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Living together is not for the fainthearted

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We are known as the Spiritans at Silveira. There are fifteen of us, thirteen young men preparing for final commitment to Spiritan mission and life, and two formators. We come from Zimbabwe, neighbouring Malawi, Zambia and Ireland.

Silveira House is a Jesuit centre for development and leadership training. It was once a busy place with many courses directed towards the empowerment of ordinary people and the building up of church and society in Zimbabwe. But the current economic madness that shapes much of Zimbabwe life today has paralyzed many of its programmes. It is very difficult to obtain food at affordable prices.

In keeping with the principle that you should not do alone what you can do with others, the Spiritans have joined with Redemptorists, Franciscans and Carmelites in forming a school of theology, Holy Trinity College in Nazareth House. The Nazareth Sisters, many of whom are elderly and suffering from the current dire economic conditions in Zimbabwe, have leased half of their very fine building to our school.
Holy Trinity College

There are thirty-two students in all, a permanent staff of four and fifteen visiting lecturers. The late Fr. Breifne Walker from Ireland was with us for a Seminar Week. He led the first and second years in an intensive workshop on the social teachings of the church. The third and fourth years had their own seminar on Social Communications conducted by Nigerian Spiritan Fr. Sylvester Igboanyika.

Holy Trinity College describes itself as a community of life-long, theological learning and it is a happy community with wonderful staff-student interaction. It strives to inculcate love for theological reflection that will sustain its students, many of whom are candidates for the priesthood, in their future lives and ministry.

Spiritan formation is more than academic training. Our community living is a formative experience, especially for the two formators, Fr. Sylvester Kansimbi from Malawi and me. Living together teaches the Spiritan way of being and doing. This is not for the fainthearted, but I find it wonderful to be part of something new and vibrant in the life of the Congregation.

Lessons in self-reliance

Each day provides its own challenges with pennies carefully counted to repair a puncture, buy a few beers for our Saturday community night, and get medicine when one is sick. The unforeseen expenses trouble us most and they are on the increase in the context of scarce resources and the impossible inflation rate, currently at 231 million per cent! The difficulties of living in Zimbabwe today teach valuable lessons in self-reliance.

Weekends are occasions for pastoral engagement with the local church. We meet face to face with real poverty through the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

The local secondary school is a microcosm of public education in Zimbabwe. The teachers are discouraged by a wage that does not even cover their transportation. So there are very few teachers. Two of our young Spiritans are there two afternoons a week doing what they can. I know that their work with the final year students in science and math is greatly valued. In the midst of overwhelming gloom we are at least able to make a little light of hope shine forth. The rumour is that there will be no public examinations this year as the resources are just not available. Another rumour is that army personnel will supervise and mark the examinations.

Hunger and disease

In the absence of any credible national news there are many rumours, some of a frightening nature. The nearby maximum-security prison, Chikurubi, has stopped giving food to prisoners with the hungry staff taking what is available for themselves. It is said that the vegetables are boiled and strained, with the watery soup going to the prisoners and the vegetables to the wardens. Disease is widespread and the deaths are many. Families are unable to come and claim the bodies of their loved ones. Their meagre resources are reserved for the living.

Our community prayer always embraces the needs of those we encounter in our pastoral work. The number of young deaths is frightening. The absence of antiretroviral and other drugs, poor nutrition, the lack of sanitation and clean drinking water are ever-present realities. And so we pray.

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The people themselves know how to pray. In the midst of great human suffering they find a way to retain hope and discover joy. Our liturgy is a noble defiance of despair and death as we celebrate the mystery of life. The sufferings of Jesus are well understood and the anticipation of his resurrection is something very real.

Across the road, the building of our new Spiritan House is inching towards completion. We look forward to living in our own home. Many hardships lie ahead of us, but we are equal to the challenge. Our greatest strength is the community spirit ever at work among us. We know that we are privileged in the midst of great need, even as we too taste what it is to do without. It is not easy to study in the dark and without food. But the invariable response to the latest shortage is a smile and an encouraging word. Tomorrow it will be better!

The road ahead will not be easy for these young Spiritans. But a road walked in solidarity is a joyous way. It is a way that leads to fullness of life.

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