

**Rich Tarro, Kenya - Lent 2023**

**Heavy crosses to bear**



*Valentine (center) studying in one of our tutorials*

St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Catholic priest who volunteered to die in place of a man with a family in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in 1941, taught that "The cross is the school of love." Although I truly believe that suffering conforms us to Christ and try to live out my life according to this precept, I often find myself grumbling and complaining at the slightest inconvenience. I tend to sweat the small stuff, forgetting how blessed I truly am.

Unfortunately, many of the children and their families I encounter in my ministry work have heavy crosses to bear. The

primary goal of the HOPE Project is to provide educational opportunities to our students to lift them out of poverty. Our students not only need to succeed in school, but in many cases, persevere and accomplish this in the face of dysfunctional and sometime abusive home environments. I often am in awe of how our students struggle forward despite all that is stacked against them. They carry their crosses because they have no other choice.

Valentine is 15 years old and in Grade 8. She is a jovial girl who loves singing and playing netball. She makes friends easily and is well liked in school. Her best subjects are math, science and English. Her dream is to be a doctor.

Valentine's mother, Consepta, gave birth to Valentine in western Kenya when she was just 16 years old. After Consepta discovered that she was pregnant, her boyfriend abandoned her. When Valentine was born, Consepta's parents took them to live with the parents of the father as Consepta's parents did not want Consepta and Valentine living with them. The father's parents were not eager to have Consepta and Valentine live with them either, but they begrudgingly took them in and then treated them badly. When Consepta complained to her parents about how she was being treated, they told her to "carry her cross."

When Valentine was 2 years old, Consepta married another man, but Valentine was left behind with her grandparents (the parents of her father). Things then got even worse for Valentine. She was frequently tied outside with the dog, forced to sleep outside, and was often not fed.

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When Valentine was 6 years old, Consepta brought Valentine to live with her in her new husband's house. By this time, Consepta had given birth to three more children. Valentine started school, and life become somewhat normal for her. Then one day, Consepta's husband told her to send Valentine away. He claimed that his culture (Maasai tribe) does not allow him to keep a child from another man (blood line). Consepta begged her husband to let Valentine stay. He finally agreed, but only under the condition that he would not be financially responsible for Valentine. Consepta would have to work to support Valentine.

One morning, while Consepta was working on a farm, a neighbor came running to tell her that her husband and two men holding swords and axes were leading Valentine into the forest. Consepta rushed there and found Valentine tied to a tree. The men had planned to kill her. With the help of villagers and the police, Consepta managed to rescue her daughter. The men were eventually convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

After the conviction of their son, the family of Consepta's husband, the one who attempted to kill Valentine and was now in prison, chased Consepta and Valentine away. After a month, Consepta was able to rejoin her three kids, but the family would not allow Valentine back. At this point, Consepta's sister Catherine, Valentine's aunt, travelled to western Kenya to rescue Valentine. Catherine is a married, 47-year-old mother of four children. Catherine brought Valentine to Mombasa, where she enrolled her in primary school, joining Grade 6. However, Catherine was unable to keep up payments on Valentine's school fees, and Valentine was often denied admission to classes.

We became aware of Valentine as she was enrolled at a school where other HOPE students attend. We accepted her into the HOPE Project last year. Since joining HOPE, Valentine's life has changed. We make sure that her school fees are paid and that she has all the school supplies and learning materials that she needs. Since joining HOPE, Valentine's grades have greatly improved, and she is now performing above average in her classes.

Catherine is extremely grateful to the HOPE Project, as Valentine is finally thriving and happy. While life is much better for Valentine, all is not yet perfect. Her Aunt Catherine's husband is also abusive. Catherine, however, does her best to shield Valentine from this. "The cross is the school of love."

God is good!  
Rich ([rtarro@mklm.org](mailto:rtarro@mklm.org))



*Valentine's Aunt Catherine receiving a food ration from HOPE Project*

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----- **TEAR** -----

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