

Germans, Spaniards and Ugandans build a school in Gomba, Uganda

Since 1996 on an almost yearly basis, Bugala, an Opus Dei centre in Kampala, has organized work camps in different villages in Uganda. The camps usually fall in the summer months of July and August. This year, a group of Germans, Spaniards and Ugandans completed Phase 2 of St. Mary's Primary School.

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Last year a group from Galicia in Spain and another from Cologne, Germany, completed the first phase of St. Mary's Primary School, Kimbo in Gomba district, 85 kilometres south-west of Kampala. The project consisted of three classrooms and an office, now in use.

This year, the same groups returned to finish the job, i.e. the four remaining classrooms, to accommodate all seven years of the primary course. They were joined by about 20 Ugandan University

students at different moments of the project.

In the middle of July the first group of 11 Spaniards, majority students from Galicia, arrived to get the classroom block underway. Together with their Ugandan counterparts and the more experienced local masons, they constructed the block from the foundations to the ring beam paving way for the roof. Work involved mixing mortar and concrete, brick laying, carrying and crushing heavy stones, tying steel beams and all of this in a dry blistering heat.

Not everything was manual labour, however. On some days, the participants in different groups would engage the children of the school in games and other educative activities such as proper washing of hands. Others had teaching sessions with the children and some taught them catechism.

Having noticed from the previous year that most of the children in the school lacked shoes, the visitors from Spain brought with them many pairs of shoes and sandals to donate to the children. It was moving to see the visitors wash the very dirty feet of the children before they tried on their new shoes. Though many of the children were found to have large feet, a good number found something that would fit them. Noticeably the children still came to school with bare feet the next day. The reason was that their parents told them that the shoes were to be reserved for Sundays when they went to church and other important celebrations. A Spanish doctor who joined the group later removed a number of jiggers from the feet of one of the children in the school.

Work was every day, except Sundays, from 9.00am to 5.00pm. The day started with mental prayer and Mass

in a small chapel that had been set up in the house where the participants were living.

Sunday Mass was at the nearby parish with the local people. Despite the long two hour ceremony, the visitors enjoyed praying with the villagers. Also on Sundays, the work camp participants made visits to the poor and elderly in the surrounding villages taking them bread and sugar. It was a good moment to see the poverty and misery in which the people live, who at the same time were happy and very welcoming.

Towards mid August, a group of nine arrived from Germany to complete the works begun by the Spaniards. They too were joined by a large group of local university students. Their work involved roofing, plastering, fitting windows and doors, doing the floor and painting.

By the end of the month, both groups had left, and the little work remaining, fitting windows, etc. was to be done by local masons. The children, their parents and teachers are not the only ones to benefit, however. From the comments of the visitors and the local students, this brush with the poverty and simplicity of the people of Kimbo had been not just a novel way of spending the summer months but an opportunity to take stock of their comfortable routines and think how they can give back something tangible to their community.

After all the work done over those two years, St. Mary's Primary School has moved from here:

to here:

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