South Africa
Breaking the cycle of poverty

To be born in the Ilembe district of the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa is to begin a life in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of poverty, hunger, sickness and unemployment.

While wealthy western tourists are drawn to the cosmopolitan delights of Durban, the wild beauty of the Elephant Coast and the breathtaking sights of the Drakensberg mountains, the region has an altogether darker side too.
In the most impoverished regions, a childhood spent in constant hunger leads inexorably through inadequate education to unemployment.
Survival calls for desperate measures. Where there is no food for the table, no clothes for themselves or their children, then for many girls and women the only answer is to sell themselves into prostitution.
With up to 88% of the population testing positive for HIV/AIDS, the final stage in the cycle of poverty is pro-programmed. And while death is the ultimate release for some, others are left orphaned and either physically or mentally challenged.

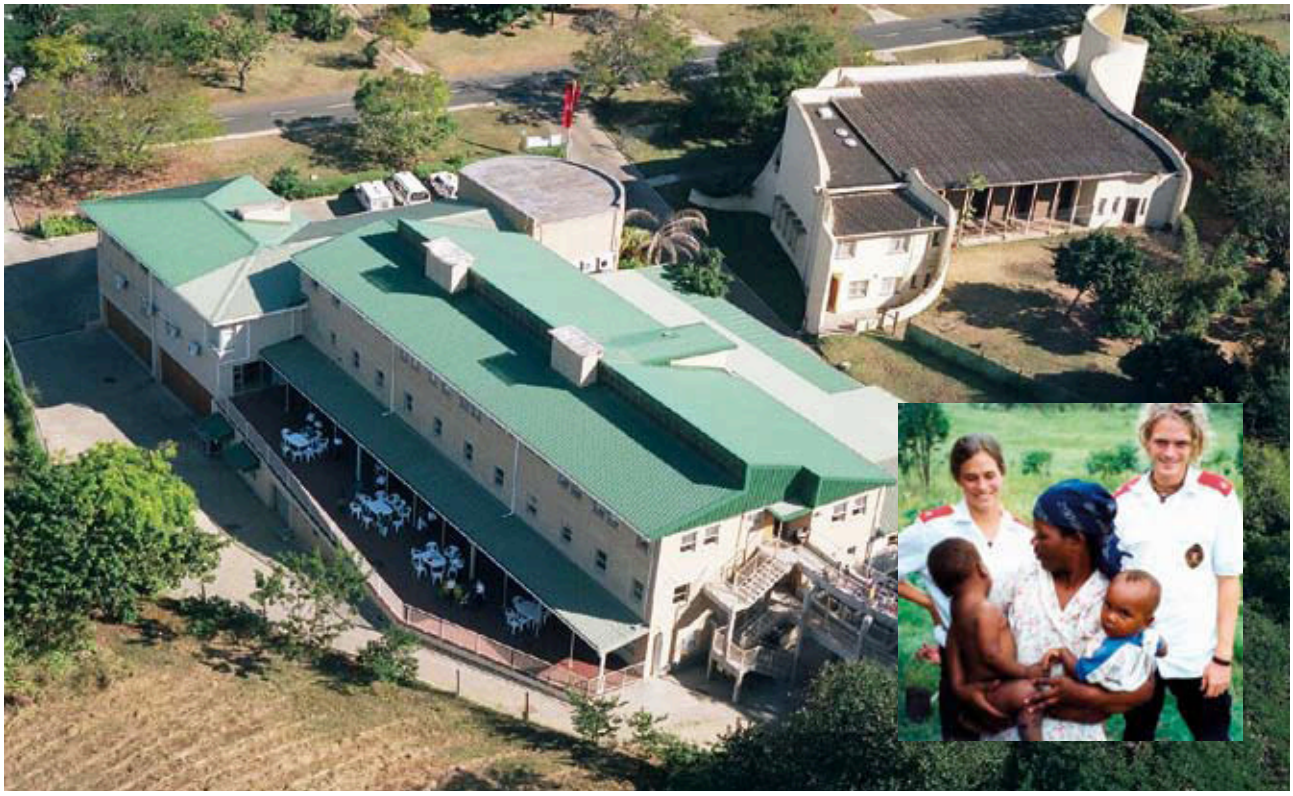
This is the reality of Ilembe in 21st century South Africa. And breaking that cycle of poverty and desperation has been the work of the Order's Brotherhood of Blessed Gérard since its foundation by a small group of volunteers in 1992.
In the years since then, their number has grown to more than 700 and a modern complex of children's home, care centre and hospice has been created on the site of a former paper factory workers' township in Mandeni with the aim of breaking the cycle of poverty at every stage.

The **Children's Home** cares not only for the many AIDS orphans but also for those who have themselves been HIV positive since birth. Some have simply been abandoned by families too poor or too troubled to look after them any longer.

The **Hospice** bridges the gap between hospital and home, either for patients discharged from hospital but unable to care for themselves or for those who need care at home but cannot be hospitalised.
Blessed Gérard's Hospice cares for the sick and dying through a combination of training, home-based care, day care and inpatient care.
The Hospice also provides a programme of Highly-Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART) which employs 16 trained therapeutic counsellors caring for around 300 patients.

A vitally important part of the Brotherhood's work is the **AIDS Education Programme** through which local people are advised on how to avoid HIV infection and how to live positively with AIDS.

For the younger age group, the **Pre-Primary School and Crèche** at Whebede, 25 kilometres from Mandeni, provides a caring introduction to education for the children of migrant workers in a particularly poor area in which they would otherwise spend their early years with little mental stimulation.
The crèche also fulfils a vital need in allowing mothers – who often have to bring up their children on their own while



Mandeni, South Africa: Blessed Gérard's Hospice. Staff and their charges enjoy a game outdoors

their husbands are away working – to get jobs of their own to provide for their families. A **Malnutrition Clinic** helps mothers to care for their children properly, and provides free milk, food and protein for infants who would otherwise go without through poverty.

For those who have already left school, the Blessed Gérard **Community Development Centre** combats unemployment by providing needy people with skills in sewing which encourage them to become self-employed and independent of charity. Meanwhile, a **Friendship Club** organises meetings to enable elderly people to break out of isolation by socialising with others.

In addition to all these practical expressions of the Brotherhood's desire to ease the lives of those living under such difficult conditions, a number of funds have been established to provide urgent medical treatment for those unable to afford it, to provide bursaries to students whose parents have no means to pay for their education, to help people in genuine cases of immediate need and to give medical assistance and care in case of disaster.
Through all these activities, the work of the Brotherhood of Blessed Gérard has rightly been described as 'a source of light in a dark and miserable area.'