

CONGOLESE
NUN SEEKS
TO ELIMINATE
HUNGER AND
CREATE A
NEW ECONOMY

NUN PLANTS SEEDS OF HOPE AT NOTRE DAME ACADEMY

By David Perry, Lowell Sun



Sister Claudine Dumbi is an agriculture teacher at a Jesuit school in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as a farmer.

Sister Claudine Dumbi, a Congolese nun with the Sisters of Notre Dame order, looked into the crowd of about 200 bright-eyed, neatly uniformed students at Notre Dame Academy yesterday morning.

"These boys," the nun says, looking back at the image of a pair of scrawny youths grinding a potato-like mash on a screen. "They eat one meal a day. People don't have food in the Congo. These two do not eat in the morning, but they walk five miles on foot to get to school. You can't imagine."

Dumbi, 42, visited the Catholic school to plant seeds. As an agriculture teacher at a Jesuit school in The Democratic Republic of the Congo's capital, Kinshasa, and as a farmer, she plants the land. But this was about sowing seeds in the U.S. to help realize her country's self-sustainable future.

If the Congo is simply given supplies, says Dumbi, its people will never learn to feed themselves. With her "Chicken Project," people are farming the land and eating its spoils. It is creating farmers.

Her project is at once about killing hunger and birthing a new economy. Feeding people is job one. Chickens bring commerce, eggs and meat, as well as a welcome

addition to the area's vegetable diet, including a staple called manioc, a starchy root vegetable poor in protein but prepared "like mashed potatoes," says Dumbi. "Very heavy food."

In the U.S. for nearly a year, she is in the midst of an internship at the Sisters of Notre Dame Congregational Offices in Ipswich, where she has been studying technology and English. She returns to the Congo this summer.

She recalled later that eating once a day is "not human. So the kids are sleeping."

"Why are you sleeping?" she asks them. "Sister, I'm hungry. I didn't eat yesterday," they tell her.

"Sometimes I cried," she says. "It's very hard and sad."

She spiced the presentation to students in the first through fourth grades with pre-recorded animal noises (when a chicken was on screen, a chicken noise echoed through the school's chapel; likewise a cow's "moo") and a snippet of infectious African pop, to which the kids clapped along.

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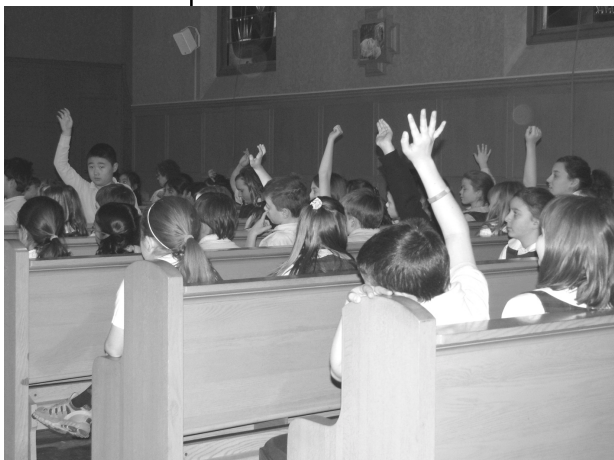
Photos: Academy of Notre Dame staff

At right: Sr. Patricia Conner, high school principal; Sr. Kathryn Lawrence McGuiggan, moderator for the Alumnae Association; Sr. Catherine St. Clare Flaherty, former elementary school principal; Sr. Claudine Dumbi; Sr. Mary Farren, former high school principal; Sr. Mary Duke, elementary school principal; and Sr. Judith Colwell, Grade 1A teacher



The lively music illustrates a point: Though her central African nation is torn by war, racked with poverty and hunger, its people are spiritually resilient, she says.

"In Africa," Dumbi tells the school children, "the people like music and dancing. They are suffering, but they keep their joy with singing and dancing." She confesses to the students that she's still learning English, her sixth language. "When I got here, I thought everybody was speaking too fast. I am learning."



Above: With an attentive audience of students, many had questions to ask Sr. Claudine during her visit to the Academy this past January.

In 2002, she began the Chicken Project with 200 chicks she bought. Now, she says, there are more than 1,600 of the birds. "Because the people are very hungry," she says, "I thought it would be good to start something to help them. It helps many people. They eat eggs and they eat chicken."

She studied agriculture at the same school where she now teaches, beginning in 2002. The following year, she began studying agriculture in Lille, France. She brought back seeds.

She tells people who come to the convent for vegetables, "I'm going to give you the seeds and next time you won't come here. You will have your own vegetables." People who leave with vegetables often walk five miles to market to sell them.

"We do have some cars, but the roads are very bad."...

"How do you know which ones are chicken eggs and which ones are eating eggs?" asked one boy during a question-and-answer period. "We'll save that for science class," said his teacher.

The elementary and high school students embraced an opportunity to help Sr. Claudine's Chicken Project. As their Lenten project, students collected coins to help her buy more chicks (\$1.20 per baby chick) in the Congo so there will be more eggs and chicken for the people to eat. We are proud to report some impressive results.

The elementary school raised \$2,059.45, or enough for 1,716 chicks, while the high school raised \$1,264.52, or enough to purchase another 1,053 chicks, bringing our grand total to nearly 3,000 chicks!

If you would like to contribute, e-mail Sister Dumbi at claudine.dumbi@sndden.org.