



BE MY WITNESSES

Worshipping in Mlimani: A Portrait of Saint Demetrios Parish

Jeremy Ingpen

Photographs
courtesy of Father
Chrysostomos Wan-
jala Wanyonyi.

These photographs portray recent services at Orthodox parishes in the Diocese of Western Kenya. The first few images are of Saint Demetrios parish in Mlimani, a farming village with a population of about two thousand, located five miles off the main highway between Nairobi, Kenya and Kampala, Uganda. Most of the inhabitants are subsistence farmers but a handful work in the neighboring towns. The average family income is between one hundred and two hundred dollars per month. The church is built out of bricks hand-made on the site. It stands on a hill overlooking the region and, in a landscape of single-story buildings, it is the tallest

building for miles around. There is a dramatic contrast between the splendor of the church and the simplicity of the shops and dwellings. The Liturgy is celebrated in Ki-Swahili and in Luhya, the language of the region. People walk to worship from a radius of two to three miles.

Father Chrysostomos grew up in the village and attended seminary in Nairobi. His father brought the family to Orthodoxy, having been raised in the Quaker tradition. Father Chrysostomos lives by farming his own two acres. He grows maize to be dried for the staple ground cornmeal *ugali*, and keeps two dairy cows for the sale of milk. In times of

prosperity, he rents additional land to raise more maize for sale. The presbytera is responsible for running the household, cooking over a three-stone fire in the attached kitchen building, and overseeing the hauling of water. She is also a leader in the church school.

This part of Kenya, formerly known as the Western Province, came late to the colonial adventure. It had been part of Uganda until the turn of the twentieth century, when it was carved off and allocated to the then-young Kenyan colony. Open grasslands were seized for the benefit of the settlers and used for cash crops such as sisal. The native Luhya people were restricted to their villages, which became densely populated with land parcels subdivided. A highway and a single-track railway line were built through to Uganda. Following the adoption of a new constitution in 2010, Mlimani became a part of Bungoma County.

At the time of the Kenyan independence struggle and the Mau Mau Rebellion (1952–63), the only church to



© 2021 The Wheel.
May be distributed for
noncommercial use.
www.wheeljournal.com



© 2021 The Wheel.
May be distributed for
noncommercial use.
www.wheeljournal.com





Mlimani, Western
Province, Kenya

side unambiguously with the anticolonial movement was the Orthodox Church, represented by Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus, who himself led the overthrow of the British rule in Cyprus. Jomo Kenyatta, independence movement leader and first president of the newly independent Kenya, and Archbishop Makarios became close allies, and the Archbishop was present at the independence celebrations in Nairobi in 1963. In gratitude, Kenyatta gave the Orthodox Church land in western Nairobi for a seminary, which to this day is named after Archbishop Makarios. Until very recently, all the

bishops were Greek. There was also some educational missionary activity from Finland, notably Father Johannes Eco (originally from Springfield, Vermont), who is much loved in Kenya and venerated as a local saint. The Archbishop Makarios Seminary in Nairobi trains priests for all of eastern Africa. The remaining photographs show the results of these efforts, as Father Chrysostomos joins a group of other diocesan clergy and the Archbishop Makarios of Nairobi to concelebrate the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Dormition, 2020, at Saint Peter's Parish in Kapkechui, Eldoret, one hour east of Mlimani. ✱



Jeremy N. Ingpen is currently working on translating the work of Olivier Clément. His translation of Clément's *Transfiguring Time* was published in 2019 and his translation of Michel Evdolimov's *Two Martyrs in a Godless World* was published in 2021, both by New City Press. He is currently working on the translation of Olivier Clément's *Dialogues with Patriarch Athenagoras*, to be published in 2022, as part of the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Greek Archdiocese in America. He has also translated poems by Anna Akhmatova and Rainer Maria Rilke.