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Kenyan Ordained Priest

Fr Anthony Njugi, was among thirty-eight of Opus Dei's faithful who were ordained to the priesthood on May 26 in Rome. Fr Anthony speaks about his educational and family background in an interview.

06/07/2007

Fr Anthony, if you do not mind, tell us a little about yourself and your family

I was born in Nanyuki town, 250 kms North of Nairobi at the foot of Mt Kenya. My parents came from Nyeri. They moved to Nanyuki in the 60's. My dad used to work for Marshalls E.A. Ltd, and my mum was a primary school teacher.

A few years after my birth (I'm the fourth born of five) we moved to a rural area near Nakuru where my paternal grandmother had a farm. This was to become my dwelling place for the next 13 years until I was 16. Lots of memories flood my mind. It was the family-centred social life that really got ingrained in me. Everything revolved around the responsibility each one had in the extended family with grandma (she is a widow) playing the role of elder. The concerns of the dispersed family - uncles, cousins, nephews, the great-grandmother who was still alive, and all relatives - were brought to her.

There was a lot of interaction between neighbours who were all great friends and also the usual frictions that almost always involve cattle and the crops. There was high sensitivity regarding the old people. I still remember making visits with mum to a number of old people who could not move a lot. We would take them gifts of all sorts. One of the things I learnt was to always accept whatever they wanted to offer you in return. Mum said we should accept whatever they offered to show that we also appreciate what they are capable of doing. Apart from that, one soon realized that all they needed was company.

What about your school days?

In primary school I met people who would be still friends. George used to come first in class. We unsuccessfully tried to beat him in the end-term exams. I still remember

my dad's reaction whenever he received the report-form: "Once again number 2...." Then he would add, "there is still room for improvement!"

George and I parted company when we were sent to different secondary schools, but we are still in contact. Secondary school life was a big change for me since it meant change of environment, and although my brothers and sisters had gone through it, I never got used to the idea of being away from home for three months. Perhaps I was too attached to the village, to the people, to the quiet life. Nevertheless, I adapted to the boarding life in Nyandarua High School. I made many new friends from different economic and social backgrounds. Most of us came from modest families who had to make sacrifices in order to raise school fees.

In Form Three, I took up Accounting as an optional and slowly started cultivating ambitions of a career in Business studies. In the last year of school I chose an undergraduate course in Moi University as my first choice. At the same time, I started enquiring into possibilities of pursuing Certified Public Accountants (CPA) studies.

Peter, a good friend of mine, came across a brochure of Strathmore College and he quickly showed it to me because we more or less had the same ideas. Our career adviser told us that it was the best place to study CPA, but that we needed good grades. All our efforts therefore went towards studying harder than before.

When I told my dad of my plans, he was very happy and even before the results came out he gathered more information from Strathmore and

from the examining board, KASNEB. Then came the day of the interview. I still remember that it was a sunny Tuesday. Some of my friends had also come and so we handled the nerves more easily. I got very impressed by the way everything was conducted professionally at Strathmore; and how they treated me as an important person.

From that moment I started praying hard for admission to Strathmore. Two weeks after the interview, the results arrived and I had passed. Being a fellow from the village, I had all the fears on top of me about the big city of Nairobi - what if I failed to meet the standards? etc, etc. However, all those fears disappeared when George, my tutor, called me to his office and asked me how I was coping with the new situation.

Why did you choose to study Accountancy and decline to join Moi University?

Two years after joining Strathmore, I was invited to join Moi University. It came at a time when my dad's professional situation was unstable, university student allowances were reduced and on top of that they were required to pay more fees. Since I had advanced in CPA, I decided to continue until the end and to forego the opportunity to attend a public university. I must say that it was a hard decision to make since it meant taking a huge risk in my professional perspective. Definitely Mr. Ahluwalia's "quantitative techniques" came in handy, but I think that it was Dr Sotz's advice that helped me face the situation with determination.

How was it being a door boy at Mbagathi Study Centre?

Living in Nairobi meant I had to work in order to meet the personal expenses. The College had offered me a bursary for my studies. A job opportunity came when Mbagathi Study Centre, a centre for young people affiliated to Strathmore offered me a part-time job as a door-keeper. It was the first time I was earning money out of my work. The good relations with Mr Aizpun, the director at the time, helped me to achieve equilibrium between work and studies.

What is your most memorable undertaking as a student apart from class work?

Giving catechism classes at Mitumba slums. It was while working at Mbagathi that with some friends, we organized Catechism classes for children in Mitumba slums, South C. We would spend Saturday mornings playing with the kids, giving the

classes, speaking with their parents, etc. At the beginning it was difficult to win their confidence, but soon they realized that we were genuinely interested in their welfare. From that moment onwards, I became aware that I had to think about others and not just my career, my future, etc.

How was it being involved with the beginning of Opus Dei in Uganda?

My horizons became even wider when I went to Uganda to give a hand in the apostolic work of Opus Dei. It wasn't easy at the beginning since I already had a job in an investment bank and also because of the usual uncertainty of moving to another country. Once again my fears were dispelled when, one of the young fellows who frequented Bugala Study Centre, greeted me, "agandi sebo?", and seeing my consternation he asked me, "aren't you a musheshe?" The Basheshes are

a tribal group from the South-West of Uganda and the fellow had mistaken me for one.

The realisation that Ugandans could consider me as "one of their own" won me over. I learnt the local languages in order to communicate better. Ugandans are very cordial people. It is said foreigners who go to Africa normally suffer from the "African Syndrome". I suffered "Ugandan Fever".

Uganda is also the country of the first contemporary African martyrs; St. Charles Lwanga and Companions of the 19th Century. Studying here in Rome, I've had the opportunity to visit the emblematic places where the first Christians gave their lives for the still young faith. It seems to me to be a clear parallelism between the two martyrdoms.

What is your vision of the Church especially in Africa?

Many have pointed out that the future of the Church is in Africa. At the same time we cannot ignore the hardships that continue to assail the continent - famine, disease, war, etc. However, if we turn to the first Century of our era, we discover that the Christians had to overcome insurmountable difficulties. And how did they do it? With fervent faith, they changed society with their hard work and good example. Maybe that's what we need in Africa - to turn to the first Christians in order to learn, and then take it as our own responsibility.

INTERVIEW