



Responsability for Justice- Fight against poverty in Africa

I would like to start by thanking the Management of the National Conference of Lay Apostolate Association for inviting me to talk to you today.

However, I must tell you that my visit to Portugal is a miracle of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, the late Prelate of Opus Dei and first successor of St. Josemaria, Founder of Opus Dei.

I was privileged to attend the Beatification of Blessed Alvaro in September 2014 in Madrid, Spain. On the itinerary of my group from Kenya, we were going to do a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima the day after the Beatification of Blessed Alvaro. On that day, I was scheduled to address 3 press conferences in Madrid which meant that I could not go to Fatima with my group. I was happy to avail myself for the press conferences during which I talked about my work in Kimlea but I felt the “pinch” of not going to Fatima. At the end of the day when I returned to my residence, I sat down to pray and in my prayer I talked intimately with Blessed Alvaro, telling him that between him and God, they should organize that I go to Fatima to meet my Mother Mary one day in my life before I die. So my prayer has been answered and I am extremely happy to be here today.

CNAL could have invited anyone else from Africa for this conference but the lot fell on me and I will be forever grateful.

Kimlea Girls Centre within the Kenyan Context

Let us now turn to the topic of my speech today which is “Challenges of Christian Hope in Africa so that Justice and Peace can be built and my personal experience in dealing with the specific needs of the continent of Africa”.

As one more lay faithful of the Catholic Church, I think you will agree with me that the greater part of the apostolic panorama in the Church is more in the hands of the laity than it is in the hands of the Holy Father, the Bishops and the priests. This is because if you draw a triangle representing the Church hierarchy, the Holy Father is at the peak of the triangle, the Bishops are slightly below the Pope in the same peak, the priests, nuns and religious are in the middle but narrower part of the triangle while the lay faithful are at the bottom and the widest part of the triangle. The Holy Father, the Bishops, the priests, the nuns and religious are by far only a small percentage of the people of God. On the other hand, these people have been formed in the knowledge of their faith in the seminaries and the convents, whereas the majority of the laity has not necessarily received any Christian formation. I think that this is the first and the biggest challenge in the Church all over the world and perhaps much more so in Africa due to lack of adequate means. However, one thing I can proudly boast about is that the Church in Africa is growing at an amazing rate.

When the world was preparing for the visit of Pope Francis to the Central African Republic and Kenya in November 2016, Sr. Suja Francis, a member of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate working in Juba, South Sudan remarked: “Focus is turning to the Church in Africa, one of the most remarkable stories in the history of evangelization. At the start of the 20th century, there were barely 2 million Catholics



on the continent, and most were Europeans who belonged to powers that controlled almost all of Africa. Today, there are more than 200 million Catholics, virtually all of them native Africans. According to a new study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, since 1980, the Catholic population has dramatically risen by 238 percent, the largest growth anywhere in the world”.

Talking about the Church in Africa: Sr. Francis referred to it as “a story of challenges and hope”. She said this after greeting some children inside a United Nations camp for internally displaced families. Africans have a great desire to listen to the word of God; we have an ear for God. For instance, in Kenya we have about 4,000 different religious denominations at the moment. This means that you can find a different church every few meters in the same village. Kenya as a country is 580,367 Square kilometres with a population of 46,790,758 people consisting of 43 different tribes (ethnic groups).

My Experience In Kimlea

Kimlea Training Centre is a project of Kianda Foundation, an educational non-profit making organization which has been promoting the welfare and education of women in Kenya since 1961. Kimlea started in 1992 to train women and girls in income generating skills. It is situated 30 km from the city of Nairobi in an area dominated by large tea and coffee plantations. 75% of the plantation workers are women who are our target group for all the programs organized in Kimlea and 50% of these women are the sole bread winners of their families. They have come from all over the country in search of paid work or as a result of political upheavals – they belong to different ethnic groups. Most have not had any formal education although this is now changing in the country as Primary education has recently become free and compulsory.

Though in theory the law foresees equality between men and women, traditionally it was not like this and culture takes time to change. There is a high percentage of absenteeism of fathers in these families. The woman in Kenya is the backbone of the family, resilient, resourceful, does not give up in looking for solutions for her family.

The tea or coffee pickers earn the equivalent of 2 euros per day, an income that is not sufficient to cover their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing of a family. As soon as the children are old enough they also begin picking tea to supplement the family income. This implies a high school drop-out rate which creates a cycle of poverty and robs the young people of hope for the future.

It is to be noted that this sector of the population does not enjoy any social or medical security.

How Has Kimlea Tackled These Problems?

Kimlea started an outreach programme for these women. Some attend literacy classes, all learn cookery, garment making and what we call life skills (basically human virtues) and Christian doctrine classes for those who wish as they are from different denominations. This knowledge allows them to trade and earn some extra money especially when there is no tea or coffee to pick. With time some of them have made this trade their main activity and have given rise to small businesses that have helped to improve the standard of living of the family.

As a result Kimlea has started a Business Centre to help them professionalize their business knowledge. They can attend a 2-month programme of 2 afternoons per week.



Besides improving their skills they also learn basic accounting and business management.

Many of these families found it difficult to access any medical facility. To help with this problem Kimlea started a Clinic.

Besides the training offered to the women, Kimlea offers a 2-year course in hospitality for young girls when they finish school. This is an alternative to tea and coffee picking. In addition to the skills they learn which give them the opportunity to get good employment; the girls in Kimlea are offered an all-round formation. Each girl has a mentor who tries to help her develop her character and all the potential she has. Through the formation classes they receive and the interacting with the mentors they discover their dignity as persons and as women; they are helped to cure wounds they have in their heart – having experience in many cases, broken family situations, abuse, disease,... things about which they have never spoken with any one. In some cases they also carry a burdened heart which is unable to forgive those who caused their suffering and it takes many sessions of mentoring to ease their hearts. However little by little they brighten up and are able to smile at people and socialize with their classmates.

We also have a school chaplain who gives the girls classes on Morals once a week and spends a day listening to them in the confessional. It is impressive to see them queuing to speak to the Chaplain (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) as none wants to miss the advice and encouragement they receive.

To date we have trained over 20,000 women and girls and have had incredible success stories. The most rewarding successes are those real transformations we see in many cases: from despair to hope, from dysfunctional families to true Christian living.

Kimlea's Success Stories

Peris Gichuki: She is 2nd born of 6 and discovered Kimlea as a result of 1997 election crisis. Trained from 1998 to 2000; was employed as assistant teacher in Kimlea because she was top in her class; with her small salary of 100 euros a month, she educated her younger sister and 2 brothers to college level; started a maize grinding business for her parents; paid for studies to advance in her professional training. She is the best teacher in Kimlea and a mentor for all the students who come to Kimlea. She is now married and a mother of 4 children. During and after her training she shared with the youth of her village everything she learnt from Kimlea with regard to human and Christian virtues. Whenever any of them is going to get married, they go to Peris for preparation. On her wedding day, the youth wanted to buy her a wedding gift but she told them that instead of buying her a material gift, she had a request to ask of them: "I would like all of you to come with me for confession on the day before my wedding so that on my wedding day, you can all line up behind me for Holy Communion". A few of them complained: "that is very hard for us". This is because some had been for quite long without confession. However, on the material day, all of them went for confession and on Peris' wedding day, they all received Holy Communion. Peris said that was the best day of her life.

Another alumna who is a success story is **Veronica Kimani**. She was among the first 22 students admitted to Kimlea on 2nd March 1992 and one of the 12 girls who completed the training in 1993. Veronica has 9 siblings and was born in a coffee growing zone about 12 km from Kimlea. Her parents earned their living by picking coffee and Veronica had suffered a lot throughout her schooling life. She picked coffee on most weekends and school holidays in order to subsidize her parents' wages for food and school fees. When she joined Kimlea we offered her the job of cleaning the school and working in the school garden on Saturday and holidays as a means of paying her fees. As she could



not afford to pay for public transport, she used to work to and from school every day including Saturdays and never complained at all. On completion of her training, she started a business of cooking and selling cookies. She continued helping her parents with whatever she earned so that they could educate her siblings. She got married after two years of working. Her business was improving little by little to the extent of employing her husband to deliver the orders to her clients. After some time, she decided to be a farmer using the piece of land her husband had been given by his father. She kept 2 milking cows and some chicken and pigs. She was a farmer until 6 years ago when she enrolled herself for a counselling diploma course. All the while, Veronica was the Patron of the Youth in her area and had become so popular that the youth as well as couples would go to consult her for marital and family problems. 3 years ago, the position of the Chief (local authority) of her area became vacant and the community persuaded her to apply for the job. She attended the interview with 5 men and she was selected for the post. She was most surprised to be selected because this job is usually done by men. At that time, she was 6 months pregnant and thought that she had to mention to the interviewing panel in case they would object to her asking for maternity leave. The leader of the panel told her: “You are married, aren’t you? Then there is no problem in you asking for maternity leave when the time comes”. She is a happy mother of 6 children.

Metrine Wafula is a 1995 graduate of Kimlea. She joined Kimlea as a primary school leaver after working for 6 years as a house help in a village called Banana hill 6 kilometers from Kimlea. Her employer sponsored her in Kimlea as a bonus in thanksgiving for her good work and told her that she could find herself a different job on completion of her training. As soon as Metrine finished her training she got a job as a housekeeper in the Convent of the sick and aged Consolata nuns. However, she did not last long as housekeeper because one of the nuns identified her for her outstanding leadership qualities and good moral principles she had received in Kimlea. The nuns started a nursery school and they employed Metrine as the assistant to the nun in charge of the nursery school. After a few years, the nun fell ill and later passed away. The other nuns appointed Metrine as the person in charge of running the nursery school. Now the school has developed into both nursery and primary school where many orphans and children of the surrounding tea and coffee plantation families go to learn. Metrine is now a mother of 3 boys and 1 girl.

Like Peris, Veronica and many others, there are many past students of Kimlea who are the solution of their families today and who have managed to break the cycle of poverty thanks to their training in Kimlea. As the saying goes, “educate a woman and you educate the society”. Also the fact that if you give a man fish to eat today you have fed him for the day but if you teach him how to fish, you have fed him for a life time. That is what Kimlea is doing with the women and girls of Kiambu County in Kenya within a radius of 20 km. If families are sustained with both human and Christian values, the whole country will have peace and justice.

Frankie Gikandi

Conferência proferida no IV Encontro Nacional de Leigos «*Este é o Tempo para esperar contra toda a esperança, para trabalhar pela Justiça e pela Paz, para amar as pessoas, para amá-las uma a uma*», a 18 de novembro de 2017, em Viseu