

How Bishop Pante Lost his Cross in Huruma Slums

By Fr Daniel Mkado



Photos by Milke Kalunde 2013

Bishop Virgilio Pante on his motorbike. He says with the motorbike he can do several errands unlike when driving a car.

Today Bishop Virgilio Pante of the Catholic diocese of Maralal wears a simple cross made of beads while someone in Huruma slums is probably walking around with a 'bling-bling' of the bishop's silver cross.

"This is a simple one, nobody will steal it. It probably costs Ksh 100 unlike the other one that was worth KShs 10,000" he says while showing off the samburu beaded cross hanging on his neck.

The seventy year-old Italian bishop recounts of how in June, while riding his *pikipiki* in between the makeshift houses of Huruma

slums, a young man approached as if to shake his hand but instead went for his silver cross and plucked it from his neck.

"I had been invited by the Missionaries of Charity in Huruma for the religious profession of three of their sisters when this incident happened," he explains.

The cross, he says, was very special because it was given to him by Pope John Paul II -- now saint -- on September 3, 2001 when he went to Rome to receive the instruments of the bishops.





Photo by Fr Mkado 2016

Bishop Virgilio Pante talks to Fr Luigi Brambilla of Tuthu Parish during the Consolata Day celebrations in Sagana. Bishop Pante today dons a beaded cross after losing his silver cross in Huruma slums.

“I have worn that cross every day of my life for the last 15 years. Every morning when I woke up it was the first thing I wore,” says the bishop who is from Belluno, North of Italy.

“It is like losing your marriage ring, even if you buy another one, better than the lost one, it is not the same,” says bishop Pante.

What was the good Bishop thinking riding a motorbike into the slums without any form of security? You may want to ask.

Bishop Pante is known for his trade mark motorcycle which he uses more often than he uses his car even when on pastoral work in the vast Catholic diocese of Maralal.

He notes that in all these years, he has never had a serious accident apart from a few rolls and running over a few squirrels and goats in Maralal.

In 1982, the second born in a family of seven he went to DRC Congo, a distance of 4000Kms on a motorbike to visit his brother priest, Flavio Pante.

While many people have looked at Bishop Pante’s trademark use of the motorcycle as a sign of humility he sees it as a convenience.

“Using a Pikipiki is being practical. It’s not because I am humble, I am clever bwana,” he says noting that with the traffic in Nairobi town you can’t do much in a day but with my pikipiki, I can do five errands in one hour.

It is not the first time the bishop is being robbed of his belongings. He remembers thieves walking into his office in Maralal while he was out for lunch and making off with a radio.

Another time someone broke into his car in Maralal and stole his mitre and staff. He sent a word around that his stuff had been stolen. Two weeks later, someone found them abandoned in a paper bag in a cemetery but all tampered with.

He believes that whoever stole it got embarrassed and returned it.

“Where do you take things like that? He poses noting that wherever you go, it is evident that these are church stuff and if one is a catholic, they would know that these things only belong to bishops.”

When the Christians of the Catholic diocese of Maralal learnt that he had lost his mitre and staff, they made him a set of two.



Bishop Virgilio Pante presents Pope Francis with an African mitre made of goatskin. It was a replacement to one he lost when someone broke into his car in Maralal town and stole his mitre and staff.

"I got two staffs, one from Sererit parish and another from Lodokejek parish; all made of wood with lots of Maridadi. You see, you lose one, and receive two. God gives you double of what you have lost" he jokes.

When the woman who made the Bishop's mitre heard that it had been stolen, she made a better one, it was that mitre that bishop Pante presented to Francis as a gift during their visit to Rome in April 2015.

In gratitude, Pope Francis wore it at the High Mass that took place at the University of Nairobi during his apostolic visit to Africa in November 2015.

When the Missionaries of Charity sisters heard of the incident, in Huruma they consoled the bishop, saying that the cross would not make the person who stole it happy.

"It is just as we say among the Samburu, that the cow that you have stolen will not make you fat," he notes but adds that he does not believe that someone who steals a religious item is cursed.

"It is just ignorance, I forgive the young man. He is probably going to enjoy a meal or a drink today or tomorrow and that's gone. He does not even know the value of that cross," the Bishop says.

"The issue of assaults and robbery in our cities is sad. This tells us something as a country, as a society. That there are many people out there who are unemployed, they are looking for something to eat and since they can't find it, they resort to stealing from others," he adds.

"That poor man was just looking around for a chance to steal something from someone. In the slums, it is survival of the fittest. People come from upcountry thinking they will find paradise in the cities when they meet harsh realities" he sympathises.

At age 70, Bishop Pante has five more years before he retires and still looks physically fit but he says looks can be deceiving.

He has survived two cancers: of the prostate and cancer of the lips; that saw the doctors remove 8mm of flesh from his lips.

"I confronted God, why do you touch my lips and I want to speak everyday to your people? It would be better if you cut my finger which I can survive without but not my lips," he says.

With the operation, the cancer was gone. He was lucky that the two cancers were diagnosed at their early stage, "kwa bahati ya Mungu" (by God's grace) and they were able to remove them before they spread to the other parts of his body.

"I think God still needs me to serve his people" says Bishop Pante who comes from a family of two priests and a nun.

The bishop says he has learnt the hard way to be careful and hopes nobody tries to steal his chalice or his motorcycle.

"If someone stole my chalice which I was given at my ordination in 1970, I would be devastated. This chalice has inscribed on it the date of my ordination as a priest which was 26 December 1970. I have celebrated Masses with it for the last 46 years. Almost half a century," he says

"I have learnt my lesson. I will be more careful next time," he concludes ●