

Live, from Namitembo Parish

It's only Tuesday afternoon (8/3/2004) as I write this from our sister parish, on the other side of the world; but it feels a bit like we've been here for weeks. Not that the time has dragged at all -- far from it! It's just been very intense and stimulating. In fact, I've had trouble getting enough sleep, as I've awakened repeatedly in the middle of the night, with all kinds of fresh thoughts and images bouncing around inside, along with crazy ideas and unanswered questions.

I thought that a fitting way to begin telling this story would be to describe Sunday's great 50th Jubilee Celebration, with a few comments as I go along...

Even feeling dead tired from jet lag, it was without a doubt the most joyous and spiritual celebration I have ever been to ... and the *longest*. It lasted *six hours*. There were a dozen priests, two bishops, 15 sisters, nine of us from Seattle, and around 5000 people in all. Fr. Owen moved the celebration outdoors, constructing a raised platform (with a roof) for the altar. "Friends of Namitembo" chapters, from Zomba, Blantyre, Lilongwe and other places, made elaborate preparations for the Mass, including even a radio hookup, to broadcast the Mass to listeners all throughout the region!

The opening gathering and procession took about 45 minutes itself, with music and rhythmic dancing winding its way toward the altar. The principal celebrant was newly consecrated Bishop Thomas Msusa; and two special honorees were present, a priest and sister, both from Namitembo, to celebrate their own 25th anniversary jubilees. A history of Namitembo was then read (I've requested an English copy, to bring home), and the proper of the Mass began.

There must have been 30 different songs during the Mass, sung whenever a good reason could be found to accentuate something. My favorite was the Gloria, which really stood out as a song of glory. It embodied an unrestrained joy; one needed only to look at the faces of the dancers, raised to the heavens, to know that they were singing, "You alone are holy, you alone are Lord, you alone are MOST HIGH!" The Bible was then brought to the altar for the Liturgy of the Word -- again with song and a processional dance -- in a food basket, held aloft on the head of the central dancer...symbolizing the fact that we were all about to be fed, with the Word of God. After the readings, followed by the bishop's homily, there was the customary collection -- including tomatoes or carrots, perhaps head of cabbage or a chicken. This particular collection was the biggest (monetary) collection in the history of the parish -- about \$80.00! The two jubilarians were then called forward for a recommitment ceremony, featuring a candle lighting and blessing. Representatives from the parish then came forward (always with song and dance), to present gifts.

And there was still more. Representatives from all of the 70+ small Christian communities in Namitembo were called forward and given candles, lighted from the "50th Jubilee Candle," in a commissioning service -- accompanied, of course, by a "sending song" (something like "Here I Am, Lord," except with a different melody and in Chechewa).

Eventually we got to the Offertory, followed by the familiar parts of Mass that Christians everywhere recognize, even in a foreign language. It was of course a high Mass, with incense, and with the bishop intoning the formal parts of the Mass. We finally arrived at Communion (bread only), with the priests dispersing throughout the crowd to distribute the Eucharist (there are no Eucharistic Ministers in Malawi, something we take for granted here). After Communion, Elders of the parish -- founding members from 50 years ago -- were called forward, to receive special certificates.

Finally, there was time set aside for speeches. I was called forward, and in St. Bridget's name, I told everyone how pleased we travelers were to be there, and that we had traveled over 18,000 kilometers for three reasons:

"First, we have come to honor you. You are our sister parish -- in fact, our elder sister, for we are only 36 years old, and you are now 50. As our elder sister, you know things that we have never known, and must be the wiser sister."

"Second, we have come to celebrate with you. There is no doubt that our sister parish of Namitembo knows how to celebrate! You are so joyous, so happy, and so full of life, so full of the Holy Spirit. It is a delight for us to be here for this celebration."

"Third, we have come to learn from you. People in other lands often think that because people in America *have things*, they "know things." But this is not true! For instance, my people would usually believe that any Mass longer than one hour would have to be tiring! But this celebration today has already lasted over 5 hours, and it is still full of energy and life. (much laughter) There are so many things we can learn from you that would enrich our lives -- about your homes, your families, your lives, and your rich faith -- and why you are such a warm people. What I hope is to be able to go home and tell my people the stories of our sister parish -- and that you will take the time to share with us who you are, how you live, and what you live for. If we can go back to Seattle and tell those stories ... then we will always be sisters to one another. Thank you for welcoming us so well."

The Mass concluded soon afterwards -- again, with song and a recessional dance. The whole assembly gradually moved a few hundred yards over to the Community Center (built several years ago by St. Bridget), for a great feast. The kitchen crews had been working for days -- several goats had been slaughtered and chickens killed, the meat cleaned and prepared, along with rice, potatoes, traditional nsima (a maize dish), a wide variety of vegetables -- and three large Jubilee cakes. The feast did not last for more than an hour and a half or two, though -- with nightfall coming not long after 5 p.m., people needed to soon leave for home. No streetlights in Namitembo!

I wish I had sufficient space here to describe the liturgies on the next two days. On Monday we all went to celebrate with one of Namitembo's small Christian communities, which meet weekly for prayer, and Mass when a priest is available. Five of us visited the community that has named itself "St.Bridget" -- and were brought to the point of tears, from the simple love and beauty of that community. They have written us a letter, which I will share when I return to Seattle, and I hope that I can faithfully communicate that experience. On Tuesday three of us attended morning Mass at the main church in Namitembo -- simple, reverent, and melodious -- and many of us again went out to the small communities, for three weddings and a baptism. Such a rich experience!

We've held meetings on our current project, the Agricultural and Trade School, but I will save that topic for my return. Next week I'll say a few words about some of the individual people we have met, and some of our more personal experiences. Until then, tsalani bwino, akudaletseni Mulungu (stay well, and God bless you).

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