

Claire's Pilgrimage Journal

Prologue

14 June 2008, Milwaukee

Three days before our departure; I'm mostly packed, shopped for...medications readied. I'm feeling a sense of loss of things familiar—my music, my surroundings, my own bed. I think I will miss my car and the independence it brings.

The minutia involved in the preparation is behind me, and in their wake, a sense of disquieting calm. Maybe others adapt to change better than I, or maybe others have a richer sense of adventure.

Regardless, this experience touches on the universal experience of what happens when one is brought out of one's comfort zone. Maybe one reaction is anger at the disruption, perhaps coming from a sense of entitlement—"I deserve my comfort zone." I'll admit to this. I'm a big fan of my comfort zone. The problem with that is that people outside of my comfort zone haven't been able to play on a level playing field as me. As a healthy, native English speaking Westerner, I have privileges I'm not even aware of.

That's not to say that the good things I enjoy here are inherently unjust or illusory in some way. I believe they're good, but it's not the full picture. I don't know why it's not the full picture, but I'm conscious that it's not.

15 June 2008, Milwaukee

Two days before our departure. I ask myself sometimes how it came to be that I have become tethered to the people of Uganda so quickly and so intensely. One answer, of course, is that it's required of me because of my responsibilities at the parish. But then I think of the Christian story and how we believe in a God who tethered Godself to humanity so completely that God was born a human person.

If I believe in that God, and if I bear the image of that God through my Christian initiation, then I am an image also of that devotion to humanity. And that is what

brings me to Uganda. So, I'll stretch out my hands and be bound and led to where I otherwise would not go.

I realize that I haven't yet opened my heart completely to that experience. My time and energy and working hours I certainly have devoted to the experience, but I gave my mind—not my heart—over to

"...you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

John 21:18b

being tethered. So, my prayer this evening: "take my heart, outstretched, open, and vulnerable. Take me to the places you, not I, will have me go. And, as you gave up your heavenly comfort zone to become human, let me follow you that I may lead others to you."

16 June 2008, Milwaukee

I've been preparing for this pilgrimage for so long that some of the anxiety I have is grieving the loss of anticipating the experience and accepting life-after-the-trip. It is impossible to anticipate the unknown, and I need to give up trying.

Perhaps this is true about the pilgrimage from death to that which lies beyond. We have some vague images of heaven, but so much is unknown. What will we feel, if anything? How will God look? Will there be language? Will I be conscious of my earthly life?

We have no way of knowing, except through the knowledge of faith. We can only walk as pilgrims, trusting in the One on the other side of the darkness.

The Pilgrimage

17 June 2008, in flight, Chicago to Brussels

I learned not long ago, through the National Geographic Human Genome Project, that millions of people descended from ancestor R1b who emigrated from East Africa however many thousands of years ago. From there, he and his descendants migrated through the Middle East, Central Asia, and Northern Europe, before crossing the Atlantic. So now, in a way, this is a pilgrimage home.

A group of 29 adults from a non-denominational church is on our flight to Brussels and then Entebbe, the international airport near Uganda's capitol, Kampala. They will be helping build an orphanage near Kampala.

The mix of front-of-the-mouth Flemish and back-of-the-mouth French add linguistic diversity to our otherwise, thankfully, uneventful flight.

18 June 2008, in flight, Brussels to Entebbe

There is a surprising number of young children on this flight with their parents. It makes me wonder if families live part of the year in Europe and part of the year in Africa.

Ethiopia looks to be a very mountainous place. Flying over Sudan, there is cloud cover and turbulence over Khartoum. Metaphor? The sun is setting far in the west—West Africa, that is.

The travel has worn us all down. Erin is trying her best Flemish. Fr. Dennis and Fr. Jim have passed the last several thousand kilometers playing cards. I've been blessed with having been able to sleep a little. My groupmates are not so lucky.

18 June 2008, Kampala

We finally made it. Fr. Arthur was waiting for us at the airport, as planned, along with our driver, a very friendly and efficient gentleman in his middle years. Fr. Arthur, also about 40-something, is soft-spoken and efficient. He has a purposeful walk, and I think we'll get along well.

"You are most welcome here," he said as he shook our hands.

Last night, on the road between Entebbe and Kampala, we saw people—mostly men—gathering in the parking lots and courtyards of the small stores lining the road. They transacted business in candlelight on small tables in the courtyards. The same road was also periodically lined with well-lit gas stations and signs for Nokia cell phones.

Fr. Arthur explained that shop owners keep late hours because residents nearby are home only in the evening. Someday the internet may change that, with people buying and selling goods and services online from their own homes with the click of a mouse. When that happens, whole centuries will be by-passed. That time may not be far off; Fr. Arthur, Fr. Augustine, and I have done most of our communicating via the internet.

A sprawling UN base also lined the route between Entebbe and Kampala. Its satellite dishes, military vehicles marked "UN," light blue flag, and the vastness of its infrastructure gave me a feeling of security.

The night air is moist and sweet, with the distant aroma of burning coal. The crickets and flower-fragranced air remind me of summer nights in southern California.

19 June 2008, Kampala

I awoke this morning to the sounds of birds, car traffic, a soccer game, a dog barking, a rooster crowing, and Muslim call to prayer. The morning air is filled with car exhaust. A swarm of school children pass nearby. It's not yet light outside, and I miss the long hours of summer daylight I've grown accustomed to in the North.

I look out of the honeycomb weave of the mosquito netting around my bed. My room here at Pope Paul VI Memorial Hotel is furnished adequately enough with a desk, chair, night stand, closet, and bed. The bathroom seems to have what it needs—a shower, sink, mirror, toilet, and toilet paper. Nothing more. The shower doesn't have a shower curtain.

Pope Paul VI was the first pope to visit Uganda, and the hotel is located near the cathedral and Archdiocesan offices. Weathered pictures of Pope Paul VI and local bishops hang on the walls of the lobby and the hotel's restaurant where we eat breakfast. All the hotel staff dress in crisp uniforms. Ugandans seem to take pride in their dress, in what they do, and in who they are.

English is everyone's second language here, after the local language, of which there are 50-something. In Kampala the local language is Luganda, beautifully constructed of (by my count) five vowel sounds—oh, oo, ah, ee, and eh—and a handful of consonants—b, d, g, k, l, m, n, r, s, t, w, y, and z (based on what I've casually observed). A creative blend of consonants, like "mw" and "nj," throw a challenge into the otherwise straight-forward sounds of the language.

There are amazingly enormous birds here. One looks like a prehistoric stork, as large as a school child, with a tuft of red under its lopping-shears bill. Another is a grey extra-large-size wading bird.

Breakfast this morning consists of off-white scrambled eggs, bread with margarine and marmalade, passion fruit juice, coffee, and tea. After breakfast we headed into the city center to change money. On the way, we passed the market where piles and piles of products were being sold by the side of the street—lumber, doors, axles, refrigerators, tiles, bananas, fertilizer, gravel. I asked Fr. Arthur if there was a plan to widen the dangerously congested streets, and he explained that shop owners generally own their own property, and for the government to take over the shops, they'd have to compensate the shop owners, and the government doesn't have the money to do that.

After changing money, we drove to the Catholic cathedral. Along the way, we saw a huge new mosque and a beautiful Hindu temple. Tons of people line the streets of Kampala and are dressed in what Westerners would consider respectable, conservative dress—pants and dress shirts for men, skirts and blouses or dresses for women. There is an occasional woman in a sari, and we saw two women in burkas.

The pleasant and peaceful cathedral complex is located on Lubaga, one of Kampala's hills. The Archdiocesan offices and the Archbishop's residence are neat and ornamented with tropical trees and plants. A sign commemorating a 1993 visit by Pope John Paul II is staked prominently on the main lawn.

I take particular note of the roof of the cathedral which had been leaking and for which a mission appeal had been done at St. Robert by a priest from Kampala. The roof looks beautiful, and I couldn't imagine a leaky roof on any structure in what I hear is the rainy season here.

The cathedral interior has a decidedly Central European feel—clean, stark walls; vaulted ceilings; brick pillars; wooden pews and kneelers; and an altar retrofitted for Vatican II liturgical norms. I wonder if an East-Central European architect was involved in the planning.

The statuary and art inside the cathedral was more Western and Roman than I had anticipated. Given Uganda's proximity to Egypt, I would have expected some Coptic influences. Fr. Arthur explained

that the Catholic Church in Uganda has been mostly influenced by the missionaries who came (French and British initially). Devotion to Mary, the Ugandan Martyrs, and St. Therese were evident in the cathedral's art. With the exception of a few postcards with images of the Ugandan Martyrs, all of the religious art in the cathedral gift shop was European/Western.

We then toured the Archdiocesan Museum—three cramped rooms filled with the most random and sometimes the most precious memorabilia: huge tomes of French-Luganda translations handwritten by the first missionaries, commemorative chalices and photographs, the last soda enjoyed by a beloved bishop before he died, a page of manuscript of a letter of St. Peter, an elephant skull, antiquated office equipment, and old vestments. There were moments when I felt like I was on the fourth floor of the Parish Center in our parish archives room. Then I realized that this was their Archdiocesan museum. A huge drum and taxidermied lung fish brought me back to Uganda.

Neither the French-Luganda dictionaries nor the page of codex (I presume a gift to the Archdiocese) were in a protected, climatized environment.

We then headed back to the hotel for lunch—a heaping spoonful of cooked mashed plantains called “matoke,” rice, a thick polenta made from white corn called “posho” (a word derived, we’re told, from the English “porridge”), potato wedges, a meat gravy, a pea-carrot sauce, red cabbage salad, and watermelon for dessert.

The afternoon had in store for us one of the highlights, in my view, of our time in Uganda—a visit with the head of Catholic Relief Services in Uganda. CRS is the foreign aid ministry of US Catholics. For years I’ve been publicizing CRS’s Operation Rice Bowl. Now I was hearing firsthand what those funds raised were actually doing on the ground. Jack Norman, the head of CRS in Kampala, is a wiry, pragmatic, articulate gentleman of about 50. He described the many projects CRS is engaged in from the dangerous northern districts to the city of Kampala itself. Later I saw a map in his office with pushpins showing where the many CRS projects were spread throughout the country. No area is very far away from a CRS initiative. A few days later, we saw a CRS van at a hospital outside of Masaka.

Sitting on a porch overlooking suburban Kampala where CRS’s offices are located, Jack explained to our group that the highest rates of HIV/AIDS are now between married couples. Along with helping to supply antiretroviral medications to infected patients, promoting marital fidelity (and abstinence among teens) is a priority for CRS in fighting HIV/AIDS.

The recent practice of young women marrying older men is a problem CRS is trying to combat. Such

arrangements are seen by the young women as their ticket out of poverty, but long-term they benefit no one. A few days later, we saw a billboard with a picture of a middle-aged man and the caption, “You wouldn’t let your daughter be with this man, so why are you with his?”

Jack explained to us that almost everyone in Uganda knows someone who has died of AIDS, and everyone has seen trucks carrying coffins. CRS assumes under-reporting of HIV/AIDS everywhere, since numeric accuracy is not a cultural value and since in some places there is still a stigma about HIV/AIDS. Some people feel pressured not to disclose because they could lose their job.

Agricultural initiatives are CRS’s next highest priority. Jack described a seed fair event organized by CRS in which local farmers are given vouchers to buy seeds that fit their soil conditions. The seed sellers then cash in the vouchers to CRS for reimbursement. These seed fairs respect farmers’ particular growing conditions and needs, promote the growing of quality seed, and inject capital into the local market.

When asked if seed was available, Jack told us, people said that almost anything is available; they just don’t have access to it. This difference between access and availability framed the rest of our pilgrimage. We started seeing our ready access to so many things stateside and the lack of access even to the most basic things here in Uganda. Even my access to knowledge and information became apparent to me. There are improvements in Uganda, to be sure. Cell phones are rather inexpensive even by Ugandan standards, and the internet gives more and more access to ideas. Nevertheless, access even to water is sketchy at times.

“We simply won the lottery,” Jack reflected, referring to North Americans and Europeans, “and happened to be born where we were.” That was a sobering perspective but helpful in piecing all these experiences together.

As we left, we snapped a group photo and exchanged business cards. I was happy to have the connection with someone who has gone before us.

Although we had hoped to visit Cardinal Wamala (the retired Archbishop of Kampala who visited St. Robert in spring of 2006), he was out of the country while we were there. In his stead, we visited a cheerful retired monsignor, sitting in a wheelchair and dressed in a white cassock, at the retired priests’ house.

After the rather intense first day, our group kicked back in the evening at a pizza restaurant. Fr. Arthur pointed out a few times that Uganda is like two countries right next to each other—in my words, the well-off and the destitute. The occasional armed guard in front of restaurants and banks I’m starting to get used to.

The night air is filled with the scent of burning leaves and, at least in my room back at the hotel, bug spray. I saw a few mosquitoes in my bathroom, but between the bug spray, mosquito netting, and malaria medication, I feel protected.

The sky today was a canvas of light blue with white cumulus clouds in the foreground. The "*Land of the Lost birds*" (Marabou storks) that we now call pterodactyls circle overhead continually, even over the most dense urban areas. They're so huge I've mistaken them for airplanes on more than one occasion. They're called "kalole" in Luganda, a fittingly graceful and friendly name.

Crickets are singing me to sleep, and I think I will have a hard time leaving next week.

20 June 2008, Kampala

Our host, Fr. Arthur, took us first thing this morning to the tombs of the kings of Buganda. The kings are buried in a large grass structure which is also the palace of the kings. According to local culture, kings never die; they simply "disappear into the forest." Therefore, the structure can be both the palace and the tomb simultaneously. (The current reigning king has a separate residence in the city.) The palace-tomb is located within a courtyard about twice the size of St. Robert's parking lot. Around the perimeter of the courtyard are small (one room?) houses in which some of the 84 wives of the king live. Some of the wives take turns as custodians of these more public dwellings; the others reside in houses outside the perimeter of the courtyard.

Every woman (and also every man) belongs to the king, and I suppose that being a wife of the king, even if you had to share him, was (and is?) an honor.

Before entering the courtyard, we pass through another grass and reed dwelling inhabited by an older gentleman who needs the help of a walking stick. The man is dressed like a Jedi knight from *Star Wars* and belongs to the water buffalo clan. The water buffalo clan is responsible for "carrying the king."

Each of the 52 clans has a particular responsibility within the Kingdom of Buganda, the territory in which Kampala lies. The monkey clan, for example, is known for caring for the young, and, when each of us in our group informally adopted a clan, the obstetrician in our group adopted the monkey clan. Enamored by the pterodactyls, I adopted the bird clan, trying to watch over my little flock of six.

After purchasing tickets to the museum-tomb-palace, we were given a tour by a young man whose interest in local history was quite evident.

"You are most welcome here," he starts. As we entered the palace, we were asked to take off our shoes, then sit with legs bent to one side on mats made of palm fibers in the middle of the palace. One wife of

the king was working in small rooms on each side of the middle of the palace where we were sitting.

Our young docent outlined the succession of kings and the political history of Buganda. There certainly were some violent periods of Ugandan history. Sharp metal spears lined a display of framed photographs of the kings. The kings themselves are buried there in the palace behind cloths made from the bark of a particular local tree. This same material is still used ceremonially and has made its way into some tourist souvenirs. It was the main clothing before Muslim and Asian traders came a few hundred years ago and before Western explorers and missionaries came in the 1800's.

As we left the palace, a school group was coming in. They were silent and respectful, even though the ratio of adults to children was less than what we would have. Behind the school children I noticed a taxidermied panther behind a glass case. I sure wouldn't want to encounter one of those live!

One woman in our group was given a skirt to wear on the tour since she hadn't worn one that day. I started feeling grateful for the rights of women that are honored back home. Here it seems that women's rights are less honored, at least historically. At one time, the king could demand the daughters of certain men. Thankfully, I personally feel respected here, even if I'm expected to wear skirts most of the time.

While I was happy to have a church event next, the visit to the shrine of the Ugandan martyrs revealed at least as much violence. In the late 1880's, 22 Catholic and 23 Anglican Christians, mostly teenagers and young adults in the king's court, posed a threat to the authority of the king who, over the course of two years, killed them using brutal methods. Some were burned alive over slow fires; others were dismembered. The killings had the reverse effect as what the king had hoped for, and the martyrdom of the young Christians was the mother's milk needed to give birth to a young, strong church in Uganda.

On many occasions, our group was impressed by what seems to be a vibrant, young Catholic church. There is about one priest for every 3,500 to 20,000 Catholics, depending on the location. Catholics in Uganda don't always have access to the Eucharist, even on Sundays, but, since they don't have access to many other things, it seems to make them that much more devout when they are able to go to Mass.

We met several priests throughout our visit, most of them in their 30's and 40's. Catholic-run schools are packed beyond capacity. I got the impression that tons more church workers are needed in every area. Some programs for lay formation are set up, but with transportation and the infrastructure being what they are in Uganda, my guess is that training and ministerial formation is sketchy and concentrated on

priests who might be able to set up training programs of their own.

There is a faint hope discussed by some that Pope Benedict will visit Uganda. I earnestly hope he does. The people of Uganda deserve it. I'm sure there's corruption (Uganda's #1 problem on many people's list), but many people seem to be working very hard to build up all good things in Uganda. Yellow and white, the colors of the Vatican, were prominent on Catholic buildings. I saw at least as much yellow and white throughout our visit as I did the red, black, and yellow of the Ugandan flag.

The property surrounding the shrine in Namugongo is built up for pilgrims for the June 3rd feast day. An outdoor sanctuary was built in the middle of an artificial pond for the feast day Mass. Pilgrims walk from all over Uganda and even from Kenya and Tanzania and camp out in Namugongo for the feast day. After having participated in two walking pilgrimages to Czestochowa, Poland, where roads are paved and sidewalks at least exist, I can't imagine what it would be like to walk even across town to Namugongo. Perhaps if I grew up here, I'd get the hang of it. Still, I can't help but wonder what could come about if Czestochowa partnered with Namugongo to build a pilgrim hostel or something like that.

After a visit to a gift shop that seemed cleaned out after the recent barrage of pilgrims, we headed for lunch in "the nice part of town." We had delicious Chinese food, and, as I used chopsticks in Africa, I reflected on how small the world has become.

In the afternoon Fr. Arthur took us to visit briefly two of his nieces, one of whom lost a mother and the other lost a mother and a father to AIDS. Both teenage girls were very shy, but who wouldn't be around foreign visitors? Getting there over the pot-hole-filled dirt roads was an adventure—well, it was an adventure in my mind. It probably was routine for Fr. Arthur and our driver. Fr. Arthur helps to support both his nieces, and I saw him slip each girl a few thousand shillings—a few dollars.

Later in the day, Fr. Arthur took us to the National Museum of Uganda, a building that would be on a par with a small city museum in the US. Nevertheless, the exhibits and the docent were very informative. We learned more about the political history, the culture, and the natural history of Uganda. I learned that spears had names in Luganda, depending on the type of spear it was. I also learned that women who did not bear a child for the king were buried alive with the king. I started counting the ways someone could be killed—burned alive, buried alive, speared, thrown to wild dogs, dismembered. Either I'll sleep very well tonight or I won't sleep at all.

One exhibit that stuck in my mind at the museum was a model of a priestess whose job it was to

help women be fertile by giving them some kind of herbal concoction. The priestess sat very dignified, with a bark-fiber blanket around both shoulders and a round cap on her head. I wondered if she and the king were allies and if she was respected in society.

Another display showed skulls of various pre-human mammals and a model of Lucy. I remembered my R1b ancestor and felt a kinship with Ugandans as I looked at the bones behind the glass. I generally have found it easy to feel at home among Ugandans. Maybe it's because I talk often with Fr. Augustine and Fr. John Mary at St. Robert and hear them speaking Luganda in the kitchen every once in a while. Or maybe I know deep inside that we're all cousins—just distant cousins.

One wing of the museum had local musical instruments which our docent and her colleague played for us. One played a large goat-skin drum, and the other sang and played a type of stringed instrument. A couple people from our group purchased CD's of this traditional music. I was glad such an opportunity existed to buy a CD. At the end of our visit to the museum, we stopped at the museum gift shop and then a private, pricier boutique outside.

Driving from place to place, we have seen curious signs which apparently have lost something in translation:

"This compound under armed guard 23 hours/day"
 "Jesus Christ Salon"
 "New Creation Supermarket"
 "Blessed Salon for Men and Women"
 "Smart and Modern Supermarket"
 "Mummy Beauty Salon"
 "Hygiene Butcher"
 "Food Blood"
 "Decent Photos with Flames"
 "Newton New Generation Standard House"

Well, so long as locals know what's there, that's what matters, I guess. It's all about access. We also saw a Muslim butcher and an Evangelical Christian bookstore in the same building and a sign in front of a house saying "Beware of Rabid Dogs."

The soil here, a reddish "burnt umber," contrasts strikingly with the vibrant green, floppy-leaved banana trees. We drive back to our hotel in our 14-passenger van, very tired, and enjoy a favorite local beer, Nile Special. Fr. Augustine arrives tonight.

21 June 2008, Kampala

I woke up this morning to local pop music on a radio and a car engine being revved. Shortly thereafter began the rooster crowing and the dog barking. Muslim morning prayer has just begun drifting over a drowsy Kampala. It mixes with what seems like hundreds of birds warbling and cawing and chirping.

The sky over Kampala is crowded with tall trees that really have no reason not to grow taller, the occasional skyscraper, and smoke from smoldering

charcoal and garbage. Pterodactyls fill in any empty space. There's also a bird the size of a duck and the shape of a heron with the caw of a crow. Yesterday afternoon brought a generous amount of rain. The purple-grey rainclouds were all too familiar to our group, but plants here needed water, and the rain helps keep the dust down.

There seems to be, as in most places outside North America, a different sense of personal space here. This I find especially true with traffic. The space we leave between cars, trucks, motorcycles, bikes, and pedestrians is much wider than the death-courting millimeters here.

Uneven surfaces are everywhere. We've encountered uneven steps, uneven pavement, uneven tiling in bathrooms, and where there might be even surfaces, there could be entire holes. I have a random, unsealed-off pipe in my bathroom, and we've all learned to avoid the uncovered ditch between the main hotel building and the cafeteria where we take most of our meals. But the big picture is—I have a bathroom and a place to sleep and eat good food. I feel my expectations lowering and a new sense of gratefulness settle in. Some streets have curbs and are paved, but most streets are one-lane dirt roads with two- or three-foot drop-offs on either side for drainage. Remarkably, we haven't seen or smelled sewage here. With the steep drop-offs and uneven roads, though, strolling a baby here would be impossible.

At one point we ask Fr. Arthur about malaria prevention, and he said that it's quite difficult. He explained that most mosquito bites come at night when people are sleeping and that, even if people had mosquito nets, they don't have beds to put the netting around. Most people sleep on mats on the ground.

After buying some food for lunch at a Western-style supermarket inside a mall, every bit as clean and polished as a mall back home, we spent the day in Buyege, the hub-parish of St. Jude where we're building the school. In Uganda, each parish consists of sub-parishes, often further divided into "base communities." St. Jude is a sub-parish in the village of Baakijulula (where Fr. Augustine is from), and its hub is Our Lady of the Assumption in Buyege. Fr. Arthur is the pastor. Buyege is an hour or so drive west-southwest of Kampala, through vast papyrus swamps.

Incidentally, we're told that papyrus swamps spontaneously combust when too much of some gas in the water combines with sun-crisp papyrus fronds above water heated just to the right temperature by the sun. Temperatures are generally between 68 and 74 Fahrenheit year-round.

Along the sides of the road, at water level in the swamps, there are peaceful water lilies with lavender flowers, oblivious to the commotion of our bouncing around on the dirt roads. The papyrus is tall—taller

than a person—and bright green. They're used to make mats but not paper, as they were in ancient Egypt.

Buyege seems to be a village consisting of four schools (two of which are boarding schools), a church, a rectory, a convent, and a health clinic. There seem to be very few houses, but I'm sure they're there, since Fr. Arthur's parish encompasses a vast territory with 40,000 Catholics. We were astounded at this number and asked Fr. Arthur for clarification. Yes, he said, 40,000...Catholics. He and an associate, Fr. Charles, are the only priests in this region, and they are assigned two seminarians, John Vianney and John Mary.

We met the president of their parish council, a man full of life and with a continual smile named Bonaventure. His English is outstanding, but, since he is a teacher by profession, he taught me a few words in Luganda—and held me accountable for remembering them. Bonaventure is very friendly, someone very easy to get along with (which is probably why he's the president of parish council), and has a continual twinkle in his eye. He is quick to notice things and also to share things. He helped break down some barriers which we needed, stepping into the reality that is Buyege.

"You are most welcome," each person says as they shake our hands, either with a Western handshake or the local, three-fold "hand-thumb-hand" shake.

The community of sisters in Buyege numbers about 14 and look after one or two of the schools there and about 14 aspirants—teenagers interested in religious life. It's hard not to wonder if the girls are sincere and capable of the challenges of religious life or if the convent offers them food, a bed, and the hope of education. Regardless, I prayed for them as we briefly toured the convent and met the sisters in charge. By this time I was eager to see women in leadership, and the sisters struck me as strong, caring, capable leaders. I guess you have to be under these circumstances.

Allow me to describe Buyege. The rectory building had dingy, dirty rooms, with two bathrooms that had flush toilets but water all over the floor. I would describe the bathroom as filthy, not due to any laziness, but due to lack of access to building materials that would keep the facility clean. If the floor wasn't a dirt floor, it was close to it. There was a mirror and a sink with running (cold) water.

Outside there was a small courtyard that connected two buildings, maybe the rectory with a series of meeting rooms. Uneven surfaces are everywhere.

After formal welcome speeches in a room in which impala antlers were mounted on one of the walls and fresh flowers were placed on a table, we toured the church, Our Lady of the Assumption. Liturgically it had what it needed. Capacity was several hundred, and the design was in the shape of a cross, similar to particular

churches I've seen in Milwaukee, San Diego, and Ireland. The walls were dirty and could really use a cleaning. I thought of what a great joint youth ministry project that could be. The furnishings in the church looked like something from the 1920's, and if someone had told me that the building hadn't been used in decades, with the exception of fresh flowers in the sanctuary, I would have believed it.

Outside the church, two enormous rain barrels collected rainwater from the gutters on the church. The barrels had been donated and probably constitute the main source of water for the parish buildings and maybe the convent and surrounding schools. Purification? That's a different story. I assume the water is boiled, but the only stoves I've seen in Buyege are charcoal burners.

The first school we visit is St. Michael, the most recently-built but in the worst condition. It's a boarding school for girls and boys, about age 8 to 14-ish. The classrooms are essentially only rooms under a roof with a semblance of walls around them. If there was instructional material, it had been put away. No visual or tactile stimuli were apparent at all. Steps and uneven surfaces everywhere.

We rounded the corner from a classroom building to the kitchen and dorms. There I saw the worst conditions that I could only describe as squalor. The kitchen was essentially a small, dirty outbuilding with a large charcoal burner inside. No doors or screens kept bugs and animals away. There were no chairs or counters or storage, and the floor was dirt. To think that food for human consumption was prepared in that building—shack—was a disgusting thought.

Just a couple steps away from the kitchen—"kitchen"—was the girls' dorm. We were shown inside a room that was only slightly larger than a walk-in closet. Two triple bunks lined the walls. The smell was stifling. Girls in early adolescence with no possibility for clean sanitation and hygiene just is heartbreaking to me. What future do they have? What do they hope for? Do they allow themselves to hope?

Maybe that building had been designed for only one person per room. Even then it would be small. I'm numb with pity. Part of me is angry that adults let kids live that way. But a bigger part of me knows that they wouldn't if they had a choice.

At the end of our visit there, about 50 of the students gathered to greet us. Amazingly, most of them had clean school uniforms, but only some of them smiled. It's hard to imagine how a child could smile at all under those circumstances. They're stronger people than me. They wave at us, and Bonaventure coaches me in saying good-bye, "mweraba."

At the second school we visited, seven teachers (counting the headmistress) take care of 351 students. We step inside the headmistress' office, a room about

the size of a bathroom in the US. Six of us barely fit inside. We sign the customary Guest Book, and the headmistress says, "You are most welcome here."

There is a desk, a few chairs, and a filing cabinet. I stand next to the filing cabinet and let the others take the chairs. Posters with charts of chores and days of the week, school rules, and other administrative notes cover every surface in her office. She outlines the history of and basic information about the school, then talks about the biggest needs—electricity and fumigation against bats. In the background I had heard some chirping, but didn't realize until the headmistress nodded to the plastic bin on top of the filing cabinet as she talked about the bats, that the chirping was coming from the bin on top of the filing cabinet by my head. I stifle my inner squeal.

As much as I have as an American, part of me resents the constant request for money. Most Americans are three paychecks away from homelessness, and I wanted to impress upon them that we have poverty, too, in our streets and rural areas. But I'm conscious that I use the word "poverty" to refer to what I see in the US and "squalor" for what I see here.

At the third school, St. Henry's, which is in very close walking distance from the other two schools and the church, there was noticeable improvement in the conditions. Twenty-nine teachers care for 425 girls at this boarding school. We're greeted by the deputy headmaster since the headmistress was away. The students were a little more outgoing, and more students were wearing uniforms...and smiles. The deputy headmaster described some of the programs at the school, including a variety of sports and "computer lab." (I would have liked to have seen the computer lab.) Their MDD (Music, Drumming, and Dance) class was soon going to be going on to a competition. Their student body president—a girl of about 14, dressed in a clean, cream-colored dress—gave a speech, and afterwards she came up to a few members of our group and told us that she'd like to be a doctor. "You are most welcome here," she said.

School #4, St. Theresa, founded in 1952, gave us the biggest welcome. St. Theresa's is run by the sisters in Buyege, had at one time been an all-girls school, and is now co-ed. The trend pedagogically in Uganda is to integrate boys and girls in co-ed schools.

With 800 students, St. Theresa is proudly the best school (I presume academically) in the sub-county of Wakiso. Of the 800 students, 200 are able to pay for lunch. Some students help raise livestock and grow their own food. En route between schools, we had seen some neatly-tended gardens with tomatoes, Japanese-style eggplant, occasional cabbage and watermelon, and the ubiquitous sweet potato, cassava, and banana,

growing in the reddish, sometimes sandy, sometimes clay-like soil.

In a courtyard between two long buildings, about 50 children in blue uniforms stood neatly in rows, with Sister Headmistress—a rather large woman in a medium-blue habit—nearby, welcoming us with a speech (beginning, “You are most welcome here”). We guests sat on an assortment of wooden chairs across the courtyard from the students and Sister Headmistress.

Some of the students sat at near drums, and after the formal welcome speeches, the drumming began. Soon, some of the students started to dance in a circle between us and the students assembled. We all clapped in time with the beat. I was seated next to Mr. Bonaventure who leaned over and said, “and now you dance.” It took two more proddings on his part to get me up there, but when I did, the children’s faces exploded with smiles and laughter. The other two women in our group joined me, and we danced in a circle with the children for several minutes, trying to follow their very polished lead. It was a most enjoyable moment and one I’ll never forget.

From St. Theresa’s we walked over to the sisters’ convent and saw the chapel, a cavernous and dimly-lit building, but the chapel nonetheless, and met the young aspirants. On our way out, a tiny, older sister—Sr. Florence, I think—met us. She had spent some time in Italy and the US, and one could tell that the horizons she had been exposed to were quite broad.

While in Buyege, we also saw the village’s health center—a dingy, deteriorating building consisting of about three wings of four or so rooms per wing. As we entered, a very weak woman was getting off a bicycle which she had hired to bring her to the center. Since she needed help getting off the bike, I wondered how she had been able to stay on. Another woman was lying on a mat on the ground outside the main entrance to the center.

One nurse practitioner was staffing the center while we were there, and there was a small handful of patients waiting for help from her. In all, four nurse practitioners staff the center, but no doctor.

What I saw at the health center I can only describe as deplorable. The “pharmacy” was no more than one set of shelves in a room with no lock and right by the entrance. The shelves were scantily stocked with a few plastic containers of medication or maybe vitamins. With thousands of children nearby in those schools and villagers who have to live somewhere nearby (although we didn’t see a lot of houses), nothing was adequate. No emergency care could be provided there, and even we, with our pretty rugged van, would need at least an hour to the closest hospital. My mind raced ahead to what would happen if someone in our

group needed emergency medical care. I was immensely glad that a doctor was in our group, and that is a non-negotiable condition for any future trip I would ever make here.

As we toured the clinic, we saw posters lining the walls trying to give basic healthcare information about various diseases in both Luganda and English. All-in-all, I saw three hospital beds, each of which was rusty, with a lumpy mattress and a cotton blanket that I wondered how often gets laundered and under what conditions. One of the beds was in a hallway. The other two beds were in one room along with two rusty bassinets, lined only with dirty plastic or leather straps on the bottom. One generator kept certain medications refrigerated, but two kerosene lamps were kept in prominent places in case the electricity went out. There were moments I had to remind myself that what I was seeing was actually real.

I saw no instruments (perhaps they were locked away), nor supplies of any kind, except the plastic bottles in the “pharmacy.” I don’t remember seeing sinks or public toilets. Maybe they existed behind doors not opened for us. Grime lined the walls, and I thought of the service projects I had done with teenagers over the years in which we cleaned and painted houses and church buildings. I allowed myself to dream of brining a crew of twenty or so able-bodied people with thick gloves, brushes, and gallons of bleach.

We sign the Guest Book and leave in silence.

The squalor I saw in Buyege ranks among the three worst things I’ve ever witnessed, the other two being images of aborted fetuses/babies and touring Auschwitz.

One person from our group journaled that night, “Buyege is a place in need of...everything.” I started making a list of things I thought would be essential for the schools and clinic we saw today—reading glasses, classroom materials, rubbing alcohol, IV equipment, books, chairs, windows...the list got to be too long. What I can hope for, and maybe what the people of Buyege hope for, is a little bit of capital they could use to buy a cow (which we found out costs \$100) or seeds, sell the milk and produce, and start buying some basics.

The ride home was very quiet...and it’s only Monday. On the way back to Kampala, we see subsistence farmers hoeing their small plots of cassava, sweet potatoes, and banana trees.

If Baakijulula is anything like Buyege, tomorrow will be another hard day. The inside of my room at Pope Paul looks like a palace.

I washed my hands when I came back and removed an initial layer of dirt. Then I washed them again and still got more dirt off. When dirt was still coming off after the third washing and I realized that I hadn’t even been working in the soil, I wondered how

people here are able to keep anything clean. Their ability to dress in clean clothes and uniforms, which they do, is remarkable.

I had adjusted very well to the difference in time zones between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. The time zone difference I'm having a hard time adjusting to is going from the Iron Age in Buyege to the Postmodern Age in Kampala.

Tonight I have the overwhelming urge to tell everyone back home, "Go grab your children and your spouse and hug them tight and be grateful for every last bit of everything you have been given."

22 June 2008, Kampala

Today was an immensely pleasant day, and we spent all of it in Baakijulula. After our breakfast at the hotel—consisting of eggs, untoasted bread with marmalade and margarine, juice, instant coffee, tea, and hot water and hot milk in plastic thermoses—we headed back through the papyrus swamps and arrived around 10:00 in Baakijulula. We drove up onto a very pleasant hill on which a large brick building—St. Jude School—was under construction. The grass road leading up to the school site was lined with banana trees onto which flowers had been tied.

The day was beautiful and sunny with a warm, but not hot, breeze. The view from the hill was beautiful—Lake Victoria and green rolling hills in the distance. A couple cows were gnawing on grasses just below the crest of the hill, and a blue sky covered everything. There were moments I felt like I was in rural Wisconsin. Overhead an occasional jet flew into Entebbe, but it looked like something from another universe.

Two yellow and white tents were set up for Sunday Mass. One tent housed parents, and the other housed the "dignitaries"—the priests, guests, elders of the community, headmaster, teachers, parish council members, etc. The altar was set up under the "dignitaries'" tent. (That was my word, not their word.) Many were dressed in their Sunday best, some in traditional attire. We were delayed in starting Mass, and while everyone waited, the choir, which consisted of about a dozen women in traditional dress, started singing some church songs. St. Jude's drumming team accompanied them. One of them had a songbook.

After a while, I started feeling uncomfortable with the formal us-them setting under the tents. Hoping against hope that I wasn't being disrespectful, I got up, walked across the no-man's-land between the two tents, and knelt in front of the woman with the songbook. She pointed to where they were, and I started following along as best as I could. The two other women from our group joined me. This brought smiles, laughter, and high-pitched yelping from some people in the parents' tent.

Soon Mass began, and Fr. Augustine presided. The whole Mass was in Luganda, with the exception of the Greek and Hebrew called for in the Roman Rite.

During Communion I broke down, letting go finally of the worry and anxiety about the safety and logistics of our group, knowing that the pilgrimage was about half over, that the school building was making good progress, and that no doubt our hosts would do everything possible to take care of us. I felt immensely protected—by our hosts, by the network of the church, by the members of our group who were very solicitous of each other, and by God—even a world away from what I had considered home. I realized then, as Communion was being distributed to people who have almost nothing in terms of possessions, how truly vulnerable I had felt—I who have so much. The feeling of being away from home and at home at the same time is hard to describe.

After Mass, there was a welcome dinner served buffet-style in chaffing dishes. Two kinds of rice, "Irish" potatoes and yellow sweet potatoes, matoke, cassava, posho, a cooked bean dish, peanut sauce, vegetable stew and chicken and beef stew to pour over the starches. Refreshing, sauerkraut-like shredded white cabbage was served as a side. We guests were served first, along with the local priests, then those in the dignitaries' tent. Some of the women in the dignitaries' tent ate with their fingers. After a while, those in the other tent were able to eat, but many didn't. Some of the children ate. When they did, they ate with their fingers. We were told that some people in the village stayed up all night making the food.

After the welcome dinner, there were more welcome speeches, welcome songs, welcome poems, and welcome dances. In one of the welcome speeches, there was reference to their understanding that the US economy had taken a down turn and that the cost of gas has gone up significantly for us. They wanted us to know that they were aware of our circumstances. That was very humbling.

At the end of the welcome speeches, we presented the headmaster, Daniel Ssali, with an envelope full of letters written by St. Robert School seventh graders. He randomly selected one of the letters, and the math and science teacher translated it into Luganda for those whose English wasn't good enough to follow along. Up until then, there was mostly adult-adult or adult-child interaction, but the child-child connection with the letters broke down many remaining barriers.

Our group was given a thorough tour of the construction on St. Jude School by the headmaster and the engineer, both of whom had attended St. Jude as children. Students are currently having class in a one-room building (which currently doubles as Baakijulula's church) and under a mango tree. Two classes meet

inside the one-room building, one on each side of the room. The new building has four separate classrooms, plus a long room that will have two accordion doors dividing it into three classrooms. Mass will be in that long room when the building is finished. The classrooms are built to Ugandan specifications—7m X 8m—and are to accommodate 52 to 58 students each. In addition to the seven classrooms, there is a reception office, an office for the headmaster, and a faculty lounge. There is an outhouse across the field but no bathrooms planned.

Enrollment has already exceeded capacity, and there is space eventually to build a third wing, making the L-shaped building into a U. The walls are up nicely, and the roof is next to be added. The engineer said that the foundation weathered the rainy season well, and there are no cracks. The engineer has the foresight to plan culverts to move run-off away from the school.

Together we dreamed of what the space inside the L could be used for—gardens, an amphitheatre (since it's built on a hill)...my mind raced ahead of where it needed to be. We laughed.

The buy-in on the part of parents and community members is remarkable. Parents crush rock to make cement, and many parents have made the bricks themselves. Some students have raised cows to help raise money. Workers are working ahead of payment.

Three others in our group handed the headmaster some gifts we had brought. A swarm of students surrounded us. We pulled out two large armfuls of navy St. Robert Parish T-shirts, and when the headmaster announced that the choir would be receiving the shirts, the students yelled and smiled. Then we pulled out a few large bags of candy, and the kids went wild. We handed the headmaster the candy, then pulled out two boxes of pencils. When the students heard the word "pencils," they screamed louder than when we said "candy."

Soon, sadly, we were back in the van, bouncing down the dirt road en route to Fr. Augustine's family's house a few kilometers away. As the van tried to dodge ruts, I wondered if Uganda has an Army Corps of Engineers that could come in and grade and pave the roads around Baakijulula.

Fr. Augustine's family's house is a cozy cottage nestled near the crest of a very pleasant hill overlooking a bay in Lake Victoria. A mix of arid and tropical plants grow native on the hill behind their house. In their front yard, the family had set up a table, chairs, and mats in a circle. Soon, watermelon and bananas (the large, sweet kind called "ndizi"), and hot tea were brought out. Priests and guests were served first, followed by the men in the family, then the women in the family. Some of the local children from Baakijulula followed us,

and, after they sang more songs, they were each given a small piece of watermelon. They sat quietly altogether on the grass eating their watermelon.

Fr. Augustine's father is about 90, defying the national life expectancy of about 57.

At Fr. Augustine's family's house, we were able to ask more questions, as now there were four very fluent English speakers who had had international travel experience. We learned about the traditional dress, for example. Traditionally women wear dresses with puffy sleeves buttoned on the left shoulder with two buttons and tied at the waist with a wide, shiny sash. The attire's ancestor is the Indian sari. Men traditionally wear a long, thin, off-white tunic over pants and shirt. The men's traditional dress is derived from the dress of Muslim traders. Before the Indian and Muslim influences, Ugandans wore cloth made from dark orange bark fibers.

Fr. Augustine's family has a lovely and practical garden-orchard. Above our heads hung large medium-green avocados, and lining their property were coffee plants, a papaya tree, and the ever-present banana trees. By now our group's entrepreneurial minds are working overtime, and we (mostly jokingly) start talking about my developing an avocado orchard here.

23 June 2008, Masaka

This morning we discovered that we weren't, after all, able to use our visa cards to pay for the hotel, despite the very visible "We Accept Visa" signs in two places in the lobby. Various reasons were given, but still our morning was thrown into a tailspin, as we tried to withdraw money, exchange money, and arrange for a moneygram. Our access to a quick method of payment was hampered, but it helped put things into perspective for us.

In the afternoon, we headed west to Masaka, bouncing along on the dusty, uneven roads in our no-frills van. Along the way, we passed the equator monument—much smaller than I had envisioned it. Fr. Arthur said that we would stop on the way back tomorrow afternoon.

In the evening we made it to our destination, a Cistercian monastery with cloistered nuns in Butende, just outside Masaka. Masaka is still within the kingdom of Buganda, and people here still speak Luganda, but Masaka is its own diocese. Masaka itself is way smaller than I thought. It had been destroyed in 1979, and it sure will take a while for it to be built up. I would consider it a town rather than a city. The vast expanse of land surrounding it makes up for the relative smallness of the town. All told, Uganda is about the size of the state of Oregon and is divided into 16 dioceses.

Every once in a while in the countryside we see pine trees which look rather out of place. The pines are

not native, we're told, and as we drive up to the monastery—a well-lit complex amid the early darkness of rural equatorial Africa—the road is lined with fragrant juniper hedges, which are not native either.

At the monastery this evening, we met up with Fr. Emmanuel, a friend of Fr. John Mary (a priest in residence at St. Robert along with Fr. Augustine). Fr. Emmanuel is the head of health services for the Diocese of Masaka.

The monastery provided welcome variety to our diet—cooked vegetables and spaghetti noodles, along with the rice and gravy-stew. Fruit was served as dessert as per local custom.

After dinner, one person from our group pointed out the Southern Cross, a constellation of stars only visible south of the equator. As I looked up at the gillion stars in the sky, I could only think of:

“In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the abyss.”

24 June 2008, Masaka

Today was a church-centered day, and, after 6:45 Mass at the monastery (in English and Luganda), we visited a bishop, a high school seminary, a major seminary, and a Catholic hospital.

The bishop of the diocese of Masaka, very friendly and dressed in a purple cassock, was celebrating his name day today. We sang “Happy Name Day” (to the tune of “Happy Birthday to You”) to him. Once in his office, we signed his guestbook as customary. “You are most welcome here,” he started. He then spoke to us about the history and basic information about the diocese, then asked a little bit about us. We thanked him for allowing one of the priests from his diocese to help out at St. Robert, and he thanked us for hosting him. After a group photo, he waited outside, waving to us, until our van pulled away.

After picking up Fr. Jude—a young, thin, energetic colleague of Fr. John Mary—we stopped off at Royal Mutesa I University in Masaka where Fr. John Mary is sending textbooks for their library. The library is a small building with only two rooms. They will need many more shelves than what they have there to accommodate all the books coming their way. They sure could use the books. It was not believable to think that a university was operating with the few random books I saw there on the shelves. Every student we saw was studying—either inside classrooms, in the library, or outside under the trees.

At the high school seminary, we met the librarian who turns out to be Cardinal Wamala's brother, Fr. Henry. Fr. Henry spent time in England and speaks with a crisp British accent. The books in that library were old, dirty, and random, but they were well organized. As a former high school religion teacher, I know that this library by no means has what it needs.

I'm sure he knows that, too. But he was very proud of the library.

After a brief stop at the major seminary, we had lunch at the Villa Maria Guest House—a buffet of traditional local food.

After lunch we toured the hospital at Villa Maria. Uneven surfaces were everywhere. Did I mention the uneven surfaces? Many of the buildings were dirty, there seemed to be entirely inadequate sanitation, and some of the patients there seemed to wear little more than rags.

We saw a sign that said, “We wish you a speedy recovery. –Management.”

We were delighted to see a CRS van there, and the sister who gave us the tour described how the hospital treats HIV/AIDS patients and tries to help with prevention.

Fr. Emmanuel explained to us that they have a hard time keeping staff at the hospital. Some secular hospitals are able to pay employees \$250 per month, but this hospital is able to pay only \$150.

We walked passed a tent used for HIV/AIDS awareness presentations toward the maternity ward. As we entered the lobby of the maternity ward, an orderly was carrying a plastic tub of bloody water that sloshed back and forth as she carried it. The lobby walls were lined with various health awareness posters in Luganda and English. The sister showing us around led us down a hall, and we stepped into a room with six or eight patients. The smell overwhelmed me, and when one of the men in our group questioned whether he should be in the maternity ward, he and I both agreed to step outside until the tour was over.

Patients are generally expected to bring with them a family member able to take care of laundry, feeding, etc., while the patient is in the hospital. A dozen or so of these family members were outside tending to laundry in the open air.

After touring the hospital, we stop off at Fr. Arthur's family's house for a brief visit. A crate of glass bottles of soda is brought out. Guests and priests sit, while men in the family stand, and women—even older women—kneel. Mounted high on the walls are impala antlers, family photos, and a picture of one of the kings of Buganda.

“You are most welcome,” Fr. Arthur starts. He introduces his family members, and we spend a couple minutes holding the families newest member, a little newborn girl. After a family photo on the front porch, we head back to the monastery.

At dinner we learn that the Dutch monk presiding at Mass this morning was the head of a Cistercian abbey in Kenya. In the recent unrest, the monks were forced to flee and all the property was

confiscated. Only the Kenyan sisters running a hospital and a school were allowed to stay.

I'm starting to miss dairy, salty foods, and sugar. The donuts make me think of the abundance of sugar we have back home. I kind of miss sugar. But it's a lot harder for me to complain after what I've seen. And I've only seen it; Ugandans live it.

Tomorrow: Lake Mburo National Park.

25 June 2008, Kampala

I'm glad I was sleepy this morning and didn't react strongly to the large beetle crawling on my jacket and the ants exploring my toothbrush. One person from our group had a lizard in her bathroom by her toilet.

We got to the bus around 6:00, ready for our big adventure. Truth be told, I am fine with seeing wild animals behind the safety of fences within zoos. Nevertheless, I remember being told by the folks in our diocesan offices that if we planned a trip to Uganda, we should not go unless we work in a recreation day. It worked out for our hosts that we would go to Lake Mburo today, so...so be it. Never in a million years did I think I would be doing anything like a safari, and here I am in East Africa, bouncing around the back of a van on the way to see wild animals in their natural habitat.

Along the way, we stop off to get breakfast. I order bread and coffee. Others order bread and tea. Fr. Arthur orders tripe over matoke which came with a slab of avocado on top. Now there's a breakfast!

As we drove west, the vegetation changed from tropical to arid, and I thought of the two Mitchell Park Domes with their corresponding plant life. With the exception of a few-mile stretch of road which was being improved, the roads were pocked with potholes. There were times I thought the van would break an axle or blow a tire. But it held together and got us to the park.

A large gate painted with black and white zebra stripes marked the entrance. Animal bones and antlers lay against the foundation of the entrance building. We used the pit toilets nearby and proceeded into the park. Almost as soon as we passed the entrance, we started seeing animals—a very big waddling warthog, families of bushpigs, various impala-like mammals, two crested cranes (the national bird), mean-looking water buffalo, playful monkeys, and graceful zebras. Seeing zebras in the wild...now there's a sight to behold!

We reached the lake proper, and Fr. Jude and three people from our party went on a boat ride with a park ranger. They went to see hippopotami and crocodiles close-up. Since I could see hippos from the lakeshore and really had no interest in seeing a croc, I stayed back with Fr. Arthur and our driver.

The sound of a hippo coming up for air is really something. I might describe it as something like a horse spraying water out of its mouth. The lake was lined with papyrus, and across the lake in some distant

trees I saw fish eagles with their white heads diving down for a fish lunch.

Incidentally, we learned that fish (especially tilapia) from local lakes is generally exported or seen as an expensive indulgence. We learned a local saying: "to live by a lake is to not eat fish." Back home, I think nothing of purchasing a tilapia fillet for dinner on occasion. I will never, ever take fish for granted again.

Our day in the park was really delightful. We got back to the monastery later than expected, and dinner was most welcome since we hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Along with dinner, the cooks at the monastery had triangle-shaped donuts, the first dessert (other than fruit) of our trip.

We ate pretty quickly, settled accounts with the monastery, and left for Kampala. Along the way, we stopped off at the equator monument. Water flows clockwise on one side of the equator and counterclockwise on the other. A local guide demonstrated this by floating a small flower in water in small sinks set up right near the monument. On the equator itself, water simply drains down as though it was being suctioned. I would have liked to have stayed longer and really wrap my mind around what I was seeing, but we still had a ways to Kampala.

On the return trip to Kampala, I start becoming accustomed to the sites—villagers bent over, hoeing their small garden plots by hand; papyrus swamps; pterodactyls soaring overhead; shacks for stores and mud huts for houses. Every once in a while there is a nicer house or nicer store. I grow accustomed to the variety of smells in the air, the most common of which are smoke from smoldering fires, car exhaust, and the freshness of water and vegetation. I grow accustomed to the pattern of the language I hear on the radio and spoken by our hosts. I've learned a few phrases, but I'm not ready to construct sentences.

One thing in the Ugandans' favor is their growing season. It's essentially year-round, assuming that rains don't wipe out crops during the rainy season. I asked about composting, and Fr. Jude said that some people do compost.

26 June 2008, Kampala

Today we spent with Leocardia, Fr. Augustine's sister, and Fr. Augustine, as well as Fr. Arthur. It was our last full day in Uganda, and I am not wanting to leave—not because of the exotic things we've seen, but because of the depth of life lived here—the horrific and the lovely.

Maybe God was aware of that depth when becoming human. The horror of the cross (or of being burned alive over a slow fire or killed in Auschwitz or in utero) I wish humanity could avoid. But it is something I can only resist and work against. But God has tethered

Godself to all of humanity, regardless of pain or comfort.

Speaking of comfort, today we enjoyed some. After driving south from Kampala to resort-like Entebbe (the city, not the airport), we stop off at the zoo and complete our list of exotic animals—ostriches, shoebill storks, monkeys roaming all over the zoo, rhinoceroses, crocodiles (just in case deep inside I really *did* want to see one!), birds with tails as long as yardsticks, lizards, and probably other animals that don't come to mind at the moment.

After a roasted tilapia and fried chicken lunch on the shores of Lake Victoria, we visited a church shrine of the late Indian Vincentian, Fr. Bill. Some supernatural experiences happened to some people around the time of his death, and he now has quite a following. The small church (with a capacity of about 200) was packed with young Ugandans.

Then we drove to the Botanical Gardens, and on the way we saw motorcycles decorated with greenery and Ugandan flags, welcoming home the national soccer team who had just won a game. At the Botanical Gardens we saw enormous and gorgeous trees. Among the indigenous species were the incense tree, the elder tree, acacia, mahogany, and some whose names I cannot remember. Cinnamon and nutmeg were imported from South America. Along the way, we pass a giant ant (termite) hill. One of our two docents takes a termite and demonstrates on his shirt how the termite can be used to hold skin together after a cut, in place of a suture.

Down a steep hill we reach a jungle-y area where, according to our docents, one of the Tarzan movies was filmed. There were long fibers hanging down from super-tall trees, and both our docents and two members of our group swung on them. At the base of the steep hill was a natural spring. Our driver lowered an empty plastic water bottle into the water, held it up, and we were amazed at how clean the water was. Our group was pretty tired after the walk through the gardens, so we headed "home" to Kampala.

At the hotel restaurant we order a last round of Nile Special. I ask the server if there was any kind of dessert that I could order—cake or anything sweet. After checking in the kitchen, she reports back that they have none but that there's a place not far from the hotel that would. Not wanting to leave our compound, I order a fruit plate and a book of matches. She looked bewildered, probably thinking that I wanted to smoke (which almost no one does in Uganda, especially women). When the fruit plate comes, I put a small yellow and white birthday candle I brought from home in the middle of the watermelon and, with the help of the women in our group, light it, and present it to Fr. Dennis whose birthday is July 1st. Fr. Dennis divides up

the pineapple, banana, and watermelon seven ways. It was a lovely way to spend our last full day in Uganda.

27 June 2008, Entebbe airport

First thing this morning was a stop at the post office to send the postcards we've accumulated, then a local craft area, lunch (a buffet of traditional foods), a bank to change back shillings into dollars, and then, like a band-aid being ripped from the skin, we drove to the airport. Maybe my groupmates were eager to return to the US. They were starting to miss their spouses and children. I was just starting to feel at home.

Along the way to Entebbe, we spot a stuffed animal shop and stop to look for a stuffed monkey. This was one of two times I saw toys. The other was a box of old, dirty toy cars and trucks sitting near the parish meeting building in Buyege. We were the only ones in the stuffed animal shop.

We sat for awhile at the airport café, our baggage piled nearby. Then it was time to say good-bye. There was a mix of Western hugs and Ugandan hugs—both people bringing each side of the head to touch. In line to check in at the airport, I turn around to wave good-bye one more time to our Ugandan hosts—Fr. Arthur, Leocardia, and Fr. Augustine—and cry. I see on their faces the collective experiences of their people—the impossible tragedies and the beauty.

Epilogue

1 July 2008, Milwaukee

I think of the seeming nothingness in which millions of Ugandans live and the smallness of their expectations. The size of their expectations seems inversely proportionate to the size of their hope—the lower their expectations, the greater their hope. I've learned that expectations are different than hope, and that sometimes I have confused the two.

"We won the lottery" echoes in my mind. I, too, could have been born in Uganda, and now I am tethered to those who have been. But I didn't bring things with me when I was born; I found them here. Just like them, I was born out of nothingness, and everything is bonus.

In the beginning there was vulnerability. All else has been bonus.