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“To do good, you don't have to belong to the same faith”

Spurred by a Buddhist woman's zeal, José Luis Olaizola, a supernumerary of Opus Dei, and his wife Marisa have raised over a million euros to help fight the exploitation of young girls in Thailand.

12/27/2013

Twelve years ago, I was a relatively well-known writer, having dedicated the past thirty years of my life to the

world of literature. One of my books would bring about a big change in my life, a novel for young people entitled *Cucho* , which won a prestigious literary prize.

But back in 2001 my life was moving along on an even keel. I was writing for various magazines, giving conferences and looking after my family (I have nine children, twenty-one grandchildren and one great grandchild). Then one day I received a letter from Rasami Krisanamis, a professor of Spanish at the University of Chulalonghorn, in Bangkok. She asked me for permission to translated *Cucho* into Thaiandese, but said she couldn't pay me any author's rights since she planned to use the money raised from the book for various non-profit educational projects.

About a year later, Rasami made a trip to Spain to brush up on her

Spanish. When we met, she suggested I make a trip to Thailand to give a conference for Spanish teachers there. I tried to refuse but it was useless, since Rasami is an true force of nature. A Buddhist, she belong to a very strict sect, the Santi Asoke, and is determined to do as much good in the world as possible. Having won my consent, she organized the trip to Thailand for me and my wife Marisa. There I met the person who would have such an enormous influence on my future and that of my whole family, Fr. Alfonso de Juan, with whom Rasami works closely because, as she says, to do good you don't have to belong to the same faith.

Fr. Alfonso, a Jesuit missionary, has spent more than forty years in Thailand. For much of that time he provided assistance to refugee camps with 400,000 Cambodians and boat people from Vietnam. But when I

met him, he was now dedicating his energies to fighting the plague of child prostitution.

The young girls caught up in this “sex industry” are usually orphans or come from broken families. Often the mother has died of AIDS and the girl is living with the grandmother, who lets herself be fooled by the agents seeking young girls. Fr. Alonso realized that the solution lay in providing scholarships for the girls to get a basic education that would enable them to find a job and learn the Thai language, since many of them come from the poorest areas of the country near the Cambodian border. He relies on a network of teachers, doctors and nurses to identify young girls in the greatest danger of being drawn into this nefarious industry, and provides them with a scholarship of a hundred euros. In Thailand, this amount covers an entire year of

schooling, along with clothes, food and everything needed so as not to be forced to lose one's dignity as a human being.

On that first trip to Thailand, I had a chance to speak with a fourteen year old girl. Her name was Ama. She had tried to burn down the brothel in which she was being held. When the police came and asked her why she did it, she said: "I would be happy to die in a fire." The woman who brought Ama to the city told her that she would find a good job for her there. When Ama refused to cooperate they beat her until she couldn't walk. That's when she tried to burn the whole building down.

A key moment during that first visit was when Fr. Alfonso told me how happy he was that Iberia has just agreed to give a scholarship for one girl. I reacted a bit skeptically, saying that this seemed a drop in the bucket

compared to such a widespread problem. But he told me vigorously: “At least, one.” That phrase would eventually become our family’s motto.

Back in Spain, during a conference in Bilbao I had the opportunity to speak about the scourge of child prostitution in Thailand and Fr. Alfonso’s work. Although it was not at all my intention, at the end of the event people came up to me and gave me 3,000 euros for Fr. Alfonso. Encouraged by this response, I wrote an article for a woman’s magazine about scholarships for young girls in Thailand at risk, and donations started pouring in.

It was at that point that we decided to set up the foundation *Somos Uno* . All of my children are involved in running this not-for-profit NGO. They view the project as their own, and help out in a variety of ways, from

organizing fund-raising events to looking after the web page and sending out newsletters to donors.

Up to now we have raised over a million euros. This has enabled Fr. Alfonso to grant scholarship to more than a thousand girls, of whom over a hundred are now studying at the University.

I end with a recent email from my Buddhist friend Rasami. “With the money raised from selling some of your books, I have been able to give scholarships to three impoverished girls. They get up each morning at 4.30 to work for an hour before school helping to draw sap from rubber trees. One of them had beautiful black hair down to her waist that she cut off and sold for a hundred euros to get money for her school uniform and books. When I told her she now had a scholarship that would enable her to finish high

school she couldn't believe it and cried for joy. She is a beautiful young girl whose parents are dead and who lives with her grandmother.”

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