

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 on 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 bread-winner 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 are 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 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 my grandma Catechism and she was baptized a Catholic at age 60. [1] 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

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 so engraved in my mind that I would do it before every major exam for the next twelve years. I changed this when I joined the University and a friend of mine introduced me to the daily rosary, a custom I have continued since then. But that rosary for exams as a young boy left an indelible mark in my soul. I strongly believe that it put me under the mantle of Mary who became my mother, and the rest

of my story has taken the direction it has today thanks to her.

The second thing is 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 we belonged to covered a huge agricultural district. At that time we had the Parish Centre – about 6 Kilometers from my grandma's farm – with the parish priest and his assistant. Depending on this parish were 20 outstation local Churches (my local church was one of those). In the district there were many boarding secondary schools (8 schools in total: 4 for girls

and 4 four for boys, each with a minimum of 800 students between the ages 15-18 years); there was a double number of 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 of the month in a local church two kilometers from the farm was a real blessing. The Mass had been fixed at 3.00 pm with an allowance of 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 had permission to go or

not. On a number of occasions, we skipped school when we felt that the teacher in question was anti-Catholic. We would face the wrath of that teacher for the next week or two.

These two anecdotes (the novena of the rosary before exams and novena of Mass every first Friday of the month) make me remember my catechist with veneration. I personally did not have conditions at home to grow in the faith. The catechist stood by me. Later on, things would change for the better with the conversion of my grandma. The scarcity of the 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 is that you were there for 9 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 senior fellows – mainly in the last or penultimate year of school. The group that would do this would hardly get to 100 students. 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 determined to get converts from us. From this group I have what I can call very intimate friends[6].

When I was in my last year, I was the senior fellow[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. 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 vocations director was my family background. The conditions of my 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 this.

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. This same friend invited me to visit the Cancer Ward for Children at Kenyatta National Hospital one Saturday morning. Later on, we ended up attending a meditation in an Opus Dei Centre for university students and young professionals. When the first academic year ended, the same

friend invited me to an annual retreat.

What I appreciated here is the power of friendship, and the laity becoming aware of 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, but this is a story for another day. It suffices though to mention that I continued going to the Opus Dei Centre that I had been introduced to, attending means of formation and receiving spiritual direction from the priest there. Bear in mind that I had no father figure in my life then. This priest became immediately this figure. The centre became a home where I could tell with total security all my anxieties, worries and ambitions. It is an experience that I will never forget. Not only the

spiritual things, but also the barbecues, excursions, the library, etc. I immediately fell in love with the writings of Saint Josemaría Escrivá. I remember keeping a hand-written extract from *Christ is Passing By*, no. 76.

“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 combination of shadows and light will make us human, humble, understanding and generous.”

In the final year of my course I discovered my vocation[9] as an Associate member of Opus Dei. As the saying goes the rest is history. It is about waking up and entering into the daily struggles trying to lead 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 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 right 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

doing this, the former Archbishop of Nairobi asked the people of the Work in Kenya to begin a social project for the people in the impoverished Eastlands district of Nairobi. I was involved in the preliminary studies of possible projects. By that time, I had already come to know the neighborhood pretty well. Finally, it was decided that we would start 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 for Spain for further studies. This project is what has now become Eastlands College of Technology. <https://www.ect.ac.ke/>. I can confess that when I was growing up on the farm, I had known poverty first hand. However when I started

staying in Eastlands while 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. Eastlands College of Technology is one such response among hundreds of others spread out over the five continents. I am personally very fulfilled as a person to have been involved in this. I hope to share this in the future with my friends and former colleagues. We can never turn our backs on 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 6 years to finish it. Some mornings I would wake up to try to resolve the same problem that had stumped me the previous night at 1.00 am if not later. Today, there are more tools to do those technical problems than the rudimentary ways in which we were handling them those days. Somebody once said that “education is what is left when the subject matter 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 stand and deliver. In other words, to work at it till it is done.

I was once working and turning the lathe in the Tea Factory where I did my internship, when 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 immediate work in front of me. To see my colleagues, their families behind, the people who will enjoy the tea that we will 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 stories from these years?

Yes, I have been studying in Spain for 6 years now. One scary 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 in the coast of Kenya and had never had issues. 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 to the water. I started diving into the waves looking in the direction of the open sea. After getting tired I tried to stand but there was no ground. I looked back and could only see people like small dots. I tried to swim back but the undercurrents were so strong that the buildings along the beach looked like dots and the people on the beach had disappeared. I started shouting for help, and thank God through a chain of surfers they brought me the life-safer.

Besides swimming in summer and mountain climbing and jogging, one of my favorite activities has been badminton. Through badminton, I have met more than 50 students in the last 6 years. These are mainly students on international exchange programmes who do a semester or

one academic year at the University of Navarra. Most of those who play badminton are from Asian countries, though I have met a number from America also.

One moving anecdote involved Kuan, who is from Taiwan. At the time when this happened, Kuan was 19 years old. He was receiving Catholic doctrine classes from a friend in a University Residence. Though he was complaining that the concepts were hard to understand given that he was starting from zero (Kuan was meeting Christianity for the first time in his stay in the University), one day he was moved to tears while 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 his concerns. He had been able to open his heart in confidence with the priest.

With the studies and sports, I have made many friends. For four years, I was giving a hand in a boys-club on the weekends and during the summer. I introduced badminton to the club. It also became one of the normal activities in the summer camps. I have made friends of all ages, and colors.

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 for my Prelate, whose plans are those of the Church. I would like to serve the Church as she wants.

The immediate plans are to conclude the thesis. The topic is *Integral Formation in University Education in Blessed John Henry Newman*. I will also have a short stay for pastoral practice in Spain till late this year.

After that, I will go wherever the Prelate thinks best.

Notes:

[1] I was lucky to have had that responsibility because 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 help her learn by heart 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% Christians 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 at Lhautecour, France, 22 July, 1647; died at 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 on the farms. In a boarding school you concentrated on studies, met other people from elsewhere, 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 the family. In

the public school one would pay some subsidized fees by the government. The type of school you went to was decided by a government agency based mainly on the marks you scored in the compulsory national examination at the end of primary school.

[5] This means that although 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. About four of them became priests from the group that I coincided with. Before us and after us there are others including 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 7 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. We were doing four years of secondary school.

[8] His name is Fr. Charles Gachingiri, IMC. He is a parish priest in one of the parishes of the capital of Uganda, Kampala. Fr. Charles was baptized 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 baptize them in the school. That was the case of Bishop Peter Kihara, then a priest. He would send his missionary friends to pass by the school to greet his nephew

Charles. That way we would have a surprise Mass...maybe 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 of 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 identified myself with this fellow who was woken up.

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