



## **Press Release - For Immediate Release**

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# **Widows and Orphans See Hopeful Future With HEAL Ministry in Nigeria**

Little Scholastica rubs her older sister Fustina's face in a playful manner, just like any other three-year old.

But Fustina, who is six years old in a video, seems oblivious to the antics. Her frozen stare at the camera seems to betray unhappy memories. Those memories might be that of a terrorist attack that destroyed her family's village only two years earlier, when she was four.

Scholastica and Fustina are two of the many children in northern Nigeria who lost their parents and relatives to the ravages of a cruel civil war, and who have been forced to live on the roads and in forests, scrounging for food and hoping for relief from passersby.

The terrorist group Boko Haram's abduction in 2014 of 276 girls of the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria gained worldwide attention. The incident was only one of many attacks in northeast Nigeria since 2010 involving the bombing and raiding of villages and killing Christians.

"The girls are growing and are healthy," said Deacon Leo Okonkwo, founder of the religious community **Messengers of Justice (MOJ)**, and **Home to Enhance African Life (HEAL)**, which are taking care of the girls. "This is because of the proper care and support that the Messengers of Justice, through HEAL, has been offering them."

The two girls were rescued by the **Mother Enabler Compassionate Home School**, a ministry of the MOJ religious community and HEAL. Today the girls enjoy good meals, education, caring concern by the sisters, and a secure environment, Deacon Leo says in a video on the [HEAL website](#).

HEAL president Nick Costello added, "We make accommodations for helping those people who are fleeing difficult situations, such as Boko Haram attacks or other religious violence."

The [Telegraph in the United Kingdom](#) said that Boko Haram claims "that Western-style education is at the root of corruption and criminality in Nigeria, having lured people away from following Islamic teaching as a way of life. In traditional Koranic schools, pupils receive no formal education but spend their days memorising the Koran."

Scholastica's family home in central Nigeria, in Minna, Niger State, was destroyed by bombings in 2013. Fustina's family was purged from their home due to raids. Deacon Leo and HEAL missionaries stepped in to help these refugee families, and Scholastica and Fustina are now residents of HEAL in the primary school program.

The Compassionate Home, in Umuagwu village, in the southeastern part of the country, serves about three hundred village children. "The Compassionate Home is the life preserver HEAL throws to orphans drowning in abandonment and indifference," Nick Costello said.

There are also widows benefitting from HEAL's services who are working or being served. These are women pushed out of their homes at the death of their husbands, or are exposed or marginalized by society.

"HEAL's mission reaches into the dark corners of the world. Their missionary brothers and sisters embody the Church 'for the poor' that Pope Francis speaks about," Deacon Leo said.

At an early age, Deacon Leo, who has made many trips to the United States, made a covenant with God, promising to be a holy priest and to be the slave of poor and marginalized children. Leo went on to found **Water For Life Mission** in 1997 to extract clean water in rural villages and to educate poor orphaned children.

When Leo became involved in digging clean water wells and raising funds to pay for orphans' school fees, as well as praying for the sick in the rural villages, volunteers joined his efforts. In 2004, Leo organized them into the Messengers of Justice community, who model their lives on Jesus Christ in service of the poor and marginalized orphans and widows. Today both consecrated men and women belong to the group.

While doing his work, Leo realized that the costs of paying for orphans to attend private school became prohibitive. So, in 2006 Leo donated his father's estate to purchase land in the rural village of Umuagwu, southern Nigeria. There, the Mother Enabler Compassionate Home School became both the home and school for orphans.

Under financial pressure from various quarters, Leo reached out to his old friend and former seminary classmate, Nick Costello, from Chicago. In 2013, Leo and Nick founded Home To Enhance African Life (HEAL) as a 501c3 charity. Read [HEAL's story on their website](#).

"Please help us in our struggle, against any and all dark forces commandeered against us, to provide a good education to the children we serve in Jesus' name!" Deacon Leo said.

### **About Home to Enhance African Life (HEAL):**

HEAL's mission is to form servant leaders among West Africans through education, entrepreneurship, and poverty relief in the Self-Emptying Spirit of Christ (cf. Phil 2:6-11). HEAL was founded in 2013 and received tax exempt status in 2014. Visit us at [www.HEALnigeria.org](http://www.HEALnigeria.org).

HEAL is listed in *The Official Catholic Directory* under the Archdiocese of Chicago. ([Letter of acceptance](#))

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