

Interview with Fr. Charles Wanyoike

Fr. Charles Wanyoike, a Kenyan, was ordained priest on May 24th 2008 in Rome, Italy by the Bishop Javier Echevarría.

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a) Tell us something about yourself and your family.

I am the fifth born in my family. My father worked as a hospital administrator for many years before he retired in the early 90s in order to run a small scale business. My

mother continued teaching in a primary school in Nyeri, until she also retired and joined my dad in the running of the business on a full-time basis. As time went by, the worsening of the economic situation in the country almost brought the business to a halt. This led my parents to change from one line of business to another. At the beginning, they ran a wines and spirits shop, today they deal in tailoring.

I have always felt and received the support of my family at the different stages in my life: at school, at the university and especially during these years I have spent abroad. My elder brothers and sisters got married and settled down with their new families. My younger sister is about to complete her university studies. I see in them all, a special blessing from Our Lord.

From my earlier years at school, I remember that my classmates would often tease me for being very short in height. Each year, I would look forward to having someone shorter join my class at school. At least in that way, I would not be the only one on the receiving end. The situation hasn't changed much over the years, yet I am now more than ever convinced that whether tall or short, one has to seek sanctity all the same. I learnt from the teaching of St. Josemaría, that there is only one race of people: the race of the children of God. We all belong to this race with our differences, capabilities, studies, defects, ethnic origin etc.

b) Which schools did you attend?

I went to Consolata Primary School in Nyeri until Standard 5, then transferred to Moi Nyeri Complex where I completed my primary school studies. At that time, my

dream was to go to Mangu High School, but was admitted to Nyeri High School, where my elder brothers had studied. I remember that a few days after school had begun, my father visited me, to tell me that I had received an opportunity to join Njiris High School. He insisted, however, that whatever decision I would take, both he and my mother would adhere to it. I knew how much my parents would have loved me to go there, yet something kept me from taking that decision. When I told him the next day that I would remain in Nyeri High, he simply said, "Ok, let God's will be done". This was just one of the many occasions he has repeated that answer almost word for word. Two other significant occasions were: when I told him that I was going to join Opus Dei, and recently when I told him of my ordination.

I owe part of my vocation today to that decision of remaining in Nyeri High School. Towards the end of my secondary school studies there, I did an interview with some Strathmore College representatives with the hope of pursuing an Accountancy course in this College. When I received the admission letter some weeks later, I was very happy and grateful to God. As time passed on, I got to know about Opus Dei and its message of the sanctification of ordinary work. It was then that I asked for admission to Opus Dei.

c) How was it working as a student assistant and accountant in the then, Strathmore College?

It was a real test of responsibility, for in those circumstances, I had just recently finished high school and had no working experience as such. At the same time, it meant combining work and attending evening classes

at the College. I am also grateful for the opportunity I got to work in the Accounting department of the College, for this experience was just the beginning of my career in financial accounting and which later on helped me a lot at Africa Online.

d) What did you do at Africa Online?

At the end of the first academic year at the University of Nairobi, I applied for an accounting job at Africa Online. I was lucky to be taken in and was assigned to the credit control department. Amongst other things, I would get in touch with the clients on a day to day basis, resolving their financial debts with the company. Again, this involved a direct contact with new people, institutions, organisations etc. an unforgettable experience.

I returned to campus with the hope of continuing at Africa Online during

the next vacations. I remember being taken in on the same job two or three other times However, when I completed my degree in Bachelor of Commerce at the Lower Kabete campus, I left for Spain to study theology at the University of Navarre.

e) How would you compare working as an Accountant to your pastoral duties?

It is not easy. Both the accountant and the priest are called to sanctify their work, sanctify themselves and seek the sanctity of other people as they work. In that sense they are similar. For the accountant, there is always an opportunity to make new friends, be it in the work place or in the streets as one fulfils ordinary duties. As a priest, one can also make friends and help them to live better their spiritual life.

Yet there is an important difference, the main occupation of the priest is the salvation of souls, being ready to administer the Sacraments, being at the service of the Church etc. In this respect, a new meaning has been added to my life and that is a gift for which I will eternally be grateful to Our Lord.

f) What was the most difficult thing about teaching English in Spain?

During the summer holidays in Spain, I had some opportunities to teach English to groups of students from Spain. The most difficult thing was the difference in language structure. For example: whereas in English one responds to a question using the same verb and only changes the pronouns, in Spanish one conjugates the verb. Such differences, though subtle, end up making the translation difficult. A

Kiswahili saying like: 'haba na haba hujaza kibaba' - Little by little, fills the pot - would come in handy to raise up the spirits when things looked tough. All in all, I liked the experience.

g) What are your most memorable moments as you played basketball all over Spain?

Making friends and spending time with them. We formed a group of friends from different countries and different careers at the University of Navarre and we would play basketball especially over the weekends. We also participated in the tournaments at the university. Then, at other times, we would organize excursions to the Pyrenees, historical towns, museums and other cultural places. They also were occasions in which we would also speak about our religious beliefs,

practice, the faith, the Church and Opus Dei.

h) How was it being in Spain during the death of Servant of God Pope John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI?

There were many news articles and mass media coverage on the life of Pope John Paul II. What was even more moving, were the broadcasts of the events as they occurred in St. Peter's at the time. The long queues of pilgrims, the funeral mass, the conclave, the first Pontifical Mass of Benedict XVI etc. Being in Europe and in a country almost next door to Italy made it easier to follow up the events. They were grimy days for everyone and especially those for whom it was their first time to witness consciously such events. We stuck close to the TV set waiting impatiently and anxiously for the "*fumata bianca*" (*white smoke*). When

we saw it, there was a bit of uncertainty as to whether it was really white, but the continued clanging of the bells of the Basilica, confirmed the joy we were already experiencing in our hearts.

A few months later that same year, I moved to Rome, where I have remained until today. From here, living in the same city as the Pope, one can see the universality of the Church. The profound Christian culture, ancient monuments and Churches, the continuous flow of pilgrims to Rome from all over the world etc., help one to keep praying for the unity of the Church.

i) What role do you envision for African Christianity in the global stage in the 21st century?

The future is in our hands, in the hands of the African community as a whole. Saint Augustine observed that human beings in general admire

seeing the height of the mounts, the big waves of the sea, the wide currents of the rivers, the immensity of the ocean, the course of the stars, and they forget how much they have to admire in themselves. I am convinced that the same case applies to us as Africans. The time has come in which we have to set the African heritage in the global network of cultures and developments. For instance, the importance of solidarity and charity with one's neighbour, that is very imbued in our African culture, shall be our priceless weapon to fight the individualism & consumerism in today's world.

For this to succeed, one primary obstacle has to be eliminated, that is the lack of peace. Pope Paul VI stated in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* that, 'Development is the new name for peace', meaning that there cannot be any development of peoples or nations, if peace is not

guaranteed. Several African countries have been war-torn whereas others experience instabilities from time to time, like our beloved country experienced a few months ago. We, therefore, have an important task ahead of us and we all are called to contribute towards its success. All we need is to work together, with the spirit of '*Harambee*' – together as one –, convinced that this united effort will bear good fruit in due time.

In all this, we could see the message of the Pope for the African countries and especially our beloved Kenya: “sow peace & love for one another, and development will be the fruit of your labour!” The ball is in our court. Let's go for it!

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