
THE CARMELITE NEWS

FEBRUARY 1985

WHITEFRIARS — FAVERSHAM — KENT

Published by the Carmelites of England and Wales

SUET DUMPLING

Hello, once again, and welcome to our first chat of 1985. I hope you all enjoyed your Christmas. I hope too, that those of you who find it physically tiring with all the rush and preparation and comings and goings have recovered your energy by now, and that those of you who find your emotions tugged this way and that by the thoughts that Christmas can evoke — what has been, what might have been — have recovered your equilibrium once more.

As I look out of my window at a dull, cold January day with frozen slush and snow covering everything — just about as cheerful as a cold suet dumpling! — I cannot help contrasting it with this time last year when I was in Zimbabwe.

AFRICA

It was 5.49 a.m., when I stepped from the plane in Harare (the capital) onto the soil of Africa. Being encumbered by luggage and a bad back, which was very stiff after ten hours in the plane, I did not kiss the ground as another distinguished traveller tends to do. Nor did I manage to avoid the immigration formalities as he does. I must get a few tips from him on this subject and ask him for the name of his travel agent! But I digress. The point is that I stepped out of the plane into brilliant sunshine and weather as

warm as an English June. For three weeks I enjoyed that marvellous weather. It rained only once in all that time, when I was at St. Barbara's Mission for a few hours in the late evening, which was very refreshing and desperately needed, as all the world knows. I could say that the thought of you all back home putting up with winter cold and fog and rain and snow and ice put a dampener on my enjoyment. I could but I won't! You wouldn't believe me anyway!

DRUMS

On New Years Day (1984) I was taken to Mass in the Carmelite parish of Hatfield in the suburbs of Harare. It was a simple and very devout celebration and all in Shona, the language of that region. However, there was no problem in identifying the "Adeste fideles" or "Silent Night", whose music is international. Still, there was a difference: the drums:

There were three of them, rather like the three bears: Father drum, Mother drum and Baby drum! I have heard drums in military bands and symphony orchestras; I have heard them playing jazz and rock; I have heard them in the wizardry of the Caribbean steel band; but never have I heard drums like the drums of the Zimbabwe Liturgy. At one moment they were soft and gentle and inviting;

at another melancholy and sorrowful; then firm and strong and encouraging; and from time to time loud and challenging, confident, full of hope; always moving and inspiring, always touching and freeing and expressing the human spirit and the faith that strengthens and guides it. And the singing matched the drums. Or was it the drums that matched the singing? Perhaps the truth is that the music as a whole was composed with both the drums and the voices in mind.

CONFIDENCE

There has emerged in that part of Africa a group of African composers creating music suited to the liturgy of an African culture, yet not limiting their sources of inspiration to purely African music. They are sufficiently confident of their own Africanness to draw upon sources other than African — Plain Chant for instance — in composing their music. Surely this is a mark of greatness, of a truly catholic mentality.

I was reminded of my own Irish and Welsh blood as I listened to musicians completely in love with and in control of their music. It came as no surprise to learn that our choir in Harare had a distinguished record in the competitive festivals of music which are regularly held in that area.

Wherever I went, from the big city to the bush village, the liturgy, i.e. the celebration of Mass, was marked with simplicity and devotion, an unforgettable combination of drums and singing, and a happy spontaneity that enriched the reverence and dignity of the occasion.

SICK-CALL

In marked contrast was the sick-call I

was privileged to attend a fortnight later in the Triashill Mission.

Fr. Egan, a Carmelite from Galway, who has spent most of his priestly life in Zimbabwe, took me along with him. We drove for a mile or two along a road as well surfaced as any in England then turned off onto a dirt-track which had been levelled off — with the exception of ridges and ruts at irregular intervals just to keep you awake! Then my friend grinned sideways at me and with a muttered "Hold tight" turned off the track into the bush. It was like moving out of the harbour at Holyhead into a force 9 gale blowing up the Irish Sea. "Hold tight" indeed! The truck and we inside it bucked and rolled and dropped and bumped across the sea of scrub until we suddenly found ourselves in the haven of the village, a group of round, thatched huts set amid plots of cultivated land.

SOMEBODY'S HOME

We were brought to one of the huts and stooped to enter its interior. It was about fifteen feet in diameter and about the same height at the point of its conical roof, with the daylight filtering in through the eaves about six feet from the ground — for all the world like the recessed lighting of some of our modern churches. The walls were of wattle and mud, and the floor of mud and cattle dung smoothed and trodden hard as concrete. It was spotlessly clean and tidy with a raised section opposite the door on which the household utensils were arranged, and in the centre a small hearth in which a wood fire slowly burned. Gourds and spoons were tucked into their places in the eaves and a couple of raffia-style mats and a sack completed the furniture. It was cool and shady. It was cared for. It was somebody's home.

OLD LADY

There, by the wall on a couple of rush mats and covered with a plain grey blanket lay that "somebody": an old lady, a great-grandmother with her family around her quietly and prayerfully and calmly waiting for death.

We were welcomed as friends. Fr. Egan administered the Sacrament of the Sick and Holy Viaticum to the old lady. She was very weak and obviously not long for this world but she was still conscious and aware of what was going on. She asked for me to bless her, which I did, and she gently squeezed my hand for a moment. We all recited together the prayers for the dying, followed by a prayer for the family. Then we came outside and had a few sociable words — including their conviction that, with a beard like mine, I must be at least eighty! — and so back to base.

ONE FAITH, ONE CHURCH, ONE LORD

The old lady, God rest her, died the following day, but I was far away by then, too far to return for her funeral. As I continued my visits to the various mission stations and indeed on many another occasion during the past year this old lady has come back into my mind. She made more real for me the truth that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. His faith, his hope, his love working through his church and his sacraments, guiding, healing, supporting and pointing the way from one generation to the next. To Him all men and women are the same and He treats them equally, with love and care. Colour, race, place, status mean nothing to Him. He reached out through his church to that old grandmother in Zimbabwe and to her

family just as he does to a granny in Gloucester, Galway, New York or Rio de Janeiro, or anywhere else for that matter.

There perhaps is food for thought and prayer and conversion of heart during Lent. We are the church. How do we compare with Jesus in treating people as people irrespective of colour and class and all the other elements we allow to blind us? Do I treat other people with fairness, with kindness in thought, word and deed?

WELCOME

Another indelible memory of my visit was the welcome given to me by my Carmelite brethren who really put themselves out to make me feel at home everywhere I went. They put a car at my disposal to visit the various mission stations and I even had a driver in the person of Fr. Tommy Fives from Kinsale. Such a storyteller: he could charm the fish to come out of the water! The brethren said that they were giving me the driver because of my back, but I suspect they knew Fr. Fives was a better driver — and on those tracks and dirt-roads he needed to be!

The Sisters on the stations also made me very welcome — I felt I had known them for years.

RESURRECTION

As you know there were years of civil war there and all that is involved. It is marvellous to see now hospitals, clinics and schools rebuilt and re-equipped, and irrigation and other agricultural developments moving ahead. Much still remains to be done, but it is a tribute to the missionaries, to the sisters, to their helpers and to the people that so much has already been achieved. You have been a part of

this resurrection by your prayers and by your generous support, and we Carmelites thank you most sincerely for it.

Perhaps there is food for thought and prayer in that resurrection, seeing it in the light of the Resurrection of Jesus. Everyone of us has his or her Gethsemane and Calvary in some way or other. Sometimes we forget that just as the Resurrection followed His Gethsemane and Calvary so it will follow ours. Hope and the strength that comes from it should be the keynote of a Christian life. Maybe we could pray about that as our preparation for and celebration of Easter. We all need it.

ROSES

Two days ago when I started this letter to you I said the weather was as uninviting as a cold suet dumpling. Today the sun is shining and I've just seen three brand new rosebuds tucked away in a warm corner — live in Hope! There will be roses in June again.

Till then mind your step and keep warm.

Our Lady keep you,

Edward Higgins O.S.A.

Novena Notices.

OUR COMING NOVENAS—

OUR LADY OF LOURDES
February 11th - February 19th

SAINT JOSEPH
March 11th - March 19th

SAINT JUDE
April 23rd - May 1st

