Struggling with Chichewa: A Great Challenge!

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land is a playground for most of our children. After school, they come to play football and volleyball. They make many small pitches to accommodate their several teams. My hope was to chat and joke with the children as I always did at home. But that language barrier!

Learning Chichewa

Malawi is officially English-speaking, but the local language Chichewa is most commonly used. And without it, I'm afraid one has little or nothing to offer to the Malawi Church. In fact, a confrere, attempting to encourage me to learn the local language, told me that the use of English in the Church had been banned in Malawi. I had no reason to doubt him since even the National Anthem was sung in Chichewa. But later I realized that at least two out of the thirty-seven parishes in the Archdiocese of Blantyre have Mass in English on Sundays.

My teachers

Some teachers at Blantyre secondary school began giving me language lessons to enable me to start reading the Mass. After their introduction, reading gave me few problems. But speaking was a hard nut to crack. When Fr. Eugene Oguamanam, CSSp, one of the lecturers at the Balaka Intercongregational Seminary visited Ndirande for a weekend, he gave me an insight: "Don't feel shy to speak. Formulate your own Chichewa and speak it. People will learn to understand you. That's what I did while learning Zulu in South Africa."

Our Catechist helps translate a short sermon for me every Sunday. And I make sure I read it as faithfully as possible. Sometimes people get disappointed as my sermons finish just when they are about to get a point or two. But some have come to love them very much. They say, "Fr. Dominic's Masses are brief and nice." At first I used to feel sad when I discovered that I had failed to pronounce a certain word correctly. But now I am growing a thick skin. I don't worry. I console myself with the thought that even the English language has varieties of pronunciation. Someday people will say, "This is Fr. Dominic's Chichewa."