

News from Namitembo, II

I'm happy to report that we're still well and kicking here in Namitembo. The Mallahans left last Friday, and today (the 13th) Mr. Foy begins his trip home, but my son John and I will stay for a few more days. This week we visited the Liwonde Game Park, and I'm quite sure that Mr. Foy will be most happy to share a few stories and pictures of the visit. Make sure he tells you about the hippo that dashed in front of us one evening and went right through a fence! Last night we stayed at a hotel along Lake Malawi, an easy drive from the airport, and arose to watch a beautiful sunrise over the lake.

In this brief note I'd like to describe our experiences with what forms the backbone for strength and vitality of the Church here in Malawi. It is an essential element of the African Church, and it is particularly evident here in Namitembo. I have touched on this reality in previous years, but we have had a much better opportunity to observe and share in this experience on this visit. This secret strength is the small Christian community, the "neighborhood Church," and we have nothing like it in our American Church experience.

In our American Church one might say that we have experience, in general, of three levels of Church: the universal Church (the pope and the Roman curia); the diocese or archdiocese (our bishop or archbishop, responsible for the growth and development of the faith within large regions; we support this level in Seattle through the Annual Catholic Appeal and other efforts); and the parish (we are all familiar with our own activities here at St. Bridget). One could even add to that list a fourth level, which we seldom consciously focus on: the domestic Church, which is our own faith experience within our lives as a family.

The neighborhood Church is another level, a potentially vibrant and vital level. In many parts of the world it has grown very strong partly by necessity. This is the case especially in third-world circumstances, where there are large numbers of Catholics, little availability of transportation, and a shortage of priests (for about 10,000 Catholics here at Namitembo, there are three priests, one of whom is 91 years old!). This neighborhood Church is obviously not a reality in the United States. It is not even one we can easily imagine without experiencing it directly; but it forms the backbone of the Church in Africa and other places.

The structure of Namitembo parish consists of a main church and seven "outchurches," which are smaller stations spaced around the geographic area, each visited by one of the priests for Sunday Mass at least once a month. This structure is similar to our notion of a parish, especially of parishes that have "mission churches" attached to them (there are several such parishes with missions within the Seattle Archdiocese). Namitembo, however, as with virtually all parishes in Malawi, and indeed all parishes that we have visited thus far in Africa, is also divided into small Christian communities -- 74 of them. These communities consist of Catholics from one village or from a couple of neighboring villages; and they together meet weekly, usually rotating their meeting place within the community area according to an agreed schedule.

Usually, of course, they do not have Mass when they meet, since there are far too many of them; but the priests do make it around to each of them over time. The

communities each have their own elected local leadership, men and women who are trained by the priests. The communities are also supported by full-time catechists, who themselves receive training and are commissioned by the diocese (this is in some ways similar to the diaconate, which most of Africa does not have). The communities begin with a gathering prayer of some kind, asking for God's presence and inspiration, followed by song. This is followed by a "Liturgy of the Word" type of experience that forms the center of the community's worship/prayer.

This Liturgy of the Word begins with a reading from scripture, most frequently the previous Sunday's gospel. After the reading, there are few moments of prayerful silence. The reading is then read aloud again, followed by another period of silence. After this, any of those attending are invited to share a word or a phrase from that scripture that seemed to speak to their heart. The community then repeats that word or phrase together, three times. There is another period of silence; and another person may give a word or phrase, which is then again repeated by everyone in the community. This continues until everyone has had the opportunity to give voice to their experience of the scripture. Usually six or seven out of a group of 20-60 individuals might do this.

Then each of those individuals who voiced a word or a phrase begins to explain how that scripture spoke to their hearts. It is NOT a homily, but a short explanation of what it mean personally, how God is calling the person to act this day or this coming week; it is a shared experience of how God touches the personal heart.

Following this sharing, the scripture is read one final time. This is followed again by song, after which the community then offers individual prayer intentions -- much like our "Prayers of the Faithful," opened to the community. This is followed by the Lord's Prayer an exchange of a greeting of peace, and a closing song.

After this, the community has an offering and a "business session." This is a time when THE COMMUNITY ACTS TOGETHER. The communal prayer has set the stage – and now they review what needs to be done. Someone might tell about a neighbor who is sick or in need; there might be a situation with one or more of the young people, or a situation about a woman whose husband has left her. The community then decides how it can respond to those needs. At one community gathering I attended, there was a wedding coming up the next week, and the community helped plan the celebration. At another meeting it was noted that many of the men of the community were not attending the gatherings, and they decided how to encourage them (it was decided that those men who were attending should take the lead in inviting the other men, but that their wives should first tell their husbands that this had been discussed by the group, and ask them to come).

I was really impressed – we all were. I told each of those communities that I thought we at St. Bridget could learn a great deal from their example! It is not something that can develop easily within our busy, mobile, individualistic Western culture, but wouldn't it be great if we all had that sense of care and involvement in the lives of those around us?

I'll write again next week! Pray for us in our travels, and know that everyone in Namitembo is praying for us at St. Bridget.

Deacon Denny Duffell, from Malawi, 7/13/06