

CJ Zimbabwean Region

*With the present censorship of the media and the ban on public gatherings it is difficult to discover what is really happening in Zimbabwe. With our own sisters striving to live and work in an increasingly hostile environment **Sr Frances Orchard** went to visit them in early December. This is an extract from her report.*

“Things can’t get any worse” is a phrase that I have heard repeatedly from our sisters in Zimbabwe over the past few years. However, things have got worse, and the outlook is that they will continue to get worse. Ever since the failure to achieve political change in the elections of March 2008 the economic situation in Zimbabwe has spun out of control. The inflation rate is the highest in the world at well over 200 million per cent; the incidence of HIV/AIDS is also the highest in the world; unemployment is at over 80%; most government services have collapsed as teachers, nurses and those employed in public utilities such as water, sanitation disposal, and power are permanently on strike because their wages lag far behind the rate of inflation. To get to work by bus costs more than a person’s weekly wage. One banana now costs Zim \$ 50,000,000 – at least that was the price yesterday!



Most schools and colleges are closed; power cuts are frequent; in Mbizo the sewage is running down the streets; water supplies are irregular and dangerously contaminated – in Harare we were two days without water - and the outbreak of cholera has now become an epidemic. Everywhere one goes there are queues - for petrol, for food, and outside the banks for money. When I arrived the maximum amount of cash a person with an account was allowed to draw from a bank in a day was half a million Zimbabwean dollars. However, the price of a loaf of bread was 2,500,000 Zim dollars! Whilst I was there the government increased the allowance to a hundred million a week with the result that prices shot up and bread was then costing eight million dollars. If life is this difficult for those who have bank accounts it takes little to imagine the economic hardships of the urban and rural poor.

This is the context in which the sisters of the Zimbabwean Region struggle to carry out their ministries. At the Amaveni Children’s Home the number of abandoned children is pushing overall numbers up continually. A few days before my visit the children had found an abandoned baby at the gate of the Home. ‘Blessing’ has now been admitted and given a chance to survive.

At the school in Mbizo and the pre-school the children come to school hungry and finding fees, even at a very low rate, is increasingly difficult. Many families rely on funds sent in by members who have joined the ‘Diaspora’ overseas where now one third of all Zimbabweans live. At Chishawasha feeding the girls at the Sixth Form Hostel is increasingly a problem - especially when the power goes - and the girls have to cook using firewood.

Cooking for the students at Chishawasha



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At St Joseph's Clinic, Chishawasha, the number of patients is increasing continuously as local government medical services fail. Our two sisters working there cannot refer difficult cases to hospitals that are not functioning, and complicated maternities that cannot be referred are resulting in still born babies.

St Joseph's Clinic, Chishawasha

Whilst I was there the sisters were also beginning to treat cholera cases. Cholera is spreading widely because without municipal water supplies people are resorting to digging their own shallow bore holes, and at times these are too close to the sanitation systems. One response to the cholera is that people no longer shake hands on meeting - and at Mass the Sign of Peace is no longer given by physical contact - and everyone is punctilious about washing their hands before eating, that is, if there is any water.

Despite the hardships, or maybe because of them, the Region continues to grow in Zimbabwe. At present there are 21 finally professed members, 12 juniors counting the five who made their first profession on December 6th, four novices, two postulants, and six candidates.

The sisters were determined to make the first profession of five sisters on December 6th a day of celebration for all the parishioners at St Edward's Parish. The three Kwekwe communities had a hand in the preparations of the liturgy, the song and the dance, and preparing lunch for three hundred people. Everyone lent a helping hand. The ingredients for the cake had been bought in Botswana except for the eggs which the convent chickens supplied. Getting a cake to rise is problematic when the electricity fails, and after a near disaster when the power cut out shortly after the cake went into the oven, it was watched all night and coaxed lovingly into rising once more.



The profession Mass lasted three hours in the searing heat, but the joyful singing and dancing, the sound of the drums beating, the swaying of the congregation, helped everyone to forget life's hardships momentarily as they joyfully accompanied the five newly professed sisters. After Mass the mandatory hand washing before lunch in the parish hall was a sombre reminder that cholera haunts the land. The parish women helped to prepare the lunch on a traditional log fire and the cake was solemnly cut for dessert.

In a land without hope it was heartening to find that a religious profession could remind people that their real hope lies not in the politicians but in the risen Lord.

Profession Mass – Offertory Procession

