

Fare-thee-well John baptist Kakubi, bishop of firsts

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KAMPALA. Rev John Baptist Kakubi, the Bishop Emeritus of Mbarara, is gone. He breathed his last on February 11 at Nsambya hospital.

He died due to kidney failure, according to the Catholic Church. He was buried at St Joseph's Vocational School Chapel on February 13, a school he founded about 35 years ago, according to his wish, which was granted by the Catholic Church in consultation with the Papal Nuncio.

Bishop Kakubi spent 20 years at the helm of Mbarara Archdiocese having been appointed by Pope Paul VI on June 26, 1969 and consecrated on August 1, 1969 at Kololo by the same pope during his first historic visit to Africa.

At the time, it was rare that someone ordained a priest on June 11, 1960 at the age of 30, would become a full diocesan bishop just nine years into priesthood! Only four other Ugandans have achieved such a feat; the Archbishop Emeritus of Tororo, His Grace James Odongo, the Bishop Emeritus of Hoima, Edward Albert Baharagata, late Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka of Rubaga, and late Bishop Adrian Kivumbi Ddungu of Masaka. All were appointed just under or slightly over nine years in priesthood and while in their 30s. Bishop John Baptist Kakubi was the 8th Ugandan in history to be appointed bishop. To-date, a total of 40 Ugandans have been appointed bishop. Little wonder then that the appointment as the new bishop of Mbarara was overwhelmed by his appointment as a Monsignor, who was at the time rector at

Kitabi Minor Seminary in Bushenyi. According to his biography, *Memoirs of a priestly and episcopal life*, a telegram from the Papal Nuncio headquarters in Nsambya was sent summoning him to Kampala. Arriving there, the Nuncio Archbishop Amerio Poggi broke the news of his appointment to succeed Bishop Jean Marie Ogez, who due to poor health had retired in October 1958.

According to the biography, Bishop Kakubi says: "I had prepared myself to refuse the appointment, which I did. After this refusal to take on the new appointment, the nuncio gave me three chances to make up my mind and sign the acceptance note. Twice, I refused. At the third time, he referred me to the promise I made at my priestly ordination, to obey the Pope by carrying out his apostolic work of shepherding God's people in Mbarara."

This was when Monsignor Kakubi changed his mind and signed the document accepting the "burden". He was so shaken and trembling that he even failed to drink

TRIBUTES TO THE BISHOP

The Christians paid glowing tribute to Bishop Kakubi while bidding him farewell on Saturday February 13 at Nyamitanga.

Mr Gervase Ndyababo, the Chairman of the Laity for Mbarara, Archdiocese, said the fallen Bishop was a model priest. "He lived a life a model priest lives. In his ways, in his sermons and in his works," Mr Ndyababo said.

"We deeply thank God for the grand gift he gave to us in Bishop Emeritus JB Kakubi and we celebrate his life. He was an exemplary and fantastic shepherd who put emphasis on education," said Dr Gaston Ampe, the chairman of the Archdiocese of Mbarara Development Association.

the soda the Catholic nun in his house offered him. The Monsignor spent the next two nights sleepless, waiting for the official announcement from Rome about his nomination as the new bishop of Mbarara. With the whole world watching pope Paul VI's first visit to Africa, Bishop Kakubi was ordained bishop with three other Ugandans: Serapio Magambo (Fort Portal), Barnabas Halem Imana (Kabale) and Edward Albert Baharagata (Hoima). Foreigners consecrated along with them, included the former Archbishop of Lusaka, Emmanuel Miringo and

retired Archbishop of Nairobi, Raphael Mwana Nzeki. Following the death of the Bishop emeritus of Kabale Barnabas Halem Imana early this year, this now leaves only Rt Rev Edward Albert Baharagata, Bishop Emeritus of Hoima as the only survivor among the Kololo consecrated Ugandan bishops.

As for Bishop John Baptist Kakubi, his appointment as the new bishop of Mbarara was so historic in that it marked the first time an African was seen in charge of a diocese in this part of Uganda.

Previously, Mbarara Diocese was part of the Rwenzori Vicariate that was created on March 28, 1934 covering the political districts of western Uganda namely Nkore, Kigezi, Toro and Bunyoro. With its main seat at Nyamitanga, Mbarara, the Rwenzori Vicariate assumed full status of a diocese in 1953 with the first bishop being Rt Rev Fax Lacoursiere, who was later succeeded by Jean Marie Ogez and finally to the joy of everyone by son of the soil, John Baptist Kakubi.

During his 20-year tenure as bishop, John Baptist Kakubi engineered many developmental projects in the diocese and nurtured a number of young men including the current Archbishop Paul Bakyenga whom he ordained priest at Mushanga Parish on July 11, 1971 before appointing him chaplain of Ntare School and later rector of Kitabi Seminary. It was again Bishop Kakubi that spotted the immense talents in this young priest (Bakyenga) and in 1974 sent him for further studies in the biblical institute of the prestigious Gregorian university in Rome for a Licentiate degree in sacred scripture.

Born September 23, 1929 at Burundama village in Rugaaga Sub-county, Mbarara District to Raphael Ziridamu and Kandida Kiremire, Kakubi

"His immense contribution towards God's Kingdom in Mbarara is invaluable. We are forever grateful for the thought to start St Joseph's Vocational School, which has nurtured some of the great leaders of our times and continues to do so for future leaders," said Ferdinand Katatumba, the chairman of St Joseph's Vocational School, Old Boys Association.

To Prof Tarsis Kabwegyere Bishop Kakubi did more than some politicians have done in building the country. "Building the country, people think is done by ministers, politicians. What this man did is far much than what ministers have done; the students that have come from St Joseph's are doctors and lawyers," he said.

was ordained priest on June 11, 1960. Bishop Kakubi was down to earth. In August 1997, he led a delegation of Ugandan youth to the world youth celebrations in Paris France, which I also attended. Despite his status and age, the good bishop freely interacted with everyone and used to share jokes with other members of the delegation, most of whom appeared to be his grand sons and daughters. I sat next to him during the British Midland flight from Heathrow Airport in London to Paris' Charles De Gaulle.

He freely chatted with me. In Paris and the northern city of Amiens where the Ugandan delegation toured, the bishop was part of the delegation and participated in all activities carried out. At the place where the first Catholic missionary, Rev Fr Lourdel Mopele (Mapeera) was born and baptised, members of the Ugandan delegation performed some tradition dances for the local people and at one moment, Bishop Kakubi joined them while performing the Kinyankore dance to the amusement of everyone around.

Humble servant

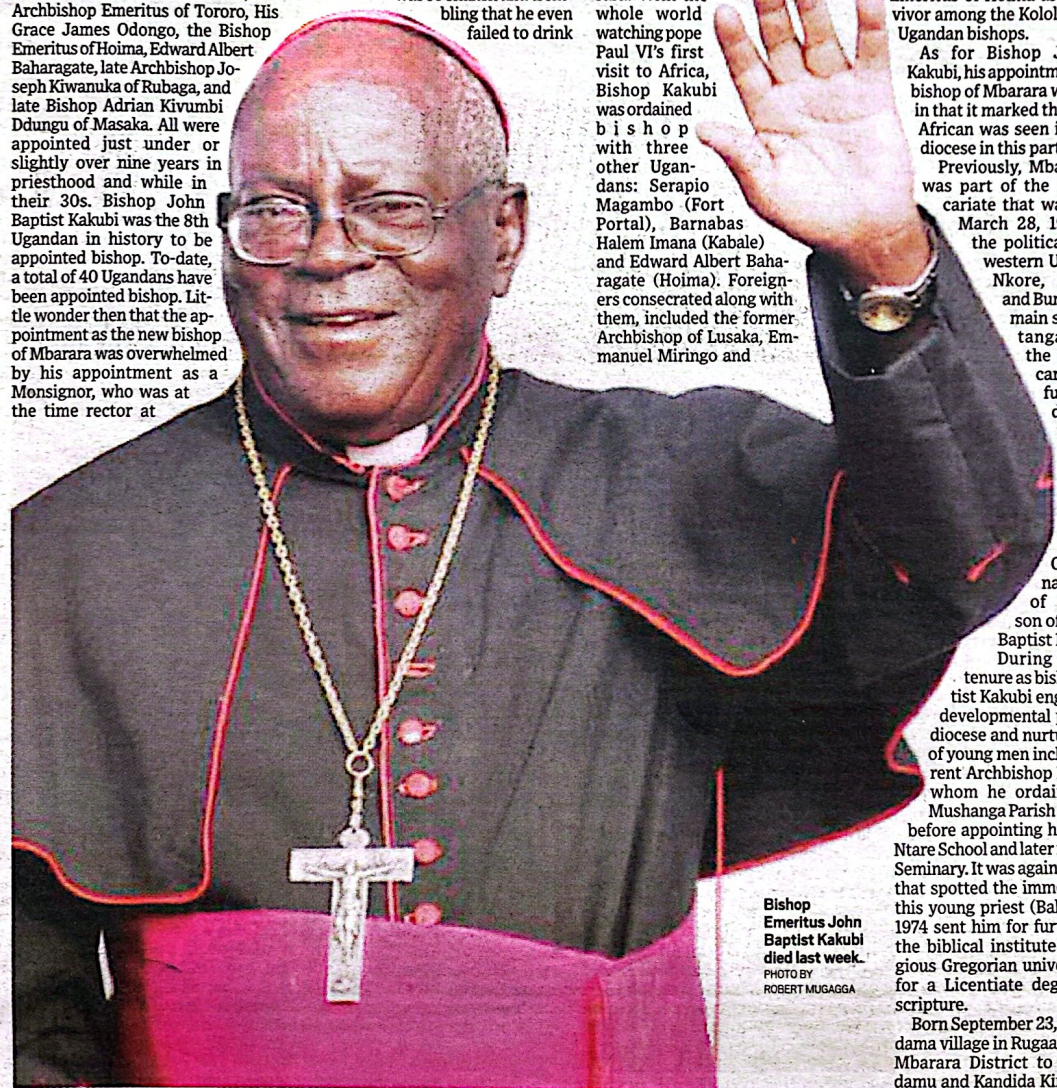
Bishop Kakubi was a simple man who wanted his work to talk rather than boasting. He sheltered Christians who were running away from wars and political persecution in 1970s and 1980s at the diocese.

Prof Peter Kasenene told the congregation that he loved his vocation. "What have we learnt from him is love for his calling, he was always praying. He would call a Father whenever he was not feeling fine," he said. He added: "As Christians, we all want to go to heaven; instead of mourning (his death), we should be happy."

Ambassador Ignatius Katete-girwe, a family friend and contemporary, said Bishop Kakubi ought to be declared a saint or given special recognition for his devotion to religious work and the achievements. "The small dose of religion in me was planted by Bishop Kakubi," he said.

He liked to celebrate and enjoy with people around him. Mr Katete-girwe said, "We used to dance entogoro (Ankole traditional dance) together."

Archbishop Bakyenga said: "He was good at slaughtering, he would play music; in the past he used drink; he would celebrate good things God had given him."



Bishop Emeritus John Baptist Kakubi died last week.
PHOTO BY ROBERT MUGAGGA