

The Joys of Missionary Experience in Zambia and as an Educator

As we celebrate 125 years of the Catholic Church in Zambia I invite you to celebrate with me the fact that I have spent almost half that number of years here as an educator and priest. And I feel blessed that I will be spending the rest of my life here with the people of Zambia, praising God who has worked such great things among His people.

I first came to Zambia in August 1955 and, apart from periods when I was away on studies or for health reasons, I have been here all the years since then. These have been years full of extraordinary joy, happiness and fulfillment. They have been such wonderful years that if I had to live them all over again I wouldn't ask for anything different. Many years ago the Zambia National Tourist Board had a big advertisement showing a hippo wallowing in a river pool and spouting water up through its nose; and underneath were the words, "Come on in! It's great in Zambia!" How very true. It's great in Zambia and I am so happy that I "came on in".

It was the people that made Zambia great for me. Visitors speak about the climate being superb, the vegetation being wonderful, the wildlife being marvellous. These things are all true. But what really made Zambia special for me was the people. Nowhere else could you live and work with a people who are so gracious, so hospitable, so open, so warm in their welcomes, so gentle, so appreciative for any small thing done on their behalf, so patient in difficult circumstances. For me the people of Zambia have always been a living expression of what it says at the beginning of the Bible: "Then God saw all that he had made and saw that it was very good" – when God saw Zambia and the people He had put there He surely saw that it was very good.

One outstanding experience, of course, was Independence in 1964. I have glorious memories of the occasion at Canisius and the raising of the Zambian flag at midnight on 23rd October, the first time a flag was ever flown at the school. Then there were all the developments that took place after that – schools, roads, clinics, UNZA, UTH, airports. But even greater were the developments among the people and the whole process of Zambianisation. It was such a joy to see Zambians taking over responsibility and becoming the leaders in all areas: in government, administration and industry; in the Church and among us Jesuits; in the judiciary and in the medical field; at the University of Zambia and in all areas of life. A great memory for me is becoming a Zambian citizen as soon as it was possible to do so after Independence. I didn't know it at the time, but this equipped me to be acclaimed a few years later as the first Zambian to become the Dean of a School at UNZA!

Another great joy of missionary involvement in Zambia was to experience its transformation into a Christian country. The Constitution declares that the Republic is a Christian Nation. It can say this on the basis of the faith of the vast majority of the people. The 2010 Census showed that 95.5% of the people of Zambia identified themselves as Christian. This is something that no other country in the world (apart from the Vatican State) can say about itself. And Zambia's stupendous accomplishment is that it achieved this Christian status in the short space of less than 150 years. The challenge now is to live up to the formal declaration of the Constitution and

the professed Christianity of almost all the people and to become a Christian country in values and practices, especially in care for the poor, the weak and the under-privileged.

It has also been a great joy to witness the enormous progress made by women and girls in so many different areas, especially in education, in public life and in career prospects. The stress over the past thirty years on girl-child education and the current efforts to end child-marriages and all forms of gender-based violence have led to a massive and very welcome surge forward in turning Zambia's constitutional acknowledgment of "the equal worth of women and men" into a reality. How gratifying it is to live and work in a Zambia that gives such full recognition to the role and dignity of women and girls!

As an educator, I was greatly privileged to be intimately involved in all of Zambia's early educational reforms and the development of its educational policies. Some things stand out in this area. One is the way a culture of education has been established in the country, with it being taken for granted that every child will attend school for the full primary cycle and that a large proportion of primary-school-leavers will go on to secondary school and even to university. Among other things this has led to the development of community schools where the people have taken on themselves the responsibility of ensuring education for their children and are not waiting for the government to do everything on their behalf. This has also led to the mushrooming of universities and a huge increase in the number of university graduates who will promote the development and prosperity of the people. Within the education sector it was also wonderful to play a role in developing the national educational policy, *Educating Our Future*, which has been acclaimed by international educational experts as being among the finest in the world. This is something of which Zambia can be very proud.

Zambia is a very young country. At present, according to the United Nations, it is the 8th youngest country in the world, with more than half its population being under 17 years of age. Having so many young people poses a great challenge. But it also provides an even greater opportunity since it means that Zambia is a country filled with the vitality, promise, energy and resourcefulness of a very young population. It is a great joy for those of us who worked here in the missionary era and subsequent years, and also a great hope for us, that we have seen the way our good and bountiful God has blessed the country with so many young people, nearly all of them committed Christians. We thank Him for that and we continue to thank Him and the people of Zambia for the wonders He has worked through us in this beautiful country. We may now be old, but we feel happy and privileged that we have been able to spend much of our lives here. We are also happy that we can spend our final years side by side with the people of this country, especially the young people, looking forward with confidence to the great things that God will surely continue to do for and through the great Zambian people. Thanks be to God! Praised be His Name!

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