjoy any real privacy, with only a bed-sheet, hung over a piece of string, separating the sleeping quarters from
the living area. Incredibly, most shanty dwellers in Kibera are tenants paying rent to landlords for their hovels and are always in danger of eviction for failure to pay up. If you can begin to picture such a scenario then the “Kibera phenomenon” will start to kick in for you. Once you set foot in Kibera with its inhuman over-crowded living conditions you can never view life the same again.

The ‘flying toilet’
Against a background of huge unemployment, a high crime rate and gangs of frustrated youths hanging idle around street corners, when not scavenging on dump-sites, the biggest single problem in Kibera is the lack of sanitation. Often one nauseating latrine is shared by 200 people, sometimes even at a fee. With the warm weather the stench of stagnant sewage is unbearable and when it rains the mud makes walking totally treacherous, with most paths impassable. Open sewers running everywhere, with no proper drains, together with the amazing phenomenon of the ‘flying toilet’ means that diarrhoea, typhoid, malaria and cholera are rampant. Sadly, there is also a very high incidence of HIV/AIDS, affecting about 30% of the adult population.

What is a ‘flying toilet’, you may ask? Well, the people, having no bathrooms in their shacks, are forced to “go to the toilet” in discarded plastic bags which at night-time they fling out of their windows as far as they can — but since their neighbours next-door and opposite are doing exactly the same, everyone has unwanted toilet refuse outside their own doorstep! (Pray never to get hit by a ‘flying toilet’!) Of course, with the sanitation problems there is also a lack of clean drinking water, little electricity, poor health facilities and never enough food. There are only two ways to get out of the poverty trap: either education or crime. But most youths never have the chance to complete their secondary education because the school fees are so high — so what chance do they have of finding employment in the future?

Self-help group of women
There are glimmers of hope in Kibera. One such beacon of light is a little nursery school for orphans called St. Monica’s, opened in a district known as Raila, in the heart of the slum. It is a relatively new venture begun in January 2007 by a group of women, led by Margaret Atieno Odhiambo, calling themselves Catholic Women Fighting HIV/AIDS Kibera (CAWOFHAK for short!).

These courageous women are about nine in number and what is significant is that all of them are HIV positive themselves, but coping wonderfully thanks to their daily taking of anti-retroviral drugs, provided free by a few NGOs. It has been my privilege to work with these ladies in helping change the lives of some of the local children of the slum.

The CAWOFHAK women were deeply concerned by the significant number of orphans in Kibera who lost one or both parents due to HIV/AIDS. They decided to do something themselves to care for the orphans and vulnerable kids from poor backgrounds and give them a chance for a brighter future. They thus started a little day nursery school with a handful of children and a voluntary teacher. At the moment in 2009 we have three teachers, one chef and about 150 children, aged between two and eight years, who besides receiving a basic education also get two nutritious meals a day at this early childhood development centre.

The lit-up, smiling faces of the children reveal that most of them are healthy and happy in this safe environment. At St. Monica’s we have at least 40 children who are orphans but HIV negative, usually living with a grandparent, and 50 children who tragically are HIV positive, some of whom are from single parents and others from parents who are HIV positive too. We are also helping a wonderful little seven year old boy called Vincent, living in a tiny shack opposite St. Monica’s, who sadly has Cerebral Palsy — but we are going to transform his life by getting him specialised physiotherapy. Thanks to help from the Spiritan European Secretariat based in Brussels we are now well on the way to building permanent classrooms and toilets for St. Monica’s which will greatly improve daily life for everyone using our Day Centre in the Kibera slum.

Not a good year in Kenya
You may remember that a deep wound was inflicted on this usually peaceful country when in January and February 2008 well over a thousand men and women were brutally killed and 300,000 displaced in the ethnic violence and tribal clashes that erupted after the disputed presidential election results of December 2007 between President Mwai Kibaki and his arch-rival, Raila Odinga.

It was a time of deep pain and great bloodshed. People who had lived side by side for years with no apparent problem suddenly turned viciously against their neighbours just because
they belonged to a different ethnic group such as the Luo or the Kikuyu or the Kalenjin. Ethnic and tribal tension is strong in Kenya, a country of 35 million people coming from 42 different tribes. You may remember the worst day of the violence when a mob set fire to a Church in Eldoret and burned to death up to 50 men, women and children from President Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe who were seeking refuge in the wooden Pentecostal Church.

One year down the line, though life has now generally returned to normal, the political climate is fragile, many Kenyans are still homeless after the chaos of the skirmishes, the price of food is sky-rocketing and most businesses are yet to pick up. In the Nairobi area, the Kibera slum was the hardest hit, rendering an already very difficult situation even more desperate. As a result the number of children coming to St. Monica's nursery has increased greatly. But we plough on and keep trying to do our best to face the challenges with the few resources we have.

A few kilometres away
These lines about Kibera are just to give you a little taste of the kind of work we Spiritans are daily involved with in certain hotspots around the world. My main task, however, in Nairobi is not working with AIDS orphans or slum dwellers but in the theological formation of future African priests.

I am the Vice-Rector of the Holy Ghost Fathers Senior Seminary at Langata and I live with 35 young seminarians from Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. Together with two other priests from Tanzania, I am helping to prepare these young African Spiritans to become religious, missionary priests who eventually can be sent anywhere around the world to minister as Holy Ghost Fathers. At the same time, I lecture in Systematic Theology, partly at the Jesuit Hekima College and mainly at Tangaza College where in the School of Theology alone we have 476 young students from 40 different religious congregations from over 50 countries preparing for priesthood and pastoral ministry.

Tangaza is a vibrant, dynamic, multi-cultural learning space, a cosmopolitan Missionary Consortium of 7 different Institutes with 1250 students in all, coming from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. Part of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Tangaza is teeming with energy and life. Teaching there is a daily reminder to me that though vocations are declining in Europe, Canada and the States — they are blooming and blossoming here in Africa.

Helping young Africans to think critically
I do not regard my lecturing in theology as being any less missionary than my work with the AIDS orphans and destitute kids in the squalor of the overcrowded Kibera slum. Quite the contrary.

Teaching theology in Africa today is an integral part of Mission, of preaching the Good News to the poor, and essential for building up the Church. Apart from being a stimulating ministry and an exciting challenge facing classes with up to 70 eager students — I am passionately convinced that it is also a humanitarian action helping young Africans to think critically for themselves, to unmask what are the causes of so much suffering on their continent. Theological reflection helps them to identify what can be done concretely to transform blatantly unjust structures which result in an ever widening gap between an obscenely wealthy minority and the vast majority of desperate African men and women who live on less than $2 a day.

It is crucial that future priests and pastoral ministers in Africa receive an excellent theological formation; that they are equipped with the best, up-to-date, balanced theology possible so that they can apply it to real-life practical situations in their parishes and missions. It is exhilarating as a Spiritan to be able to play such a privileged role in the formation of the next generation of leaders, not just of the African Church but of much wider horizons, as young African priests are sent out to other parts of the world to minister to countries in the North suffering from a chronic shortage of vocations.

Who knows, maybe in the future, one of my African students from Tangaza College may end up ministering as Pastor in your Parish now that “mission in reverse” is in full swing!