



Fr. Franklin at Kajuki Church

In this edition of the Parish Newsletter we are honored to feature our guest and visiting Kenyan Priest, Fr. Frankin Njabani. This is his first trip abroad and he will be with us at St. James until December, please take the opportunity to meet and welcome him. Both in person and in this detailed account, you will soon see and enjoy the wide eyed enthusiasm he has for life and its experiences.

I am Fr. Franklin Njabani Francis. Analyzing my name, Francis is my father's baptismal name, Njabani is a name I was given at birth on June 21st, 1977, which is associated with a certain age group of young people from Kenya who were taken to Japan for a period of time to

assist in keeping peace. My paternal uncle I am born after was among this group. Franklin is my baptismal name given to me when I was one month old.

My country, Kenya, is made up of 42 tribes. I am born among the Meru tribe located on the Eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya. The Meru tribe is made up of nine sub-tribes. My father and mother are from the Mwimbi and Muthambi sub-tribes, respectively. The family takes the Mwimbi sub-tribe lineage due to paternal consideration of most African tribes.

I was born in a village called Ndumbini, Meru district in Eastern province - Kenya. I am the third born in a family of eight sons and one daughter. When I was young in 1978, we migrated across the nearby river and settled on the other side in another village called Ntuntuni, where I have grown with my brothers and sister.

My life with parents was not balanced between the two. I was more close to Mom than to my Dad. I was told that my Dad was a teacher when he married Mom. I don't have a clear story of what happened but at my age of reason, I found a dad who had no job and a mom who had no job. We lived a very difficult humble life. It has always remained very fresh in my mind the incident in 1984, when we had a very severe drought in our country. Three of my first cousins died and two of my brothers, and my mom almost died. We were a family of many children but no reliable source of income for our upkeep.



Prayer House

In 1987, my Dad got a job to work in a tea factory as a manual laborer, and was only able to come home for a weekend once every few months. It was a very poorly paying job which could hardly support such a big family, but my Dad had no option due to our hard life. He really tried, but the difference was very minimal. Until his death on April 15, 1997 due to liver failure (may God rest his soul in eternal peace), most of our very hard moments, we maneuvered with only Mom at home.

The Rite of Passage is still one of the most significant rituals in Meru culture. This rite transforms a young man into an adult, giving him the right to marry, acquire wealth and property, and make independent decisions. Once a boy is initiated, he is forbidden to enter the mother's house and must have built his own house on the family compound before initiation. He cannot enter the mother's house again until he becomes the father of a child. For the case like mine, ordination freed me to enter my mom's house. Currently, initiation is done to boys before they join high school.



School Mass under a tree

All through elementary and high school, I did not have the idea of becoming a priest. I did not even become an altar boy in my parish, which was many miles from my home. My school life was very hard. Tuition was a big challenge. I had to repeat grade 8 three times even though I was the top student, plus another one year out of school before we had the fee for high school. I got my first pair of shoes when I started high school. I wore size 12 because my feet were so wide from not wearing shoes. Today I wear size 9.



School Children

Due to this problem of school fees in my studies, I was very much thinking of how I could complete my high school studies and first get some work to do to help my mother and my brother who were struggling very much in supporting my siblings at school. So immediately after completion of my high school, I got some work to do in a Tea processing factory. The work was very hard, the pay was very low, and workers were exposed to many dangers. I really suffered but I persevered and worked for one year.

One day in 1999, I was so depressed after reflecting about my life, and how I was suffering in the factory. I started asking God questions, if He could create me just to suffer all through my life. "What did I do to you Lord?"

I asked God bitterly. In this period of depression I had a very vivid dream seeing some people consoling me and telling me to serve this same God, that He had a good plan for me. It remains very fresh in my mind; it was a Saturday when I dreamt.

The following day still depressed, I attended Mass in a nearby out station and coincidentally, a newly ordained priest from that village had a thanksgiving Mass in his prayer house. He was accompanied by a white priest who seemed to have been his friend throughout his formation. After the Mass he was given a chance to talk to the community. In his speech, he stressed vocations to serve God more intimately as priests and religious. I could not help connecting my previous night dream with what this man of God was saying. I left the church that day with a firm resolution to inquire about the procedure of joining the seminary which I was completely innocent of, and joining if accepted.

The following day I went to visit my uncle, a priest who was then the pastor of the parish under which the out station of the newly ordained priest was from. He gave me the direction to go and look for someone who had gone to the seminary before, to guide me how the application is written, and to take the application to him after I had written it. That same day, I was very lucky to meet the newly ordained priest (who had the thanksgiving Mass) on my way back, who directed me verbally how the application is written which I did without delay. It's vivid in my memory that I wrote and handed it to my uncle on the 8th of February, 1999.

I received a reply calling me to the bishop's house. On the day I reported at the bishop's house, I met with four other age-mates who had come for the same. We were addressed by my uncle who told us to

go and prepare ourselves to report at the Diocesan conference centre for an orientation course. He explained that we would meet with the other bigger group for the course. The day came, and 26 young men sharing a common desire converged at the centre. Again, my uncle was in-charge of the group. This is the time I was helped by my colleagues to understand that there is an office in the system, of the Vocations Director who happens to be my uncle. The orientation course was so good, we had an opportunity to know each other.

In March, I was among those who reported to seminary to begin the priestly formation. Through many challenges due to my humble background, I completed and graduated successfully in philosophical studies early May, 2003. I was promoted to continue with formation and the same year, in August, I started my theological studies at another college. In the same style, God hid me under his wings and in early May, 2007, I completed and graduated successfully in my theological studies. I was then sent out for pastoral experience where I worked in two different parishes for six months each. With the help of God, I was ordained a Deacon along with my other 10 group-mates and was given an appointment by my bishop to a parish for six more months, after which God still wanted to use me, a poor instrument, to administer in word and Sacraments. On December 6, 2008, I was ordained a priest. It is a gift and I have always appreciated with humility and gratitude to God.

My first appointment as an associate pastor was at Blessed Virgin parish, Kangeta, the extreme north of our Diocese. This is an old parish well established and the Christians are advanced in faith. I served with this pastor very well for one year, after which my bishop transferred me in the same capacity to St. Peter's Parish, Kajuki, where I am serving currently.



Palm Sunday

When I received the letter of appointment, I didn't have any idea of what St. Peter's Parish looked like. The following day I visited the parish for reconnaissance. The physical outlook tore my heart into pieces. I could not help comparing the two parishes. The church at St Peter's is small, looks very old, no pews..... The Fathers' rectory is worse,- small, old and leaking, rooms not self-contained, very congested... I went back to my first parish very down. Through God's grace, I remembered my very new vows to serve the people of God wherever I was sent, knelt in the church and asked for the grace. Dear brothers and sisters, God is never late to grant genuinely positive things we ask with sincerity. A week later, I reported at St Peter's with a lot of peace at heart.

The pastor there received me warmly. He was so lonely, but now he had a companion. We worked well until his untimely death through a tragic road accident August 18, 2011. This was a big blow to me. I was left in total darkness. After the burial of my pastor, my bishop visited the parish as usual to collect his belongings and to define the way forward of the parish. Being very young in the priesthood, I did not even dream of what happened. As we finished packing the second day, when only two of us were in the room, my bishop told me looking right at my face, "Listen Father, I have no priest to bring to St. Peter's now. Tell me if you want me to send somebody to work with you". I can say more about how confused I became but, in simple terms, this is how I became the pastor of St Peter's.

I now have an associate pastor, one year younger than I am, who works with me. Kajuki parish has the main church and 26 outstations. It covers an area about 8 miles by 16 miles (125 sq. miles) of mountainous terrain...with no paved roads in the parish. We celebrate Mass at the main church and several outstations each Sunday so it takes about two months to be able to visit each of the outstations. Transportation is a small motorbike for me and my associate. The parish is very poor. The combined collection each Sunday is about \$90 or even less. However, people have a strong faith, it is only that they are relatively poor and they are still in the slumber of the Consolata missionaries who were giving them money for food and educating their children, etc. Each outstation has a catechist, and the people meet to pray each Sunday even if we are not there. Some do not even have a church and must meet under a tree.



A total American immersion – Fr. Franklin relishing his first Mac n cheese at the St James Harvest Festival

In May, 2011, Msgr. Meyers came to Kenya to visit my uncle, Fr. Bernard who has been his good friend for over 25 years. I met Msgr. Mike there and before he left I was invited to come and visit St. James and began to make plans for the trip. The death of my pastor delayed the trip until this year.

Late September - on the 24th, I joined the community of St. James Church. I have continued to enjoy the hospitality of Msgr. Michael Meyers – the pastor, his associate pastor Fr. John Lee and the pastor emeritus Fr. James Kavanagh. The smiling faces and the welcoming words of the parishioners have made me adapt very fast, feel appreciated, and assured of my love and prayers. I am so grateful to Msgr. Mike and the entire people of St. James, for hosting me to have an opportunity to see and experience a developed church of America. It is blessing to me and I look forward to the rest of my time here until I return to my parish at the end of the year.

NB. You can see the parish of St. Peter, Kajuki, nicely if you go to www.maps.google.com and search: kajuki market kenya