

Dear ...Friends

Writing from a cold Zimbabwe, where we are having the coldest winter on record. I see many parts of the northern hemisphere are having heat waves or heavy flooding, including in my native British Isles. The predictions that global warming will cause extremes of weather seem to be true this year.

Zimbabweans have a way of surviving, in spite of the economic challenges. In my last newsletter I mentioned that the value of the local currency had fallen from being on a par with the US dollar just 2 years ago to about 30% of its value; now, just six months later, it is only worth 10% of the US dollar. Wages, however, have remained fairly stagnant, so the standard of living is declining rapidly, with many having to cut back on basic commodities, such as food. The biggest challenge is with fuel and electricity. This might explain why so many businesses and factories have closed down. As a way of survival there has been a resurgence both of selling local produce - since there is a scarcity of foreign currency to import goods - and in doing barter trade. Also people are travelling less, often sleeping at their workplace during the weekdays to avoid the cost of transport.

Meanwhile life goes on at our mission, even if there are more of the poor at our doors these days. Last December (2018) we had a 4-day course for catechumens, who were making their final preparation for baptism (attached photo No. 1). We do this course every December, and usually it results in around 50 baptisms. The theme for the Catholic Church chosen by the Pope this year is 'baptized and sent'. This means he wants us to promote both baptism and evangelisation.

On 2nd January 2019 I went with many of the priests from our diocese, including Bishop Albert Serrano, into neighbouring Zambia to attend the funeral of the father, Lawrence Godwin, of my assistant priest Fr. Stanislaus Lumano (No. 2). Most of the priests in the picture, taken outside the cathedral of Livingston, were our own priests. Lawrence and his wife had led an exemplary life, and three of their children are now priests.

The annual rainy season, which ended in February, was again rather poor, but at least we got something. This picture shows the cattle enjoying a drink at one of our dams (No. 3). Most of the dams only got about half full, such as Dundu Dam at Nkandebwe Hills (No. 4). Some food aid is being given out by the government, but it is spasmodic and many do not get any assistance at all. To do my part in helping as many as possible I am buying raw grain wherever I can, since it is much cheaper that way, and we have our own grinding mill, where the grain can be ground. The other day I was travelling on the road and found a boy lying beside the road with his bicycle beside him. We stopped to see what had happened and he told us he was too weak from hunger to carry on. We put the bike in back of our pick-up truck and took him to the outstation where I was to say Mass. The women prepared him a meal and he went on his way.

As I had forecast in my last newsletter of December 2018, our seminarian Lashiwe Muzamba, was finally ordained a priest on 1st February, at St. Ignatius Cathedral in Hwange. The next day he celebrated his first Mass at our mission of St. John's (No. 5). On the left of the photo is Fr. Albert Mudenda, then comes Fr. Lashiwe and on the right is Fr. Christopher Sibanda; all three priests are from our parish. Parishioners had flocked from all sides for the occasion, and afterwards there were various celebrations. No. 6 shows our girls singing with Fr. Christopher showing off his talents as a conductor!

On the building side there is good progress on our big dam at Katete, which is being built to serve the nearby new primary and secondary schools. No. 7 shows the dam as at 26th February, and No. 8 shows the dam as it was on 26th July. We are so grateful for the help of the Irish Charity "Zimbabwe Rural Development Trust" that helps construct these dams.

One of our projects, which I mentioned in my last newsletter, the On-call accommodation for staff at St. Patrick's Catholic Hospital in Hwange, was completed earlier this year, as the picture (No. 9) shows. It consists of three buildings, which can accommodate four men and four women. This should alleviate the challenge of treating patients who need emergency treatment at night, such as might occur with car accidents. Up until now, whenever there is an emergency at night the hospital bus has to rush around the townships collecting the staff. This can take one or two hours, which of course is very unsatisfactory.

On 13th July there was yet again another ordination in our diocese, this time to the diaconate. It was Simelinkosi Masango, and was held at Mzola 55, an outstation of Jotcholo Mission (No. 10). These places

are about 200 Km from my mission, about half way between Hwange and Bulawayo. It was a simple ceremony, very much in a rural setting, but well organised. Almost every priest in the diocese had made the effort to get there, in spite of the challenge to find fuel.

Near Mzola 55 is another outstation, Tshongokwe, which is about 13 Km from the main mission of Jotcholo, I was asked in 2014 to help design a new Catholic hospital for the place. A congregation of sisters, the Daughters of Calvary, were offered the land there and already they have built a convent after fundraising. A certain contractor has commenced building the new hospital (No. 11), but for the time being I have been asked to take over. We have just started building the paediatric ward (No. 12).

Moving on to the subject of building schools, there is finally good progress with the first classroom block for a new secondary school at Katete (No. 13). The photo shows the builders have reached the top of the four gables. I say finally because there have been repeated problems getting building materials, plus we have had many challenges with our trucks, which suffer a lot not only from the very poor roads but also from the fuel shortages. There are problems also in finding spares, but in the end we always seem to find them. It is a triple classroom block. What is challenging us now is the roofing timbers. Due to mismanagement of the forests it is hard to find timber in Zimbabwe now, but finally we managed to get a supply from Mutare, about 1,200 km from Hwange. This project is being sponsored by an ex classmate of mine in Ireland, assisted by several other classmates (all priests).

Another school project which is at last beginning to progress well is the triple classroom block that we are building at Nechishala Secondary School (No. 14). This is sponsored by retired priest Fr. Alexander Alapont, who worked many years as my predecessor at the mission. He is over 85 now, living in Spain but still busy fundraising with a group of well-wishers.

Weddings are getting fewer and fewer these days, partly because of the economic challenges, but also partly due to a community that is less and less settled. Many of the old traditions have been swept away by the younger generation and people are less settled than their parents; in turn the parents also being less settled than their own parents. Hence it was good to see the wedding of Gift and Tendai on 27th July 2019 at our mission church (No. 15). The church was packed with about 500 attending.

I don't know if I have ever posted a picture of me just on my own, so I hope you won't mind me slipping in the last picture of me sitting on the steps of Milondo Dam, at Nkandebwe Hills. A local NGO has recently built a cattle dip tank nearby, which will help the community very much, since up until now the cattle have had to be taken down the mountain to another dip tank for dipping. A number have perished on the way, especially since they can easily fall and break a leg. The dip tank was made possible by the building of this dam. More about the dip tank in the next letter, when hopefully the project will have been completed.

My sister Sue is looking for new Trustees for our charity 'Children and Families in Need in Zimbabwe' (CFNZ), which helps with day to day running of the mission and sponsorship for children. If you would like more information, and are a UK resident, please contact her. There is no financial commitment, only 3 meetings a year on Skype .

I will be on leave this year from September until November so more again about that when I next write in December.

Meanwhile may God bless you all, and I thank all those who assist either by their prayers or their donations, or even both!

Fr Tim