

## Back to Africa: diocesan seminarian Clay Elmhorst makes return trip to Ethiopia

Editor's note: In February 2010, Clay Elmhorst, a seminarian from the Diocese of La Crosse from Rudolph, traveled with Catholic Relief Services to Ethiopia as part of the Global Fellows program. This past summer, Elmhorst returned to Ethiopia alone on a nine-week mission. The following is a first-person account of his return trip.

By CLAY ELMHORST

MUNDELEIN, Ill. — I've recently returned from a summer mission trip to Ethiopia. The trip was both fruitful and rewarding. My travels included the entire country, where I became immersed in and a part of the whole Ethiopian culture. The poverty is real, and the need is great throughout the African Horn, especially in Ethiopia, the seventh poorest country in the world. More than anything, Ethiopia has helped me find a place of solitude and quiet, to help me focus on God's will, and my journey into the priesthood.

My discernment led me to



Clay Elmhorst, a seminarian from the Diocese of La Crosse, poses for a photo with Abeba, a child from the village of Adigrat which Elmhorst visited as part of his summer mission trip to Ethiopia.

the remote village of Adigrat, where I was welcomed and very much involved in their diocese. Ethiopia is less than one percent Catholic, and the majority of those Catholics live in the central and northern part of the country. I spent four weeks in

the northern mountain region of Tigray teaching English to local children. My classes, in short, were always full, instructive and very successful, especially considering the lack of resources and electricity. Being among the people of

Adigrat was very challenging, as the difference in culture is somewhat shocking. Over time though, I began to understand the routine, lifestyle and simplicity the Ethiopians all very much value. Life there is so different: some days you don't have running water, other days the electricity will go out for hours. The Internet is non-existent. Most days I had to wash myself with baby wipes. I can't say it was easy; there were days I very much wanted to come home, especially when I got sick. Within the whole summer experience, I was sick from practically everything, including the altitude, food, water, insects, and, because of the Sahara Desert, the air.

But these moments of sickness became moments of thankfulness, as I transitioned from Western civilization into the Eastern world. The Ethiopian life is one of labor, hardship, and prayer. Being in Adigrat, I understood and appreciated all the things I have take for granted here in the U.S.

In July, I spent over four weeks in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia's capital. There I volunteered with Blessed Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. My time there was spent working in the men's wards at their House in Siddis Kilo, as they didn't have many men volunteers. I worked as a nurse's aid at a medical station, where I assisted and aided those who were dying and destitute. At one point I was alone in helping those who needed immediate first aid care because the station nurse left the city for more clinical experience elsewhere. So it was just me, some other volunteers, and my first aid training I learned in the military and Boy Scouts.

In general, the people had a great sense of gratitude for my time, presence, and care; I was always able to help those who



Seminarian Clay Elmhorst poses with some of the children he met during his summer mission trip to Ethiopia.

needed it, and they saw that.

In truth, my reaction to the afflictions and realities within the walls of the compound were quite numbing. It took a few weeks to get used to everything, especially when it came to those who were suffering and dying, literally from the most common of ailments; on average three to four people died per week at the Siddis Kilo House — the causes ranging from HIV/AIDS, malaria, dysentery, tuberculosis, hepatitis, typhus and noma, a tropical gangrene-like disease known as "the face of poverty," all of which are very preventable with adequate nutrition, health care and education.

To assist all the walk-ins that came throughout the week, we had to improvise and think outside the box, as the sisters were short-staffed and tending the needs of the other 1,200 patients. The patients' needs ranged from tending to old and infected wounds, catheters and bedsores, to sewing and removing stitches, treating serious burns, and even resetting bro-

teers and I were the only people available to help the poor and destitute living in the slums of Siddis Kilo.

My time in Addis was long and tiring. At times I was pushed way beyond my comfort zone. Other times I was downright numb by the needs of all those around me. My hours spent helping patients at Siddis Kilo were very tiresome and demanding. In the end, although I admit I became used to it, even to the point of forgetting I was an American. With everything at home going on without me, the world seemed pretty small at the Missionaries. During my stay, I realized I was just like the people I was caring for. I felt I had the same color eyes, the same hands, and the same smile as they had.

The days spent in Siddis Kilo helped me understand what it means to be a part of the, "human condition," or the, "human element." What was so profound was that I was a human being, whom God loved, and through me, He was loving and taking care of those near me, through my own hands. One can't help but understand the power of that love; when the person you take care of starts crying tears of joy, thanking you in Amharic, and starts kissing your hands. I truly felt closer to Christ than ever.

Next to the Eucharist, this work was the closest I've ever felt to Him. Working with the poor in Siddis Kilo, one can't help but see the face of Christ on their faces, and in turn, they saw Christ in you.

Leaving Africa, I see now that my visit has left a mark not only on my path to the priesthood,

but also on my entire human person. Regardless of place, I'm not the same person that flew to Africa in June. Coming back now and being in the United States has been the hardest part of all. The cultural difference is, in many ways, outrageous. One can't help but look back, reflect, and wonder how different it would be, if circumstances were different, if I were born in Ethiopia. Whether it's the food I eat, the car I drive, or the many different sets of clothes I have in my closet, I could never forget the poor and underprivileged in this world. They're forever a part of me now.

Leaving Africa, one can't help but be thankful, and even ashamed to some degree, for all the things we have. In America we have everything — food, health care, education, and most important, opportunity — some things other people in the world don't even know exist.

When I arrived back home, the first thing my directors asked me was, "Well, what is it? Do you want to be a diocesan priest, or a missionary priest?" I laughed and said, "Father, don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. If I learned anything from my experience in Ethiopia, it is that, yes, I'm called to the priesthood."

"Well then, which is it?" he said. I looked at him, without hesitation, and I said, "Both." I'm called to be a missionary for the Diocese of La Crosse, to bridge the gap between the spiritually wealthy and materially poor people of Ethiopia and the spiritually poor and materially wealthy people of America.



Seminarian Clay Elmhorst plays the guitar for some children during his summer mission trip to Ethiopia.



Some of the children of the village of Adigrat pose with the soccer ball Seminarian Clay Elmhorst brought them. Elmhorst said the children were ecstatic because they had never played with a soccer ball before.



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Some of the children from the Ethiopian village of Adigrat react to seminarian Clay Elmhorst bringing them candy and a soccer ball.

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