

After 10 years:

## The Evangelising Mission to the Luangwa Valley

*(“Sunthirani kozamako”)*

To all pastoral agents working in the Luangwa Valley and in Chipata Diocese;  
To the superiors of our various congregations that enrich the Luangwa Valley;

The pastoral letter *Sunthirani kozamako* was launched in 2008 in order to accompany the Diocesan commitment and dedication towards the evangelising mission in the Luangwa Valley. The letter came in response to a serious research and four years of meetings and common reflections after the Centenary celebrations of Chipata Diocese, held in Kambwiri/Chasera in 2004. It spelled out in a clear language the vision, strategy, and required attitudes for this mission, as we had discerned it at that point in time, and finished with a strong appeal to become part of this mission. Ten years have passed, and it is time not only for stocktaking and for sifting out our experiences, but also for a firm (re)commitment to the common mission, which, we believe, has been entrusted to us by Christ and which must proceed in his spirit that *always leads us out of our comfort zones into “deep waters”* that are yet waiting to be touched and transformed by the gospel.

This present letter takes up again the main points of *Sunthirani kozamako* and reflects on them in the light of the discussions that the letter stirred up as well as the experiences of the past ten years.

### ***Gratefulness to what has happened in the last ten years***

The Gospel is brought by its messengers—and we have to give thanks to God for giving us His messengers who have been toiling in the valley during the last ten years in very generous, loving, and committed ways.

1. The Comboni Missionaries remained faithful to the valley in their difficult commitments in Chama & Chikowa—to the Parishes as well as to Chikowa Youths Training Centre, emphasising especially the empowerment of laypeople in the evangelizing venture. We are also very grateful for the work they rendered to the valley from Kanyanga Parish that culminated in the establishment of Chikwa (sub) Parish.
2. The Missionaries of Africa committed themselves again to Lumimba Parish, and since then provided the Parish generously with a stable community/team.
3. The Sisters of Charity of Ottawa also moved to Lumimba, working in the Parish and in the school, reaching today many people that could not be reached by the priests, and working greatly towards the stability of Parish and school.

4. We opened Chikwa (sub-) Parish. The new venture still demands great acts of faith and commitment from those who accepted the mission: simple styles of life and transport adapted to the local circumstances, and especially the ability and patience to create relationships in a divided community that is still marked by the absence of capable Christian leadership. The availability of our brothers in this mission is for us a sign of God's presence and love for people in the Luangwa Valley.
5. We opened Masumba (sub-) Parish. We could witness the transformation that arose from the insertion of a committed priest into an expectant Christian community as well as the spark and momentum that "Christian immigrants" from all walks of life brought to this part of the valley. We could also witness the transforming grace that comes with the sacraments where people have regular access to them. Not all is perfect, yet the commitment of Christians in Masumba Parish provides today a tangible example for Christians in the neighbouring Parishes of what is possible also in the valley, spiritually as well as in terms of financial self-reliance.
6. Apart from the new parishes, Diocesan priests remained faithful to the valley also in the parishes that have outstations in the valley (Nyimba, Petauke, Katete). In an extended sense, also the staffing of Ukwimi Parish is part of our commitment to the valley.
7. We opened Chamilala Parish with the help and dedication of the Carmelite missionaries, who now enrich the Luangwa Valley with the faith as grown in our neighbouring sub-continent, and expectantly we wish all blessings and success to the difficult mission augmented now by the Carmelite charisms.
8. The Sisters of Mercy of St. Charles Borromeo have inserted themselves fully into their apostolate in Chamilala working for the clinic and in many other ways for the integral health of people here. Through their presence and care they give a concrete face to the healing ministry of the Church.
9. Also in Mwila, the Diocese through its health desk established a long awaited health centre and provides today services that complement the holistic mission of the Church.
10. Radio Maria brought many social issues of the valley into the open, giving the valley a voice but also a sense of pride and of belonging to the Diocese. We can witness in most of our outstation a desire to "be aired" and to be part of the Diocesan ventures.
11. The Luangwa Valley Think Tank has been given a firm place within the strategic planning of the Diocese and in the Diocesan pastoral council.
12. Various plateau parishes have been supporting parishes in the valley by training and financing catechists, helping with furnishing the houses and sacristies of our new commitments, and by helping out in various ways through their visits in pastoral matters as well as with concrete material and financial help. The pastoral office has made available the pastoral vehicle to a number of Parishes in the valley for visits to the outstations, has visited the valley Parishes even up to taking part in the ministry on a regular note, and the Diocesan desks have often prioritised the valley.

13. We need to give thanks for our long-term donors who remained faithful in sustaining our priorities in the Luangwa Valley, especially to MISSIO, for financing the training of competent catechists, helping to sustain Chikwa and Masumba Parishes, providing our catechists with bicycles and for financing the meetings of the Think Tank. We thank Church in Need, the North American Province of the Comboni Missionaries, and many other donors who helped in many ways, as did private individuals. The financing for the drilling of boreholes to bring clean water to people and the many efforts in the education sector and for the support of orphans (LOP, Millipap, and other projects) need to be acknowledged with much gratefulness. We give thanks to our donors, including families and friends, acknowledging also the generous help coming from other Dioceses, who in various ways made possible our apostolate in the valley and who improve people's living conditions. We give thanks to the countless acts of charity from the part of many Christians who through their generosity have given God's love a concrete face.

### ***Signs of hope***

We have witnessed an increased commitment of the government in the valley, for example in the erection of communication tower, which will hopefully work towards overcoming its isolation. We also hope that the recent road-building activities will be sustained in the future and that the creation of new districts in the valley will bring essential services closer to people. The government of Zambia partnered with the Church in the Kasweta apostolate, in Chamilala Clinic, in Lumimba Secondary School and in other commitments. We see in the valley the possibility of better networking conditions—among ourselves but also with the various stakeholders involved in improving its living conditions. Radio Maria has the potential of bringing valley issues into national discussions. We also look with much hope to the fertile grounds in regards to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, where a sense of unity in our common living environment has often helped us to transcend our differences.

Clearly the past ten years have seen a remarkable pledge to the valley that we acknowledge with gratefulness. Our fidelity to the call demands that we live our love and commitments in a way that ensures sustainability and continuity beyond our individual efforts.

### ***The acceptance of the letter***

The letter *Sunthirani kozamako* was a call for spiritual renewal and indeed conversion towards embracing a vision where the valley is seen as the ground of our *common mission* in which we can only succeed where we work together. It was also a call for an unconditional and loving presence in the valley, following Christ's own model: Through the incarnation he made himself fully at home in the culture of his people—absorbing its wisdom so as to draw close to sinners, to the sick, to those who were invisible to the policy makers, and to those who were excluded from the religion of the day. Doing so, he became a decisive challenge to his own culture, which he chose to transform not by force or by show of powers but from within through his self-giving and acceptance of vulnerability that culminated in his death and resurrection.

Not all parts of the letter were embraced by everybody. Some parts provoked many discussions and indeed at times outright rejection. Yet it is important that we are committed in moving together.

This document takes up again the central points of the letter, with the hindsight of ten years of experience. We ask each community as well as the superiors of our various congregations to evaluate our presence in the lines of this document—and to identify together with the coordinators the points of friction as well as those that need further clarification and discussions.

### ***(1) Mixed communities?***

The call for readiness to embrace mixed communities—where it benefits the mission—caught storms of lightening from many sides across the board of stake-holders of the apostolate. The last ten years have shown that mixed communities did not materialize. The appeal was never meant to abolish our congregations or our various styles of life and apostolate—which we affirm as God’s gift also to the valley. Yet, even the charisma of our congregations are never an end in themselves but are there to serve the mission of Christ and of the Church. In our Diocese we have never forced a mixed community on a congregation. But where mixed communities were embraced in clear, honest and transparent ways, they have greatly enriched the Diocese—also in the valley. At a time when the White Fathers found it difficult to adequately staff Lumimba Parish, a Diocesan priest became part of their team, for several years. Being human, the team did not lack its hitches and worries, but all sides—and especially the Christians whom we serve—saw it as a positive and unifying endeavour. Lumimba Parish benefitted greatly from it until this present day. We have never sought mixed communities for their own sake. The letter stated the reason in simple terms:

*Those to work in the valley (individual priests as well as sisters, missionary congregations) must be willing to shape their style of life on the needs of this mission.*

The call to be available for mixed communities grew from the consideration that a given congregation or indeed the Diocese may not always find the best people for the valley among its own ranks. However, even when we have to acknowledge that the idea of mixed communities, at large, has not been accepted, we cannot do away with the demand that the specific conditions of the mission in the valley shape our style of life, our community, prayer, and our way of doing the apostolate. The apostolate needs to be staffed with apostles who are ready to embrace this common vision. Secondly,

*Before people look at us as “Comboni”, “Teresian Sisters”, “Diocesan Priests”, and “White Fathers,” they see us first and foremost as priests (Azibambo), Sisters (Azimai) or Brothers.*

The specific vocation of our congregations is built on the common vocation as priests, brothers, and sisters in the Church that we want to be visible to people. There is no room for possessiveness in the valley—because first and foremost we want to offer people a deep sense of belonging to the universal Church.

### ***(2) A vocation within a vocation?***

While the letter strongly confirmed the valley as the ground for mission for the whole diocese, it spoke at the same time of “a vocation within a vocation”, implying that the insertion into the valley is not for everybody. This sentence also provoked much criticism. In various meetings, Diocesan priests as well as members of various missionary congregations stressed that every priest/brother/sister

must have the readiness to go and work in the valley. Nobody became a priest or a sister in order to stay within an established comfort zone. Everybody promised obedience and availability, and nobody can exclude himself/herself from the valley by asserting that, after all, it is a vocation within a vocation. Everybody who works in Chipata Diocese has in one way or another expressed his/her readiness to be part of this mission. We have to give thanks to God for this prevailing attitude and reaction—an attitude that we need to protect also for the future. Where “a vocation within a vocation” becomes understood in an exclusive way, it is indeed a misleading term. What the expression tried to safeguard, however, is clearly stated in the letter:

*“A person appointed to the valley, but unable to adapt to the necessary style of life (respect, hospitality, open house, team work, a non-paternalistic attitude, able to put his or her own assumptions aside, etc.) will be a hindrance rather than an asset.”*

Unfortunately, experiences in the valley have shown that a single person unable to adapt can destabilize a whole team and become a burden to the mission and even jeopardize it. It is the duty of the bishop as well as the superiors of our congregations to evaluate our communities and make sure that this is not the case. A person unable or unwilling to embrace the common mission should not work in the valley. Also an attitude of negativity about people in the valley can be a cancerous disease that is better cut out before it affects the whole body.

Ten years after the launching of the letter we need to continue to stress that appointments to the valley are not about filling gaps and serving numbers. Again, carelessly taking out a pastoral agent from the valley in order to fill a gap somewhere else can jeopardize the whole mission. Of course, congregations remain in charge for determining the staffing of their missions. However, all appointments to and from the valley should proceed in open and honest dialogue with the bishop. We need to insist on more efforts in our *common evaluation* (bishop with the superiors of our congregations, valley coordinators with the parish teams) of our commitments and appointments in the valley.

### ***(3) Financial solidarity?***

Being a common mission means also that all strive to contribute towards this mission, also financially. The letter pointed at the scandal of visibly uneven access to resources for the common mission:

*All are involved in the same apostolate, in the same vineyard, yet some have access to all possible means, while others don't know how to finance one single trip to an Outstation. People in the Valley see this also. White Fathers share among White Fathers, Comboni among Combonis, Teresian Sisters among Teresian Sisters etc. Yet all live in the same community of Valley people. Our commitment to our own congregation/society/association takes priority over our commitment to a common vision and mission among the valley people. Should it not be the other way round, namely that the common vision and mission in the valley shapes the approach and style of life also of our different congregation/society/association? Coordination for the valley includes sharing resources among us. This demands real conversion.*

Looking back at the past ten years, the lines of solidarity at large continue to follow the lines of our *vipani* and “tribes”. Indeed, we are usually happy to contribute where we see our own responsibilities and where we see with our own eyes how the funds are serving the mission. As critics of the letter said, voluntary contributions to a vague common fund that is remotely administered will hardly become an attractive option for the future. However, this does not exempt us from thinking beyond our own doorsteps. Solidarity and sharing remain a duty for all of us in our common apostolate and we are grateful for the efforts and generosity that we encountered. In whatever way we use finances, or ask for them, we must have the whole picture in mind, ask about sustainability, and see ourselves in the context of the means of our neighbours in the same vineyard. We have to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to transparency about our sources of income and our expenditure. The valley coordinators need to have a say in budget making in our individual Parishes, so that our ways of working with finance shows to people that we are serving the same mission.

The Diocese has prioritised donor funding to the valley. Structures of solidarity between richer parishes on the plateau and those in the valley should still be improved. Proportional contributions from the valley parishes to the Diocese and to the seminarians are also important and understood by people as a concrete token of belonging and of shouldering common burdens; to some valley Parishes it even gives a sense of pride of being found reliable and be among the contributors instead of always stretching out a hand to beg.

All this, however, does not substitute the sharing beyond parishes and beyond congregations and *vipani*. The past years have shown some examples of this kind of generosity, and where it happened it radiated to people a concrete sense of belonging to a wider Church. The question about the best ways of achieving financial solidarity needs to remain firmly on our agendas.

#### ***(4) Unconditional presence***

The establishment of Masumba Parish with a resident priest, in spite of yet unresolved problems of housing and transport, came in response to a felt need that this rapidly developing area needed an own Parish. The creation of Chikwa and Chamilala (sub) Parishes, in contrast, provoked a lot of criticism in our Diocese: “People are not ready ... People have not been sufficiently prepared ... People don’t know what it means to keep a Parish ... People have the wrong expectation...” In many ways this criticism is fully justified, and preparations could have been done in a better way. However, it needs to be said that the move towards the establishment of the new Parishes followed in response to the demands of our unconditional presence as spelled out in the letter—which had clearly lined out the creation of the new Parishes. The move was not done in response to closing our eyes to the difficulties of the new missions, but out of a sense of our responsibility to be with our people also when it is tough.

The Centenary celebrations of 2004 as well as the research of Father Bernhard had shown clearly that people in the valley felt not only neglected but also abandoned by us, that our Diocese was associated with tarmac roads and the benefits of modern life and not seen as genuinely interested in the people of the valley in their poverty. Throughout the valley, the presence of the church had been erratic, and especially during the rainy season Christians were just left to themselves. The irony that the centenary celebrations of the Diocese took place in Kambwiri—the mission that came to be abandoned early 1905 for greener pastures after barely seven months of presence—prompted serious reflections about the meaning of the incarnation. Very often, our

coming to the valley was coupled to a capital IF: “We are coming IF it does not rain ... IF people manage to pay for the fuel ... IF people improve their contributions and attendance ... IF they honour their own responsibilities ...” Such an IF can be important in some circumstances as a didactic and heuristic device to help people wake up to their responsibilities. However, experiences have shown in the valley that communities left to themselves rarely flourished or woke up—unless other factors, like the coming of new members, came to be involved. Christ’s incarnation, like his love, did not stop when things became difficult and when he was rejected. While we continue to feel the tension in the valley in the face of slow responses and high costs of transport (unless we are ready to use bicycles also for long distances, as in Chikwa and Lumimba), let our presence in the valley and our love for its people not be conditioned by the quality of people’s response! St Paul himself showed us that he could continue his mission not only in good but also in bad times and even with an empty stomach (Phil 4:10-19)—which in the valley rarely happens: People have shown an amazing hospitality to the messengers of the Good News, especially when visited in their families, even though their responses do not always follow the institutionalized patterns of *mtulo* and *masika/vuna*...

### ***(5) “Dancing to the tunes of the valley?”***

The greatest part of the letter was dedicated to the attitudes of respect, of listening, of acknowledging that the Holy Spirit in His own ways has preceded the missionary and the Church, and of building on people’s own experiences with the spiritual world. The letter strongly stressed the need for a listening presence and insertion in the valley until we become a relevant and meaningful coordinate in people’s lives—only then will our “spiritual compass” make any sense to people.

Some pastoral agents missed in the letter the other sign of the coin: the challenge that the Gospel poses also to people in the valley. YES, without subtractions, it is our duty to proclaim the Gospel in the valley with all its demands. But our way of proclaiming our truth has to reflect the way of the master who came as somebody who emptied himself and who served. Our Church has a rich tradition that clarifies the intrinsic relationship between dialogue and proclamation.<sup>1</sup> It is never one thing or the other—both always need to go together. The Vatican documents make it abundantly clear that we are Catholic (in its original sense) only where we manage to listen and be attentive to the life-giving traditions that are found also outside the gates of our Church. At one and the same time, we are Catholic only where we courageously take up the duty to proclaim the Gospel also where it conflicts with people’s ideals and ways of life. The attitude of listening does not compromise the search and stance for truth, justice, mercy and righteousness, but will always enhance it.

What about our established ways of the Diocese? As one priest put it, “The letter makes us dance to the tunes of the valley—But is it not time now for people in the valley to dance to our tunes?” Looking at the past ten years we see that people who have lived without viable leadership very often appreciate clear and firm rules—many actually want “to dance to our tunes”, looking for a more visible way of belonging to the larger Diocese. Exposing people to the rules of our Diocese is a good thing and is often welcomed in the valley. Vagueness in matters of the catechumenate for example has not always been helpful. The same can be said for other matters, including the duty to contribute, pray on Sundays and also in the rainy season, or the duty to understand the sacrament of marriage

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<sup>1</sup> From *Nostra Aetate* (1966), through *Redemptoris Missio*, to *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), and Walter Kasper, *The Nature of Ecumenical Dialogue* (2001).

in a positive way—in many parts of the valley people know it only as an unwanted extension of baptism that the Church tries to force on them.

This affirmation, however, does not take away in any sense the thrust of the letter. If we want the Christian message to take roots in the valley, we must cultivate a strong sense of humility and one of listening to people's own experiences with God, even when they lie hidden under arid and hardened layers that developed during decades of humiliation and ridicule also from the side of the Christian churches, including ours! Also on the plateau, complacency and satisfaction with our own tunes has often led to a superficiality of faith.

Triumphalism is a strong temptation in the valley, where people themselves too often feel inadequate and second class compared to what is possible in other parts of the country. Social and political marginalization and brain-drain has led to entrenched practices and to a poverty of mind; for many, the search for God has been substituted by a thirst for alcohol! This can very easily lead us to despise people's ways of life and feel very good about our own. The church on the plateau becomes again the yardstick for the church in the valley—and slowly but surely we fall back into our old ways of making the valley second class citizens of our church and eventually again leave it behind.

For Jesus, the woman suffering from bleeding and feeling unclean who approached Jesus in a way that bent all protocols (because she felt unable to approach him up-front) was as much a “daughter of Abraham” who needed to be valued and given ample time and healing as was the daughter of the honoured leader of the synagogue (Mark 5:21-43). Here it is worthwhile to reiterate what was stated in the letter:

*If the way people lead their lives in the valley does not make sense to us, or if our solutions are not followed by people, it usually means that we have not listened enough and that we have not yet understood properly what is going on. A priest or a sister asking a question has more success in the valley than the one giving answers. When we go to the valley, we have to realise that we have entered holy ground. Real listening demands a readiness to put our own concepts into question, and readiness to live in some grey zones.*

*The question then arises as to how we can keep this sense of respect and a listening heart alive. The valley seems to favour communities where pastoral agents can share their experiences; where they can laugh at their own mistakes; where experiments are encouraged; where each significant experience contributes something to the whole team. Sharing across communities enhances the chances to keep our hearts and minds open, and so does the chance to stay back, retreat at times to have some distance and reflection. In the past the White Fathers were keeping diaries for this very purpose, a habit that should be compulsory also today for all pastoral agents in the valley.*

It was this point that led to the policy of diary writing in all our parishes in the valley—which is not optional, yet which, by most, has not been taken up with sufficient determination. Specific guidelines about the focus of diary writing have been circulated. The team of coordinators and the apostolic delegate to the valley are to collect the diaries on a yearly basis (every February), and use them to keep reflections about the valley alive.



### **(6) Listening with a respectful heart: core groups**

Africa has witnessed a great onslaught on its religious and cultural traditions, not only from the side of radical and militant Islam that tried to root out and destroy anything not in line with the holy book, but also from the side of Christian Churches: The born-again experience with its radical break with the past has led many Christians to connect the culture and religion of our parents to the devil himself. Many seek the blessings of the future and of the Holy Spirit in global trends, not in local traditions—which become irrelevant, worthless and even demonic. The valley has always longed to escape its isolation and its people want the benefits of modern life—many are ready to jump on the train of global development even if it means to leave behind the ancestors.

Yet people in the valley, including our committed Christians, continue to be befallen by *mashawe* spirits and by *mizimu* with new forms and names. They continue to be entangled in witchcraft disputes that lead to terror, murder, burnt houses, and families torn apart beyond repair. They continue to tap into the powers of local medicines to enhance their own powers and manipulate the love of others. And the dead ones continue to appear in people's dreams. Where people walk away from the past, the past comes back—no longer as a blessing but now to haunt.

It is against this backdrop that the plea of “*Sunthirani kozamako* to listen with a respectful heart needs to be stated in even stronger terms. Positive transformation of a culture and religion can only come about through positive and creative engagement and dialogue.

*Often people in the valley have been belittled as being backwards. Maybe too few efforts have been made to identify the strong points that we find in the valley, that reinforce a sense of pride and a sense of belonging, and that create community. People have been made powerless in the valley; the research brought out that their positive sense of identity and pride is often situated in an unreachable golden past of their “makolo” while they see the present times characterised by hunger (njala) and foreign interests in animals, minerals and gold. Sociologically speaking, powerless people are more inclined to behave as beggars or to withdraw from positive community action. Moreover, having little access to official channels, they are more inclined to make their voice heard through illegitimate and secret means (witchcraft, poison, slander, etc.) that are very much present in the valley, and which also spoil our Christian communities... Yet the question of how to build more positively on people's strength, bring empowerment and awaken a positive sense of identity deserves ongoing attention.*

*Much still needs to be explored in the valley that would give us a glimpse into the moral universe of people. A general condemnation of tradition as “cikunja” (pagan) has contributed to the superficiality of faith in the valley. There will always be conflicts between tradition and the Christian message. But if the “owners” of tradition are given a place in our Church and feel at home and understood, then there is a chance that traditions change from within and that the Christian message makes sense to people.*

The core groups give a place to the “owners of tradition” in our Church: to headmen and headwomen, to traditional healers, *alangizi*, knowledgeable people, helping us to get their side of a story and also

helping us to keep pastoral reflection alive where our Parish councils and teams cannot provide the conducive playful momentum. We have distributed specific guidelines about the core groups, what they are and what they are not, and the team of coordinators is very willing to help with their establishment, which will be part of our ongoing evaluation of our commitments.

***(7) Becoming relevant to individual families and being ready to “waste time” with people***

The letter spelled out the necessity of the ability to create relationships:

*Our focus of attention will be, beyond mere preaching, to insert ourselves in communities of the valley in such a way that we may win their confidence and trust. ... In many places there is a certain apprehension of being incorporated into wider structures, especially when they conflict with the interests of the immediate family. The report has spelled out some of the reasons for this (hunting & fishing, origin traced from many directions, trend of in-marriage, lack of centralisation, etc.) For a pastoral approach, this means that personal contacts with families, lineage and clan-heads are very important, if we want to touch the nerve of what makes people move. Large-scale Church Organisations (Church Councils, Catechumenate programmes, Seminars, etc.) also have their place in the valley, but without personal contacts they will remain on a very superficial level.*

*Priests who are mostly remembered in the valley are those who visited families and were able to stay in the village even if there was not much to do in what concerns the Church programmes. Even if priests could not possibly visit everyone, they were described as having visited “all families” and as having been there “for everybody”. Coming just for a seminar, a Church Council meeting, or some examinations of catechumens and then leaving again the place after a “little weekday Mass” (often angry about the poor response of people) has not born fruit in the valley; we may call this type of apostolate a waste of fuel. Remaining in the village after a flopped Church Council meeting, visiting someone’s little garden ravaged by the animals, showing interests in the activities of fishermen who are otherwise so distant from our Church, asking questions about people’s families, clans and lineages, and praying with the sick in their homes, may prove not a waste of time. Through these personal contacts, we become a relevant coordinate in people’s lives.*

In Parishes with many outstations, contact with the many Christians remains often institutionalized. In the Parishes with fewer outstations, the priests and pastoral workers manage to visit families also in the *mbumbas*—and even sleep there. The Lumimba diary drew out a number of occasions where programmes succeeded, meetings were attended, and contributions rose where families were individually approached and made to feel part of the programme. The contact and insertion into families has brought much pastoral fulfilment to our pastoral workers. At the same time, becoming part and relevant to individual families must never be seen in exclusive terms. We are sent to all, rich and poor, and should always demonstrate our availability and readiness to move on to others.

### ***(8) The care for the sick and the presence at funerals***

The care for the sick and the bereaved as well as our presence at funerals is a priority of our pastoral work throughout the Diocese. Also in the valley this apostolate is crucial, since people see especially in times of sickness and death who belongs to the family and who does not. The lose group of those who are around the sick person for hours and hours, and days and days, are also those who discern what the sickness is all about. Where we become part of this lose group, we also take part in the spiritual discernment processes that surround the sickness. It is here that the Christian faith stands or falls. Where people discern witchcraft in a sickness or a death it clearly shows that we were absent where we were most needed. Visits to the sick and the presence at funerals remain part of the prime ways for the Church of becoming meaningful in a spiritual sense to people in the valley. How much do Sisters, and indeed all pastoral agents, contribute to the work of evangelization by their mere presence at funerals of people from all walks of life! These efforts cannot be made up by preaching and by other accomplishments. Again, Lumimba diary states many times that they have more people listening to their homilies at a single funeral than they have Christmas and Easter together—multiplied by the number of Outstations! A funeral is a uniting event in the valley, where people attend from all walks of life and from all different churches. The Church should be seen as contributing to this unity in the face of death and of sickness, and not as being divisive. Many Outstations in the valley developed ways of cooperating with other churches at funerals—not compromising Catholic identity and yet allowing other churches to take meaningfully part in the prayers, and such efforts should be further encouraged and strengthened. Our policy of asking for contributions when we celebrate the Holy Mass at funerals should never be an excuse for neglecting the opportunity and duty of evangelization at funerals—where it is most needed and also most fertile.

### ***(9) African hospitality***

The letter stressed the importance of embracing “African hospitality” with its risks:

*People welcome us very well in the valley. We can eat and sleep in their families. If however our own houses are closed to people, if they do not feel welcome, we should not be surprised that people see an unbreakable barrier between our lives and theirs. Our touring in the villages is seen as our “work” for which we are paid, get allowances and benefits (even if we tell them that we don’t), like the many other NGOs touring the villages and designing programmes. Our real life however may be seen as proceeding somewhere behind the gate or outside the valley. Jesus invited his disciples to his home: “come and see”. In the valley, relationships entail eating together. If our own tables are closed to people, then people may regard our message as they regard our food: as relevant for ourselves but not for them.*

At this time, we have to look back with thankfulness to the communities who have tried to live this hospitality, always ready to be called out of the house, and also always ready to call people in. The value of *shared happiness* is something to be protected and to be explored much further during the coming years—not as an extra, but as an essential part of our mission in the valley.

**(10) Looking for new insights and solutions for persistent challenges**

Many people in the valley, in many parts even the vast majority, live in marriage situations that our Church regards as irregular. Jesus welcomed everybody who wanted to become part of his redeeming journey, giving them the required means and the grace, while also posing fundamental challenges. It was not the law written in stone which was bringing salvation to people, but the joyful surrender to his new ways. Marriage in the valley is rarely understood or lived in the life-giving sense that Jesus proclaimed, and our church laws in regards to marriage are often taken as a strange burden that is best avoided. How can we help people to understand our sacraments in a life-giving way? How can we make people feel at home in our church who cannot be received (yet) into full sacramental communion? How can we pose to them the challenges that come with the Christian faith in a way that makes sense to people in the situation they find themselves in? Polygamy, high divorce rates, the heavy involvement of one's extended family in a marriage, and early marriages will remain with us still for a long time in the valley—but these conditions make people not unloved by God nor should they make them unloved by the church. Such pertinent questions demand ongoing engagements, courage, creative experiments, but also evaluation and discussion.

**(11) Evangelisation beyond Parish borders**

The mobility of people in the valley has not decreased in the past ten years. As the letter states,

*Life in the valley is fluid; people are on the move. The research revealed especially the fluidity in movements for men: some weeks fishing, some weeks resting in the village, some months in town looking for some job, some weeks doing piece-work at a safari lodge, some weeks with relatives here and there. We think a lot in Parish structures, and it surely brings benefits to create in people a sense of identity of belonging to a Parish community. But people's worlds are much bigger than our geographical Parishes. Valley people do not believe in boundaries. They do not believe much in Parish boundaries either. They like being visited by different priests and sisters, to whatever Parish they belong to, talk with them, celebrate the Eucharist with them when they are passing through, an event they have too rarely in any case. People look for a wider integration than the Parish level. Yet our systems of record keeping punishes the people who are on the move, makes them irregular and unfit for our stable church. Many could not be baptised for ten years and longer, because they never managed to follow the catechumenate through until the end in their parish. It engraved on them the awareness of being unfit for our Church and many just gave up mentally; "it's not for me". Jesus who was himself always on the move, travelling beyond boundaries, surely sympathises with the pilgrims of the valley.*

While it is clear that we have not developed an inter-Parish ministry in the valley and that Parishes remain the fundamental units of our administration, the plea remains to be sensitive to people's ways of life and help them feel at home with us—and if only for the limited time that we have them with us. The diary of Lumimba reveals for example that Christians who received a warm welcome in Masumba Parish for the few months they lived there also became more active in their own *mbumba* back at home.

Migrants to the valley have played very crucial roles in establishing the church in the valley. Our local *mbumbas* greatly benefit from committed teachers, nurses, and other workers—but experience also shows that their integration into the structures at local level is not always easy. Every Christian appointed to work in the valley is a gift to our Church, and all need attention from the pastoral team to feel at home and to become truly part of the church.

**(12)      *Language, coordination, and unity in diversity***

The research spelled out great differences in the styles of life across the valley even within a single Parish. Family structures and customs differ, as do people's life-styles and languages. Our liturgical languages follow the languages of the plateau, but in their homes throughout the valley people speak a different language. This does not always help people to feel at home in their prayer life—prayer itself can attain the air of superficiality and be seen as belonging to a sphere of life that is divorced from the rest of it. Our liturgical languages cannot change overnight, and there exist also reasons for not changing them: they are unitive for Parish and Diocese alike, and people everywhere follow and understand. Still—when people spontaneously pray in their own mother tongue, their prayers seem to pierce through the heavens in a different way—and we should encourage people to pray at home in the language they feel most at home in. Efforts of preparing the liturgy together with people have borne fruit in many places of the valley and should be encouraged, as should the search for ways of prayer and of singing that make people feel more at home in their prayer life.

The demands of life also differ from place to place, even within a single parish. Masumba is very different from Kasweta; Mkasanga differs from Lumimba or Zewe. Many teach their catechumens during the dry season, leaving people free to protect their gardens during the rains. Others teach them during the rains, when the seasonal workers are back. The valley helps us to stress a model of Church that starts at the local level (the *mbumba*) and adapt the church practices to the local necessities of life. At the same time, people themselves long for integration into the wider Diocesan structures—in many ways they don't want to exaggerate their sense of isolation. The unity of our Christian life throughout the Diocese is a value that we must work for. In order to live this tension of striving for unity in diversity in a creative way, we need to embrace the work of coordination. The letter stated that the coordinator or team of coordinators

*would visit all valley parishes, stay in touch with them, encourage sharing, coordinate policies, and help with integration with the Diocesan desks. The full-time coordinator with his team would help the parishes and communities to revisit their policies in line with an overall valley framework and keep reflections alive. Policies may be different from one part of the Valley to the other, but the coordinators could work for transparency, accountability and for unity in diversity.*

Today we have a team of coordinators in place. Far from being full-time, however, and having often “many other hats to wear”, the practice of organised visitations to the Parishes during the past ten years existed often more on paper than in practice. This point needs to be re-evaluated. As a Diocese we have been faithful to the valley meetings. We have also partly succeeded in harmonizing the catechumenate, make it more relevant, and still make it possible for people to follow different times and seasons. The work of coordination demands from the side of the Diocese the ability to respect

the local scenarios. But it demands also from the side of our parish priests the ability to accept coordination!

**(13)        *Don't go against nature!***

Life in the valley unfolds according to the rhythm of nature and the rhythm of wildlife. Also the life of the Church should unfold along these lines. Whether we go by car, motorbike, or bicycle, people know best when to travel and when it is better to wait for another day instead of rushing home. Lumimba has shown us that the local ways of transport (bicycles!) in the rains are often superior to our four-wheel drives and that people are very willing to accompany us even to the furthest Outstation—in safe ways and with a lot of pride. Our efforts of making long journeys are rewarded where we are willing to stay for prolonged times.

The need to go with the rhythm of nature has received much more attention in recent years from our Church. *Laudato Si* stressed in a unique way the responsibility of the Church for the care of God's creation. The Luangwa Valley is unique in its wildlife. But human-animal conflicts, the lack of clear compensation policies, and the seeds of distrust sown into the community through a spying system so as to catch poachers, have made the collaboration of the Church with wildlife protection ambivalent. Where the poor shoulder the real costs of wildlife protection through continued isolation, additional work in the gardens (chasing away elephants night after night) and the absence of viable alternatives, the church has to be on their side. At the same time, the Church needs also to be in the forefront of protecting and caring for God's creation. We hope that the Church can become a more viable dialogue partner with the authorities that make policies in regards to the protection of wildlife.

We also hope that the liturgical life of the Church in the valley can flow more clearly with the rhythm of nature—which will be the crown of our work of evangelization. Let this strong appeal of the pope also remain central in our common prayers and reflection.

**(14)        *Remaining on our toes***

Life is changing fast in the valley and such changes also impact the ways in which people live their Christian lives. Mining, gold rushes with its risks and promises of fast money, and foreign investments are examples. Also changing government policies need careful evaluation in regards to their impact on the valley. An example is the new ECZ regulation about expiring examination numbers, since they disadvantage the poor in the valley who cannot afford to rewrite their exams according to the new requirements. The valley forces us to remain alert and on our toes, but also vocal, since nobody else may be lobbying for the valley's people. Hence the need for more networking among ourselves, the collection of precise information among our people, a better integration with the JPIC desk and with Radio Maria, and also a working relationship with the government as well as with other stakeholders in the valley.

Sincere gratitude to all who have dedicated their lives to our mission in the valley.