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Hugh O'Donnell C.M.

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Father Richardson and the Mission in Kenya

BY

HUGH O'DONNELL, C.M.

In the spring of 1980 I was writing to Father James Richardson on some matter of business. The business was brief, so I used the remaining space on the page to invite him to say a special word to the province. He was finishing his final year as superior general and I had in the previous year a recurring sense that he had something important to say to the Congregation, something that was the fruit of his many visits and long experience. So, I invited him to say it to our province. It was my guess that it had something to do with prayer or simplicity of life.

He eventually wrote back and said that he had two letters on his desk, the one from me inviting him to say a word to us and the other from Bishop Cavallera, the soon to retire bishop of Marsabit in Kenya. The bishop was inviting the community to send him priests who would found and run a major seminary in his diocese at Maralal. Father Richardson acknowledged that in my letter I was not asking for a new mission, but he nevertheless asked if our province would consider the bishop's request.

We discussed the matter in the provincial council and saw no reason not to investigate the invitation further, even though we had serious doubts about our ability to enter the world of the Samburu and do the work effectively. I replied that we would study the matter and also consult the province on the feasibility of going and the willingness of confreres to volunteer.

In the summer of 1980, Father Richard McCullen was elected superior general, and Father Richardson had the option of going to the province of his choice. In a conversation among the three of us Father Richardson said he was choosing the Midwest Province, because he was interested in the Kenya mission. I told him that we had not at that time made a decision to accept the mission. He said he had been following the correspondence and was satisfied with the direction of the negotiations.

Father Richardson was free to go to Kenya and make a first hand investigation of the situation. We agreed that he would go in August. Father Patrick O'Brien volunteered to accompany him. The two of them went with the intention of reporting their findings to me. They were well received by the bishop who took them on a 1200 mile tour of Kenya in a Landrover. The trip over some very rough roads speaks well for the hardiness of Father Richardson. Father O'Brien, for his part, felt that the Landrover was the vehicle he was born to drive. As the tour ended they asked the bishop if they themselves met his requirements and expectations. He said that he would be very happy to welcome them.

From the province's point of view developments in Kenya were moving ahead of our plans to consult the confreres and make a free final decision on Kenya. Father O'Brien had made arrangements to stay in Kenya if the trip was successful, and Father Richardson saw no particular need to return to the United States. I asked both of them to come to the United States, because, if we were to accept the mission, it should be the mission of the Midwest Province and not of particular confreres. With this in mind, when the final decision was made and the personnel selected, we had a formal missioning ceremony and dinner at Saint Vincent's parish in Saint Louis a few days before Christmas 1980.

The confreres of the province supported the mission and seven or eight volunteered. So we accepted the mission. We chose Father Richardson, Father O'Brien, and Brother Paul Joseph. There was done on one major condition, namely, that we would collaborate with the two priests of the diocese whom the bishop promised to put in charge, but we would not accept responsibility for the administration of Good Shepherd Seminary in Maralal. This condition collapsed within the first six months we were in Kenya, and the administration of the seminary fell into our hands.

Father Richardson, Father O'Brien, and Brother Paul left for Kenya at the end of December 1980. They won the confidence of the students and people early on and seemed to love the mission from the beginning. Whatever interior difficulties Father Richardson may have suffered in his transition from the worldwide affairs of the Congregation to the solitude of Maralal, he never showed anything but a whole-hearted presence to the people and love for the mission. He told me years later that for a long time God had given him the grace to be content with whatever circumstances he found himself in. I think

he must also have suffered from the loneliness of the mission and the lack of community life, but he never spoke or complained about the situation. He was ready for any and every challenge. He taught spirituality and subjects in the theology curriculum and was spiritual director and confessor to the seminarians. The students revered him as an elder and honored him for his holiness. Their affection for him was deep and their admiration unqualified.

In my several visits to the seminary I noticed a gradual but profound change in Father Richardson. It took a while for him to let go of the office of general, or rather for the office to let go of him. But as it did, the depth of his humanity was revealed more and more. I witnessed how profoundly he touched the hearts and lives of people as the responsibilities and habits of office gave way to the transparency of his person and his priesthood.

Father Richardson saw the first fruits of the seminary on the day before he left Kenya. On 10 January 1987, Dominic, the first priest to be ordained from Good Shepherd Seminary and the first ever member of the Samburu people to be a priest, was ordained. It was a remarkable event. A thousand people came and filled the church with their presence and their singing. After Dominic was ordained and before the mass continued the elders of the Samburu people came forward and inducted him among the elders. The dinner and festivities continued through the afternoon. It was Jim's last day in Maralal. We left the next morning for Nairobi, Saint Louis, and eventually De Andreis House in Denver.

Perhaps as an epilogue, but also as a window into Father Richardson's soul, I would like to mention the death of Father Ted Wiesner. On 27 May 1987, a few months after Father Dominic's ordination, Father Ted Wiesner, who had joined the team in Maralal a couple of years earlier, died of hepatitis at age fifty-two. It was a great loss for the province and for the mission in Kenya, but it was an immense sadness for Father Richardson. He loved Ted Wiesner as a confrere and priest, admired him as a missionary, and had placed high hopes in him for the development of our mission in Kenya. In feeling what Ted's death meant to Jim, I came to know at a whole new depth what the place the Kenya mission had in Jim's heart.

You must belong entirely to our good Lord, because he continually shows his mercy towards you. Be of good heart and don't lose courage, believing that God will receive great glory from your illness.

*(Saint Louise de Marillac, letter 46, to Sister Elizabeth Martin,
Angers, 5 June 1641)*