

South Africa



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The refreshing spring of grace

By Sarah Moran, RC '09

"They're singing about grace," whispers a fellow teacher. It's morning assembly in the dusty schoolyard of St. Peter Claver School in rural South Africa. I stand in a line of teachers facing two hundred Basotho students assembled in rows. Their smart, hunter-green uniforms and rousing harmonies create a stark juxtaposition against the backdrop of dilapidated schoolrooms and the ramshackle dwellings of wood and corrugated iron visible just beyond the grounds. The students begin swaying and stomping rhythmically, in unison, to the traditional hymn's chorus. "O mohau wa Modimo ke kwetsa e kakang. Na esale o mphihlela ke maketse feele," they sing. It means, "The grace of God is like a refreshing spring of water. Since I found it, I have been amazed."

A year after graduating from Regis, I find myself in this grace-filled place, a township called Maokeng, just outside the town of Kroonstad. Maokeng remains a vestige of the apartheid era, wherein native Africans were removed from legally-designated white towns, creating informal settlements or "townships" on their periphery. Though that era has long since ended, roads remain unpaved, electricity sporadic, water impure, people largely unemployed, and HIV/AIDS prevalence high. Yet even as it tells of South Africa's heartrending past, Maokeng brims over with the rich culture of the Basotho tribe, and St. Peter Claver School is no exception.

"Good morning Sister Sarah," is the greeting I receive from students as I walk to my first class. Until this year, any white person teaching here has been a Catholic nun, so it has proven futile clarifying the distinction between sister and volunteer. This week, I've been teaching 7th grade English and social science. My role as the school's substitute teacher has kept me well occupied, since serious illness among faculty is as common as it is among students. Next week, however, my role will change entirely.

A few days ago, a fellow teacher learned that his work visa was not renewed. As he must return to his home country, the nuns in the school's administration have requested that I take over his courses: 8th and 9th grade economics, mathematics and mechanical science. A proud English major, I am anxiously optimistic that my business minor and the foundation of the Regis core curriculum will come to my aid.

Teaching St. Peter's students, who ensure that their uniforms are immaculately clean despite living in poverty, who speak and write three languages with ease, who never fail to notice an uncrossed "t" or an undotted "i" on the chalkboard, is nothing less than a privilege. Most days, my grinning muscles are seriously overworked. But at night, when all is still and the weight of a long day hangs heavy on my shoulders, the question of "*how ought we to live?*" is never far from my mind. The social injustices affecting this community, particularly the vulnerability of our students, can feel overwhelming. How ought I to respond when I learn that another student has lost a parent to AIDS? How ought I to instruct when, on Monday mornings, the students slouch in their desks, unable to concentrate because their last substantial meal was a free school lunch they received on Friday?

In moments like these, I cling to the simpler question of *how ought I to live today?* I recommit to being a loving, firm teacher who holds these students to the remarkable standards they have set for themselves despite the local and global inequities of wealth, health, and opportunity that affect them. I try to live as I believe I ought to in the here and now. So today, we befriend the rats *here* in the classrooms. When the pigeons in the rafters create a distracting cacophony, I nominate a student to catch them *right now* (and he is thrilled to do so, often retrieving one in each hand in a matter of seconds). And the wisdom of the students' song reminds me to join the Maokeng community, each and every day, in visiting that "refreshing spring of grace."