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Getting acquainted with St. Josemaria

Leah Mbugua had never heard of St. Josemaria until she chanced upon a newsletter and prayer card to him. Devotion to him at her parish church is spreading because of her.

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Beams of light find their way through translucent iron sheets to the earthen floor of St. Josemaria Escriva's Church lighting it up. In front is an altar, and to one side, neatly stored, stand drums and kayambas used by

the choir. Wooden pews fill up the church all the way to the back where the door is located and on the walls, at intervals, hang pictures depicting the Stations of the Cross. This simple structure accommodates a congregation of 300 people.

Named after the saint of the ordinary, the church is the eighth and last outstation of the parish of St. Stephens Church in Gachie, an agricultural area about 8 kilometers from the city centre of Nairobi, Kenya's capital. Here the sacraments are celebrated and on Sundays, parishioners attend Holy Mass.

Leah Mbugua, a parishioner, has been instrumental in the naming of the church. 20 years ago, the mother of four developed kidney related complications and had to be admitted in hospital for a month. But once home, it did not take her long to realize that she was far from well

and she decided to go to the National Hospital for further medical tests and proper treatment.

She was admitted upon arrival. X-rays showed that she had an enlarged kidney and doctors diagnosed Polycystic Kidney disease but needed a CT scan before embarking on treatment. As the hospital lacked the necessary equipment, Leah had to go to another hospital for the test.

On her return, she found a newsletter about St. Josemaria and a prayer card beneath her pillow on the hospital bed. Surprised, she asked the lady in the adjacent bed, if she had seen anyone leave them there, but the lady said she had seen no one. Leah got curious and started reading the newsletter. In it, she came across an account of someone cured of kidney ailments due to St. Josemaria's intercession prompting

her to start praying through his intercession for her cure.

The CT scan results came a day later and Leah was taken aback to learn that she had a normal urinary tract. Meanwhile, all the symptoms and pains related to her kidney problems had also disappeared. To date, Leah attributes her cure to St. Josemaria Escriva.

This is not the only favour she has received from the founder of Opus Dei. She recently developed uterine cancer. Throughout her illness, she never ceased asking St. Josemaria for a cure. On completion of the radiation sessions, the cancer was completely gone.

“Others have not been as fortunate as I have been,” Leah said, “all those who went along with me for radiotherapy sessions are gone.”

Getting to know more

Leah's devotion propelled her husband to find out more. He wrote to the then vice-postulation office in Kenya. In reply, he started receiving periodic newsletters which the couple read and shared with friends. All their acquaintances now know about St. Josemaria.

Leah's friends in the parish say they have received favours of one kind or another from St. Josemaria and that devotion to him is spreading fast amongst members of their families.

In 2003, Leah's husband, as chairman of the church council, was asked by the priest in charge of St. Stephen's, to find a name for a new outstation that was coming up near their homestead. He immediately suggested that the church be named in honour of St. Josemaria Escriva.

On the expansion track

Growth at the latest outstation has been rapid and after a mere four years of existence, there is a need for a new building altogether. This notwithstanding that the church has already been extended once to fit in more people.

“On Sundays one has to come for Mass early or you end up standing outside,” said Mama Shiku, a close friend of Leah’s.

Many people from the area earn their living from tilling the ground and keeping livestock or chicken. Even though they are not well off, they make contributions to ensure that the church is clean and has all the facilities needed. Through these small contributions, they have managed to dig a well, install electricity and build a gate.

Parishioners now know more about St. Josemaria as Leah has had to

explain why the church was named in his honour.

“We don’t know much about him, but it’s as if he knows us, that we don’t have money to do all that we should do yet we are willing to do things and we try to do what we can. He understands us,” said one of the church choir members.

Big dreams

There are big plans in the offing. The parishioners want a bigger and more beautiful church that can accommodate more than 1500 people.

“This is not the kind of Church that St. Josemaria would like to live in,” said Leah pointing to the earthen floor of the church. “We did not put tiles here because this is not the final church. We intend to build a big one,” she added.

Money is lacking, but not faith. With St. Josemaria as their patron they know they will get it.

“What we ask for is what we shall get,” said Leah highlighting the importance of dreaming big. “We have faith, we have great faith,” she added.

As a first step towards getting to know their patron better, some of the parishioners attended Mass in honour of St. Josemaria held on 30th June at Strathmore University.

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