

Fr Paul Kalenzi shares a moment with the choir after his ordination, marking the beginning of a priesthood shaped by faith, service and a journey that led him from accounting to ministry. PHOTO/COURTESY

From a promising accounting career in London to priesthood

Fr Paul Kalenzi left a promising accounting career in London for the priesthood, choosing a path shaped by faith and purpose that has since led him to serve refugee communities across Uganda.

BY EDGAR R BATTE

Fr Paul Kalenzi once burnt his accounting books.

It was not an act of anger or rebellion. There was no dramatic fallout, no slammed doors or burning resentment. It was quieter than that, almost ceremonial. A deliberate closing of a chapter he believed he had outgrown.

In London, United Kingdom, he had already reached what many would call arrival. A career with KPMG. A structured professional path. The kind of success that can be measured, mapped, and projected into a predictable future. He had studied Economics at the University of Manchester, qualified as an accountant, and stepped into a world where life made sense in ledgers and logic.

But somewhere beneath the order, something unsettled remained.

So, he burnt the books.

Years later, seated in Kampala, overseeing budgets and programmes that determine whether refugee families eat, learn, or keep a roof over their heads, he recognises the irony without resistance.

"The things I thought I was leaving behind... are the very things I now use every day," he says, smiling.

He pauses, then begins where every story of return really starts, the beginning.

Kangemi

Kalenzi's early life unfolded in Kangemi, a densely populated settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, where his family had found refuge after fleeing Uganda during the turbulent years of Idi Amin.

Life there was tightly held together by improvisation. Space was limited. Privacy was rare. Stability was something you learnt to manufacture from whatever was available.

Their home was two small rooms. But it was never just theirs. Other Ugandans passed through constantly, some stayed a night, others longer, all carried by the invisible network of exile and familiarity. There was always someone sleeping on the floor, someone cooking, someone telling a story.

"I was a very happy boy," he says simply.

That happiness was not born of comfort, but of presence. Of people. Of shared survival. Of a home that never closed its doors.

Even as a child, he was learning something about humanity that life expands when it is shared.

A boy between books and belief

Kalenzi became an early reader. Newspapers, magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*, and novels his parents kept around the house. He read everything.

2016 FR KALENZI ORDAINED

Then one day, he picked up a Bible. Not out of devotion, but curiosity.

He read it the way he read everything else; from the beginning, without expectation. But somewhere along the way, it stopped behaving like an ordinary book. It began to ask something of him. He did not understand it at first. But it stayed.

After school, he would walk into a basilica in Nairobi and sit in silence, drawn less by doctrine than by stillness. A quiet habit formed around him before he had words for it.

When the family later returned to Uganda, he studied at Shimoni Demonstration School, then St Mary's College Kisubi. He made friends, lived the ordinary rhythms of school life, but something had already taken root beneath it all.

At some point, he began speaking about becoming a priest. His father was cautious. He wanted something different for his son first: education, work, experience of the world, before stepping away from it. So, Kalenzi followed that path.

London

He went to the University of Manchester. He trained as an accountant. He worked in London with KPMG. On paper, everything aligned perfectly.

He had entered a world that rewarded precision. Where progress was visible. Where success was structured and measurable.

But clarity on paper does not always translate to clarity in the mind.

The question that had followed him since childhood did not disappear. It simply became quieter, more persistent.

He began to explore other possibilities, visiting monasteries, considering enclosed religious life. But even there, something felt misaligned.

"I wanted to be in the world," he says. "Encountering people."

That sentence would eventually become the turning point.

The decision to leave

At 27, he made the break. He left his job. Stepped out of the professional track he had built. And entered the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, known for their intellectual rigour and active engagement with the world.

Formation began to stretch him in ways corporate life never had.

In Arusha, Tanzania, he entered novitiate, discipline, silence, and structure.

In Harare, Zimbabwe, he studied philosophy in the middle of an economic crisis where basic commodities disappeared from shops and survival became a daily negotiation.

Then he returned to Nairobi.

Not as a visitor this time, but as a Jesuit working in Kangemi, the very place where his childhood had begun.

The return was disorienting.

As a child, he had not fully understood the weight of that environment. As an adult, he could not ignore it.

Formed by many worlds

His journey continued outward again.

Paris, France, came next, five years studying theology, learning to think and speak faith in a new language. Then to Boston and Chicago, US, where his work shifted unexpectedly toward fundraising and institutional support for Jesuit missions in East Africa.

It was work that demanded the very skills he thought he had abandoned: analysis, structure, and financial reasoning.

The irony was not lost on him.

By the time he was ordained in 2016 at St Peter's Church in Nsambya, his life had passed through multiple geographies and identities, each one layering meaning onto the next.

He was no longer the man who left London. And yet, he was not someone else entirely.

Work becomes immediate

Today, Fr Kalenzi serves as Country Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Uganda.

The work is immediate, unrelenting.

Refugees arrive daily, some needing food, others shelter, medical care, education, or simply direction. In Kampala and in settlements across West Nile, the scale of need is vast and growing.

Resources, however, are shrinking.

The response has had to evolve: vocational training, education support, agricultural projects to supplement food aid, counselling for trauma that often has no language.

It is work that demands both structure and compassion, spreadsheets and human presence, planning and improvisation.

The accountant has not disappeared. He has simply found a different ledger.

THE IRONY OF RETURN

Looking back, Fr Kalenzi does not frame his life as a contradiction.

"I wanted to become a priest. I did," he says.

But there is another desire he still holds: to write. To tell stories. To make sense of the path that led him through burning books, structured careers, restless searching, and eventual return.

And perhaps the deepest irony of all is this:

The boy who once lived as a refugee in Kangemi now stands on the other side of displacement, not away from it, but within its long echo, helping others find stability in a world that rarely offers it.

And in doing so, he has found that the life he tried to leave behind never really left him.

It simply waited for him to recognise it in a different form.

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