

An email account of the most recent trip to Africa by Pastor Joe T. Gorman

Golden Church of the Nazarene

P.O. Box 18499

Golden, Colorado 80402

joetgorman@aol.com

<http://www.joegorman.net>

303-809-8895

Email #1

Subject: Rwanda: Orphans HIV/AIDS--Changing the World One Family at a Time

Greetings to you all from Gisenyi, Rwanda! I made it hear from North Carolina just fine after three days and 8 hours of sleep in 72 hours.

We arrived at church this morning about 9:30 a.m. Not having anything to do as Simon was inundated with people wanting his attention, I did the first thing that came to mind—take pictures. It wasn't long at all before I had a throng of children surrounding me wanting their picture taken. I took pictures right up until the time that church started.

After church I took more pictures. I took 167 pictures just today of children. Taking pictures of the children is very hard work as they all want to see their picture after it has been taken. For every child who has their picture taken there are 6 more who are hanging on my arms and smearing their dirty fingers on my camera lens. I really need to learn how to say, "Please don't touch the camera" in French, Kinyarwandan, and Swahili.

After church who should come up to me, but Veronique. I couldn't believe it. She looks wonderful. I was so happy that I gave her a huge hug and she gave me a bear hug in return. Veronique is so radiant that she glows. Simon says she looks like a muzungu (white person) now because her face is so bright.

There was a singer who is known throughout Rwanda who came over to Simon's and Caritas'. As we got up to eat, I noticed her ear rings, necklace and

bracelet. I thought they were made by "Beads for Life" and asked her if that's where she got them. Simon broke in and told me that Veronique made them. He told me that he took Veronique and another widow, Josephine, to Kigali for a special five day training with Beads for life. This was sometime in June, I think. The woman who trained them was handicapped, but she has been helped to make a living by making the necklaces and ear rings. Simon says they have made many, many necklaces, ear rings, and bracelets. They look beautiful. Tomorrow we will see them when Veronique and Josephine come to the church to work on them. Veronique and Josephine are working together on making necklaces, bracelets, and ear rings. Josephine is HIV positive like Veronique (although Josephine is taking anti-retroviral drug whereas Veronique's immunity has risen from 400 to over 1000 and the only medication she needs is Bactrium, I think Simon called it) and has four children. Her husband abandoned her. I think she is the next one we will try to buy a house for.

One of the young women who wanted her picture taken was 21-year-old Jeanette. She is an "adult" orphan. Her parents died when she was about 14 and then she was on the streets by herself and quickly became pregnant by offering sex for money--the only way she knew hoe to survive. I've said this to Simon so often the past few days, "What do you do?" If I were in her situation, I doubt that I would have done things any differently. Jeanette wanted her picture taken and then she kept hanging around and talking to me a little bit between all the other kids wanting their pictures taken. She smiled beautifully for her pictures, but when she was waiting around she had a big frown on her face. She looked deeply sad and bothered by something.

After church she kept hanging around with the rest of the kids. Since she's a bit older she doesn't quite fit in with the other teens. I started talking with her and thought she had told me in French that she has a six-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter. Since she looked like she might be about 18, I thought I must have misunderstood her. But, as it turns out, I understood her

perfectly.

To support herself she carries different kinds of loads back and forth between Gisenyi and Goma with her baby on her back. The loads she carries are illegal and her loads are confiscated between one and five times per month. Simon says that she can be beaten or even forced to have sex if the border police seek to force the issue. She makes about \$1.20/day. Simon says that a mother with two small children needs at least \$2/day to survive. When I found out that she was carrying loads, I had visions of the old, broken down women carrying loads up and down the hills of Bukavu every day until they collapse and die.

Jeanette became pregnant when she was only fourteen-years-old. She has a two-year-old daughter, Vivian, and a six-year-old boy, Arnold.

I don't know who was watching her children today.

Every day when Simon comes to church, he sees her sitting on the rock at the gate of the church. She leaves her two-year-old at the church all day and then goes to work. For several days she left her baby and didn't tell anyone and the workers at the church wondered where Vivian had come from.

After taking pictures for about an hour, I was starting to get a bit tired and was wondering how I was going to tell the children that I was done taking pictures. Just as I was about to tell them I was done, it started pouring down rain. That was just the excuse I was looking for! Inside the church I took a few more pictures, but eventually told the children, "Nimemaliza." (I'm finished) I ended up sitting down and several of the children, including Jeanette sat down and many of them wanted my email address and phone number. I guess it was kind of like getting my autograph.

I talked a little more with Jeanette and then John, one of the children Simon and Caritas have adopted, came and started talking with me. He speaks a little bit of English so he helped me talk with Jeanette a bit more. A little

bit later Simon came into the church and started directly addressing Jeanette. He told her he wanted Winifred (their NCM coordinator) to help her go to counseling so she does not become pregnant again. He talked very directly to her about not continuing to get pregnant. She started to cry. The context here about talking directly to each other is very different than in the U.S. Today we met another girl, Celine, who is 15 years old and pregnant with a one year old baby. Simon had another direct conversation with her about how she got pregnant and she gladly told him. I'll tell more about her story later.

I asked Jeanette if she would like to learn to do something else to support herself and her children, like learn how to sew. Simon also suggested helping her to learn how to sew in the mornings and then in the afternoons we could help her get set up so she can sell cassava flour or something like that. Setting up a cassava business would cost about \$30. This way she'd still make money while going to school.

In helping Jeanette, Simon says, we help three people—her two children and Jeanette—who really is not much more of a child herself. She should be in college having fun with friends, baking chocolate chip cookies, text messaging and keeping her FaceBook homepage up-to-date.

Instead, she's getting old before her time carrying heavy, illegal loads back and forth the border in the midst of a war zone. For a while before Vivian got older, Jeanette carried her on her back along with the heavy loads she was carrying.

With the money that has been generously given, we will change the world for three more people—Jeanette, Arnold, and Vivian. Hardly a huge dent on global poverty, but it is one more mustard seed-sized rock thrown in the lake of God's mercy, whose waves are rippling out into the far reaches of the Kingdom of God.

By the way, we haven't traveled over into Congo yet. We may travel there briefly on Thursday depending on whether the boats are traveling back and

forth between Goma and Bukavu. All of Celestin's and Simon's friends and family in Goma are safe and doing well. We won't take any unnecessary chances.

Thank you for your prayers! They make a world of difference.

God bless you and your families!

Joe

Email #2

Subject: DRC/Rwanda Trip Update #2: Visit with Veronique (the widow who adopted eight children in Rwanda)

Dear Friends and Family,

One of my "must sees" this year was Veronique, her eleven children and the house we (the Golden church and friends) bought her. I saw Veronique for the first time on the Sunday (Nov. 3) I preached at Simon Pierre's church in Gisenyi, Rwanda. Gisenyi is a town of about 60,000 on the western border of Rwanda. Its city center is about 2 miles from Goma (population 750,000)—the same Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that you've been hearing about in the news.

Celestin and I ended up going to a church service, meeting with pastors and spending the night with his friend Safari and family in Goma (Nov. 5) before catching a boat for Bukavu, DRC the next day.

Everything seemed to be fine in Goma—people were going to work, children going to school, churches worshipping, and UN soldiers sleeping on their armored motor vehicles—but only a few miles away people are still being killed and several hundred thousand are languishing in squalid refugee camp conditions. Celestin checked things out in Goma the day before to make sure things in the city were okay before he took me there—just so my mom knows that he was watching out for me. :-)

As part of my message in Gisenyi, I talked about Veronique's simple trust in God. I told about how even though she herself was sick with HIV and barely able to work enough to feed her own children, she took in eight orphaned children. I mentioned how she had challenged me and so many others to trust God in deeper ways. There were several hundred people in church that day so I didn't know Veronique was there until she came up to me after the service.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her. What a change has come over her! As I mentioned in my first email, her face glows now. Gone are the heaviness of worry and the burden of sickness. Veronique's immunity has gone from 400 to over 1000 which means that she's healthy enough that she does not need anti-retroviral medication. Other than vitamins and eating healthy the only medication she takes is Bactrium (I'm not sure what this is—maybe one of you do).

Everyday now Veronique is at the Gisenyi Church of the Nazarene (which ministers to 814 orphaned and high risk children) with her friend and co-worker, Josephine, making "Beads for Life". Josephine is also widow and has four children. Josephine and her children live with another family in Simon Pierre's church. I had told Simon some time ago about "Beads for Life" (www.beadsforlife.com) and how they've helped over 100 widowed and abandoned women in Uganda support themselves and families by making necklaces, bracelets, and ear rings from magazines and posters.

This past May Simon just so happened to meet (I'm beginning to believe in "coincidences" less and less these days) a woman who helps teach how to make Beads for Life. When Simon found out that she would be in Kigali in a few weeks for a large Expo of various goods, he asked her if she would stay for a few days and teach Veronique and Josephine how to make Beads for Life. The woman was more than happy to do this and so she spent five days teaching Veronique and Josephine the Beads for Life technique.

Another wonderful thing about this woman is that she is handicapped. Making and teaching Beads for Life has helped her support herself in spite of very difficult obstacles. So far Veronique and Josephine have made over 100 necklaces—just in time for Christmas gifts, I might add. You can place your orders now. I also have Banana Leaf Christmas cards that I'm bringing back with me. :-)

The day I visited Veronique I took with me pictures of my family and a few of Annie's surgery and an xray of her knee and hip implants.

Veronique was thrilled to receive our pictures and especially one of Annie. I was stunned when she told me how she has prayed for Annie everyday between 3 and 5 in the morning! I knew Simon Pierre had told her about Annie's surgeries, but I had no idea how seriously she had prayed for Annie. In fact, all the friends I've made in Congo, Rwanda and Ghana have been incredible prayer warriors for Annie. I've often wondered why they would care so much for a young white American girl they've never met—but then again maybe they wonder the same about us—why do we care so much about them when we know so little about them? I'm constantly struck by how much those I'm supposedly ministering to here, minister and give back to me far more than I could ever give to them. Only God can do something like that.

One thing I wanted to tell Veronique is how she has blessed our family and church in so many ways. Simon didn't think this was a good idea as he thought this would be a difficult concept for her to understand.

But I told him it was a very important message and so he told her.

Through Simon I told her how we had been blessed by Veronique's prayers for Annie and her sacrificial love for the eight children she has welcomed into her home. I also explained how many people have been encouraged by her faith in the midst of impossible situations.

She teared up. I teared up. I love looking into her eyes--they are radiant and speak a story all their own. Being in her presence was a holy moment on holy ground. I wish you could have been with me to experience it.

Their house is very nice. It's about 20 X 35 feet with concrete floor and walls and a metal roof. The house itself sits on a rise about halfway up one of the thousands of lush, banana tree-filled hills for which Rwanda is famous. It's hard to see the house from more than fifty yards away because of the density of banana trees. With the money that came in for a fence for the house, the men of Simon's church were also able to build an unattached

addition to the house where there is a place for the goats and a room that will be made into a kitchen once there are doors and windows. Through your generosity we were able to give another \$400 toward finishing up such things. Veronique and the children have planted dozens of egg plant bushes and okra in the back of their 2/3 acre-sized plot. Simon says these are some of the most protein rich vegetables there are.

When I visited Veronique she gave me the following letter she wrote in her own words (she wrote it in Kinyarwanda, but Celestin translated it for me. Even though it's addressed to me, all of you who prayed and gave deserve Veronique's blessing every bit as much as I do):

To our parents who love us,

You are our leader, Dr. Joe Gorman, who is also our parent. We write you this letter for many reasons:

1. For the help you gave us so that we may have the house where we are living.
2. Assistance for our survival (before getting the house we were living in very hard conditions and we were very cold at night). But now, having our house, allows us to be proud of ourselves, respected in the community, and we thank Jesus for that.

You are a messenger of Jesus Christ to us. Through you we have realized that Jesus liberates people from bondage because:

- We have a nice house
- Everyone is sleeping on a bed, but before everyone was sleeping on the floor. This is

God's answer to our prayers.

I don't know why you thought to help us after only meeting us for a brief time. You had problems of your own (Annie's surgeries), but yet you cared for us. We do not understand such love.

I am not saying all of this because I'm crazy, but because I'm full of joy and feeling happy in Jesus Christ who has changed our lives.

Thanks be to God who sent you to us. Thank you to all of you who helped us.

Veronique Munyambo

What else is there to say? Even though we are the ones who gave, I'm the one who feels blessed beyond imagination. Jesus' words are more true now than they have ever been: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Thank you for your prayers and partnership.

God bless you and your families!

Joe

Email #3

Subject: DRC/Rwanda Trip Update #3: Nsimire and her children

I met Nsimire this past Saturday (November 8). We met at a baptismal service we held at Lake Kivu. I'm getting pretty good now at saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" in Swahili. Nsimire seemed rather afraid of the water so she held onto me for dear life in what was pretty deep water for her short, petite frame. Nsimire is pronounced "see-MEE-ray" with a roll of the tongue when you pronounce the "r." Her name means "I love you"

in the Mashi language which is Celestin's mother tongue.

Simire is thirty-nine-years old and has eight children (ages 3-16).

Her husband abandoned her when she was six months pregnant with their last child who is now three-years-old.

Simire tried numerous jobs to support her family on her own. About a year ago she finally despaired of being able to support them all on her own so she sent

the six oldest children to live with various relatives in Uvira (a town on the shore of Lake Tanganyika about six hours from Bukvau).

Most recently Nsimire has sold little deep-fried bread rolls for 50 Congolese Schillings each which is about 10 cents. She bought the rolls for 40 CS and then sold them for 50 CS. At 10 CS profit/roll, she had to sell 55 of them to make \$1/day. Sometimes she sold this many and other times she did not. For a family Nsimire's size, it takes at least \$2.50/day to feed them—and this does not include school fees (every family in Congo must pay school fees for all of their children—for a family of Nsimire's size, school fees, uniforms, and supplies can cost about \$1000/year).

One day as Nsimire was walking in silent despair wondering how she was going to take care of her children, she walked by the Moriya Church of the Nazarene as it was worshipping. She heard the singing and decided to go in. This was nine months ago. It wasn't until Nsimire shared her testimony with the church that they learned of the pain she has been through.

I preached at her church on Sunday. As I talked to her after church (the service lasted four hours!) I asked her how we can pray for her.

She said: "Pray for me, but also ask God to provide a place for me and my children to be together. Pray for my children to receive an education. And also pray for my family's survival, because four of my children are girls and I'm afraid that the longer they grow up away from me the more disconnected we will become. I'm also afraid that because of the hardship of life in our country that my girls will be taken advantage of and made pregnant. Lastly, pray for me to have the means for some small task to work at that will help me make enough money to support my children and provide education for them."

One possibility that we have considered for her is that with a small loan she can begin selling second hand clothes or cassava flour.

Another possibility for her is to learn how to sew in the mornings and then

sell something in the market in the afternoon. The Moriya church currently has one sewing machine they own and another they rent to teach widowed and abandoned women how to sew. Before I leave Bukavu on Friday, I will give them enough money to buy at least a second sewing machine.

Before we left the Moriya Church I told Simire: "I'm very sorry for your hardship and the pain you have experienced. God has heard your prayers and seen your tears. God is here to help you. God is going to take care of you. My church, friends and I will pray for you and your children and do what we can with God's help to meet you and your children's needs."

The Moriya church has paid Nsimire's rent for the next six months at the tiny place she rents (rent for her is \$6/month; to buy a small house in this area would cost about \$1500) In addition to the sewing machine ministry at the Moriya Church, Nsimire attends, they also make dust covers for couches or tables that they sell in the area. The funds help take care of orphans, widows and abandoned women like Nsimire—to help them tangibly, but also to give them hope that tomorrow can indeed be better than today and not just an ever-repeating nightmare of heartache, struggle, and loss.

Thank you for your prayers.

God bless you and your families!

Joe

Email #4

Subject: DRC/Rwanda Update #4: Some Lighter Fare from DR Congo

Dear Family and Friends,

Many of the stories I share are hard ones to read—just imagine what it's like to experience them face-to-face. I think you and I both need a break from the heavy stuff in today's email. So, instead of giving you another heart-breaker today, I thought you might enjoy a look at the lighter side of things from

this side of the world.

Last night at dinner Celestin asked me to pray. I was standing by the serving table and had just started to pray when I felt someone grab the hair on my left arm and give it a sharp tug. It hurt but not enough for me to cry out so I kept praying and opened my eyes to see what had happened. And there was seven-year-old Rachel suddenly looking very guilty with her head buried in her lap. Rachel is very sweet, but usually shy so I was very surprised to find that she was the one who had pulled the hair out of my arm. If it would have been one of the boys—Jeremiah (12), Joshua (10) or little Joe (5) I wouldn't have been surprised in the least. They are very typical boys. :-)

I couldn't help but laugh out loud in the middle of my prayer.

Everyone was wondering what happened to me. After I told them what had happened, the true story came out—Rachel, like so many other children here, has been fascinated with the thick, Gorilla-like hair on my arms. She told Celestin and Esperance she wanted some hair on her arms like me so she thought she'd grab some of mine and put it on her arms where it would grow thick like mine. We laughed until we had stomach cramps.

Of Rats and Men

On our way back from Mudaka yesterday where we visited a young handicapped girl, Pasie, who I wrote about last year, we saw many people walking back and forth along Lake Kivu, carrying on their head or back fish they had caught, large bunches of bananas, 150 pound sacks of charcoal or cassava flour, bunches of eight foot long stalks of sugar cane, planks of 2 X 4 lumber, and sticks for firewood. The most interesting thing we saw was a man carrying what at first looked like a very large rabbit, except that it wasn't a rabbit. It was an enormously huge rat! It still gives me the shivers just thinking about it. The man was carrying it by its hind feet in his bare hands like it

was a computer bag. Our friends, the Brozovichs, have a Shitzu, named Mushu, and this rat was a lot bigger than Mushu. I've never seen a rat so big—and hopefully I never will again!

Last year when I visited Celestin, I slept in a room by the church where every night after I turned out the lights I heard rats galloping like horses back and forth in the ceiling. They were so noisy I couldn't sleep—especially since I had visions of them coming down from the ceiling at night to nibble on my toes. I finally decided there wasn't anything I could do about them coming to get me in the middle of the night. So I stuck in ear plugs and went to sleep, figuring that even if they were going to get me, at least they wouldn't wake me up. It still creeps me out just thinking about mutant, dog-sized rats being in the ceiling.

I can imagine how excited this guy was to bring home some meat for dinner. I can hear the excitement in his voice as he calls out to his wife: "Honey, guess what's for dinner?! Rat! It's what's for dinner!"

Colorado Youth Soccer

Colorado Youth Soccer donated 80 jerseys, socks, and shorts as well as 14 balls to youth in Rwanda and Congo. All the kids have been ecstatic to receive official jerseys. The contrast between the bright red, white, blue and green jerseys and the threadbare, never-been-washed look of the shirts of those who received the jerseys is huge. The first team to receive jerseys was a team of 15-18 year old boys in Gisenyi, Rwanda. They wore their jerseys more regally than any king ever wore a crown.

Most of the boys came to their game in flip flops. When it came time to kick the ball they kicked off one flip flop, kicked the ball, stuck their foot back in the flip flop and kept running down the field.

Some boys had one flip flop and one tennis shoe. Others wear dress shoes.

And many play in bear feet.

Most of the soccer fields here are make-shift at best—mostly open fields with goals made from trees and vines. Many of the soccer fields in Rwanda and Congo are nothing more than a plot of dirt, which quickly turns to a lake of mud when it rains—which it's done a lot since I've been here.

The kids here are incredibly creative. Since very few of them can afford a ball of their own, they will make a soccer ball out of whatever scraps they can find—old plastic grocery bags wound together or plastic grocery bags wound around a chunk of soiled foam from an old mattress and then string it together with strips of plastic bags or banana leaves.

New soccer uniforms are making a world of difference in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo--developing countries that are often more mud brown than flaming red. Thank you Colorado Youth Soccer for brightening up a corner of a world that has seen far too much war and sorrow!

God bless you and your families!

Joe

Email #5

Subject: DRC/Rwanda Update #5: Ntakwinja and the Bethsaida Child Development Center

Dear Family and Friends,

Ntakwinja ("N-ta-kween-ja") was married to her husband for fourteen year when he just disappeared one day and never come back. She doesn't know if he's dead or alive. It's been seven years since she's seen him and she can't imagine that if he's still alive that he would not have contacted her for seven years.

Ntakwinja has six children. She had a seventh child, a girl, who died about

six years ago when she was four-years-old. She died of Beriberi which often sets in as a complication of malnutrition.

After Ntakwinja's husband left, she managed to pay the rent for their simple house by herself for three years until she faced some setbacks with her health that kept her from working. After she could no longer pay rent, she and the children moved in with her brother and sister-in-law and their four children. Her brother was often away on business, working in the mineral trade, leaving Ntakwinja and her sister-in-law alone much of the time. Her sister-in-law eventually became sick with AIDS and died two years ago.

Ntakwinja's brother is still alive, but he's now very weak and in the final stages of AIDS. She continues to live with her brother, caring for him, his children, and her own children as best as she can.

Another sad part of this story is that her parents also died of AIDS.

I asked her: "How do you and your children survive?" Her answer:

"As best as we can." Carrying heavy loads as a quasi-human donkey up and down the steep hills of Bukavu has been the primary way she has supported herself. These days she is experiencing pain in her chest and stomach and is physically unable to carry such back-breaking loads anymore. What she would like to do to help support herself and children is to have a small baking business where she can sell loaves of bread. If she can have enough money to start making bread, then maybe she can also learn how to sew, she thinks.

Her rent is \$10/month. I asked her how much money she spends on food a month and after she laughed a bit at the absurdity of the question given the circumstances of her life, she said, "If there's something to eat, I eat, and if there's not, I don't. How will I calculate those times when I don't eat?"

Whatever food comes in, the family eats. Otherwise the children need to find their own food wherever and however they can. Unbelievably, they are essentially on their own when it comes to eating. Celestin said that this is

one of the unwritten laws of the poor in Congo:

"Find your own way to eat." I had suspected that this might be the case, but hearing it with my own ears and seeing it with my own eyes ripped away a few more of my remaining illusions as to what it's like to be the poorest of the poor in one of the poorest countries in the world. The United Nations ranks Congo as among the poorest 5% of countries in the world.

Ntakwinja's four youngest children are very weak and often sick, she tells us. As she was talking I was wondering if her physical problems and even those of her children might be symptoms of HIV/AIDS. So I asked her with Celestin translating: "Have you been tested for HIV/AIDS?" Celestin said that when I asked the question it was like a pin had pricked him. He said it had not occurred to him to ask her this about HIV/AIDS, but immediately knew it was the right thing to ask. After Celestin asked her the question, I could see the answer for myself even without hearing the words. She hung her head in shame and began to speak in a low voice: "Yes," she said. "I tested HIV positive about a year ago." Even though Celestin knew some of her story before our meeting, he was as speechless as I was at her revelation.

Before proceeding to help her start her bakery business, Celestin and I talked it over and believe that it is best that she first receives a physical examination to determine just how far advanced HIV/AIDS is in her system. Once she meets with a doctor, then we can know better what the next step is for her. I was curious about the cost of a physical exam in a case such as Ntakwinja's and was told it costs between \$10-20. HIV/AIDS tests are \$1. For \$20/year/person a kind of insurance is available through the Catholic Church. Each person pays 20% of the total treatment and the plan pays the remaining 80%. This is a pretty amazing plan for this part of the world. I gave Ntakwinja's pastor, Maombi, \$100 of the money you have graciously given for exactly such a time as this. She will undoubtedly have more medical and physical needs, but for now we are doing what we can, with what we have, where we are and then trusting God to show us the next step.

Ntakwinja says she thirty-two-years old, but she looks closer to fifty due to extreme hardship, physical exhaustion, and the advancement of HIV/AIDS. Two years ago she was sick and came to the Bethsaida church for prayer. She says she was healed and sensed that the power of God is in the Bethsaida church. I don't know what kind of healing she received, but whatever it was, she received an answer to the prayer she was praying that day.

I first met Ntakwinja the day Celestin and I visited the Bethsaida Church of the Nazarene in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (a city of about a million on the south end of Lake Kivu) and their twice weekly feeding program for about 150 children. With wall-to-wall children in the tiny church, there is barely a place to walk without stepping on a child. The church is 14' X 20' at the very most. The rafters of the ceiling are so low I have to stoop to keep from hitting my head on them. Although I do not know it at the time, Ntakwinja is there helping to serve porridge to the children.

When Bethsaida started their child feeding program about six months ago, Ntakwinja volunteered to help prepare and distribute porridge to the orphans and at risk children in the church—including her own. The feeding program takes care of at least two meals a week for her children as well as gives her an outlet to give back what the church has given to her and her family. Unsurprisingly, the community has flocked to this amazing program of the Bethsaida church that is only 2.5 years old.

Child Development Centers

The feeding program is part of the Bethsaida' Child Development Center, a holistic program for at-risk children that Nazarene Compassionate Ministries is encouraging each local church in Africa to participate in. Unbelievably, the Bethsaida church has only had its child development center in place for

six months.

As part of each CDC, there are also Bible study, prayer, and literacy programs for the children who are not able to go to school, and healthcare. Every CDC includes an "International Health Clinic," as Celestin half-jokingly calls it that can treat for diarrhea, worms and viruses. CDCs also address the emotional part of life with counseling for children who have been traumatized by the harsh conditions here—war, death of parents, disease, malnutrition, etc. CDCs seek to address the spiritual, social, physical, emotional, mental needs of children. They are more than a great concept—they are making a world of difference one child at a time.

Joe

Email #6

Subject: DRC/Rwanda Update #6: Hero of the Year Nomination--and Germophobia

Dear Family and Friends:

Here's a couple observations I had about two different encounters--one at the beginning of my time here (11/2) and the other that happened the day before yesterday ((11/12):

Germophobia

As we were getting back into Simon Pierre's Toyota Land Cruiser to leave the area where the Ngera school and project for orphans is located in Gisenyi, a young boy walked, by, whipped down his pants and peed right in front of us. There it was for God and everybody to see, but the boy didn't give it a passing thought. I've seen this countless times before so that isn't what got me thinking. I couldn't help thinking of the fifty or so absolutely filthy kids whose hands had just rubbed the hair on my arms (children are fascinated

with my arm hair—Celestin says it's like Gorilla hair—the adults are probably fascinated by my hair as well—they just have the good manners not to say anything) and that I just held hands with for the last hour and a half. I don't even want to know where these children's hands have been. I have seen too many noses in fingers and other places they shouldn't be in public.

Many Americans, when they visit Africa for the first time, use hand sanitizer with just about every physical contact with a person or piece of dirt as if it's going to mortally infect them. I've gotten pretty lax in using hand sanitizer, actually. I use it maybe once a day if I happen to think of it. But after today I'm thinking I may need to become just a bit more germophobic. :-)

Hero of the Year Nomination

If you have visited CNN's website recently, you've undoubtedly noticed that they have been holding nominations for "Hero of the Year." My nomination is an unnamed man I saw yesterday on the border between Congo and Rwanda. As Celestin and I were walking to the immigration center, I caught sight of a man trudging up the hill with a 20 liter canister of kerosene on his shoulder. There is nothing exceptional about this 44 pound load, even ten-year-old girls can carry that much weight here, except that this man was barely more than four feet tall and walking not on feet, but on what looked like just below the knee amputated stumps padded with some kind of rubber, padded "slipper."

This man wins my "Hero" nomination for not whining, complaining, or quitting when he has every reason in the reason to do so. I'm sure this man is not perfect, but his never-say-die-I'm-going-to-find-a-way-somehow-someway attitude has deeply affected me. Next time I'm tempted to grumble or moan about something in my life, I will call him to mind, for he is doing what he can, with what he was, where he is. The apostle Paul put it this way, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have

learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living plenty or in want. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"
(Philippians 4:12-13).

God bless you and your families!

Joe

Email #7

Subject: DRC/Congo Update #7: "Multiplication of Fish and Loves"—Goats, Schools, and Sewing Machines

Dear Friends and Family, here's a brief synopsis of what we have been able to do with God's help and blessing in Congo in 2007-2008.

An unexpected blessing from this year's trip to Congo was to get updates from Celestin regarding the projects we sat in motion last fall. Last year's trip was a whirlwind of activity and it was hard to keep track of all the different areas and churches who received what and when. Each community who received funds last year was given a say in what they believed was in their best long-term interests. This was something that took time and could not be decided completely during the short time I was here. Last year we gave away 26 sewing machines in Congo and built five classrooms that house over 310 children at the Ballibanga elementary school in Bukavu. 4 pigs have turned into 11, 6 sheep have turned into 15, 52 goats have turned into 124. Here's a short recap and update on how the sewing machines, goats, and school you built are doing.

Goma, DRC

Goma First Church received six machines. When we visited them this year, even as war was continuing on the outskirts of Goma, one of the women, Mama Masika expressed her gratitude and excitedly told us about their sewing project in Goma. They started teaching sewing last year with the six machines

the Golden church gave them. Eight women have been trained since last fall. This year they are training 23 women who are divided into groups of three on the six machines. It takes one year for training to be completed.

Kasika

In Kasika, another small village about 12 hours over horrific roads from Bukavu, they received two sewing machines. In this area there was only one woman who knew how to sew. As soon as the Kasika church received their sewing machines, she started teaching 8 other ladies to sew. After four months of training, they started a sewing workshop in Kasika which is the very first one in the town of 5,000. A sewing workshop offers sewing training for anyone who wants it. People will also bring clothes to be repaired from which the group makes money. The women at the sewing workshop also evangelize while doing this. There is a choir of those who have been trained and they have a devotional and time of prayer in the morning. Sometimes they do a Bible study, Celestin says.

The last report the women from Kasika sent to Celestin says that they have \$180 in their account. With other money they've made from sewing activities, they have bought a plot of ground to start a new church. On this plot they have started a child development center.

Child Development Centers offer a holistic program for at-risk children that Nazarene Compassionate Ministries is encouraging each local church in Africa to participate in. As part of each CDC, there is a feeding program, Bible study, prayer, and literacy programs for the children who are not able to go to school, and healthcare. Every CDC includes an "International Health Clinic," as Celestin half-jokingly calls it that can treat for diarrhea, worms and viruses.

CDCs also address the emotional part of life with counseling for children who have been traumatized by the harsh conditions here—war, death of parents,

disease, malnutrition, etc. CDCs seek to address the spiritual, social, physical, emotional, mental needs of children.

All this is being done from the sewing machines the women at Kasika received that year.

Since it's hard to find porridge in Kasika, they give the children vegetables, sweet potatoes, and corn. They have lots of palm oil in the area that they produce themselves they give the children so they can have some fat in their diet which is often missing in the diet of malnourished children.

Kasika is a place where many people have been killed by rebels. They are slowly rebuilding their community. As a result of rebel terrorism, there are many widows and abandoned women who have been raped in this region by rebels. There are also many orphans in this region.

In addition to the money we sent for the sewing machines, we also gave \$240 for various agricultural projects that went for buying corn seed, beans, and cassava. The people in Kasika have now had two harvests which has given them five times what they planted. After selling a part of the harvest, they started a pig rearing project. They bought four pigs which gave birth to 15 piglets. Unfortunately, 8 of the piglets died. But 7 others are doing fine. They now see that they may need a vet in helping pigs to survive in this climate.

The idea of the pig project is to help those lades who have been abandoned, raped or widowed. They are targeting to give one piglet/family. Once the piglet grows and reproduces they will give back two piglets to the ministry after they are weaned which is usually about three months. Pigs have between 5-10 piglets at a time.

Pigs have two litters a year, Celestin says.

As part of this program, there are 46 women who have been raped, 30 widows, 15

abandoned women, and 82 orphans who will benefit from this project.

Once a woman is raped 99% of them are abandoned by their husbands.

Such a woman will either be chased away from the community by their husband or the husband will abandon her. Rape is a source of deep and painful shame.

Women lose their face. They are dehumanized. This causes the woman to keep their rape a secret. Many become sick with AIDS, but cannot tell anyone because of the shame associated with it. And then the husband gets infected and so on and on AIDS go.

Kasika has a high rate of malnourished children. Even though it's a very lush place, many people are still afraid to plant large crops because the rebels may come in and steal or destroy their crops. Many people still go into the forest at night and only come out in the morning because the rebels come at night.

In Kasika Celestin says a community well is the biggest need right now. Their next projects to start are a school and a pineapple plantation. An entire community is being transformed.

Masisi

Masisi is located about 50 kilometers west of Goma in the middle of rebel territory. People still live here, but it's very difficult for outsiders to visit as the rebels are very paranoid about outsider influence. Three sewing machines went to Masisi last year. They are still there, but are not being used because of the war that is going on around them. Where there is war there is instability, and where there is instability, people have a hard time planting crops, children cannot go to school, and regular patterns of life are disrupted and stopped. It's a difficult time in Congo for too many people.

Kashero

Kashero is located on the outskirts of Goma by Mugungu, the huge U.N.

refugee camp we visited last year. The Kashero church has trained five ladies who are working as a group on the two machines they received last year.

Kamituga

In Kamitugu, which is about 100 miles west of Bukavu, they trained three women on two machines. They have also rented a room where these women sew together. From December to September they raised enough money from their sewing activities that they were able to pay \$63 in rent (\$7/month) and put \$120 into the Zone Church account (there are about 20 churches on a zone).

When there is a need on a zone level, the ladies contribute to it—e.g. if someone visits the hospital or has HIV/AIDS they will help pay the medical expenses. In the countryside, Celestin tells me, if it's discovered that someone has AIDS, his/her family will disown them.

This means that there will be no one to take care of those with AIDS except faithful Christians who take mercy on such people. The money being made from the sewing project in Kamituga is part of such a ministry of compassion to the rejected and abandoned. Celestin told me that the ladies from Kamituga also visit and care for people dying of AIDS.

Byonja

The people here talked and decided to buy six sheep with the money we had for them. They also bought 50 Kg of corn and 20 Kg of beans to plant. With the remaining money they bought some hoes and machetes.

At the end of June, they sent a report saying that six sheep gave birth to nine lambs. They have now planted one hectare of corn (about 3 acres). The people here are very hard working and creative, Celstin says. They will make a big impact in their community with the means that are available. These people are doing what they can, with what they have, where they are.

John Wesley Church (Bukavu)

They had an initial amount of \$30. They make soap and make bread to fund their compassionate ministries. They have made \$50 in profit that has enabled them to minister to four handicapped children, 20 vulnerable children. They also bought 10 cooking pots, 5 blankets and 30 yards of material for widows for clothes. Their goal is to assist 50 vulnerable children in the coming year.

Kalemie

The churches in Kalemie which is several hundred miles south of Bukavu along Lake Tanganyika received \$1,000. The people here received 30 goats which were given to ten churches. In their understanding every church should have three goats which as a starting point. They now have 82 goats. 52 babies were born this last year. Most of the goats here gave birth to twins. The churches have built small barns at each local church to hold the goats. Their target is that when each local church has 20 goats as a stable flock they will start distributing them to the needy in the community.

The children in the church look after the goats according to a schedule that is given out every Sunday at church. The children look over the goats from 2-6 p.m. after school. Celestin really likes how they have involved everyone in the project. The entire community has taken ownership of the project.

With the money they received in Kalemie, they also bought a field where they are planting cassava. The field is 80 meters square—which is almost 3 acres. Their idea is to have a grinding machine so they can produce cassava flour (Celestin says fuel-powered grinders cost about \$600). This flour will be sold by the ladies in the church which will be a way of giving them a job but also a way to make sure that the money will be used for the benefit of the church to help those who are in need in the area. 20% of the money made will

go to the zone fund that helps with medical assistance for the needy, 30% will be reinvested in agricultural projects, and 50% will go as payment to the ladies who are working. The women who are picked for this project will be selected according to those in greatest need—e.g. widows and abandoned women. Having a job will help these women to take care of their own families.

Mudaka

In Mudaka, the community where the handicapped children, Seraphim and Pasie live, their 17 goats have now turned into 31.

Uvira

We gave the Uvira church (which is on the northwest shore of Lake Tanganyika) 3 sewing machines and 5 goats. They now have 11 goats total. Their target is to reach 50 goats and at which point they will start distributing them to the needy in the community. In Uvira once they have 10 goats in a local church, they give five to another church to take care of until they reach 50.

Bunyakiri

In Bunyakiri they received 5 sewing machines. Akilimali is the one who is in charge of the sewing project. They started a sewing workshop, immediately producing clothes. With the money made from the project they help support the widows and the orphans in the church.

With the money they have made so far they are taking care of 42 raped ladies, 36 widows, 78 orphans. The Mai Mai rebels are in this region rape many women. Celestin says that an average of two women a day are raped in this region because of the many rebels surrounding the Gahuzi Biega National Park where Bunyakiri is located.

They have also bought four goats with the money they have made from their sewing project. Their goal is to reach 30 goats to start distributing to widows and raped ladies.

Ballibanga School (Bukavu, DRC)

Last year the Ballinbanga School had 230 students when I visited.

This year they have 400 students. They lost two classrooms in January because of the earthquake that destroyed many homes and schools in Bukavu.

They are able to provide free education to 35 orphans and 25 abandoned children.

With the money we gave last year, the therapy room that was built has been expanded to over twice the size to include room enough for five total classrooms with over 320 children in just the new part of the school. The school class sizes: 85; 75; 52; 51; 66

Celestin told me again and again that entire communities that had been devastated by war are now being rebuilt through what the Golden Church and friends have done in Congo. To God be the glory! Great things he has done and is continuing to do, one sewing machine and one goat at a time.

I'm flying back to the U.S. in about four hours from Kigali, Rwanda, so this will be the last email you receive from me from Africa. I have a few more stories I'd like to share, but these can wait until I'm home.

God bless you and your families and thank you so much for your generosity, prayers and encouragement!

Joe

Email #8

Subject: DRC/Rwanda Update #8: Kigali, Rwanda; Genocide Memorial; Ntarama Church

I returned from Kigali yesterday about noon. I woke up this morning at 3 o'clock. I wish I could wake up naturally this early every morning—I'd be a lot more productive, that's for sure! At the risk of filling up your spam filters, here are a few more thoughts—this time from Kigali:

This past Saturday (November 15) after Celestin and Simon Pierre left for a conference in South Africa I was left by myself in Kigali. I've been to Kigali several times now and have stayed at the Mission Field house for close to ten nights passing through Kigali on the way to Gisenyi, Goma, Bukavu, or Bujumbura, Burundi. But this was the first time for me to be there by myself. If my stories give you the impression that I'm particularly intrepid and brave, please don't think that of me any longer. I am by nature incurably inquisitive, true; but I'm also a big chicken. I had never been on my own in Africa before so I was a bit anxious about arranging my own taxi to and from the airport, being able to tell people what I wanted to eat without hurting myself babbling on in unintelligible French, and how I was going to sleep on Saturday night at a Field house with no electricity. The Field house is surrounded by a security fence, has a night watchman who slept just outside my bedroom window, and has barred windows—but it was still a little creepy all the same.

Needless to say, the boogiemer didn't get me.

On my own during the daylight hours of Saturday, I wondered what I could do to occupy myself. There aren't many touristy spots in Kigali, but one place I've visited before is the Genocide Memorial.

When I told Shelly that I was going to visit the Genocide Memorial again, she said: "You really know how to have fun, don't you?" The Genocide Memorial is not a fun place to visit, but it's part of the necessary history of the

culture and context of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Rwanda is an incredibly beautiful country—its tea plantations are a patchwork quilt of green, the scent of eucalyptus trees hangs in the air, and dense forests of banana trees hug this land of a thousand hills. It's hard to imagine the biblical Eden to have been any more "perfect" than Rwanda, a tiny country just a tad larger than New Hampshire. But yet within this Edenic like place, all hell erupted in 1994. Even in the midst of all the beauty of Rwanda, I can never get the ugliness of the Genocide out of my head.

During one hundred days from April to July 1994, about one million Tutsis and several hundred thousand Hutus were brutally murdered in Rwanda. If you've seen the 2004 movie, "Hotel Rwanda," then you're familiar with the tragic story of the Rwandan Genocide. Gangs of Hutus, the ethnic majority of Rwanda, incited hatred of the Tutsis, the ethnic minority, calling them "cockroaches" and "vermin." The Nazis took a similar approach in laying the groundwork for the Jewish Holocaust. The sad history of human genocide is that once the perpetrators can sufficiently dehumanize and scapegoat their intended target, then mass murder is never far away.

Before Rwanda's colonization by Belgium, Hutus and Tutsis had lived more-or-less peacefully with each other for centuries, if not a millennia. The Belgians quickly identified more closely with the Tutsis who they took to be taller and lighter-skinned than the stereotypically shorter and blacker Hutus, even though genetically there is no difference between Tutsis and Hutus. Drawing from the racial theories of the early part of the late nineteenth century, the Belgians believed the Tutsis to be more advanced and "European" than the Hutus. It wasn't long before Belgium created identity cards, identifying every Rwandan as either Hutu or Tutsi. The Tutsis, who make up around fifteen percent of Rwanda's population, were made the rulers over the Hutus. The Tutsis often ruled with an iron hand, planting seeds of enmity and racism that would explode with such devastating consequences in 1994 with Hutus killing their Tutsi neighbors, colleagues, and even family members,

seeking to exterminate the Tutsis from Rwanda once and for all.

Visiting the National Genocide Memorial in Kigali on Saturday was a graphic reminder of a visit I made to the Catholic Church at Ntarama, Rwanda in 2004 where over 5,000 men, women, and children were savagely murdered by the genocidaires. Ntarama is a rural community, less than an hour from Kigali. As my friend Celestin and I got out of our taxi, I could hardly imagine a more peaceful place—flowers in red, orange, and pink bloom, birds singing, the warm morning sun on my neck, men and women at work in the fields, children coming home from school. It all seemed so ordinary, but yet I knew that just up the hill lay the largely undisturbed remains of the victims of April 17, 1994. Didn't the Genocidaire notice how lovely this place is? Evil has no eye for beauty.

It was one of the most heart-wrenching experiences of my life as I imagined the last moments of 5,000 innocent men, women and children who had fled to the church at Ntarama as a refuge. I stepped carefully on the pew benches so as not to desecrate the human remains that still lie between them. What I see is so ordinary: School books lying on the church floor. Plastic cups. Utensils. Spilled bags of beans. Shoes of adults and children. Bones. Human bones. A human skull and cross sit ironically juxtaposed on the altar. Our guide at the church says it's the skull of the church's priest. Large rocks litter the church floor, remnants of the genocidaires who shot, hacked, bludgeoned and killed with whatever means they could find. At the back of the church are row after row of human skulls--I lost count after 1,000. Some of these have machete slashes and others have been crushed by a blunt instrument. A few of the female skulls still have brightly colored scarves wrapped across their foreheads in exactly the same place they had been placed the fateful morning of April 17, 1994.

Arm and leg bones are stacked several feet high like firewood at the back of the sanctuary. The families of the victims have chosen to keep Ntarama as close to its original condition as possible so that the world never forgets.

As I stood among the ruins of once vital and happy lives, I felt that any attempt at speech would have been sacrilege. I wept. I was in the midst of tragedy, but yet I stood on holy ground. As I gained composure, I questioned our guides, a man and a woman, whose responses my friend Celestin interpreted for me from Kinyarwanda. Our guides lost their wife and husband and ten children during the April massacre at Ntarama. The woman told us that she had been pregnant at the time and now has a daughter who is ten years old. She has never remarried.

I mustered the courage to ask our male guide where he was when the genocidaires came. He took me to the exact pew in the church where body after body piled upon him, disguising that there was still life stirring at the bottom of several feet of dead men, women, and children--his neighbors, his family, his hopes and his dreams.

My friend Celestine and his wife, Esperance, were in Rwanda at the time of the Genocide. Understandably, they do not like to talk about their experiences. In April 1994 they saw men running around the city with blood dripping from their machetes. They have told me that they saw things they pray to God they will never see again.

The people of Rwanda and Congo have seen as much suffering as any people in the world. When we take seriously the gratuitous suffering and incomprehensible evil experienced by the innocent, we may be tempted to think that God is dead, missing in action, or simply does not care. Even after the horrors I've seen and heard about, I choose to affirm the theological category of the universality of God's grace in all of creation. What I mean by this is that in ways that are often hidden and very mysterious God is everywhere present, redeeming, reconciling and resurrecting—even in the midst of and especially in situations of inexplicable suffering and evil.

A conversation between three characters in Susan Howatch's novel *Absolute Truths* helps me make some sense out of the mystery of human suffering and

God's redemptive presence with us when we suffer:

"Your difficulty at the moment," said [Neville] Aysgarth kindly, "is that as you're hanging on the cross all you can see is the dark. But don't forget that we look back on Good Friday in the light of Easter Day."

"The light and the dark intermingle to form the pattern of redemption and salvation," said Jon [Darrow]. "The dark doesn't become less terrible but that pattern which the light makes upon it contains the meaning which will redeem the suffering. . . ."

Hastily, I [Charles Ashworth] interrupted: "Why did you put that heavy emphasis on 'intermingling,' and how does it link up with that sentence I quoted from Romans [8:28]?"

"The correct translation of that passage is actually: 'All things intermingle for good to them that love God.' I know you think I'm a rotten theologian, Charles, but at least my New Testament Greek is sound."

I [Charles] flexed my memory to recall the verb under discussion.

"But what's the point of the alternate translation?"

"It gives a better impression of synergy—the process where two different things are put together and make something quite new. If you just say: 'All things work together for good'—as if the good and the bad are all stirred together like the ingredients of a cake which later merges from the oven smelling wonderful—then the man who's dying of cancer will want to punch you in the jaw because he knows damned well you're understating his pain and playing fast and loose with the reality of his suffering by implying that his disease is in the end a good thing. But if you say: 'All things intermingle for good,'

you're implying that the good and the bad remain quite distinct.

There's no question of well-mixed cake ingredients which emerge from the oven

smelling wonderful. The bad really is terrible and the good may seem powerless against that terrible reality, but when the good and the bad intermingle—not merge but intermingle—"

"They form a pattern," said Jon, "as I pointed out a moment ago. The darkness doesn't become less dark, but that pattern which the light makes upon it contains the meaning which makes the darkness endurable.

Do you remember telling me, Charles, that when you were a POW you found that human beings could endure almost anything so long as they believed their suffering had meaning? What they couldn't endure was the possibility that there was no meaning which would allow the suffering to be redeemed."

–Susan Howatch, *Absolute Truths* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

Email #9

Subject: Rwanda/DRC Blog #8: Annie and Caritas

One of the many unexpected and incredible blessings of my trips to Africa has been the lifelong friends I've made with Celestin and Esperance Chishibanji in Congo, Frank and Hanna Mills in Ghana, and Simon Pierre and Caritas Rwaramba in Rwanda.

Most of you know that our 14-year-old daughter, Annie, has a chronic bone disease that made it necessary for her to have bilateral total hip and knee replacement surgeries in January and April of this year. Some of our strongest prayer supporters have been our friends in Africa. Sometimes I wonder why they would care so much for a privileged American girl who, even though she has many physical struggles, still has more opportunities available to her than 99% of all Africans.

But then again maybe they wonder the same about us—why do we care so much about them when we know so little about them?

I took some pictures of Annie's surgery with me to Congo and Rwanda—pictures of her in the hospital as well as the post-op radiographs that show her knee and hip implants in frightening detail. Not being used to these kinds of surgeries my friends had a difficult time wrapping their

minds around the idea of the implants and screws being permanently in her body without causing her excruciating pain. It's rather mindboggling to me, too, come to think of it.

Simon Pierre visited us in Colorado the week before Easter this year. Before his visit I told him about Annie's bone disease and surgeries. When he met her, he was very surprised at Annie's positive attitude. He told me later that many handicapped people in Africa are bitter and depressed and he expected the same from Annie. But while he was with us, she offered to get him something to drink, eat or anything else he needed. Her generous spirit was not at all what he expected, he said. So when Simon Pierre returned home to Rwanda he told his wife, Caritas, about Annie. Caritas was so taken with Annie and her story that in May she organized a special "Annie Walking Day Celebration" at the Gisenyi, Rwanda Church of the Nazarene. I wish I could have been there to hear the singing and see the dancing and joy written across Caritas and the other women's faces. To go along with the celebration, Caritas also wrote the following beautiful poem about Annie:

Let's share hope

If I had not known her parents, I would not have known her
Her parents are filled with mercy and love,
He father is grieved when seeing people in trouble and tries to save them.

I did not meet her, but people told me about her,
Those who saw her, Celestin and Simon Pierre, told me about her happiness,
About the gladness and hospitality that she has. She ignored her disability

I did not meet her, I saw her in the picture on the hospital bed undergoing surgery,
Even during that time, she never stopped laughing. Her smile means a lot to me.
I did not meet her, but I saw her in the family picture, smiling so nicely.

I did not meet her, but on reading her writing I knew that Annie was full of hope,
That one day she would come out of the wheel chair and then walk with her own feet.
After I learned about her I discovered what was inside her

I determined to walk with her--wherever I'm with her, wherever I go, whatever I do, Annie is always with me.

Your picture is always kept close to me, so I can always look at it, reminding me that I'm with you.

I pray for you whenever I look at your picture,

Let's us, we who share the same faith, bring our cultures together,

Our fellowship and energy pray hard for this beloved daughter.

Let's hope that the time is drawing near for her, to be able to stand up and walk.

There is nothing impossible with God, because he proved that.

Let's join Annie in singing this song from Psalm 23.

It was on 25th May, 2008 that I started to think of Annie

--Caritas

Isn't her love for Annie incredible? I went to Africa expecting to give rather than to receive. I've been blessed way out of proportion to what blessing I've done. But this is so like God, isn't it?

When we are where he wants us to be, we can't out give God. We give and we bless others and we can't help but get some on ourselves.

Caritas is not the only one who has taken a special interest in Annie. Veronique, the HIV positive widow in Rwanda who was barely surviving with her three children and then decided that with God's help she would welcome 8 orphans into her family, has also been praying for Annie. When I met with Veronique early in November, I gave her some pictures of Shelly and the kids as well as a few of Annie's surgery. Veronique was thrilled to receive the pictures. I was stunned when she told me how she has prayed for Annie everyday between 3 and 5 in the morning! I knew Simon Pierre had told her about Annie's surgeries, but I had no idea how seriously she had prayed for Annie. If I was not already overwhelmed by Caritas love for Annie, Veronique's love, in spite of her own pain and hardship, was almost too much to comprehend.

As difficult as Annie's journey has been, I really believe that the prayers of our friends in Africa, many whom Annie has never met, have made a world of difference in her recovery. You have prayed for Annie, too, with great effect. No single prayer alone has taken her burden completely

away, but each person's prayer has lightened the load just a bit so that what might have otherwise been impossible is now possible. As we are on the doorstep of Advent, I can't help but think of the angel Gabriel's words to Mary at the annunciation: "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

My friends in Africa have taught me in a way that I had never understood before how our lives in the body of Christ are intimately interconnected with each other, whether we live next door to each other or 10,000 miles away from each other. I went to Africa expecting to minister to people, not to be ministered to. I went to give. But I've received. I went to bless. But I've been blessed. And my family has been blessed. And my church has been blessed. My heart overflows with gratitude for the faithfulness of God and the love of his people. Thank you.