

# The Xaverian Who Conquered Africa

## LIVING THE CHARISM

### **An image of Brother John Olsen adorns the alter of the Brothers' Chapel in Bungoma, Kenya.**

On the 15th Day of October the Xaverian Brothers at St. Joseph Center of Bungoma Kenya had a very beautiful mass in memory of Br. John Olsen. The following is a eulogy in the Kenyan concept, which was composed and read during the mass by John Mary Zaire Oketch.

Br. John Olsen, who was born in 1929, was a wise American with a special place in his heart for the African continent and its inhabitants. His love for Africa was demonstrated in March of 1999 when he travelled thousands of miles to come and live with his beloved friends at Musikoma Pastoral Centre. His coming to Africa in the company of three other American brothers (Brs. Dan Conaghan, Ed Keefe and Tom Murphy) was a blessing and even the heavens affirmed this by the rains that poured down on their day of arrival, despite it being a very dry season. Br. John and his three brothers had come to set up a house of hospitality, which later turned into a house of formation, with Paul, Antony Holula, Aloise and Sammy becoming the first postulants in December of 1999, and Br. John as their postulant master.

In January of 2000, these four brothers moved to St. Joseph Centre, where they were joined by Br. Richard Cook, and later, Br. David O'Mahoney. At St. Joseph Centre these brothers continued with their mission. In their hearts were the inscriptions "Go out and proclaim the Glad Tidings to my beloved," in their lips were the letterings "Concordia res larvae crescent," and in John's reflections the avowal from the fundamental principles "the gift you have received give as a gift" must have been at the centre of his meditations. Br. John being "a jack of all trades and a master of all" did not only get involved in formation, he also helped in the financial management of the diocese. In 2001 he was asked to be the novice director and thus he moved to Nairobi-Kangemi.

Br. John was extremely intelligent, and this gift made him a brother who many wanted to interact with. In the community, Br. John liked quiet environments, embraced cleanliness, and loved every kind of technological advancement: he was what today we would call a "dot-com." He was a source of leadership qualities and knowledge that was very unique in the community. He was a scholar who never showed pride: in fact, one would be taken aback to realize that he was a Ph.D. holder. He embraced simplicity and was always at the service of the community. He never stopped learning and was an ardent supporter of those who were interested in education. He was a good researcher, reader, and student, even at his old age. He was a resource-mobilizer, and always thought of how to raise money for a project, for children and for families affected by alcoholism.

Br. John's benevolence, combined with his family's magnanimous spirit, transformed most street children and children from poor backgrounds into successful individuals through the Olsen Fund. This fund was born from Br. John's love to serve the poor. His altruistic attitude made him convince his putative family members and friends to support the poor children who could not access education because their economic background was an impediment. He turned his late brother's (Paul Olsen, who died in 1999) funeral contributions into the Olsen Fund that has supported lives of many poor children's education. In 2002 with profound humility Br. John requested that the Olsen Fund's money be channelled through the Xaverian Brothers because our founder willed that we be "a band of brothers who work together." That request was granted, thus, since then, the funds

continue to be managed by the Brothers. This programme has transformed lives, has given hope to the hapless, has turned dreams into deeds, has given knowledge to the marginalized, and has affirmed Mother Teresa's wise statement that "there is nobody who is too poor to give and there is nobody who is too rich to receive."

Beyond the Olsen Fund programme, Br. John also initiated the (A.A. Group) Alcoholic Anonymous and because he wanted to see addicts convert to be teetotallers he helped in the foundation of rehab centres; one in Mayenje-Busia headed by Mr. John Odiaga and one in Bungoma headed by John Keya (what a coincidence in the first names, even the reader is John). These two centres remain as a vestige of Br. John's spirited efforts and wisdom in the world of magnanimity. These two centres saw the transformation of young and old people who had hit the rock bottom and had to be taught to love the serenity prayer and with this prayer "Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference" the beloved of Br. John got a lease in life.

In 2003 Br. John was asked to be the scholastic master and being a humble man, he accepted this task. He lived with the scholastics at Hardy in Karen, and also continued with his work at St Joseph's Parish of Kangemi as the college administrator. In 2004 his body complained and he went to the U.S., but after six months he came back to Kenya in 2005 strong, healthier, and ready to carry on with the mantle which he begun on the 15th day of February 1947, when he responded to the call "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere, and make them my disciples."

After coming back from the U.S., he was requested by the Tangaza College Administration to oversee the counselling programme for students, a task he carried out with a lot of gusto. While at Taganza he also initiated a programme (student-to-student counselling programme) and this whizzy project still thrives in Tangaza to date.

Between the years 2006-2008 he continued devoting his time and energy to the projects he initiated. In the company of a brother or Mr. Francis Onyango, he drove the Suzuki to every corner of this country to make sure that the poor kids got education and the addicts were rehabilitated. Everything he had was a blessing and that is why I think the Suzuki has triumphed over every bad situation.

In 2009, Br. John's time in Africa with his beloved sons and daughters had to come to an end. The physical presence had to be replaced by a spiritual presence. Yes, Br. John had to go back to his country of birth (the U S of A). In that final party in Otunga house (where no beer was served) I remember him asserting a very special statement "I am not going with that which I have been doing, but I am leaving it to you, continue with the charitable works".

Bro you came to Africa, you saw Africa and you conquered Africa, may you now see God and conquer the angels with your humility. Wise men and big hearts never die in the African tradition, therefore, Bro John you will always be with us until we make the last uneducated poor to have knowledge and the last addict to be a teetotaller.

We honour you brother for your plucky deeds, your big heart, and your life changing missions.

**ETERNAL REST GRANT TO HIM O LORD**

**AND LET PERPETUAL LIGHT SHINE UPON HIM**

**MAY THE SOUL OF BR. JOHN OLSEN REST IN PEACE**

**AMEN.**