

COMMENTARY ON THE PAPER BY PROF. PAULUS ZULU

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What strikes me most forcefully on reading the paper by Paulus Zulu is the starkness of the contrast between his paper and that of Kevin Ryan on the condition of North American youth.

The problem of American youth is life style. The problem of African youth is survival. Their problems are different not merely in degree, but in essence.

It is interesting to see from the papers of Juan Llach (which I could read) and of Prof. Grundano (which I could not) that Latin-America is half-way between the two – beginning to emerge from the simple struggle for survival and therefore in a position to debate how to avoid the pitfalls into which American youth have fallen.

The latest figures on Zimbabwe show that life expectancy in my country, because of the impact of HIV/AIDS and the economically destructive policies of the government, has fallen to thirty-four for women and thirty-seven for men.

Annual inflation in March 2006 was conservatively calculated by the Government to be 913% p.a. and rising. Food and medicines are scarce, sanitation systems are collapsing, power and water cuts are becoming more frequent, education is becoming unaffordable. Single parent families, and often no-parent families, are the result, not of divorce, but of HIV/AIDS. We do not have war, but otherwise we fit very neatly into the situation described by Pierpaolo Donati in his general introduction to the topic, citing 'The State of the World's Children, 2005'.

As is so often the case in God's curious plan for the world, there can be seen in all this a symmetry of needs. The first world suffers from an excess of material wealth and a lack of spiritual wealth. The third world, in the agony of its material poverty, is forced back on its spiritual wealth.

Young people everywhere, if given the chance to express it, have a huge generosity of spirit, which can be fostered by appropriate organisa-

tions. The West needs to involve its young people more in social work, both national and international, rather than in the traditional cures for social evils – sport and military service. The Church's role should be to explain to its young people how such work fulfils what His Holiness the Pope calls 'the ecclesial exercise of the commandment of love of neighbour' (*Deus Caritas Est*).

The third world, with its spiritual hunger untainted by material possessions, and moved by the horror of the material conditions of life, is meanwhile producing more and more young people who turn to the priesthood and sisterhood.

Many of these young priests and sisters are becoming the 'gastarbeiters' of the Western Church – the providers of spiritual nourishment to a spiritually undernourished West.

I have recently been speaking to the leaders of the Catholic Student Society of the University of Zimbabwe. They too manifest the generosity of spirit of which I spoke earlier. But it is sad to see how that generosity is crushed down and oppressed by the realities of daily life – the problem of finding money for their University fees, the problem of HIV/AIDS in their community, the problem of trying to do anything innovative in the face of a government which stamps down on any ideas which do not emanate from the Party.

So, in a mysterious way, we may find an over-arching solution to the difficulties of our young people by encouraging an interactive love inspired by the thoughts of 'Deus Caritas Est'. Let the youth of the First World heal the youth of the Third World materially, while the youth of the Third World reciprocate on a spiritual plane.