

Now I am one of you

April 4th 1989. Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei, had just been accorded the honours of an elder in the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, amidst thunderous applause from the more than two thousand people present. He was very moved, and began his speech by saying: “Now I am one of you”

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Members of Opus Dei, a personal prelature of the Catholic Church

founded by St. Josemaría Escrivá, had been working in Kenya since 1958, spreading the message that work and the ordinary circumstances of everyday life are opportunities for encountering God and serving others.

Bishop Alvaro went on to praise the deep sense of God's presence expressed in the Kiswahili phrase Mungu yuko. "You Kenyans have a marvellous sense of God's presence... I've been told that when something good happens, you give thanks to God with some Kiswahili words that mean 'God exists'. I have them written down here so as not to forget them: 'Mungu yuko'. It's wonderful that you see God's hand in everything."

He was able to meet and talk with the members of Opus Dei, as well as cooperators and friends of the prelature. He also visited corporate

works, such as Strathmore and Kianda, and other apostolic undertakings. On his way to celebrate Mass early in the morning, it impressed him to see the thousands of people walking to work because they can't afford bus fare. He also saw the tea and coffee estates in Limuru, where hundreds of women and girls pick tea leaves and coffee berries all day long in baskets slung over their backs. He urged the faithful of the prelature and friends to do something to further the education of these people, in the spirit of Harambee.

"Harambee", he said, in a second multitudinous get-together in the KICC, "is a Kiswahili word meaning 'all together'. I know that you use the expression Harambee for many material things like setting up a school, building a church or hospital and that some people contribute with money, others with bricks or

whatever they have. We all contribute with our effort, our prayer and our work well done. Everyone, whether rich or poor, is able to help. Perhaps the one who does his work with most love of God is the richest in his eyes... But it is urgent to promote projects aimed at providing an educational solution to the human and spiritual needs of those who have least."

In response to Bishop Alvaro's concern, Kianda Foundation initiated the Kimlea Technical Training Centre in 1991 for women and girls working in the Tigoni coffee and tea plantations. Since then more than 12,000 students and families have benefitted from Kimlea. The institution offers technical skills to prepare its students for employment and income-generating initiatives, as well as providing human and spiritual formation. They follow a two-year program leading to

professional qualifications in hospitality, tailoring, knitting, cookery and agricultural skills. There are also literacy courses for women who were never able to go to school.

The story of Veronica is one of the many success stories related to Kimlea. A secondary school leaver from Riara, Kiambu, she had to walk 15 km to and from Kimlea, as her parents who were coffee pickers, could not afford transport. While at Kimlea she would come on Saturdays to work in the school shamba to pay her fees. When she finished her training, Veronica started a small business of selling cakes and mandazis to the neighbouring kiosks. With the proceeds of these sales she helped towards the upkeep of her family and the education of her younger siblings. In 1994 she married Joseph Kimani, a photographer by profession.

With the formation Veronica had received in Kimlea, she became very active in her local church and was made Patron of the Youth in the Parish. She mentored young people, helping them to lead a good moral life and so became very popular with many families. When the position of the local Administrator became vacant, everyone encouraged her to apply for the job. She was not sure the interviewing panel would offer her the job, which is predominantly a man's job, as she was pregnant. It turned out that they had heard how much she was helping families in the area and they offered her the job.

"Would you mind if I ask for Maternity Leave at any one time?" she asked. They replied that being married, the normal thing was to have children and there was no problem in her taking leave with full salary. Now she is both a happy mother of six and a very popular local authority in the area.

For the last few years Veronica has been mentoring the students in Kimlea, giving them motivational talks and encouragement to excel in life as respected women. Two years ago she was the chief guest in the annual graduation ceremony.

Veronica and her whole family have great devotion to St. Josemaria and Bishop Alvaro. She says that if it were not for the life of prayer and Christian formation she received in Kimlea, she would not be what she is today.

Another past student, Zipporah, recently wrote to the Principal of Kimlea: Hello, I have got time to say hi! I am so happy to look on the website and see back my college school. You people you moulded our lives. We are so much blessed. I am in Dubai almost 2 years now. May God bless you all!

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo was beatified in his birthplace, Madrid, Spain, on 27th September 2014. Hundreds of Kenyans are planning to travel for the ceremony, many of whom met him in 1989.

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