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NEWS
MISSIONARY

Focus East Africa

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**Making a
Safe Haven
in Dublin**

**The Golden
Rule Poster**

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Be Saved
Together**



Catching up with God

What God asks of us as adults is not what God asked of us as children. What God will ask of us tomorrow may not be what God is asking of us today. God goes ahead of us. Our task is to catch up with this elusive God, to read the signs of the times, to decipher what God is doing in our world.

There was a time when Catholics divided the peoples of the world into two groups — Catholics and non-Catholics. They were not us. And that's all we needed to know about them.

Closely aligned with such thinking was the axiom "Outside the Church there is no salvation" — a conviction that animated many missionaries to go overseas, baptize converts, and so save souls.

Then the church as a whole came to the conclusion that explicit faith in Jesus and membership in the Church were not required for eternal life. If others sincerely followed their personal conscience in their own lives, they could be saved. The church was catching up with the conclusion Peter had reached in the Acts of the Apostles: "I now really understand that God has no favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

There followed a further development in Catholic thinking. Other religions contained positive life-giving values: "seeds of the word", "rays of the truth" to use the language of Vatican II.

More recently still, Catholic theologians and missionaries are asking whether other religions are themselves ways through which the Spirit of God is active in the world: "The Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world" and so is present in the religions of the world. Where does that leave Jesus and our profession of faith in him as Saviour of the world? The exploration continues.

Other religions are no longer far away. They are no longer foreign. We find them on our streets. They live next door to us. Have they something to say to us or do we think we know all there is to be known about God, about religion, about life? Could we walk together as companions on a journey of faith? Could we struggle together for justice and liberation on behalf of the oppressed of the world? Could this be what God is asking of us today?

As we have moved from confrontation to conversation, could we now move from conversation to cooperation? One is reminded of the words of Catholic theologian, Hans Kung: "There can be no peace between the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions."

There is much to be done. Between Hindus and Muslims in India, between Muslims and Jews in Israel and the West Bank, between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, between the Christian churches and the First Nations in Canada, between fundamentalists and mainline believers in many places.

Demanding unconditional surrender leads nowhere. Neither does an arrogant simple-minded saying like "Either you are with us or you are against us."

Pope John Paul encourages us: "The various Christian confessions, as well as the world's great religions, need to work together to eliminate the social and cultural causes of terrorism. They can do this by teaching the greatness and dignity of the human person and by spreading a clearer sense of the oneness of the human family. This is ... a pressing service which religion can offer to world peace."

The future of the planet and its human beings may well depend on the willingness and ability of people of faith to be on speaking terms.

Patrick Fitzpatrick, CSSp

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Who would have thought ...?

Bernard Kelly CSSp

A modern author has written that "healing means first of all allowing strangers to become sensitive and obedient to their own stories." A prominent sickness today is that people have become strangers to themselves. Their situation has changed to such an extent or so rapidly that they no longer recognise themselves. A young man is confined to a wheelchair because of an accident, a young woman faces life alone when her husband dies, an old person is put out of the house he lived in all his life. All that has become familiar and reassuring is suddenly taken

Francis Liberman's missionary society did not have a promising start. Of the seven priests who left for Africa on the first missionary venture, six died within a year. Shortly after this news reached him, Francis wrote to his brother in January of 1845: "I tell you frankly that if I had foreseen what I now behold, I would not have dared to undertake so great a work, one so far beyond my powers."

That same year, one of Francis' two principal collaborators, Eugene Tisserrant, died in a shipwreck on his way to Africa. Then the other, Frederick Le

It has been the misfortune of the clergy in recent times that they hold to ideas out of the past. The world has progressed, but we have lagged behind. We must keep abreast of the times. Clinging to olden times and retaining thought patterns that ruled a previous era will destroy the efficacy of our endeavours. Let us then frankly and simply embrace the new order and breathe into it the spirit of the gospel.

— Francis Libermann 1848

away. I remember the words of an aunt of mine as we lifted her from her wheelchair to take her for a drive in the country: "Who would have thought that things could have turned out like this?"

There was a time when the need to consciously reassume our identity, to repossess our own story came only at clearly defined turning points in our lives. There were times of major decision: the choice of a career, the decision to marry, the adjustment to illness or sudden misfortune.

Nowadays the rapidly changing world seems to hold a constant threat of "identity crisis". Nothing lasts long enough to become familiar. It's not easy to get a firm foothold. Whether it's in business or religion, what appears to be solid ground often turns out to be quicksand. The successful businessman sees bankruptcy staring him in the face; the good Catholic cannot understand how the simple belief of yesteryear has suddenly become so agonizingly difficult. "Who would have thought that things could have turned out like this?" comes easily to the lips of many today.

Vavasseur, wrote from Reunion to say that he was thinking of leaving the society to join the Jesuits. In his reply to that letter Francis disclosed that he himself had not been spared the feeling of being a stranger to himself: "Everything within me seems to go counter to remaining in my present situation. Every attraction of nature and of grace points in a different direction. There is not one fibre, one tendency within me that does not prompt me to seek solitude. In spite of all that, however, I would consider it a crime to even entertain such a thought. God binds me and chains me to this task which is crucifying, yet most dear to my heart."

The unfolding of our personal story will constantly take us by surprise, and in the midst of our surprise ask of us to say again to ourselves who we are. Like Libermann we will hold on to our identity, our personal meaning, not by following our inclinations however noble, but by turning our attention to the designs God has on us. Sometimes He binds and chains us while He speaks to our heart. ☩

How to Spend My Days?

by John Kevin CSSp

We have been here twenty years. We have passed from middle age to early old among a people we hardly know and with whom we have almost nothing in common. The doors to their culture and to their language are still no more than half-open to us. For the majority and even for those whom we regard as our friends, we are a race totally apart, whose way of life is as different from theirs as would be the lives of the ancient Egyptians from ours. It is not easy to explain why we remain. "Why don't you leave them alone? Are they not better off as they are?" are questions that were frequently asked, though more in years past than now.

We stay because we feel that we have something to offer not only in practical matters but in matters too that the milieu of the questioner, perhaps, has long ago discarded as irrelevant. Had the people given us any sign that either our presence or what we had to offer were unwelcome among them we should have left long ago.

If they gave any thought to us at all, and it is likely that they did not, they may well have considered us as being at worst harmless and at best people who might have something to con-

tribute to the easing of their lives. It would be for them rather than for us to pronounce on whether our years among them have in fact been of any value and, were they asked, being the kind of people they are, they are never likely to be anything other than laudatory. The people who know us seem happy for us to stay. For the rest we remain what we were when we first arrived, an enigma.

Arriving in a mission territory, the most important thing we bring is our ability to grow in relationship with others. The most valuable gift we bring back is the story of our encounter with a people whose way of life we have shared.

— *Kathy Murtha VICS*

The people among whom we live and work are known as Pokot. I spent my first seven years among them in, loosely-speaking, a state of semi-despair. That I never developed the full-blown variety I can only put down to two somewhat hazy notions that I harboured at the time. One, that things were bound to get better and two, that the position in which I found myself was the necessary prelude to that future happier state of affairs.

A mission among the unsuspecting Pokot

Having begun no new missions in the country for many years, aside from those sloughed off from older, long-established ones in the dioceses entrusted to us from the beginning, the Holy Ghost Fathers in Kenya, in the person of a council of responsible elders and under an able and far-sighted leader, judged the time right to rectify that long-standing state of affairs. After weighing the needs of two other unsuspecting communities and the number of missionaries available, a decision was made in favour of opening a mission among the equally unsuspecting pastoral Pokot.

The Catholic mission to these pastoral Pokot of north central Kenya became a reality in the middle of 1980. Three men were required to staff the beginnings of it. One, Gerry Foley, a man of great missionary experience, was brought from the Diocese of Mombasa. A second, Sean McGovern, almost equally experienced, was captured from the Diocese of Machakos, (for which deed, I may say, the Holy Ghost Fathers earned no plaudits from the bishop of that diocese). I was the third; I had just returned from a stint in the highlands of Papua New Guinea