

"From an African Train": A Life Given to Africa

Thirty years ago, in August 1987, a young member of Opus Dei managed to save the life of an African boy in Kenya – but lost his own in doing so. The story of that day is recounted by Miguel Aranguren in his book "Desde un Tren Africano."

09/18/2017

I was only an adolescent who had just celebrated his 17th birthday

when the opportunity to take part in an international language course came up. It would be held in Nairobi, Kenya, in Strathmore College, the first interracial school in Africa, begun under the impetus of Saint Josemaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei. This stay allowed me to enter deeply into this magical continent, and it changed my life! I wrote down in a diary many of the events of that trip and on my return to Spain they became a novel called "From an African Train." I had become a writer.

Kenya was the first country in Africa where members of Opus Dei went to start its apostolic work, in 1958 when the country was still a British colony. They arrived in Mombasa by boat with an image of our Lady that Saint Josemaria had given to them. The 'A' Level College they managed to start two and a half years later was the result of their strong faith in God. It

admitted students from all over Kenya of every race, tribe and creed, as Saint Josemaria had wanted.

The book I mention above is a mixture of truth and fiction and includes the true story of Santiago Eguidazu, a Numerary member of Opus Dei, who celebrated his 32nd birthday the very day he arrived in Kenya. He was an economist by profession who left a well paid job in London to work in Kenya, to “spread the universal call to holiness” to the inhabitants of a far away country.

I had many things in common with Santi, as we came from the same place in the north of Spain. He took an interest in my own liking for literature. He had been in Kenya for four years involved in activities with young people and in the development of Opus Dei in East Africa. He treated equally well those coming from different social

backgrounds, tribes or beliefs, Hindus or Sikhs, and was always optimistic and hard working. He adapted quickly to the African ways.

Santi took me to the children's home looked after by the Mother Teresa's sisters in Huruma, a low income district of Nairobi. Seeing the work of the sisters fascinated me! This was a call from heaven for me.

Santi died on the beach of Kanamai, near Mombasa, where he was the director of a camp organized by the Hodari Boys Club for more than 100 boys. I was there helping as a tutor, together with Chema Postigo. The place was very beautiful, with many coconut trees and white beaches. In order to entertain the boys Santi used to sing at night with his not so good voice around the fire.

I remember when one of the small boys came to me smiling, with his very white teeth, to tell me that Santi

had told him that he too had a guardian angel. He was not a Catholic and not even a Christian.

The 19th of August thirty years ago began with many clouds in the sky. Little by little a storm was building up. Santi had gone in the afternoon to the reef, during the sports time, with some of the boys. There one of the boys went swimming on the other side of the reef, a dangerous place hit by big waves. At some stage he asked for help as he was having difficulties in getting back to the reef. Santi jumped in to help him. It is not clear what happened next. The boy managed to reach the reef but Santi's body appeared floating unconscious, most likely after he hit some rocks. Fr. Manuel Gonzalez, the priest of the camp, who was also a medical doctor and happened to be nearby, was called. Santi's body was put on some tires and dragged to the shore by a number of boys who came to help,

while artificial respiration was done on him. Although he was taken to a nearby medical clinic, he was already dead.

He was buried in Lang'ata Cemetery, not far from the Ngong' Hills, a well-known place thanks to Karen Blixen's autobiographical novel that inspired the movie "Out of Africa." Many Strathmore College students attended his funeral and burial.

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei, when informed about his death, wrote to Santi's parents telling them:

"As always happens in these cases, I found it very hard to accept the will of our Lord. But later I bowed my head and savored slowly the words that our most beloved Father [as we affectionately call the founder of Opus Dei, Saint Josemaria Escriva] used to repeat: 'May the most just and lovable will of God be done, be

fulfilled and eternally praised above all things' (*The Way*, no. 691). I slept very little last night and continued praying to Santi. You should be very proud of your son. I remember when he was in Rome on his way to Kenya. We spoke for some time, before I gave him the blessing for the trip to Kenya, whose final stop is in now heaven. He was excited about going there and ready to give himself to God. It is clear that he was ready and prepared to meet our Lord, who allowed him not to suffer a sickness."

Santiago Eguidazu made a reality of the founder of Opus Dei's words: "there is only one race, the race of the children of God."

The wake of his body took place in the oratory of Strathmore College and was very moving. Many people walked by, also some who had not stepped before in a Christian place of worship. Even they prayed for a

short while and later on shared what they had learned from Santi's life.

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