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"People here are always giving thanks"

Isabel Covarrubias, a teacher from Santiago, Chile, is spending this semester helping out at Kimlea Technical Training Centre in Kenya.

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Kimlea began under the impetus of Alvaro del Portillo, explains Franki Gikandi, who directs the center. "He was seeking to fulfill faithfully the desires of St. Josemaria by starting

institutions all over the world that would serve people from all social backgrounds.”

This center for the formation of women lies in a rural area about 20 miles from Nairobi. To date, more than twelve thousand women have received assistance at Kimlea, which is a corporate work of Opus Dei. Attached to the school is an outpatient health facility that provides medical assistance to the local people.

Isabel lives with Florence, a cooperator of Opus Dei, in Limuru, a village about 20 minutes from Kimlea. At the school she gives classes in basic computer skills to the teachers and students, as well as to a group of mothers from the surrounding area. The Kenyans call her “Njery” and she has already learned a few words in the local dialect, Kikuyo.

What led you to spend this semester at Kimlea?

I studied Pedagogy at the Catholic University in Chile and now I'm working as a teacher in the Colegio Los Andes. I help organize a social program there that provides assistance to various projects in Santiago, and I've had the experience that helping others is very enriching. I'm hoping that by getting to know a country that is so different from my own I will also learn new things to help me in my work back in Chile. So I'm here trying to be useful, and also to learn.

What role does the Catholic Church play in countries such as Kenya where there is so much material and spiritual need?

What has really impressed me is that, although you see a lot of poverty here, the people always feel blessed by God. Sustained by prayer and

Mass on Sunday, they are always giving thanks, even if it's just because God has given them another day of life.

The Church's presence here is very evident, with many Catholic institutions and missions trying to solve all the infinite needs that one finds in Africa. The people here feel supported by the material and spiritual assistance provided by other Catholics.

Would you advise a friend to repeat your experience?

Africa is a place that needs a lot of help. One comes here to be useful and make use of one's knowledge, but at the same time the local culture and people end up giving you much more than what you give. Besides, life in Chile is so hectic that the experience of living in a distant place can help you to disconnect and see

everything differently. You come to see what's really important in life.

The people here are incredible. The lady I'm living with, the teachers at the school, the students, the village people. Everyone here makes me feel at home, and the people want me to get to know their own families and local customs. But it's also true that a lot of hard work awaits anyone coming here, and they will need to adapt to totally different customs and meals and lifestyles.

For the beatification of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, funds are being collected for Harambee projects in four African countries. Would you encourage Chileans who come to the beatification in Madrid to support these projects?

Certainly! During these months I've seen how people's generosity can help change lives. 80% of the expenses at Kimlea are paid by

scholarships and the students are very grateful for this assistance. And since they know it's a gift they can never pay back, they take good advantage of it and really pay attention in the classes and care for the facility as their own.

It's true that both in Chile and Africa there are many material needs. I think that the help one gives, besides being a sign of generosity, is an act of justice towards our fellow human beings.

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