

Holy Cows

By Marisa Celenza
Editor



“I would like to buy her a cow.”

This simple response led to a fundraising initiative that has provided hundreds of cows for the small diocese of Lugazi in Uganda, East Africa.

In 2004 Father Emmanuel Walakira, a missionary, visited St. Wilfrid parish in Toronto to raise money for his work in Uganda. Fr. Emmanuel is pastor of Our Lady of Fatima parish that consists of 80 acres of fertile farmland, a church, two elementary schools serving 600 students each and a high school of 700 students. High school students pay a tuition fee of \$400.00 per year, an enormous sum in this community. Many cannot afford to pay and do not continue on to high school. There are about 90 orphans due to AIDS in the elementary schools. With no means of support, these children have no hope of attending high school. The needs are great in this community.

Fr. Massey Lombardi, the pastor of St. Wilfrid parish, asked Fr. Emmanuel if he would like to buy his mother a gift before he returned home to Uganda. Expecting that Fr. Emmanuel would like to buy her a purse, a pair of shoes or perhaps a sweater, he was quite surprised with the answer.

Fr. Emmanuel immediately responded that he would like to buy her a cow! In Uganda, cattle play a crucial role in the local economy. Cows are central to life and survival. They provide milk, especially for the children in the parish schools, fertilizer for the crops, and, of course, meat.

Fr. Massey, a master of grand plans, asked what Fr. Emmanuel would do if he had 200 cows.

Fr. Emmanuel looked quite surprised and answered that this would provide milk for the children, meat to eat and fertilizer for the crops. They could also sell the milk and use the profits to hire teachers.

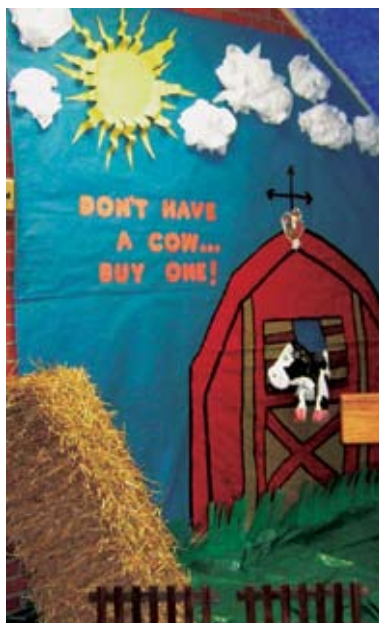
Immediately Fr. Massey called his sister in Florida and asked if she would like to purchase a cow for 200 dollars. He even offered to name it after her. She requested that the cow have big brown eyes and slim hips. Thus began the Holy Cows project.

In February 2005, Fr. Massey visited Lugazi, along with Monsignor. John Murphy from St. Clement's parish in Toronto. They returned with touching images and stories of the poverty and needs of Uganda. The students in Fr. Massey's parish schools of St. Wilfrid and St. Jerome

in Toronto immediately began fundraising activities. Salt and Light Television produced a 15-minute video called “Holy Cows”. Part of the proceeds from the sales of the CD goes to the Ugandan project.

I first saw this short documentary at a Toronto Catholic District School Board meeting and thought what a wonderful Lenten project this would be for our school, St. Simon. At the end of our Ash Wednesday service. I showed the video to the students. The message is very clear throughout the film. The African children, many of whom are orphans, who have lost their parents to AIDS, have nothing.

There is one particularly haunting image of a small child clutching a pencil. This pencil was obviously a very precious item for this child. Many of our students were touched by that image and commented on how we take so much for granted. I challenged our students to think of ways that we could raise enough money to purchase a cow from each class in the school. I knew that this was an ambitious goal. Actually, I would have been very pleased if we were able to raise one cow per division.



Holy Cow Barnyard

and submitted names for our cows. Everyone paid a nominal fee to participate. Each class also had a jar to fill with loose change. Our foyer became a barnyard and each day throughout Lent, we were spurred on by announcements and updates on our fundraising efforts.

Our culminating activity was a Holy Cow *moove*-a-thon dance for the entire school. Through these fundraising activities, the students raised enough money to purchase nine cows.

A parent came to me the day after the students saw the video and asked if her family could purchase their own cow. Her daughter had gone home greatly impressed with the image of the young



Fr. Emmanuel

child clutching his pencil. I also purchased a cow as an Easter gift for my family. Our Catholic School Advisory Council purchased another cow. In total, the St. Simon community purchased 12 cows. Students were thrilled. Their enthusiasm, cooperation, and spirit had raised enough money to make a difference.

Their excitement did not end there. One day in April 2006, Fr. Massey came to visit and brought Fr. Emmanuel, who was visiting from Uganda. Students were enthralled to listen to his stories about the schools and the children in Uganda and he was most appreciative of the donation. Fr. Massey informed the students that their donation would be used to purchase cows for St. Francis Hospital Nyenga, the community hospital.

Several weeks later, Father Massey visited St. Simon Catholic School with Sister Jane Frances Nakafeero, who is the hospital's administrator. She was in Toronto for a stopover on her way home to Uganda, but took the time to come and thank the students in person for their donation. Students were very eager to hear Sister Jane Frances speak of how the money they had raised would be used and they had many questions for her.

St. Francis Hospital Nyenga is a private not-for-profit hospital in the Lugazi Catholic diocese. It is a 100-bed hospital that was originally established as a leprosy camp. Today it is a fully-fledged general hospital with a large maternity ward. The hospital also houses a convent with eight young nuns training to be nurses. Due to decreased donor funding, some of their income-generating activities could no longer be sustained. There are over 12 acres of farmland lying idle that needs much repair. Our donation of 12 cows will help to rehabilitate this farm. Many of the children admitted to the hospital suffer from severe anemia and malnutrition. Our cows will provide milk for the children and will supply fertilizer for the crops that the community hopes to grow. The crops will feed the patients and generate some income to continue with the care and support the hospital offers.

Fr. Massey has large plans for the diocese of Lugazi and his plans are moving ahead very quickly. In just over a year, the donated cows number over 200, including 70 calves. Money raised has also been used to build fencing around the parish property, to purchase

the necessary medication for the cows, and to build a three-room bunkhouse for the cattle keepers.

It does not stop there. Fr. Massey has raised enough funds through schools and private donations to complete a dormitory for 150 girls, a classroom block for 600 kids, a dining hall for 600 students, a science building and a new kitchen. They now need tables and chairs for the dining hall, biology, chemistry and physics equipment to outfit the labs in the science centre, a 10-thousand gallon water tank, a new generator to keep power consistent, and a library that will include an administration building. They are also lacking books, paper, computers, sports equipment and audiovisual equipment. They have one TV set and DVD player that Fr. Massey purchased for them.

The Holy Cow project provided a wonderful experience for our community at St. Simon. It had the support of the students, staff, and parents alike as we worked together to help rebuild the community of Lugazi. Many other schools in the Greater Toronto Area have supported this project – Cardinal McGuigan CSS, St. Patrick CSS, St. Basil the Great, TCDSB; St. Kevin, Corpus Christie, St. Edith Stein, Father C. Sullivan, Our Lady of Peace, DPCDSB; St. Jean de Brebeuf CSS, YCDSB; Holy Family, St. Mary CSS, DCDSB; Our Lady of Peace, HCDSB.

You may wish to consider this fundraising activity for your schools. If so, I encourage you to purchase the "Holy Cows" video that is available for \$22.95 from the Salt and Light Television boutique at www.saltandlighttv.org. This short documentary is a testament to one Toronto priest's vision to buy hundreds of cows for Uganda. But more than that, it is a tribute to the children in schools and parishes in the Archdiocese of Toronto who helped make this vision a reality.

Fr. Massey hopes to duplicate the work that has been accomplished in the Our Lady of Fatima parish in other parishes in Uganda.

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Sr. Jane Frances