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The Miracle of a Vocation to the Priesthood

On 4 May 2019, Bernard Nderitu will be ordained in Rome together with 33 other faithful of Opus Dei. He will be the first Associate member of Opus Dei in Africa to be ordained a priest

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Can you tell us a bit about your family?

I was brought up in Nyeri, an agricultural district in the central part of Kenya. When I was 5 days old, my parents separated from their traditional marriage. They went ahead to contract other traditional marriages. My two elder sisters (Jane and Pauline) and I went to live with my maternal grandma. My grandma had been widowed some five years back at the tender age of 40. For the rest of my childhood and adolescence she would be the breadwinner for the three of us and other cousins that came to stay with her after tragedies similar to ours.

While studying in primary school, we used to alternate days of school with farm work. My grandma is a small-scale tea grower. Since we could not afford farm hands, we needed to skip school in turns to be able to pay school fees and other related financial commitments. The ones who suffered the brunt of these

tough conditions were my sisters. Pauline dropped out of school and contracted a traditional marriage at age 17. Jane was lucky enough to finish high school and contracted traditional marriage immediately.

At age 7, I followed my two elder sisters for catechism classes for the first Holy Communion in the local church near our primary school (about 2 kilometers from the farm). We had all been taken for Baptism at birth by our parents. In the conditions of growing up with grandma, who was not a Christian at that time, going to Church for anything was tough. It could easily earn you corporal punishment which was a common practice in schools and at home at that time. By the grace of God, I taught [1] my grandma Catechism and she was baptized a Catholic at age 60. In the immediate extended family, we were the only Catholics (my grandma and

I). The rest are mainly evangelical Christians.[2]

Two very memorable things regarding my primary school years

In the first place, I attended Catechism classes for 3 years for my first Holy Communion. In those classes, I was taught to do a Novena of the Holy Rosary before every end of term exams, if I wanted to top the class. I did it for the first time when I was about 8 years and it worked. This remained hard engraved in my mind so much so, that I would do it before every major exam for the next twelve years. I changed the concept when I joined the University, and a friend of mine introduced me to the daily rosary, a custom I carry on since then. But that rosary for exams as a young boy left an indelible mark in my soul. I strongly believe that it is under that mantle of Mary, who became my mother, that the rest of

my story has taken the direction it has today. Thanks to her.

The second thing was the Mass on the first Friday of every month, for nine consecutive months. It was another novena proposed by the catechist. With minimal theological understanding of the arguments about indulgences attached to the devotion, my young friends and I were drawn by the possibility of an assured Confession and Communion once a month.

The Parish where we belonged covered a huge agricultural district. At that time, we had the Parish Centre – about 6 Kilometers from my grandma's farm – with a Parish priest and his assistant. This Parish looked after twenty outstation, local Churches (my local church was one of these). In the district, there were many boarding secondary schools (8 schools in total: 4 for girls and 4 for

for boys, each with a minimum of 800 students between the ages 15-18 years), there were twice as many primary schools. Although not all the students were Catholics, the two priests could hardly meet the needs of the outstation Churches, let alone going to the schools.

The possibility of an assured Confession and Communion every first Friday^[3] of the month in a local church two kilometers from the farm came was a real blessing. The Mass was at 3.00pm with 30 minutes for Confessions before and after the Mass. As is obvious, many of those Fridays would fall on school days. There were classes in the morning and in the afternoon. If it coincided with classes, depending on the teacher on duty in the school, the class teacher, and the director of the school, one was given permission to go or not. In a number of occasions, we skipped school whe

n we felt that the teacher in question was anti-Catholic. We would face the wrath of the said teacher for the next week or two.

These two practices: the novena of the rosary before exams and novena of Mass every first Friday of the month makes me remember my catechist with veneration. I personally did not have conditions at home to grow in faith. The catechist provided these to me. Later on, things would change for the better with the conversion of my grandma. The scarcity of priests, of course did not leave me indifferent.

Where did you go to school and were you thinking then of a possible vocation to the priesthood?

I was lucky enough to secure a place in a public boarding school[4]. However, this came with its own challenges. Among other things, it

was a protestant sponsored school[5]. The second thing was that you were boarding for nine months of the year, with three breaks of a month. Of the 1000 students that the school had then, about 300 were Catholics. The rest were all Protestants and one or two Muslims.

On Sundays, we used to organize the Liturgy of the Word, led by one of the seniors – who were students in the final or penultimate year of school. Not more than 100 students would attend. The rest would join the Protestant services or stay in their dormitories. With this group of about 100 students every year, we learnt how to refute the Protestants who were hell-bent to get us to convert. From this group, I have, what I can call very intimate friends[6].

When I was in my last year, I was the senior [7]. The treasurer[8] of the group was destined for the

priesthood. His uncle was a priest of the Consolata Missionaries. When Fr. Charles – the aforementioned treasurer – joined the Consolata Major Seminary in Nairobi, I thought that maybe God was calling me to take this path as well. With others, we had given Charles catechism classes, while we were in Form 1. We were more seasoned Catholics than the neophyte Charles was; I thought at that time. I have to admit that God has his own ways. I applied to the seminary. I was asked to wait till I finished my studies in the University. The main reason for the delay, according to the vocation's director was solid: my family background. The conditions of the family were too tough to sustain my vocation at that time. Besides I had qualified to join the University for some Government sponsored course. I could always join the seminary a little later when things had settled in the family. This vocations director was a seasoned

man. I will forever remain indebted to him. One of the reasons behind my desire to join the seminary at that time would have been to run away from my responsibilities. Now when I look at it with more perspective I can see it.

Did you go to university and if so what did you study?

I studied Mechanical Engineering in the University of Nairobi (1996-2002). This is where I met the college-mate who taught me that the rosary could be recited daily. One Saturday morning, this same friend invited me to visit the Cancer Ward for children at Kenyatta National Hospital. Later on, we attended a meditation in an Opus Dei Centre for University Students and Young Professionals. At the end of the first academic year, the same friend invited me to an annual retreat. I mention all these together because of my previous

difficulties to attend Mass, Confession, and receive solid doctrine were all resolved in one go. There was daily Mass was in the University Chapel some 10 minute walk from the student's hostels in which I was living.

What I appreciate here is the power of friendship, and the consciousness of the laity about their call to sanctity and apostolate that comes with baptism. This friend of mine took me by the hand and encouraged me to follow him.

The University life was very rich as anyone can guess, but that is a story for another day. It suffices to mention that I continued going to the centre of Opus Dei that I had been introduced to, attending the means of formation and receiving spiritual direction from the priest of the centre. Bear in mind that I had not had a father figure in my life. This

priest became immediately this figure. The centre became a home where I could relate, with total confidence all my anxieties, worries and ambitions. It was an experience that I will never forget. I went to the centre not only for spiritual things, but also for the barbecues, excursions, the library, etc. I immediately fell in love with the works of Saint Josemaría Escriva. I remember pinning a hand-written extract from *Christ is Passing By* “*As we walk along it is inevitable that we will raise dust; we are creatures and full of defects. I would almost say that we will always need defects. They are the shadow which shows up the light of God's grace and our resolve to respond to God's kindness. And this chiaroscuro will make us human, humble, understanding and generous*”.

In the final year of my course I discovered my vocation^[9] as an

Associate of Opus Dei. And as the saying goes: “the rest is history”. It is about waking up and entering into the daily struggles and trying to live a coherent Christian life. This comes with successes and at times, with failures and big ones for that matter. The most important thing is that God advances His grace to us, way before placing any responsibility on us. Saint Josemaría has taught me to live the “now” moment. The moment that I am called to redeem is *now*. Not yesterday, that is gone, not tomorrow, that I have no control of, but now.

What did you do after you finished your studies?

After finishing my studies, I worked with the central workshops of Kenya Railways, with the Kenya Tea Development Authority in a tea processing factory and with the lubricant department of a petroleum distributing company.

During the same period, I had started giving some catechism classes in the slums in the Eastlands neighbourhood of Nairobi. While I was at it, the former Archbishop of Nairobi asked the people of Opus Dei in Kenya to do some social related project in Eastlands. I was involved in the preliminary studies of possible projects. By that time, I had already known the neighbourhood pretty well. Finally, it was decided that we would set up a technical training college. I was the first employee. It meant doing everything and laying the foundations. One key job consisted in forming possible future employees with the social sensitivity that the project required.

I worked in this project for 10 years until I left to Spain for further studies. This project is what has now become Eastlands College of Technology: <https://www.ect.ac.ke>. A good percentage of the employees

are those who studied in this same project. I can confess, that as I was growing up in the farm, I had known poverty first hand. However, when I started living in Eastlands, whilst working for this project, I met real poverty. The poverty that is lived in those slums degrades the dignity of the human person. Saint Josemaría taught his children to join hands with other citizens, Christians or not, and try to uphold the dignity of every person. His way of proceeding was always with the go ahead of the ecclesiastical and political authorities of the country. Eastlands College of Technology is one such response, amongst hundreds others spread out in the five continents. I am very fulfilled as a person, to have been involved in this project. I hope to share this in the future, with my friends and former colleagues. We should not turn our backs to human misery, as Pope Francis reminds us frequently.

Do you think your professional experience will help you in your future priestly work?

The University course has shaped me into who I am today. The course demanded many hours of work. It took me six years to finish it. One would wake up to resolve the same problem that he had got stuck with the previous night at 1.00 am if not later. Today, there are more tools to do those technical problems rather than the rudimentary ways in which we were handling them back then. Somebody once said that “education is what is left when the material is forgotten.” After thinking about this phrase, I have come to a personal conclusion, that what is left are the virtues associated with a difficult demanding course: patience, perseverance, endurance, reflection, studiousness, order, etc. One learns to sit and deliver. In other words, to be at it until it is all done.

I was once working with a part of metal on a lathe machine, in the workshops of the Tea Factory, where I did my internship, and a colleague commented that as a fresh graduate, one could afford to smile while doing such a repetitive and boring job. At that time, I had just been taught to see beyond the metal works in front of me: behind this work to see my colleagues, their families, the people who would enjoy the tea that we would eventually produce etc. To me it was not just turning the lathe. It was much more!

You have been studying in Spain for the priesthood for a good number of years now. Any story of these years?

Yes, I have been studying in Spain for 6 years now. The first nasty experience happened in Galicia in the summer of 2014. I was doing a course in a place called Fonteboa. We

went to swim in the Atlantic. I had swum before in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Kenya and had never had any problems. We were three of us. There was all manner of people swimming, surfing etc. One of my colleagues had carried a book to read, the other one went jogging along the beach. I wanted to swim, and so off into the water I went. I started swimming towards the open sea. After getting tired, I tried to stand and ops, there was no ground. I looked back and could only see people like small dots. I tried to swim back but the under currents were so strong that, the building along the beach looked like dots and the people on the beach had disappeared. I started shouting for help, and thank God that through a chain of surfers, they got for me help. I learnt a good lesson one over there!

Besides swimming, in the summer, I went mountain climbing and jogging,

and one of my favourite activities has been badminton. Through badminton, I got to know more than 50 students in the last six years. They are mainly students on international exchange programmes, who do a semester or an academic year in the University of Navarra. The majority of them are from Asian countries, though I have known a few from the US.

One experience that I lived vividly is the one with Kuan, from Taiwan. Kuan was 19 years old. He was receiving catholic doctrine classes from a friend, in a residence within the university campus. He complained that the concepts were difficult to understand, given that he was starting from zero (Kuan did not know anything about Christianity before coming to Spain), and one day he was moved to tears whilst talking with the priest of the residence. What made Kuan cry – he later

confessed to me – was that it was the first time in his life, that an adult was ready to listen to him. He had been able to open his heart in confidence to the priest.

With studies and sports, I have made many friends. For four years, at the weekends and during the summer, I helped in a boys' club. I introduced badminton to the club, and it has become one of the normal activities in the summer camps. I have made friends of all ages, and colours.

What are your future plans? Will you be coming back home soon?

Ordinarily one is ordained for service to the people of God. I have been taught to travel light and be available to my Prelate, whose plans are those of the Church. I would like to serve the Church as the Church wants to be served.

The immediate plans are to conclude the thesis. The topic is *Integral Formation in University Education by Blessed John Henry Newman*. I will also have a short stay for pastoral practice in Spain until later part of this year. After that, I will go wherever the Prelate thinks best.

Notes:

[1] I was lucky to have had this responsibility, being uneducated (she can neither read nor write), it was easier for her to learn the catechism at home since we could go to the farm reciting the vocal prayers and it help her learn by rote the other key concepts. She had paid for my education; I was in turn reciprocating in this way. The experience of catechism with the catechist of one hour a week at the local church had not been successful. My grandma would go for subsequent classes having forgotten

whatever she had learnt the previous week.

[2] The country is 83% Christian of which the Catholic population is 23%. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Kenya

[3] The devotion to receive communion at least on the first Friday of every month was promoted by Sister Margret Mary Alacoque, a religious of the Visitation Order, Apostle of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, born in Lhautecour, France, 22 July, 1647; died in Paray-le-Monial, 17 October, 1690. Cfr. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/St._Margaret_Mary_Alacoque](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/St._Margaret_Mary_Alacoque)

[4] In an agricultural district, those who joined a secondary day school next to their immediate primary school continued doubling up school with work in the farms. In a boarding school you concentrated on

studies, met other people from elsewhere, and besides these schools were better equipped with material and human resources. A private school, boarding or day school, was out of the question because of the financial constraints of my family. In the public school fees were subsidised by the Government. The type of school one went to, was decided by a Government agency based mainly on one's academic results achieved in the compulsory national examination at the end of primary school.

[5] This means that although it was a public school, the chaplain was from one of the protestant denominations.

[6] Two of them are going to Rome, with their wives, to witness my priestly ordination. From the group that I was a part of, four are priests. The groups, prior to ours, include the

current Bishop of Marsabit: His Grace Peter Kihara Kariuki. I.M.C

[7] The Catholic group was led by a council elected by the members. This council consisted of seven members: the chair, his vice, the treasurer, the secretary and his vice, the choirmaster and the liturgical secretary. In my penultimate year, I was the vice chair and the chair in the final year.

[8] His name is Fr. Charles Gachingiri, IMC. He is a parish priest in one of the parishes in Kampala, Uganda. Fr. Charles was baptised in our first year in this boarding School. He is the nephew of Bishop Peter Kihara mentioned earlier. We come from the same village. It was common to have a small group of catechumens during the year, in the school. We would prepare them and if we were lucky, some priest passing by (especially missionaries on some

sabbatical) with the knowledge of the parish priest would baptise them in the school. That was the case of Bishop Peter Kihara, then a priest. He would send his f missionary friends to go to the school to greet his nephew, Charles. That way we would have a surprise Mass...perhaps the only one in the whole academic year.

[9] This decision is a long process. But since there are only a few people to whom God has talked to directly, for the rest of us, the message from God comes to us in many ways. It comes to us through others, through a good spiritual book and so on. I remember once reading the first point of: Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, London: Scepter, 1987 n.1

“There are many Christians who are persuaded that the Redemption will be completed in all environments of the world, and that there have to be some souls — they do not know which ones

— who will contribute to carrying it out with Christ. But they think it will take centuries, many centuries. It would be an eternity, if it were to take place at the rate of their self-giving. That was the way you yourself thought, until someone came to “wake you up”.

I simply identified myself with this person and woke up!

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