

Finding light amid darkness of HIV

Father Contarin, a missionary in Thailand, is honoured for turning lives around

By Letizia Tesi

A decade ago, there was no hope for children diagnosed with HIV and AIDS in Thailand. Hospitals lacked adequate drugs and institutions lacked funds. Victims were destined to die in religious centres like the one in Rayong operated by Father Giovanni Contarin, a missionary for the Ordine dei Camilliani (Camilliani order) who has been working in Thailand since 1985.

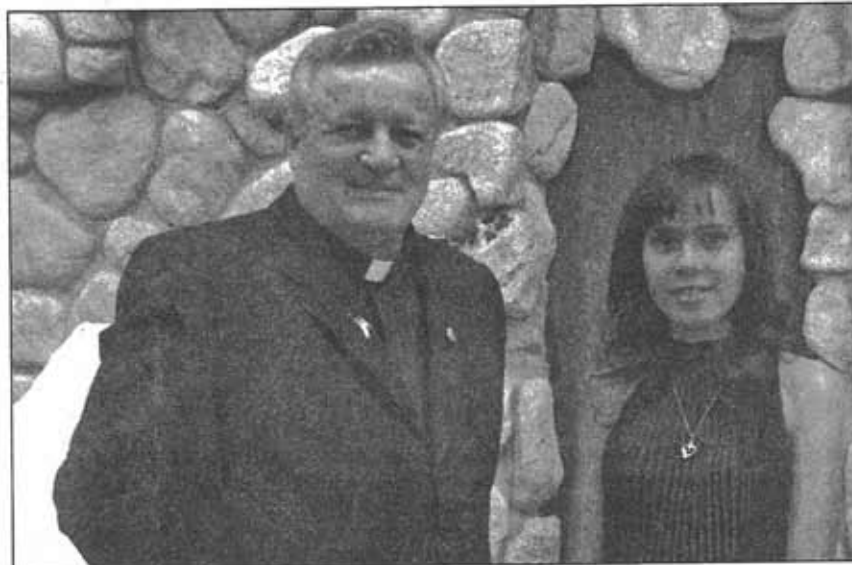
Orapan Sangrung too had gone there to die. Her fate was similar to that of thousands of other orphaned children with HIV. Oon, as her friends call her, is 22, and since the age of seven she has been burdened with a stigma. Ten years ago, being an orphan with HIV meant two things: isolation and death. When Oon, who never knew her father, became an orphan at age seven after her mother died, she was accepted into a temple run by Buddhist nuns. But since she was HIV-positive, she was not allowed to attend school.

At ten years of age, her health took a turn for the worst, and the nuns sent her to a hospital that lacked the proper medicine for treatment. Doctors asked Contarin to take the girl to his centre – not to receive treatment, but to give her palliative care.

But Contarin never stopped fighting to save Oon's life and the lives of the other children at his centre who had HIV.

At 11½ years of age, Oon began taking anti-retroviral drugs, and from that moment her story changed.

"A Swiss doctor decided to start on this new therapy," says Contarin, "although there was no medical proof that it would be successful. But the child was dying and there was nothing left to do. At first I was skeptical too, and we couldn't afford the medicine because it was too expensive. But this doctor had a box full of different medicine that would



have lasted a year. In a few months we saw significant results, and Oon became a symbol of hope for everyone."

Her story encouraged the missionary to continue his battle against HIV.

"Her improvements gave me the hope and courage to knock on doors, and to travel in search of this medicine and some way to get it into Thailand, even if illegally at first. Doctors Without Borders helped me with the medicine, but we did a lot of work because we had to travel hundreds of kilometres to take the children for blood tests and checkups."

The first group of children undergoing the anti-retrovirus treatment became a symbol of hope in Thailand. HIV was no longer a death sentence.

"Then came another sign from God – another grace," says Contarin. "A pharmacist who worked in a government lab began producing some of these drugs, notwithstanding that the huge pharmaceutical companies attempted to prevent that from happening in order to protect their own interests. We continued to sup-

port the pharmacist and gradually the government began producing some of the medicine that the government then accepted as essential drugs. Thailand today produces seven types of anti-retroviral drugs."

The battle, however, lasted seven years.

"The approval process was very tough because there was much opposition on the part of the pharmaceutical companies, which didn't want these products to be made locally," Contarin says. "We managed to get some contracts with other drug companies who are now fine with supplying us medicine at reduced costs rather than giving us the consent to produce it ourselves."

AIDS treatment costs about 30,000 Euros per year. The essential drugs are free only in Europe, Canada, the U.S., Australia, and – thanks to Father Contarin and all the doctors who helped him in his battle – also in Thailand.

"We don't use generic drugs but locally produced essential medicine, and



Left: Father Giovanni Contarin with Orapan Sangrung (Oon), who received life-saving medication from Contarin's HIV/AIDS treatment centre in Rayong, Thailand. Above: Oon and Contarin in Toronto with guests at a fundraising gala held two weeks ago in support of the four Rayong treatment centres, one of which cares for abandoned HIV-positive children with physical or intellectual disabilities.

we're also fighting to obtain patents for new medicines," he says. "Most drugs also have side effects, but there are marvelous second- and third-generation productions that, unfortunately, we don't yet have."

Whenever he can, Contarin travels to Canada to visit his relatives, Alicia Martinello and Phil Lo Grasso, who created the St. Camillus Angels Foundation in support of Contarin's four treatment centres, which can house 83 children. Last year, over \$5,000 was raised during a benefit gala organized in his honour.

This year, Contarin returned to Toronto along with Oon herself. Oon is petite with lively black eyes that look at the world with the gratitude of someone who takes nothing for granted.

When she attended the gala two weeks ago, she felt the affection of everyone there. Over 300 people attended to support the centre – her home – and to support the founder, Father Contarin, whom she calls dad.

Oon is studying to become a digital

graphic artist and hopes to attend university next year. Her greatest wish, however, is to remove the stigma that has marked her life, and to have a family like "normal" people.

"Prejudices against those afflicted with AIDS and those who are HIV positive are still very strong," explains Contarin. "Today, however, children in Thailand who are HIV positive are accepted in 80% of public schools. But many religious leaders consider the virus a stigma. For example, in the Buddhist philosophy – with its fatalistic viewpoint – it's a type of curse, the result of bad behaviour in previous lives, like a sort of negative karma. This is why in our centres we organize courses to help overcome religious prejudices, and we have advanced prevention programs where we recommend the use of a condom. I feel it involves medical questions the Church should avoid because these issues don't enter the religious realm. The Church has the duty to teach Christian values. The condom isn't a Church issue." ♦