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Dear Friends

As we approach Christmas we look forward to the coming of Christ. Although it is over 2,000 years since he came upon this earth surely he is having the same wish today to come amongst us and to show us the way to heaven? Just before he died he announced, "behold I am with you, even till the end of the world." He came among us in such a humble way, even being born in a stable. There was no room for him, even at the local inn. In the way of the world pride takes precedence over humility, but let us imitate Christ's humility this Christmas. Let us invite him into our hearts and ask him to give us the strength to reject all that is evil in our lives and at the same time to put him first.

We also look forward to having rains. It has been a rather poor start to the rainy season so far, so it is still quite hot, often up to 40 degrees. We have gone from an unusually cold winter to an unusually hot summer!

Sadly the economic decline continues; the local currency had fallen to 10% of the value of the US dollar by August 2019, whereas 2 years ago they were on par. Now in December the local currency is worth less than 5% of the US dollar. But life goes and people keep smiling! Being slim is now the order of the day so the teenage girls all look like models! Thank God one source of relief came at the beginning of December when the government re-introduced a subsidy on the main commodity, maize, which brought the price down by over 50%. The people were so relieved; there were queues in the shops. I hope and pray this little bit of relief will cheer our people up as we approach Christmas.

On 18th August it was a big day for one of our outstations St. Joseph's Church, Gwaai, when the bishop came to bless the new church and to confer the sacrament of confirmation (Picture 1, 2). It is a small church, built to cater for a small community, but the people are united and are so happy to have a church. They have waited over 10 years for their turn to have a new church.

Every four years there is a national Marian congress, and it was due this year. It was held at Gokomere Mission from 22nd to 25th August, about 700 Km from our mission (3). We went with about 40 members of our local Legion of Mary. About 2,000 gathered for the occasion, which I found very encouraging.

This year I was also due for 'home' leave, which lasted for the months of September and October. My twin sister, Susan Jennings, and her husband Dave Jennings moved in February of this year from a village near Oxford to the island of Anglesey, just off the North West coast of Wales. They bought a cosy little house (4), which was originally built for a vicar. The island is beautiful, with many little fishing villages dotted around the coast (5).

On 21st September there was a big celebration of Westminster Cathedral in central London, which I had the privilege of attending (6). It was held in honour of John Bradburne, of Mutemwa, whose process for beatification had just been opened. If a person on our church is beatified it is one step before he or she is declared a saint. If John is eventually declared a saint he will be the first saint for Zimbabwe. The official opening of the cause was in fact held earlier that month in Mutemwa, Zimbabwe on 5th September 2019. It was presided over by Archbishop Robert Ndlovu of the Archdiocese of Harare, accompanied by many priests and sisters and about 15,000 of the faithful.

John Bradburne was born and brought up in England, the son of a country Anglican vicar. After serving in the Second World War in the Far East with distinction he decided to go on foot in search of God. His search led him to the Holy Land and eventually to the Catholic Church. He never married, preferring to be a 'wanderer for God'. I suppose if one was to try to describe his character we would have to say he had a very unique personality, very artistic, very entertaining, a great socialiser, very friendly and kind by nature. In appearance he looked the perfect 'hippy type', but there the resemblance ends.

A great lover of the English language, he spent much of his free time writing religious poetry. His free time consisted mainly of the night hours, when everyone else was asleep. His wondering led him eventually to Zimbabwe, where of the last 9 years of his life he ministered to a colony of lepers, living in north eastern Zimbabwe at a place called Mutemwa, near the Mozambique border. When he was first introduced by a friend to the colony he found them in a very neglected state, so he made an instant decision to go and live amongst them. He threw himself into showing them every care and affection, bring them medicines and food, binding their wounds and baptising them, praying for them and burying them when they died.

He begged off the more wealthy citizens in nearby Harare and managed to build them more permanent structures to live in, plus a chapel. However, certain locals were benefiting from raiding by night the vegetable gardens of the hapless lepers. Once John had discovered what was going on he spent many a night patrolling the perimeter fence to ward off would be invaders. All this incurred their enmity, leading eventually to his murder.

By 1979 the civil war was still going on and John was faced with the decision whether to flee to the safety of Mozambique or stay and face the bullets of these locals. He decided to stay with his lepers to the end, which came very quickly after that.

My travels around Europe then took me to Spain, where I spent a few days in Valencia, where an old priest friend of mine Fr Alexander Alapont, has lived in retirement for the last few years. (7.) He is still the guiding light of a group of well-wishers from the nearby village of Carcer, who have been raising funds for around the last 30 years to assist with the building of local primary and secondary schools in our parish. Although these schools are council schools, the government itself has not been able to build any new schools since around 1985.

For the last three or four years these well-wishers have been assisting with the building of Nechishala Secondary school. Picture 8 shows progress of the new triple classroom block (8). Still in Spain, a major Spanish Charity, Manos Unidas, is also helping to sponsor a complete new hospital that we are building for the local sisters at Tshongokwe, about 200 Km from our mission. Picture (9) shows the paediatric ward about to be finished.

Next I was off to Germany (10), where several donor agencies have helped with building projects over the years. One of the agencies is Aktion Dreikönigssingen, based in Aachen, which has been sponsoring the building of a new triple classroom block at Dambwamukulu outstation. This charity is assisted by the German Bishop's Conference and they specialize in helping children and youth in need in the Third World. This project had delayed for various reasons, but finally we finished it earlier this year, as the attached picture shows (11).

After Germany it was off to Ireland for a few weeks, during the month of October. As usual my old friend Tom Clair, the plumber, took me all round Ireland in his work van (12). He has been such a help to me over the years; may God reward him in the next life. Some of my relatives have immigrated recently to Ireland, and this photo shows us meeting up with John Peacock, a first cousin of mine, who has retired with his American wife to the south western most part of Ireland, to a place called Schull, County Cork. What a wild and windy place, but the scenery is just beautiful. What attracted them to settle there was the friendliness of the local people. He is a retired research professor, specializing in developing drought resistant crops. With the abundant rain of Ireland I guess he does not need his skills much these days!

On 18th October we visited the main national shrine of Our Lady at Knock (13), where Mary appeared to 13 local people in 1879, when Ireland was suffering from the potato famine.

I returned to Zimbabwe on 7th November. My sister Susan also flew to Zimbabwe for a few days to update herself on how we were making use of the funds from our charity Children and Families in Need in Zimbabwe (CFNZ) which can be gift aided, from the UK that is supporting our mission. This exercise also included advising us on the Child Protection policies that apply to all registered UK charities; these policies also apply to those who administer the funds, even if they are administered in another country. We visited one of the projects funded by the Irish charity "Zimbabwe Rural Development Trust" that helps construct our dams (14, 15). You will see that the dam has now reached its full heath, though still much more work has to be done, such as constructing a sub-dam and a two large pillars.

One of our local diocesan priests, Fr Mathias Sibanda, celebrated at Victoria Falls with his fellow priests his silver jubilee as a priest (16). Only one other local priest was ordained before him, meaning that most of our priests are quite young.

I mentioned earlier that our current rainy season, which usually runs from November to February, has got off to a poor start. Lake Kariba, on our northern border with Zambia, has shrunk to one of its lowest levels in living memory (17). With boats marooned on dry land, the cattle are enjoying pasturing on the newly exposed bed of the lake.

Finally, I can't close this letter without referring to a unique event that occurred in our diocese on 23rd November. This year our diocese was chosen for the first time ever to host the Annual National Choir Competitions of Zimbabwe. We normally come in the bottom two or three places, but this time we really tried hard and came 10th out of about 30 choirs. The day started with Mass, presided over by our Bishop Albert (18), followed by the competition (19).

Thank you all for your generous donations.

May God bless you all this Christmas, and may the coming of our Saviour reignite our love for Christ.

Yours sincerely,

Fr Tim Peacock

PS. Attached is the trifold for CFNZ, should you be a UK resident wanting bank details to support the Mission here.