

PASTORAL VISIT TO ZAMBIA AND MALAWI

CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

SUNDAY 24 JANUARY 2010 – MONDAY 1 FEBRUARY 2010

At the end of January and into February, Paul Chitnis, the Chief Executive of our Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF) and I paid a pastoral visit to projects supported by the people of Scotland through SCIAF in two of the poorest countries of the world, namely Zambia and Malawi. During the first part of our visit our host was the Apostolic Nuncio to both Zambia and Malawi, Archbishop Nicola Girasola and his secretary, Father Fabritio – both gave us much valuable information and practical pastoral help.

Initially, we were under the direction of Father Paul Desmarais SJ, the Director of Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre where we were to go at the beginning of our visit – and then were under the care of Martin Sampa, the Development Director of a project site in Sikaunzwe where we visited small-scale farmers.

However, on our first day we began with the meeting of many of those involved in the projects, concluding with an evening Mass at St Ignatius Church in Lusaka itself. I outlined to the parish priest, Father Joseph Keaney SJ, and the crowded congregation the purpose of our visit with regard to SCIAF projects – and basically indicated that the peoples of countries like Zambia and Malawi had so much to teach the Church, rather than just learning from them. I indicated that I realised that Zambia was a rich country but with many poor people living in it – and I said that I would be seeing something of the poverty in the villages, of the difficulties parents faced feeding and caring for their children, of the hard and tiring work of women in the communities, and of the enormous challenges which HIV and AIDS created for individuals and for the whole country. I reminded the people of the recent teaching of our Church with regard to its understanding of development – that it must be focussed on the whole person and on every person. This is also why 'justice is inseparable from charity'. I indicated that as Christians we strive for the good of each person and of every person, especially the poor, the oppressed, the orphan and, of course, women.

The next day was spent under the care of Father Paul Desmarais SJ, initially receiving input from Paul and his colleagues at the Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre and then receiving input in the extensive plans for those who were responsible for the initiatives taking place in the area. Over a working lunch, three of the small farmers gave input to us and a wonderful afternoon was spent 'on site' with two farms in particular being developed in a very wonderful way through organic farming by the families concerned.

A similar event took place on the following day – although initially we had an hour's flight to Livingstone and then a field visit to a project at Sikaunzwe about another hour over dirt tracks to Livingstone itself. Among other things we saw the goat production, demonstration plots and a fruit security project being worked in collaboration with another project entitled: 'Community managed disaster risk reduction'. Often much of the technical language was difficult to follow – but no one could doubt the enthusiasm of all involved in the various projects, their appreciation of the financing from the peoples of Scotland through SCIAF, or the longterm effects on these farmers and on their families.

Serious theological reflection underpinned what was taking place – and, consequently, we were very happy also to meet with Bishop Raymond Mpezele in Livingstone and then on our return to Lusaka, to visit Father Peter Henriot SJ, responsible for the theological reflection at Luwisha house in Lusaka itself. Father Peter is the Director of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection of the Zambia/Malawi Province of the Jesuits based in Lusaka – and attended the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa as an expert for the Zambian Bishops and the AMECEA Bishops (the Bishops of East Africa).

Unfortunately, our visit to Malawi was slightly delayed because of the cancellation of one of our flights – but the enthusiasm of the Bishops, priests and religious in Malawi more than made up for our basic lack of time to do everything which we wished to do. We met representatives of the Jesuit Refugee Service who assisted in the pastoral work involved in caring for about 7000 people in a refugee camp; and visited the headquarters of the Bishops' Conference in Malawi – in which the Apostolic Nuncio had a house also, as he is Nuncio to that country as well.

We attended a meeting of the various agents of the Bishops' Conference responsible for the ongoing pastoral work of the Conference in a variety of areas supported by SCIAF; and on Sunday in St Patrick's Parish Church I concelebrated Mass with Archbishop Tarcisius Garvazio Ziyaye, the President of the Bishops' Conference, who is also the Bishop of Blantyre, as well as Bishop Rémi Joseph Gustave Sainte-Marie, the Bishop of Lilongwe and his recently appointed Auxiliary Bishop, Bishop Stanislus Tobias Magombo. It is difficult to describe in a few words the enthusiasm of the packed congregations at the first Mass which I celebrated in English at 7.00 am and then at the Mass in the local language, at which I spoke, at 9.00 am. Following on that, we paid a visit to the Sisters of the Poor Clares in their monastery in Lilongwe itself, quite near the headquarters of the Bishops' Conference where we were most warmly received. The Sisters are well known throughout Malawi and further afield because of the magnificent liturgies which are celebrated each day in their very beautiful and prayerful chapel.

In addressing the Bishops, priests and people in St Patrick's Church in Lilongwe, I linked the two Synods of Bishops on Africa with the two Synods of Bishops on Europe which I personally had attended. At the Synod of Bishops on Europe, the late Pope John Paul II had spoken of Europe breathing with 'two lungs' after the downfall of the Berlin Wall and Europe, East and West, now being united. I indicated that at the African Synod, Pope Benedict XVI had spoken of Africa as being a 'spiritual lung for the whole of humanity' and of the extraordinary human wealth which that country had.

I emphasised one particular aspect of the outcome of the Synod, which has still to receive the final message from Pope Benedict – that aspect would be 'a spirit of hope'. It is hard to imagine 'hope' in the Continent of Africa which is wracked with so many problems: social, economic, political, ecological, religious etc. But hope was emphasised throughout the Synod from the start through the guidelines, the agenda and often repeated in the interventions in the general sessions and working groups.

To emphasise that demonstration of the spirit of hope, I mentioned comments about which I had read, namely: “Africa must not despair – the blessings of God are still abundant, waiting to be prudently and justly employed for the good of our children; the peoples of Africa should not be afraid of, far less still be discouraged, by the enormity of the problems of the continent; the future history of the continent is still to be written and God has blessed that continent with vast natural and human resources; Africa is not helpless – its destiny is still in the hands of its people”. In conclusion I indicated that the Synod Fathers, in communion with Pope Benedict XVI, viewed the Synod on Africa as a ‘new Pentecost’.

It was in that same spirit of hope that I also spoke on the priesthood in Africa in the ‘Year of the Priest’. With many missionaries now retired to their home countries or failing in health, so much depends on the new generation of African priests and bishops. That spirit of hope for the future comes from the fact that Africa was the cradle of human civilisation, is the home of the most vibrant Christian community in the world of today, and is ready to fulfil its true role in our world.

That same spirit of hope which brought Paul Chitnis and I, on behalf of SCIAF, to Africa more than inspired us throughout our stay there – and still inspires us as the country awaits now the final message of the Synod from Pope Benedict XVI.

