

***Jambo*** from Africa, everyone!

I write this note while sitting on the side of a dirt road in Kenya, watching the sun head for the horizon. Mike Foy, Marilyn Price, my son John and I are among the 12 Seattle pilgrims on an immersion trip to Africa, organized by Catholic Relief Services.

To date our group has been three days in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania; 3 days in Nairobi, Kenya; and two days so far in Mombasa, Kenya, on the coast of the Indian Ocean. Today's trip took us to the remote village of Bomba, 2 1/2 hours out of Mombasa (and 10 kilometers from any regular water source). And the reason I'm sitting by the road? One of our vans lost its clutch; and in turning to assist, the other van has gotten a flat tire! Fortunately, we had finished for the day, and were headed back to Mombasa when we all got this unexpected break. I just hope the Archbishop understands if we show up late for our scheduled dinner tonight.

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No description I can give would do justice to our experience here. By way of illustration... I could show our pictures of the Kibera slums -- largest in Africa, twice the population of Seattle, squeezed into a few hundred acres of hard land. But our photos would fail to communicate feeling rudderless amidst a close, chaotic sea of humanity, rolling to and fro, up and down upon endless rocky, dusty pathways -- or the noxious odors of open sewers, mixed with the appealing smells of a simple dinner cooking next to the path, the small charcoal fire stinging your eyes with smoke -- or the sound of a hundred conversations in different languages, mixed with the wordless sounds of an old woman's stare and the musical voices of small children asking "How are you, how are you?"

No, a great photographic artist would need to capture these images, with a timeless eye; and words better than mine should describe this visit.

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We have met with experts. Tanzanian business leaders, trying to lift their country's economy; African Catholic professionals (accountants, professors, lawyers, doctors/nurses) who gather regularly to share their faith and a sense of direction; the US Ambassador, who officially represents us; the country head of USAID, in charge of our national relief and development efforts; and individuals such as a marvelous, articulate African woman, newly appointed Deputy Secretary to the United Nations.

Since Nairobi is also the headquarters for all of East Africa, many of our expert consultants are from Catholic Relief Services. We listened to the leader of the CRS Emergency Response Team, who organizes logistics for the international Catholic response to catastrophic disasters that inevitably afflict hundreds of thousands around the globe: the tsunami, the earthquake in Pakistan, or flooding caused by hurricanes. We met with the CRS Director of Microfinance, who explained the differing strategies being used to offer the poor footholds out of poverty. We talked with the regional head of Agro-Enterprise, who described the complexities of providing food assistance and aid to small farmers while trying to

build local markets. And -- especially germane to Africa -- we met again and again with leaders and those in the field, who are grappling with the vast human suffering caused in so many different ways by HIV/AIDS.

We have met many faces of the African Church, from Most Reverend Boniface Lele, Archbishop of Mombasa, to Fr. Michael Czerny, head of the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN), to so many pastors, sisters, and lay men and women who give their lives for others. We have sung hymns and shared Eucharist in a church in the slums; we have visited Catholic works in schools, field projects, health clinics and at a hospital. We have gathered repeatedly in prayer with small Christian communities, who extend the faith and worship of the parish community out into the neighborhoods and villages. And we have walked along with our lay Catholic brothers and sisters as they visited those in need, in small, crowded homes: those sick and suffering from AIDS, or children orphaned by AIDS and cared for by relatives -- usually a grandmother -- who themselves are with little resources, even food.

Everywhere the need is great and the resources stretched thin, but repeatedly we experience a vibrant love, passion, and hope. And we are welcomed as friends.

I pray that we will all return as changed people.

I pray that this change goes deep within our being, individually and collectively, that it will form and transform who we are.

And I ask for your prayers for the work of CRS, and for the grace that we may all become instruments of the Holy Spirit in remaking the face of the earth.

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We are truly on sensory overload, physically and spiritually! And now, we head for Namitembo!

*Until next time....*

Peace and Blessings,  
Deacon Denny, 6/29/06