

## *Savior of the World Family*

Sierra Leone is a country on the west coast of Africa. It was founded in 1787 as a home for freed slaves by Great Britain. The capital city, Freetown, was where the first freed slaves brought over by the British began a settlement. Sierra Leone gained its independence from Great Britain, peacefully, in 1961. What followed was a series of many different governments and political parties all trying to control the country's lucrative trade in diamonds. Other countries and outside political groups noticed Sierra Leone's unstable governments and great potential for funding political ends around the world with the diamond trade, both legal and illegal – so called “blood diamonds”.

Rebels in Liberia invaded Sierra Leone in 1991 and started an armed insurrection. This began a horribly bloody and ruthless civil war. The war continued to cut its bloody way through the country, curbing agriculture, and drastically cutting government revenues from mining. Hundreds of schools, health clinics, and administrative facilities were destroyed. Running water, electricity, and garbage pick-up was stopped, as was all development of roads and construction or renovation of buildings. The tourist trade, to what was once called the “Athens of the West”, ended. Most of the population became homeless, and Sierra Leone plunged to the bottom of the economic scale.

The rebels systematically began a reign of terror and intimidation on the local unarmed farmers and villagers. Thousands of civilians, from infants to the elderly, had their legs and arms hacked off by machete. Melted plastic was poured into the eyes of the elderly. People were tied into grain bags, doused with gasoline and set on fire. Many of these “soldiers” were just children themselves, captured by other soldiers, given drugs and a gun and told to do as they were instructed or they would suffer the same fate. Many of the child soldiers were forced to kill their own parents. It is estimated that over 10,000 children were abducted and forced to become soldiers. The war was brought to an uneasy peace in 2001 with the help of other African nations, the UN, and Great Britain.

Louisa Aminata Sankoh Hughes was a 17 year old high school student from the northern town of Makeni living with her uncle's family in Freetown in 1999. She was sent to Freetown because her family did not have enough money to pay for her schooling. The rebels invaded Makeni and her family fled to Freetown. On the way her sister's newborn baby girl died of exposure as they ran and hid from soldiers.

The rebels soon attacked Freetown, and Louisa was forced to leave school to sell cabbage in the market place in order to buy the rice the family needed to survive. She was held at gun point by soldiers more than once, but each time was able to escape. When peace finally came to Freetown in 2001, Louisa was well familiar with the torture and mutilation techniques of the rebels.

Her family was now in the state of utter deprivation and on the brink of starvation. Her family, which were of the Muslim faith, heard that the local Catholic Church was giving out help to the refugees. Louisa, driven by the fear that her very sick younger brother would die soon, went to see what help she could obtain. At the church she met a Missionary of Charity priest from the United States, Fr. John Gibson. He asked what the family needed and, crying on her knees, she told him five dollars to buy medicine for her dying brother. He asked her how often her family ate. She told him 3 times a week.

Fr. Gibson was able to give the family the five dollars her brother needed and he also obtained a bag of rice for them. Grateful beyond belief, Louisa asked what she could do to pay him back. He told her to come to Mass every day. This she did. Six months later Louisa was received into the Catholic Church. She then began to discern a vocation to become a Catholic sister with the Missionaries of Charity. Unfortunately, there weren't any Missionary of Charity sisters in the country anymore. They had been gunned down by the rebels in Freetown's sporting stadium when they refused to submit to the rebel's request to violate their chastity. Four sisters were killed; one survived.

Louisa worked with Fr. Gibson and others to help distribute food and aid to the refugees. Fr. Gibson left Sierra Leone in 2002 and came to the Carmelite monastery in Munster, Indiana. From the monastery, Fr. Gibson began to tell the story of what he witnessed and worked with in Freetown. People began to spontaneously give him donations to help. He sent the money he received directly over to Sierra Leone through Western Union to individuals there he knew were trustworthy and would use the money to help others and not just themselves. Louisa Aminata was one of those trusted individuals.

Louisa first began to help those around her who were starving. Louisa then noticed the large number of children living on the streets. They had been orphaned by the war. She would walk the streets and question children she saw who were obviously not being cared for. To those who had no family, she would provide food and clothing. In the spring of 2004, she told Fr. Gibson that it was not a good thing to care for the children just on the street. She asked him if she could adopt the children and gather them together into a house. Fr. Gibson thought that it was a wonderful idea and told her to go ahead. She petitioned the government and received the approval to become the mother of 15 children. Within 2 months that number had grown to 20. She named her new home, Savior of the World Children's Center. She was 21 years old.

Back in the United States, friends and supporters of Fr. Gibson's missionary relief efforts told him that it would be wise to become a nonprofit entity. Fr. Gibson agreed, and so these supporters began the Savior of the World Children's Center, Inc, a nonprofit tax-exempt charity based in northwest Indiana. Its board members are all lay volunteers, and all work is done out of their homes. None of the donations are spent on salaries or rent.

Louisa, now 28 years old, has a home filled with 45 children ranging in age from 1 to 18 years old. Some of the children lost their parents due to the war or the poverty and disease that it caused. Others have a mother or a father who, because of illness or poverty, cannot care for them. And then there are those who were abused by their families and who ran away to live in the streets or were driven out. Many of these children were under the age of 10 when they began living on the street. Some lived on the street caring for younger brothers and sisters, even though they were only 8 or 9 years old. The younger children – the babies and toddlers – have been rescued by Louisa from abortion.

Donations given by the generous individuals of northwest Indiana are her only means of support. She does not receive any help from her government, nor is there any help to be received. She does not receive help from any religious or charitable agency.

Louisa's favorite expression is "Thank you, Lord." She is most grateful for all the Lord has done for her. She considers the children welcomed into her home as Jesus himself. He is there in the disguise of the suffering little child. When asked about the fate of her children she says she is very hopeful. Louisa explains, "My children and I live in poverty, with suffering from the lack of basic things. They have known what it is like to see their parents killed in front of them; they have been abandoned; they know hunger and illness. But I say, "Thank you. Lord." I say thank you because my children with the help of the Lord Jesus will grow up to be compassionate people. Because they know what it is to suffer, they will, in turn, be able to help others in their suffering. When one does not know suffering, it is much harder to love the suffering brother or sister in front of you both with understanding and with practical help." She prays that some of her children will become priests and sisters. She says, "If they become priests or sisters, they will be very good priests and sisters because they will know what it is like to be without, what it is to suffer illness, what it is to be hungry, lonely, and abandoned. They will have the utmost tenderness for other people."

Louisa's children, especially the older ones, are well aware that it is because of the generosity of strangers that they are alive and can continue to survive. They cannot understand exactly why people so far away would want to help someone such as they, little and forgotten. As they grow, under the direction and instruction of Louisa, in their faith and understanding of what it is to be a follower of Jesus, they are beginning to see that life is about the giving of oneself. It is about opening oneself up in order to share in the sorrows of others. It is about recognizing Jesus truly present in the poor and in the suffering little child.

Rosanne Kouris  
Director, Savior of the World

*"Every moment of our lives is an opportunity that Jesus in his love is giving us—an opportunity to love him and to serve him with all the resources that he in his goodness has put at our disposal. When we invest our love in orphan children, we are placing ourselves fully at the disposal of the Lord God who has redeemed us."*

*Fr. John Gibson OCD*