

# *If I Can Help Somebody!*

*Africa Newsletter - 2022*

By Fr. John T. Judie

"If I can help  
somebody as  
I go along  
the way,  
then my  
living will not  
be in vain"

In March 2020, I was exactly one week from departing for an extended stay in Africa when the pandemic hit. Naturally, I felt greatly disappointed that my plans and expectations of what I would do in ministry there was not going to happen any time soon. This is the year when I could definitely spend close to seven months ministering to our brothers and sisters there. When I did arrive, I saw how much more deeply affected were the people there by my extended absence from being with them. My sons, in particular, greeted and treated me as if I had risen from

the dead! They just could not do enough to take care of my every need, although I had come back to help take care of some of their needs. I am not accustomed to being so pampered but, on the other hand, I understood their need to do such for their "Daddy". Nevertheless, we enjoyed so much wonderfully blessed family time together.

## SEMINARIAN SPONSORSHIP

The words of a familiar gospel hymn, "If I can help somebody as I go along the way, then my living will not be in vain", might as well be the theme song for the work of Fr. John Judie Ministries in Africa. It was during my very first visit to East Africa that I saw for myself the great impact of poverty on the lives of the people there. This is when I learned about the minor seminaries (high school and jr. college) all having full enrollment of students and some with waiting lists. Because of the situation of economic poverty there, every student has to pay school fees to study in the seminary. Many of these young boys come from very poor families. When the family members failed to pay the school fees (equal to \$100.00 a year at that time), the students were being

dismissed from the seminary. Thus, the "ministries" began with finding sponsors for these young boys who wanted to remain in seminary and pursue their calling to priesthood. The sponsorship commitment at this time is \$250.00 per academic year. Presently, we are blessed to be sponsoring around 63 students in five different jr. seminaries in Tanzania. God has truly blessed this ministry over the past 28 years.

## SOFI JR. SEMINARY

I always knew and embraced the fact that just offering financial assistance was not anywhere close to the scope of ministry waiting to be done in Africa. Thus, I am now devoting the majority of my time in the seminaries counseling the students. This is the one thing that ever seminary rector asked me to do in the months I am with them. Sofi Jr. Seminary is one of three jr. seminaries in the Diocese of Mahenge in Tanzania. The student population is 129 and many of them face major challenges at their young age, mostly because they have parents who are peasant farmers. Their family's income is dependent on how much crop they are able to grow and sell to meet all their needs. I learned that 70% of the student population there is in



major financial debt. I do not know how the seminary rector manages to care for the students, feeding them daily and paying his staff. He did say to me: "If I send most of them home because of their school fee debt, we would not have a seminary here."

There was something very special about this community of seminarians that gave me a very different feeling from the other seminaries I visit regularly. I was able to spend some days there on two different visits. I was impressed by how well everyone there seemed to get along, in spite of the fact that they are adolescents. As opposed to other seminary communities where I have spent time, I never observed or heard of any disciplinary action taken on any student there. This is not the case with those I am counseling in other seminaries. In my private sessions with other seminarians, it is clear that not all of them are focused on becoming priests in their future. They appreciate getting the quality education and spiritual formation but many of them admit that they have other career plans on their minds. At Sofi Seminary, every single student in the counseling session talked to me only about the importance of his becoming a priest. Their biggest challenge: living from one day to the next not knowing when they may be sent home because of the rising school fee debt.

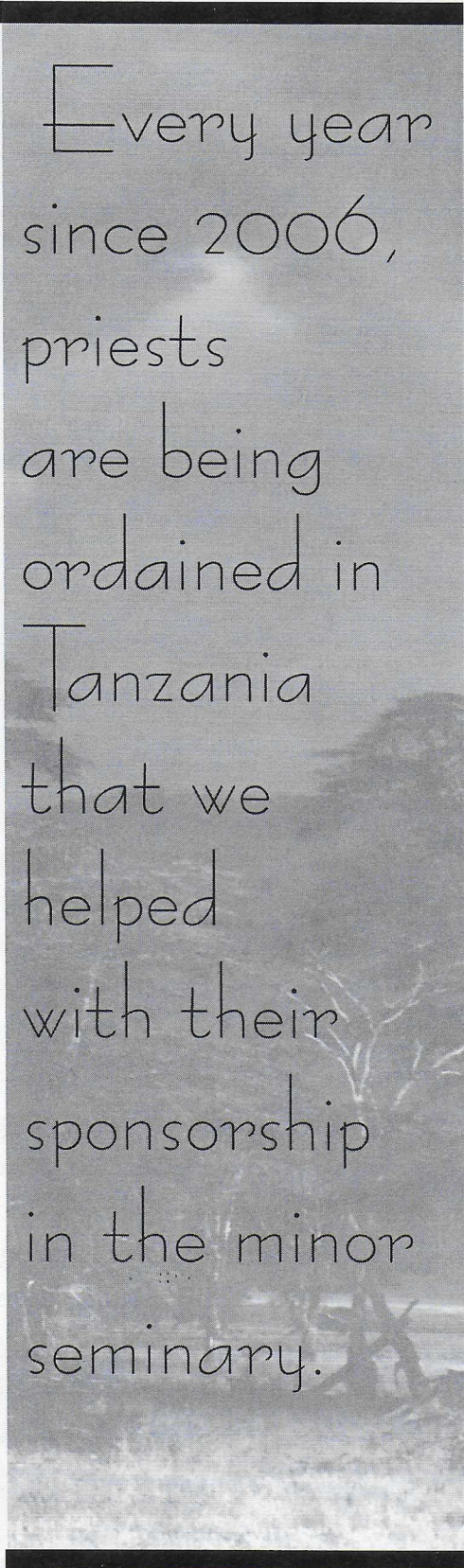
Sometimes we have to hear about

the lived experiences of others to appreciate how blessed we are in this world. One young boy named John, a freshman in high school, had only his mother who was struggling to pay his school fees. The father has no involvement in his son's life and the other relatives oppose the idea of him being in the seminary. When we arrived at John's home parish and found him there, we learned that (just the week before) his mother had passed away. No one else in his family has extended any care or concern for him, so the pastor makes sure that this boy has breakfast and lunch at the parish and supper with the school teachers. Then, he goes home to sleep in an empty house. John was very anxious to get back to the seminary as soon as possible. I think he realized that his seminary community is his only family now. We must do whatever we can to help him stay there.

Marco is another young boy at the seminary in his second year of high school studies. While I was there, he was brought to me and seemed to be very much distraught. I learned that his father has five "wives" and shows no care or concern for any of his children. This boy was also dependent only on his mother to give him financial and emotional support while in seminary. The day Marco was brought to me, he had learned that his mother had just left the home without any intentions of returning. At that point, there was no pressing need to talk about school fees. This boy

just needed to be hugged, held and consoled—and that is what he got! If I can touch somebody...!

Humphrey is a high school junior who the rector asked me to see for some particular reasons. It seems that, for years, he has been told



Every year  
since 2006,  
priests  
are being  
ordained in  
Tanzania  
that we  
helped  
with their  
sponsorship  
in the minor  
seminary.



that he has a medical condition (like what his father had) which causes him to tremble in his hands. This young man also told me that he was terrified of standing before a group of people to say anything. I asked him to stretch out his hand and, when he did so, I stretched out my hand next to his. Then, I told him that I did not see anything different between his hand and mine. I handed him a book and told him to read out loud several paragraphs to me. He did so and did not stumble or stutter. I also said that, if he can read out loud to me, he can do the same thing to the community with whom he lives. I instructed him to prepare a speech to give to his community at their morning assembly and read it to me. He did so and had no problem with his presentation. The morning after we left, the rector told me that Humphrey was now the lector (reading the Scriptures) at one of the community's daily Masses each week. He also gave his speech at the morning assembly the same day after our departure. In the rector's mind, this was a miracle! As for me, if I can touch somebody...!

Every year since 2006, priests are being ordained in Tanzania that we helped with their sponsorship in the minor seminary. It never fails when I return to Tanzania that I will meet several priests, some newly ordained and some ordained just a few years, who will make sure that I know we had sponsored them years ago in minor seminary. Not only is the harvest

plentiful for priestly vocations there but the future of the harvest is just as plentiful. Near the end of every academic year, boys and girls finishing grade school can apply to enter a seminary for priesthood or a convent for formation as a nun. There is only one jr. seminary in the Archdiocese of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania. For the coming academic year, they have already 300 applicants. I believe that God is touching these young people's hearts, so we need to be ready to touch their lives.

### **GOD AT WORK!**

I have always said that I had no idea, during my first visit to Africa, that I would be doing any of this ministry for these 28 years. It is really God Who is doing the work and I am just the instrument (with your support) to make it happen. All of this began with my first four-month visit to the Diocese of Morogoro in Tanzania. As much assistance as we have been able to give with what donations we receive, there are others in need who we are not able to help. The Diocese of Morogoro now has a new bishop. At a certain function just before my return to the States, he spoke his own gratitude to me (and to all of you) for the many years of support for vocations to the priesthood. He then announced that the diocese itself is establishing a Pastoral Education Fund, specifically to support seminarians from very poor families. Praise God!

### **THE BLESSING OF FAMILY**

Many have heard me talk about my sons in Africa and our family life there, especially when I mention the "sacred table". These young men never had what we would consider a happy or even "normal" family life in their growing up years. So, our family meals together are designed to give them what they never had growing up but, still, need. We enjoy food and drink together, then spend the rest of the evening speaking to one another only what is in our hearts. Geoffrey, one of the newer sons to join the family, was caught by surprise at his first sacred table with us. I announced to everyone that Geoffrey recently had a birthday. Then, we brought forth a birthday cake and sang "Happy Birthday" to him. The big surprise: Geoffrey told us that he had turned 30 years old and this was his first birthday cake in his life. These sons may not have had much (or anyone) to belong to in their earlier years but they have come to know and celebrate together what it means to be family today. If they can touch somebody...!

### **SETTING THE TABLE**

We set it every day but this table is different. We call it the Sacred Table. Two family members have traveled by bus separately for over twelve hours to arrive at this evening table. Each will return home early the next morning. They came just to be family for a



few precious hours. Imagine! We gather at the table to pray and share food. It is what happens afterward that is sacred. There is a familiar rhythm as, one by one, an outpouring of appreciation and love comes forth. Emotions are easily expressed and valued. Listening is more important than speaking. As words and emotions flow from the heart, we know that we are part of something ordained and blessed by God. Long embraces follow and we are satisfied. This Sacred Table was a sweet reunion with my family after a three-year absence. I am a blessed Mama.

In the five glorious weeks of being present and open to God's plan in Tanzania, I saw many tables blessed by God. In two village outstations, first communicants were brought to the altar table surrounded by singing, dancing and swirls of color as villagers praised God while offering maize (corn) and live chickens in a joyful procession. In a mountain village, a new preschool room was built by Fr. Placid. Children sat on straw mats eating cups of porridge, their sacred table blessed by God. Wooden desks became tables as teachers and children discovered the joy of building with toy blocks and looking at picture books I had carried to share. Smiling faces

looked up from tables as we shared songs and dance as gifts to each other that needed no common language.

Young men in a jr. seminary became family as they kneaded dough and stirred ugali under the watchful eyes of two dear Sisters. They are sons of peasant farmers and a fertile growing season has been especially hard. Their future is uncertain as family finances are depleted by the drought but they know that they are blessed at this moment to be given an education.

It is a privilege to share in the Body of Christ through the Eucharist. One Holy Table deeply moved me. Dear Fr. Beatus invited me to attend early Sunday morning Mass at the Amani Center as I began a four-day stay with him. This center is home for disabled children and teens. Most live there as families are unable to care for them. Some are brought by police after being abandoned on the streets. Most are non-verbal and unable to sit independently or walk. These innocent children of God are cared for, valued and happy at this loving place. It is their home. Sunday Mass was in a large room with a simple table. I watched as three children were brought to the front, sharing a seat in an old model

wheelchair. A Sister started beating on the drum and praise to God began. Two young men worshiped God by their constant movement throughout Mass. Pacing the aisle, they approached the altar while moving their arms in a continuous song of praise. Although no words could be formed, loud vocalizations from the children echoed in the room. Indeed, all were making a joyful noise unto the Lord! An adult positioned a child's head to receive the Body of Christ. I thanked God for being a part of this joyous Eucharistic Table.

This five-week trip was a spiritual journey. Most days began early, walking the dirt road with Fr. John to celebrate Mass at altar tables with religious communities. God was always at work! My spirit was renewed and every holy moment was cherished as relationships deepened and new ones were embraced. Each table shared was a Blessing from God and I am forever grateful!

Peggy Keen



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