

HOLY CROSS EAST AFRICA

1958 – 2007

EVOLUTION OF A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY - EXPATRIATE TO INDIGENOUS

In January, 2003 Father James Burasa, CSC was elected district superior of the Holy Cross community in East Africa. This was an historical event. In a sense the community had come full circle since the first Holy Cross missionaries arrived in Uganda in 1958 under the leadership of Father Vincent McCauley, CSC.

From its beginning, wherever Holy Cross has gone as a missionary community, it has almost always tried to put down roots and establish a local Holy Cross community of indigenous members.

The first task facing the new men in Uganda was to get to know the people, local church and culture; they were the first Holy Cross to serve as priests in Africa.

Africa was undergoing momentous changes. Ghana was the first African country to gain independence; others looked forward to self rule. The Church was growing very rapidly. Holy Cross came to assist the growing church.

Each age needs leaders who can address the needs of the time and place. In many ways Father McCauley was well suited to lead Holy Cross. His personality was outgoing. He easily formed friendships and bonds. He was a very capable fund raiser. He provided a needed public face and image for the community. Though he lacked African experience, he quickly made links with the other religious communities serving as missionaries in Uganda as well as civic leaders both local and colonial.

Just a year after the arrival of the first Holy Cross priests, the first Holy Cross brothers arrived in Uganda.

When it was announced that Uganda would become independent in 1962, the Catholic Church sought to establish itself more firmly and deeply in the country. The Diocese of Mbarara was divided, and Holy Cross was entrusted with the new diocese of Fort Portal under the leadership of now Bishop Vincent McCauley, CSC. A new era for Holy Cross began. Both the local bishop and the religious superior of the community would be Holy Cross but with different responsibilities. The majority of the clergy of the diocese were White Fathers and diocesan priests. Holy Cross was still small in numbers and experience. The role of the religious superior of Holy Cross was evolving.

Father Louis Meyer, CSC, a former missionary in Bengal, as had been Bishop McCauley, was sent from the USA to be superior. Father Meyer saw a broader role for Holy Cross than just in Fort Portal. He purchased a house in Kampala and worked towards establishing an office of Catholic Relief Services in the country. The Holy Cross superior was not so visible in Fort Portal. The community was in some ways keeping a low public profile. With the arrival each year of new missionaries the Holy Cross community was growing. In Fort Portal Holy Cross took responsibility for a new "town" parish, Bukwali. New missions were being opened in Busongora and Hoima areas. In the beginning Holy Cross worked with the other clergy. Now Holy Cross began some ventures on their own. They were becoming more and more integrated into the local church and culture.

In 1965 Father Meyer left Uganda for health reasons. Father John Croston, CSC, the diocesan treasurer and close friend and confidant of Bishop McCauley, was appointed the new superior of Holy Cross. The community in Uganda now became a district in the Holy Cross governmental structure. A significant shift had taken place. Instead of the

Holy Cross superior living outside Fort Portal and not being involved in diocesan affairs, the new superior was in Fort Portal and very closely linked with the bishop.

New members continued to arrive. However, there was a significant difference in the mentality of the younger Holy Cross men. Uganda had achieved its independence during the time that the Vatican Council II was taking place. The newer members had done their theological education during the time of the Vatican Council. They came with new and different understandings of the church and mission and religious life. Following the Council many changes were introduced into the church. The younger members were better prepared to understand and welcome these changes. It was inevitable that some tensions would arise. Some questions were being raised about the relationship between the diocese and the Holy Cross community. In the United States the church and community experienced many tensions as well. The number of men joining the community began to decline and even more tragic a number of members left the religious life. Some of the first missionaries decided to return to the USA. Lots of uncertainty faced the community and its members. Fortunately at that time the community was blessed with enlightened and courageous leadership at the general level with Very Rev. Germain-M. Lalande, CSC as superior general and at the provincial level with Rev. Howard J. Kenna, CSC as provincial of the Indiana Province, the sponsoring province of the Holy Cross priests in Uganda.

In 1969 the number of Holy Cross men in Uganda, brothers and priests, reached its highest level and then began to decline. Only many years later would the number be once again over 35. A fuller presence of the Holy Cross family occurred in 1967 when the first Holy Cross Sisters arrived to work in the Fort Portal and later other dioceses.

One innovation in religious life after the Council and the General Chapter of 1968 was the election of district superiors. In 1970 the priests of Uganda elected for the first time the district superior. Father Robert McMahon, CSC was elected. In some ways he represented a bridge between the pre and post Council generations of Holy Cross. He had been ordained in 1962 at the beginning of the Council so he had been educated before the Council. However, beginning in 1965 he was in charge of the newly arrived missionaries so he was well known to them and they to him. He was being asked to guide the community through some stormy waters. He chose as his assistant one of the younger priests, Rev. Richard Wunsch, CSC. Shortly after his election Father McMahon left for the USA and the provincial chapter meetings. He extended his stay in the USA and finally decided to submit his resignation as district superior.

The community faced a crisis. For the first time the community had elected its own superior; now that superior had resigned after only a few months. Father Wunsch was elected to fill out the term of Father McMahon. Father Wunsch had worked in parishes and also begun using his many technical talents especially in motor mechanics. The first two Holy Cross superiors were primarily responsible for the community. Father Wunsch was the second Holy Cross superior who would also have a major other apostolic responsibility. For many years to come the superiors of Holy Cross would be challenged to lead the community and at the same time engage in practically full-time apostolic work. Not long after Father Wunsch took responsibility as superior, there was a coup d'etat in Uganda and General Idi Amin Dada became President of Uganda. This change would profoundly affect the community for a decade to come. Another significant

change took place in the leadership of the church. Bishop McCauley was succeeded by Rt. Rev. Bishop Serapio Magambo as the second bishop of the Diocese of Fort Portal. By the time the community of priests gathered for the District Chapter of 1973, their number had dwindled to almost half of the number who were in Uganda in 1969. The men were disheartened and very uncertain about the future. The Chapter made the dramatic move of voting to withdraw as a community from Uganda over a period of years. The resolution passed by a wide margin. The men of the Chapter saw no future for Holy Cross priests in Uganda.

District legislation must be approved by the provincial. Father Kenna did not accept the decision to terminate the corporate presence of Holy Cross in Uganda; he allowed any who wished to return to the USA to do so but said that those who wished to remain in Uganda would be able to do so and with the support of the provincial administration. This decision was confirmed by the 1973 Provincial Chapter; the Chapter introduced a new idea that the community look for another country in East Africa to work in. Father John Keefe, CSC was elected as the new district superior. While superior Father Keefe continued pastoral ministry in parishes and with the local congregation of religious sisters.

Father Keefe and the community were challenged to continue their apostolic work in the diocese and to plan for the future of Holy Cross. No new missionaries were coming from the USA. A few older missionaries returned home. Expatriates and Christian religious leaders felt a continual tension in dealings with the government. Holy Cross men reflected on the meaning of a missionary vocation after the Council and the role of Holy Cross in cross cultural ministries.

In addition the community members considered the community's broader history. Holy Cross was not like the other missionary communities working in Uganda. The other communities were sent to establish and build up the church in new lands and then withdraw to serve in other lands. Holy Cross, however, had always established a permanent presence of Holy Cross where they went as missionaries. Holy Cross had usually tried to plant the charism of the community in the lands to which its members went. Some members wanted to establish a Holy Cross community in Uganda. Others were very hesitant or even outright opposed to such a move. For three years the community members discussed formally and informally their future in Uganda and tried to listen to the Spirit for guidance.

The community recognized that the next district chapter would have to deal in more depth with the question of the community's presence in Uganda. Serious preparations in the form of consultations were made in preparation for the next district chapter to be held in 1976.

The men who gathered for the chapter were not as many as those who gathered in 1973, but they were of a very different mind set. For one thing they had become more accustomed to living with the tensions and stresses caused by the unsettling political situation in Uganda. They were also more self-confident that they could take initiatives and not be intimidated by the challenges they might face.

The Chapter of 1976 was a watershed. The Chapter reversed the decision of 1973 to phase out the presence of Holy Cross in Uganda. The Chapter chose just the opposite. The members decided to establish a permanent presence of Holy Cross not only in Uganda but even more broadly in East Africa. The community would undertake to put in

place a program to welcome African members and would begin once again to recruit new missionaries to come from the USA. All of these decisions were passed by unanimous votes. The future of Holy Cross in East Africa had been decided insofar as the community could choose and decide. The challenge was to implement the decisions. The first challenge was to investigate apostolic possibilities outside Uganda. Approaches and visits were made to a few dioceses. The Archbishop of Nairobi invited the community to come and take responsibility for a parish to be developed in a newly begun housing project called Dandora. Two priests, Rev. James Rahilly, CSC and Rev. William Blum, CSC, volunteered to go to Kenya. In June, 1978, two and a half years after the chapter of 1976 had decided to seek a parish outside Uganda, Dandora Parish opened under Holy Cross sponsorship. The community which only five years before saw itself leaving East Africa was now established in two countries. What is a bit surprising is that the number of members in 1978 was even smaller than they had been at the time of the chapter two years earlier. The small numbers did not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the members as they saw the community spreading out more broadly. The Chapter scheduled for 1979 was anticipated in its first session which was held in October, 1978 in order to hold elections for district leadership. Father William Blum, CSC was chosen to be the new district superior. An anomaly of sorts was created in that the superior lived in a community of only two in Kenya while all the rest of the community resided far away in central and western Uganda. While serving as superior Father Blum continued to assist in the parish and later engaged in teaching theology. Dandora Parish grew rapidly as the population in the Dandora area also grew in great numbers. For the first time Holy Cross had a parish that was clearly identified as being

the responsibility of the community. Both the parish and the formation program attracted some younger religious from the USA who came to join the district—some for shorter and others for longer term commitments.

The '76 Chapter had not only decreed that the community seek an apostolic placement outside of Uganda but even more importantly had decreed that the community begin to develop a program that would welcome African candidates to the community. Beginning in 1979 one of the major emphases and priorities of the community would be recruitment and initial formation. One of the priorities of the district superior was to help plan for the different levels of formation that would be needed for seminarians.

The first candidate to join Holy Cross would be a diocesan priest. He spent almost a year in Holy Cross communities and then went to Bangalore, India for novitiate training. He did not take vows in Holy Cross. Slowly other men joined as seminarian candidates. At the same time the Brothers of Holy Cross in Uganda had decided to begin a formation program. The community faced the challenge of choosing formation personnel and establishing formation sites.

The District Chapter of 1982 focused on formation as a main theme. The community was about to begin accepting candidates and needed to begin working out a formation program.

For philosophical training the community decided to open a house in Dandora and to send the students for philosophy to the Consolata Fathers' Seminary in Nairobi. In 1980? a Kenyan seminarian joined the novitiate community in Cascade, CO, USA. The community was not yet ready to open its own novitiate in East Africa. By the next year,

however, the Saka Lake property near Fort Portal was designated as the future novitiate and the first novitiate staff--a priest and a brother--was chosen.

Plans for post novitiate training had to be developed. At this time in Kenya several religious communities besides Holy Cross were also looking to establish formation programs for seminarians studying theology. They also foresaw programs for lay religious. Over a period of three years plans were drawn up for the establishment of a theological consortium to be known as the Theological Centre for Religious. Holy Cross was one of the founding members.

When Father Thomas Smith, CSC was elected as district superior in 1985 the community was very focused on religious formation in Holy Cross. The first professed seminarians followed their theological studies at Hekima College, a Jesuit institution serving much of Africa. Preparations continued for the opening of the theological centre. In 1986 the first students enrolled at the TCR. A couple years later the first Holy Cross seminarians joined the TCR, now known as Tangaza College. The post novitiate formation program was located within Dandora Parish so that the students might have a fuller and more direct contact with the professed religious and the pastoral ministry. As the number of men requesting to join Holy Cross both as brother and seminarian candidates increased, and the experience of running common formation programs continued, a new sense of the charism and identity of Holy Cross came more and more to the fore. A desire for a deeper union of the priests and brothers even at the juridical level developed. In 1988 the brothers and priests in East Africa made an historic decision. They decided to merge and form a mixed district. To this day, almost twenty years later, they remain unique in the

congregation in terms of juridical structure and community life and ministry. In addition to his service as district superior Father Smith was pastor of Dandora Parish.

A new concern was the pre-novitiate program. The seminarians had been attending the Consolata Philosophy Seminary in Nairobi. There was a desire that the brother and seminarian candidates follow as much as possible the same academic program at least through the novitiate. In the light of the Tangaza collaborative experience and its success, Holy Cross proposed to the other religious communities in Uganda that were receiving local candidates the idea of founding a collaborative philosophical centre and program. With rather amazing speed the communities developed a program and were able to open the doors of the Queen of Apostles Philosophical Centre Jinja in 1989. Following the model they had adopted in Dandora, the Holy Cross community was anxious that the community have an apostolic work close to the formation location. Simultaneous with the opening of the Philosophy Centre Holy Cross was entrusted with responsibility for Bugembe Parish, Jinja. Since that time the academic programs at Tangaza and PCJ have grown and prospered. Alongside the parishes they have provided both a rich academic experience as well as exposure to the broader community of young male and female religious in various missionary and indigenous communities. In 1994 as Father Smith was completing his terms as superior Holy Cross had grown both in its apostolic works and as a mixed community of expatriates and native East African religious. Father George Lucas succeeded him. He was the first district superior since almost the beginning of the community's presence in East Africa not to have an apostolic assignment in addition to that of being superior. The community needed a man who could devote all his energies to the service of the community. For most of his years as

superior Father Lucas lived at the parish centre in Jinja; however, towards the end of his last term the District Headquarters including the office and residence of the district superior was established at Nsambya, Kampala. From this point Holy Cross became more like most of the other missionary religious communities that had their own administrative centers distinct from diocesan and community offices and activities. From the very beginning of Holy Cross in Toro in the Fort Portal Diocese Holy Cross priests had served in Butiti Parish. In 1994 Butiti Parish was divided and one of its centers, Kyarusozi, was established as an independent parish; it was entrusted to Holy Cross, the third parish the community had accepted responsibility for. For some years the community had been accepting candidates from Tanzania. The community felt a growing desire to be present in Tanzania and to have closer links with these new members. In 1999 Holy Cross accepted responsibility for Kitete Parish in the Mbulu Diocese of northern Tanzania. Kitete became the fourth parish entrusted to the ministry of Holy Cross religious. In 1990 the Holy Cross Sisters had founded a secondary school in Jinja within the boundaries of Bugembe Parish. With vigorous and dynamic leadership the school grew and developed. Toward the end of the decade the sisters requested the men's District of East Africa to accept ownership and responsibility for the school. Since that time Holy Cross Lakeview School has served the people of Jinja and Eastern Uganda with the contributions in a collaborative form of the brothers, priests and sisters of Holy Cross. The community had grown in both numbers and its presence and responsibility for apostolic works including schools, parishes and the collaborative formation institutions in Tangaza and Jinja. Another secondary school as well as a technical school had developed under the auspices of Holy Cross and Kyarusozi

Parish. All these ventures had their origin in the zeal and dedication of Holy Cross religious, lay and clerical, male and female.

As the community entered the New Millenium and the 21st Century Holy Cross was well established in East Africa and had ever deeper roots in the peoples and churches of the areas where its members were ministering. A number of men had taken final vows and some had been ordained priests. Slowly the circle that began with the coming of the first Holy Cross missionaries in 1958 began to come full circle. Slowly the number of African religious grew and matured. The completion of the circle was symbolized first with African members taking responsibility for parishes and schools and then culminated with the election of Father James Burasa as the first indigenous district superior.

In 2004 the General Chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross decreed that it foresaw the possibility of the District of East Africa becoming an autonomous province before the next General Chapter scheduled for 2010. It provided for that possibility and encouraged that development.

As Holy Cross in East Africa approaches its Golden Jubilee it has much to be proud of as it looks back over 50 years of presence and ministry and even more to hope for as it moves into the second half of its first century in East Africa.

Bill Blum, CSC
June, 2007