WHEN GRANDMOTHER
BECAME MOTHER AGAIN

In the city of Mbanza-Ngugu, in Bas-Congo province, thousands of children have lost their parents, often due to AIDS. They are then often taken in by their grandmothers.

The route to Jeanne's house winds down a dusty path, under a power line and through a ravine. She lives in Zongo, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Mbanza-Ngugu, a city in Bas-Congo province. At nightfall, throngs of children sell lamp oil because – despite the power line – there is no electricity.

This is where Jeanne lives. She is a woman of few words but she smiles easily. She does not know how old she is, but she must be approaching 70. She had eight children, all dead but one, who is mentally handicapped. One of her daughters gave her three grandchildren, a boy and two girls, whom she adopted when their mother died of AIDS.

Although her mother died some years ago, eight-year-old Nicole remembers her very well. In Kikongo, the local language, she describes her as "very nice" and "very thin." But she barely remembers her father, who died of AIDS some time earlier.

In Mbanza-Ngugu, according to a local survey, there are nearly 7,500 orphans whose parents have died of various causes, including AIDS. But since this number does not include orphans living on the streets as a result of war and poverty, the real figure is certainly higher. The majority of the orphans in the survey have been taken in by family members, usually their maternal grandmother. One out of ten

is adopted by a family with no blood relation to the child.

Jeanne, who hides her white hair under a scarf, says that her three grandchildren have given her so much. They are well behaved and obedient, more so than their mother was at their age, she notes. They help her around the house and prepare meals, but they also help in the fields. On their plot of land in the nearby community vegetable garden, they planted cassava and sweet potatoes, staple foods in the Bas-Congo.

But Jeanne admits that it is not always easy to feed so many children. And at the start of the school year, she must find them uniforms, which are mandatory even in public schools. At moments like these, Jeanne says she finds life "difficult."

Children whose parents have died of AIDS, a disease that some consider to be shameful, are sometimes stigmatized. They are often teased or insulted by other children. Orphans are frequently accused of witchcraft, a claim that is impossible to refute.

Ten-year-old Martin, the oldest of the three children Jeanne cares for, says that other children in the neighbourhood do not usually bother him. "If they insult me, it makes me sad," he says, "but I forgive them." He tries not to think about it. In his spare time, he makes little cars out of the soles of discarded flip-flops, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that he dreams of becoming a car mechanic. But his main focus is school. Thanks to UNICEF's intervention, Martin and other orphans don't have to pay school fees.

About 100 orphans are taking vocational training at several learning centres in Mbanza-Ngugu. The most popular classes are car mechanics for boys and sewing for girls. But teachers report that many students experience fatigue and difficulty concentrating, mainly because they do not have enough to eat.

Among AIDS orphans, the least fortunate end up in families who marginalize them as though they themselves were infected. Some orphans are not allowed to eat from the same plate as the other children. It is not uncommon for them to be

mistreated, which drives them to run away. HIV/AIDS creates orphans as well as street children. "Children think that they will find salvation in the streets," explains Fr. Alfred Mamba Ngula, a Roman Catholic priest. "But often they just find people who don't want them sleeping on their doorsteps." These children run the added risk of being assaulted or severely beaten.