

Along the way

Fr. Paul Mimbi relates how he discovered his vocation to Opus Dei. He was ordained priest in 1982 and has been teaching Ethics and Theology in Nairobi, Kenya for many years.

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September 1971. Like many Form IV candidates I was busy dreaming about the options which were open to me in my relentless pursuit of higher learning. In those days few made it to A-levels. Still fewer made it to the only university in the

country: University of Nairobi. There were only 1,000 places available —55 to 60 in the Department of Civil Engineering, the course that I intended to pursue. It was therefore crucial that one made the right choice of A level school. I was toying with the idea of going to Alliance, Kagumo or Shimo la Tewa...

A change of heart

Just about this time an announcement was made that two teachers were due to arrive from Strathmore College (Nairobi) to carry out some interviews. Only a few lucky students were selected for this interview, as Strathmore was only taking one or two from the school (Kwale Secondary School). When the anticipated day arrived, there was a lot of expectation among the few privileged students. David Sperling and Martyn Drakard came. I am not sure how I performed in the

interview —as a matter of fact, I was not satisfied with the way in which I answered the questions, but I do remember that I was suddenly overwhelmed by a longing to go to Strathmore. So much so that I took a rash decision: I dropped the quest for all other schools except Strathmore. We had been advised that it was prudent to arrange our choices in a hierarchy—from high profile to low—so as to fend against any risk of missing out altogether from an A-level school. Against all measures of prudence I made only one choice: Strathmore; notwithstanding the fact that, along with Alliance and Starehe, it was one of the high profile schools. Moreover, unlike the other two, it was what was then known as a high-cost school. I knew I was mad, but I didn't care and I told my parents as much. They were a bit apprehensive, but didn't insist on me changing my mind. They must have seen how eager I was to go there....

During the months of January and February, 1972, things reached a climax. All my classmates were getting acceptance letters from the high schools of their choice, but mine was not forthcoming. I began to blame myself for the imprudence of putting all my eggs in the one single basket of Strathmore... then around March the long-awaited letter arrived! Although many years have passed, I can still recall the joy that filled my heart. It must have been one of the happiest moments of my entire life... On seeing my joy, my parents set about making arrangements for the fees, despite the heavy cost involved....

Strathmore College

When I showed up at the Mombasa railway station, several A-Level students from different schools—Nairobi School, Lenana School, Alliance High, etc.—were already

walking up and down the waiting bay of the station, in full uniform. One could see that they were feeling quite pleased with themselves. Little did they know how I felt! Later I met a second year student in the 2nd class compartment who was making it to the same school as I was. We made friends, but the friendship was short-lived. The reason is that he began a long-winded explanation about how something called Opus Dei was in charge of Strathmore and that I had to be very careful about relating with members of Opus Dei. Although he spoke most of that evening—up till past midnight—nothing much registered in my mind because I was overwhelmed by the sheer joy of having made it to Strathmore.

The college was situated in a rather upmarket area of Nairobi — Lavington Green. My first impression was an enduring one: the cleanliness,

the orderliness, the gentlemanly manner with which everyone—students and staff—treated me. I immediately felt at home. I felt that this institution was going to have a lasting impact on me...

When everything got underway I realized why Strathmore was a high-profile institution. Classes began immediately; the teachers were very competent and yet so simple and down to earth and approachable. It amazed me that during dinner I was sitting at table with the Principal, David Sperling, and enjoying a lively conversation about all manner of things. He even spoke to me in Kiswahili! There were some two hundred of us in the residence not only from most of the tribes of Kenya but also from all over East Africa: Uganda, Tanzania and even from as far as Zambia, as well as Asians and Europeans. It was a mosaic of mankind. I later got to know that

Strathmore was the first multi-racial institution in East Africa. We learned about various means of formation which were offered by the administrators of the residence: some special talks, circles, seminars at Tigoni, etc. I also discovered, albeit late, that there was Rosary everyday after dinner in the Chapel. With Chris, a friend of mine, I began to attend some of these activities... despite the fact that some of our classmates thought that we were gravitating too close to what they referred to as the 'OD fraternity'. Very soon two other friends joined us: Wency and Mike. Now we were four and could put up some concerted resistance.

A turning point in my journey to the Work occurred around June 1972 when I attended a study seminar at Tigoni. As I was perusing the books, I came across *The Way* in the Chapel Library. I must say that the book left

a very deep impression on me... as a matter of fact I read it all in one go. I stopped only for meals and could not wait for them to be over to continue with ‘the book’. After reading it, I became lost in thought...

Bucking the Issue

Later that year —around October—, the director of the circle I attended (Martyn) spoke to me about vocation. I vigorously denied that I had one. Then, at his insistence, I said “perhaps a Supernumerary”. He left it at that, to my great relief. In November and December I sat my London GCE Exams. I decided to stay on in Nairobi and work while awaiting my results, but went to the Coast just for a week, also to tell my parents about “this issue of Opus Dei”, which by then had consolidated. As they knew little about it, this elicited little reaction.

All they knew was that Strathmore was very “mzuri”.

I returned to Nairobi to work, and on 6th January 1973, I asked for admission to Opus Dei...the rest is history...

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