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Work camp in Nyeri

We set out for Nyeri on a Thursday afternoon. The first group departed at 3:00 pm because the van they were using needed to be driven back to Nairobi later that day. The second group, of which I was part, set off an hour later. Our journey was awesome. We recited the Rosary and did our prayer along the way.

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Our prayers must have had an immediate effect in heaven, because

when we stopped at a small town to purchase some bananas, the lady who sold them offered us another bunch for free. Anyone who heard us or saw us in joyful conversation with her, might have thought we were known to her or we were her sons.

We got to Nyeri town at around 8.45 pm. At the first market we passed through, we purchased several items to be used to prepare the day's dinner, and then headed to Teleki Study Centre, where we were to spend our days in Nyeri. The earlier group was waiting for us there. Their sullen faces lit up when they saw us. We would later pull their legs by suggesting that we weren't really the reason for their joy; it was the food we had brought that had lifted their spirits.

We prepared the meal together, everyone lending a hand where they could. It was only after dispatching

the meal that we sat down for a get-together to make our first formal introductions. The largest contingent among us was from Eastlands College of Technology. The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Strathmore University, and Strathmore School were also well represented.

After the introductions, we reviewed the next day's programme and then retired for the night. A number of us had to use sleeping bags. More than one of them had to be shown how to use those fluffy contraptions.

We all woke up at around 6:00 am the next morning. Our aim was to attend Mass at 6:30 am at the nearby parish, named Our Lady of Consolata, Birithia. Sadly, despite our efforts, we still got there a few minutes late. The priest, correctly suspecting that some of the new members of his congregation might

not get the local dialect, gave his homily in Swahili, along with all the parts of the Mass that required a response.

After Mass, the priest invited us to introduce ourselves. Steve, who was leading the delegation, did this on our behalf, drawing a hearty clap from everyone in the church. And once outside the church, some of the locals approached us for brief chats; the catechist even took a group photo with us.

Having dispensed with these pleasantries, we took off for St Pius, an outstation of the parish. It was to be the site of our work camp. We were welcomed there by a team of church members. In what was quickly becoming a theme of our trip, they had prepared a heavy breakfast – tea, arrow roots, and eggs – for us. We were busy stuffing ourselves when the chairman of the

church arrived to formally welcome us.

Our main task at the church was to give it a fresh coat of paint. Given that most of us had never painted anything, it fell to Julius Ogeya, a professional painter who was part of the group, to provide us with the initial guidance. We began by removing all the furniture and laying out newspapers on the floor. Then we divided ourselves into three teams, one to paint the inside of the church, another to paint the outside, and the third to paint the gate.

Inside the church, we cleared all the cobwebs, filled and smoothed the cracks, then dipped our rollers into tubs of paint to begin the main part. By the time we were done with the first coat, most of us were covered from head to toe in splotches of paint; a few, who congratulated

themselves for allegedly working smart, didn't have a single drop.

At 1:30 pm our work was interrupted by a colossal meal prepared for us by the church members. Naturally, we welcomed this interruption with open arms. We summarily dealt with the well-cooked ugali, greens, and beef. And then having recited the Rosary, we resumed our duties.

It was already getting dark when we wound up for the day. We hastily but carefully cleaned and stored all our tools, with the help of Joseph Wachira, the Church's development chairman, who was with us the entire time. And then we cleaned off the makeup we had covered ourselves with throughout the day and departed for the centre.

Along the way, we bought some milk, along with some beef for that night's dinner. Upon arrival at the house, some of us set out to prepare dinner

while others went off to further clean up . And then we all regrouped to stow away the beef, which was accompanied by rice, some greens and salted with a rich get-together about the day's events.

We did make it on time for Mass on Saturday, despite having to take a detour to pick up a friend in town from Dedan Kimathi University . One of the seminarians at the church cornered us after Mass to thank us for our work and like the catechist the day before, to take a photo with us.

Feeling athletic, a few in the group decided to jog up to St Pius instead of clambering aboard the vans with everyone else. Luckily, it wasn't too far, and they made it in good time for the dense breakfast, which we reliably made light work of; unlike the previous day, everyone now knew how much work lay ahead.

After breakfast, we set about putting the finishing touches to our work. It was arduous work, requiring steady hands. We touched up the patterned windows and the metal door, as well as carefully cleaning up all the paint that had splattered onto the floor, before cleaning up and rearranging all the furniture. Thankfully, we were up to the task, and wound it up before 2:00 pm.

This done, we wolfed down another heavy lunch, accounted for our tools and materials. While still in our work attire, we took a group photo with the church chairman and the team of chefs, right in front of the freshly painted church. Then we cleaned ourselves up and departed for the centre.

On the way, we stopped by the cathedral. The guard at the gate wasn't very keen on letting us through, and we wouldn't blame

him, as we were still covered in paint; he must have thought we were up to no good. But we were quite insistent, especially since we wouldn't have another chance during the trip to visit the church. After some spirited convincing, he relented and let us in, but accompanied us around until we departed.

This didn't bother us in the least, after all, we had gotten a chance to appreciate the church's architecture, make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and also pray beside the mortal remains of Blessed Irene Nyaatha, a highlight of the visit.

We then headed directly to the centre, where a priest tended to the less material needs of many in the group. Which is not to say that the material needs were overlooked. In fact, it being our final day, we had a sheep to slaughter for barbeque.

Our work camp, it may seem from this account, was primarily a food festival. Maybe so, but with a great deal of camaraderie. A group of six alumni of Dedan Kimathi University joined us in slaughtering the poor animal, and preparing the other elements of our dinner. It wasn't until midnight that everything was ready, and we all sat down to dispatch the feast over a lively cacophony of wonderful stories. A few of us then stayed up to do the dishes, while the rest retired.

We were to leave for Nairobi the next day. But first, we planned to attend Mass at the newly painted church. We woke up very early and, while some prepared breakfast, others packed their belongings, tried to put things back in order in the centre and loaded up the van. And then, having dusted off the breakfast, we set off.

Along the way, we recited the rosary and did our meditation. Thankfully, the Mass hadn't begun by the time we arrived. When it finally did, a little later than planned, the priest didn't speak in Kiswahili as we had expected and those of us who spoke Kikuyu had to simultaneously translate the day's sermon, which was about the role of missionaries and the importance of engaging in missionary work, to the rest.

After the Mass, we planted a few trees outside the church and took some more photos with the priest and the congregation. And then we headed to Steve's home, which was nearby, where we had lunch. We were warmly welcomed by his mother, some neighbours, and a few village elders.

As was expected... a banquet had been prepared for us there. It was so delicious that we decided to carry

home what we couldn't finish. A visit to the grave of Steve's father – where we said the response – and a brief venture in the family's tea farm served to ease digesting a bit of the food, before we returned to continue eating.

The sun had almost gone down when we finally hit the road. Each of us received a bundle of fruits from Steve's mother. And just before departure, we had to take the now customary group photo with his family.

We finally arrived in Nairobi at around 9:00 pm, exhausted but extremely satisfied by the fulfilling experience.

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