

## **In Memoriam: Father Chrysostomos, a Kenyan Village Priest**



*By Jeremy Ingpen*

If you take the A104, the main highway linking Nairobi and Kampala, a crowded two lane highway rutted and potholed with broken tarmac, heading west from Eldoret, you come to an unmarked intersection. The bus conductress, whom I asked to let me know when we had arrived, was incredulous – “you want that? Not Bungoma?” “Yes. That’s the place.” When we stopped on what seemed to be just the side of the highway, I too was doubtful. But there to greet me were Father Chrysostomos and his brother, on motorcycles.

Two miles north of the highway on a dirt road you come to an unmarked settlement: a scattering of houses on either side of the road. Here the future priest was born and here he established an Orthodox parish, building the church that towers over the village, from locally made bricks, the tallest structure for miles around. His parishioners walk to church from the surrounding area of small farms – ½ acre and one acre plots – a patchwork of smallholdings in hill country at 1500-meter elevation.

His father had a smallholding at the other end of the village and was raised in the Quaker tradition. He brought his whole family to Orthodoxy. Orthodox Christianity had begun to gain ground in Western Kenya and Uganda

in the 1930s and 1940s. The Orthodox Church supported the battle for independence from British rule and Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus, himself a fighter for independence, attended the independence day celebrations of Kenya in 1963. Not long afterward, the government of President Jomo Kenyatta donated land in Western Nairobi for the Orthodox seminary that bears Archbishop Makarios' name.

Local Greek residents supported the young Kenyan Orthodox Church. The young future priest had a Greek Sunday school teacher who, after she had retired and returned to Greece, regularly sent the money she had saved from her pension to help with the cost of building the church in the village. He was then instructed by a missionary of the Finnish Orthodox Church, Father Johannes Eco, a teacher originally from Springfield, Vermont, who became his mentor. The future priest was accepted to study at the Archbishop Makarios Seminary and graduated in the early 1990s.



I have few details of the first ten years of his career, the years of him establishing a family life. He married his future presbytera, a tall, distinguished woman with quiet authority and a winning smile, and they had two sons. They bought a plot of land in the village and they built a single-story, two-bedroom house, of locally made bricks, stuccoed and painted yellow in the local custom, with a separate outbuilding for the kitchen, in which Presbytera cooked over a three-stone fireplace, the smoke rising up through the eaves. Later they were able to buy an adjoining plot so that their small holding had almost two acres, on which Father Chrysostomos raised maize for the staple cornmeal ugali, and two dairy cows whose milk he sold to neighbors.

In this period, he said, they would walk two hours to church. In 2002 or 2003 he began a parish in his home village. To begin with, they worshiped under the gum tree, with a tarpaulin stretched over the portable altar. And this is when we first became acquainted, by letter. My little Vermont parish, of 25 families, linked through Johannes Eco of Springfield, Vermont, who had been a missionary teacher in Kenya for the Finnish Orthodox Church, had first given money for a cow to provide cash income to the young priest and his family. Now, in 2003, our priest gave me a letter and asked me to reply.



“We have been worshipping under the gum tree” – with a picture of the altar under the tarpaulin -- “now we want to build a temporary church, a 30-sheet building (thirty sheets of corrugated iron). The cost is 8500 shillings (\$120). We would be grateful for your parish’s help.” This was

within reach of the budget of our small church and we sent money, by Western Union.

A few years later, I received pictures of the permanent church under construction, with bricks made from clay on site. Fr. Chrysostomos’ brother was the master builder. Could we help with the cost of roofing materials, for \$800? This time my whole family donated. And, in 2013, I travelled first to Amsterdam, then to Nairobi and then the 8-hour bus ride west to stay with Fr. Chrysostomos and his family for ten days.

As a priest in the village, Fr. Chrysostomos knew each of his parishioners and their children. We were greeted warmly in each house we visited. When we met local officials it was clear with what respect Fr. Chrysostomos was held, by the village chief, by the district police superintendent, by the principals in the



elementary and secondary schools. In the evenings, we sat in his living room and talked as parish members visited. When Presbyteria brought in the evening meal, Fr. Chrysostomos made the first ceremonial cut into the ugali. Presbyteria helped her younger son, still in elementary school, with his homework, written out in a neat hand in his exercise book. We talked - about ugali: “we always eat ugali, even the dog eats ugali;” about who raised the best dairy cows, when to buy them for the best price; when the farmers needed money for planting, how the Guernseys were the best cows for this climate, and about his hopes to build a medical clinic for the village. Night comes suddenly on the equator and the household goes to bed early. The day starts early too, before dawn, with farm chores. Presbyteria swept the house clean each morning, managing the household while also being a leader in the Sunday School.

In the church, Fr. Chrysostomos served with simple dignity. Still, the splendor of the service, the richness of his vestments, the invitation of the iconography and the soaring arches of the church, provided a dramatic contrast to the bare simplicity of the single-story dwellings on the surrounding smallholdings. In the communion line, the parishioners sang joyfully: “come taste and see that the Lord is good.” The picture that he would most often send me after the Sunday service was of him standing on the ambon, in front of the Royal Doors, quietly talking to his beloved parishioners, delivering his homily. A priest in his church, in his parish, in the presence of the Lord.



He died suddenly in a vehicle accident at Theophany, 2022, as he returned from taking his younger son to start university. In the Matins for the Forefeast of the Synaxis of John the Baptist, that follows immediately after the Theophany, or Baptism of our Lord, we read: “O Forerunner, you have celebrated the rites of baptism and accomplished the mysteries of God that were openly explained to you, and becoming yourself the victim, you were offered as an innocent lamb. Therefore, we join you and sing: “O God of our fathers, blessed are you.”

May his memory be eternal!

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