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Dear ...Family & Friends.....

When I look back over the year 2021 I see a year where the concern of the world was still dominated by the Covid 19 Pandemic. The good news is that after almost two years it has claimed around 5,5 million lives worldwide, which compares with 50 million that died 100 years ago during the Spanish Flu. Still, it does affect many people since it is very infectious and the latest variant of omicron seems even more contagious, though on the positive side it appears to produce milder symptoms. In our country we have had a repeat in 2021 of what happened in 2020, with the government regularly opening and closing schools and public places. We thank God that in Zimbabwe the number of cases and deaths remains quite low, and in August 2021 they reopened schools and places of public gatherings, but since December schools have been closed again until further notice. The average death rate is about 20 per day out of a population of about 14 million.

In my August 2021 newsletter I mentioned the good rains of early 2021, followed by an exceptionally cold winter. Now I have to report that the early summer of this year, from October to December, have been the hottest months any of us can remember. The government, meanwhile, was not sure how good the rains would be this current season. From mid-December onwards much of the country has had at least some rains, but this means that there may be drought conditions in various places.

Every two years I get home leave, and in early August 2021 I went to Europe, returning in late October. Due to the Covid restrictions I saw it was not practical to go to two of the countries that I normally visit, namely Germany and Spain, but I did manage to visit Ireland and then the United Kingdom. Once I stepped foot on Irish soil I was obliged to stay in a hotel for 12 days quarantine. The stay cost twice the price of the air ticket, but thanks to the kindness of well-wishers the bill was covered. The bed was king size and there was a TV screen to match. I had been wondering how to occupy myself during that time, and then decided the best way was to try to catch up on all that I was behind on so I was with my computer non-stop. Hence I never found time for the TV, nor even the siesta. To this day I very much appreciate that time.

During my visit to Ireland I travelled much, and again visited Knock, which is the main Marian shrine of Ireland (Photo 1). I also managed to visit Northern Ireland, and while there stayed a few nights with the Missionary Sisters of Charity, of Mother Teresa (2)

Unfortunately for me I mislaid at Heathrow Airport both my computer and another one which was a gift for a fellow priest, whilst on my way back to Zimbabwe. So much for all my work during the quarantine! Thanks be to God we found the mission computers by going on line in Google Search, and eventually a well-wisher retrieved them and posted them back to me. I got them on Christmas day, so I will always remember this Christmas Gift! I am sorry but that should explain why the Christmas newsletter has become a New Year newsletter instead.

It was great to have the break, but I am also glad to be back. The day after I arrived at the mission we had the ceremony in the Hwange Soccer Stadium of the ordination of our new Bishop, Raphael Ncube, on 30th October 2021 (3). The previous bishop had passed retirement age. It was a great day, and to me the singing was heavenly. Bishop Raphael is from the adjacent archdiocese of Bulawayo. In case you are wondering what he looks like I managed to get a picture of him as he stood next to a statue of Mary (4). All the priests of the diocese were gathered together with him on 27th December 2021 when he invited us all for a Christmas meal and Mass together. (5)

As a priest he wrote several books, all about the spiritual life. I see also he is very much in favour of developing new missions and building schools and health facilities, so it looks like he is going to keep me busy!

Speaking of buildings we at last finished the main structure of the first double classroom block for the new secondary school of Dambwamukulu (6). Hopefully this school will end up reaching sixth form, and will include low cost hostel facilities for those who have more than 5 Km to walk to school. Thanks to a private donor, funds recently arrived to build a teachers cottage for 5 teachers, so we will get busy on that in January 2022.

Still on the school side we have almost finished building the new primary school for Chezya. It has 4 classrooms (7) and accommodation for 4 teachers. At the local secondary school of Neshaya we have almost finished building accommodation for 4 more teachers. If we can get sufficient funding I hope to build accommodation for another 6 teachers, plus a double classroom block. This will enable the school to be upgraded to go up to 'A' level.

Our new irrigation scheme that is besides the mission is going on. The 4 acre property has now been fenced and the kiosks and toilet block (8) are now finished. We have also started building a storeroom.

The new hospital in Tshongokwe is moving on steadily and there are now houses for 6 staff. We are also busy building a shelter for expectant mothers (9).

Over the past 20 years or so the local road works department has been unable to repair our roads. By last year a local bridge, situated about half way between Hwange and our mission, was by then almost completely destroyed. With their permission I decided to repair it myself. It took 7,5 tons of cement, plus many reinforcing rods. We supplied the builders and all the materials, while they helped with labour. The first picture shows us busy mixing concrete (10), while the second picture shows the final product, a concrete slab over 30 metres long and about 8,0 metres wide (11).

Our building work does not just consist of building new buildings but repairing damaged buildings. This occurs frequently out here, either due to the work of termites, which eat the roof timbers, or due to the heavy winds and even whirlwinds that we sometimes witness. One such project is to repair the roof of the school of Mwemba, just 15 Km from the mission, which was damaged by the termites. Thank God we were able to remove the roofing sheets intact, otherwise if the roof had collapsed the roofing sheets would have been broken (12).

Getting away from buildings, we recently were sponsored to buy new sewing machines for the mission sewing project. Picture (13) shows our girls displaying a new multi stitch sewing machine, plus an over locking machine. Both of these were purchased in South Africa.

Weddings have been few and far between for the past two years thanks to the Covid 19, but with the recent slight easing of restrictions we managed to have a 'white' wedding of Divine Effort and Ronita on 28th December 2021. We were four priests concelebrating (14), especially since one of the priests, Fr Eusebius, who is from our parish, is the uncle of the groom. Afterwards we all enjoyed lunch and entertainment, with the 'court' showing off their dancing skills (15).

Christmas was very special this year, with 23 baptisms of catechumens and 2 baptisms of babies. The candidates had recently been on a preparation course at the mission (16). On New Year's Day we had another wedding, topped off with the baptism of two small twins.

On a more salutary note, I think we have to be realistic and face the fact that we live in very unsettled times, with the three leaders of the superpowers, The USA, Russia and China, all squabbling over the threat of the invasion of the Ukraine and Taiwan. This is very dangerous, and could even usher in a third World War. The continuing presence of Covid 19 over the last two years has also been a game changer for the whole world, with the shutdowns causing great economic hardships, which have hit the whole world, both rich and poor countries alike.

I see this as a wake-up call from God to put him first in our lives. Surely if we all do this peace and forgiveness will come into the world. Each of us can do our part, even if it is little.

I wish you all God's blessing for the year 2022.

I want to thank those who have helped me in any way, whether it is by prayers or donations, but I also thank those who may simply be happy just to read these newsletters.

Yours sincerely

Fr Tim Peacock