

Interview with Sister Mary Elizabeth Lloyd, author of “AIDS Orphans Rising”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is honored to be joined by Sister Mary Elizabeth Lloyd, who is here to talk about her new book, “AIDS Orphans Rising.”

Sister Mary Elizabeth Lloyd has been helping the orphans and the Child Headed Households of the missions of the Religious Teachers Filippini for the past 12 years. Her experiences in Albania, Brazil, Ethiopia, Eritrea and India have spurred her on to produce this work. Sister Mary Elizabeth holds a doctorate degree in Nutrition and Public Health from Columbia University.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Sister Mary Elizabeth. I’m excited to have you here today. The number of children who are orphans because of the AIDS epidemic isn’t a topic many people have probably considered. To start, would you tell us just how serious this situation is?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: The U.N. predicts that there will be 25 million orphans from AIDS by 2010—Every 14 seconds a Child Headed Household is formed! You are right Tyler, very few are aware of the staggering statistics. When I say CHH—Child Headed Household—I mean little brothers and sisters usually 5 to 8 of them under 18 years of age trying to survive without a mother and father.

Tyler: Sister Mary Elizabeth, how did you become interested and concerned with the issue of orphans who were left parentless because of AIDS?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: My first encounter with these orphans was in 1995 at our mission in Adigrat, Ethiopia. At that time 50% were orphans from war and the other 50% from HIV/AIDS. We had to figure a system to help these children.

Tyler: What specifically led to your desire to bring this matter to the public eye by writing “AIDS Orphans Rising”?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: I fear for these children and the world. The numbers are staggering, when you walk through villages that were once filled with families you find only children, or just abandoned huts...More than 75% of the orphans are girls with no education and nowhere to go. Most have only prostitution to turn to.

Tyler: Where is this situation most prevalent? Is it where the AIDS epidemic is especially bad?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: India and China are the places to watch. This year alone it is estimated that there will be 3,700,00 orphans from AIDS in India. China has not come up with a number, but I am certain it beats India. 4 million children walking around without a mother, father, little food, poor shelter...picture if Al Qaeda befriends them before good people do!

Tyler: Why should readers in the United States be concerned about AIDS in foreign countries?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: We are all in this world together. When anyone on earth suffers we should all be concerned. No matter your belief I think the world is beginning to realize whether it is a Tsunami, hurricane, earthquake or

assassination...we are all affected and we all have a responsibility to help each other. All countries are pulling together for global warming...let's pull together to help the children...they need love most of all, then food and education.

Tyler: What about AIDS overseas do people in the United States especially need to understand? How is the situation in foreign countries different from in the Western World?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: Access to good effective medicines is the key. We are so lucky in America. Remember when Pope John Paul II would kiss the ground when he would arrive at a destination. We should all kiss the ground of our great country. Just travel to a foreign country and get sick; you will quickly see the difference. And traveling to remote parts of Africa, India, Asia...the children do not stand a chance. There are just too many to treat. The International Community ignored the issue from 1991-1997 hoping they could stop the epidemic! It was too late.

Tyler: Sister Mary Elizabeth, these children whose parents die from AIDS are often left as child-headed households. Why is that? Don't most of these children get adopted or go to foster homes?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: At first that is exactly what happened. Most children went to extended family members. But the extended families are either maxed out, or died out. Many countries, like Guatemala, are halting international adoptions for political reasons. One grandmother I met in Ethiopia had ten children. They all grew up and got married and had children. All of her ten children have died, all of their spouses have died and she has more than 50 grandchildren to care of! She is not the only grandmother in this predicament. In the book there is a chapter on adoption and what's best for the children.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about the political reasons for why many of these children cannot be adopted?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: Many say the children should not leave their native land and that the adoptions are draining the country from its future leaders. Usually it is the brightest child who will get adopted. These kids are clever—they get all prepared when they know people are coming to the orphanage to look for a child. In the book "There is No Me Without You," the author Melissa Faye Green does a great job showing this side of the children.

Tyler: Are there possibilities to adopt these children? If so, what difficulties might an American adult face in adopting a child?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: It seems right now in Ethiopia you might have a good chance of adopting the child, but the window of opportunity is a narrow one. The book has several sites that would help you in obtaining a child. The trick I feel is to do all the paperwork, do your research, and pray. I have seen so many times that often an adoption will fall through, but the next one the couple applies for is just fine. Be patient, God knows what child you should receive. I heard a beautiful explanation of the difference between a real birth child and an adopted child...the adopted child is conceived in the heart!

Tyler: Sister Mary Elizabeth, are many of the orphans whose parents die of AIDS carrying the HIV virus themselves?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: There are many, but thousands more are disease free. Usually the youngest child will die either before the mother or shortly after and all the other children are healthy. That's why these children can succeed if good people like yourself will help them.

Tyler: How do child-headed households manage to survive? How does a child under eighteen manage to care for several younger siblings?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: These children are resilient. You have to see it in action. With the proper help and schooling these children can rise to greatness. At our mission the CHH that has an older child leading them live out in the city. We pay their rent, give them food and education until they can start providing for themselves. The book gives several of these stories but let me give an example. One CHH has 4 members, a 17 year old girl, a 15 year old girl, and two boys 13, and 11. The boys go to school all day. The girls attend elementary school in the morning and then our home-ec school in the afternoon. In the program, they work at our Pizza and Gelato Café. They make enough money that soon they will be able to support themselves. But for now we pay the rent, help feed them and provide all their education. These girls are on their way to one day owning their own café! The boys will receive an elementary education and enter a local vo-tech high school where they will learn marketable skills.

Tyler: Sister, will you tell us a little bit about these children? What are their daily lives like?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: The children all want to go to school; they know it is important. They all want to learn a trade; they know this is vital. Each classroom has about 60-70 children and they sit perfectly still and do all their school work as they know if they misbehave a child who is listening at the window will jump in and take their place. You see the school has only so many desks so children who are not admitted into the school sit outside the windows hoping to hear some lessons and learn that way! These are not your street orphans! Yes, they exist and that is another whole book. But the CHH are fighting desperately to stay as a family, get educated and grow into normal adulthood.

It is not easy. Let me speak about something as simple as getting water. At one of our missions where there are hundreds of orphans trying to make it on their own, there was a terrible drought. The World Food Program came and left a huge canvas sack filled with water, and containers were given to the adults! So the kids had no way of getting the water. One of the children ran up and tried to drink from the spigot; he almost got killed by adults beating him away with sticks. Thank God we were able to dig a well solely for the children.

Tyler: “AIDS Orphans Rising” provides many resources for readers to use to help Orphans of AIDS. What are some of these resources?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: Some advice –Always help a group that will give 100% of your donation to the children. The Religious Teachers Filippini is the only group I have found that can give you that promise.

Frank McKinney’s Caring House and Habitat for Humanity are great for providing housing for the children.

And I would recommend setting up your own family foundation—that way the money goes for the area you are most interested in. Jillian Coleman Wheeler has many resources and ideas for setting up your own foundation.

Another great way to help the children is to use the talents you have. If you love to run, run for the kids. Get sponsors; send them the money. Lisa Smith Batchen has raised thousands of dollars just for food for these children. Go to her site; she can help you get started: <http://www.dreamchaserevents.com/>

Marshall Ulrich climbed Mt. Everest and the seven highest mountains in the world for the children. Go to his site and see all the good he has accomplished for the children of this world: <http://www.marshallulrich.com/>

Tyler: How do you use the money raised for the orphans?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: Food, clothing and education. Most of the children eat one roll a day! We are working to provide a hot lunch program for them. Do you know what ended hunger in the USA? The school hot lunch program. This is a big priority for us but an expensive one. Many say why don’t you get these big groups to help you? We have tried and their answer is always, “We only help the Government. You have to get the food from them.” Many of these Governments have their own agendas as to what to do with the food. In Eritrea the World Food Program is forbidden to distribute its food.

Tyler: Sister, where do you personally find the courage to carry on your work, despite a situation that must at times seem overwhelming?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: These children are not giving up and they have been the ones facing incredible suffering. How could you not help them? God does provide. Sometimes He makes you wait, but He always comes through. Just look, you are interviewing me, not by chance, God sent you, and some good person will read this interview, then read the book and then take action to help these children. Faith gets you through all difficulties!

Tyler: What do you foresee for the future? Will the AIDS epidemic become worse, or are more people being educated about it?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: It seems to be getting worse but will peak. The medicines in the developed nation allow parents and children to live many productive years even though they have the illness. And the work of research scientists, I am praying, will soon pay off with a vaccine. Education is the clue. But just not about disease and how you can catch it. These children are in need of basic education and more. The government can teach you, but they

don't love you and they are not going to start teaching morals. So it is up to NGOs and religious groups, and just good people to get out there to help educate these children. If you have never been loved, do you think you could love? Picture the world without love.

Tyler: Sister Mary Elizabeth, thank you so much for joining me today and allowing me to help spread your message. Before we go, will you please let our readers know about your website and what additional information can be found there?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: Thank you so much Tyler.

The book "AIDS Orphans Rising" can be purchased at Amazon or your local bookstore.
Our websites are:

<http://www.aidsorphansrising.org> and <http://aidsorphansrising.blogspot.com>

You could email me at: srmelloyd@gmail.com

Tax deductible Donations may be sent to:

Religious Teachers Filippini Mission Fund
455 Western Avenue
Morristown, NJ 07960

Tyler: And how can readers purchase a copy of "AIDS Orphans Rising"?

Sr. Mary Elizabeth: You can get a copy of the book at:

<http://www.Amazon.com>

or

<http://www.LovingHealing.com>

Loving Healing Press also offers an ebook version of the book that allows you to access all of the sites mentioned in the book. I would recommend this to anyone doing formal research in this area.

Tyler: Thank you, Sister Mary Elizabeth, for joining me today. My best wishes are with you as you carry on your important work.