

Keep Looking Upward



Dear Mission Friends:

For many years beginning with the arrival of Fr. Kieran Healy, O.P. in Kenya in 1993, our Western Dominican Province has helped support the mission of St. Joseph's Province of Eastern United States in Kenya. This month our Br. Daniel Thomas, O.P. describes his ministry there, much of which is made possible through your continued support and prayers.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.

]

When I first came to Africa during my sabbatical in 2001, I was taken to the site that had been donated to the Archdiocese for the establishment of a parish, to be administered by the Dominicans. As is often the case in Kenya, we seemed to have driven forever while getting further and further away from the city center. Finally we came up a hill and parked the car. All I could see in every direction were plantations of coffee and bananas, and one compound of several homes that formed the western boundary of the five acre plot that was to become St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Parish. Fr. Kieran Healy, O.P. was the second *Priest in Charge* (a term that is used here more often than *Pastor*) after Fr. Ed Gorman, O.P. returned to the states in 2002.

A simple *makuti* (Kiswahili word meaning “thatched”) building was quickly erected and just as quickly came down in a strong wind storm two weeks later. The structure in the photograph on the next page is the third incarnation of this *temporary* church.

In an optimistic move, the Dominicans rented a house nearby with the thought that it would only take a year or two at the most to get a temporary church structure built along with a residence for a Dominican community. The thought that immediately comes to mind is the quote from the Psalms: “*One day with the Lord is as a thousand elsewhere.*” (Ps. 90:4) In reality, that time frame was to be tripled and we would wait until 2008 to finally begin building our residence.

*Br. Daniel
amidst the
coffee trees.*





Funding for the building was to come from our *Mother Province* in New York and the plans were redrawn and modified several times in an effort to bring the cost down to a more manageable figure. Then it became a matter of, “*Hurry up and wait!*” The Nairobi City Council is notoriously slow to grant approval of plans and the Kenyan style of dealing with these kinds of delays is summed up in two little words: *kiti kidoga* – literally, “a little something,” which means colloquially, “*Give me a bribe, and you’ll see how fast your permit gets approved!*” However, the parish management committee didn’t want us, as a church community, to encourage this pattern of corruption which is so rampant in this part of Africa, so we had to wait and jump through uncountable hoops as one after another miniscule problem was encountered and subsequently addressed.

Finally, ground was broken on July 22, 2007, but the keys weren’t handed over to us until October 3, 2008 -- fourteen months later! And even then there was one more hurdle to jump: getting the electrical connection for the church and residence compound. The resistance on this point was coming from our neighbors, influential Indian businessmen – five brothers who each had a lavish home on the compound adjacent to our plot – who had enough clout to block the power company from putting the necessary wires across the front of their property even though it

was not actually *on* their property. That meant that we had to pay for another transformer and the power finally came just before the Thanksgiving weekend, when we were able to begin the move into our new home. It has six bedrooms, a chapel, visiting rooms and all the other accoutrements of a regular home.

Our presence on the same plot as the church has made a very significant improvement in the way the parish is developing. Having electricity is also a plus. Now the parish is moving towards establishing a full-fledged parish council and this will help the parish continue to grow. Already, we are a healthy blend of peoples as the parish is made up of Kenyans who are more or less comfortably established and living in nice homes in gated communities; a smattering of embassy and UN workers; and people who live in and around the remaining coffee plantations that haven’t yet been taken over by housing developments. Many of these people don’t have electricity or running



The common area of a typical compound.



water and are trying to support a family on less than 200 Kenyan shillings a day. (That's currently about \$3.00-\$4.00.)

The amazing thing that I noticed right away, as soon as I got settled here in Kenya, was the happiness that radiated from the faces of people who lived well below what I would have thought to be the poverty line. I often see "older mamas" walking along the road carrying heavy burdens of wood or corn stalks that are supported by a strap across the forehead, and they are chatting away and laughing as they walk the sometimes ten kilometers back to their home or farm.

Kenyans walk incredible distances without thinking twice. I get up before 5:00 am and can see people already walking on the road. Some will walk all the way to town, a distance of five or six kilometers, and then come back at the end of the day carrying bags of groceries or other items uphill to their homes. One morning a lady was coming up the road with a heavy load of wood *on her head*, and I saw her drop it. I watched as she quickly repacked it and two



other ladies lifted the load back onto her head. The amazing thing, though, was that she was able to spin around with a little wave goodbye and thank the two who had helped her continue her journey.

Once I offered a ride to one of our workers who was taking a fairly large bundle of wood home. I found the load almost too heavy for me to lift into the car. When we got to her house I asked her to take a picture of *me* with the load of wood strapped to *my* forehead. I managed to get it on my head, but getting it off was another matter. I couldn't lift it up and off my forehead, and had to have her help me! Talk about embarrassing!

Her home was in a large quadrangle-like compound with an open common area where people were doing their laundry and cooking over open fires. There were eight or ten "apartments" which all opened onto this area where children played and a few goats munched on the grass. There was no sign of any electrical connections or running water. When I was about to leave, she said to me, "*Brother Daniel,*

I would like to welcome you to my home!" There were other parishioners there who were so excited to have me visit and all I could think was, "*If this were my home, I'd be too embarrassed to show it.*" How smug we can be sometimes! She also asked me to take a picture of her and her daughter in their little two room "home." You can see in the photograph how clean everything is, but it was so tiny, I had to stand almost outside to get this shot. When I've shown this photograph to others in the states, they point out the calendar on the wall with the saying, "*When life gets you down, keep looking up!*" I don't know if this woman or her daughter knew what this meant in their language, but they certainly seemed to be living by it.





Whenever any of you think that your commute is grueling or you're tired of being squeezed onto busses or rapid transit trains, just look at how these workers from a nearby construction project get to and from work every day. They are picked up from the center of the city, packed into dump trucks, and transported on a 30 minute drive. I counted 80 or more guys in this truck all standing *cheek to jowl*.

Although our Masses are all in English, a lot of the music is Kiswahili. Singing in Kiswahili is becoming easier and easier for me, but I've found that I need to have a translator when I teach the adult catechism class, since so many of the concepts that we talk about are not fully understood when I present them in English. One of my Samburu friends told me, "When you speak in English, all I hear is, 'chump, chump, chump, blah, blah!'" But I'm not yet anywhere near the point of knowing enough Kiswahili to be able to teach in it, and it will probably end up sounding just like my English does to the Africans: "chump, chump, chump...."

Recently the parish sponsored a

seminar – what people in the states would call a workshop – for all those persons involved in liturgy. I was very surprised when more than 65 people attended an all-day Saturday workshop. They came from the parish community and our two "outstations" -- St. Martin de Porres School, *aka* The Good News Center, and the University of Nairobi campus, both of which are located about 20 minutes from the Church. I conducted the bulk of the presentations, with Fr. Martin Martini translating for those in attendance who had less fluency in English. The day led the participants through the basic structure of the liturgy, explaining how various seasons and feasts are arranged. A multi-media presentation vividly portrayed the structure of the Liturgical Calendar as well as that of the Mass, enabling participants to attain a wider understanding of how and why we celebrate the liturgy the way we do. Another seminar is already in the planning and, with electrical service at the Church now, we will be able to open this meeting to a wider number of people.

The parish supports a large, volunteer choir, even though the parishioners – like most Kenyans – sing well, even in parts and harmony! Half the songs in a typical Mass will be in Kiswahili and most of the music is accompanied by keyboard, drums, *kayamba* (a rhythm instrument) and various types of tambourines. There is always at least one woman who

can *ululate* – make that high-pitched, tongue-screeching sound so typical in African singing. We also do a lot of clapping and waving, such as at the "Gloria" and the "Hosanna."

Worshiping in the *makuti* church keeps the community vitally aware of our missionary nature, and even though there are plans for a more permanent structure, many of the community like our temporary church and hope that we don't move too quickly into the mainstream of up-and-coming church communities, possibly losing the wonderful sense of being a young, pioneer church.

I have often told young Dominicans who are about to go out on a new assignment that the first step in being a good minister or missionary is to, "*Love the people you are sent to minister to, and when you preach, tell them why the Jesus you meet in the Gospels compels you to do this.*" As I move into my fourth year in Africa, I am aware of how long it takes to begin to understand the people you are living amidst. Here in Kenya, the love, however, comes easy.
Br. Daniel Thomas, O.P.

