

Kenya Trip

A letter to the USF Community

By Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

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Dear Colleagues:

From January 15 to 19, I was in Kenya for a four day Ignatian Family Encounter at Hekima College of Theology in Nairobi. The meeting involved approximately 200 Jesuits and co-workers from across Africa prior to the World Social Forum that opened in Nairobi the day I left for San Francisco. Participants were from Jesuit organizations that work on HIV-AIDS, local development efforts, literacy programs, conflict resolution, social analysis and political advocacy, primary and secondary education, spirituality centers, refugee support, environmental degradation and prison ministry. The list of works gives you a sense of the magnitude of the challenges facing Africa.

The vast majority of conference participants were Africans, very few outsiders were involved — I was invited to represent American Jesuit higher education. Over the three days, we were exposed to the vast, complex, interrelated issues that plague this continent: massive poverty, prolonged bloody conflicts, HIV-AIDS, corruption of the political and business elites, illiteracy, extensive hunger, marginalization of women, torture, forced displacement of persons. The list goes on and on.

Two experiences remain with me still. My first afternoon in Nairobi was spent in Africa's largest slum, Kibera. It is a five hundred-acre section [by comparison, USF's two campuses are 50 acres] inhabited by almost one million people. There are no paths [paved or otherwise], no sewers, no indoor plumbing of any kind; the shacks are flimsy constructs of baked mud bricks, tin slabs, lumber scraps and strips of plastic and cardboard from commercial packaging. I was told that the whole area is a sea of mud during the rainy season.

In Kibera, I visited St. Aloysius Gonzaga High School, which was established in 2004, to provide a free college-prep education to 290 bright teenagers who have lost both parents to HIV-AIDS. Walking through the precarious structures that make-up the "campus," I wished that USF students could see for themselves what I was seeing. Young Africans were packed two to a desk into windowless rooms, lighted by a single naked bulb; the only learning resource was a "black board" — a scrap of plywood painted black — shared pencils and paper, no books. The students were welcoming, enthusiastic, resilient and eternally grateful for the education which could take them out of Kibera. In this context, one realizes how crucial the "global perspective" that USF offers is for achieving "authentic human development [Vision, Mission, Core Values]" — theirs and ours.

We concluded the day with a Catholic liturgy in the chapel at Hekima. My psyche was replaying vivid images of the afternoon's experience in Kibera. At that point in the liturgy which allows for spontaneous prayers from the congregation, I was startled from my

reveries by an African who prayed aloud "in thanksgiving to God for all the good things that God has given to Africa." It was hard for me to imagine just what those "good things" were, given my initial impressions of the continent. We really do consider "things" good. This African was grateful for less apparent and far more profound "goods" than some of the "things" we count as blessings — flat screen TVs, MacMansions, designer clothes, MP3 players, fine wines, elegant meals, etc., etc.. One cannot be in Africa and not see the crying need for "the full, integral development of each person and all persons, with the belief that no individual or group may rightfully prosper at the expense of others. [Vision, Mission, Core Values]" Likewise, one cannot but wonder if we are prospering at their expense and at some cost to our own humanity.

I return to campus all the more convinced about the quality of education that USF offers and grateful for you, faculty and staff, who share these convictions and deliver that education. Our world desperately needs to be refashioned into a more humane and just place for all; it needs men and women with educated minds and hearts to take on this challenge in whatever profession or position they find themselves. I cannot overstate the importance of what we are doing for our students and the world-at-large and my enthusiasm for what we are trying to accomplish at USF.

Perhaps at the beginning of the semester, it would be worthwhile for all of us to reflect on how effectively we discharge our responsibilities for opening students' minds and hearts to the state of the global village within which we educate. We also know that 80% of our first year students consider it very important to develop their personal values [versus 63% national average] during their college years. This may be the moment to consider how effectively we offer students opportunities to reflectively appropriate those goods that lead to a purposeful and satisfying life.

Sincerely,

Stephen A. Privett, SJ  
President