

## From the Desk of Fr. Jerry

October 13, 2024

Dear Friends,

Several years ago, I received a phone call. The caller identified himself as a priest of Zambia, a landlocked country in Southern Africa. He was studying in a two-year graduate program at Catholic Theological Union in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. "I want to go back to my country as a priest," he told me. "Would you be my spiritual companion while I am here?"

Fr Wilfred told me later his parents wanted to give him the African name "Bwezani," but the priest who baptized him told them that wasn't the name of a saint. The priest gave him the name Wilfred.



Fr. Wilfred and I met at least once a month for the next two years. One day I joked that I would visit Zambia when he became a Bishop, something I fully expected would happen. Two years later he wasn't yet a Bishop, but a close advisor of one. I decided to make the long journey. During Holy Week and the Triduum in 2014, my eyes were opened to a situation of great need. Upon my return home, a boy scout seeking the rank of Eagle approached me about a service project. The result was a bike drive for Africa.

The first missionaries to Zambia established a parish in the Luangwa River Valley of Eastern Zambia, but they found the conditions harsh and later abandoned their mission. The Catholic people of the area felt abandoned and complained to the bishop. The bishop made a commitment to start new parishes there. That is when Fr. Wilfred became pastor of the new parish called Chikwa where the traditional tribal chief resides.

Priests in poor African dioceses receive no salary or vehicle. Still, they serve parishes covering wide areas that consist of multiple outstations, even up to a dozen or more, and smaller Christian communities. The priest visits all of these by bike, motor scooter, or sturdy vehicle, if he is lucky to have one and if he finds a way to pay for the gas. There are no paved roads. When the majority of folks are subsistence farmers they are unable to provide adequate "vuna," the material support of the priest.

When I retired, I established "Friends of Chikwa Parish NFP" to continue the effort to support Fr. Wilfred's mission and the building of the new Holy Cross Church at Chikwa. Although the response has remained consistently strong, the need remains great.

The video presentation and discussion planned for this coming Tuesday evening at 7:00 PM in O'Gara Center resulted from a "Vision Trip" sponsored by World Vision, Zambia in August. The video gives a "before and after" view of life with and without water and electricity. Please come and see.

Fr. Jerry Gunderson