

# The Beginnings of Kibondeni College, Nairobi. A Historical and Sociological Overview

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**Abstract:** *The theme of this article is Kibondeni College, a corporate work of Opus Dei in Kenya, East Africa. Its focus is the pre-history, the initial stages and the development of the school which started as a service unit alongside Strathmore and Kianda Colleges. The article seeks to highlight the role of the teaching, faith and vision of St. Josemaría Escrivá with respect to hospitality work as a noble career for women, and how several ladies of Opus Dei implemented it at a difficult moment in Kenya's history.*

**Keywords:** *Catering Schools – Women – Kibondeni College – Opus Dei – Josemaría Escrivá – Kenya – 1960-1970*

**Abstract:** *L'articolo studia la storia del Kibondeni College, un'opera corporativa dell'Opus Dei in Kenia, in particolare le fasi iniziali e lo sviluppo della scuola alberghiera che iniziò come centro di servizi per lo Strathmore e il Kianda College. Vuole mettere in luce il ruolo avuto dagli insegnanti, dalla fede e dal convincimento di san Josemaría Escrivá che il lavoro domestico e di accoglienza fosse un'occupazione femminile di tutto rispetto; mostra inoltre come alcune donne dell'Opera lo svolgessero in un periodo difficile della storia del Kenia.*

**Keywords:** *Scuole alberghiere – Donne – Kibondeni College – Opus Dei – Josemaría Escrivá – Kenia – 1960-70*

In the book *Opus Dei in the Church*, Pedro Rodríguez points to a constant in St. Josemaría's theological, anthropological and social teaching: that

Opus Dei is a portion of the Church and, just as the Church is *Familia Dei*<sup>1</sup>, Opus Dei is a family<sup>2</sup> with its own familial structure<sup>3</sup>. From the beginning, the faithful of Opus Dei, most of whom live with their own families<sup>4</sup>, learn to hallow family life. They discover that the tasks appertaining to hospitality work are an important element in the creation of a warm atmosphere and well-being. It is not surprising therefore that, as John Coverdale puts in his book *Uncommon Faith*, Josemaría Escrivá should insist that a centre of Opus Dei (or any family home for that matter) should not look like a convent, school, barracks or boarding house, but simply what it is: a family home<sup>5</sup>.

St. Josemaría's first experience of family life had naturally been that of his own family, which was a warm, Christian home and that was what he wanted the centres of Opus Dei to be. At first St. Josemaría's own mother and sister, both of whom never belonged to Opus Dei, provided this family atmosphere for the young people St. Josemaría was dealing with, in their own home. It was they who taught the first women members of Opus Dei many details about hospitality services. Coverdale notes, for example, how Dolores Fisac from Daimiel, would spend time with the two ladies whenever she visited Madrid, in order to learn directly from them how to create that family *ambiance*<sup>6</sup>. Others followed suit, setting the pace for many women members of Opus Dei who, either because this was their career before joining Opus Dei, or because they discovered the noble service that is rendered to society and to the Church in this way, decided to take it up as their professional work.

This article traces the path of a number of ladies, members of Opus Dei, who relocated to Africa in 1960 to advance the education of African women, at the request and with the blessing of St. Josemaría. Some of them were experts in the field of hospitality. They were all ardent professionals zealous to promote the welfare of the African woman in, among other

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Pedro RODRÍGUEZ, *The Place of Opus Dei in the Church*, in Pedro RODRÍGUEZ – Fernando OCÁRIZ – José Luis ILLANES, *Opus Dei in the Church. An Ecclesiological Study in the Life and Apostolate of Opus Dei*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1994, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Josemaría ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, Princeton, Scepter, 2002, n. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Fernando OCÁRIZ, *Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church*, in RODRÍGUEZ – OCÁRIZ – ILLANES, *Opus Dei*, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. John F. COVERDALE, *Uncommon Faith. The Early Years of Opus Dei, 1928-1943*, New York, Scepter, 2002, p. 339.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 339.

things, the family and hospitality work<sup>7</sup>. An outcome of their efforts was the start of a training unit in hospitality work that eventually became Kibondeni College. This endeavour was at first closely linked to the setting up of Strathmore College, a corporate work of Opus Dei for boys in Nairobi. In order, therefore, to set the training unit within its historical context, the author finds it necessary to present a brief overview of the history of modern Kenya, its colonization, evangelization and social set up and the circumstances that prompted the need for a College like Strathmore, and how St. Josemaría became involved in that development. The article is therefore divided into two parts. The first part comprises of the historical overview while the second part assumes a more sociological nature. However, neither of the two parts purports to be strictly academic, rather the author intends to simply inform and document certain facts that could provide the framework for more scholarly subsequent studies related to the initiatives and influence of St. Josemaría in Africa.

There are three main objectives for writing this article: first, to trace the historical background that led to the need for a school like Kibondeni College; second, to highlight the role of the Founder of Opus Dei in that history, his concern for the plight of the African woman and his desire that she be accorded her due place and dignity in social life. Finally, to show how St. Josemaría's vision of the irreplaceable role of hospitality work as a true profession and the backbone of society<sup>8</sup> became a reality in Kenya through Kibondeni.

The primary sources used for this article are the words and writings of St. Josemaría. His teachings are to be found in many forms: some already published, others written but not yet published, while a lot more can be found in the living testimonies of people who heard him talk about the hospitality career and Kibondeni College directly. Much of this has been summarised in his biographies and other theological and historical articles the most relevant, as far as this study is concerned, being: *The Founder of Opus Dei* by Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *Opus in the Church* by Pedro Rodríguez, Fernando Ocariz and José Luis Illanes, and *Uncommon Faith* by John Coverdale<sup>9</sup>. Among his own publications, a work entitled *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de*

<sup>7</sup> Educational welfare projects are not the main aim of Opus Dei, its aim being to help men and women to be good Christians. However, in all countries in which it works, Opus Dei carries out some social, educational and welfare projects. Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, n. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Andrés VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei. The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, 3

*Balaguer*<sup>10</sup> has served as the matrix for the whole of the second part of this work. An invaluable link between Kenya and the presence of Opus Dei in the country has been Pedro Casciaro's book entitled: *Dream and Your Dreams will Fall Short*<sup>11</sup>. Most of the information about the beginnings of the work of women of Opus Dei in Kenya is contained in two books: *To Africa with a Dream* by Olga Marlin<sup>12</sup> and *En el corazón de Kenia* by Esther Toranzo<sup>13</sup>.

Kibondeni College emerged from the experiences gained working with the first girls to ever take on catering and administration of a school such as Strathmore College. It is natural therefore that information about the beginnings should come from the persons who worked directly in the establishment of the catering unit of this college as well as from the first trainees who worked with them. Consequently, two different sources have provided the necessary information. Firstly, direct interviews with some of the ladies of Opus Dei who went to work in Kenya from the beginning, on one hand, and on the other hand, with the girls who formed the first three groups. The other invaluable source has been diverse narratives to be found in *Noticias*, an unpublished monthly Newsletter for the women of the Prelature<sup>14</sup>.

Regarding the colonisation and eventual African rebellion called Mau Mau that rocked Kenya in the early 1950s there exist abundant scholarly literature of which only a few of the latest have been selected. These are: *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* by D. Anderson's<sup>15</sup>, and *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of the Empire in Kenya* by C. Elkins<sup>16</sup> as well as *Mau Mau. An African Crucible* by R. Edgerton<sup>17</sup>. Views opposed to the opinions of the above works have also been consulted. Among others, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya, Counterinsurgency,*

vols., Princeton, Scepter, 2001-2005; COVERDALE, *Uncommon*; RODRÍGUEZ – OCÁRIZ – ILLANES, *Opus Dei*.

<sup>10</sup> For the origin and content of *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, cfr. José Luis ILLANES, *Obra escrita y predicación oral de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, "Studia et Documenta" 3 (2009), pp. 259-261.

<sup>11</sup> Pedro CASCIARO, *Dream and your Dreams will Fall Short*, London, Scepter, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Olga MARLIN, *To Africa with a Dream*, New York, Scepter, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Esther TORANZO, *En el corazón de Kenia. 25 años de mi vida en el Opus Dei*, Madrid, Rialp, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding "Noticias", cfr. ILLANES, *Obra escrita*, p. 240, footnote n. 95.

<sup>15</sup> David ANDERSON, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline ELKINS, *Britain's Gulag. The Brutal End of the Empire in Kenya*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Robert EDGERTON, *Mau Mau. An African Crucible*, New York, The Free Press, 1989.

*Civil War, and Decolonization* by D. Branch<sup>18</sup>, and *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics* by M. Clough<sup>19</sup>. For the final assessment of the rebellion the author has taken into account oral sources of people who lived through the Mau Mau and who confirm most of the information as presented in this article although those oral sources have not been cited.

For the history of evangelization in Kenya, this study relies on *A Century of Catholic Endeavour*, a research publication by Lawrence Njoroge<sup>20</sup> whose contents are confirmed by other sources, albeit not cited, and a manuscript by P. J. McCamphill entitled: *The Beginnings of the Catholic Church in Kitui*<sup>21</sup> which gives a parallel account of the History of the Catholic Church in Kenya until the founding of the Kitui diocese.

The method chosen for this article is historical-narrative and sociological in nature. Nevertheless, owing perhaps to a general lack of awareness of the historical import of historical documentation in the College over the years, it has not been possible to trace the relevant records of the transactions between the College and the Ministry of Education in the earlier years because after a period, documents considered not to be too important are destroyed. Consequently, what the reader will find in these pages has been culled from oral or written interviews with the pioneers of the school both teachers and students as they tell of their first experiences, the odds they had to face and how they surmounted them<sup>22</sup>. The information gathered was then classified and analysed, in order to identify what was most representative in their memories of the beginnings of Kibondeni. A lot of this information comes in anecdotic form, but it helps to grasp the important task of social integration which the presence of Opus Dei in Kenya helped to foster.

This article covers only the first ten years of the life of Kibondeni, from its inception as a simple department taking care of the domestic administration of Strathmore College to its consolidation and recognition by the Ministry of Education in 1967 as a School of Catering and Institutional Manage-

<sup>18</sup> Daniel BRANCH, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya. Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization*, African Studies Series, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall s. CLOUGH, *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics*, London, Lynne Rienner, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence NJOROGE, *A Century of Catholic Endeavour. Holy Ghost and Consolata Missions in Kenya*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> P. J. McCAMPBILL, *The Beginnings of the Catholic Church in Kitui, Kenya*, 1989. <http://www.friendsofkitui.com/images/pdfs>. Kitui is one of the dioceses in Kenya.

<sup>22</sup> These are indicated as "interview with", followed by the name of the person, the month and year.

ment and the subsequent placement of the first graduates of the school in the world of work. It closes with the establishment of Watani, a residence for young professional girls, alumnae of Kibondeni, in 1970.

#### HISTORICAL ROOTS OF MODERN KENYA 1849-1963

The first recorded European presence in the interior of what is today Kenya was that of Ludwig Kraft, a German explorer in 1849. He did not reach far, but before retreating to the coast he saw, away in the distance, a snow-capped mountain. On asking a local leader for the name of the mountain he was told that it was called *Kinyaa*, meaning in the vernacular *the mountain that glows*. Kraft interpreted the sound as *Kenya*. Joseph Thomson was the next white visitor to the interior. He traversed the country from Mombasa to the Great Rift Valley, some 350 miles away. The expeditions of these two Europeans were followed by various others of which the most significant was that of Frederick Lugard. Besides exploration, Lugard worked for the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC)<sup>23</sup>, doubled up as agent for British Government interests in Africa, and in this capacity helped to pave the way for the eventual colonisation of countries like Kenya.

In a conference held in Berlin during 1884 and 1885 Africa was divided out between various European powers resulting in the 53 countries that politically make up modern Africa. In East Africa the territories that Lugard had procured for IBEAC became a British Protectorate. Subsequently between 1896 and 1901 Britain built a railway to connect Mombasa in the Indian Ocean to its interests in the Lake Victoria region, such as the Nile waters and Uganda. Unfortunately, the costs of building the railway far exceeded the budget prompting the colonial governor, Sir George Elliot, to seek alternative ways to offset the deficit. He consequently advertised Kenya abroad as suitable territory for white farming. White farmers started to arrive in 1902, and took over the healthy land at will, mostly in the highlands of Central Kenya and parts of the Rift Valley. These zones became known as the White Highlands, and were leased out by the colonial government for periods ranging from 99 to 999 years<sup>24</sup>. To free the land for white settlement, the native

<sup>23</sup> IBEAC was a governmentally chartered colonial authority established in 1856 to function as a Steam Navigation company, which was also used to advance political interests abroad.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. ELKINS, *Britain's Gulag*, p. 11.

peoples were driven out to less productive areas dubbed African Reserves. By 1920 Kenya's status had changed from that of a mere British Protectorate to a British Crown Colony, excepting a 10-mile strip of land along the coast that continued to be under the nominal control of the Sultan of Zanzibar.

The origins of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, are closely related to the IBEAC activities and the construction of the Uganda Railway. The location, that eventually became a town, started off as a suitable resting and storage spot for IBEAC caravans, owing to the coolness of the place and the availability of fresh drinking water and fruit. Its local name in the Masai language was Enkara Nairobi or *the place of cool waters*. It used to be a market and confluence area for people from three ethnic communities that flanked the area on three sides: the Masai, the Kikuyu and the Kamba. Once the railway reached Nairobi, European buildings started to come up: hotels, cafés, banks, members clubs, and private homes<sup>25</sup>. Asian immigrants put up similar establishments for their use. In 1950 Nairobi acquired city status. With the exception of the small Islamic city-states along the East African coast, some of them founded between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries, urbanization was an entirely new phenomenon for the people of the interior.

In Nairobi and other urban areas founded along the railway line as far as Kisumu on Lake Victoria, society was segregated along race and ethnic lines. In Nairobi, the Europeans lived in the cooler northern and western suburbs or in homes adjacent to their estates which often included farmlands and horse-breeding<sup>26</sup>. Government officials generally lived in smaller *whites-only* holdings around Nairobi<sup>27</sup>, and the Asians dwelt in the city centre where they kept shops called *dukawallahs* in which they bought and sold all sorts of goods<sup>28</sup>. Only authorised Africans and Arabs could live in Nairobi and only for reasons of work. When they did, they lived in small flats of one or two multipurpose rooms built in the low savannah land to the East of the city. It was not uncommon to find two families sharing this space. In these areas also ethnic separation was strictly enforced<sup>29</sup>.

By the 1930s the African Reserves had clearly become inadequate for the growing population. Besides, under the new power, all men were required

<sup>25</sup> Similar towns sprung up in all the territory where the railway passed.

<sup>26</sup> Karen, Lang'ata and Loresho are good examples.

<sup>27</sup> Muthaiga, Lavington Green, Hurlingham and Westlands suburbs.

<sup>28</sup> Parklands, Pangani and Ngara areas lie to the south of Nairobi bordering the savannah land.

<sup>29</sup> The Gikūyū (commonly called Kikuyu) lived in Bahati, the Luo in Kaloleni and so on with people of other ethnicities.

to pay taxes to the government. This forced crowds of people to go to the towns and to white settlers' farms in search of employment. Consequently, they became squatters on these farms. Where more than one ethnic group coincided on the same holding, they were obliged to dwell in different zones in order to maintain the imposed racial and ethnic separation.

From the onset discontent was simmering among the African people, and especially among the squatters. The political details of the heightening tension, that eventually exploded, do not fit within the subject matter of this article. Suffice to just mention how that explosion finally occurred. After World War II, during which many Kenyan Africans fought for the British, a new mindset emerged especially among the young educated Kenyans. These began to demand political reforms to advance the welfare of Africans. The British officials in Kenya ignored their requests and, instead, locked up and punished the militants and outlawed all political associations. The Kikuyu of the Kenyan Highlands were at the forefront of these demands because they had been the most affected by loss of land to white settlers. The suppression of political associations drove the militants underground, leading to the formation of secret societies. These became the cells of a violent rebellion whose members called themselves Mau Mau and recruited memberships through secret ritual oath-taking. The Kikuyu who declined the oath became *traitors* in the eyes of the Mau Mau and as such, targets for Mau Mau attacks. Most of these were committed Christians who objected, not so much to the *cause*, as to the manner of the ritual.

The rebellion came to a head in mid-1952, with the brutal murder of two African government officials. This was followed by the massacre of an entire family of a pro-government chief in the Lari location near Nairobi. Subsequent attacks on *traitors* and settlers claimed so many lives that the colonial governor, Evelyn Baring, declared a State of Emergency in Kenya<sup>30</sup>. To stamp out the Mau Mau he used strategies more chilling than those of the Mau Mau, whose rebellion he was trying to quell. First, he launched an attack on the more than twenty thousand Mau Mau insurgents who operated from the remote mountain forests near Mt. Kenya, using military forces. The Mau Mau rebels were poorly armed, with no outside source of weapons or financial support, whereas the British used twenty one thousand paramilitary police, many thousands of *loyalist* Africans, supported by the Royal Air Force with Vampire jets and heavy bombers plus the equivalent

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. ELKINS, *Britain's Gulag*, p. 34.



of a full division of British troops<sup>31</sup>. Edgerton observes that: “The Lancashire Fusiliers were flown from Egypt to Nairobi on board long-range Royal Air Force transport planes. It was the longest airlift in British military history. [...] They spent their first day parading through Nairobi. But it took them more than four years to neutralize the Mau Mau military threat”<sup>32</sup>. As the bombing and shooting in the forests did not appear to stem the rebellion, Evelyn Baring decided to try a more direct strategy that would affect all Kikuyu families, whom he suspected of supporting the guerrillas. It was dubbed *Operation Anvil*. It started in April 1953, when the military suddenly surrounded, and detained in camps, some eighty thousand Kikuyu civilians suspected of aiding or abetting the insurgents<sup>33</sup>. The captives were subjected to various forms of physical and psychological torture, to compel them to confess their Mau Mau status<sup>34</sup>. This strategy was soon followed by the most punitive action of all, whereby the remaining Kikuyu population of more than one million and a half, mostly elderly men, women and children, were crammed into eight hundred fifty four heavily guarded camps scattered throughout Central Kenya in the fashion of the Nazi concentration camps or Stalin gulags. Anderson and Elkins draw this convincing parallel to the concentration camps and the gulags because, here too, thousands died from starvation, disease or torture<sup>35</sup>. Accounts of these atrocities, usually denied by government officials in Nairobi and London at that time, were finally leaked out by the media and when investigated through the insistence of the opposition in Britain, found to be true<sup>36</sup>. Thereafter the bombing and shooting came to an end, the State of Emergency was lifted, and the gulags were gradually dismantled. The number of the people who lost their lives during this period is disputed. Some accounts give put it at approximately twenty-five thousand. Of these only thirty two were European settlers and a further sixty three who lost their lives in battle<sup>37</sup>. More than ninety percent of the dead were Kikuyu<sup>38</sup>. The remaining Central Kenya population, practically all Kikuyu, was left devastated and traumatized; they had lost everything they

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. EDGERTON, *Mau Mau. An African Crucible*, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 120ff.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, pp. 76, 236.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, pp. 275-310.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. BRANCH, *Defeating Mau Mau*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

had: their land and property, their loved ones, and their honour<sup>39</sup>. There was an urgent need therefore to rehabilitate these people. Most of this work was being undertaken by missionaries and the Red Cross. The British had certainly won the war, but the Mau Mau had, to their credit, the pride of, at least, having compelled the Conservative Government in London to expedite Kenya's independence.

*Christianity, education and Opus Dei invited to Kenya*

As early as the 15<sup>th</sup> Century some Portuguese missionaries had attempted the evangelization of East Africa, but by late 19<sup>th</sup> Century the only remnant of those efforts was a small dilapidated chapel in Malindi, facing the sea, where a small plaque indicates that St. Francis Xavier celebrated Mass at that spot while on his way to Goa and the Far East. The evangelization of East Africa, properly speaking, begins in 1862 when, by decree of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*) in Rome<sup>40</sup>, the Holy Ghost Fathers (or Spiritans) were authorized to establish a Prefecture in Zanzibar<sup>41</sup>. Their jurisdiction extended from the Cape of Guardafui at the horn of Africa to Cape Delgado in Mozambique, with no definite boundaries to delimit its extension in the mainland. It therefore included the whole of the British East Africa Protectorate, which is Kenya today. When the Spiritans found the evangelization of the predominantly Muslim population of Zanzibar practically impossible, they decided to try Mombasa, and subsequently set up a mission there in 1889. Here, too, they made few converts, and so looked forward for opportunities to evangelize the inhabitants of the interior. It is on record therefore, that ten years later, when the railway line first reached Nairobi, a Spiritan Father was on board. Their first mission in Nairobi, St. Austin's Catholic Church in Mũthangari area, was founded that year, 1899<sup>42</sup>. Other Catholic missionary groups arrived soon after: the Consolata Fathers from Italy in 1902, and the Mill Hill Fathers, mostly from Holland, in 1903. Each group took a different part of the country, but all of them continued to fall under the Prefecture, later upgraded to Vicariate of

<sup>39</sup> The Native Lands Rights Confiscation Order was gazetted in the "Kenya Official Gazette", 1954, and applied in the Operation Anvil.

<sup>40</sup> This Congregation of the Holy See, also called *Propaganda Fide*, was founded in 1622 with the aim of spreading Christianity where this had not yet arrived.

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. NJOROGE, *A Century*, pp. 34ff.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. MCCAMPBILL, *The Beginnings*.

Zanzibar. By the time the events concerning this study take place, the Vicariate had expanded into various dioceses, the main one being the Archdiocese of Nairobi.

As a British territory, Kenya's official religion was the Anglican Church, run by the Church Missionary Society or CMS. Parallel to the CMS, other protestant missionaries were also hard at work, but, while they all competed to win converts, they united in their efforts to prevent Catholic endeavours. From the beginning the missionaries had scrambled for territory and government recognition<sup>43</sup>. With time, and especially during the Emergency and the period immediately after, the denial of certain rights to Catholics became evident, especially in the field of education, rehabilitation and welfare. To counter this bias, the Catholic Archbishop of Nairobi, John Joseph McCarthy, a Spiritan and dedicated educator, decided to move<sup>44</sup>. Throughout his career in Africa, McCarthy had always been a tireless defender of the rights of all citizens before the law. Now, as Bishop, his concern was how to deal with an Administration that was actively anti-Catholic. We get a glimpse of his efforts from an excerpt of a letter he addressed to Leone G. B. Nigris, head of *Propaganda Fide* in Rome on March 4, 1955, asking for financial assistance to mount rehabilitation projects for the former detainees and their families<sup>45</sup>. He also asked for support to set up a Catholic institution of higher education, preferably a university, and a seminary.

The situation in Kiambu District which includes the important section of Nairobi is very special and highly important. [...] The Protestant sects, including the Church of England, the Presbyterian Scottish Mission, Quakers, Methodists and the Salvation Army have all united in a world-wide appeal [...] to win over and impress the Kikuyu living in Nairobi... The Catholic Church must also prove in a practical manner that it is equally

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. NJOROGE, *A Century*, pp. 171ff.

<sup>44</sup> John Joseph McCarthy was born 27<sup>th</sup> April 1896 in Miltown Malbay (Ireland), ordained priest 24<sup>th</sup> June 1925, appointed Titular Bishop of Cercina and Apostolic Vicar of Zanzibar (Kenya) 11<sup>th</sup> July 1946, ordained Bishop 27<sup>th</sup> October 1946. On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1953 he was appointed Archbishop of Nairobi (Kenya), retired in 1971. He died 13<sup>th</sup> January 1983. Cfr. "Annuario Pontificio" 1971, Città del Vaticano, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1971, p. 319 and 1984, p. 1015.

<sup>45</sup> Leone Giovanni Battista Nigris was born 27<sup>th</sup> August 1884 in Ampezzo (Italy), ordained priest 18<sup>th</sup> July 1909, appointed Titular Archbishop of Philippi 18<sup>th</sup> August 1938, ordained Bishop 25<sup>th</sup> September 1938. He died 21<sup>th</sup> September 1964. Cfr. "Annuario Pontificio" 1964, Città del Vaticano, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1964, p. 587 and 1965, p. 1368.

interested in their social and spiritual needs, else there is danger of losing thousands of Kikuyu<sup>46</sup>.

On 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1957, the Apostolic Delegate for East and West British Africa, Gastone Mojaisky-Perelli, wrote to his friend, Josemaría Escrivá, expressing his fear that unless the Catholics moved quickly in Kenya to catch the new mood, particularly in the educational sector, others might take over and Catholicism remain permanently a minority religion in these parts<sup>47</sup>. The Archbishop went straight to the point. He wanted Escrivá to do “a very great favour for the Church in these lands”, and he explained the urgency of the matter:

We have reached a critical point: The number of Christians, the increase in conversions, the imminent change to “self-government”, etc., have set in motion a game that will have extraordinary consequences for Africa’s future. The next twenty years will decide—who knows for how long—whether Catholicism will be the religion of the majority, with the greatest influence in these lands, or whether—God forbid—it will be reduced to one more Christian sect among so many<sup>48</sup>.

Owing to the hardships people were experiencing, and their lack of sufficient doctrine to differentiate between the different Christian denominations, it was the church that offered most material benefits that naturally attracted more converts. For this reason education was a priority, and the Archbishop wanted to offer the best. This, in his opinion, was a university school of engineering, and so his letter continues as follows: “I ask you, before God, to see if you can provide me, as soon as possible, with members who can start a civil engineering school in Nairobi, Kenya. They should be English-speaking and the president<sup>49</sup> possibly from Great Britain (Oxford

<sup>46</sup> NJORGE, *A Century*, p. 178.

<sup>47</sup> Gastone Mojaisky-Perelli was born 6<sup>th</sup> August 1914 in Buonalbergo (Italy), ordained priest 1<sup>st</sup> August 1937, appointed Titular Archbishop of Amida and Apostolic Delegate 8<sup>th</sup> August 1959, ordained bishop 1<sup>st</sup> November 1959. In 1960 was appointed Apostolic Delegate to Democratic Republic of Congo, and in 1962 appointed Official of the Secretariat of State. On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1963 he was appointed Archbishop (personal title) of Nusco (Italy), and 10 years later Archbishop of Conza-Sant’Angelo dei Lombardi (Bisaccia, Italy). He resigned in 1978, died 5<sup>th</sup> March 2008. Cfr. “Annuario Pontificio” 2008, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008, p. 677.

<sup>48</sup> Letter of Gastone Mojaisky-Perelli to St. Josemaría (Mombasa, October 26, 1957), in VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder*, vol. 3, p. 257.

<sup>49</sup> Rector or Principal.

or Cambridge)”. The scope of this paper does not permit us to discuss the reason why he preferred graduates from Oxford or Cambridge but, obviously, within a British Colony the prestige of these two institutions would carry weight within the Commonwealth. The letter ends with an irresistible appeal: “I beg you, then, to answer me (in the affirmative) and to see if you can send someone to study the proposal on-site”<sup>50</sup>.

St. Josemaría’s reply was prompt and explicit.

I received your letter of October 26, and want to answer it immediately. You can’t imagine how overwhelmed we are with work right now... And it will be another few years before we could provide you with all the people that would be needed. Nevertheless, Your Excellency’s request is such a priestly one that it is impossible for me to say no. So, as Your Excellency wishes, at the end of January a couple of my sons who are engineers—one of them English-speaking—will go there to work with Your Excellency on how to get that project started<sup>51</sup>.

Whether or not Josemaría Escrivá had thought of members of Opus Dei working in Africa so soon is difficult to tell. In *En el corazón de Kenia*, Esther Toranzo states that the first recorded moment when St. Josemaría talked about the expansion of Opus Dei to Africa was around 1945 when, on a journey to southern Spain, he glimpsed the African coast from Algeciras and was heard to say: “It is impossible for the grace of God not to reach that far”<sup>52</sup>. This aspiration of the Founder was now about to be fulfilled. Pedro Casciaro relates how in October 1958 Josemaría Escrivá called him from Mexico, where he usually resided, to Rome. “Once I got to Rome the first thing the Father asked me to do was to go to Kenya for a few weeks, to Monsignor Mojaisky-Perelli, who was now the Apostolic Delegate for the various British Dominions in East Africa”<sup>53</sup>.

Casciaro observed the situation, and appreciated the concern of Mojaisky-Perelli. Under the British educational system which prevailed in Kenya, the Africans and numerous Asian immigrants had little chance of proceeding to university. The secondary school, or Ordinary Level Certificate of Education, required a further two years for the Advanced Level Cer-

<sup>50</sup> Letter of Gastone Mojaisky-Perelli to St. Josemaría (Mombasa, October 26, 1957), in VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder*, vol. 3, p. 257.

<sup>51</sup> Letter of St. Josemaría to Gastone Mojaisky-Perelli (Rome, November 4, 1957), in *ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>52</sup> TORANZO, *En el corazón*, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> CASCIARO, *Dream*, p. 304.

tificate which was a condition for university entrance. This two year course could only be taken in special schools which did not exist for Africans<sup>54</sup>. The Europeans and people of other nationalities could send their children abroad for A-levels and university education, but African children found themselves barred from further studies.

On his return to Rome, Casciaro submitted his findings to Escrivá. In the summer of that year Esther Toranzo, who was living in London at the time, relates that she heard St. Josemaría speak about the imminent start of the apostolic work of Opus Dei in Africa. “He spoke enthusiastically about Kenya, with admiration for the country: he asked us for prayers, and said that we were about to begin the prehistory of the apostolic work in that nation. [He explained that] he had sent some members of Opus Dei there to study what projects were most needed”<sup>55</sup>.

In August, 1958, the first members of Opus Dei arrived in Kenya with the mission of starting a university...<sup>56</sup>. The first stage would be an A-level College in line with the British educational system. That was the origin of Strathmore College<sup>57</sup>.

Escrivá gave clear guidelines for this new institution which were to become the terms of reference for all the future educational institutions: The College must be multi-racial and inter-ethnic from the start, a place where the different races and ethnic groups could intermingle and get to know and appreciate one another. The college must be open to students of all creeds: Catholic, non-Catholic and even non-Christian. In addition, owing to the lay character of the members of Opus Dei, it should be clear from the beginning that the new institution was not a missionary school, but a private school run by laypeople, in the free exercise of their respective educational careers. Finally, the students should pay for their education. If in some cases the fee was subsidized, the students should still pay something because people do not appreciate what is given for nothing<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> At around this time, Alliance Boys School was starting an A-level course but it gave preference to Protestant students.

<sup>55</sup> TORANZO, *En el corazón*, p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> This aspiration was realized fifty years later, when on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2008, the President of the Republic of Kenya, Hon. Mwai Kibaki, finally presented the much awaited Charter from the Commission of Higher Education to Strathmore University.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder*, vol. 3, p. 259.

<sup>58</sup> Cfr. CASCIARO, *Dream*, pp. 305-306.

While this new institution for men was getting underway, the Founder of Opus Dei thought of a parallel institution for girls and invited the first women to go to start in Kenya. They eventually began a secretarial school for girls called Kianda College, as well as ensuring the family *ambiance* of all the Centres with their hospitality skills.

## BEGINNING THE APOSTOLIC WORK OF THE WOMEN OF OPUS DEI IN AFRICA

The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the women's presence in Opus Dei fell on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1960, and on that day St. Josemaría celebrated Mass for a group of them in Rome. It was a special occasion because it was then that he announced the imminent departure of the first women of Opus Dei to start the apostolic work in Kenya and Japan. On that occasion he told those present: "I want to put more of my heart into this greeting than at other times. Because in a short time we are going to Japan, we are going to Kenya"<sup>59</sup>.

Later, he met with the ladies who would be going to those new places and spoke to them about their work there. There were eight going to Kenya: five Numerary<sup>60</sup> and three Assistant Numerary<sup>61</sup> members<sup>62</sup>. All were young and full of anticipation. Before their departure for Africa, Escrivá called them to Rome for a period of time. He was aware that they would meet with difficulties, and so he wanted to strengthen them with his trust. He assured them that if they lived well their practices of piety, if they were close to God, everything else would fall into place. He also instilled in them a great love for the African people even before they set foot on the continent, repeating his constant teaching "we are all one race, the race of the children of God"<sup>63</sup>. In *To Africa with a Dream*, Olga Marlin recalls that moment:

<sup>59</sup> TORANZO, *En el corazón*, p. 56.

<sup>60</sup> The five were: Olga Marlin, from USA, who had met and joined Opus Dei in Ireland, an education studies graduate; Mary Theresa Mahoney, a Major and nurse with the USA Air Force; Margaret Curran, Irish and a secretary by profession; Marlene Sousa, Portuguese from Cape Verde and specialist in Fine Arts; María Teresa Temes Hernández-Garnica, a history and library studies graduate from the Central University of Madrid.

<sup>61</sup> They were Rosario Insausti, Encarnación Riera and Elisa Serrano, all from Spain.

<sup>62</sup> Regarding membership in Opus Dei, cfr. Fernando OCÁRIZ, *Unity of vocation and variety of members in Opus Dei*, in RODRÍGUEZ – OCÁRIZ – ILLANES, *Opus Dei*, pp. 110-115.

<sup>63</sup> Josemaría ESCRIVÁ, *Christ is Passing By*, Manila, Sinag-Tala Publishers, 1973, n. 106.

He told us that the men of Opus Dei were starting a prep school for boys which would be the first multiracial high school in Africa, and that they had met with open opposition. He stressed his constant teaching that out of a hundred souls we are interested in a hundred. "In the eyes of the Lord", he said, "there is no difference of nation, race, class, status... We're all brothers and sisters, and have to behave that way towards one another"<sup>64</sup>.

She remembers St. Josemaría's concern for the African women who, he told them, had not been well treated. They were to contribute to changing this situation by providing the much-needed education which would promote the dignity of the African women. Although he dreamt of Africans coming to Opus Dei, he told them not to be discouraged if it took many years, because Christianity in Kenya was still less than fifty years old<sup>65</sup>.

On 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1960, the first five arrived in Kenya by air to be followed three weeks later by the rest, who came by sea. They began by working in their professional fields until they could get their bearings: Mary Mahoney, being a nurse, worked in the Fairfield Nursing Home, Olga Marlin got a teaching position at The Kenya High School<sup>66</sup>, Margaret Curran as secretary in Tysons<sup>67</sup> while María Teresa Temes and Marlene Sousa concentrated on laying down the foundations for the school which was to start in their rented house in January 1961. Together with Rosario Insausti, Encarnación Riera and Elisa Serrano, the main task of Temes and Sousa became the organization of the hospitality aspects of their new Centres and the two future Schools<sup>68</sup>: Strathmore and Kianda College.

Due to the racial segregation that prevailed, the first friends they made were naturally from the white community. These friends talked about future African rule, of which they were sceptical, fearing the worst. Already, many Europeans and Asians were planning to leave, while the Africans were jubilant and eagerly awaited independence.

Meanwhile, the group set to work on their projects and, although the story of Kianda College does not belong to this study, it may help to understand the context in which they were working, to relate an event which brought them face to face with the reality of racial segregation. Their rented house was in the pleasant area of Lavington Green, a whites residential

<sup>64</sup> MARLIN, *To Africa*, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>66</sup> The Kenya High School was a whites only school in the Lavington area of Nairobi.

<sup>67</sup> A law firm in Nairobi.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Olga Marlin, Nairobi, June 2006.



area. They had advertised their carefully prepared course for high school graduates and received seventeen applications, all from European girls, and one from an Asian. The next, and last step, was to officially register the school with the city's Education Department. At this department however, they were informed that the inclusion of an Asian girl among the students required a written consent, signed by all their neighbours, agreeing to a non-white coming to the school. Thinking that should be easy, they immediately wrote the letter and brought it from door to door: not one person agreed to sign<sup>69</sup>. Their reaction to this incident was that of shock for it went diametrically against everything they had come for, all that the Founder expected of them. They remembered that he had told them, not without some indignation, how the Counsellor<sup>70</sup> of Opus Dei in Kenya had been vilified in the local press to the point of saying "he is not even a Christian gentleman!" simply because Strathmore was to be a multiracial institution<sup>71</sup>.

María de los Ángeles Canel, who came to Kenya the following year to work in Strathmore catering unit after spending a few days in Rome, remembers that Escrivá had told her: "Keep always in mind that you have to be one more among the people of the country, live with them, love them; be convinced that the domestic work in Kenya can be a woman's job at a professional level and reach to the highest professional level"<sup>72</sup>.

Some years later, speaking about the African students, he told Olga Marlin that: "They [African people] have been treated very badly. They have the right to be treated marvellously well, and the best way to make that happen is to treat them as equals. We are equal! We can't claim the slightest difference"<sup>73</sup>.

In Kenya the concept of equality between the races was new. When their European friends therefore learned that the newcomers were planning to bring African girls to work in Strathmore, they were very surprised, as this was not the practice in the country. They tried to dissuade them with the rationale that: "We have always had houseboys. The City Council even requires every house to provide quarters for them. It is the normal procedure". When asked why houseboys, the European and Asians would explain

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>70</sup> At that time this was the designation of the position which today is held by the Regional Vicar of Opus Dei.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Olga Marlin, Nairobi, June 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with María de los Ángeles Canel, Nairobi, April 2005.

<sup>73</sup> MARLIN, *To Africa*, p. 63.

that “the African woman knows nothing about a modern house; African women can’t learn, they’ll run away”<sup>74</sup>. Here then was a dilemma: these ladies had come to teach and to promote women and here they were being told that *African women can not learn* the administration of a modern home or a modern institution. Nonetheless, they persisted in the belief that this would somehow change and things would work despite the obstacles.

At this juncture we should look into the *houseboy question*, and the tradition that entrenched it in the Kenya colonial life style. The houseboy concept was a creation of British rule in Kenya, and was quite contrary to African traditions. In traditional Kenyan society the woman had always been the mainstay of the family because she did everything. Among the agricultural communities, the woman tilled the land, planted, weeded, harvested the crop and took it to market, while all along she also attended to all household management. A wife had to attend to all the needs of her husband and his visitors. It was generally unacceptable for him to be served by anyone else.

This lofty status and self esteem of the male members of the family was jeopardized under colonial rule, even though at home the man continued to behave traditionally. It was altered when the men found themselves forced to go out to earn money for the yearly hut tax imposed by the government which could be paid either in money (the rupee) or livestock. Since no family could generally afford to give out their livestock as tax the men were left with no other alternative than to seek salaried employment, given the fact that in their majority they were unskilled and uneducated people as regards western formal education, the only kinds of job they could do were as servants for the Europeans and Asians as these were the ones who had money. The result of so much availability of cheap labour was that every European and Asian family kept many servants who worked as farmhands, porters, rickshaw drivers, horse syces, valets, cooks, housekeepers... Those who worked inside the house came to be called *houseboys* regardless of their age. These learned European cuisine, and the management of western style houses. They became experts in domestic services not only in the homes but also in hotels and restaurants, clubs, hospitals and schools. The City Council Planning Department even obliged every home to have a “Servants Quarters” (or SQ). This consisted of a single room for the houseboy to live in, but the regulations prohibited bringing a wife or family to live there as this would contravene the segregation law.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Olga Marlin, Nairobi, June 2006.

In traditional African set up it was uncommon for woman to go in search of paid employment. Neither was it usual for a woman to solicit paid help for her family from someone else unless she herself was unwell. However, by the late 1950s this situation was gradually changing owing partly to loss of land and the heightening population pressure that led to the Mau Mau conflicts, the introduction of Christianity, and western form of education and lifestyles. Gradually, progressive young women who had gone to school started to take on jobs such as nursing and primary school teaching. As they went out to work, the traditional rural reliance on the help of a relative to take care of the baby when the mother was doing other chores began to be replaced by the need to employ someone to help in the house as paid job. Like in many other places, today *house-help* is a thriving employment for girls in Kenya though, sadly, often abused, a factor which must have been known to St. Josemaría when he said that “Employers must be brought to respect an adequate work-contract with clear and precise guarantees in which the rights and duties of both parties are clearly established<sup>75</sup>.”

The aim of Kibondeni, however, was not to train house-helps, but to promote hospitality as a noble profession. This was what the Founder of Opus Dei expected, being, at the same time aware that not everyone had that vision. In an interview he gave to the director of the Spanish Women’s Magazine, *Telva*, he laments that narrow vision:

We must not forget that there are people who have wanted to present this work as something humiliating, but it is not. No doubt the conditions under which this work used to be done were humiliating, and sometimes they still are even today when domestic staffs are subjected in their work to the whim of an arbitrary employer who does not guarantee their rights, and who gives them low wages and no affection<sup>76</sup>.

There is not much documentation on the history of professional hospitality services in Kenya, but there is evidence that the subject first known as Domestic Science, and later as Home Economics, was introduced by Catholic missionary nuns, and some wives of protestant missionaries. Alongside evangelization, the Catholic sisters and the protestant missionaries would impart some elementary classes in hygiene, nutrition, laundry, childcare, and needlework. The latter was very important because the use of textiles for

<sup>75</sup> ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 109.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 109.

clothing was a recent development in sub-Saharan Africa. With the introduction of formal education, domestic science became a subject for girls and carpentry for boys. The extent of that education depended on many factors, among them, the environment and material circumstances of the school and of the pupils. Sometimes teaching took place in make-shift classrooms, or under trees, for want of better facilities. Many of the homes were just mud huts where food was cooked with firewood on a three-stone hearth.

By 1960 the educational system for Africans in Kenya comprised of eight years of primary education, divided into two segments of four years each, called Elementary and Intermediate levels respectively. There were still so few secondary schools that only those who passed the selective examination at the end of the Intermediate level, and could afford the fees, were eligible for secondary level of education. Admission to university required another two years of higher education (A-levels) which until 1961 was only available in Makerere College, Uganda, or abroad. Research by Jerry Olson in 1972<sup>77</sup> reveals that by 1961 there were roughly 818,000 students attending elementary school. Of these, only 29% of the male cohort and 9% of the female cohort accessed and completed the Intermediate segment. Out of these, only 2% or approximately 6,400 students enrolled for secondary education, due to lack of space, poor examinations results or simply poverty<sup>78</sup>. Olson's figures show that on average only about a hundred and three girls and nine hundred and fifty one boys completed the fourth form in 1961<sup>79</sup>. These figures can be disputed, but they do give us a roughly good idea of the status of education in Kenya at this time.

A study by Jane Kivu and Olive Mugenda<sup>80</sup> shows that, already in 1955 Domestic Science was an examinable subject for the Kenya African Primary Education (KAPE) Certificate. Later on it was dropped as examinable subject, probably due to lack of qualified staff<sup>81</sup>. The highest educational insti-

<sup>77</sup> Cfr. Jerry B. OLSON, *Secondary Schools and Elites in Kenya: A Comparative Study of Students in 1961 and 1968*, in "Comparative Education Review" (1972), pp. 44-53.

<sup>78</sup> These figures, cited in Olson's study were taken from: *Colony of Kenya, Nairobi*, Ministry of Education Annual Summary, 1961, Government Printer, 1962.

<sup>79</sup> After independence more schools were built and schools enrolment rose to about 1,140,000 by 1968. Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>80</sup> Cfr. Jean KIVU, *Home Economics Professions in Africa*, in Olive MUGENDA (ed.), *Home Economics in Kenya, Strategies for Change. Discussion papers by professional Home Economists*, Nairobi, Ngatho Publishers, 1995, p. 44.

<sup>81</sup> The Education system in Kenya at this time was segregated with different plans of studies for the different races.

tution in Kenya then was the Royal Technical College, established in Nairobi in 1956. In 1961 this institution was upgraded to a University College (The Royal College Nairobi), affiliated to the University of London. Three years later it was renamed University College Nairobi, and became part of the University of East Africa, which comprised of three Colleges one in each of the three East African countries: Kenya, Uganda (Makerere) and Tanganyika. The increase of schools for African children after independence in 1963 meant that more girls could go to school. Consequently, there arose the urgent need for teachers for secondary schools and Teacher Training Colleges. Among other measures taken to deal with this deficiency, a department of Home Economics was established at the University College Nairobi, through a special arrangement with the Victorian University of Manchester, School of Education, to examine and award Diplomas in Education, with emphasis on Home Economics.

This brief trajectory maps out the setting in which the ladies of Opus Dei, recently arrived in the country, went in search for girls to work with them in the training unit of Strathmore; a multiracial institution, run by Europeans, and catering for boys. The first Kenyan woman to support them was Jemimah Gecaga<sup>82</sup>. She had been introduced to them by Joseph Gabiola, a priest of Opus Dei, soon after their arrival to Kenya. From that first meeting both sides conceived a great respect for each other. When they met her, Mrs Gecaga already knew and appreciated what Opus Dei had to offer Africa, so when she learnt that her new friends were interested in the promotion of women's education, she immediately resolved to help them in whatever they needed. Olga Marlin describes her as a person with "a distinct air of authority and great dignity"<sup>83</sup>. One of her major concerns was political freedom for the African people.

At her demise a local daily wrote, in homage to her, a profile that portrays an indefatigable advocate of human rights, especially where the rights

<sup>82</sup> Jemimah Thoiya Gecaga was born in 1920 in Kiambu District and educated at the Church of Scotland Mission at Thogoto (later Alliance Girls School). By 1952 she was one of the few women teachers in Kenya, teaching community development to women at the Jeans School in Kabete, near Nairobi. In 1955 she went to England to take a diploma in Domestic Science. On her return to Kenya she became a probation officer attached to the Law Courts; 1958-1960 was nominated member of the Legislative Council (LegCo), the colony's equivalent to Parliament, making her the first Kenya African woman to hold such a position. She was re-nominated as Member of Parliament in 1974 thereby becoming the first woman MP.

<sup>83</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, p. 89.

of women was concerned, convinced that for progress to be achieved in any field both the men and the women need to work together.<sup>84</sup> It added: “She was involved in many voluntary activities, her goal being mainly to awaken women to the vital issues which were hardly understood in 1958”<sup>85</sup>. On learning, therefore, of the difficulties that the ladies of Opus had met in their efforts to find girls who could work with them in the hospitality services for Strathmore College<sup>86</sup>, besides encouraging them to persist in that effort, she pointed out to them that they had in fact arrived at a most appropriate time when, she said, “Our women need education in order to become self-reliant, and make themselves respected. This can only happen when they are financially independent. Your school should provide them with the necessary skills”<sup>87</sup>. She noted that one of the difficulties stemmed from segregation, which included the educational system, but she assured them that once Kenya gained Independence from British rule all that would change. Although the discussions with Mrs Gecaga referred mostly to the problems encountered with regard to Kianda College, her words were an encouragement in their holistic endeavour for Africa. She advised them to be patient, because they would soon have more African girls in their schools than they could cope with<sup>88</sup>.

One evening Jemimah Gecaga brought two of the ladies of Opus Dei to a women’s meeting held at the newly founded United Kenya Club. On the way there, she explained that this was a very special moment because it was the first time that women from all races were coming together. Of that meeting Olga Marlin says: “One could sense the exciting upsurge towards independence and nationhood, and the ardent desires of these women to create a new, free society devoid of any discrimination”<sup>89</sup>. At the United Kenya Club they were introduced to Dorothy Hughes, East Africa’s first Kenyan woman architect, politician, community worker and a mother of six<sup>90</sup>. At the time the

<sup>84</sup> Cfr. Jemimah Gecaga, Feature, in “The Standard”, Friday, August 3, 1979, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> “The Standard”, August, 3, 1979, p.4.

<sup>86</sup> At the beginning Kianda College did not offer residential facilities for its students, but Strathmore College wanted to house over a hundred people between teachers and students.

<sup>87</sup> MARLIN, *To Africa*, p. 90.

<sup>88</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>90</sup> Dorothy Hughes was daughter to Mr and Mrs Ullman, both Londoners, who became pioneer founders of the city of Eldoret in Uasin Gishu, Rift Valley province. They went to Eldoret in 1913 when Hughes was three years old, and their house became the second building of the new town. She did architectural studies in England, and on her return to

women of Opus Dei met her, Hughes had a flourishing architectural firm in Nairobi. She eventually became a Co-operator of Opus Dei and many years later gave her family estate on the hill at Mũthangari, in the Lavington area of Nairobi, for the definitive premises of Kibondeni College. She was one of the few European women who believed in the Africans. Like Gecaga, Hughes was convinced that Independence would come sooner than people thought, and when it came it would require educated Africans. She was at that time member of the New Kenya Party, the first multiracial political party, which advocated for a united Kenya<sup>91</sup>.

Strathmore College was due to open on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1961. The hospitality project had been designed to function alongside it, but by late 1960 the search for girls had not yet born any fruit. Following St. Josemaría's teaching to always be close to God, which is the Christian teaching, these ladies prayed ardently to find a solution. Then they learned that in a Consolata mission in Tetu, up in the Northern fringes of the Aberdare Mountains, also called Nyandarua, some sisters had been teaching household skills to African primary school leavers for many years. During the two World Wars these religious had faced many difficulties on account of being Italian, but they had nevertheless managed to come back and rebuild their missions. This meant that they had more experience in dealing with Africans than any of the European neighbours with whom the people of Opus Dei had been consulting.

Two of the ladies travelled to Tetu and met Sister Germana<sup>92</sup>, the sister in charge. She showed them around the school and what the students were learning: Cookery, Sewing, Agriculture... The school consisted of a

Kenya, she was elected by the Uasin Gishu settlers, mostly of Afrikaner origin, to become their representative in the LegCo. In 1959 she was selected as delegate to the Lancaster House Conference in London, whose sole agenda was the imminent Kenyan independence. In the 1961 Preliminary Elections (whites only) she lost her LegCo seat on account of her membership to New Kenya Party, and staunch Catholicism. She spent the rest of her life establishing social development and charitable projects, such as the Cheshire Homes for the disabled for which she was Chairperson for many years. Married to John Hughes (founder of Hughes Motors, the Ford Agents in Kenya); she was mother of six children. She is buried in St. Austin's Catholic cemetery, Mũthangari, Nairobi. Cfr. Evelyn MUNGAI – Jane AWORI (eds.), *Kenya Women Reflections*, Nairobi, Lear Publishing Co., 1983, pp. 74-76.

<sup>91</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, p. 93.

<sup>92</sup> Née Teresa Cuninetti, sister Germana (name in religion) was born near Turin, Italy. She entered the Consolata Congregation in 1937, and came to Kenya in 1949. She dedicated her life to the education of local women, and the formation of sisters of the Consolata and their affiliated congregations in Kenya, England and Liberia in West Africa. She died in 1990 at the Nazareth Consolata House in Riara Ridge in Kiambu, Kenya, and is

compound surrounded by a single-storey building with cement-floored classrooms and dormitories. According to Marlin, everything was simple, functional and clean<sup>93</sup>. Over tea they disclosed their own project. They mentioned the resistance and scepticism they had found regarding the viability of a training unit where they could teach hospitality services by working with African girls. In response Sister Germana emphatically said that, those people were very wrong. “African girls are very hard working, and you’ll see how quickly they will learn”<sup>94</sup>. She also aired her views regarding the *houseboy system* which she described bad for the family, because “the men end up having one wife up-country in the village and another in the quarters in town”<sup>95</sup>. She promised to assist them by speaking to the parents of any of the girls who might want to do the training, and mentioned that if the first group liked it, others would follow. She would select the first girls herself. No doubt Sister Germana’s authority sufficed to reassure several girls and their parents.

Meanwhile other opportunities to pass the same message to other people started to come up. Around this time, Hannah Rubia, whose husband was in politics<sup>96</sup>, heard about this new project and she not only welcomed the idea but saw it as providential because it fitted in perfectly with her own aspirations for the country. Another remarkable contact was Margaret Kenyatta<sup>97</sup>, daughter of Jomo Kenyatta, the man who at Independence became the first Prime Minister and later President of Kenya. Once it was explained to her, Margaret Kenyatta at once recognized the import of this new project, and not long afterwards she visited Strathmore with some of her companions when everything was still under scaffoldings. They were shown everywhere; the area where the catering staff would live, including the rooms for the trainees and teachers. When she, and her companions, realised that all the rooms were

buried there. Source: Roswitha Meier, Consolata Regional Headquarters, Ng’ong Road, 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, 48301, Nairobi.

<sup>93</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>96</sup> Hannah Rubia’s husband, Charles Rubia was the first African mayor of Nairobi. He later joined Parliament and was appointed Minister of the Government of Kenya.

<sup>97</sup> Margaret Wambūi Kenyatta was born in 1928 in Dagoretti, Kiambu District. She was amongst the earliest educated girls in Kenya. She attended Alliance High school where she was among the only thirteen female students. At the completion of her education she first worked as a teacher, then, when the Emergency broke out, she worked at several occupations before joining politics. She was elected the first African woman Mayor of the City of Nairobi in 1968. In 1977 she was appointed Kenya’s Ambassador to the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP). Cfr. MUNGAI – AWORI (eds.) *Kenya Women*, pp. 95-96.



together they were mesmerized: Africans were to live, eat and work together in the same house as their European teachers! They wondered how such an unprecedented arrangement could come about. This incident provided a good opportunity for the ladies of Opus Dei to explain the teaching of St. Josemaría—that Opus Dei is a family, and so once the girls come to start working they would be part of that family. There would be no need for SQs.

The first six girls who came to work at Strathmore arrived on 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1961. Sister Germana had been true to her word and Josephine Nyakarundu, Euphrasia Waiyatha, Jean Wangūi and Veronica Wanjirū came through her<sup>98</sup>. The other two, Veneranda Wamaitha and Esther Nyagūthie were introduced by Hannah Rubia. Others followed: Susan Nyambura, Lillian Wanjiru, Mary Wambūi and Rebecca Njeri. Everything was new to them—the house and furnishings, electro-domestic equipment, etc. and, therefore, they naturally felt shy and timid. María de los Ángeles Canel, Obduli Martín and Carlota Díaz, who all arrived within twenty four hours of the six first girls, did their best to make them feel at home<sup>99</sup>.

The six trainees were all Kikuyu. For the first night, since the building was still unfinished, everyone slept on top of piled-up mattresses in one area of the building. The next few days were dedicated to exploring the three-storey building<sup>100</sup>; it stretched out along the four sides of a courtyard or patio, which became the hub of all the activities in the Catering Department. The life, and the kind of work the girls were introduced to, was very new to all of them; from having their own individual rooms to climbing stairs, or working with electro-domestic *appliances*.

Insausti, Serrano and Riera became the first teachers of the trainees, living and working together with them. They had learned from St. Josemaría the value of little things and the importance of good example<sup>101</sup>. The new girls learned quickly and well just as Sister Germana had predicted<sup>102</sup>.

<sup>98</sup> African Kenyans generally have two personal names, the given name at birth, usually of African origin, and the baptismal name if they are Christian. It is customary to use either one or the two personal names and one's father's given name as the family name.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with María de los Ángeles Canel, Nairobi, April 2005.

<sup>100</sup> At the beginning the Catering section of Strathmore was referred to simply as Strathmore. The name Kibondeni came later when the official training began.

<sup>101</sup> "Do you really want to be a saint? Carry out the little duty of each moment: do what you ought, and put your heart into what you are doing". Josemaría ESCRIVÁ, *The Way*, Manila, Sinag-Tala, 1991<sup>12</sup>, n. 815.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Olga Marlin, Nairobi, June, 2006.

As part of their training in running a hospitality services institution, the trainees rotated through all the departments: food preparation and production, service area, laundry, ironing, and housekeeping... There they learnt how to work with sophisticated *appliances* such as vacuum cleaners, floor polishers, dishwasher, multipurpose mixer, potato peeler, washing machine, dryer, iron roller etc. Although it was a whole new world for them, they learned quickly. Occasionally a girl would exclaim at the effectiveness of science and technology. One day, Nyaguthie, enthralled with the potato peeler she was using, remarked to the head of section: “just look, they get peeled all by themselves!”<sup>103</sup>. Another student, Nyambura, was fascinated with the industrial coffee maker which in one go could produce coffee for the one hundred residents. In the laundry and ironing department, Waiyua, who loved her steam roller, nicknamed it Serapia<sup>104</sup>.

The diligence with which these first trainees approached their work impressed their teachers. Canel relates how one trainee from the kitchen department one day approached her to ask for the time. She wanted to be informed when five minutes were up. Puzzled by the unusual request, as Canel agreed to inform, she asked “why five minutes”? The answer was to the point: “I want to see how many potato chips I can fry in five minutes in order to calculate what time I should start frying for dinner”<sup>105</sup>. This from “women who could not learn”!

The teachers from those early years all coincide in not only commending the girls for their quick ability to learn, but also for the ease with which they learned to live details of order, cleanliness, and the care for little things. In an article of *Noticias*, one teacher comments that: “At first the girls began to be orderly to please us, to imitate us; now they continue to do it realizing the supernatural value of little things”<sup>106</sup>. Many years later it was these little details that the girls remember most about Strathmore.

Unavoidably, an accident would occasionally happen at the workplace. Initially, when this occurred, the girls feared they would be expelled from Strathmore. To their astonishment, they found that, instead of being scolded or sent away, their teachers would sympathise and console them while at the same time they taught them how to avoid a re-occurrence. This understand-

<sup>103</sup> “Noticias”, July 1961, p. 29, AGP, P02.

<sup>104</sup> “Noticias”, July 1961, p. 29, AGP, P02.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with María de los Ángeles Canel, Nairobi, April 2005.

<sup>106</sup> “Noticias”, July 1961, p. 30, AGP, P02.

ing endeared the staff to the girls, who had never experienced such consideration. In other places, mistakes meant punishment.

The new experience stretched beyond cookers, dishwashers and new types of floors, to life and culture. The girls had already faced their first challenge, which was to leave the security of their homes and go to live with strangers, who were Europeans (*Wazungu*), and in Nairobi. For the teachers, the challenge was how to make these African girls feel at home and loved; how to teach them to be good professionals and good Christians who would later form good Christian families.

Occasionally, a cultural clash occurred. This was the case one evening. Canel wanted to give the girls a good surprise, so she showered them with paper-wrapped sweets from the banister over the first floor. At that moment the girls were doing various things in the courtyard, and, to her amazement, they rose up and walked away in silence. What had gone wrong? This she learnt later when one of the trainees came and explained to her that: "Food is only thrown to animals!"<sup>107</sup>.

Another incident helps to explain occasional cultural misunderstanding: one student had fallen ill, and the staff thought that the best thing was to call in their own European doctor to come and see her. He came, diagnosed malaria, and prescribed the necessary medicine which was given to her. On seeing that the doctor had come and gone, and the ill girl continued in the house, the other girls went on strike. They felt that their colleague's illness had not been taken seriously; for had that been the case, she would have been taken to hospital and given an injection, as happens in their homes<sup>108</sup>. Recalling those early instances of European-African interaction and occasional misunderstanding, Concepción Kaibel, a teacher by profession who had arrived in Kenya in 1961, remarks that, more often than not, those reactions were typical of young girls emerging from adolescence rather than due to cultural disparity. Kaibel had some experience in dealing with young people in a training unit similar to Strathmore in Spain<sup>109</sup>. It was not long before things settled down and the trainees warmed to family-like atmosphere in the Centre and real friendships developed.

Meantime Josemaría Escrivá followed the progress of everything in Nairobi. He had encouraged the women of Opus Dei to keep him informed

<sup>107</sup> Interview with María de los Ángeles Canel, Nairobi, April 2005.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Concepción Kaibel, Nairobi, June 2009.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Concepción Kaibel, Nairobi, June 2009.

of the progress they were making and the difficulties they faced. In one letter written to him by Canel, he learned from a casual comment how she had asked all the students for the dates of their birthdays with the view of celebrating them. To her astonishment none of them knew when they were born. As alternative she suggested that they could celebrate their feast days instead. This suggestion worked well for five of them, but not for one called Veneranda. There was no St. Veneranda in the calendar of the saints. To console her, the director suggested she could choose any day she liked, and they would celebrate that. This too was not quite acceptable. Not long after the dispatch of that letter, some mail from Rome brought a surprise. A letter written on behalf of the Founder of Opus Dei explained that, at the request of Escrivá, Del Portillo had gone to the archives of the Vatican, where he worked, and searched for a St. Veneranda. He found that St. Veneranda did indeed exist; she was a French martyr of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, and her feast was celebrated on 14<sup>th</sup> November. Naturally everybody, and especially Veneranda, was thrilled and dumbfounded, to think that the Founder of Opus Dei himself, had found her feast day! Many years later, when she already had a daughter in Kibondeni, she explained to a big gathering of people how Escrivá had discovered her feast day for her, and that, the 14<sup>th</sup> of November is always celebrated by her whole family<sup>110</sup>.

The next step was to get girls from other parts of Kenya to the training unit in order to uphold a multiethnic balance. For this to happen, it was necessary to get as many applications as possible, and from those to select only those girls who could really benefit from the training. The directors wrote to heads of schools in different parts of Kenya, informing them about the existence of Strathmore Catering Department, what was taught there, and asking them for advice on how to find girls who would be interested to apply. The result was a wider and more varied selection of girls for the 1962 intake. Among those of the 1962 intake was Florence Auma, from Western Kenya, who cherishes fond memories of her time at Strathmore. Auma had learnt about the training from her brother called Mr Wanjala. On his part, he had been told about by Strathmore by a cousin and he thought it could be an ideal training for his sister. This brother, who lived in Nairobi, encouraged Auma to try this new course. Although she had no notion what the training would involve she decided to try the idea. She remembers being very impressed by the way the teachers treated the students:

<sup>110</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, pp. 112-113.

They gave themselves totally to us. They helped us with affection and love. We were twenty four people catering for three hundred boys. At first I wanted to go back home, and during the first few months I asked my brother to let me leave, but he suggested that I wait a bit because it was in the middle of the term. After two months I changed my mind. I had come to like the atmosphere I found there. Besides there was a chapel and we had Mass every day. It was there I learnt human virtues, hard work with cheerfulness, I got light to see how a woman can live in society and appreciate life, love God more and live a social life. Also dealing with different people I came to understand their ways of being, working together in unity. I learnt to cook and do house work<sup>111</sup>.

Like Auma, Mary Wangūi belonged to the second intake of trainees in 1962. She had heard about the training from Nyakarundu, one of the first six students from Tetu who was her neighbour, when the latter went home for the holidays. Nyakarundu described to Wangūi the life and work in Strathmore and Wangūi was fascinated to hear that the trainees lived in the same house as their teachers, who were *Wazungus*. She expresses her impressions thus:

I was also amazed to hear that they had a real good time besides working very hard doing the house work. Josephine [Nyakarundu] told me that they also learned many things about spiritual life. She said that they were earning sixty Kenyan Shillings per month<sup>112</sup>, and that with these savings she had already managed to get her parents a small coffee plantation whose produce they were now using to pay for her siblings' schooling. With all these, I was convinced that I wanted to join her in this training<sup>113</sup>.

After the conversation with Nyakarundu, Wangūi's first difficulty was how to face her parents in order to tell them about her decision to go to Nairobi to do something called *hospitality work*. Just as Sister Germana had explained, parents did not easily let their girl-children go to Nairobi, because the city did not have a favourable reputation.

At that time, going to Nairobi was for bad girls and they had a reputation of not coming back. At last I gathered enough courage to talk to my parents. I told them that it was a girls' school and that it was boarding—my

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Florence Auma, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>112</sup> For a girl under training with all the expenses of accommodation, uniforms, meals other amenities already covered, this was considered to be reasonable pay in accordance to the living standards in Kenya in 1962.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Mary Wangūi, Nairobi, November 2005.

dad was absolutely opposed to mixed schools. When he heard that even the teachers were ladies, he was sure that it was a good school<sup>114</sup>.

Once in Strathmore she found everything just as Nyakarundu had explained; she saw Europeans working side by side with the Africans and living in the same house with them. She also realized that there were girls from many other ethnicities, an experience she had not had before.

At this juncture it becomes necessary to explain the interracial and inter-ethnic concept in the sense in which it has been sustained in this and other articles about the beginnings of Opus Dei in Kenya. The question is: to what extent or in what sense can it be said that the new training unit was both multiracial and inter-tribal? Some one could argue that interaction between European teachers and African students was nothing new in Kenya by 1960 because most of the boarding schools for African students had been set up and were run by European missionaries. In addition, many of the teachers in these schools were European missionaries. Could such schools not be considered multiracial? From the notion of interracial and inter-ethnic in the mind of St. Josemaría, and the first people of Opus Dei who came to work in Kenya, that kind of interaction can not be said to have made those schools multiracial by any means. One has to make a distinction between different kinds and levels of interaction between people. At one level one can speak of classroom interaction between teacher and student; at another level there is interaction between master and servant; and at another level still, there is what we can call social and familial interaction.

In the missionary run schools the European-African relationship occurred at only the first two levels described above. The Europeans and their African counterparts lived separately, with a completely different standard of living. The novelty of schools like Strathmore College and the new Catering section consisted in the mode and the levels of interaction. There it occurred at the first and third levels, and not in the second one. White and black worked together at the same jobs of food preparation and production, laundry services, and housekeeping. They ate the same meals and at the same tables, spent moments of rest and relaxation together, shopped, prayed and slept in the same building, with similar beddings and adjacent rooms. Not only did these Europeans, especially the three hospitality experts, Insausti,

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Mary Wangüi, Nairobi, November 2005.

Serrano and Riera, interact freely with the African trainees, but they also helped the students to act simply and naturally. This was the difference.

In *En el corazón de Kenia*, Esther Toranzo recounts this natural, free interaction between Europeans and Africans and the stories they would write to gladden the heart of Escrivá: “About that country that easily crept into one’s heart; about the new customs that we made our own, the friends we began to have... This is what the Founder of Opus Dei referred to when he told us that on arriving in Kenya we caught ‘the weakness for Africa’”<sup>115</sup>.

This free interaction between the African girls and their European mentors is also captured in another place: the *Noticias* of 1964. It reads as follows:

Yesterday we went for a stroll. Rosario, Mary Mumbua and Mary Nanzala recounted anecdotes of the arrival of these two to the training unit. Nanzala remembered the day when Mila<sup>116</sup> assigned her with her first task in the kitchen department; that was to peel potatoes for lunch, and before Mila could explain to her how to use the potato peeler, she [Nanzala] had already taken a knife ready to peel..., for a hundred plus people!! With each anecdote they laughed. Some Europeans would turn their head to look at us, [because] friendship between Africans and European is still something unusual. The Africans we met would smile at seeing the group. We know that the people comment: “they are from Strathmore”<sup>117</sup>.

The second point to consider is the question of inter-ethnic integration. On this subject, it may help to know that the typical girl who came to the training unit in Strathmore had hardly ever gone beyond her rural village. The possibility therefore, of having ever intermingled with people from other ethnic communities was remote. This does not signify, nonetheless, that there was absolutely no inter-ethnic interaction in the educational system. Although the colonial regime had not fostered it, missionary schools such as Kabaa Boys School near Thika, founded by the Spiritans in 1924, had always admitted students from all parts of Kenya<sup>118</sup>; so did the Alliance High

<sup>115</sup> TORANZO, *En el corazón*, p. 56.

<sup>116</sup> Milagrosa Santurino, from Extremadura, Spain, worked as a teacher in the training unit of Strathmore from 1962 to 1967.

<sup>117</sup> “Noticias”, February 1964, pp. 34-35, AGP, P02. The translation is ours, and so are the quoted texts that follow.

<sup>118</sup> Well known examples of people who studied in Kabaa and Mang’u in the 1930 to 1950s are the late Maurice Otunga, Archbishop of Nairobi, Paul Njoroge, first African priest of the

Schools founded in 1926<sup>119</sup>. Similarly, Mang'u, which replaced Kabaa High School, and Loreto Convent Limuru, a school for girls founded in 1930 by the Loreto sisters, had always endeavoured to admit students from different parts of Kenya. But these were prime schools and, therefore, only a tiny percentage of Kenyan youth had the privilege of studying in them.

#### KIBONDENI SCHOOL OF INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT

On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1963 Kenya gained self-rule with Jomo Kenyatta as its first African Prime Minister. On December 12 of the same year, it was granted complete Independence from British rule. Kenyatta's speeches of that time were exhilarating. From the onset he appealed to Kenyans of all races, colour, tribe or any other affiliation, to bury the hatchet and, instead, face the arduous task ahead of building a united and prosperous nation. Building a united nation was not going to be easy; more than ninety percent of the population was poor, sick, illiterate and still landless. Besides, to rule a nation made of people who were not only very different culturally, but had only recently been hostile to one another, was going to be a delicate job: the bulk of the African population lacked education, primary work skills and the capital to develop a modern state. Education was therefore high on the agenda of the new government, and skills like the ones which were being taught to girls in Strathmore catering were most welcome.

During their two years training, the pioneer group had already acquired skills beyond those of many of their male counterparts in hotels, restaurants and other institutions. It was now time to venture into the world of work. Just at this time, the administrators of the Kenya Polytechnic, which was planning to open a hostel for their women students, learnt that Strathmore Catering Department had trained girls who could operate modern hospitality equipment. They consequently asked to employ one of them on experimental basis, and Monica Henri was recommended for the post, making her

diocese of Nairobi, Archbishop John Njenga, Thomas Joseph Mboya, among others. Cfr. NJOROGE, *A Century*, pp. 200-238.

<sup>119</sup> The two Alliance Schools were set up following jurisdictional disputes between the various Protestant missionary groups. Through an agreement called Thogoto II Agreement of 1918, it was decided that they all together run two schools to cater for secondary education of children from the Protestant denominations.



the first trained Kenyan African woman in the hospitality industry<sup>120</sup>. She eventually rose to become the Head Cateress of that Hostel. The Nairobi Hospital, the most prestigious hospital in the country, also employed three of the girls in its linen department. Within a few months of finishing their training, most of the girls from the first intakes were holding responsible jobs in different establishments.

This success was encouraging for the teachers as it proved that hospitality service as a career for women in Kenya had a future. Time was now ripe to seek official recognition and upgrade the training program through the Ministry of Education. It was Concepción Kaibel who took up the challenge to draw up a complete plan of studies which could then be presented to the Ministry of Education. She started by a search for any existing suitable curriculum. "We were looking for a syllabus suitable to our circumstances, the students' background, and their previous studies and... We did not find any. I contacted the City & Guilds and some schools in the United Kingdom but most of them either had very low standards for our project or were too theoretical for our purpose. We needed to prepare our own syllabus"<sup>121</sup>.

It was during her search for this *suitable syllabus*, that Kaibel met the Inspector for Home Science Education in the Ministry of Education, Emma Njonjo. She explained to her the kind of training that was being imparted at the Catering Department of Strathmore. Njonjo suggested to Kaibel to team up with another lady, Mary Otieno, who had also expressed interest in mounting a similar initiative, and Susan Ngungu, a teacher of Domestic Science recently arrived from Denmark, who wanted to promote the welfare of rural girls through a similar project. The three ladies got together to work out a program which they presented to the Ministry of Education. Their plan was much welcomed in the Ministry of Education where it served as the conceptual framework or blueprint for subsequent hospitality services training programs in the country.

It is unfortunate that records regarding the transactions between the school and the Ministry of Education during this period were destroyed. Kibondeni College however, retained in its files two letters, both dated 18<sup>th</sup> September 1967, on the subject of the updated training program. One of them is a covering letter for the other. It is written by the Chairperson of Kianda Foundation, official owner of the school, introducing the then Prin-

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Concepción Kaibel, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Concepción Kaibel, Nairobi, November 2005.

principal of the School, Cristina Cabello Fernandez, to Emma Njonjo, in the Ministry of Education. The second letter, written by the Principal, explains the reason why the school needs official recognition.

The achievements made to date lie in the past pupils of the School, who without having obtained an official training—employed as staff—learned the essentials of Catering and Housekeeping and were later employed as housekeepers and cateresses in hospitals (Kenyatta National, Nairobi Hospital); Hostels (Y.W.C.A. [Young Women Christian Association], Polytechnic, School of Law...); private homes, and even as teachers in some country schools. It is their success that has encouraged the Foundation to undertake this enterprise, thus giving an official channel to the training<sup>122</sup>.

Then follows the request:

The main problem is to provide our graduates with a recognized diploma. The English Diploma of Housekeeping and Catering, offered by the National Council of Domestic Studies, comes nearest to meeting our requirements. However, a number of items on the syllabus are obsolete as far as East Africa is concerned, and in general the questions require essay-type answers which would be beyond the capacity of overseas students of K.P.E. [Kenya Primary Education] academic background. Consequently, we feel that it would be more satisfactory to draw up a syllabus to meet local conditions which could then be studied and approved by our Ministry of Education. This question is still under study<sup>123</sup>.

The letter explains the objective of the school, which was to assist the bright girls who, after completion of their primary education lacked the means to proceed to secondary school<sup>124</sup>. With the training they received in Strathmore these girls were being capacitated to become hospitality providers in different categories and definitions of work. Experience had already shown that the project was viable. The letter goes on to put a case for the need to upgrade the already existing course, given the kind of training the school was providing. It explains that it was only fair that on completion of their studies the girls should be awarded a nationally recognized certificate.

<sup>122</sup> Letter of Cristina Cabello, Principal of Kibondeni, to Emma Njonjo in the Ministry of Education, Inspectorate Department, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1967, which is kept in Kibondeni College.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> By 1968 elementary schools enrolment had risen to about 1,140,000. Cfr. OLSON, *Secondary Schools*, p. 42.

The duration of the course is stated: two years, combining theory and practical work. The theory covered Proficiency in English, Math, Health Science, Geography, History, Human Nutrition, Child Care and Human Values. The practical work, a vital part of the training, was taught in actual or hands-on catering conditions. These included: menu and food preparation, dining services, laundry, housekeeping, laundry, ironing and clothing care. For their services the College provided full board, working uniforms and a reasonable honorarium.

That same year, 1967, the programme was approved by the Ministry of Education and the training unit at Strathmore Catering Department acquired its own status as Kibondeni School of Institutional Management<sup>125</sup>. The first students to matriculate in the new Kibondeni School were past students who wanted to validate their previous training. Other past students did the same over the following years. Information about Kibondeni was disseminated all over the country by word of mouth, brochures, visits to schools and relatives. Applications started to pour in. The joy of those moments is discernible in a page of *Noticias* of September of that year.

Months before we had sent brochures of Kibondeni to several schools situated in different parts of the country. We received a veritable shower of replies and we had to divide the work of answering them between us, counting on the help of Mrs Lavelle<sup>126</sup>. The date for the entrance exam was fixed over a period of three days. We awaited the first day with quite a lot of curiosity, I must admit [...]. At 11:00—time of the exam—there was a queue of ninety girls waiting [...]. We made a rigorous selection and there were many amusing stories; we discovered, for example, that some of them (girls) had filled in several forms, thinking that in this way it would be easier to get into the School<sup>127</sup>.

Some of the applicants had little idea of the nature of the course they had applied for. They just wanted a training to guarantee their future. When they realized the content of the course, they wondered whether they would find employment at the end of the training. The teachers assured them that employment opportunities were plentiful provided they learned to work

<sup>125</sup> After independence in 1963, many more schools were built throughout the country. As a result, more African girls now aspired for secondary education, and already a good percentage of these were pursuing University education.

<sup>126</sup> Mrs Lavelle was a Kenyan Briton who collaborated with the women of Opus Dei from the time of their arrival in Kenya in June 1960.

<sup>127</sup> "Noticias", 1967, pp. 841-842, AGP, P02.

professionally. For tuition the girls paid a nominal fee of twenty five Kenya Shillings (twenty five Kshs) per term. Since the majority of them came from needy families, this was the fee they could afford, but—as it has been previously written—it was important for them to pay it<sup>128</sup>.

One day, the owner of an international chain of hotels, Jack Block, visited the school. He toured the different departments and was highly impressed by the professionalism with which the girls portrayed themselves. As a result, he expressed interest to offer scholarships for the training of some of the girls who could later work for the Block Hotels<sup>129</sup>. This plan, however, never took place because the Ministry of Labour would not allow women to take jobs that had been reserved for men.

At the end of two years, the first class of the new Kibondeni was ready to take the official examination leading to the Kibondeni School of Institutional Management Certificate. Once they had passed, the next step was to help the graduates get suitable jobs. According to Toranzo, this was very important and until it was done, the staff felt that their role was incomplete.

A month before the end of term we wrote to different places: schools, hotels, hospitals..., seeking out employment for the girls who were finishing their studies. The replies came immediately. Mary Wangari was the first to be interviewed [...]. The interviews were followed by telephone calls asking for the Principal of the School. The dialogue was almost always the same, their good impression of the girls' demeanour<sup>130</sup>.

As had happened with the first students in 1963, most of the girls of this second phase of training got good jobs in the city<sup>131</sup>. Some returned to the rural areas, where they were employed as cateresses, matrons and even as Home Science teachers in primary schools. Some eventually set up their own

<sup>128</sup> Cfr. CASCIARO, *Dream*, pp. 305-306.

<sup>129</sup> One of the Block Hotels in Nairobi was the prestigious Norfolk Hotel dating from the early colonial period in Kenya.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Esther Toranzo, August 2006. Cfr. also "Noticias", 1970, pp. 235-236, AGP, P02.

<sup>131</sup> A few examples of the placement of the girls from that first promotion will suffice. Mary Wangari was employed in Nairobi School and Patricia Wanja in Naivasha Lake Hotel. Awiti Obura began work as assistant cateress in Kenyatta National Hospital, but soon rose to become Head Cateress; another girl, Mary Njeri became cateress at one of the Campuses of the University of Nairobi, Elizabeth Wanjikū became matron in Nairobi Primary School, while Jane Wanjikū, another early student, worked for many years in the laundry of the Hilton Hotel.

businesses in hospitality services or in the clothing sector. It often amazed the employers that such young girls could take on the responsibility in big institutions, where they often did a better job than their male counterparts. Kibondeni had revolutionized hospitality work in Kenya. It was logical, because the men had never had any formal training but learnt on the job. Only at the level of top management could men be found who had trained outside Kenya, in places like Switzerland. It was the Swiss who eventually assisted the Ministry of Tourism & Industry to put up Kenya Utalii College for the training of hoteliers and caterers.

As Kibondeni School got better known, people started to request for catering services in events such as weddings or receptions for different celebrations. Among the groups of people who used these services were wives of people in the Diplomatic Corps. These services were interesting in that they served as branding for the school. The calibre of the services and the self presentation of the waiting staff, led some of the women guests to review their attitude towards female hospitality staff. Some went as far as exchanging their houseboys for female employees.

These encounters served to explain the social transformation that was being done through the school, as well as the inevitable financial deficit incurred every year. From among the wives of the diplomats, a group visited Kibondeni with a view to help in some way. Thereafter this group organized fundraising event; others offered to work at the organization of the library, creating files, library cards, lending services, etc. They also contributed books<sup>132</sup>. These collaborators, drawn mostly from the international community living in Nairobi, came to be called the Kibondeni Ladies Auxiliary. Among others, Toranzo mentions the wife of the British High Commissioner, who taught English<sup>133</sup>; Mrs Makwaya, from the Tanzanian High Commission, with a Diploma in Home Economics, who offered to teach anything that was needed. Carlette Roeske, a Dutch lady, whose husband worked with the Minister for Finance, started a weekly sewing group to make things like table linen or children's clothes that they would sell to raise funds for Kibondeni<sup>134</sup>.

St. Josemaría followed the progress of the work in Kenya closely. He was aware that male domestic employees were provided with Servants Quarters,

<sup>132</sup> Cfr. "Noticias", 1969, pp. 83-85, AGP, P02.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Esther Toranzo, August 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Cfr. "Noticias", 1969, p. 85, AGP, P02.

and, as Marlin relates, he was concerned about what accommodation would be available for the girls, and asked about it. One possible solution could be a residence for working girls<sup>135</sup>. When this possibility was mentioned to some women co-operators of Opus Dei, they were utterly impressed to think that Escrivá, with all he had to do, could consider the welfare of these girls in Nairobi. A good building was soon found in the South B area of Nairobi, formerly an *Asian only* zone, which after some modifications was converted to a functional girls' residence. Watani, the name of the new residence, opened its doors on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1970, providing secure accommodation in a family atmosphere for young professional women. The development of the Watani project, however, merits a separate article.

#### THE SPIRIT OF THE FOUNDER IN THE FORMATION IMPARTED IN KIBONDENI: AN EVALUATION

Three were the objectives this study proposed to pursue, namely: to capture the historical reality of St. Josemaría's desire that the African women should be accorded their due dignity and social standing; explore his mind, vision and desires with regard to work in general and hospitality work in particular, and to trace how that teaching became the bedrock on which Kibondeni College was founded. With the foregoing, it is my hope that two of these objectives have been adequately attained. One objective however, remains un-tackled, and that is an evaluation of how the formation imparted in Kibondeni may be said to reflect the vision and desires of the Founder of Opus Dei with regard to hospitality work. Before doing that it is necessary to look at some elements of that teaching, specifically four of them.

- The dignity of women and their crucial role in the true human development of society.
- Sanctification of ordinary work through the practice of human virtues and personalised formation.
- Hospitality as true professional work.
- Bright and cheerful homes.

<sup>135</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, pp. 166-167; "Noticias", 1971, p. 229, AGP, P02.

*The dignity of women and their role  
in the true human development of society*

Among the things that Josemaría Escrivá concretely told the first women of Opus Dei who came to work in Kenya, was to always uphold the dignity of every person. To Canel he specifically said: “Always keep in mind that you have to be one more among the people of the country, live with them, love them; be convinced that the domestic work in Kenya can be a woman’s job at a professional level and reach to the highest professional level”<sup>136</sup>. The background to this concern was obviously reports that had reached his ears regarding the racial discrimination rife in the colony at the time. In addition, he had learnt of another, more virulent discrimination, a direct vilification against the African woman, not only amongst many people in the white community, but also within the African culture, where she was often used like a beast of burden. The Founder hoped that the people of Opus Dei working in the country would, at least to some extent, help to change this attitude towards the African people, and the African woman in particular<sup>137</sup>.

This concern of course has its roots in the Christian teaching regarding the human dignity of every human person. John Paul II gives us a summary of that teaching: “among all other earthly beings, only a man or a woman is a *person*, a conscious and free being and, precisely for this reason, the *centre and summit* of all that exists on earth”<sup>138</sup>. This dignity, he continues, “is manifested in all its radiance when the person’s origin and destiny are considered: created by God in his image and likeness”. By virtue of this personal dignity, “the human being is always a value as an individual, and as such demands being considered and treated as a person and never, on the contrary, as an object to be used or as a means or as a thing”<sup>139</sup>. He goes on to explain that it is this dignity what “constitutes the foundation of the equality of all people among themselves”, and for that reason “all forms of discrimination are totally unacceptable especially those forms which unfortunately continue to divide and degrade the human family: from those based on race or economics to those social and cultural”. Hence, “each discrimination con-

<sup>136</sup> Interview with María de los Ángeles Canel, Nairobi, April 2005.

<sup>137</sup> Cfr. MARLIN, *To Africa*, pp. 69, 101-102.

<sup>138</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Boston, Daughters of St. Paul, 1988, n. 37.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

stitutes an absolutely intolerable injustice, not so much for the tensions and the conflicts that can be generated in the social sphere, as much as for the dishonour inflicted on the dignity of the person”<sup>140</sup>.

The recognition that generally, the human dignity of women has often been gravely wounded in public esteem, led John Paul II to write the Apostolic Exhortation, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, in which he points to a recommendation for

a further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed in order to solve the problems connected with the meaning and dignity of being a woman and being a man. It is a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator’s decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only by beginning from these bases, which make it possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women that one is able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society<sup>141</sup>.

In an earlier document, he specifically urges that “the dignity of women, gravely wounded must be restored through effective respect for the rights of the human person and by putting the teaching of the Church into practice”<sup>142</sup>. He recognises that “women with their own gifts and tasks have their own specific vocation”<sup>143</sup> and for that reason, the “conditions that will assure the rightful presence of woman in the Church and in society is a more penetrating and accurate consideration of the anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity with the intent of clarifying woman’s personal identity in relation to man, that is, a diversity yet mutual complementarity, not only as it concerns roles to be held and functions to be performed, but also, and more deeply, as it concerns her make-up and meaning as a person”<sup>144</sup>.

Underlying this “consideration of the anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity” is a trend, rooted in the feminist movement that began in the 1920s, and continues to our day, that brought about big controversies regarding the so called gender question. This, in essence, is a question of whether there are or there are not certain roles, other than motherhood,

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Roma, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, n. 1.

<sup>142</sup> *Id.*, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, Roma, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981, n. 47.

<sup>143</sup> *Id.*, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 49.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 50.



which are *per se* feminine and others masculine. Escrivá knew of this trend, and while conceding that women can be involved in practically every professional field, his teaching was that, “there need not be any conflict between one’s family life and social life”<sup>145</sup>. His stand was that “just as in a man’s life, but with particular shades of difference, the home and the family will always occupy a central place in the life of a woman”<sup>146</sup>. In his view, “the attention she gives to her family will always be a woman’s greatest dignity”<sup>147</sup>.

With regard to the emancipation of women, St. Josemaría avers that true emancipation of the woman means developing her personality and her feminine nature to the full, rather than in competition with men. That is to say, “equal rights and equal opportunities before the law do not suppress this diversity”<sup>148</sup>. When women try to deny that there is such a diversity they turn out to be the losers, not because they are better or worse than men, but because they are different. In his opinion, this diversity is precisely what enriches all mankind. He was convinced that, not only can women work in all the professions as men do, but that they can do so in a uniquely feminine manner, taking to these fields their special gifts. That women have certain inherent gifts for certain jobs was indubitable. He puts it this way:

Women are called to bring to the family, to society and to the Church, characteristics which are their own and which they alone can give: their gentle warmth and untiring generosity, their love for detail, their quick-wittedness and intuition, their simple and deep piety, their constancy... A woman’s femininity is genuine only if she is aware of the beauty of this contribution for which there is no substitute—and if she incorporates it into her own life<sup>149</sup>.

That does not, “exclude the possibility of [the woman] having other professional work—for house work is also professional work—in any worthwhile employment available in the society in which she lives”<sup>150</sup>. But, just like their male counterparts, the “woman who wants to play an active role in public affairs has an obligation to prepare herself adequately, so that the part she takes in the life of the community can be responsible and positive [...]. This

<sup>145</sup> ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 87.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

is very specially true for those who aspire to occupy leading positions in society, because they are called to a very important service on which the entire community's well-being depends"<sup>151</sup>. He believed that in "these spheres, too, women can offer a valuable personal contribution, without neglecting their special feminine qualities. They will do this to the extent in which they are humanly and professionally equipped. Both family and society clearly need this special contribution, which is in no way secondary to that of men"<sup>152</sup>.

Edith Stein, a woman philosopher and saint, who most likely did not know Josemaría Escrivá, expresses a similar anthropological understanding of the feminine nature. Like Escrivá, she was of the view that women have some special gifts, and therefore, the possibility of developing those gifts to humanize society. The explanation is that

woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning [...]. She aspires to the totality in herself and in others. Her theoretical and her practical views correspond: her natural line of thought is not so much conceptual and analytical as it is directed intuitively and emotionally to the concrete. This natural endowment enables a woman to guard and teach her own children. But this basic attitude is not intended just for them; she should behave in this way also to her husband and to all those in contact with her<sup>153</sup>.

She uses the term *feminine professions* to refer to those occupations that allow women to fully embrace and harness their feminine nature. The first among them is care for the family and all hospitality services<sup>154</sup>. She maintains that "even professions whose objective requirements are not harmonious with feminine nature, those termed as specifically masculine, could yet be practiced in an authentically feminine way if accepted as part of the concrete human condition"<sup>155</sup>. Like the Founder of Opus Dei, she sees even in the so called abstract careers, the possibility of humanizing them through the feminine qualities because "everything abstract is ultimately part of the concrete. Everything inanimate finally serves the living. That is why every activ-

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 90.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 87.

<sup>153</sup> Edith STEIN, *The ethos of Women's Professions*, in L. GELBER - Romaeus LEUVEN (eds.), *The Collected Works of Edith Stein, II: Essays on Woman*, Washington D.C., ICS Publications, 1996<sup>2</sup>, p. 45.

<sup>154</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

ity dealing in abstractions stands in ultimate service to a living whole”<sup>156</sup>. She believed that “the development of the feminine nature can become a blessed counterbalance precisely [there] where everyone is in danger of becoming mechanized and losing his humanity”<sup>157</sup>.

Escrivá expresses these abilities as “a great force for good by which women can greatly enrich civil life”<sup>158</sup>. This is so, precisely, because “there are values which a woman more readily perceives, and her specific contribution will often, therefore, change the whole approach to a problem, and can lead to discovery of completely new approaches”<sup>159</sup>. This he finds to be “very obvious, for example in the sphere of family or social legislation. Feminine qualities offer the best guarantee that genuine human and Christian values will be respected when it comes to taking measures that affect family life, education, and the future of youth”<sup>160</sup>.

And this takes us back to the evaluation of how human dignity was taught and lived in Kibondeni College; this is reflected in the testimonies of the teachers and students who worked or learnt in Strathmore. The driving force behind those efforts was the spirit and teachings of St. Josemaría.

### *Sanctification of ordinary work through practice of the virtues and personalized formation*

All consulted past students of Kibondeni coincide in saying that there they were inducted into a culture of work, and in the process discovered its *secret*. It didn’t come automatically. Faced with hard work, initially there were moments of rebellion, but when the *secret of work* was discovered, this attitude changed. This *secret* consists in the teaching of Escrivá that work is the hinge for the realization of the Christian vocation in the world<sup>161</sup>. The mission of Opus Dei was to remind humankind that man was created to work, and that, if well done, work sanctifies. To be sanctifiable, it has to be an honest job, and all honest work will always be a service to the Church and to society<sup>162</sup>. “Work is part and parcel of man’s life on earth. It involves effort,

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 90.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, nos. 34, 114, 117-119.

<sup>162</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, n. 10.

weariness, exhaustion [...]. But in itself work is not a penalty, or a curse, or a punishment”<sup>163</sup>.

He reiterated that it makes no sense to classify people differently, according to their occupation, or to look down on some jobs. The decisive factor before God is the love with which a job is done. “It is well to remember that the dignity of work is based on love. Man’s great privilege is to be able to love and to transcend what is fleeting and ephemeral. He can love other creatures, pronounce an *I* and a *you* which are full of meaning. And he can love God who opens heaven’s gates to us”<sup>164</sup>.

This spirit pervaded Strathmore and, later, Kianda Catering departments, and remained forever in the hearts of the girls. Willimina Indakuli, who trained in Strathmore in 1966-1968, remembers her first lessons in work well done. Indakuli entered into hospitality work by a lucky accident. Her life’s dream had been to become a police woman. Then, one day an Irish teacher from a college near her home, told her about a letter she had received from Kibondeni asking her to look for girls who might be interested in a hospitality career. Indakuli had no notion about catering or hospitality but saw in this new development an opportunity to go to Nairobi. So, she decided to try this career.

In Strathmore she discovered not only how to handle machines she never knew existed, but also that she could present the same things she already knew in a more attractive manner. “I learnt that I could present the *ugali* I ate everyday at home in different ways”<sup>165</sup>, and the more I learnt the more I thought of my friends in Kakamega. I would think: what a pity there is no Kibondeni in Kakamega so that more girls could learn what I was learning!”<sup>166</sup>.

She also found out that she could draw meaning from that work. This was part of the *secret* of the professional excellence taught in Kibondeni. “Little by little I learnt that work is a means of personal holiness. I learnt to get along with girls from other tribes. English was our sole means of communication so that everybody could follow the conversations. It united us”<sup>167</sup>.

If the human perfection of work and love are what give professional standards to a job, the matrix of this excellence is growth in virtues. Escrivá

<sup>163</sup> *Id.*, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 47.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 48.

<sup>165</sup> The *ugali* is a very simple dish made of maize flour and water.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Willimina Indakuli, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Willimina Indakuli, Nairobi, November 2005.

wrote in *The Way*: “To begin is for everyone, to persevere (to finish) is for saints”<sup>168</sup>. This perseverance requires the exercise of many virtues, such as justice and prudence, which are essential in order to know at each moment what ought to take priority; courage and fortitude in order not to abandon work begun, overcoming the difficulties found in any undertaking<sup>169</sup>.

Once the girls understood this *secret* of work, they appreciated the need to look after little things well in order to do a really professional job. Indakuli commented: “I have sometimes gone to the kitchens of some highly regarded hotels and other institutions, and I have felt that may be they should take better care of their department in the side of cleanliness, order, maintenance. Then I think, but of course they did not study in Kibondeni”<sup>170</sup>. Another student, Agatha Mutania, was introduced to Kibondeni by Mary Mumbua, one of the first students. Mutania’s first impression was that of much work.

Before I came to Kibondeni I had never done heavy work, so for me it was very taxing and there was a lot of work to do; catering involved both practical sessions and theory. I found it difficult to cope with it, but I managed. When I came I had thought I was coming for just a Course, but I soon discovered that there was more than just a Course, and a difficult one at that. I also learnt that doing my work well, for God and for the love of God, it becomes a means to achieve heaven; that work can sanctify one<sup>171</sup>.

In the teaching of the Founder of Opus Dei work is also an occasion for friendship and sharing of the commonality of being human; an opportunity to give and receive the efforts of others, even as one gives one’s own efforts to them. “What is social work, if not giving oneself to others, with a sense of dedication and service and contributing effectively to the good of all? The job of a woman in her house is a social contribution in itself, and can easily be the most effective of all”<sup>172</sup>.

Naomi Atsiba was among the students of the second phase of trainees, or Kibondeni proper. Right from the day she arrived in Strathmore Catering unit, the cordial combination of friendliness and demand for serious work, endeared the school to her. Of those first months she remembers: “Here we were being taught very well the subjects of catering, for example the theory

<sup>168</sup> ESCRIVÁ, *The Way*, n. 983.

<sup>169</sup> Cfr. Josemaría ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, London, Scepter, 1977, n. 82ff.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Willimina Indakuli, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Agatha Mutania, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>172</sup> ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 89.

of Catering, Cookery, and Laundry. We were taught to take our studies and the work we did very seriously. The teachers were very patient and always ready to help any student who might have some difficulties in her studies”<sup>173</sup>.

Some past students of Strathmore College, today prominent members of Kenya society, believe that an important part of their education in Strathmore College came from the high standards set by the Catering Department. One of them declared this at a graduation ceremony at Kibondeni, where he was the guest of honour. Among other things, he told the graduands: “I was among the first students of Strathmore College of Arts and Sciences. It was among the five schools in Kenya offering the A-level education at the time. The Catering Department was the one that used to feed the entire fraternity of Strathmore [...]. Their meals were fantastic”<sup>174</sup>.

This gentleman expressed his gratitude to Strathmore and to Kibondeni whenever he had a chance to do so. On one occasion he told Olga Marlin that

Strathmore College prepared me for life. Not only academically, but also socially [...]. Our clothes were laundered and mended for us; our rooms were cleaned, and we had four meals a day (breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner), sharing tables with the teachers. We learned courtesy and good manners from all this, and how to behave in a well-run home [...]. Good living habits stay with you and have a positive, multiplying effect on society<sup>175</sup>.

### *Personalized formation*

St. Josemaría was particularly concerned that the formation given by people of Opus Dei should be personalized and adapted to the needs of each person. Furthermore, in order to create a warm family atmosphere, he believed that the people working in the hospitality profession must themselves feel that warmth during their formative years.

After graduating from Kibondeni in 1969, Jane Mbaire was employed by Pearl Dry Cleaning Company in Nairobi, but later joined the Inter-Continental Hotels when they opened a branch in Nairobi. She worked there until she finally set up her own successful business. Mbaire too is convinced that it was the care for detail that she learnt in Kibondeni that set her up in life.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Naomi Atsiba, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>174</sup> Peter Muthoga, Graduation speech and presentation of Margaret Muthoga Trophy, 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2001, which is kept in Kibondeni College.

<sup>175</sup> MARLIN, *To Africa*, p. 236.

I was taught to work as a team, to be thorough in whatever I have to do, to have high regard for others and to respect their opinions; to be obedient to my authorities and above all to be God fearing [...]. I thank Kibondeni for setting me off into my present family life. I have always treasured all that I learnt, and all those I met in Kibondeni. Sentimentally, after our wedding, I brought my first child, Michael, to be baptised at Kibondeni Chapel<sup>176</sup>.

### *Hospitality as true professional work*

The notions of work and profession are closely related, but on closer scrutiny, it is soon found that these concepts are not synonymous. Every profession is work, yet not every work can be considered a profession. The term work has a wider meaning than that encompassed by profession and transcends it. Work is any activity that transforms something, but the term *profession* is generally applied to work that meets certain conditions. Theorists of the social sciences point, as the basic minimum for a job to be considered a profession, several requirements<sup>177</sup>. They begin with the epistemic component and move on to specialization. In addition they demand a capacity for the direction of activities, and of the job in question, to the service of others of a technical-artistic nature necessary for the ordinary existence of humankind. In addition, such service should be seen to make a clear and significant contribution to the development of society, have its own certification, its own ethos and autonomy, and be open to continuous formation or personal development<sup>178</sup>.

St. Josemaría was no doubt familiar with these theoretical considerations and controversies surrounding the semantics of the term profession. Nevertheless, he maintains that hospitality is a true and noble profession and, like all professions, it has certain requirements. The human basis is talent and a special inclination that helps to live order and good taste, care for details, service, and so on<sup>179</sup>.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Jane Mbaire, Nairobi, November 2005.

<sup>177</sup> These sources, not cited here for a lack of space are, among others: Nathan GLAZER, *Schools of the Minor Professions*, in "Minerva" 12 (1974/3), pp. 346-349; Everett. C. HUGHES, *Professions*, in "Daedalus" 92 (1963), pp.655-68; Bayles MICHAEL, *Professions*, in Joan CALLAHAN (ed.), *Ethical Issues in Professional Life*, New York, Prentice Hall, 1988, pp. 25-35; Talcot PARSONS, *Essays in Sociological Theory*, Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1954.

<sup>178</sup> Cfr. Christine GICHURE, *Ética de la profesión docente. Estudio introductorio a la deontología de la educación*, Pamplona, Eunsa, 1999, pp. 188-199.

<sup>179</sup> Cfr. ESCRIVÁ, *Carta*, 29-VII-1965, n. 11, AGP, serie A-3, leg. 95.

Over and above what nature gives, Escrivá avers that people offering this service ideally ought to be professionally prepared<sup>180</sup>. To be useful one must also know how to do things properly. “I cannot see the integrity of a person who does not strive to attain professional skills and to carry out properly the task entrusted to his care”<sup>181</sup>.

Among the indicators of a true profession, there are two that stand out prominently: the job must have its own *ethos* and autonomy. It could then be asked: and how does hospitality as a career display these two requirements? In St. Josemaría’s spirit the answer would be that “It is not enough to want to do good; we must know how to do it. And, if our desire is real, it will show itself in the effort we make to use the right methods, finishing things well, and achieving human perfection”<sup>182</sup>.

Virtue and human values were the unspoken *ethos* that underscored the spirit of Kibondeni. Joyce Agwenyi’s memories of her time there can serve by way of example. A Kisii from Nyanza, Agwenyi joined the school at an early age. Because she was still too young to know what she really wanted to do the priest of Kisii Parish, and a friend of the family, advised her parents to send her to Kibondeni.

Once there I immediately liked the place, from the way I was received, the warmth, the smiles, and the joy [...], to the material aspects. The place was clean; furniture not broken, meals were good, etc. Another thing that called my attention was the love towards each other. Last, but not least, the care for little things, such as cleaning of tables, washing of the utensils... When I saw all these, even though I had not been the one to choose the College, I knew it had been well chosen for me<sup>183</sup>.

Celine Akinyi, another past student, says she stayed on in Kibondeni because “something she could not explain” held her back. A Luo from Nyanza coming, as she did, from a small village, she had never seen a well-laid table before. She remembers how the supervisor, who worked with her in the practical catering sessions, would teach her with infinite patience the various aspects of this job.

<sup>180</sup> Cfr. *Id.*, *Conversations*, n. 109.

<sup>181</sup> *Id.*, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 50.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 50.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Joyce Agwenyi, Nairobi, November 2005.



She would demonstrate how to do a particular job, advice and correct me, all without getting tired. She would, for example, show me how to lay a table correctly, and then ask me to check and see whether all the other covers that I had laid were exactly the same as that one. I would often have to correct something in each of the 144 covers that were in that dining room. I did all willingly as I knew that this would fashion me to be a better person in the future, and the way she worked was really a challenge for me<sup>184</sup>.

If all honest work constitutes a contribution to the good of others, to the common good, and is a source of progress, civilization and material well-being, hospitality is especially so. The Founder of Opus Dei was convinced of the social significance of this work, a point he constantly tried to make. “The main aim of this apostolic work [...] is to dignify the work of domestic staff in such a way that they can do their work with a scientific approach. I say ‘with a scientific approach’ because housework should be carried out as a true profession”<sup>185</sup>. He reiterated with regard to this work, that “every day you must do the [domestic] administrations more scientifically: with ingenuity and art, giving the warmth of a home, putting into it the care, refinement and skill of a mother and an older sister. Scientifically, I wrote, with the noble and serious determination a person puts into his or her profession”<sup>186</sup>. Even by the standards of the social sciences there is no denying that this work qualifies as a profession.

*“Bright and cheerful homes”<sup>187</sup>  
and the social impact of hospitality work*

As we have seen, the past students of what is now Kibondeni College lived and worked in the early days in the Strathmore Catering Department. Many of them say that although they found the building, furniture, equipment, and even people, different from what they were accustomed, there was something in Strathmore that evoked home; a real family atmosphere. Jane Mbaire for example, a student in 1966, says of her years in Strathmore Catering, that she found a real home: “A warm community and cordial relationship”<sup>188</sup>. Among the factors that created this atmosphere was also the

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Celine Akinyi, November 2005.

<sup>185</sup> ESCRIVÁ, *Conversations*, n. 109.

<sup>186</sup> ID., *Carta*, 29-VII-1965, n. 20, AGP, serie A-3, leg. 95.

<sup>187</sup> ID., *Christ is Passing By*, n. 27; cfr. *ibid.* nos. 30, 78; *Conversations*, n. 111 among others.

<sup>188</sup> Interview with Jane Mbaire, Nairobi, November 2005.

architecture and *décor* of the place. There was one particular place—the patio or courtyard—that called to mind the African traditional rural home compound, where members of the family generally spent many hours together. As they prepare meals or carry out other home tasks, mothers watch their children at play in the compound; family meetings, dances and celebrations all take place there. A paragraph from *Noticias* captures this atmosphere in the patio of Strathmore Catering Department. “Everything that happens in the house turns around it. It can be seen from any angle and from there you see the different departments of the Catering Department: ironing room, service area, kitchen and laundry. It is certainly an important part of the house. It is not easy to reflect the idea I have of it, among other things, because I think there is not another like it in the world”<sup>189</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

To close this first part of the history of Kibondeni, I refer to an interview with Esther Toranzo, who steered the school from the beginning of the 1970s to late 1980s.

St. Josemaría loved everything good that God put into the heart of man. Africa has a heart as big as its country is enormous. I think—it’s just personal intuition—that Africa had a special place in the heart of the Founder of Opus Dei; and it continues to have in his daughters who are grateful to the Founder for the chance of working in Africa. If they were to ask me now, many years after those beginnings, what the foundation of the success of Kibondeni School of Catering was, what deserves to remain in its Annals, I would say without hesitation: what the first ones to arrive in Africa learned from the lips of the Founder of Opus Dei<sup>190</sup>.

Toranzo also credits the students for their self driven motivation and love for the family. In spite of adopting modern ways, she admired the fact that they never forgot the basic reality of their background. It impressed her deeply to observe how at the end of the two or three years’ training in Kibondeni, once they found work on leaving the school, they kept it year after year. “And it was marvellous to see how the first salaries went into building a better house for their parents, or to pay for the studies of a younger sister;

<sup>189</sup> “Noticias”, September 1965, p. 82, AGP, P02.

<sup>190</sup> Interview with Esther Toranzo, August 2006.

the family came first. It is one of the spiritual riches of Africa and they had not lost it”<sup>191</sup>.

Asked how the first ones started Kibondeni and to what she could attribute its success, María de los Ángeles Canel’s response is simple: “I don’t think that we can say ‘we started Kibondeni College’: it came out of nothing, nothing on our part except following the wishes and advice of St. Josemaría. It was started, developed, and reached to what it is today only from that small seed he planted in us”<sup>192</sup>.

Among the people who greeted the Founder of Opus Dei on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1975, hours before he departed this world, were two past students of Kibondeni from those early beginnings, Anna Indakuli and Agatha Mutania. In the brief moments he spoke to them, he told them that God was blessing Africa, and that they had a colossal job ahead of them in Africa and out of Africa<sup>193</sup>. This colossal job will provide material for many future studies.

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<sup>191</sup> Interview with Esther Toranzo, August 2006.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with María de los Ángeles Canel, Nairobi, April 2005. This study covers only the beginnings of the school. Today Kibondeni College has its own premises, a more expanded curriculum and higher admission requirements.

<sup>193</sup> Cfr. TORANZO, *En el corazón*, p. 59.



*The Kitchen of Kiboneni  
in a photo of May 1961.*



*A sigh of Kiboneni's Courtyard.*

THE BEGINNINGS OF KIBONDENI COLLEGE, NAIROBI.  
A HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL OVERVIEW



*A walk along the Ngong Hills.*



*The Laundry and Ironing Department.*