

A VISIT TO KENYA

SOME THOUGHTS FROM CARDINAL KEITH O'BRIEN

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I have just returned from spending the first week of November in Kenya at the invitation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. It was indeed a fascinating visit to a country which is suffering from various upheavals at this present time – and a visit which gave me an insight in the tremendous ongoing apostolate of our Church in that beautiful country.

The upsets of which I was soon aware concerned the **tribal unrest** just over one year ago involving particular areas of Kenya – tribal unrest which had horrific effects. In areas which I visited and which had suffered because of the unrest many families had been devastated through the deaths or mutilations of loved ones with countless homes having been destroyed and families displaced with men unable to find work.

In parishes which I visited priests and sisters spoke of having to open their churches and compounds to vast number of peoples who came to them out of sheer fear during the occasions of unrest. I visited a camp holding about 7,000 people described as an IDP camp (for internally displaced people). There, there was a near sense of hopelessness with conditions rivalling those which I had witnessed some few years previously in Darfur in the Sudan which then as now was described as the “world’s worst humanitarian disaster”.

The other devastation being visited upon Kenya as in other countries in Africa was that of **HIV / AIDS**. Very many people are afflicted and of course considerable numbers are **HIV positive**. In a prison which I visited the Governor allowed me to speak to over 200 men gathered together in one of the halls. I think I spoke in an appropriate fashion about “hope”; but for me the most moving part of the visit was when the Catholic visitor to the prison asked the Governor if I could meet with those men who were HIV positive and who literally had no hope either for themselves or their families – and was able to bless each one of them individually. I found a tremendous openness among people who were HIV positive – and this was shown in various ways at open air entertainment provided for me after the Mass and dedication of some of the facilities being extended by the Franciscan Sisters and the Voluntary Missionary Movement (VMM).

Another increasing worry among peoples whom I met concerned **climate change**. People indicated that the rainy seasons were not as they used to be; and the spectre of horrible starvation and drought at present in areas of Kenya with the loss of many lives was in danger of being evident elsewhere.

The role of the Catholic Church in Kenya is considerable and I think increasing.

I met one of the Bishops in the area which I was visiting – Bishop Philip Anyolo of the Diocese of Nakuru but unfortunately Bishop Emanuel Okombo of the Diocese of Kericho had to be in Nairobi. The vocation situation is very positive and I was invited to celebrate Mass with over seventy students at the “Pre-seminary” dedicated to St Mary in Molo. These were fine young men aged between 17 and 38 who were being directed by four resident priest staff before deciding eventually or being chosen for the National Philosophy College or the Theological Seminary. The same method of training was being used by the Kiltegan Fathers who have a national house of formation in Nakuru which involves their pre-seminary spiritual years – before all of their students continue their studies at

their national College in South Africa studying philosophy there; and then all go together to their Theological College in Nairobi. Incidentally I met a great variety of Kiltegan Fathers – most mature in years having given a lifetime of service to the Church in other parts of Africa or indeed in Kenya itself. One other interesting development which I visited was a house of prayer founded by the Kiltegan Fathers on the outskirts of Nakuru which was used for retreat goers as well as providing days of recollection both for the Kiltegan Fathers and for the local clergy in Kenya. One other group which I met were the Franciscan Brothers of the Third Order Regular of Penance founded in Ireland in the year 1818. They are not the “usual” Franciscan Brothers – but their spirituality and lifestyle is based on the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi and St Clare. Since 1976 Baraka Agricultural College has been under the management of the Franciscan Brothers having initially being founded by the Catholic Diocese of Nakuru to educate and train the newly settled farmers of Rift Valley Province. At the College there are now certificates and diplomas in “sustainable agriculture and rural development” as well as shorter courses designed for farmers, development workers and rural business people including rural youth programmes and bee keeping development programmes. They themselves have six Brothers in formation – and expect brothers who apply to join them to have completed secondary school education at a satisfactory level and also to have had a good professional training or a teacher training certificate or diploma.

However the main purpose of my visit was to visit and dedicate projects coordinated by the **Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception**. Since the Sisters arrived in Kenya in the year 1990 and in Kericho in 2000 theirs has been a fascinating growth and development.

Their particular project in the Diocese of Kericho where I was staying was entitled “**Live with Hope**” with this particular project involving: Home based care for HIV positive adults and children; voluntary counselling and testing for those in need; training in abstinence and behaviour for young people; and projects for orphans and vulnerable children. Consequently a great number of people have helped in a wonderful variety of ways – with 36 people employed in the project with financial help from the USA Government; and many volunteers coming from around the world particularly from Scotland.

At a Mass which I celebrated on All Souls Day at the Convent of the Franciscans Sisters in Molo with a great variety of missionaries present I spoke on the death and awaited resurrection of so many wonderful people who had been our predecessors in the missionary field. I spoke of this same “death and resurrection” occurring both in our Church at large as well as in religious orders and congregations at this present time. I spoke of the form training for people for Priesthood and religious life; as well as of course the tremendous involvement of lay women and lay men sharing the charisms of our religious orders and congregations as well as those young men of course who are entering the Secular Priesthood.

I left Kenya with much “hope” in my own heart for the Church in that country – realising a tremendous awareness of problems which were being faced but also aware that the Church and its members were tackling them with a will.