

Many things in Kenya; Orphanage dormitory, Differences in the liturgy, Things we did not expect, "Muzungu".

Letter to a prisoner

2019-02-05, [St Barnabas Orthodox Orphanage and School South Kinangop, Kenya.](http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2019+report-02-of-ministry-trip-to-kenya.pdf)

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Dear Brothers and sons in Christ:

I am doing many things in Kenya; every day is filled with new things. I wanted to write you another letter, because no matter where I go, you are still with me. Unfortunately, when I do not write letters very often, some of you may feel like I forget, but I never do. I think the life of a priest is one of doing 1/2 of everything I need to do every day. Sometimes it is 1/4! I count as the most important task of the day that I pray, and pray for you, and everyone who has crossed my path. This is the second obligation, with the first being of course to love you, and the third obligation is to visit you as much as I am able to. I do not relent on any of those cardinal obligations.

I have many things that I want to tell you. In no particular order, I will try to express the intensity of living and working in Kenya.

The orphanage has 109 children that it cares for. Most are boarded with foster homes, each of varying quality. Only 20 boys live at the orphanage. Most of the children are orphans - meaning that their parents are dead, or abandoned them, or do not have the ability to care for them. I believe I told you this before, but it bears repeating - some of the homes treat the children as free labor, and with so many homes, there could be worse things. It is very hard to know, because there is very minimal supervision by the state.

Because of these children, and the danger they are in, I am obsessed with the plans to build a Dormitory, on land the Orphanage has purchased, and dug a well on. We visited this land, and I was very impressed and even overwhelmed. I looked at the area where the dormitory will be built, and thought about so many children that we do not even yet know that will be protected and fed and will learn the Orthodox faith. It is really exciting to be as it were "in on the ground floor". Of course, there are millions of children in need to be protected, and many other millions that are ignored or marginalized - I think you can look around and see a few - but nothing gets done if we wait to do everything. No one has helped if we wait to help everyone. This land was formerly used as a school, so the buildings for the classes are there. Fr Methodius estimates that the building of a dormitory to house 180(!) children will cost at the most, \$45,000. This amount is not large, and some people have pickup trucks that cost more than this! It is a king's ransom in Kenya.

We have come up with an idea - a "founder" of the orphanage dormitory is one who sponsors a child, for \$250. We need 180 founders to build the Dormitory. Anyone who gives any other amount is a "donor", and Fr Methodius and I have promised that we would both the memory ALL founders and donors and their immediate family (spouse, children), whether living or dead, at every liturgy - in South Kinangop, Kenya, or McKinney Texas USA, in perpetuity. We have a strong social media presence, and already have over \$3000. I believe that we will have the cash in hand before the end of the year - and I will be disappointing if this does not occur before mid-year!

Time is not money here - it is safe or unsafe children.

The less time we take to finish this project, the sooner more children will be safe. I consider this project to be of the utmost importance. Children need to be safe, and have enough food to eat, and have companionship and role models, and to be taught the Orthodox Christian faith. Every day without a dormitory will be a dangerous day for one of these children, as well as the others we do not yet know, because there is no room to take care of them and teach them. See:

I now feel as a pastor that I must have 3 feet. One foot is in my parish, another foot is in the prisons, and another foot would be in Africa. I'm quite certain that if I pray more, God will help me to grow another foot and none of these things will lack attention. I've been honest with you, and told you that before I went to Kenya was really beat. The travel and everything was really getting me tired – not physically – but in my heart. Coming to Kenya has made my heart sing, but it also has made my heart think very much of you and miss you. I don't miss all the mileage, but I miss you.

I have learned in life, and seen this reality also in Kenya, that the idea that human life cannot be valued with money is a lie. Human life is continually valued with money. You yourselves have experienced that your lives are valued with money, and you found that you are considered to be less valuable than money. Only those with means are treated in Kenya. If you walked into a clinic with a broken arm, they would demand money before you are treated. They would not treat you without getting money first. I was told that if a person had an accident, a hospital would do the minimum to treat them and save their life, and then would literally not allow them to leave, so that their free labor would work all the debt.

There are many things in America that the poorest of the poor (and even, many times, the homeless) have that many here do not have - for instance, access to clean water. Many people are forced to buy water, and it is very expensive. Others walked literally 10 km daily to get water from the river, what are that they consider to be clean. We can turn on a tap almost anywhere (except, a couple of Texas prisons, to our shame as Texas citizen) and have clean water, which will not kill us when we drink it. Our food is also cheap and plentiful. Many can have government assistance and buy quality food easily, or milk for their children, and medical care is available for almost anyone.

I want to tell you about my experiences today, Sunday, 3 Feb. Of course, we served Divine Liturgy, and Fr. Methodius asked me to be the principal celebrant, however we did things a little bit differently. Father said all of the secret prayers in Kikuyu, which is the language of the Kikuyu people. As far as I know all the children understand Kikuyu first and Swahili and then English. Their eight-year-old children that can speak pretty fluently in all three languages. Does that make you feel like a dumb American? I like the secret prayers being said aloud. Many of you have experienced that when I serve liturgy since we are so close to one another. I hope you are benefited by them. I said all of the litanies in English, except for one which Father probably said in Kikuyu.

There are also some other differences in the liturgy. One of the things that struck me right off is that everybody sings, and they sing loudly! The Gospel and the Epistle are read in English, and I was asked to give the sermon. Right after the gospel, and before the sermon, they have a little bit of, almost an intermission, where they sing many songs congregationally, with much clapping. I have always loved the African voice. I especially love that beautiful clear sound of an African woman singing. Father Methodius' Papathia Evelyn sings beautifully. The style was that she would sing something and then the congregation would answer. I think it was in Swahili, so I did not understand it, it was very nice. This is their tradition as far as I know and all of the churches in Kenya. We don't have the tradition, but they have it and they should keep it. The only thing that I would prefer is that they would sing Orthodox songs, instead of Protestant hymns. Of course, when they sing them, they don't sound like boring old Protestant hymns. I think it would be relatively easy to sing Orthodox hymns with more rhythm and handclapping.

It is a challenge to give a sermon that is simple and said slowly, so that it can be translated into Swahili as I go along. Today, the Gospel about the Canaanite woman who had a demon possessed child was read. When I gave a sermon, I was looking out over many people who have been marginalized. Some had parents who died or even parents who ran away. Some were found in the street and were begging and starving. Of course, in our country we have the poor, but the division between poor and rich in half and have nots is much starker in Kenya. For many of these children it would only be a dream that they could go to college, or have a really good job. I am sure that many of them still feel the sting of the abandonment by their parents, or the abuse they have an even continue to receive in the home in which they are living. Many of them come to the

school with empty bellies, and only have food when they are served a late breakfast of maize and sorghum porridge and a small piece of baked bread, called a “mondazi”.

I was looking at these children and thinking that this Canaanite woman is a perfect example for them. I think she is also a perfect example for you, and for me. I can't claim to be marginalized, but you certainly are able to make that claim, and to be telling the truth.

I told them that she was a pagan, and had no status whatsoever in Jewish society. It took great courage for her to go to Christ and beg for her child to be healed and then Christ said something that sounded rude! He said that He was not sent except to the children of Israel and not to the little dogs. The woman responded with great humility, but also great dignity and courage, and said “Yea Lord, but even the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters table”. I explained to them that what she was really saying was: “I know Lord that I am an insignificant person, and I do not deserve mercy, but I also know that Thou art merciful and careth for everyone, the rich, the poor, and even those that are not the children of Israel, and therefore I know that Thou wilt heal my daughter and I am grateful for this.” Of course, the Lord healed the woman's daughter and then said that He had not seen so great faith, even in all of Israel.

What is this faith? It is only possible to have this faith if one also has humility. Humility is not how we hold our head or the things we say that how we live, and how we think, especially when we are insulted or marginalized. Humility makes one bold, and ensures that the Lord will help us, even though we are insignificant persons. Being angry because we are marginalized is not humility. Being jealous of the rich, or those who have when we have not is not humility. Being cynical about society is not humility.

We are not rich, we are poor. In your case, most of the time you do not have a name, but rather a number, and if your name is used it might have the prefix “offender” in front of it. To many in society, you, and poor Kenyan orphan children are insignificant persons. God does not care about any of this. He only cares about the heart.

This woman, of whom we do not even know her name, had a good heart, a spacious heart, a humble heart. She did not react with anger when she was put down, even though this apparent rudeness of the Lord was something she often experienced. Patience, and freedom from anger, even after multiple and continuous insults is a primary sign of humility. She reacted with humility, and dignity, and with personal strength and courage. This must be because she lived with these virtues, and didn't just take them out when she saw the Lord. We do not know her name, but the Lord knows her name, and she is certainly numbered among the saints.

I love these children very much, and I have learned about Kenyan society, with its strengths and its weaknesses. It has many strengths, but there is no safety net for the people living here, and there is poverty here that Americans cannot easily comprehend. There are insignificant people here, according to the world. The only solution when one is considered to be insignificant is to understand that we are all equally significant before the Lord, but only if we live with purpose, and strength of character, and humility and love. If even one of these children really heard my words, they will become a saint. You and I will also. I had trouble saying the sermon, because I started to cry, but this is definitely an inconvenience when giving a sermon, and God helped me to carry on.

Let's switch to a less serious subject. There have been many things I expected in Kenya - since people are people no matter where you go, but also surprises. Marina and I came up with a (growing!) list of things that surprised us.

1. They wear MANY warm clothes - jackets and hats, and hoods, even when it is 80 degrees! They think it is cold when we think it is time for shorts and short-sleeved shirts.

2. They drive very differently. A double line on the road, or even one on a curve - is just a suggestion, and not a strong suggestion. They pass anytime and anywhere! They also drive on the wrong side of the road a lot. If that part of the

road is better, that is where they drive, until an oncoming car gets very close. I noticed that nobody seems alarmed about this, including the oncoming car that sees a car heading right at them! Even though people are weaving a passing, and driving in a way that we would say is "cutting me off", there is no road rage. People use their horns a lot, but nobody ever honks back. Nobody seems mad or anxious on the road. They are more "free spirited" drivers than us (since traffic laws are a "suggestion", but they are also more courteous than us.

3. Many roads are very bad, full of BIG potholes. The majority are unpaved, and just dirt (dust right now in the dry season, and lots of stones.

4. Out in the country (which is almost EVERYWHERE), roads are completely unmarked. They have names, but no signs. When I use my GPS, the road shows up (sometimes), but even Google does not know the name!

5. They use motorcycles for EVERYTHING. They are cabs, carry produce, wood, beds, dressers, 4 people at once, 10-12 foot sticks of wood, or big stalks of maize (used for cattle silage), and even cows and sheep! I took one somewhere, and I held on for dear life! Even small children - 5 or 6 years old - take them. Since stop signs are also just a suggestion, I was looking everywhere. I have never seen one involved in an accident, but still, I think a stop sign is not just a "slow down a little bit before turning" sign!

6. It is dusty here. I visited the house of a woman who works near our house. She has gotten to know us - especially Marina, and wanted very much for us to see her house. It is very dusty there, but the house is very clean, although it is smaller than a small living room. The people in the neighborhood all know each other, and their clothes are IMMACULATE. They wash clothes and dishes by hand, and wash often! They also wear beautiful dresses and stylish clothes, even when going out to work in their fields, or work as a maid, or almost anything else.

7. Most of their clothes have English words on them. I saw "Adidas" shirts and all kinds of American clothes.

8. One bad thing. Marina was at a hair salon - Christine, only 6, was getting her hair done - and they needed to take a Mutato (van) or motorcycle home. The ladies were very kind, and told her to be careful not to get cheated - overcharged. They were so concerned that one of them went out with Marina. They warned her to have only a little and to keep only a little money in her hand. They were very angry that many Kenyan taxi drivers tried to cheat the "Muzungu". The motorcycle drivers argued over her like a prize, and surrounded her like a pack of hyenas. They were trying to charge her 500 shillings (\$5) when the proper charge was 50 bob (50 shillings - or 50 cents). The lady was very sharp with them, and Marina paid 50 bob. The drivers look out for Muzungu - a white person, and there is the "Muzungu price" and the Kenyan price. This is not true for everyone, because anywhere you go, there are honest people, but there is a prevailing attitude that "Wazungu" - "white people, plural" are rich, and not smart about prices, and can be cheated. The next day, Marina went back, and gave each of the ladies an American dollar (100-105 shillings), and thanked them. They were very appreciative.

9. The little children, and even some of the young ones, up to age 8 or so, are fascinated by my white skin, beard and blue eyes. They gather around us in droves, and want to touch our hair, since it is so different from theirs. They touch our skin - I think to see if it feels the same as theirs. They touch my beard often. Some questions they asked - "how did you color your eyes?" "How did you make your skin white?" I told some that I went swimming in a pool and it had lots of bleach in it, and I got bleached. Marina and I use sunscreen, and it is white coming out of the tube. We think some of the littlest children (3 years old!) must think that applying that stuff makes us white! The children are very bold, and very curious. That is, the very young ones are. The older ones can be very shy.

God willing, I will send another letter, or even 2 before I leave Kenya. I am here for two more weeks. "Sosho" (Grandmother) Marina left for Dallas this morning. The children really loved here and will miss her. They begged her to come back ; we intend to come back next year, probably in January again.