

## RSCJ Serving the children of the Congo

By Mary Frohlich, RSCJ



Village children in the Plateau de Bateke, Congo.

It seems as if every place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is overflowing with children. Little tribes of children run and play in the muddy, rutted streets of the slums; the dark classrooms of the schools are stuffed wall-to-wall with children; in the countryside a strange (i.e., white) visitor attracts ever-growing crowds of giggling children. Children are often workers. Tiny children, as young as three or four years old, run errands in the slums. Boys as young as seven work with others to haul carts through the streets. Children of all ages aggressively hawk the foodstuffs their mothers have prepared. Most babies are cared for by other very young children. Up to fifty percent of the children in the Congo do not go to school, or drop out after the third grade when their families must start paying school fees.

That is the context in which the Congolese Religious of the Sacred Heart operate five schools and several vocational training programs. During the five months I was in the Congo, I lived on the compound of the Sacred Heart schools in Kinshasa. The school buildings, built in the early twentieth century by Belgian RSCJ, now house two high schools, three primary schools, and a two-year kindergarten – a total of 4500 students, mostly girls. During the Mobutu era, the Kinshasa schools were taken from the sisters and run by the government. Three years ago, with both the buildings and the moral fiber of the schools thoroughly run down, they were given back.

I was greatly impressed with how much restoration the sisters have achieved in such a short time. Basic repairs have been completed on the buildings, and everything has been freshly painted. More importantly, the spirit and discipline of the schools have begun to take on the Sacred Heart character. This is especially impressive since most of the faculty and staff continue to be those hired during the period of government management. These men and women have to be gradually “converted” to an understanding of Sacred Heart education.

In the Congo it is never easy to accomplish anything. I learned a lot about this when I took on the project of taking care of the rabbits that lived in hutches in our back yard. The hutches were in terrible shape, and the hired workers were not always giving food and water to the animals. I learned how

difficult it is to persuade people who have always been hungry and oppressed to invest themselves in their work. I also learned how difficult it is to achieve a simple practical project like repairing the hutches when money, expertise, and supplies are all chronically unavailable. Finally, I learned that even after one thinks one has made progress, the next day is likely to bring a setback – for example, the carpenter hired to do repairs disappearing with the money given to buy supplies. After these experiences, I understood much better the challenges facing our Congolese sisters. They face similar issues – scaled up a great many times – as they deal with the problems of the schools.

Despite everything, I truly enjoyed my time in the Congo. Of course, there are many un-enjoyable aspects of life there. The daily heat is draining; water, electricity and/or the internet are liable to go off at any time; the pervasive poverty and political corruption make one sometimes sad, sometimes angry. My more abiding memories, however, are of the vitality of the sisters' community life, the good work of their schools and the overflowing joyfulness of Congolese liturgies. I was struck by the fact that in some ways living in a milieu where Christian values are so obviously in peril brings out the best in Christians. Our RSCJ sisters, along with other devoted Congolese Christians, know both what they have to stand against and what they have to stand for. Their witness of joy, generosity, and hope makes a huge difference to the Congolese children who are lucky enough to encounter them. ✦



Top: Sisters Therese and Annie with children at Kimbanseke.  
Bottom: Sister Fideline at the fish pond and rabbit hutches.



*Following her five-month international experience, Mary Frohlich, RSCJ, has returned to her ministry as associate professor of spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She anticipates going to Rome this January to prepare for final profession in July. To learn more about the Congolese reality, please feel free to contact Sister Frohlich at: [mfrohlich@rscj.org](mailto:mfrohlich@rscj.org).*



◀ Use your smartphone to view more photos from Sister Frohlich's stay in the Congo.