

# **The man who walked with elephants (and soon to be priest)**

Paul Kioko grew up among elephants, lions and snakes. After working for a number of years as a doctor, he is preparing himself to become a deacon on the 3rd of November. This is his story.

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## **Where were you born?**

I was born in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, but most of my childhood was

spent living in different National Parks in Kenya with my parents and brothers. My father worked for the Kenya Wildlife Service as a Game Warden.

## **What did your father's job entail?**

His job was to direct wildlife conservation activities in the different parks. Each posting lasted on average five years and the family was constantly on the move with him from Nakuru National Park to the Aberdare Mountains to Amboseli at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro to Tsavo National Park.

## **What was your childhood like in the Savannah?**

We grew up playing in the bush. Although there was always the danger from lions and such like critters, my mother's greatest fear was actually scorpions and snakes of which we had plenty. Thanks to our

guardian angels we never had any serious incident.

## **But I imagine you did have many adventures...**

You bet! Once, one of my brothers did get venom from a spitting cobra into his eyes and had to be rushed to hospital but thankfully he didn't lose his eyesight. And another of my brothers almost crashed his bicycle into a pair of lions that were hidden by a bend in the road. As the lions were more interested in a warthog they had just caught, my brother was able to beat a hasty retreat to safety.

## **How would you spend your weekends?**

If we behaved ourselves reasonably well during the week, my father would take us out on Sundays for a game drive. The challenge was to be the first one to spot one of the 'big five' – elephant, rhino, lion, buffalo,

or leopard. My father almost always won because he had more patience in looking at the same spot long enough to see where the animals were hiding.

## **Did your mother enjoy the bush?**

Very much so, although she always seemed more interested in the birds – something we boys could never manage to understand. Let me explain. My mother was born in the United States of America and came to Africa in the late 60s to teach Mathematics and to see the world. Maybe that is why she liked the birds – like them, she had to fly to another continent to build a home. While in Tanzania she met my father who was then finishing his training as a Warden and the rest is history, or divine providence as my grandmother would say.

## **What did you learn during those years in the wild?**

Many things. The love for the great outdoors and the beauty of nature for sure. But what has stood me in good stead many times is remembering the patience of my father in seeing the bigger picture and the simple joys of life in my mother seeing a little brown bird.

## **Did you learn to handle wild animals?**

Growing up in the wild was paradise for young boys. Although we never had a television in the house or PlayStation for that matter, we didn't need them. Orphaned animals would be brought to our house and many times we had baby Impalas, gazelles, antelopes, lion cubs, elephants and rhinos walking about.

The bigger animals especially the elephants, were kept at night in pens behind our house and we would feed them rotten mangoes and oranges. The game consisted in trying to

throw the fruits directly into their mouth to score 3-pointers.

## **After growing up what direction did your life take?**

We moved to Nairobi and I began secondary school. It was precisely in Lenana School where I first met some young university students who would come to give us talks on Christian doctrine. Later on I learnt that some of them belonged to Opus Dei. Through them I got to know more about this part of the Catholic Church and in my last year at Lenana, I asked for admission to Opus Dei.

After finishing my medical studies at the University of Nairobi I worked at the Armed Forces Hospital for a year before moving to Mater Hospital where I worked for close to 15 years. First in the Emergency Department and later in the Intensive Care Unit where I helped with the open-heart

surgery program and finished a specialization in Anesthesiology.

## **When did you start considering the path to priesthood?**

As the book of Wisdom says, there is a time for every matter under heaven. I realized that just as God had given me a vocation of service to the sick as a doctor, He was now giving me a vocation of service to the whole Church as a priest. In a way, being a doctor prepared the path for the priesthood.

## **And now you will be a priest?**

No, not yet. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November I will be ordained deacon, along with 34 other faithful of Opus Dei from 16 countries, by Mons. Celso Morga. And God willing, in May next year we will be ordained priests.

## **How have you prepared yourself?**

I have been in Rome for some years now studying at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and receiving further formation in the Roman College of the Holy Cross together with many others of Opus Dei from all over the globe. In these years I have come to understand that the greatest preparation for the priesthood is the work of the Holy Spirit but that God makes use of those around us to guide and form us.

### **What subject have you enjoyed most at the University?**

I did my Licentiate and Doctorate in Moral Theology and given my medical background I guess it isn't surprising that I really enjoyed all the subjects touching on bioethics and the philosophical foundations of medical practice.

### **What is the topic of your Doctoral Thesis?**

They say the fastest way to fall asleep is to ask a doctoral student to explain the subject of his thesis! At the risk of putting you to sleep, I will venture to say that my thesis is fundamentally about the virtue of prudence as the indispensable link between the ‘technically correct’ and the ‘morally good’ in medical decision making. As a doctor working in an ICU, I had faced this dilemma many times: where to draw the line and when to say to the patient, ‘enough is enough’.

## **Moral Theology, Rome, priesthood...Do you miss your years in the Game Parks?**

Childhood memories are with us always and I will never forget the adventures of growing up with the wild animals. But a life of service to God and neighbor is an even greater adventure. You wake up in the morning and you are never quite sure where the end of the day will

find you. Before, I merely admired the beauty of God's creation; now, I contemplate the loving hand of God's providence wherever He leads me. I hope that through the ministry of my priesthood many more will discover the adventure of a divine vocation. Pray for us.

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