

Southern African Diary

25th January – 3rd February 2008

When the Cardinal and I set out from Heathrow on Friday January 25th to fly to Cape Town and then on to Durban, I had little doubt that the centrepiece of our visit to Southern Africa was going to be the 36 hours that we were going to spend in Zimbabwe.

But we had three days with the Southern African Bishops' Conference first and it was that which took us to Durban.

They meet in a conference centre, which is part of a monastic campus called Marianhill about 25 miles outside Durban. They appear to work harder than we do in the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in that they have two meetings a year, each of which lasts for a week.

The Bishops gave us a very warm welcome and we were there at the invitation of Cardinal Wilfred Napier, who is the Archbishop of Durban. Although we shared the accommodation of the campus with them, we did not actually join their formal meeting until the Monday morning.

On the Saturday afternoon, we visited an Aids hospice, in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, north of Durban. This is funded by the Pontifical Mission Societies and we were able to speak with patients and staff.

After Mass on the Sunday morning, we made our way, under the auspices of CAFOD, to Pietermaritzburg to meet with the chief executive of the KwaZulu Natal Council of Churches. She was able to give us a useful briefing on the work of the consortium of churches which made up the Council. Sooner or later, almost every conversation in Southern Africa will come round to the question of HIV Aids and the pandemic that it represents in the countries. Estimates differ about the number of people infected but it is almost never less than 25% of the population and this figure, of course, includes many children who are orphans, their parents having died of Aids related illnesses. HIV Aids represents a tragic spectre that haunts the people.

It is easily said that no one dies of Aids – and that can well be true now in the UK. Anti retroviral drugs (ARV) are available and at reasonable prices but their effectiveness depends on early diagnosis, a regular and sustaining diet and a capacity for a reasonably regular lifestyle. Our visits that afternoon to 3 or 4 homes in one of the townships soon demonstrated to us that those conditions are rarely those which govern the lives of the poor. We visited one home where the head of the household was an old granny and the family lived off her meagre pension. Food was scarce, the home conditions were very poor and all the surviving members of the family – about 10 altogether – were HIV Aids infected. There was precious little long-term hope there – and yet, South Africa is a relatively prosperous country. We returned to Durban quite chastened by our experience but we had seen at first hand some of the pastoral problems that affect our brother bishops in that country. Incidentally, the Catholic Church in South Africa is one of the most effective sources of the ARV drugs but it can often seem like only a drop in the ocean.

We spent the Monday morning in conference with the Bishops, sharing with them how we saw the Church in England and Wales and taking part in their debates and listening and learning from them. An underlying purpose for our visit was that it should be a tangible and heartfelt expression of solidarity and support for a wonderful group of pastors who face very intractable problems in the development of post-apartheid South Africa.

On the Tuesday, we flew to Johannesburg, changed planes and then went on to Zimbabwe and its capital, Harare. Harare's so-called International Airport is, I imagine, a little like the Marie Celeste. All the buildings and equipment are there but except when a plane comes or goes, there's scarcely anyone there.

We were warmly welcomed by some of our hosts including Archbishop Robert Ndlovu, Archbishop of Harare and President of the Bishops' Conference, and the Charge d'Affaires at the Nunciature. When we had paid out \$55 each for our entry visa, we made our way into the city through deserted streets. Our resting place was the Dominican Convent in the centre of town and there we were to spend the next two nights.

On the Wednesday morning, we had a very full meeting, visiting a diocesan centre for Spirituality, which can house 150 people, admittedly in dormitory conditions, and it is busy every weekend with different groups.

Some of you may remember that when I was last in Harare some two years ago, on the Sunday that I was there I went to Mass in a township called Mbare. This had been one of the communities that had been devastated by the regime some months before and devastation had meant the bulldozing of all the shanty dwellings and the premises of the street traders who are such a feature of township life in Zimbabwe. Peoples' homes and livelihoods had been ruthlessly destroyed by the police and the military – and why? It is said that this was one of the areas of population which had dared to voice opposition through the ballot box to the re-election of Robert Mugabe.

To visit this township again 2 years on was a desperately sobering experience. If things were bad two years ago, they are far worse now. We spent an hour listening to a German Jesuit who was the parish priest, hearing how he ministered to his people who were hungry, homeless and diseased. It was one of the most moving moments of the whole journey, experiencing how faith and love can triumph over almost all adversity and suffering. I, for one, do not know how I could possibly survive as a pastor in such seemingly hopeless conditions and yet, here was faith, courage, optimism and hope. When we drove away to our next visit, the cars were silent and we each had to try to absorb and make sense of all that we had seen and heard.

I mentioned the presence in South Africa of countless orphans. If anything the situation in Zimbabwe is worse. But as one would expect, the Church is at the heart of the care and love of the poor. We went to a hospice, run by an Irish Sister of The Little Company of Mary – the Blue Nuns - founded by Mary Potter who hailed from Southsea. As well as the hospice for children infected with HIV Aids that she supervises, she administers a team of about 70 workers who care for the orphans on the streets and in their so-called homes. It is an extraordinary beautiful and loving work which seeks to bring comfort and nursing to the poorest of the poor and again, we were left relatively speechless by what we saw and heard. It was quite hard to go back to a relatively normal lunch.

The Cathedral in Harare is still run by English Jesuits and together with Archbishop Robert we celebrated Mass there in the evening with Cardinal Cormac as the preacher. We were not there to conduct a political campaign against a ruthless regime, but we were there to stand alongside our brothers and sisters who are suffering with such courage and in such poverty and it was a privilege to be able to do so.

Our stay in Zimbabwe was short but we spent a very instructive hour the next morning with members of the Bishops' Conference, who briefed us on the current state of affairs.

He told us that the political leaders have no solutions to the problems that the country faces - 24,000% was the inflation rate on the morning we left! Zanu-PF is the ruling party and there is no effective opposition, though it seems now that Simba Makoni, a former Minister in the Mugabe government, is to stand against him in the Presidential elections which are due at the end of March. It all seems so hopeless, and yet there are seeds of hope.

“God hears the cry of the Oppressed” was the title of a Pastoral letter issued by the Bishops on Holy Thursday last year and it was a brave attempt to offer guidance, light and hope in such difficult times. But such is the complexity of the political scenario that this letter, so bravely written and published, found opposition and division even within the community of the faithful. The letter was an appeal to the people but it led inevitably to a conflict with the government as well as among the faith communities. There is a desperate need for a new constitution which can incorporate justice with good government and the basic rights of the people, especially the poor, who are the vast majority of the population.

The closing words of the Pastoral Letter are worth quoting in full. “We conclude by affirming with a clear and unambiguous *Yes* our support of morally legitimate political authority. At the same time, we say an equally clear and unambiguous *No* to power through violence, oppression and intimidation – to say nothing of torture (my words). We call on those responsible for the current crisis in our Country to repent and listen to the cry of their citizens. To the people of Zimbabwe, we appeal for peace and restraint when expressing their justified grievances and demonstrating for their human rights.”

Words such as these call for concrete action, for symbols and gestures not just from the suffering people of Zimbabwe, but from all of us who share faith and human kinship with them. Lent is the best of times for us to identify with the struggles and sufferings of our sisters and brothers and I suggest we do so in the traditional ways of *prayer, fasting and almsgiving* – for Zimbabwe!

We left Zimbabwe in a way devastated by all that we had seen and heard, and yet sustained and encouraged by the bravery, the love, the hope and the sheer naked faith of all that we had experienced.

Two days in Cape Town rounded off our visit and that was wonderful, but I will never forget those brief 36 hours in Zimbabwe when we heard and listened to the “Cry of the Oppressed”.

