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Dear Family and Friends

On 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020 it was our turn to have 'lockdown' imposed on the country, thanks to the impending pandemic of Covid 19. In the event, as I write this newsletter three months later, we have had reported just 530 cases of infections and 6 deaths. Perhaps part of the reason that the pandemic has hardly affected us is that the aggravating underlying health issues that induce many of the deaths in the 'first world' hardly exist here, especially the challenge of obesity. On the other hand the suffering caused by the lockdown is very severe, due to a virtually universal job loss, lack of unemployment benefits, and the closure of almost all public transport. This has resulted in a great deal of hunger in the country. Also because of the lack of public transport many people cannot access health facilities, and in cases where the medication is not free many no longer have the money to buy it. Thus a good number of people are going without medication for such sicknesses as HIV, BP, sugar diabetes, asthma and epilepsy.

I see other countries in the Northern hemisphere are grappling with the question as to whether the negative aspects of the lockdowns outweigh the negative effects of Covid 19. I do see that in certain countries, especially the United States and Brazil and even in my native United Kingdom, Covid 19 is a real pandemic and is causing great suffering. In our case there has been a slight easing of the lockdown in the last two weeks or so. At first all church doors were closed for public services, but now services can be held with up to 50 participants at a time. Some sectors of industry have also been allowed to resume operations, but so far the informal sector is still closed down. Unfortunately the informal sector represents 60% of the economy, which affects the poorest of society. All this has happened at a time when the economy was already in distress. When I last wrote in December I mentioned that the value of the local currency had dropped since 2017 from being on a par with the US dollar to being just 5% of its value, but as I write this it is now about 1% of its value. Thus inflation in the local currency is over 500% annually. Recently the government allowed the use of the United States dollar for day to day public transactions. This has eased the situation, since that currency is very stable here.

We have to thank the NGO's for giving some relief in the form of food aid to some of the more vulnerable segments of the community. On our side we do what we can, even though it is limited. The harvest varied from place to place this year, though some areas had reasonable rains. Photo No. 1 shows our local river, the Deka, in flood, so we have been travelling to the areas where they achieved surpluses and buying up some of their excess grain. This we distribute back here at the mission to those who are in need. To make all this possible I am using funds from CFNZ, our UK based charity funding the running of the Mission. The schools have been closed all this time, but they may partially reopen in July. The borders are all still closed, however, so we have had difficulties getting spares for our vehicles.

Our pope is asking us all to pray about it. We need God's help in these trying times. In our church we priests were feeling a bit 'redundant' when the church doors were closed, but at least we were able to say the Mass without restrictions, even if it was alone. All the gatherings of church associations are still suspended, but we hope as time goes on the restrictions will be eased.

Just before the lockdown was imposed we managed to get a new 1-ton pick-up truck (No. 2). It is a Nissan 4 wheel drive diesel, kindly donated by Aid to the Church in Need, based in Germany. They had promised the vehicle over a year earlier but they were delayed because these days even in Germany the donations are becoming fewer.

The lockdown has affected marriages as well, but again I hope later this year we will be able to conduct marriages again. Thanks be to God we managed one wedding before the lockdown, of a young couple Shingani and Florence (Photo No. 3.). A family in the UK had been sponsoring Shingani to do a Diploma in computer studies, so hopefully once the lockdown is over he can apply for a job.

Meanwhile, on the building side we have all recently been able to resume construction work, even if it is somewhat restricted. The building work includes emergency repairs to damaged buildings (No. 4). This shows a classroom block of a primary school that is at one of our outstations, named Musuna Hills. The termites had damaged the roof. The next photo (No. 5) shows our truck in Bulawayo collecting the materials to repair it.

In February we finally managed to hand over the newly finished double classroom block for Dambwamukulu Primary school (No. 6). Although the main building was completed last year there was still some 'touches' to be done, such as painting and the exterior paving, plus the completion of toilets. This was sponsored by another German charity, known as the Holy Childhood, or Aktion Dreikönigssingen. The building took several years to complete, due to various reasons, including difficulties in getting building materials, breakdown of our vehicles and lack of availability of qualified workers. Sadly, due to the economic hardships in this country many skilled personnel have emigrated to other countries, especially South Africa.

Over the last few years the supply of water to the mission has been becoming increasingly erratic. There is a pipeline running just outside our fence, which takes water from the nearby Zambezi River (about 2Km away) to Hwange, to supply the townships there with water. For the last 2 or 3 years the water has failed to reach the townships due to leaks in the pipes and even broken pipes. The pipeline is about 70 years old, made of steel and due to the insolvency of the Hwange Colliery (coal) they have failed to maintain the pipeline these last few years. Last year another kind donor from the UK offered to help sponsor a borehole for the mission. Initially we bought a 10,000 litre water tank (No. 7). The next picture shows the final completion of its erection in May of this year (No. 8). Next came the task of drilling the borehole. The next picture (No. 9) shows the drilling rig going into action at the bottom of our plot, throwing up initially soil, later, as the depth passed five metres, we saw water gushing out (No. 10). They drilled right down to 60 metres, so the availability of water is plenty. After this we hired another company to install the submersible pump. Once this was done they erected a frame to carry 6 large solar panels (No. 11). Finally when everything was completed came the acid test – would we see if the solar powered pump would pump a reasonable amount of water? Thank God as soon as they switched everything on the water came flowing out (No. 12).

We managed to finish the new hospital just before the lockdown (No. 13). Now that the lockdown is eased we are busy preparing the materials to start building accommodation for the first two nurses.

I mentioned our mission is only about 2 Km from the mighty Zambezi River. This river divides Zambia from Zimbabwe, so I can see Zambia from the mission. 100 Km upstream is the Victoria Falls. Attached is a photo (No. 14) showing the river in flood, taken in May. You may notice the beautiful local flowers, known as ‘bougainvillea’. Thanks to help from an Irish charity “Zimbabwe Rural Development Trust” construction of the big dam at Katete has also just been resumed (No. 15).

Over the past year or so we have also been building a new triple classroom block at Nechishala Secondary School (No. 16). This is sponsored by a group of Spanish well-wishers, especially centred around a village called Carcer, near Valencia. They have been encouraged over the years by one of the Spanish priests, Fr Alexander Alapont, who was a pioneer in setting up the Catholic Church in our diocese. Fr Alexander now lives in a retirement home in the city of Valencia. His picture appears (No. 7, December 2019) in the previous newsletter. The builders are now nearing completion of the walls, and at the time of writing the carpenter was busy preparing to erect the roof.

I am busy these days going to the outstations, which had been closed for almost 3 months. The people are so happy to be able to worship in their churches again. I can only insert the picture of one of them, so I chose our mission church, as seen from the front door of our house (no. 17). I thank God that we priests have been ‘re-employed’. In fact I found myself still being quite occupied during the lockdown, doing many of the things I was always behind on. These included doing some editing of some religious publications.

Another benefactor has donated the funds to purchase a 9 year old 7 ton truck, which has just this week arrived from S. Africa. This is such a boost, it means we can repair and sell one of our old trucks, which was very expensive to run. Another family in the UK is sponsoring a young woman, Mercy, to sew sanitary pads, both for the girls at the mission, and to sell locally. It is hoped, after a year, she will be self supporting. Due to the lockdown she has not been able to work though. Thanks to others CFNZ donations, we have a new project rearing 50 chicks to supply eggs for the Mission, for the children and adults. It is hoped that, once the children return, they can help care for them, and sell some of the surplus eggs as a small business. (no 18)

We all live in trying times. Surely it is a wake-up call to all of us to put God first in our lives. I am aware many would like to see what has happened in the world over the last few months as a bad dream, which will soon go away. Only God, however, knows the future. Even if things get worse for a time let us trust in God and pray that he will give us the strength to understand that we have to accept the crosses in our lives, even as Christ accepted to suffer on his cross for us.

Meanwhile life here goes on. When I look around me I still see lots of smiling faces. Our people are resourceful and the lockdown has encouraged them to be more generous in helping each other. I also thank God that this is a peaceful country with little crime. Long may it stay that way.

Thank you all for your prayers and financial support. If you would like to donate to the UK charity, CFNZ, my sister Sue runs for the Mission, please contact Sue at the address below.

May God bless you all.

Fr Tim Peacock

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