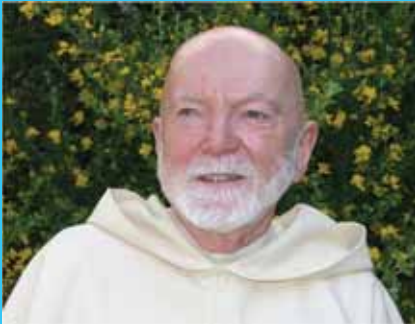


From the Director



Dear Mission Friends:

Last month I stated in my article on TURMOIL IN KENYA that I hoped that by the time you received this newsletter the situation in Kenya would be calmer. As it is, the “turmoil in Kenya” continues. In this edition, I would like to share with you a letter from Father Kevin Kraft, O.P., the novice master at the novitiate in Kisumu, Kenya. The letter speaks for itself giving you insights into the political situation of Kenya through the experiences of one of our Dominican Missionaries.

In Christ’s Peace,

Fr Martin de Porres Walsh OP

Novitiate in Exile

By Fr. Kevin Kraft, O.P.

I am writing this letter, surprisingly, from Nairobi, where the entire novitiate just arrived yesterday. Let me explain.

After sharing extensively with the four novices on New Year’s Eve about how the Lord has been working in each of our lives in 2007, I had during private adoration on Thursday, Jan 3rd, a very strong sense (a *certainty*) that **I and each one of the novices are exactly where God wants us to be, that He has placed us here and we are in the very situation where His will can be fully accomplished in us.** I almost spoke about it to them, but in the end, didn’t that afternoon.

We had a rather touchy situation come up in the Dominican compound in Kisumu the next two days. We were giving refuge to an increasing number of people last week: three complete families (with 8-10 per family) and several individuals. Some were from the Luos tribe who had reason to fear because of their surroundings, but the first

ones to come were our accountant, (from the Kikuyu tribe) her brothers- and sisters-in-law plus their kids, fearful of their security due to reasons of tribal identity. **Much of the looting, burning and even killing going on in Kenya these last days has been motivated by ethnic distrust or hatred, since the political allegiances have largely been drawn along ethnic lines.** Within a week our sheltered guests grew to over 30, plus the 60 or so kids that are normally on the compound during school vacation. With the friars, not even counting the sisters, their patients, the workers and guards on our compound, that works out to about 100 people lodged and fed daily! But it seemed to us an obligation of charity to protect these people, offering them safe haven in our compound, which seemed to be out of the range of the violence wracking Kisumu.

Friday during the day there was a tense moment when somebody came to our door to ask what tribes the people were from whom we had on our compound. The administrator of the kids’ program called the police who came quickly, but the man who asked the question had already



St. Dominic founded the Dominican Family in 1216. The Dominican Family consists of four branches: the nuns, the friars, the sisters, and the Dominican laity. There is a monastery of Dominican nuns in Karen, Kenya, outside Nairobi. Here we have a picture of members of the other three branches of the Dominican Order in Kenya: the friars, the sisters, and the laity.

gone. Then about 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, Jan 5th, Fr. Martin Martiny got an urgent message from the bishop, that he had heard from a reputable source that there had just been a bus full of Luo people that had been burned (with them in it) on the road to Nairobi. Fr. Martin called me aside and told me, saying he thought the time had come that we had to move the Kikuyus and Merus off the property, for the safety of all concerned. But he also said that, since two of the novices are of tribes associated with the Kikuyu, they might come looking for any of them if there were to be an incursion into the compound.

Fr. Martin and I both felt that if the news of that bus-burning became public, which was bound to happen, all hell might break loose in Kisumu, with a thirst for blood along ethnic lines.

A large group of Kikuyus in Eldoret were attacked a few days ago in a church where they'd sought refuge. The attackers locked them in, and then set the church ablaze. Some of those in the church managed to escape out of the church and evade the attackers outside, but many sustained serious burns, and at least 20-30 were burned alive. That sinister deed of ethnic hatred sent shock waves across the country: it meant that even churches might not be respected as safe havens for those whom hate-driven people wanted to kill.

Well, when Fr. Martin spoke of the expediency of some of the novices leaving the compound for their own and others' safety, I felt very clearly that there was no question of sending them away, that I should go with them and that we could move and continue the novitiate year

elsewhere. I began telling them of the assurance I'd received in prayer just two days before and we agreed together to go. We weren't really sure where we should go, because a lot depended upon the possibility and security of transportation in these troubled times. The brothers told me to forget about Tanzania, because the road passed through Kisii, a hotspot that would be very risky to attempt to cross. In Uganda, there's a large Dominican sisters' formation convent in Kampala, where we could have asked hospitality, but there was an uncertain road through western Kenya to get there. We weren't sure about the possibility of getting to Nairobi either.

But we felt we had to go soon, with the urgency of thinking news could break and things could explode at any minute. Within a half an hour we had our bags packed with the essentials for however many days we might be gone, and after quick good-byes, off we went downtown, with an armed escort from our local police station, to see what we could do. When we got downtown to the local civil authority ("District Commissioner", something like county sheriff), we found that there were convoys of buses which would be going to Nairobi with police escort. I decided on the spot that staying in Kenya and going to our studentate in Nairobi would be much less disruptive of our novitiate life than seeking refuge in another community in a neighboring country. Our original plan was to get the police to provide us safe

transport to Nairobi. Well when we got there, there was a huge crowd of people milling around – mostly newly-made refugees – and four to five buses filled with people headed for Nairobi, awaiting their police escort. And there weren't any tickets to be had, nor any more buses leaving that day, so using considerable pressure Fr. Martin was just barely able to buy us bus tickets for the morrow. Fr. Martin left to do other urgent things before we realized clearly that: a) there was no way we could travel to Nairobi that day, and b) we would not be allowed to spend the night on the premises, as has been happening with police stations in much of Kenya these past days, and which I thought we might do.

I had seen so many people leaving Kisumu on foot the past five days, and now we were among them, albeit not in as harsh a condition. My thoughts went to other similar crowds gathered in the airport – the tourist and business category, willing and able to pay the much higher airfares to get lifted out of the tense Kisumu situation to Nairobi or other countries. I was glad to be among these people, all blacks but myself, most of them from non-Luo tribes, seeking safety outside of Kisumu. I knew there was another group of refugees, too: those who have suffered the most, gathered by the thousands in parks, police stations and churches across the country, living out in the open day and night, fearful of attacks even where they are gathered. When this latter group travels, it is not in the comfort of intercity buses,

but standing packed in the back of army vehicles or cargo trucks like cattle, open to the inclemencies of the sun, wind, heat and cold....

As it turns out, while we were waiting, we found out that the “news” of the bus-burning was a (false) rumor that had never happened! Good news! Of course, that still didn't alleviate all fears, because just such a rumor, if disseminated and believed by people, could still provoke as deadly a reaction as if it had been real. Too, the fellow who the day before had asked what tribes people in our compound were from was no rumor!

So we stood around on the same street corner from 12:30 til 6:00 p.m. Somewhere around 1:30 a Red Cross vehicle came and some workers delivered 10-15 liter potable water bags to every group of 8-10 people waiting by the roadside in the sun with their small bags nearby. I thought of my sister-in-law who works for the Red Cross: never did I imagine that I would be on the receiving end of their emergency services, but the water was very welcome indeed, as our thirst was increasing, and the small half-liter bottles we carried were nearly exhausted. A policeman came out about 3:00, long after the bus convoy had left for Nairobi, and called everybody together to tell the 40 or so people still waiting there that we could neither travel that day nor find refuge at the District Commissioner's premises, and so our waiting outside his premises was “useless” and we might as well go home for the night after

making our own travel arrangements for the next day.

Going home was easier said than done for most of the people there, including ourselves, because most had left their homes out of fear of attack. The bus agencies were unwilling to sell any more seats for the following day, having several days' buses held over, awaiting road security to be sent out. It seems that that afternoon may have been the first civilian convoy to undertake the trip to Nairobi since the violence began. At any rate, the policeman said that all they could offer was a police escort for those who bought their own bus tickets for the following day. When I called Fr. Martin and asked about returning to the compound just for the night, he said he really felt it would not be safe for the same people who'd just left the compound to be seen coming back into it, and asked us if we couldn't stay in town. He suggested seeking lodging from a Franciscan sisters' motherhouse nearby (a congregation that works very closely with us), but when I went there to check on the possibility of us spending just one night in a sitting room at their place, the superior and community were afraid to receive us for the same reason: a possible attack by their Luo neighbors upon finding they were 'harboring' other tribes. I certainly couldn't blame them, when we had left our very own compound for the same reason, but when I left them, my voice cracked as I said, “Thank you all the same; I can understand your fears; I hope we'll find some other place to stay.”

In all of this, I was not personally at risk, as the anger of the Luos is directed at other tribes and not at foreigners; I was there to accompany my brother novices wherever they had to go. Still, I felt like Joseph looking for lodging in Bethlehem! The sisters gave me a good lead, however, where I finally found us lodging: a local parish run by the Mill Hill fathers, very close by the police station. They already had half a dozen people who had sought refuge with them, camping out in their parish hall. Fr. Gerry said, "Sure, you can come along too if you need to." It must have seemed strange to him that a priest whom he'd met at diocesan clergy meetings was asking him for refuge for his whole novitiate class and another 5-7 adults, us having our own house just across town and up on the hill, but then these are strange times, and he accepted without hesitation. So I went back and told our folks.

Just when I arrived, there was a large group of SDA's (Seventh Day Adventists) singing moving Christian songs to the waiting refugees, alternating with brief preaching and prayer. Then they spread out, introduced themselves to everyone, offering words of encouragement and solidarity, and finally shared little cartons of milk and loaves of bread with everyone present. That was our lunch! It was a beautiful gesture of this congregation which is obviously attuned to the 'signs of the times,' responding to this very recent category of displaced people in Kisumu. We exchanged names and addresses with some of them, and hope to

visit their church when we return to Kisumu to thank them for this most heart-warming, encouraging gesture. Hopefully we Dominicans can learn from them to do the same; it was very effective preaching!

After the SDA's took leave of us, those in our party walked over to the nearby parish, where we were very warmly received by two of the parish priests and a group of laypeople, including our fellow refugees. One of the most welcoming was a Kisii man who had lived 25 years in Kisumu, and had had his house looted by Kisumu residents. What a tragic betrayal of neighborliness toward a man who had made Kisumu his home! He had already sent some of his family off to Kisii to be among his relatives, and he was now living in an empty church hall with a mattress to sleep on and probably a bag or two of salvaged items!

Shortly after arriving we recited Vespers with the people in our group, and then received gratefully an evening meal of *uji* (hot porridge) and bread. After Compline outside in the cool of the night, the men slept in the church with a host of mosquitoes for company. We were up early the next morning at 5:30 and at the D.C.'s office before 6:00 to make sure we got on our bus. We said Lauds at 6:45 by the roadside with some other hopeful passengers looking on, and then went to the bus station to board, fortunately only a few blocks away. The 8:00 bus finally left Kisumu at 10:30, being one of at least 14 buses of various agencies travelling together, along with an estimated 50 private cars, headed

by a police vehicle to insure the security of the convoy.

Actually, the "security" was more psychological than real, since as soon as one of our buses got a flat, we stopped to help them, and the convoy went on. It seems that they hadn't foreseen very well the inevitable problems or different speeds that one or another vehicle would have throughout the normally six- to eight-hour trip to Nairobi. In any case, we arrived in Nairobi about 7:00 p.m. without any difficulties or dangers, thank God, and Fr. Maury, one of the oldest running marathoners in Nairobi, picked us up in the van, and we came home to a hearty welcome by our brothers in the studentate.

So here we are, peacefully settled in for the time being as guests of the studentate community, where I began my Kenyan experience – probably only until next weekend, if all continues quiet in Kisumu and on our compound in particular. We are all healthy, alive and well, happy to be here with our brothers. We've shared jokes here in the studentate about being "fugitives" and "refugees," but **we know that tens of thousands of other Kenyans are living in a truly precarious situation as displaced people, with no one to give them the welcome we had. After what little hardships we experienced, we have a much greater sensitivity towards those who have much less to begin with, have suffered much harsher treatment than we, and experience true, gripping fear and insecurity concerning their future. Please keep them (and us) in your prayers.**