

A Life of Heartbreaking Beauty & Sadness

Twenty years ago, when he was asked “Will you go to the African missions out of love for Jesus Christ?,” Father Charles Hanley courageously answered “Yes!” On home leave recently from the Capuchin mission of Chinyingi, in rural northwest Zambia, Father Charles offered to share some of his experiences with our friends and benefactors.

In describing his life in the Zambian mission over all these years, Father Charles stated, “It has been both heartbreakingly beautiful and heartbreakingly sad.” The beauty of the physical environment and the awesome wonders of creation surround you there, he said. There are breathtaking sunsets, glorious sunrises, spectacular exotic birds, and the powerful, majestic Zambezi River that constantly shout out God’s Presence.

But then there is poverty and pain almost beyond description. The people are poor, very, very poor, but they struggle heroically and are amazingly generous with the little they have. When someone comes to them for help, they never turn them away, even at great personal cost and sacrifice.

This inspiring trait of generosity was recently reflected in the goodness of the Zambian Sisters, the Daughters of the Redeemer, who staff the Mission Hospital and a network of health clinics in the Chinyingi area. For over two months Father Charles was not able to provide the Sisters with even the nominal salaries they are supposed to receive. There just were no funds available. When he explained this financial crisis to them, the Sisters graciously volunteered to work without pay. They simply would not permit the sick to be deprived of critical medical and social services.

“The stark realities of third world poverty are evident everywhere you look,” Father Charles commented. The soil is not well suited for growing crops. There is little or no fertilizer. Unemployment is extremely high, and without a job, a man there can easily become demoralized. Often parents are not able to provide even the basic necessities for their family, and they suffer the horrific pain of watching their children go hungry. In an effort to secure even meager resources, some men travel into neighboring countries in search of work. Others turn to alcohol in a futile attempt to escape from their problems.

HIV/AIDS is a major epidemic and of monumental concern in Zambia, where about 25% of the population is afflicted with this devastating disease. The Mission Hospital has developed a very effective outreach called C.H.A.P. (Chinyingi HIV Assistance Program) which seeks to address some of the problems associated with AIDS. Small hospice houses for AIDS patients have been constructed. AIDS education groups have been formed to teach people about the origins and causes of the disease. The Sisters take in orphaned babies who are HIV positive, and they care for them as their own, even though they know the babies will eventually die from AIDS-related

illnesses. “The Sisters are simply amazing,” Father Charles remarked, “caring, compassionate, committed Catholic women of faith and love.”

The Capuchin Friars serving in Zambia are similarly dedicated and hardworking, Father Charles pointed out. In Franciscan brotherhood, they stand with the people in their times of sickness, pain, and sorrow. Because of the demands of ministry, the Friars have to “wear many hats.” Father Charles often travels long distances to offer the Sacraments in outlying places. “We bring people to God through Baptism,” Father Charles commented, “and we bring God to the people through the Eucharist and other Sacraments.”

Occasionally, he is even called upon to assist in law enforcement efforts, and at other times, he is needed to serve as an ambulance driver, transporting people to the clinics when necessary. Father Charles also devotes a lot of time to visiting the sick, and pitching in at the hospital and clinics in any way he can.

Father Charles reflected, “It is our high priority to provide assistance to the poor, but always in a manner that doesn't lessen their sense of dignity or diminish their sense of self-worth.” Sometimes the gift of a blanket, for instance, can free parents from that expense so they can provide their family with other resources essential for their well being. But the needs are vast and unrelenting, Father Charles said. “Every time I realize that we don't have the funds necessary to help all who are destitute, and who have no other source of assistance, it can bring me to tears.”

Father Charles recounted the personal experience of meeting a distraught couple carrying their ten year old daughter along a remote dirt road. The parents were exhausted and soaked with sweat from the many miles they had walked. They were attempting to reach the Mission Hospital, where they hoped their little girl, who was dying of malnutrition, could be treated. Father Charles quickly recognized that she would never make it. With no telephone available, and no vehicle passing along that road to pick them up, all he could do was offer consolation to the parents, as he gently held the child in his arms as she died.

Chinyingi, as the Zambians say, is out in “the bush,” the most isolated part of the country. Consequently, when Father Charles is on home leave here in the States, he spends most of his time seeking contributions of important items that are impossible to get there. He packs and ships them back to the Mission, or actually brings them on his return flight as part of his own luggage.

For the second time in three years, the Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB) of New York City donated over \$58,000 of prescription drugs and medical supplies to the Chinyingi Mission. Father Charles carefully packed these into 25 footlockers that were boarded on the plane with him when he returned to Zambia. This cargo was so precious, he didn't want to let it out of his sight. He knows first-hand how these medicines have literally saved people's lives there.

The donation of topical creams, iodine, aspirin, and ointments for minor injuries, as well as children's multivitamins and cough medicines, enables the clinics to better serve the sick. CMMB also contributed very expensive antibiotics and anti-malaria medicine. Oral re-hydration salt, needed to counter the loss of body fluids from diseases like dysentery, and from the daily strain of living in a tropical climate, were also enthusiastically welcomed as gifts. The last time Father Charles returned to Zambia, he brought back a medicine called Mefoxin, which later cured four people of meningitis. Without this medication they would have died. CMMB also donated medical reference books, and much needed supplies like thermometers, examination gloves, syringes, and needles. Father Charles also received donations for a physician's desk reference, a monetary grant for the Sister's nursing education, medical dictionaries and anatomy books.

The Chinyingi Mission Hospital, under the skilled and competent care of the Zambian Sisters, provides round-the-clock care for the 52 most critically ill people of that area at any given time. Medical care there is terribly expensive and often unavailable to the poor. The Mission makes every effort to assist the most needy. Children, pregnant women, and senior citizens are all given free medical treatment. There are minimal fees for others who are sick, usually the equivalent of two hours worth of work. If someone can't pay anything at all, they are asked to perform some chore or task at the clinic in exchange for their medical care.

Father Charles has returned to Zambia after a short rest, and after long hours of seeking donations, and then packaging and shipping back boxes of needed supplies. Reflecting on his ministry there, and on the wonderful work of all the Friars and Sisters, he said, "How can you cast your eyes on the poor, on innocent children and the helpless elderly, on the AIDS afflicted, and not want to offer your hand and your heart to them in charity and love?" Clearly, after 20 years of selfless service to the Church and to God's people in Zambia, Father Charles continues to generously answer the call.