

Paradise Revisited

Did you ever have the experience of feeling SO FULL -- with meaning, with experiences, with LIFE -- that words were far too inadequate to express what you wanted to communicate, and you fell silent? That's what I've been feeling for the last 30 minutes, sitting in front of Fr. Owen's computer here in our sister parish of Namitembo, recounting these last 10 days, sifting through the experiences, straining to communicate.

There have been people, good people... I loved Mr. and Mrs. Kalawa, teachers in the high school at Namitembo, leaders in the parish community, with two children of their own -- the younger, a girl, just finished her "Form 2" exams (finishing sophomore year); the elder, a boy, just graduated from Namitembo high school, waiting and hoping to get in to our Trade School, as soon as it opens. I sat with them for most of the morning, asking them about education, the future, the children of Namitembo and the challenges the two of them face in teaching (#1? Poverty -- the many ways it undermines the ability of young people to stay in school, to keep at it). I appreciated the dedication and service of Mr. Maida, the outgoing principal of the grade school (and father of four), who has been struggling with the parents of the school for the last couple of years, trying to get them to mold bricks so that needed improvements to the school could be made. I asked him to name 2-3 successes he experienced ... and he humbly named the success of getting a particular young girl to stay in school, rather than leave to get married, and how this affected her sisters, and her entire family. I so admired Mr. Rex Chapeta, the new Administrator of the Trade School -- not just for his professionalism but for the vision he has for the job. (He's a good man for the job -- I'll write more about his background when I get back, and post it on our web site -- along with more details of our trip.) In his hiring interview he was asked why he wanted the job. His answer? He likes a worthy, meaningful challenge!

There has been the incredible beauty of Malawi. Joan had heard me talk about it before, but seeing is really believing, again and again. Last Thursday evening we were treated to an incredible sunset over Lake Malombe and the Shire River ... a huge red sun, breaking through the clouds just above the water, radiating golden lines in a huge arc through the clouds, with the mountains off to the side, and a deep reflected red in the waters, silently commanding our rapt attention. There was the strength and grace of the wildlife -- from the elephant patiently feeding on the tree outside our tent (no kidding!!!) in the wee hours of the night last Friday (I was too stunned to be scared!), to the deliberate dive of a kingfisher as it sought its morning meal on the river. There were the mountains; not chains of peaks, covered with pines, like ours, but rugged rocks, here and there on the landscape, as if artfully placed by a thoughtful Creator. And today, driving south of Blantyre, there were green hillsides planted with tea, carefully cultivated, creating a landscape deep, lush, and rich with color.

And there was a certain human drama that we were invited to witness, in different forms and in different faces, much different from ours in Seattle, but one that we could recognize and appreciate. On Monday we met with volunteers who cared for HIV/AIDS patients in a Home Based

Care program sponsored by Catholic Relief Services. (Of course, they weren't called that -- the stigma of the disease is even more severe here than in the States -- they were called "chronically ill.") They spoke eloquently of tending young men and women, struck down in the prime of life; helping with simple chores, providing the basic care of washing or feeding them, helping arrange for the care of their children or the working of their fields - and sometimes ultimately helping with their burial. Today we met with around 50 people in a CRS-sponsored Justice and Peace initiative -- representatives of different churches, including pastors, with traditional community leaders as well (village chiefs) -- as they recounted their efforts to build their communities around justice ... intervening when social codes disenfranchised a widow and her children, for instance, or to protect her from a cultural tradition that might "give her" to her deceased husband's brother or other relative ... or when a landowner wanted to evict a teacher from his promised housing without due cause ... or to fairly deal with a dispute. These are communities without resources, without minimal "safety nets" or welfare systems, without real protections of law and due process that we take for granted -- people who depend on one another in a most basic way.

And of course, there is the obvious poverty, nearly everywhere one goes. It is part and parcel of life here, along with the ever-present vulnerability associated with that ... "life on the edge," always.

Fr. Owen is his usual good-humored self. He is in good health, and has taken care of us very well. He has been our chauffer, our tour guide, our translator, and our designated negotiator (read "haggler") of last resort in the marketplace. He assures me that St. Bridget visitors are MOST WELCOME anytime; and to prove it, he just finished, before our arrival, the construction of a new three-bedroom block -- with hot water! -- just a few steps from the Rectory. He calls it the "St. Bridget Suite." We must all take him up on it! I have also managed to hook up with Fr. Raphael, and the two of them wanted me to send their best wishes to all of their Seattle friends.

We also spent some time with Owen's new bishop, Thomas Msusa, from Owen's Montfort order, and a former student of Owen's from seminary days. Bishop Msusa is very supportive of the Trade School at Namitembo, and has recently commissioned a diocesan Board to direct and support the project. He also supports Owen very well, and has just named another priest, a native diocesan priest named Fr. Philip, to assist Owen in Namitembo beginning in October. In fact, I'm bringing back a "chief's chair" from him, as a gift to our own Archbishop, thanking him as one bishop to another, for the work that St. Bridget has been doing in his diocese.

That's it for now. Tomorrow Joan, Janice, and I head for Nairobi, to spend two days seeing what CRS is doing there. I don't expect the beauty of Malawi, but do expect a more urban version of African poverty. By the time you read this, I'll be crossing Canada on the way home (Saturday) or with you already on Sunday morning. Either way -- I'll be tired but happy.

More to come -- you can count on that!
Denny Duffell, Pastoral Administrator

