

AMMI *Lacombe* MAMI  
Canada

# Oblate Spirit

April 2014

*Food for  
Thought*



# A taste of reality

Oh, my!

When you can't find the words to describe how you feel about something, "Oh, my" sometimes is enough. That's how we felt as we reviewed the stories for this issue, which has the Kenya Mission as its focus.



The influence of the western world is obviously there. But mixed in with cars, computers and televisions are age-old cultural beliefs and poverty levels that most of us in Canada find hard to comprehend. We have similar issues in this country, but nothing like that in the poorest parts of the world.

There is the heart-opening experience offered by Diane Lepage about the Meru slums, people struggling to survive in the most difficult of situations. There is the eye-opening description of the "initiation" by Gerald Conlan, OMI, about the transition from boyhood to manhood, and all the problems associated with these age-old traditions.

Some of these descriptions are harsh, but they are the reality faced by the Oblates we so lovingly support. These are the dangers, the pitfalls and the sometimes fatal outcomes the Oblates encounter. This is their stark reality, and our chance to experience it. Our Oblates are not in Kenya, or Peru, or anywhere they are called, to change the culture of the people with whom they work. But in their efforts, they can succeed in deepening a person's relationship with God. And for that we should be thankful.

*John and Emily Cherneski*  
*Communications Coordinators*



# MERU SLUMS:

## *A shock to the senses*

**BY DIANE LEPAGE**

MERU, KENYA – I thought I had prepared myself to visit one of the slums in Meru, Kenya, but what I saw, felt, smelled and experienced was utterly heart-wrenching.

Upon arrival at the Shauriako Slum, I saw hundreds of shacks joined together, all made up of old corral-type wood and rusted corrugated tin roofs. Curious eyes, young and old, peered out at us, the white strangers. We were joyfully greeted by Sr. Bibian, a Good Shepherd Sister, who is also the biological sister of our Kenyan Oblate, Gideon Rimberia. The Good Shepherd Sisters have built a centre in the slums, providing a meal for the children and a gathering place for all.

Meeting regularly at the centre is a group of women who call themselves the Euphrasian Women's Group, named after St. Euphrasia, the founder of the Good Shepherd Sisters. This

group has formed in order to empower and support each other to make a better life for their children and grandchildren. Many are grandmothers raising their grandchildren because the mothers have died (usually AIDS related) or the children have been abandoned. The women make small beaded items, cards, soap and grow produce to sell at the local market.

We were invited into a few of the homes, which were dark, with no windows, dirt floors, and permeated with the smell of heavy smoke. The walls were covered with old newspapers, pieces of cardboard and old posters or flyers. One of the homes had a large poster with several pictures of Michael Jackson on it that made me wonder if the woman had any idea who he was. The shacks are one-room dwellings with little to no fur-

niture other than maybe a decrepit wooden bed with an old mattress, a couple of bent cooking pots, a makeshift fire pit and an assortment of 'found' treasures.

As we walked through the alleys, I saw mangy-looking animals: a cow, ducks, chickens and a couple of goats. Children stared at us until they realized we were with the Oblates, at which time their curiosity and shyness vanished and they approached to touch the skin of the new wuzungus (white people).

Our walk then took







us up a hill where my senses were gagged with the putrid smell of feces. How in the world do these women and children live like this? How do they do it? How do they survive? Where do they find the strength to carry on? Such utter despair and poverty surrounds them, it is everywhere you look.

Once up the hill and around a corner in a small secluded area, the women proudly showed us the community garden and the produce they were growing. I was struck by their joy and hope-filled eyes. This was food for their children and grandchildren; this was income for their basic survival.

As we continued, we were brought to another area where they showed us how they make soap, another important product they sell at the market. A few of the Oblates even got into the action and gave a hand in stirring a batch. I must say it is quite the chemical process and requires knowledge, skill and expertise.

Once back at the centre, the Euphrasian women presented us with a rooster out of gratitude for the Oblates. Young men who are interested in becoming a missionary live in community with the Oblates at their formation house in Meru.

One of the pastoral experiences for the candidates is to spend one day a week journeying with the slum dwellers. The Oblate presence is a constant reminder to the women and children that they are not alone and that others do care about them.

As I look back on that day, my heart is filled with sorrow at the living conditions of these families. So what can I do to alleviate this suffering and misery? Obviously I need to assist in making sure the presence of the Oblates

continues and that self-sustaining projects of the Euphrasian Women's Group such as making cards, soaps and growing produce increases. I invite you to join me in supporting the Oblates and making a difference in the lives of the poor.



Glenn Zimmer, OMI,  
lends a hand to make soap



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# Returning to Kenya

BY KEN FORSTER, OMI

It was a natural fit. When the new administration began its mandate in August, members of the team accepted responsibility for certain portfolios in Lacombe Province OMI Canada.

When we spoke of the Kenya portfolio, I offered to hold it because I felt that my nine years in the mission prepared me to offer greater direction as well as encouragement to the committed Oblates who minister there today.

I visited Kenya in January. The schedule was well organized, with time to visit our two parishes, the many small communities served by the Oblates, many old friends and our houses of formation both in Meru and Nairobi.

I was present for the renewal of vows of Cosmas Kithinji, one of our scholastics present in Kenya at the time but preparing to return to Cedara in South Africa to continue his studies.

We have just learned that Mario Azrak, OMI, has been called by the general administration in Rome to work with the financial office. After 13 years of dedicated service, he will be leaving the mission this summer.

There are 11 Oblates serving our mission in Kenya,



Ken Forster, OMI

although one is on a study sabbatical. All are active but pushed to their limit as we staff two formation houses, are engaged in prison ministry, serve an orphanage and have just taken on the responsibility for a new parish, Kisaju, about an hour and a half southeast of Nairobi. Gideon Rimberia, OMI, a Kenyan ordained less than two years, will be the pastor of this new parish.

They have many needs. Kisaju, a fast-growing community relatively close to Nairobi, has been chosen to establish the parish centre. Without a church, the community celebrates Sunday Mass in a nursery classroom that is overflowing. They are negotiating to get a few acres of land from the Catholic-sponsored school. The Oblates are presently renting a house as their residence in the mother parish but will move shortly to Kisaju itself, and look to rent there. They will be working with many tribal groups but predominantly with the Maasai.

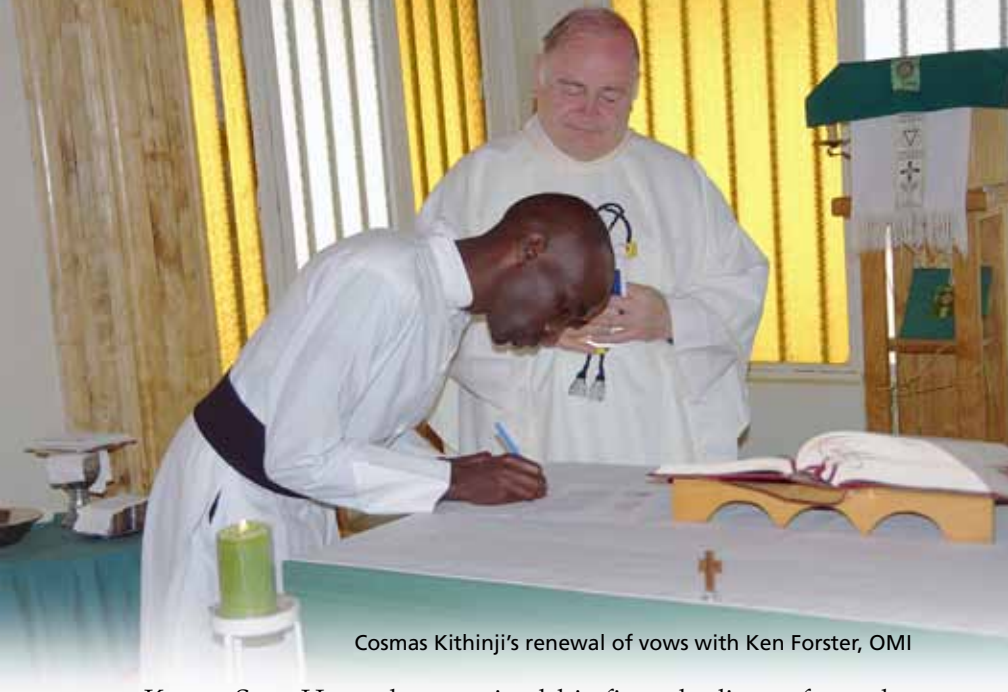
The area is very dry so water will be a major concern. Their collection from this emerging parish has been 300,000 Kenyan shillings in the last six months or about \$3,600, but they often receive considerable food and vegetables in the Sadaka (offering). They often have enough to share with a shelter for women that is run by nuns and served weekly by the Oblates.

A newly-ordained Oblate from the Mission of South



Joseph, Novice,  
and Cosmas,  
Seminarian





Cosmas Kithinji's renewal of vows with Ken Forster, OMI

Korea, Sam Hong, has received his first obedience from the Superior General to serve in Kenya. He will arrive in April.

All members of the mission community met in our formation house in Karen, Nairobi, for three full days. It was a time of prayer, sharing of ideas, wrestling with choosing a common path, planning the future and discerning leadership for the mission. Jim Fiori, OMI, has been re-appointed for a second term to oversee the Kenyan mission, with Faustin Litanda, OMI, and Gideon Rimberia, OMI, named as his councillors.

We discussed concerns regarding formation. We have three seminarians in theology, one in novitiate and six in pre-novitiate philosophy. We project that we may have 10 young men joining as postulants in Meru this spring. How can we give them the best formation as wholesome young men, as Oblates, to become saints as St. Eugene desires?

The Kenyan Mission has been financed in its formation programs, its community needs and its development projects which assist the poor, by a few major sources:

- a fund that has been set up in Rome where we access only the interest income annually

- friends from Australia
- the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate
- OMI Lacombe Province

We recognize that these sources will not be sufficient as the number of Oblates and the ministries increase, therefore much discussion centred on pursuing some self-sustaining options. Some of our major costs are related to the education of our seminarians. Approximately half of their training takes place in Kenya. The remainder occurs in an Oblate School of Theology in South Africa. We want our men to have solid international training with other Africans to enrich their missionary awareness. This is expensive.

How can we create a source of income from within Kenya to sustain us into the future? The discussion narrowed to two options:

- Land speculation (all of the properties we own have increased dramatically in the few years we have been resident in Kenya)

Ken Forster, OMI





Ken Forster, OMI

- With the growth of population within Nairobi and Meru, there is significant reason to believe that family rental units for employed Kenyans can be a reliable source of income.

These options will be seriously investigated and clear figures with plans and proposals will be presented to the Provincial council. The initial outlay of resources will be significant and as we move forward we have great hope that our friends, through MAMI, will embrace this cause. Perhaps some of you might be willing to walk in friendship with the Oblates by making a bequest or donating securities to support the growth of the Kenyan Mission.

Great things have been accomplished in Kenya and there is no reason to believe we will fall short. "God never tests us beyond our strength." I thank all readers who love and support the Oblates in our Kenya Mission as well as at home.

*Fr. Forster, the provincial of OMI Lacombe Canada, was the founding parish priest of Kionyo in 1997-2006.*





# From boys to men

**BY GERARD CONLAN, OMI**

KIONYO, KENYA – Initiation of boys in the Merian culture (people of Meru where Kionyo is situated) is a big deal. At the end of primary school (Canadian equivalent Grade 8), boys go away for two to three weeks of seclusion for initiation.

Initiation varies around Kenya, but for most eastern tribes circumcision is an important part of the initiation process. In the past initiation was done with groups of boys between ages 18 and 20 every two years, using one knife as a sign of unity. Then, to fit with the education system, it became an annual event where the age varies from 13 to 18, depending on how many years it takes to get through primary school.

Uninitiated boys cannot go to secondary school with initi-





2013 Graduating Young Men, Njogune Prayer House.  
Front centre: four Guardians for the boys: Kiogora, Eric, Isaac & Patrick.

ated men, nor can they work with initiated men. Once initiated, they cannot go back to primary school, which causes a problem for older boys who have had to leave to earn some money. Luckily we have one primary school giving primary classes to “adults” in the afternoons.

In the Western world we have become afraid of pain and there is a growing negativity to circumcision. But pain is a part of life. Experiencing modern circumcision pain today is minor compared to the past. One lad was too poor to go to camp so was “done” at home with no pain killers. However, the St. Stephen’s Parish camp uses doctors who use pain killers, at least for the operation and the first 24 hours. Pain can be instructive and helpful. During the “painful” recovery period,

the boys are attentive to instruction because they need to keep still. Let's just say it works!

The boys actually look forward to circumcision as a sign of manhood and they are different after their initiation. There is pride, a feeling of self-worth, a great camaraderie and more knowledge. They are aware that they can endure pain, that life has moments of pain, and that they are not alone.

After initiation the boy is considered to be, and is treated as, a man. This is a big challenge for boys 13 to 17 who are often emotionally immature. It can allow them to be led astray by older youths due to the freedom they are given. It can also become an excuse by some fathers (usually drunkards) to let the boys look after themselves ("you're a man now"). They must move out of the parents' house into a small house built for them (usually by the father or other family members). The parents are not allowed in, even though it is next to the main house. It is easy for boys to arrange for secret visitors. In the past, when the new men misbehaved the father would advise the boy's age-mates who would come unannounced and "discipline" him. Currently I have a situation where one student is staying away from school because of pressure by the other boys to drink beer made secretly in their new "homes."

In 2011, a seminarian recommended we begin our own initiation camp, as our boys were forced to go far away or just



have circumcision at home and with no real instruction. The cost of the outside camps was high. In the past it was common for boys to be seriously beaten to toughen them up, and that still sometimes happens.

Given my former involvement with male spirituality, I was enthusiastic about the idea of a camp. With the support of parish priest Fr. Daquin Iyo, OMI, we teamed with the leaders of the Catholic Men's Association. This was a pastoral outreach to influence the teachings given to the boys and assist many struggling families with the lower cost.

In 2011 we held the first camp with 33 boys. In 2012, it was 24 boys due to school strikes and exam delays. The first two camps were held at the Igandene Boys Boarding School. Both were successful and the parents were pleased with the effect on their boys. Some prayer-house areas are still traditional and would not send boys to a modern camp, preferring to send them into the forest. The first year we learned of two deaths as boys were rushed to hospital too late from serious bleeding. In our parish camp we get a qualified and experienced medical doctor who uses some local anaesthetic (which the old men frown upon!). There is 'supposed' to be some pain. Each operation takes about 15 to 20 minutes. Most boys grimace but don't make a sound, and this gives their sponsors great pride, and they report the news back to the fathers at home. Very often, families will have a special home mass a few days after graduation.

In 2013, we had 54 boys for our third camp from Nov. 27 to Dec. 14. Slow registrations turned into a last-minute rush that caused some pressure. We turned away a few due to accommodation limits so there were some unhappy fathers. We used the Njogune Boarding Primary School, a new venue for elite performing students from class 5 to 8. It is not complete but has good facilities.

We charged 8,000 shillings plus a 500-shilling medical deposit (about \$110 in total). Local wage for the cook is 12,000

shillings, so it is a high price for some families. But they always find it for the boys. Our attempts for an Alternative Right of Passage for Girls brought protests, and the cost was only 2,000 shillings for one week.

The medical deposit came about because in the first year one boy had an STI which blew the budget getting the proper medicines. This year, we had a rocky start, as the team of doctors was different from the previous year based on false information. They promised 600 shillings per boy plus medicines of about 4,000 for the group. The day before they were due, they rang and upped the price to 900. And the medicines they requested increased to 16,000. We were expecting to start by 12 noon, but they didn't arrive until 7 p.m. and worked until 2 a.m. The sponsors, who represent the family/father, were annoyed at the delay so we had to break the budget and provide some lunch. The sponsor must witness the "cutting."

They finished, and only two boys had to be re-stitched the next day. The following day one boy was rushed to hospital after excessive bleeding started. That was solved and he survived (thanks be to God). But a 10 p.m. call is not desirable.





However, it does give this priest a taste of the stress that parents go through with children.

After circumcision on the very first day, the boys take three or four days for initial recovery in silence – well as silent as teenage boys can be. They are not allowed to sleep much due to the risk of damaging the operation and so they are like zombies, but are well fed to enhance recovery. There were four guardians (young men about age 20 to 30) who supervised and advised the boys on how to manage their recovery. The doctor returns after two days to inspect the healing and fix any problems.

After a few days we began the lessons. The main topics included: Life Skills, How to Behave as Men, Understanding Sexuality/Sex/STDs/STIs, Cultural Aspects, Spirituality for Men, Understanding Marriage, Study Skills, legal issues and what happens when you break the law, Budgeting/Finances, Understanding Drugs/Alcohol, Leadership Skills, How to Be a Good Father, and Understanding/Respecting Women (it is hard to find a man able to do the ‘understanding’ part of this talk well).

After each presentation by local elders or outside “expert” speakers, the guardians spend one or two hours going over the issues discussed, and answer questions from the boys. As I was involved with two or three presentations, I overcame the language barrier through the guardians and the use of PowerPoint slides and video clips. Most boys understand a good amount of English, but the accent (Australian) is hard for some.

To assist the talks on sexuality, we get the boys to fill in an anonymous questionnaire on family life, drug use and sexual experiences. Sadly, there were three boys who had been forced into sex by older women before the age of 10. Three boys had been abused by older boys or young men.

My final contribution is a daily visit to give an opportunity for a few boys at a time to have a one-on-one conversation

about anything confidentially, and celebrate reconciliation if they wish. About one in five boys would have some stressful issue they wanted to talk about, usually stressful family situations, being an orphan, pornography addiction, how to stop using drugs, peer pressure, etc. A few were really interested in how to improve their prayer life and know God better. I also ask them about their career hopes and give them a chance to ask questions.

The final day they prepare for the graduation. The sponsors are supposed to bring a smart set of clothes and shoes. For the poorer boys this is a problem, so we try to help out. We also give a nice coloured, laminated certificate.

The sponsors have been very happy the last three years, and many parents positively talk about the effects on their sons around the community. One key benefit, we hope, is that the new men will have the courage to ask questions rather than be too shy. The guardians are generous in giving advice as the young men grow older. So it is important to get good young guardians, committed to the faith.

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Daquin Iyo, OMI

# Ministry through a window

BY DIANE LEPAGE

KIONYO, KENYA – When Canadians lean out their car window it's usually to order a hamburger, fries and a Diet Coke. It's not quite the same story in Kenya.

The Oblates serving in the rural area of Kionyo are one of the few with a vehicle and are constantly seen leaning out their window to greet people of all ages as they make their way up and down the rough hilly roads.

In 2013, a group representing MAMI visited the many schools, prayer houses, clinics and projects in Kenya that have been made possible through generous donations from you.

Daquin Iyo, an Oblate originally from the Congo, was one of the pastors of the prayer houses in Kionyo and served as our chauffeur. As we travelled around the countryside, we stopped frequently as Daquin would greet someone he knew.

He would lean out the window, shake hands, say a few words in Kiswahili and laugh. Many times, hands would reach back inside our truck to eagerly shake the hands of the visiting wuzungus (white people) from Canada.

Although we did not speak the same language, the shared smiles affirmed our human connection. Each one of these moments, encounters, were filled with genuine care. As we continued our drive, Daquin would tell us a little bit about the life challenges of the person we had just met.

This is a part of the Oblate ministry in Kenya. Because most people in Kionyo do not have a vehicle, they walk wherever they need to go, and they walk and walk and walk some more. Children walk up to 10 kilometres every day to attend school, while men and women walk many kilometres to the local market to sell their produce and vegetables. Others can be seen walking great distances several times a day carrying baskets full of tea to the factory or with backs hunched over, burdened with large bundles of twigs gathered to cook a hot meal.

Daquin gave rides to those who were struggling, including a young mother with a baby swaddled across her back while she carried a large bag of potatoes that she was hoping to sell at the market. Another time, we picked up several elderly people as they were making their way to one of the prayer houses.

Wherever we went people knew the Oblates and obviously loved them deeply. Part of the reason is because of the beautiful, compassionate missionary men who take every opportunity possible to share God's love. It is all about relationships, meeting people, listening to one another, and journeying through life's joys and challenges together.

Following the example of Daquin, let's lean out our windows a little bit more, reaching out to others in our daily travels of life. It's a pleasant surprise to see what happens!



# A problem or a challenge?

BY JIM FIORI, OMI



Jim Fiori, OMI

KIONYO, KENYA – We hear of terrible winter weather in both Canada and the United States. There is climate change happening here as well.

We have been getting rain quite early. This becomes problematic because people haven't yet completed the harvest and so have not been able to prepare the land and plant the crops. In the northwest we have drought and famine. People have neither food nor water.

I was recently in the outlying areas of our new Kisaju parish. We visited a school that was out of water. They have tanks where they collect the rain water, but it must rain.

At the moment their only source of water is what is left of what we would call a slough. It is runoff from the last rains. It is very small and only an inch deep. When I was there, the cattle were in it. The people will collect this water and boil it.

I told them we would pray for rain and in fact it did rain but certainly not enough to fill their tanks.

Going forward we will have to organize something about getting water. We can probably drill a well or, as they call it here, a bore hole. The pumps would have to be solar operated because they are far removed from the electrical grid.

*Jim Fiori, OMI, is the Kenya Mission Superior*

# Dr. McCunn's passing mourned

BY MAURICE SCHROEDER, OMI, MD

PERU – Dr. Don McCunn's passing is a great loss for us, and no doubt a great gain for that thoroughly good man.

As Oblates of Mary Immaculate of Peru we owe him a great debt for all he did for us and the people of Peru for so many years. We can only hope to be good stewards and imitators of all his generosity through the years.

As he was a fellow member of the Oblate congregation, we have asked the priests of the delegation to celebrate a mass for his eternal repose.

The Oblates of Peru join me in offering our sincerest sympathy to family and all the members of Medical Friends of Peru.

No doubt we have gained a faithful intercessor in Heaven. May he rest in peace.

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*There are many charities and good causes that solicit your support. Yet for some reason you have chosen to offer the Oblates your prayers, friendship and assistance.*

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How have the Oblates supported, inspired and encouraged you?

What are some of your best memories of Oblates and their missionary work?

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*A publication of the  
Oblate Mission office.*

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Missionary Projects  
can be sent to:**

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**Printed in Canada by:**

St. Peter's Press  
Muenster, SK

**AMMI Lacombe MAMI**