

Local Irish missionary talks to Moate Community School Students about his time in Kenya

By Christopher Claffey

Only one week had passed since all the students of MCS had returned to their books when Fr Brian Johnson of Banagher, Co. Offlay came to host a special talk on his eccentric and adventurous life helping the less fortunate in all walks of life, including Londiani in Kenya

He began his life as a football star and won five county championships with St Rynagh's GAA club, yet amazingly joined the brotherhood at the early age of just sixteen. He began his missionary work in America, working as a teacher in the Bronx, New York. He also helped immigrants there find jobs and shelter when times were tough.

Fr Brian trained in Mountbellew Agricultural College, Co. Galway. It was this experience which helped him when he went to Africa after his work in the states. Baraka agricultural college is situated in Londiani. It was here where Fr Johnson was based for a while and where he did a great deal of charity work with the local community.

One of the development projects he was involved with was a Goat scheme. It was started three years ago to help improve the local breed of dairy goats instead of importing goats through organisations such as Bóthar. Because of the huge nutritional value in goat's milk, the project was highly beneficial to local families. The project has been a marvellous success so far.

Fr Johnson played a slideshow of the hundreds of pictures he took in Kenya this winter. Accompanying this were many remarkable tales and stories. He described for the interested group of transition year students how each day was different for him. He never knew what each day would bring and he recounted countless times when he went out to help community members. Unfortunately a lot of these stories ended in a trip to the hospital where some of the students were shocked and appalled to hear the condition of Kenyan healthcare. Fr Johnson had some pictures of people sitting all along the edges of the corridors because there were not enough beds for them. He also explained the shocking reality that when you go to a hospital in Kenya it is not uncommon for you to have to provide your own food and medicine. Fr Johnson explained how he often had to search the surrounding area for miles to try and acquire the medicine for these people. One time he spent a whole day searching for a rabies vaccine after a young boy had been attacked by dogs. He found it eventually, thankfully!

He also had many fond memories of his time spent in Africa. He came across a special tap that was created using a plastic milk carton some string and a pedal, a marvellous creation which Mr Hatton informed the class was also being used in and around Moi sorget

secondary school! There was the also the 'nyatiti', a musical instrument similar to a cello that was made from goatskin and cowhide. This was played, believe it or not, along with a car battery powered keyboard at mass one day. On Christmas day last year Fr Johnson dressed up as Santa Clause and there were some touching photographs of the delight on the young children's faces as they received a biscuit or some sweets. He also described with quite a laugh, the local disco. This consisted of an outer patch of land with four wooden walls. The 'DJ' stood in the corner, with a radio balanced on a tree branch, turning the volume up and down. You had to be there I guess...

This brought us unfortunately on to the letter that the father read out near the end of his talk. Without any prior notification of the contents he began "Dear Brother", hunger, fever and dysentery have thinned the population all around the monastery since you left it. In one village there were twenty two deaths and about thirty orphans". At this point some faces fell as the students recalled the drought and famine they had witnessed on the news, the one that started in Somalia and spread into Eastern Kenya, forcing thousands of people into refugee camps. "You would not recognise your neighbours; to describe the appearance of the people would take more time and talent I can bring to the task". Fr Johnson stopped, looked up sadly, and explained that the letter was written in 1847 by an Irish Franciscan monk describing the Irish Famine to a friend in London. He made it painfully clear to all his audience that this was also happening in Kenya as he spoke. He recalled a tale from when a dam that provided water for thousands of Kenyans in the Londiani region dried up a couple of years back. He estimated it was an eight mile walk to the nearest water source, then eight more to come home again. Although that particular dam had recovered, he gently tried to explain that wells were drying up all over Somalia and Kenya taking all moisture from the land and causing vital crops to fail.

Fr Brian concluded his talk by showing the class his most valued possessions, four metal bracelets that were a gift to him by a woman he helped while working in Africa. He had told the class earlier not to worry about what they don't have but to value what they do have, and here he admitted he valued this gift very much because of the thought that went into it.

Fr Johnson spoke for over an hour and half. It was clear from the start how intrigued the transition year students were by his work. Questions were asked at the end and when asked if they would like to go to Kenya next year as part of our exchange project nearly every student raised their hand.

MCS would like to thank Fr Johnson for the time and effort he put in to coming to our school and enlightening our students with his vast knowledge and experience. There promises to be many more Kenyan related projects and talks throughout the school year. We've started this year as we mean to continue!

