

Pater Yves LaFontaine CMM schreibt zu Weihnachten aus Südafrika (ENGLISH!)

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Dear friends,

Here I am finally with my circular letter, my first and last one for 2016. But it's not the "Alpha et Omega" (the beginning and the end) of my year "par excellence." No, it's been a very ordinary year.

Today is the 16th. I begin this circular with a temperature of 35C, all wet with humidity. Phew! I don't know if I'll be able to continue for very long since my level of energy is really low. Since I am here I never experienced so far temperatures so changing, capricious and unstable: wind, heavy but also thin, light and short rains, unforeseen heat, sudden cooling, raging hail. All this followed one another at a hasty rhythm. Since we did not have yet much heavy heat like that of today, I am afraid that Lady Nature will take its revenge in January. It's on the way already in fact because since I started this circular, the heat did not stop. Today, the 23rd, it's 40. Once more I spent a great part of my time in bed. I am completely flat. No energy whatsoever! After all I might well be being charged for my many sins.

Thanks to all who wrote to me this year. This has no doubt contributed to keep me sound in mind – I dare believe it – and heathy.

At this time in the year – we are already at its last sighs – I can say after Shakespeare, "All is well that ends well." Apart from the heat, which wears me out completely, my physical health is good, at least in as much as general exams can say. However, just after my return from Canada at the end of July, I caught a terrible and inappropriate bronchitis – yet I had not run after it. I must say that the fatigue of the trip combined with my diabetes must have had something to do with it. This has obviously slowed me down by three good weeks. I needed two full treatments of antibiotics to knock out the enemy.

Some of you know it already; I am now the chaplain of our religious sisters in Mariannahill. This, since the death of our Fr. Henry Ratering at the beginning of April of this year. Naturally, this forces me to stay here and limits considerably my outings. I never thought I would make the vow of physical stability in my life. But it's done now.

As some of you already know it, sometime ago I have had to hand in my resignations from some responsibilities that had accumulated along the way. It was becoming a bit too much, but actually it was above all because my task of Postulator of the cause of Abbot Francis Pfanner was suffering too much from this. I am talking here in particular of my task of Coordinator of the Emaus Heritage Centre, which was taking much of my time, of my belonging to some boards of administration, etc. I am now left with only three tasks: postulator, teacher to the novices and chaplain of our religious sisters. However I am not yet completely out of the Emaus Heritage Centre since I was behind by 2 ½ years in my bookkeeping. I am now concentrating on putting an end to this. Then I will be able to go back to my main task, that of postulator. But things are moving rather slowly. Lately, since the beginning of the heat wave, I lost two weeks roughly. Furthermore, my chaplaincy takes more time than I thought.

I still enjoy my teaching to the novices. In fact, this is what I like best. We are finishing this year soon, at the end of January. I will see for next year what I will do.

Let's now move to something else, hopefully interesting for you. It is no longer safe at all here. Even at the Monastery. We have break-ins often here around. About two weeks ago somebody broke in once more at the Mater Dolorosa house – our premise for the elderly and sick confreres. Even the driving here is more than hectic; it is dangerous. One must always try to protect himself. The so-called taxi drivers – mini-bus - fly on the roads and there are no rules for them. Even the police are prudent in dealing with them because they are all armed. One must therefore drive, doubling in prudence.

For our consolation, we now have a blessed among the members of our congregation, as some of you undoubtedly know already. I pray to him each day the Good Lord brings. He is such an impressive figure! And yet how simple and humble!

Some news now concerning our political and social life here. Since some time already the radio stations and the media take up again and again the tune “Zuma must go.” But our president never leaves the scene. Ultimately his party, the ANC, finally decided not to demand his resignation, this after a sense of outrage expressed by a growing number of its tenors and some public personalities of various groups and following a collapse of the economy and of our currency. The problem is that if one attacks Zuma inside the ANC, the latter is in possession of so many inside information that he can charge him easily. This is to say that the rot runs deeper than Zuma himself, who is battling with scandals of corruption and with maladministration. It has ANC's soul. But even so it is the same man, Zuma, who in 2009 spoke eloquently about the need for a moral code to guide the nation.

Mandela realized early that his government was departing from the vision he had described. He called together faith-based organisations to work with the state to overcome the spiritual malaise underpinning social shortcomings: “The hopes and dreams at times seem to be overcome by cynicism, self-centredness and fear; which lead to problems of greed and cruelty of egotism and crime and corruption.” In 1998 he started a movement called the Moral Regeneration Movement but it was destined to fail because its first chairman was precisely none other than Zuma. Something else in this connection. At least 12 people died in political shooting during the last elections period. KwaZulu-Natal has borne the brunt of violence, with police statistics showing that some 90% of presumed political killings took place there. Moreover, the total number of murders reported nationally this year is 18,673, around 51 a day; this represents an increase of 4.9 % on the previous year.

Now, just a few other mentions regarding politics. If you think you know what corruption means, come here for a short while. You'll go back relieved. It's almost omnipresent in our government world. It is the daily object of the newspapers and the media. There is not only the famous scandal of Nkandla, that is, the president's own singled out scandal. At least he has had to pay for that one. Only money unfortunately! But there are others. There is, for instance, the “guptagate,” so called on account of the undue influence of the Indian family Gupta on the government. Once the president was forced to undo very rapidly the appointments of two new ministers, strongly suggested –not to use a more vigorous term – by that family. One must say that two of Zuma's children served as directors of a number of Gupta companies, according to South Africa's companies database, and the family is a major financial backer of the ruling ANC.

Let's now move to another field: rape. Here too we break records. The average number of rapes reported a day is 118. Research studies suggest however that, depending on the locality, as little as one in 13 rapes are reported to the police. They also estimate that there would be therefore one rape every 11 minutes. Of course these are only estimates. Nevertheless....

You probably know that our country is the richest on the African continent. And yet, there is more than ¼ of the population that can't eat their fill (around 26%) and more than half live below the poverty level (52%), this, 18 years after the end of the apartheid regime and the instauration of democracy. To be poor in South Africa doesn't exclude that one possesses a frig (57%), a radio (55%), a TV set (62%) and above all a cell phone (80%), according to a survey on the standard of living, published by the National Agency of Statistics.

On the other hand, Statistic South African shows without any doubt that poverty still remains overwhelmingly marked by the policy of systematic economic exclusion in place at the time of the apartheid, this to the detriment of the black majority. Poverty is today the lot of 25,5 million South-Africans, that is, 62% of black families and 33% of coloured, while it affects 7% of Indian families and a bit more than 1% of white families. Poverty is defined as the minimum indispensable to eat, but also to meet other vital needs (accommodation, clothing, health, schooling of children). This implies that one person must earn R577 (rand) per month (about \$50 Canadian dollars). Roughly, it can therefore be stated that each day there is ¼ of the population that does not eat its fill.

Lastly, the general attitude vis-à-vis HIV has evolved considerably in South Africa. In the whole country there are 5,6 million people infected by it; this is the highest number in the world, unless I am mistaken. The infection rate and prejudices remain important. However, in the course of the last two years the number of persons treated for this infection has increased by 75% and the infections have decreased by 50,000 over the last two years. One must also add that the country has increased its expenses for the HIV infection to 1,6 billions, the highest amount among all the emergent nations.

Ok, there would be so much to say, but I stop here. My letter is already too long.

To conclude, here come my wishes. The great St. Augustine said: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." Restlessness is indeed our human condition. "If only you could come, Lord, and chase away all these limitations and foes in our lives!" Indeed, our first natural reaction is always to long for, better still, to resolutely want a "deus ex machina," a superman of all supermen, a semi-god who will overcome all the evils of this world, in particular of our own worlds, beat them up with a yet unseen violence, slink away in complete defeat all our deadly foes and kill-joys and finally bring us the happiness we so desperately long for. Yes, we are restless. And how!

Very unfortunately, those expectations are not met - and will never be met. Just like the expectations of the Baptist and of the Jews never materialized. God's logic is in no way whatsoever ours. It is totally unexpected, perfectly surprising, way beyond our human concepts and superbly paradoxical. To answer our restlessness, definitely and for ever, God took out of his magical bag the unconceivable: a baby lying helpless in the straw of a manger! And amazingly, this "solution," so to say, surpasses our wildest expectations. Why?

Why did God choose to be born into our world in this way? Fr. R. Rolheiser answers this question wonderfully: “Because you can't argue with a baby! Babies don't try to compete, don't stand up to you, don't try to best you in an argument, and don't try to impress you with their answers. Indeed, they can't speak at all. You, on your part, have to coax everything out of them, be it a smile or a word, and that effort, which demands great patience, usually draws out what's best in you.” Brilliant answer!

Well, this God is always with us since the first Christmas. Is not his name “God-with-us.?” Now the unimaginable is possible, even at hand, and we can already experience happiness and joy in this world of ours. We need only let the poor infant of Bethlehem change us from within.

A most blessed Christmas time and New Year to each one of you!