

Remembering Sister Catherine

(Fr. Giuseppe Vallauri)

A subtitle to this could be "The first superior of the Orionine men in Kenya". Here is why. Let's return to the mid-80s, to Buntingford, England, a small town on the A 10 highway that leads from London to Cambridge. There, in 1975, the Congregation had purchased a former convent to accommodate the older girls with learning difficulties of Colombo House in London. About fifteen. Catherine, in her early twenties, from Wigan near Liverpool, had joined the staff. She came from a good Catholic family and perhaps had already known something about the Orionines who, some years earlier, had opened a house in nearby UpHolland. In 1978 the parish of Buntingford was entrusted to us, and in that same year I became its parish priest, until 1989. Thus we met. Catherine was a young woman, good, jovial, always positive, sunny, one would say today, but with her feet on the ground: her very presence radiated peace, serenity and commitment. Commitment, work, generosity, spirit of sacrifice, were some of the other traits that marked his life.

So I was not at all surprised when, one day, Fr Paul Bidone, who being in charge of the work, visited it at least once a month, and confided to me: "You know, Catherine would like to join our sisters." I was not surprised because I saw her as a religious, but I was amazed at the choice: how could she know about the PSMdC? Moreover, there were many institutes of Sisters in England, including prestigious ones, especially dedicated to teaching. The only English Orionine sister was Sister Dolores, who however had always been in Italy: she died in 1993. Catherine left for Italy, learned Italian, did her second year of novitiate in Santa Maria la Longa.

A few years later, in 1992, we met again, in Kenya. In mid-November of that year, answering the request of the PSMdC, as Father Malcolm Dyer had previously done, I left Dublin, and passing first through Brussels and then Entebbe, I finally arrived in Nairobi: at the airport, to welcome me were Sister Catherine and an American aspirant, the future Sister Carol. Sister Catherine had recently been sent to Kenya to take charge of the formation of young aspirants and postulants. I stayed a full month as their guest, providing spiritual retreats, conferences and other pastoral activities. I also met some young men from the Igoji area, where the sisters ran a small hospital and six dispensaries, who, encouraged by Sister Leonarda, wanted to join us. After this, the trips multiplied, both on my part and on Father Malcolm's, sometimes even two a year, lasting at least three or four weeks each time. Every time Sr Catherine, and also the other Sisters, were at our disposal, hosting us, taking us to places we wished to see and people we liked to meet and supplying us with all that was needed.

During the 1993 Missionary Congress in Montebello, we asked our confreres of the Ivory Coast to give to the young Kenyan men who wished to join, some experience of orionine religious life. Thus a few went to Bonoua for one or two years. Meanwhile, Sr Catherine was helping us to find land for sale where we could build our residence. Despite this, it became urgent to provide for the training of our aspirants in Kenya and it was decided, after visiting various religious institutions, to ask the Meru diocesan seminary, located in Nairobi, and which seemed the most suitable, to accept them. We proposed to Sister Catherine to take care of the aspirants: she accepted with enthusiasm, despite her already many commitments. It meant visiting them every week, taking care of their needs, listening to their requests and also complaints, as the case may be. A journey of a few kilometres through the metropolis but which took a long time, in the often-chaotic traffic.

This is how Sister Catherine became the first superior of the Orionines in Kenya. By then the need to open a house in Kenya was pressing. So in 1996 I went there for two months looking for a house, maybe just to rent it for the time being and to study a bit of Kiswahili. How many trips Sister Catherine and I made, seeing several houses and places around Nairobi, but not being able to find a suitable one. Finally, together with the help of Fr Oreste Ferrari, who had come to provide some training for our "aspirants" while on holidays, a house was found in Langata, a private one, for sale, but large enough to accommodate about 10 people. I returned to Kenya at the end of

September and, on Christmas Eve, I came into possession of the house and immediately afterwards came the first six aspirants, including the future Fathers Peter Wambulwa and Raphael Kailemiah.

From that day the contacts, collaboration and mutual help between Sr Catherine and me continued, indeed increased. How many episodes come to mind. The last time we met was in May 2018, at Tortona, in the Mother House, where she had been living for some time, undergoing treatment for the illness that together with the virus would take her away. We spent two hours remembering the "good times" of Buntingford and especially of Kenya and the various adventures we shared. One: one day, five of us were going, in the old Peugeot of the sisters, from Nairobi to Igoji; the two of us and three novices. Just outside the city, the first problem: the students of Kenyatta University were again in the road, blocking it, in protest. We had to go through countryside makeshift roads, where people seemed very hostile, due to the unexpected traffic. Then the other misadventures. Just beyond Embu, the first puncture; the wheel is changed and a mechanic is found to fix it. Shortly before Runienje, the second; we make it to the town and another mechanic takes care of it. After a few kilometres later a third puncture: for the third time I kneel on the ground, the white cassock now smeared with the red soil and change the wheel. Thinking that the proverbial three has passed, we continue without the spare wheel. By now, between delays and unexpected stops hours have passed; it is six o'clock and, being on the equator, the night is quickly approaching. But, crossing a small village one more puncture: it is necessary to surrender and stop again. A mechanic cannot be found in that village. We decide to split into two groups: Sr Catherine and a novice would go to the nearest garage with the two wheels; the other two novices and I stay in the car. It is almost dark: some nearby shops have a light and there are still many people around. An elderly man passes, and seeing the situation, immediately understands what has happened: he leans over and says: "Father, don't be afraid, many of us are Christian, here. I thank him. Even so, he stops a short distance away. Providentially, in the first vehicle that Sr Catherine asks for a lift there is a Cottolengo religious, also bound for Meru. They load the two wheels and return after about an hour. Before leaving, I go over to the elderly man who had guarded us, offering him some money. He refuses it. We arrive in Igoji several hours late. The worried sisters welcome us with joy.

Dear Sr Catherine, you have now reached the goal of your short life. When you said yes to the Lord, you gave yourself body and soul to the call, without ever looking back. Wherever you found yourself out of obedience, there was your home and homeland, even though, of course, you loved England, your country. You spread serenity, generosity and kindness wherever you were. Never a complaint, never a less than good word about others, drawing strength, courage and patience from the prayer you practiced every day. A great, clear faith shone through your face. A desire to serve, to do everything well and well everything. To me you were, especially in the time I spent in Kenya, like a good sister, always available, always eager to help, to advise, to direct and ready to consider the students and me with the same attention that you dedicated to your aspirants, postulants and novices. God only knows how much gratitude I owe you and if there is one thing that consoles me and that keeps me from tears, it is knowing with certainty, human, but still certainty, that you will be of even more help from up there.

Rest in peace, dear sister and may God grant you glory, reward and joy in his kingdom.