

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ
June 13 & 14, 2020

All Saints Parish, Syr., NY
Peter Daino

Break Margins Africa Homily

Father Fred is very faithful about wearing a face mask. The problem with it, he says, is that you can't tell what anyone is feeling. But for a gay person in Kenya that's just fine. Hiding one's feelings is a daily, life-long project. If you do not mask your emotions, you could end up in jail.

It's June, Pride Month, and as usual, we make an appeal for Break Margins Africa. Francis Kamunya gave that modest name to our project in Nairobi Kenya. It's modest because gay folk in Africa are not only marginalized, they are ridiculed, beaten and locked up. In Kenya and Malawi a gay person can be arrested, and sentenced to 14 years, hard labor. I'd call our work Break Persecution Africa.

A few weeks ago the archivist of Kenya's Gay History informed me that I am now listed as a Pride Hero of our civil rights struggle in Kenya. The reason he told me is because I wrote and produced the first Gay Friendly Play ever staged in Kenya. Cleopatra, the name of that musical, did have real Heroes. They were the singers and dancers and actors, all gay men whose families had rejected them, who were living on the streets of Nairobi, selling themselves just to get something to eat.

I say they were the heroes because indeed they did get persecuted for Cleopatra. After rehearsals, going back to their cardboard mattresses, walking back to some dark street, where they slept, many of our dancers and singers were ambushed and beaten up for acting in Cleopatra. Some of our dancers even ended up in hospital so severely were they beaten. These same homophobic thugs phoned the theater manager warning that if Cleopatra was staged they'd bomb the theater.

We did stage our musical in early 1997. But, we performed it only once, because we were tear-gassed by the government, and that put an end to Cleopatra. Still, we had accomplished our goal.

I had interviewed cast members during the weeks prior to our getting tear gassed, so with their needs and requests, I went to the Archbishop of Nairobi. The main thing these homeless youth wanted is help to get off the streets. This help never materialized, and there was zero diocesan response back then in 1997.

But some years later, Francis Kamunya, also a Marianist, came to Malawi, where I had been transferred. For weeks we discussed that Cleopatra proposal, rejected by the diocese, namely: give job training to homeless gay youth so they could escape the street life they were suffering. Francis returned to Nairobi, and in 2012 he founded Break Margins Africa, which for 8 years has been giving job-training, and a dignified life, to this very marginalized group of homeless youth. Break Margins has been so effective in reaching their goals that now a group of gay Ugandans and gay Tanzanians are seeking their advice.

Let me give a profile of the specific people we assist. Most of the young men are not from Nairobi, they grew up in little Kenyan villages where they were bullied and made to run away from home. Coming to Nairobi they live on the street. Soon they are recruited and trafficked on street corners where they are exposed to disease, and even beatings by self-hating clients. When such an abused person sees a way out of this hellish existence, they take it. In a typical year more than 200 desperate homeless gay youth approach Break Margins Africa and ask for help. All who need counselling are assisted. Those who want job training in addition to counselling are put on a waiting list. We can only pay fees for about 20 per year. The courses requested are practical. We now have graduates who are: nurses, accountants, mechanics, hair dressers, chefs, actors, airline stewards, tour guides, drivers, artists, and teachers.

There are three stages to admission to our sponsorships: 1) interview, 2) group counselling during which bead jewelry is crafted, 3) beginning a trade course. The main overseas support Break Margins receives is from All Saints, and I want to say to You Saints: You've been wonderful, beautiful, and deserve that name.

Today, I'm appealing to you again to consider supporting some of our 20 new candidates for job training courses. A typical one-year course would cost \$600. One semester \$300. One month would be \$50. A check can be made to All Saints Church, but indicate on the Memo Line, for Break Margins Africa. In this week's parish mailing you should have received an insert about BMA and an envelope in which a donation could be mailed to All Saints. For whatever you are able to give, we thank you. Your gift is moving someone from a place of humiliation to the place of self-reliance and dignity.

Let us pray for the day, when all of us, can take off, whatever mask we've been wearing, and come out from hiding, and bare the beauty of our souls.