

Dear Friends

This year so far has proved to be a year of events at the mission. On January 6th my assistant priest, Fr. Nicholas Nkamba, was transferred to another mission. He had been with me for about two and a half years. I will miss his gentle, affable style, and especially I will miss him for the help he gave in the work of the mission. My schedule is somewhat busy these days, with a typical day starting with the Mass at the mission at 6.00 AM, then Mass at an outstation at 10.00 AM, followed by the third Mass at another outstation at 2.00 PM. Needless to say I rest well at night!

Because of this, and also due to having more and more commitments in the parish, I will not be able to make my usual visit to Europe this September. I usually have made this visit annually, partly in order to get the chance for fund raising. Please God next year I will get the chance for the visit. I am sorry that I will miss seeing all my friends and relatives this year, but we have to be realistic. I have agreed with the Bishop that in future I will only visit Europe every two years, and the trip will last approximately two months. Most expatriate priests, in fact, only take leave every three years, for a period of three months.

This is the year for the priests. Pope Benedict 16th declared a year for the priests, to run from June 2009 until June 2010. There have been saying extra prayers said all over the world during that time. It is ironic that during this special year I have lost my assistant priest due to a shortage here of priests! In the meantime another boy from our parish was accepted into the minor seminary this January, making it two so far in the last two years. I hope they will persevere. For our part, all the priests of Zimbabwe had a combined Mass at the most central part of country, Gweru, in the midlands, on April 27th. It was a two-day journey from here. 160 priests managed to attend, plus most of the bishops. It was a lovely celebration, and I met priests whom I had not seen for over 20 years. Priests were so touched by this first ever gathering of all the priests of Zimbabwe that we mutually agreed to repeat this event every three years.

It has also been a good year for rains. Usually our rainy season lasts two or three months, but this year it lasted six months. In fact in March, when the rains have usually finished, we had the highest rains and even the local Zambezi River burst its banks. It has not been so high in over 50 years. On the day it burst its banks we were called out to try to rescue a pump that was being used for a local irrigation scheme. It was slowly being submerged in the river, but by the time we got there it was completely covered in water, so we were unable to locate it. But by the time we tried to return to the mission the river had risen even higher, and our truck got stuck. I came with our little 4-wheel drive pick-up truck. I put it in 4-wheel drive, diff lock, low range, and then I put 10 adults in the back to get more grip. We were half under water as well, but with the traction we had, plus having a lot of people pushing the truck itself, we managed to pull it out! A great time was had by all, even if most of us ended up covered in mud!

On the side of politics there is a great deal of stagnation on the side of the government. There is supposed to be a nation-wide consultation to choose a new constitution, but there is a lack of good will on the side of the government, since the present constitution favours the perpetuation in power of the existing president and his party. Then there is supposed to be a new election next year, but it is not clear if there is the political will for that event either.

With the continuing moribund state of the economy there are growing health problems. This year, for example, there has been a widespread outbreak of scabies amongst children. This, they say, is partly due to the fact that one of the sects does not allow its members to have injections, so their children were not inoculated against the disease. I have just discovered one family with all 3 children having scabies. They have not been at school since last year since they could not afford to get the medication. One of the boys seems to be completely covered in the disease; I could hardly find any unaffected skin. We arranged to bring them all immediately to hospital.

The growing health problems are partly caused by a breakdown in the health facilities. Since 2000 many qualified personnel in all sectors of the economy have left Zimbabwe, and that includes all categories of health workers. It is estimated that around four

million have left the country in that time, or around one third of the population. All health facilities are understaffed, and in fact some clinics have had to close. The drugs are also in short supply. One result is that those who get cataracts usually go blind and stay blind. In the past eye doctors went regularly to most of the hospitals in Zimbabwe, so most of them were given operations and could then see. Whenever I hear of such a case I bring them to the nearest hospital where they can be treated- St. Luke's Hospital, 250Km away. This week we took 3 people. It is very expensive, but I cannot watch these people suffering from a blindness that can be cured. They are so happy to be able to see again, especially if they have already been blind for the last two or three years.

On the church side, we had a grace filled four days in early May, when the Bishop came to give the sacrament of Confirmation at four separate centres. Confirmation is the sacrament that strengthens the commitments first made at baptism, to help us face the challenges of adult life. We had about 250 youth and adults confirmed, and at one of the venues we had a new church blessed, St. Francis, at Sidinda, making 17 churches so far blessed amongst our 25 outstations. During the Bishop's visit he also blessed the new priest's house at the mission. It is 4-bedroomed, and took over two years to build.

On the building side we still find ourselves occupied. We are continuing to build two new schools, and 5 new dams, plus 2 more churches are on the go. The big irrigation dam continues to grow, and when the rains came this year a huge lake formed. Please God; if we can get enough funds it will one day be useful as an irrigation dam. We have just finished helping to build a new hall and dormitory block for the local sisters. These buildings are situated at Dete, about 75 Km from Hwange. In December last year the Bishop blessed the new hall. Now we have started building them a new convent at Binga Mission. Binga is situated on Lake Kariba, about 210 Km from Hwange. Lake Kariba is one of the largest man-made lakes in Africa, being several hundred kilometres long. We are also trying to do something about the decaying buildings that house our health facilities. This month we started working at the local mission hospital of St. Patrick's in Hwange Town. We are renovating the entrance and altering the waiting room.

The work on renovating the church at Mashala goes on. This was the church that was burnt down by a lightning strike in 2008. It seems to be taking longer to repair it than it took to build it in the first place! The roof is now finished and much of the inside work is done, though we are still repairing the benches. I had no budget for repairing churches that happen to burn down, so this incident has hit my pocket somewhat. I thank God for some well-wishers from Spain who sent funds to help buy the new roof.

Speaking of funds we seem to be always short of them these days! I find myself praying often to Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She managed to build several hundred convents in her lifetime, most of them in towns and cities, and all without a cent in her pocket. She just trusted in Divine Providence. With our shortfall in funds we have not managed to buy any newer vehicles, but we have recently employed a new mechanic, who is better qualified. He seems to be able to keep the vehicles on the road, even though our truck is now 17 years old. With his help we have put stronger springs on it, so hopefully we won't be plagued any more with the constant occurrence of the springs breaking on our poor roads.

The other day I was listening to an interview on the radio, and they were talking about the pace of development of ways of communicating. They explained that one third of the world's population are now using the Internet, and two thirds of the population are having mobile phones. But as I listened I thought, 'hang on a minute, it is not quite the same story in some parts of the world'. In 2005 a fault caused the landlines in our area to be cut off, and the authorities have not yet got round to repairing them. You have to learn patience out here. There also happens to be no network in our area, so we can forget about the mobile phones and Internet also. There has also been somewhat of a crisis with the postal services, particular thanks to politics. About 10 years ago most of the existing employees were fired and young party activists were recruited to take their places. Letters and parcels do still get through, but they can take a while, ranging from a few weeks to a few months.

This radio announcement got me thinking about how the world is leaving Africa behind, but just then a Chinese man knocked on my door and came in to ask if I could help

supply him with building materials to build a booster station for the mobile phones, just 2 Km from the mission! Within a week the foundations were being dug, and please God in a month or two we will have network in this area, with the possibility of getting onto the Internet. Life is full of surprises! Let us thank God for what we get in life- when we go without things it makes us appreciate more the gifts of life. In the meantime, please be patient if you e-mail me, I get the chance to answer e-mails once or twice a month, whenever I am in town.

Sunday 23rd May proved to be a somewhat unusual day. We celebrated the feast of Pentecost, remembering the day when the Holy Spirit came down on the members of the early Church. After the service at the mission we headed off for a second Mass at St. Mary's on the Lake outstation at Musuna Boatel, a resort village situated on the lower reaches of Lake Kariba. The lake is at the highest level it has been for around 50 years, so most of the parishioners had to come to church by boat. The resort village has been cut off by rising waters, which have also flooded a number of the houses.

Please pray for us priests here in the missions. It is a fulfilling and grace filled life, but we can feel somewhat daunting at times when we see all the needs, both spiritual and physical.

*May God bless you,
Fr. Tim Peacock*