

## Eighteen Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Good morning to you. It's a delight and privilege to be back here with you, and to share a few words with you. I've missed you! My last appearance at this Mass was June 18 – that was a month and a half ago. I know you won't believe me when I say I've been working nearly all that time! Of course, I'm sure most of you know that I was in Malawi for about a month, with seven of our teens and four other adults. Last Sunday after each Mass, lots of people asked why I didn't say anything about Namitembo and our sister parish...well, it wasn't my "turn," but I'll make up for that briefly today.

There's no way that I can capture that trip in a few minutes, and I'm very sure you don't want me to give a 45 minute homily -- like Fr. Phillip did at one of the Masses that our some of our youth attended in Malawi. And I'm equally sure you might have a hard time staying alert if we had a 4½ hour Mass, like the Corpus Christi Masses we attended, with a special procession at the end of Mass. Or like what they call their "Paper Sunday" Mass, so-called because they have a special collection for seminarians, and every group in the parish, with all their members, dances up to the front of the church and puts something in the collection basket – the point is to put not coins but paper currency in the basket. That Sunday I went to an outchurch that has one of their own members as a seminarian, and fortunately he happened to be at that Mass. And so that Mass was especially joyous -- and proud, too -- and the dancing went on and on and on. Now, you should know that from all the people at that church, and from all of the 7 outchurches, the combined collection was about 150,000 kwacha, which was the largest collection in the history of the parish, and probably the largest collection at any rural church in Malawi that weekend. That actually is a lot of money for them; but you should know that this record collection totaled about \$750. That's less than a third of what any one of us travelers spent for the plane ticket to go and visit Namitembo.

Well, what can I say? Perhaps I should tell you of the differences I have seen in the nine years since I first visited there. The first thing is the increased access to electricity. Most people don't have electricity, or running water either, especially people in a rural area like Namitembo. But you see it in more places; at the schools located at Namitembo, or in the teachers' housing that we're helped build, and in a few other places. In fact, for a few kwacha, you can often get to watch a movie or television show that somebody is showing. This means that Malawians can now see hear about the outside world, how other people dress, and what their homes and cities are like. They all know who Obama is, and not surprisingly, most people love him. They're aware of China, and they're very aware of the wider Moslem world, much more so than we are, in fact, perhaps because many of their neighbors are Moslem.

Another huge change is the telephone. Fr. Owen once told me that my voice was the first voice heard from America to Namitembo, back in the late 90's, when the mission first got telephone access. But today, telephones are common. Why? Because you don't need wires anymore, you don't need an infrastructure – just cell towers! Again, though most people can't afford a phone – most people have access to a phone, through somebody that does have one. That communication change is HUGE.

But the biggest change in the Namitembo area, in my mind, is one that we have helped to bring about. It's education. There are elementary schools for each of the outchurches in Namitembo. We first helped build teacher housing, to attract the teachers. Then we helped build classrooms, where once the children had gathered for class under the trees. And when I visited in 2002, the one and only high school in the areas was Namitembo secondary school, and it had 18 students, only two girls. Today, because we've helped expand it, the Namitembo secondary school buildings offers 5 to 10 times the classroom area, and six teachers' houses; and there are over 300 students enrolled, a high percentage of them young women. And even better than that, in another, more remote part of the parish, where in 2002 there was only an overgrown field, there are three large classroom blocks, along with a large hall called the Mike Foy Hall, along with teacher housing; and there are now 200 students attending that high school.

But the crown jewel of the educational effort, is the Namitembo Trade and Agriculture School, which we've been talking about for the last few years. In 2002 it was only a topic of conversation between a few people. Today it is surely the most extensive and beautiful complex that you will find in rural Malawi. There's no way I can adequately communicate this to you, standing right here, so I'm going to move right down there [to the center of the main aisle].

*[Here my remarks were extemporaneous. First I commented that our whole church and hall, and the parish offices that surround them would all fit comfortably in the courtyard of the Trade School! Behind me, "around NE 50<sup>th</sup> St," was the Administrative block...with a library, Administrator's office, a space for a secretary, for the Deputy Administrator, and a large faculty room, with a couple of computers. Then to my right, "along 50<sup>th</sup> Ave NE," was a Tailoring classroom, with about 15 sewing machines, powered by a foot pedals, and next to it the Business Center, with a copier and a couple of more computers connected to the internet via a satellite dish that we had installed, that the school and wider community had access to for a small fee. Then the Computer classroom, with 12-14 computers, supplied by our parish – then the more advanced Tailoring classroom, then three more classrooms for teaching the theory/science for two levels of both Carpentry and Bricklaying...then "beyond where the driveway is," three large workshop areas and storeroom...then "to my left," there was nothing...nothing but land --- stretching for several hundred yards, maybe a half-mile -- for a future time when the school might offer Agriculture ...then" behind me and to the left," a large Hall used for assemblies or meals...then the men's dorm, and a small kitchen...then "on the other side, behind the classrooms," the women's dorm, then four large duplexes for teacher housing, then "further down the road," two more houses for faculty... I directed my view and body language around the whole area, moving faster as I went along... and finished by repeating what I said at the beginning: that anyone who sees this school is astounded that something so extensive and so beautiful has been built in rural Malawi. Finally, I return to the ambo.]*

Today, we see another change taking place. After almost 15 years as the pastor of Namitembo parish, Fr. Owen is being reassigned by his religious order to another mission, on the other side of the diocese, a couple of hours drive from Namitembo. And the leadership of Namitembo parish will be **in the hands of a native Malawian priest for the first time**: Fr. Phillip, who has visited here with us three times already. This is a HUGE change. We've grown accustomed to working with Fr. Owen, someone who charmed us all with his Scottish accent, and who was obviously an excellent project manager. Fr. Phillip is also delightful in so many ways, but they're different ways, and we don't know yet what that means as we consider our future together. But his leadership is a huge gift to the people, because he himself is like them, a Malawian; and he walks it and breathes it and lives it.

Finally...there is one other change I should note...and that's the change in us, here at St. Bridget – especially those of us who have gone to visit. Namitembo is very real to us. And that is especially true of our young people who have gone to visit. I know this personally, because my own son John went to visit Namitembo; and because of that, he later decided to give 2½ years of his life to volunteer there. We cannot all go to Africa to visit...but we **can** all listen to the voices and experiences of those others who have gone to visit, and so let their experiences touch our hearts.

In less than two months, as our summer is ending, we'll hold our 15<sup>th</sup> annual Elephant Stampede, to fund our ongoing work in Namitembo. Those of us who went on this journey have many great stories to share, and we'll schedule opportunities for them to share them with you. Thank you for giving me your time.

Denny Duffell  
July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011