

Features

St. John Fisher extends hand of friendship to help bu

By Teresa A. Parsons

To perhaps a dozen bishops and priests from the East African nation of Kenya, Rochester, N.Y., is more than an anonymous city in a land of ice and snow, endless opportunity and faceless generosity.

And to dozens of parishioners in Pittsford, Mendon, and Rochester, such exotic-sounding locations as Bungoma, Murang'a, and Nakuru have become more than dimly imagined jungle landscapes. They are the homes of friends.

Friendship is only one of the benefits produced by nearly two decades of cultural and educational exchange between St. John Fisher College and several dioceses in Kenya. Since the mid-1960s, four Kenyan priests who earned degrees on scholarships to the Pittsford college have been ordained bishops, and now head dioceses in their own country.

As many as 10 other Kenyan priests who are Fisher alumni include pastors, seminary rectors, the principal of a high school and a member of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

"Their record has been remarkable in Kenya," observed Basilian Father Joseph Dorsey, former academic vice president and dean at St. John Fisher. "Having a degree and the education consonant with that further qualified them for episcopal posts, but they were outstanding young men to start with.

"We found then not only extremely able (students), but felt this was a contribution we could make to the Church in East Africa," Father Dorsey added. "We also found it an enriching experience for our students and for the college."

Through contact with their Kenyan visitors, members of the college community as well as parishioners of churches where the priests spent weekends and holidays

have glimpsed the sparkling energy and enthusiasm of the burgeoning Catholic Church in Africa.

"Our folks have been enriched just by the exposure to what their life was like ... to the customs of another country and to the fact that the Church is growing so rapidly in Africa," explained Sister Alice Cooney, pastoral assistant at St. Catherine's Church in Mendon, where several Kenyan priests have served. "This has been a tremendous contribution of the Church in Rochester to the Church in Kenya."

The Rochester-Kenya connection began with a simple request from the friend of a friend of the late Father Charles Lavery, CSB. Monsignor William Kaiser, a Rochester native who served with the Near-East Mission Relief Society, was acquainted with Father Lavery, and also with Archbishop J. J. O'Connor, a Holy Ghost priest who worked as a missionary in Kenya for more than 40 years prior to being named Archbishop of Nairobi during the 1960s.

Several years before Archbishop O'Connor was appointed to the Nairobi post, he visited the United States, during which time Monsignor Kaiser introduced him and Father Lavery, who was at that time president of St. John Fisher College. Archbishop O'Connor proposed that Father Lavery provide a Kenyan priest with the chance to earn a degree from the college.

Then, as now, seminary training was relatively accessible to young men in East Africa. However, the scarcity of colleges and universities made prohibitive the chances of gaining admission and the cost of earning an academic degree. As a result of Archbishop O'Connor's proposal, Father Nicodemus Kirima arrived on the Fisher campus in 1964.

Father Dorsey recalls the first Kenyan visitor as "a brilliant student" who earned a bachelor's degree in two

Kenyan priest has simple aim in mind

Judging by the records of his predecessors, the young Kenyan priest who arrived at St. John Fisher College earlier this year to study psychology and business management has a better-than-average chance to someday become Bishop Stephen Mbugua.

Of nearly one dozen Kenyan priests who have studied at the Pittsford campus during the past 20 years, four now head dioceses in their East African homeland.

But Father Mbugua has a simpler aim in mind. "I told my bishop that I would be the one to break tradition," he said with a smile. "I would prefer to be a parish priest."

Bishop Peter Kairo, head of Father Mbugua's home Diocese of Molo, attended Fisher in the late 1970s. But it was while serving as an assistant to Bishop Rafael Ndingi of the Diocese of Nakuru — who received word of his episcopal appointment the day after he graduated from St. John Fisher in 1967 — that Father Mbugua was offered a chance to study in the United States.

When he stepped onto American soil in February, Father Mbugua's first reaction was to retreat inside the airport and close the door. He had never experienced anything like the bone-chilling cold of winter in Rochester, N.Y.

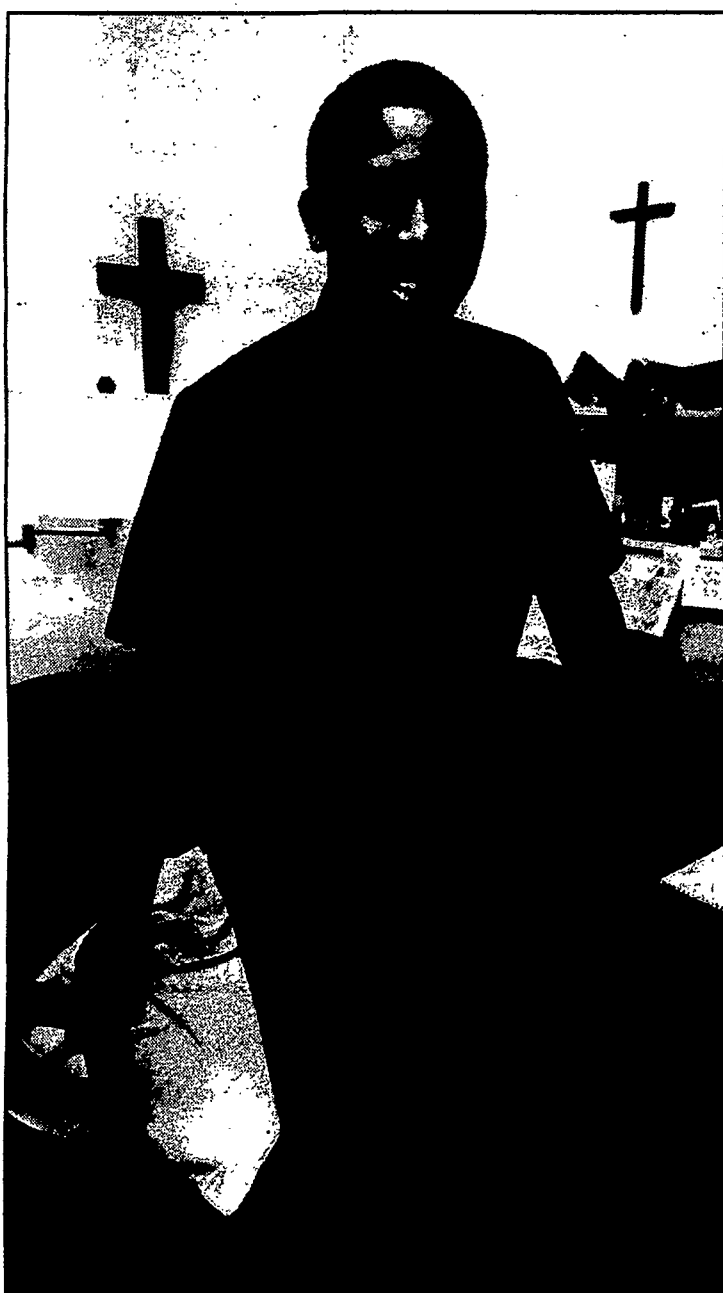
A warm reception from the Basilian Fathers and the community at St. John Fisher College have helped the 29-year-old Kenyan adapt to a more pervasive shock — that of immersion into a foreign culture, and what in many ways is a foreign Church.

Compared to its U.S. counterpart, the Church in Kenya is in its childhood. Founded in 1959, the Diocese of Molo — among the country's first — is no older than Father Mbugua.

In size, Kenyan parishes are comparable to U.S. dioceses. The parish where Father Mbugua served, for instance, encompasses more than 600 square miles, while the Diocese of Molo covers nearly 6,000 miles.

Unlike the Church in America, where Catholics struggle with such issues as authority, dissent, and the roles of women, Kenyan Catholics' concerns are basic, focusing on education and development. "More than half of the parishes in my diocese have no (running) water," Father Mbugua pointed out.

Spiritually, the Church in Kenya is "in the age of evangelization," he said. While the priest shortage in more developed nations has prompted the recall of many missionaries, vocations among Kenyans are in-



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal
Father Stephen Mbugua, 29, the most recent Kenyan arrival at St. John Fisher College, was born in the same year as his home Diocese of Molo.

creasing in spite of cultural impediments. "In Kenya, becoming a priest is not seen as a virtue," Father Mbugua explained. "According to our tradition, if one doesn't marry and have children, his life kind of terminates at his death."

For parents and other family members, a vocation to priesthood also represents an economic hardship since it represents a loss of potential income that would help educate siblings and care for the elderly.

As such cultural barriers are overcome and the ranks of African priests increase, Father Mbugua predicts the ministry of the Church in Kenya will expand to other countries and continents. "We are hoping in the future to go out into the world and serve as missionaries ourselves," he said.



The friendships forged with Kenyan scholars, including Father Francis Lestho (center) and Sister Alice Cooney (right), pastoral assistant at St. Catherine of Siena in Mendon, to travel to

years, then went on to earn a master's in sociology from the University of Rochester the following year.

While studying, "Father Nick" lived for a time at St. Catherine's Parish in Mendon, where mention of his name still elicits enthusiastic responses. "He was the most delightful, wonderful man," recalled Rita DeVoldre, the parish secretary, whose children still reminisce about his habit of eating peas with a butter knife.

"We all felt terrible when he left," DeVoldre added. "He was so full of kindness and love."

Upon his return to Nairobi in 1968, Father Kirima served as rector of St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary prior to being named Bishop of Mombasa, a diocese located on Kenya's east coast.

Meanwhile, a second Kenyan priest, Father Rafael Ndingi, had arrived in 1964 to study social science at Fisher. Father Paul G. Wohlrab, with whom Father Ndingi lived at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church during part of his stay, recalls the priest as "a very influential person."

"He had a great effect on the people he met," Father Wohlrab recalled. "They seemed to simply be drawn to him. He was very outgoing, and yet very considerate."

Father Ndingi's talent for leadership was apparently no secret among his superiors. The day after he graduated in 1967, the priest was called to Washington, D.C., where he was informed that he was the new bishop of the Diocese of Machakos, Kenya.

"He was such a fine churchman I used to kid with him that he would become a bishop," Father Wohlrab said. "I was not surprised (by the appointment) because I had seen such fine qualities in him. Frankly, I don't think he was (surprised) either."

Bishop Ndingi currently serves as Bishop of Nakuru and as chairman of the Kenyan bishops' conference. "Personally, I would predict that someday he will become a cardinal," Father Wohlrab said.

Bishop Ndingi was responsible for Father Peter Kairo's presence in Rochester during the late 1970s. Younger and more reserved than his predecessors, Father Kairo spent most of his two-year stay living with the community of Basilian Fathers at Fisher. Once he returned to Kenya, Father Kairo followed in Bishop Kirima's footsteps, serving for several years as spiritual director of St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Nairobi prior to being named Bishop of Murang'a in 1983.

Bishop Longinus Attundo is the most recent Fisher graduate to earn an episcopal appointment in Kenya. Named last year to head the brand-new Diocese of Bungoma, Kenya, Father Attundo arrived in Rochester via a different route than his predecessors. His superior, Bishop Philip Sulumeti of the Diocese of Kakamega, met Father John Reddington, then pastor of St. Louis Church in Pittsford, while both were studying in Rome.

Bishop Sulumeti subsequently visited the Pittsford parish several times, and eventually requested Father Reddington's help in educating the priests of his diocese. Father Reddington then joined forces with Father Lavery at Fisher, and Father Attundo's arrival in 1980 was the result.

What those who knew him recall most vividly is his grin. "He had a mile of a smile," Father Reddington said. "He just radiated warmth and friendship and love."

The Mendola family, with whom Father Attundo spent many holidays, remembers their "fantastic" combination of dignity and childlike humor. "On Easter Sunday, he delighted in spending time with the Mendola children hunting for the Easter Bunny."

On another occasion, Marcia Mendola opened the window at her garden and caught Father Attundo eating one of her flowers. When she explained that the berries inside the flowers were as a Japanese lantern, were considered sacred in Kenya.

"I once asked him what he would have done on a festive occasion back home," she said. "He said, 'zebra!'"

When Father Attundo learned that he would be Bishop of Nakuru, he wrote to the Mendola family to his ordination in June, 1987, and asking for their support and prayers. "We always kidded with him that he would be the first black pope, and that we'd all be there for the ceremony," Marcia Mendola recalled. "We couldn't go, we wrote back and said we were sorry. The agreement was that we'd come when you were not bishop."

More than a few other individuals also remained in contact with Kenyan priests through letters and even occasional visits. "Years ago, Bishop Kirima returned to St. John Fisher for a visit. He planned another such trip to mark his 25th jubilee.

Meanwhile, Sister Cooney and Ju



The Mendola family of Pittsford, with whom Father Attundo spent many holidays, has promised to travel to Rome when