

Oblate Spirit

AMMI *Lacombe* Canada MAMI



April 2022



25 years in Kenya

We respond with kindness



Russia attacks with missiles. We respond with kindness.

My father was born near Lviv, Ukraine, and was brought to Canada as an infant 120 years ago. My four grandparents were born in Ukraine. Emily's family originated in Germany. We have always identified as Canadian. I spoke Ukrainian as a toddler and learned the written language. But that was many years ago, and that all faded with time.

The "Uke" in me settled into the depths of my memory, replaced by the "Canucks" we became.

However, the reality of my origins came crashing back, picture by picture, bomb by bomb, horror by horror, when Ukraine was invaded in a war best described as grotesque by today's global standards.

The images, at best, are painful to watch. They are gut-wrenching. They make us want to turn off our communication devices, quit watching and reading, and escape into our own safe bunkers.

But we can't hide from reality.

Are we helpless? Not by a long shot, it seems. Many of our readers received an e-mail March 4 with an urgent appeal for help in Ukraine, and the response was astounding. Within five days more than \$75,000 was received. We had hoped for \$20,000. By Thursday, March 10, \$75,000 was sent to help in Ukraine. Donations kept coming, and by March 17, the total had reached \$122,137.

For those of you who did not see the e-mail request, there are about 25 missionary Oblates in Ukraine serving in places such as Kyiv, Rokitne, Lviv, Tyvriv and Chernihiv. Food is in short supply. Bread is rationed, if it is even available.

Fr. Vitalij Podolan is the delegation superior of the Oblates in Ukraine. "It has been necessary to hide many times from

bombings, but the Oblates do not leave their houses and parishes, but stay to accompany people, to support them morally, spiritually and materially. The risk ... is very high," he wrote.

Refugees, mostly women and children, have left the country, while husbands and fathers stay to fight. The majority have landed in Poland, where the Oblates have opened their houses and churches to shelter the refugees.

Oblate organizations around the world, similar to Lacombe MAMI, are responding with funds to buy food, drinking water, medicine, clothing, mattresses and other needed materials.

Those who didn't see the email request can still donate by calling the MAMI office at 1-866-432-6264 or sending a cheque payable to AMMI Lacombe Canada MAMI and mailing to 601 Taylor Street West, Saskatoon, SK S7M 0C9, or online through our website.

The missionary spirit is alive and well. Who would have known it would be so badly needed in a time of war.

We attack with kindness!



Now, on to happier times. Featured in this issue is a review of the Oblate history in Kenya as the mission prepares to celebrate its 25th anniversary on May 22. Ken Forster, OMI, was designated to lead the mission 25 years ago, and provides the background and experiences in those early days.

Fr. Ken Thorson, the provincial superior of OMI Lacombe Canada, recently travelled to Kenya and looks at the mission today and beyond.

The Jubilee Committee, composed of Oblates and Kionyo parishioners, is working on a celebration in Kionyo involving hundreds, and potentially several thousand parishioners and guests.

God willing, and a war that doesn't escalate, Canadian Oblates will be among them.

John and Emily Cherneski
Communications Coordinators

In the beginning . . .

BY KEN FORSTER, OMI

In the 1990s, the Oblates of Canada as a region were asked by the general administration in Rome to accept a new mission in Africa. Bishop Silas Njeru of Méru visited and stayed with the Oblates during many visits to Rome. He asked the Oblate superior general whether he would consider opening a mission in his Kenyan diocese.

The bishop spoke of many needs but stressed that he wanted the Oblate charism in his diocese. Three Oblates, including Gerard Laprise (the general councillor for Canada), Fr. Stanley Tebele (provincial of the northern province of South Africa), and Jacques Johnson (one of the Canadian provincials at that time), visited and settled on the need to send four Oblates to begin two new parishes. One was in Bulesa and the other in Kionyo.



At its inception the Canadian Oblate Conference was responsible for the mission. It was understood that the eight provinces (before they amalgamated) would contribute financially. I was asked to be the superior of this new mission. Along with newly-named team member Fr. Harold Kaufmann, we visited Kenya in September of 1996 and had the opportunity to see the two potential parishes that had been earmarked by the Oblate leadership.



We saw Kionyo and visited Bishop Silas Njiru in Méru. His driver Joseph took us to Isiolo and up to Bulesea and Mirti. (At that time the new diocese of Isiolo had been sectioned off Méru diocese and Bishop Luigi Locati was named the Ordinary of the new diocese. He was later murdered by one of his Diocesan priests).

We visited a Fr. Pio and his associate in Mirti. We had been offered the community of Bulesea, approximately 15 kilometres away. We stayed for about three weeks in Kenya in September 1996. Bulesea, in particular, was chosen because it truly fit the criteria for “specialists in difficult missions”, but Harold and I determined that it would not be a good decision to accept ministry in Bulesea for the reasons below.

- By that time, September 1996, between the first investigation and our arrival, Bulesea was in the newly formed Diocese of Isiolo. Therefore, we would have had two bishops to deal with.
- The two communities did not speak the same tribal language; one was Merian, the other Boran.
- The roads were atrocious. We drove not on the road, but in the ditch because it was smoother. The two parishes were six hours apart. We questioned how it would be

possible to establish real community bonds with only four Oblates and the difficulty of commuting.

- The living conditions at the time were very primitive with no electricity and poor access to water. I did not know if I, as second youngest at 50 years of age, could live there and therefore could not imagine the older fellows being expected to survive.
- Most importantly Bulesa was totally Muslim. We might have been able to be a faith presence there, but it would be first evangelization with no realistic hope of vocations, for many years if ever. For the Canadian region to send elderly Oblates to begin something that would be extinguished by illness or death of the original missionaries may have been daring, but certainly as well “fools for Christ’s sake.”

We spoke with the bishop, and he offered us another option of Timau, two hours away from Kionyo. Timau was a well-established parish. Two Oblates would live with the





Oblates Bill Stang and Joe Jacek were early missionaries to Kenya

Diocesan pastor, Fr. Protasio, to be mentored and two as well in Kionyo.

Harold, Fr. Bill Stang and I gathered at Aix in January 1997. Harold and I went directly from Aix to Nairobi in April 1997. Fr. Bill returned to Canada to organize, pack and visit his aging mother.

Harold and I went to stay with the Consolata congregation in Nairobi for a month or so, trying to see what was possible with learning the language.

In early May, we journeyed north to the Méru Diocese. Harold and I went to live with Fr. Aloysius Kabuti in the mother parish of Kanyakine. Fr. Kabuti was the pastor of Kanyakine parish.

The parish of Kionyo was created on May 24, 1997, and Fr. Kabuti remained the pastor of Kionyo. The idea was that we as Oblates would not assume responsibility for the new parish of Kionyo for a year, but we could see that it would be more advantageous to separate from the Kanyakine parish and establish the Kionyo parish at an earlier date.

On July 16, 1997, St. Stephen's Catholic Parish of Kionyo was handed over to the Oblates. Fr. Salesio Karanthia, the first ordained Merian priest, came to live with Harold and me. Fr. Salesio, a Merian elder, was to help us adapt and teach us the Kimeru language.

Fr. Stang came in August of 1997. His mother died at the end of September, but he did not return for her funeral. Fr. Joachim Singarajah came in September 1997.

Harold and Joachim left for language school in Tanzania in September 1997 to learn Kiswahili and when they returned in January 1998 they went directly to live with the parish priest of Timau, Fr. Protasio.

After the return of Joachim Singarajah to Canada, we consolidated our efforts in the Kionyo area.

With the formation of OMI Lacombe Canada in 2003, the Kenyan mission became the sole responsibility of Lacombe Canada.

DONATING SECURITIES

to Oblate missionary works



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To take advantage of this tax-saving offer, please call Diane Lepage (1-866-432-6264) at our office for further information. A minimum market value of \$5,000 is suggested. We would be happy to facilitate this exchange that benefits you and the poor of the Oblate missions. To view an excellent instructive tutorial on how you can increase the value of your donation of securities and earn a tax credit at the same time:

<https://omilacombe.ca/powerful-way-leave-legacy-2/>



Fr. Ken during his 2019 visit to Kenya

Silver Anniversary Kenya Mission

It seems almost impossible to imagine that it was twenty-five years ago that Oblates from the Canadian Region, after enriched by a three-month Mazenod Experience in Aix en Provence, France, the cradle of the congregation, arrived in Kenya to begin to live this Oblate charism for the first time in Eastern Africa. On this occasion of our Silver Anniversary, I was asked to write a reflection on the beginning of the mission.

This past year my sister gave to me, a few cassette tapes that I had sent home to Canada during those early years. Communication by phone was very difficult although my mother attempted to call about once a month. We only had a landline in the main mission posts and unfortunately often we would be without service as the copper wire was very attractive to thieves. So, I decided to sit and just speak of different experiences on cassette and mail home every three months or so.

I found it interesting myself to relive those challenges of the early years in the mission. I transcribed the contents of the tapes and will share with you a little of the ordinary everyday happenings. One tape was recorded June 10th, 1998, a Wednesday. Fr. Joe Singarajah, Fr. Harold Kaufmann and Fr. Bill Stang and I were at the Benedictine Centre in Nanyuki, on the other side of Mt. Kenya for a few days of retreat.

"Nice spot to get some quiet time. We use our evenings to just share after supper which is at 7 o'clock in the evening. We have evening prayer at 8 and then just time to talk about our ministry, and some of the problems that are going on in our own lives. Fr. Joe Singarajah had been away for four months at language school in Kiswahili in Tanzania in Kisumu, on Lake Victoria. He has just come back the last few days in Timau working there now with Fr. Harold. Fr. Protasio, a young priest just ordained a few years is carrying on in the role of Pastor there. The intention is for him to remain a year and then in June of next year, the Oblates would take over the responsibility of that parish."

"In April it was a very nice month. It rained only a little mainly at night. We are in what they call the longer rainy season. It rains basically through the night and April is usually bright. But in May we had more rain even during the day. The mornings would be clear, but it would rain in the afternoon and through the night. We got quite a bit of rain but nothing in comparison to what we received in December and January. They did a lot of road work putting rock in the big holes where there were ruts. They broke up a lot of rock with hammers and stuff. We could get to half of the prayer houses without any great problem. I wouldn't worry about getting stuck as I did in December and January. When I went out, I wouldn't know whether I would return for the roads were so bad. They brought in truckloads of big rock, so the roads are very rough but at least passable. Some of the smaller prayer houses are just on dirt roads so in the rainy season you just cannot make the hills, so you just don't get in or you walk in to get to the communities."

"So, what else has happened since I last spoke to you? We had



a big tragedy here. Our famous Ng'ombe, our cow, Kandy. Douglas was just calling the cow out for milking, in the valley, the land just goes down by the church and the cow had been down there grazing. He was calling the cow and suddenly it was just gone. He rushed up. The cow had fallen into a very deep pit, about maybe eight feet deep, like an L shape where it went off on a sort of tunnel to the side. Her whole head went off into the tunnel area. Only about two or three feet of her hind end was showing at the bottom of the hole. Oh boy, so anyway they got a rope. About fifty people had gathered, me included trying to pull this cow. We tied the rope around the back legs and tried to pull her out of the hole. She was down about eight feet. It was extremely hard to lift the cow straight out. But with fifty people we manage to drag little by little out of the hole. By the time they got her out, she had died. She suffocated. She couldn't get air.

That was our poor cow. How can you make money on a cow anyway? But there are other benefits like manure for the garden. I had put all the information down, about who is feeding and milking and giving a few shillings a month to do that. Fourteen hundred shillings a month between the two of them. Which is what? Fourteen hundred divided by 40? \$35 or something like that. They were getting a dollar a day between the two of them, and we still weren't

making any money. By the end of it we were still seven hundred shillings in the hole. But there were still other benefits to the thing: keeping the grass down and having manure for the garden.

So right away they slaughtered the animal. They got a "Muthingi", a butcher, who slaughtered the beast and hung it. The next day was Sunday, so they sold it to people who came to services, and they gave credit to those who wanted to buy a piece of meat but didn't have the money. They haven't collected it all yet, but by the time we collect it all we might make about twelve thousand shillings on it. We paid eighteen so we probably lose about six thousand shillings. About \$150. The people share their condolences with us. "Pole! Pole!" It was a very gentle kind of cow. Never had to worry about it running away. We had just had it inseminated two weeks before as well."

"Pastorally we are moving along. This Saturday I have a communal wedding celebration at Ngongo with twelve couples. We had the baptism of their children. Most of these couples are traditionally married and are waiting to get the dowry/ buying price. They are living together and now they are wanting to have their marriages blessed in the church and receive the sacrament. I had about twenty-five baptisms about two weeks ago. The weddings are going to take place this Saturday.

We are trying to slow down the catechists

Fr. Ken during his
2019 visit to Kenya



as they are bringing so many people. "Why don't you just slow down and prepare them more properly. Don't be so anxious to get everyone into the church and marriages blessed en masse". Right now, after this next Saturday we will have witnessed about seventy-five marriages this year. That's within nine months. They have had so little service by priests in the last couple years, so now they all want to have their marriages blessed and children baptized. That's nice to see but..."

"We had a meeting with the Principals, the headmasters, head-teachers they call them of the Catholic Sponsored Schools in the parish. There is about eight or nine primary schools and one secondary boarding school. There are so many problems with education mostly from a lack of money. We had a very good meeting with the headmasters, the superintendent of the district, and the deputy. 12-15 of them came. One woman.

At the secondary level almost all the schools are boarding schools. At the primary level there are also boarding schools from standard (grades) 4 or 5 until eight. We have said that we would not provide any financial assistance for boarding schools. Obviously, it is up to the parents if they choose, but we do not believe it is good for children to be separated from their families so young. We will try to assist day schools at primary level if the parents try to raise funds through Makethas. We would try to find matching funds through friends in Canada. I have confidence that we could get that kind of





money from Canada when we look at what sacrifice they make with the income they have.

They construct classrooms out of stone blocks cut out of the riverbanks. There is no heating. It is a matter of getting Mabati (tin roof) on top of wooden rafters. Also, a cement floor when you have a nice classroom. Others just have ground floors and slab wood siding. A stone block classroom with cement floor cost about 400,000 KS. (About ten thousand dollars) But for the people to come up with that is very difficult.

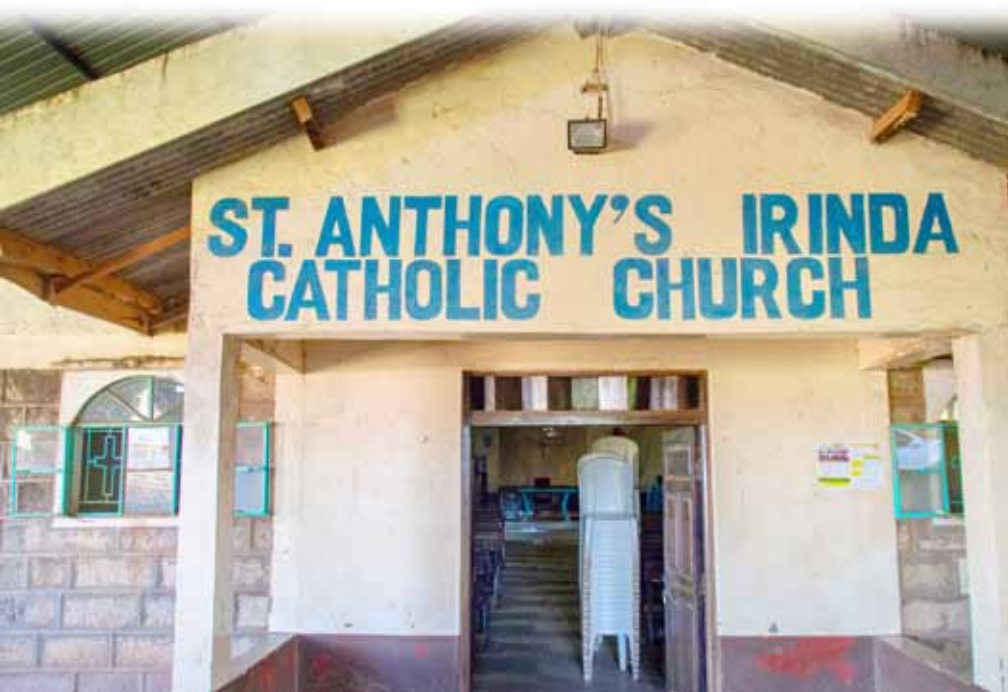
At the high school level, we suggested to the head teachers what about the possibility of a day school. There are no day schools at the secondary level in the countryside, only boarding schools. But I do think that day schools would work. There would be enough students around so that you could have a small high school, and it would be so much cheaper than boarding schools. To send their child to boarding school would be 18,000 – 20,000 shillings minimum, for three semesters. That is like \$500 a year. Our cook makes 30,000 KSH a year so that is two-thirds a salary for one high school student. So, if they have more than one child in high school most families cannot afford to send them both. So, looking at a day school one could maybe operate, if it was a Catholic-sponsored day school where you get the teacher's salary from the government, and you just had to pay for the building and textbooks. But even a day

school would have to provide a noon meal. That seems to be the tradition. They don't have anything to bring in a lunch, like bread sandwiches. Maybe we will see what they can do?"

We learned later that the reason why day school students needed to have the noon meal provided had to do with Merian Tradition and Customs. Young men were circumcised after Standard Eight (Grade Eight) and then were considered "adult males". It was not acceptable for an adult to carry his food as that was to be provided wherever he went.

Apart from the development and growth of Churches for the missions (perhaps 15 churches have been built), I rejoice in a few initiatives that we accomplished together with the people regarding community development. Firstly, we collaborated 50-50 with parents in building and establishing four day-secondary schools in various areas of our Kionyo Parish. Why this is significant is that up to that time there were only public boarding school serving the secondary students in rural areas of Kenya. St. Eugene day-secondary school was the first rural public secondary day-school to be built in all of Kenya.

Irinda Church



After our students succeeded well on their government KCSE (Grade 12 Kenyan Exam) scoring 14th out of some 96 schools in our district (all others being boarding schools), schools began to be built (mostly by Christian Churches) and flourish throughout the whole country. All these students would never have had a secondary education as their families could not afford “Boarding Schools”.

The impact of initiating rural public day schools had a huge impact in the country of Kenya. Koech report (1999) stressed on the need to make secondary education more accessible through the establishment and expansion of more day schools. According to society for international development (2003), in Kenya “fewer than 4% of Secondary students were drawn from the poorest per capita expenditure quintile, 7.3% from the lower middle-income group...” Still in 2003, “the cost of secondary education in boarding schools, (which) is higher than day schools by more than 50%.” For the poor basic survival necessitates that they spend most of their income on food, making education a second

consideration. Data shows that the poor spend much more on food than on education. (NGO Council 1997). The exclusion of the poor especially from secondary education means that they do not eventually get access to higher education and thus have little chance of upward social and economic mobility.

A second major community project took many years to complete and



Fr. Faustin on a pastoral visit

serves 2500 small family farms on the slopes of Mt. Kenya with gravity fed water. The project has approximately 40 concrete holding tanks covering an area of approximately 100 square kilometers with 209 kilometers of PVC pipe hand dug by project members. The three largest tanks were 225 cubic meters. The project cost approximately \$1 Million, plus labor in kind. This did much for ecumenism as all persons were welcome to join as members.

The Kenyan mission is today very vibrant with fifteen ordained Oblate priests serving in various ministries including four parishes. Five of these men are ordained Kenyans. We also have two Kenyan Oblate Brothers in final profession of vows as well as eight men in their last years of formation studying Theology, and several others in initial formation.

Thank you MAMI members for partnering with us and our friends in Kenya!

Murungu ni umwega! (God is good!) Magita jonthe! (All the time!)

Fr. Ken reviews the water project during his 2019 visit to Kenya





Fr. Joe with his brothers Richard (left) and John (right)

Fond memories

BY JOE JACEK, OMI

(Fr. Jacek, an early member of the mission to Kenya, reflected on the transcript of the cassette tapes provided by Ken Forster, OMI)

The second tape was recorded just a few months before I arrived on the scene, so I could relate to the place references, the driving, the “good” roads, the rainy seasons, the cold Kionyo mornings, the power going off multiple times a day and sometimes for a long time, which was why we had to have battery packs through which the power was channelled to cut out the dangerous (to computers) power surges and provide power between outages.

Just a couple months after I arrived in Kenya came the festive and solemn inauguration of the new phone system in

Kionyo. For an overseas call one no longer had to crank the house phone to call the local central operator, who knew each caller, who would check to see if there was a line open to Méru, who would see if there was a line available to Nairobi, who would try out of the country.

With the new dial system one could direct dial to anywhere. That also changed the way we could use computers and the Internet. Most people in Kenya did not have land-line phones. Then a few years later cell service spread. It was very expensive to use at first, until a second provider came along and calls-per-minute became less expensive. Soon cell phones predominated, bypassing the largely absent landline infrastructure, and thieves cut down many of the wires to sell the copper.

It was an expanding Church, with dioceses and parishes being subdivided. Many of the small farms were also being subdivided, to give to the several sons, just the opposite of what was happening here in Canada which was experiencing a declining rural population.

People in Kenya were poor by our standards, but I quickly noticed that they seemed to be happier. And I had never felt so welcomed in formal and informal ways in the various missions that we took turns serving.

If you have an intention or someone special for whom you would like the Oblates to pray, we invite you to submit your prayer requests by e-mail to mamiprayers@sasktel.net



Today and tomorrow ...

Fr. Ken Thorson, the provincial superior of OMI Lacombe Canada, returned from a recent visit to the Kenya missions. He was asked to respond to some questions about the mission as it approaches its 25-year anniversary.

Can you give us a reflection on the spirit in the mission after your recent visit?

Fr. Ken: It was my first visit in two years. On Jan. 25, with my (COVID) booster and hoping I had all my necessary docs, I made my way to Kenya. I spent just over two weeks on the ground in the mission.

My goal for the visit was to spend time with the Oblates. I spent far less time meeting with community leaders and the people we serve and with whom we work in our various ministries. This meant I had ample time for visits with each of the men, with each of the communities, and with the whole community at the annual all-member gathering.

I found the spirit of the Oblates to be filled with hope for the future, confident of God's presence among them, even while tinged with a certain residue of pandemic fatigue. Most of the men described their experiences of the pandemic and the hardships it imposed on so many



Fr. Ken with pre-novices



Irinda Church

of the people they serve. They also spoke of the ways they tried to respond. Those leaders and parishioners I did meet spoke of their deep appreciation for the presence of the Oblates through these times, and I was proud to hear of it.

Even at 25 years, the Oblate mission in Kenya is relatively young (the Oblates have been in Canada for more than 180 years!). Consequently, it's not surprising that they are occupied with the growth of the mission, new ministries and membership, the development of an accompanying infrastructure, and the resources to sustain it all into the future.

Amidst it all, I witnessed time and again the Oblates generously attending to the everyday needs of the people around them. The people with whom they work are at ease with them and come to them with confidence that they'll be received as sisters and brothers. I see this in a particular way with the Lay Associates, who have grasped the Oblate charism and understand themselves as partners with us in ministry.

What do you see as the most remarkable accomplishment of the Kenyan mission in its 25 years?

Whether in our foundation parish in Kionyo, or in our newest, in Larmudiac in the diocese and county of Nakuru, as I

travelled from house to house and parish to parish, I witnessed Oblates putting the informal motto of the congregation into practice: *'Oblates are close to the people with whom we work'*. I see leadership that is inclusive and encouraging. The people we work with are at ease with us.

As the mission has developed, we've largely stayed true to a partnership model of development. Shilling-per-shilling is an expression of the collaboration between people in Canada and elsewhere, who add their financial and prayer support to that of the people in Kenya. While shilling-per-shilling means that a project may take more time to complete, we do it together.

Irinda Church





Kionyo Church construction is almost complete

What would you like to see happen over the next 25 years?

The mission has grown slowly and steadily over these first 25 years, and it continues to grow, with three postulant, nine pre-novices, and eight scholastics. It's my hope and expectation that this slow steady growth will continue in the next 25 years. But the growth of the mission is not an end in itself; it is an indication that our charism is responding to real need.

Of course, growth in numbers must be accompanied by a proportionate growth in self-reliance; the capacity of the mission to sustain itself financially, with formators, and leadership. As I look around the mission membership, I feel assured that God has blessed us with good leaders and formators for the present moment, and for the future. These men, in collaboration with a growing number of mission partners in Kenya, and with our faithful and generous MAMI community in Canada and beyond, are ensuring a strong foundation for the future of the Oblate presence in Kenya for decades to come.

How many Oblates are in the mission and generally where are they from?

There are 15 ordained Oblate priests serving in various ministries, including four parishes. Five are ordained Kenyans. The Oblate mission in Kenya is blessed by the diversity of its members. They are Kenyan, of course, but also Congolese, Australian, Senegalese, Sri Lankan, and Polish Canadian.

Why so many Oblates from so many different places?

The Oblates are a missionary order. We are formed for the mission, not for a particular country or people. We are formed to be sent!

Where were you 25 years ago?

I was ordained in 1999, so 25 years ago I was still in formation! I had just arrived back in Canada after finishing my studies at the international scholasticate in Rome. That year I was assigned as a member of the chaplaincy team at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan.

The Kenyan Oblate family has grown



Check out our Facebook page:



Lacombe Canada MAMI

Website: <https://www.omilacombe.ca/mami/>



YouTube Lacombe MAMI Oblate Missions

And God winked!

(Editor's Note: The supporters and family of the Missionary Association commonly direct our attention and commitment to the poor who are elsewhere, often in distant places such as Kenya, Peru and other countries. The following article indirectly points out the poor among us every day where we live and in our daily lives. Both the distant poor and the nearby poor, such as a clerk in Safeway, are equally the person of Christ among us seen with the same eyes – ours.)

BY JACKLYNNE GUIMOND

Fort Francis, ON – Two meltdowns in less than three days is hardly a commendable achievement for any 75-year-old. Blame it on COVID, blame it on weather, blame, blame, blame. But I have no shame; when I need to cry, I cry!

Yesterday, en route to running errands, we passed an individual walking in an uninhabited area and directly into the very cold wind. We backed up and offered him a ride. The young man eagerly accepted, and we drove him the two miles to McDonald's, his workplace.

We introduced ourselves and learned his name was Jeremy. As he graciously thanked us I handed him a McDonald's coupon and suggested: "You can pay this forward, if you like."

"Absolutely," he replied,

As we drove away, I saw God wink!

We proceeded to Walmart to shop for the warming centre, our once-a-month personal mission. Feeling awkward about depleting the shelves, I found myself explaining that we were not hoarding these supplies for ourselves. Folks sounded supportive of our ministry.

We ran into our 'Best Man' and friend of more than 30 years who just before Christmas put our relationship on the shelf (due to an oversight on our part that he refuses to forgive.) He muttered his usual complaint about the weather report being wrong again. It seems being 'right' is of utmost importance even at the expense of terminating a friendship.

I felt sad as he walked away ... but I think I saw God wink!

A stop at Lowery's office supplies to buy archive boxes threw another surprise in the mix. Finding a forgotten Christmas gift card in my purse reduced my \$38 purchase to \$14.99. The cashier then told me that I had a \$25 credit if I want to go online to print it!

God winked twice!



Safeway was my last stop, to pick up the jalapeno bagels we so enjoy. At the checkout both the clerk and I were startled by the price on each bag of four bagels ... 3 cents.! We laughed as she proceeded to phone the bakery to confirm the price, but they didn't answer the phone. I said that I usually pay \$3 per bag so I paid the same. I questioned the change she gave me.

She smiled and said: "I charged \$3.00 for two bags and \$0.03 for the third!"

"Are you sure?" I asked ... and she smiled.

As I closed my wallet I saw a Subway gift card inside, left over from Christmas, and asked: "Do you ever go to Subway?"

"Sometimes," she replied.

I handed her the card.

It was her turn to ask: "Are you sure?"

I nodded and said: "Enjoy!".

We echoed our "Have a great day!" to each other.

And God winked!

It seems God is no different from any parent, sometimes having to find ways to mollify us! And for me, a wink can do it!

WANTED

YOUR STORIES!

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.



We are curious:

Why did you choose us?

How did you hear about the Oblate missionary work?

How have the Oblates supported, inspired and encouraged you?

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

Send your stories (and photos) to:
lacombemissions@yahoo.ca

Freedom and Catholic social thought

Centre Oblat 
A Voice For Justice



Joe Gunn

BY JOE GUNN

OTTAWA – In February, an Oblate associate sent me an e-mail from her home on noisy Cooper St. in downtown Ottawa. I had once worked there, only eight blocks from Parliament Hill. While the Freedom Convoy had swept in, three women placed themselves in front of the big rigs, pleading with the drivers to move on. These neighbours who calmly dared to say, “Enough!” were among the few moderating voices to be heard.

Watching the three-week occupation of Canada’s capital city, and blockades of border crossings by big rigs, many wondered how our society had become so polarized. Trust in mainstream media had evaporated, and social media outlets amplified the conflict. The once-inspiring concept of “freedom” seemed to become a tool that now separated neighbours.

Catholic Social Thought acknowledges that freedom is never absolute, nor entirely dependent on an individual’s opinion. In our tradition, freedom does not come without responsibilities. Pope Francis writes in his 2020 book, *Let Us Dream*, “It is all too easy for some to take an idea – in this case, for example, personal freedom – and turn it into an ideology, creating a prism through which they view everything ... Looking to the common good is much more than the sum of what is good for individuals. It means having a regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate.”

There can be legitimate debate on the question of vaccine mandates – for example, should crossing international borders require truck drivers to be vaccinated, as demanded by both U.S. and Canadian governments? It is important to delineate where my own freedoms end, and the freedoms of others begin. Faith communities should not avoid, but rather embrace, discussions towards the clarification of values. But we must do so with the skill and maturity to limit the feral anger that has developed among us.

And while Canadians have the freedom to choose to be vaccinated, the Missionary Associates of Mary Immaculate can acknowledge a wider frame for this debate. So many of our neighbours in the Global South do not enjoy this freedom – only 10 per cent of people in low-income countries have been given access to the mandatory two doses. Therefore, in February, Canadian Oblate provincials Ken Thorson and Luc Tardif encouraged their members to endorse a petition of the World Health Organization, which called for more vaccines to be made available to save lives.

Perhaps the occupations will encourage Canadians to reflect more deeply on what “freedom” is all about. We are truly free when we recognize Jesus’s love for us, allowing us to then defend the common good and the most vulnerable. Some saints have referred to this as the “freedom to live for others.” We must reject violent discourse, in all its forms – since no prophetic act can do harm to others. Dialogue with those who may disagree with us, opting for calm, respectful engagement, based on values, should become a hallmark of faithful communities.

Easter behind the mask

BY JULIAN NDUGU JAMIIBORA

KISAJU, Kenya – Palm Sunday celebrations are normally characterized by Christians thronging roadways, villages and residential areas covered with palm leaves. However, because of COVID, last year Kisaju Parish witnessed our parish priest silently going around the outstations blessing the palm leaves that a few lucky Christians were fortunate to collect. Easter blessings became a rare gem.

Those fortunate few could not hide their joy when they picked the blessed palms to keep as a reminder of Jesus in their homes.

Holy Thursday saw only empty churches. The symbolic tradition of the priest washing the disciples feet was done in the silence of our homes by the family head.

Additionally, families were advised on how to undertake services at home using guidelines that were provided by the parish. Some even made altars for family Sunday services.

Good Friday was not spared either, with the traditional way of the cross processions



being prohibited. But all was not lost as some of the Christians courageously kept the Good Friday tradition of making an individual procession with a heavy wooden cross on their shoulders to replicate what Jesus did on his journey to Calvary more than 2000 years ago

Many Christians said that despite lacking the usual celebrations that mark the peak of our Liturgical year, they continue to grow in faith through prayers and reading of scriptures in their homes.

“Christ is risen in our hearts and we ought not to lose hope just because the churches are closed. God is everywhere, even in our homes,” said one parishioner.

It is evident that the pandemic has changed the way of life and model of worship. Christians were urged to vigilantly embrace other channels of worship, especially with the use of modern technology.

We only hope that life will go back to normal and give us a chance to celebrate Easter season and resume normal parish activity.

(Editor's note: Considering the tremendous decrease of COVID-19 new infections in Kenya, it seems like Easter this year will be celebrated normally without restrictions unless there is a new wave.)



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Kenya

NOTEBOOK

BY GERRY CONLAN, OMI

JAN. 15

NAIROBI – I was happy to be invited by Fabian, one of our Oblate youth from Nyaagi Prayer House, to attend his admission to the Bar of Advocates (lawyers) in Kenya. He has worked hard, and his family is very proud of him. He is the first lawyer from his village.

The father gave a little speech exhorting him – and his fellow young advocates – to help move the next generation of youth to a better position in life. I thought it was very good. He even talked about the struggles of the grandparents to get him to be a teacher and their struggle to get him through Law School.

Andrew, our other youth member training for marine engineering, has gone to Mombasa, but after one week, still has not started. It seems the navy is as punctual as we would expect. I do find it sad that young people are forced to waste money on accommodation for nothing.

I invited a solar engineer to give us a quote to install solar power at the pre-novitiate. As he was assessing the electrical draw, he noted that the external floodlights are large power consumers so I will get them replaced with 20W LED lights. Electricity costs have increased a lot and solar power capital costs have reduced significantly.

Fr. Gerry with Fabian



Gerry Conlan, OMI



Méru Postulancy is still being used by the Sons of Divine Providence as a novitiate. They have been kindly trying to clean up the front of the property. They also alerted us to the problem of a leak in our overhead 10,000-litre plastic water tank.

JAN. 22

Kenya Mission celebrated Br. Sebastian, OMI, who was called to and professed First Vows. We pray he keeps up the good progress and decides this is what God wants for him, not just what he wants.



Br. Sebastian takes his first vows

Kionyo associates executive meet



JAN. 29

This week we welcomed Fr. Ken Thorson, our provincial superior, from Ottawa.

Last week a group of Sisters from Kisumu sent a message to a group in Australia asking for medical volunteers to help at their little hospital. A contact in Australia called me to see if I knew who they were. Coincidentally, the sister of one of our scholastics belongs to that congregation, so I connected her with our friend in Australia. Hope things work out as they also requested hospital equipment.

Don't forget to pray for Kenya. Apparently we are expecting an imminent terrorist attack. But the president doesn't think so and is angry with all the warnings issued by several countries against travel to Kenya.

FEB. 6

Fr. Thorson returned from Larmudiac Parish on Thursday and Fr. Greg Olszust was due back Friday but got a positive COVID-19 test and had to stay in Poland. So, as I was taking Fr. Ken to Kisaju, we decided to have a projects and finance planning meeting with Fr. Fidel before I left on Sunday for home in Australia.

Fr. Ken oversees three brothers renewing their vows during Karen mission gathering



We stopped at Nyumbani for a COVID-19 test because Fr. Ken wanted to make sure he was negative and not infecting everyone, so I took one also just in case. We were both negative.

FEB. 13

The trip to Australia took 55 hours travel time between our house in Nairobi and the bed in Fremantle in West Australia, where the Oblates are taking good care of me. Thank God the unit has air conditioning. I had asked for an old laptop from our Mazenod College in Perth, and they kindly had one waiting for me when I arrived. I left mine in Kenya hoping to find a couple of donations of laptops to take back for the pre-novices.



Feb. 17th celebrations in the nearly completed church in Kionyo

FEB. 20

It's been a week of rest during the seven days of quarantine. Each day I was beeped on my phone to take a photo and upload it while the App also sent my location coordinates to the police. It was quite effective as the time varied each day, and if you were not home you would be arrested and fined.

With quarantine completed, my father and I had lunch with the Oblate community at Fremantle, then coffee with my old professor from the School of Mines on the way back to Dad's house.



Some old friends from my time as chaplain at University of Notre Dame came and took me for a drink at the local pub. It was good to catch up.

FEB. 27

With all that is happening in

Fr. Dio provides pastoral care to the elderly

Europe, it hardly seems fair to say I've been relaxing and enjoying myself at home in Albany this week. Kindly pray for our Oblates in some parishes in Ukraine who have decided not to leave the country and to stay with the people.

Back in Kenya, at Larmudiac Parish, Fr. Dionisius has been involved in apostolate to the elderly, and shares with us:

"In St. Joseph Parish there are a good number of elderly persons who cannot attend Eucharistic celebrations. Therefore, the pastoral team visits the elderly, to listen to them, pray



Kionyo youth attend a leadership seminar

with them and bring communion to them. The night before the visit, one elderly lady was attacked by young jobless men demanding money from her. She was injured and traumatized. Thank God she is recovering well. The Oblates continue to offer pastoral support to the poor with their many faces."



Kionyo youth attend National Catholic youth celebrations

MARCH 6

It was great to catch up with an elderly man in Albany, Australia, who sacrifices a bit of his pension each week to support the prison ministry in Kenya. We had coffee and he talked about his early life in Italy and how the poverty he experienced there in the 1940s prompted his desire to help the women getting released from prison in Kenya. We also pray for him as his health is not the best.

The holiday has now moved to the eastern side of Australia. Mom and I travelled to Perth to celebrate with my brother's family. The next day we flew to Melbourne and had a whole row to ourselves, in extended leg-room seats, all because I said Mom would require a wheelchair from the check-in to the gate.

Sadly, an aunt of Fr. Faustin, died in DR Congo. We pray for her.

Thankfully, Fr. Greg arrived back in Kenya from Poland, bringing an old Mac computer and some donations for the mission. If he had been delayed again with a third positive,



Fr. Greg on holiday
in Poland

his travel insurance would have needed extending, so the treasurer in me was also relieved.

Fr. Greg said it was difficult reaching Warsaw to catch the plane because all the petrol stations were empty due to the influx of refugees from Ukraine. He said it is really bad over there. Once in Warsaw, the airline almost didn't let him on the plane, saying his work permit is nearly expired. But he argued successfully and finally made it on board.

Fr. Cosmas, Fr. Fidel and the Karen communities welcomed John, Frank and Raphael to start their pre-novitiate program. It seemed to go well and no doubt they enjoyed the celebration

before the Lenten season began.

Also, during the week, a large national youth event took place in Nairobi, drawing together youth from all the dioceses in Kenya. It was moved from its usual location because of the unusually high turnout. We pray the occasion helps the youth to go home and encourage more youth to keep persevering during these tough times where there are few jobs.

We note that the Oblates are assisting Kisaju Parish secure a one-acre block of land next to Korompoi Prayer Centre to make sure it doesn't get snatched up by other interests before the people can afford to buy it. It is the fastest growing (and most active) Prayer Centre in Kisaju Parish. We expect it will not be many years before they need the land to expand support services for the people.



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