

# Fr. Angelo D'Agostino, S.J.



A charismatic leader and visionary who responded with compassion and advocated for the needs of abandoned HIV-positive children in Kenya

## Biography:

Father Angelo D'Agostino, an American Jesuit priest, was born in Rhode Island in 1926. He aspired to be a doctor and graduated from Tufts University medical school in Boston and became a surgeon. He then entered the United States Air Force and served as Chief of Urology. In 1954, he answered a calling to the priesthood and began training to become both a Jesuit and a psychiatrist. Practicing and teaching psychology at Georgetown University, in 1972 he founded the Center for Religion and Psychiatry to promote dialogue between the two fields. He then traveled to Thailand to minister in refugee centers which led him to found Jesuit Refugee Services in East Africa, establishing programs in Sudan, Ethiopia, Zaire, and Tanzania.

In 1991, Fr. D'Agostino found himself on the board of a large orphanage in Kenya. Having noticed the staggeringly large number of orphans who tested HIV positive, D'Agostino founded the Nyumbani Orphanage, a home for those ill children and the first of its kind in the country. "Nyumbani" means "at home" in Swahili. This home became Fr. D'Agostino's legacy, and his next fifteen years would be spent with these children, both advocating on their behalf and gently easing their pain.

His orphanage, which grew from three children in 1992 to housing over 100 today, is a haven for children forgotten by all. If not for the care and initiative of Father D'Agostino, they would likely be lost to the slums of Nairobi until they finally succumbed to their disease. Today, Fr. D'Agostino's legacy has grown to include a state-of-the-art laboratory, a community support system for non-orphaned HIV positive children in the community and Nyumbani Village. The Village is a self-sustaining community inhabited by orphans and elders, creating families from the brokenness that the AIDS pandemic has created.

## A Witness of Catholic Social Teaching

Fr. D'Agostino's commitment to HIV positive and orphaned children is a shining example of the preferential **option for the poor** and vulnerable. Furthermore, he demonstrated a strong commitment to life and **human dignity** in his fight to get infected children the public education they deserve. Fr. D'Ag employed the principle of **subsidiarity** in bypassing oppressive governmental structures and regulations to bring affordable medicine to those in need. He harbored deep compassion for these children; he took their struggles upon himself and became their voice. This **solidarity** sustained his passionate advocacy. Fr. D'Agostino's life is a model of Christian living for all to follow.

But this orphanage achieves more than "Fr. D'Ag's," original vision: to give the children "a chance to die with dignity." As Fr D'Ag's grew to love these orphans, he saw the injustice of their situation and couldn't stand it. "I am sick and tired of doing funerals," Fr. D'Agostino told *The Washington Post* in 2001. So, despite national regulations and international patent rules controlling the sale of drugs, Nyumbani became the first place in Africa to import deeply discounted AIDS medication. "It's really the darker side of capitalism, the greed that is being manifest by these drug companies holding sub-Saharan Africa hostage," he told *The Post*. "People are dying because

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From an early age, death is a part of life for these children.

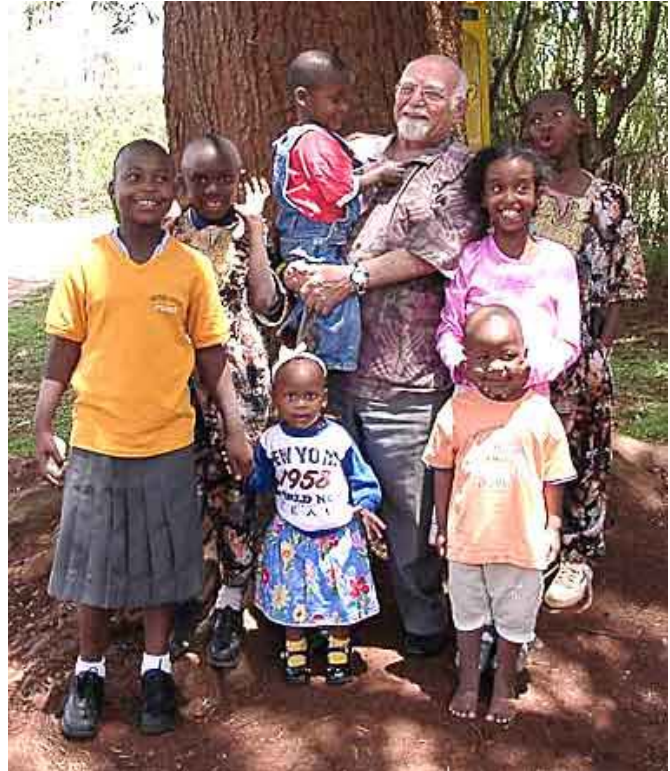
they can't afford their prices.” Fr. D’Agostino objected to the structural injustice evident in the pharmaceutical industry and risked breaking the law in service of a higher natural law – that of saving lives.

In addition to achieving access to life-prolonging drugs for the children of Nyumbani, Fr. D’Agostino also worked to better their lives. He sued the Kenyan government for its policy banning HIV-positive children from the nation’s public schools. He won his case, which allowed more than 100,000 children to rejoin their classmates in schools across the country. His advocacy helped the Kenyan government to see that children with AIDS cannot be ignored and left to die. They deserve the right to education, and now, thanks to Father D’Ag’s fearless tenacity, they have it.

Fr. D’Agostino died in November 20, 2006 at the age of 80 and was buried in Kenya. He spent his entire life pushing himself academically and spiritually. All of his previous achievements prepared him for his truest calling, administering to the sick and orphaned. Mirroring the compassion of God, Fr. D’Ag’s tenacious commitment to the most vulnerable of society employed not only great skill, but also great love to affect great change. ■

### Prayer of Intercession

Lord Jesus Christ, You gifted your servant Fr. D’Agostino with tremendous abilities and a yearning to use them to help all your children, especially those who needed him most. We pray that You may glorify your servant Angelo, so that many people may be encouraged by him. May his example shine out in our time, and may You grant all people the strength to stand up for justice and human dignity as he did. For yours is the glory and honor with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. **Amen.**



Fr. D’Ag’s love for the children led him to advocacy to change their futures and give them opportunities.



An aerial view of the Nyumbani Orphanage & School, Nairobi, Kenya

### Nyumbani Orphanage

Learn more about the Nyumbani Orphanage and get involved in continuing the legacy of Fr. D’Agostino.

<http://www.nyumbani.org/>