It’s almost two months since I arrived in Zambia. For most of that time I’ve been based at the Monastery of Our Lady Queen and Gate of Heaven under construction in the region of Msupazi, near the city of Chipata. I can now better understand the reaction of a friend of mine, a French diplomat, with whom I’d travelled from Trinidad to St. Lucia on Caribbean Airlines. He was on his way to Martinique. When I told him that I was on my way to Zambia, he became excited and described how he had visited that country, that it was politically stable and that the landscape was beautiful. But when he asked where was I going to in Zambia, and I replied “Chipata.” He exclaimed “CHI-PA-TA?” I was floored. He did not elaborate, but his expression had said it all.

Well, as I mentioned earlier, I now understand my friend’s reaction. Apart from a two day visit to Lusaka, Zambia’s capital, for the funeral of the late Cardinal Mazombwe, and a recent three day trip to Malawi, I’ve spent all the time between the villages around Msupazi and Chipata which is “town” for the region. I’ve visited the villages of Mtowe and Lulaka; attended a funeral and also Sunday Mass in Feni village, where the chief for the region lives; and assisted at a wedding in Zalile village. The Benedictine Abbey of Our Lady of the Assumption at the Mount of Prayer, Coubaril, Saint Lucia is founding a “daughter” monastery here in Chipata, upon the invitation of the bishop of the diocese, Bishop George Lungu.
The original vision for a cloistered Benedictine community of women in Zambia (there is already another cloistered community of nuns in Zambia, the Poor Clares of Lusaka) was the dream of the then Archbishop of Lusaka, the late Cardinal Mazombwe, initiated from a conversation with Msgr. Pio Pinto (now His Excellency, the Dean of the Roman Rota) and one of his Canon Law students, Fr. Benjamin Phiri (now Auxiliary Bishop of Chipata) and the Archbishop, during a visit to Rome. The monastery was originally planned to be located in Lusaka and a property had already been identified for that purpose. After visits to the monastery in Saint Lucia by Cardinal Mazombwe, Bishop George Lungu and Fr. Benjamin Phiri, and innumerable discussions with Msgr. Pinto and his sister, Mother Marianna Pinto, Abbess of the monastery, it was decided that the Zambia foundation should be relocated from Lusaka to Chipata diocese in the region of Msupazi, a very poor district of traditional villages. That was a very difficult decision for the community to make since it was already negotiating for a property in Lusaka to build the monastery. However, convinced that it was Providence calling them to this poor neighbourhood in Msupazi to continue their ministry to the poor as they are doing in St. Lucia with the adoption of the St. Lucy’s Home for street people and assisting with the soup kitchen at St. Benedict’s parish, the Nuns accepted the challenge of witnessing in the midst of the poorest of the poor.
Upon arrival in Msupazi, one is immediately struck by “distances”. The villages are very far from each other. In fact, Zambia is very large and everything is very far. One begins to appreciate how large the country is and that it shares borders with eight African countries, including Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania to the north/north-west; with Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique to the south; and with Malawi to the east. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Chipata, for example, which has 26 parishes, borders with three countries, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Its most northerly parish, Chama, borders Malawi and is 354 kilometres from Chipata, while to the south-west, Nyimba parish borders with Zimbabwe and is 245 kilometres from Chipata. Msupazi parish in which the monastery is located is almost 100% Catholic with an estimated population of 25,000 served by two priests, one deacon, eight catechists who service eight Mass centers and 72 small basic community prayer centers. Sunday Mass is celebrated once a month in the main parish church and once every two months in each of the eight Mass Centers, with communion services conducted by the eight Catechists in a different prayer center every Sunday. At the Sunday Mass which I concelebrated in Feni village there were over a thousand worshippers with one hundred and fifty (150) children making their First Holy Communion and thirty-one (31) infants baptized. The parish priest told me that this is the normal attendance at each of the eight Mass centers where Mass is celebrated once every two months on a Sunday.
Infant Baptism at Mass Center, Feni Village, Msupazi Parish

Funeral at Feni Village, Msupazi Parish

Sunday Mass at the Mass Center, Feni Village, Msupazi Parish

Music ministry during the wedding at Zalile Village, Msupazi Parish

A veiled bride and groom approach the altar for the exchange of vows, Zalile Village

Open–air church wedding, Zalile Village, Msupazi Parish
The monastery where I’m staying is being built on a ridge before M’Sesa hill, besides the main road to Msupazi, on a vast track of land, over 50 acres, that the diocese has placed at the disposal of the Nuns. It adjoins acres and acres of Msupazi parish lands originally made available to the church by the tribal chiefs. Unfortunately much of the soil is rocky and only a few parts can be used for growing the region’s staple, maize. Another problem is water. Here one really appreciates that “Water is life!” Since my arrival I learnt that the area has not had rain for the last eight (8) months. The first showers arrived last week, but the rainy season proper is expected to begin in mid-October and continue till the end of February/March. For water, everyone depends on “boreholes” or wells. There are public “boreholes” for the villages, but places like the monastery have to dig their own. One of the consequences of the drought is dust. With the main road to Msupazi and all the roads in the villages unpaved, every passing vehicle raises a cloud of dust which the wind then carries a great distance away. The principal form of transportation is ‘walking.’ People walk tens of kilometres daily to get from one place to another. Those who can afford use ‘bicycle taxis’ that carry everything from people to animals to goods.

Since the monastery is being located mid-way between a number of villages, the Nuns, with the help of some very generous benefactors, have been able to provide for the area such non-existent amenities as electricity, a police station, a warehouse, a school, and a medical clinic with living quarters for personnel. Electricity is very unreliable with outages almost every other day; sometimes for several hours, sometimes for the whole day and at times several times a day. Life in the villages is desperately poor. Housing is made from mud or red baked bricks with grass thatched roofs, a haven for rodents and sometimes even snakes. Galvanise is a luxury. Many families sleep on grass mats on the ground and some on the bare ground. Some of the construction workers at the monastery site tell stories of families having to stand all night in a corner of their hut, as the showers pour through the grass roofs at the height of the rainy season. One of the ways in which the monastery is already beginning to contribute to development in the villages is by encouraging labourers on the construction site to learn skills which they can use to improve their own homes and other houses in the villages. This they have already started doing.

The staple food in the villages is nshima, a cooked porridge made from ground maize. It is prepared in different ways and used for all three meals of the day. It is eaten with a large variety of green leafy vegetables (impwa, rape, chomoliya, mupilu, bodwe, chibanga-n’konde, pumkin leave also called ‘chibwabwa’, sweet potato and cassava leaves), with beans, chikanda & ground nuts and/or dried fish. Meats (pork, goat, beef) are a luxury and chicken only for exceptionally celebratory occasions such as weddings or at Christmas. Sanitation is a challenge in the villages and malaria, a constant threat. The funeral I attended in Feni village was that of a retired school principal who had died from malaria.

This is the social context in which the Benedictine Nuns are planning to become a life-giving presence in Msupazi. Construction of the monastery has provided employment for about forty persons under the supervision of Mr. Ventus Joseph, a contractor from St. Lucia. The nuns’ cells and guests rooms are ready and the church is nearing completion. The targeted date for blessing and formal opening of the monastery is May 2014. With nine Zambian nuns already part of the community in St. Lucia it wouldn’t be too difficult to get a group of Nyanja-Chichewa speaking nuns to form the core of the new monastic community. Besides their traditional ministry, ora et labora, the nuns will offer hospitality, retreats, counseling, seminars and workshops on prayer, spirituality, lectio divina, liturgy and scripture. They will be involved at the board level in the management of the school and facilitate volunteer services.
for medical professionals at the clinic. The Nuns will also collaborate with the diocese of Chipata in promoting an agricultural project for the villagers which will involve use of the warehouse for purchasing and storage of maize and other agricultural products. The monastery of Our Lady Queen and Gate of Heaven has the potential to deliver great spiritual and social benefits to the villages in the region of Msupazi, Chipata.