

Pastoral Diaries (Luangwa Valley Apostolate)

*“Insanity is repeating the same mistakes over and over again,
hoping for a different result.” **

Systematic diary writing is practised today by serious scholars in all the social sciences. It is a must for those who want to see how a given idea or approach works out in day to day life. In the past, diary writing was important also in the Church. Parts of the Acts of the Apostles go back to a travel diary kept by Saint Luke or another companion of St Paul. Many saints left behind their diaries. So did the missionaries of various congregations, priests and sisters, who founded the Church in Zambia. For the White Fathers, diary writing was part of their rule: ensured, inspected, and commented on by the superiors. Sadly, this helpful practice has come to be largely abandoned in our Church structures.

DIARY WRITING AND THE LUANGWA VALLEY APOSTOLATE

Due to the nature of our apostolate in the Luangwa Valley, diary writing was not only recommended but endorsed as a policy—whether we work in the Parish setup or training institutions. To remind us of the reasons: Apart from preserving for the future precious experiences of real and concrete life in the valley, the practice of writing diaries helps us pastoral workers (1) to be more reflective in our pastoral engagements, (2) to “taste” and to learn from each other’s experiences, so as to grow in a common sense of mission, (3) to evaluate our pastoral commitments, and (4) to ensure continuity and consistency.

WHAT PASTORAL DIARIES ARE AND WHAT THEY ARE NOT

Many people are helped by a *personal diary* in order to live daily life more reflectively, to clearer define and live out their values and ideas, and see how they change over time. Many Christians keep personal diaries also to reflect on their prayer life and their faith experiences, so as to come to a better discernment of the will of God.

Pastoral diaries are concerned with the details and the experiences that strike us in the context of our pastoral work. But unlike personal diaries, they are meant to be shared—not with the general public, but at least with our own pastoral teams and coordinators. Obviously, a shared diary is of a different nature than a diary that is strictly personal (see later).

Pastoral diaries are also different from minutes of meetings—though they too may highlight the outcome and discussions of important meetings, where they strike us.

Again, pastoral diaries are different from reports, from explanations of our pastoral approach, and from our records and notes concerning specific cases—which we keep in the office or in specific files.

A diary is different also from a social or pastoral analysis (which is a different step), though they can be used for such a purpose.

* While this quote is attributed often (wrongly?) to Albert Einstein, it seems to go back to *Narcotics Anonymous*.

Instead, pastoral diaries are about the honest details which accompany our pastoral work—details that move us, that make us change our position or attitude, that make us ask questions, that call us for more reflection, or that confirm us. They formulate and preserve our pastoral experiences as we are growing through them—which otherwise become elusive already after a few days. Though they are written from our own angle and viewpoint, they try to reveal also the tangible faith journey of the Church in its diverse aspects and groups—preserving the concrete struggles, questions, disappointments, and successes. A good diary will capture this common journey.

WHAT TO PUT INTO A PASTORAL DIARY?

The focus of a pastoral diary is on our daily pastoral activities, their concrete context, and people's reactions. Since pastoral life concerns all areas of life, a pastoral diary is also about people's lives—the areas that we hope the Gospel has touched or should touch. There are no constraints on what to put and how to put it. We all have our own style, our own humour, interests, and way of looking at the world and at our pastoral work, which will reflect in our diaries. We may simply start to write about where we went, what we did, how some people responded, or what we heard.

The old White Father diaries, for example, differ in style and focus—ranging from dry to vivid accounts of what the writers did and what was happening around them. Some generously spiced up their accounts with moralising comments—leaving no doubt in the reader of what the writers thought. Others kept their own feelings and opinions to themselves. A few diaries read like arts books—full of detailed drawings of aspects of people's lives. Some even encoded the tunes of people's songs and dances. Yet all the diaries were helpful.

Here are some points and questions that may be of help at one point or another, when our own pastoral diary becomes repetitive or runs out of steam:

- Church events and what people say about them.
- Any life-giving event for people and for ourselves.
- What frustrated me? (What frustrated the church leaders and catechists?)
- Any interesting conversation, any puzzling or surprising event or story. What are people talking about these days?
- Major experiences/initiatives in our sister churches. And of our Moslem neighbours.
- Recent initiatives of the government, the chiefs, the Boma, the agricultural officer, ZAWA, schools, the clinic, NGOs ... that seem to touch the nerve of people
- Major funerals. How did people react to this death? Did something transpire that makes people talk? Important public events in people's lives.
- Historical data make our diaries very precious (for example the meaning of the names of the old villages or landmarks, clan histories, etc). We can also include the source of information. ("Group-headman Temba explained that the mission plot of Lumimba belonged to the Wene Muti"—"In the meeting of the core group, people agreed that the

Bena Nzoka of Chongo were the original owners of the area of Chitungulu before the coming of Mpipa.”)

- Interesting life-stories or life-histories: Of a traditional healer, a headman or headwoman, a pupil, a teacher, a cultural expert/*mlangizi*, a hunter/poacher, a game guard, a fisherman, a polygamist, a first wife, a second wife, a youth, an orphan, a single mother, a catechist, a church leader, etc
- Put photos. (An additional advantage is that most formats include the capture date in the meta-file—very useful for later references.)

Our own interests will determine the selection of what we include and what we actually write about. The diary itself is not an analysis of our pastoral work. Over time, however, our own questions and outlook evolve, bringing new areas into focus, driven by new concerns. Whatever the focus, a good diary keeps the reader in touch with the surprising and unexpected details that accompany our pastoral engagements.

WHEN TO WRITE

Obviously, as soon as possible. When coming home from tour, if possible write the next day. Some people keep basic notes (the headlines) also when on tour, from which it becomes easier to write later. Diaries are vivid when written straight after an event. After some days the feel, the colour, the taste and the smell are gone from our memory and from the account of the events.

WHAT NOT TO PUT

We should not include confidential information about the people we minister to—such information belongs locked up in our files. Though our diaries will not be shared with the general public, we should take care that they never compromise the seal of confidentiality of the people in our care. By the mere fact that our diaries will be kept in the Diocesan archives, we are no longer fully in control of who will read them in the future.

At the same time, there are no events without individual persons. If we remove any reference to concrete events, our diary will be dull and abstract, defeating its own purpose. I propose the following guidelines:

- Any event that could be published by a newspaper can surely also be put into the diary.
- Most of the time, there is no need to mention the names of the sick people we visit. (In Lumimba, we keep such names in a different file to help our team on further visits, but remove them from the pastoral diary.) This does not prevent us to write about those visits which touched us. Neither does the reader need to know the names of those caught by the game guards, or those implicated in court hearings.
- As a rule of thumb: leave as much detail as possibly to preserve the intimacy of a story (outside of the confidential forum), but remove or change those details that directly identify a person where the story is sensitive. Often we can write a colourful story in a charitable way without giving a specific name. (“The person who kindled the Easter fire in Lumimba was more than slightly intoxicated. After having fulfilled his task, he stumbled right into the fire.”)

- We should not write about the details of specific pastoral cases that belong to the *internal forum*.
- At the same time, we should not shy away from giving concrete examples to general trends from the *outer or public forum*:

“A second girl in grade 6 of Chasera is pregnant—and one of the teachers is the alleged father. He has accepted the *mlandu* and was fined by the family 15,000 Kwacha in return for not reporting the case to the police.”

“Yet another case of domestic violence in Lukusuzi. A man broke the leg of his first wife and continued to beat her nearly to death, because the second wife told him (falsely!) that she had refused to go to the field as instructed, leaving the crops to the monkeys.”

“A young man in Mwanza drunk himself to death on a budget of 50 Kwacha—drinking *kacasu* for three days without eating anything.”

“At 02:00 hours last night the game guards raided the house of Francis who wonders now who of his neighbours reported on him. The policy of anonymous informers has eroded all community trust in Lumimba.”

- Where a person holds a public office or function and his/her behaviour affects the community (for example corruption), I believe we can and should write about it. Stories and complaints that people talk about in the public forum may be considered as public stories—also when they include individual names of office holders.

If you are in doubt what to put and what to leave out, start by writing down all information and keep it as a private diary. Edit it at a later stage (even many months later) when you decide what you want to take out.

In Lumimba we try to write on a weekly basis (with various degrees of consistency), each community member, and print out what we wrote and place it into a *private folder* that only we can access. At a later stage we edit, taking out confidential information. Then we also correct the spelling to make it easier to read. While it is important to write as near to an event as possible, the tedious work of brushing up things can also be done later.

RE-READING

Re-reading our own diaries after some time is already a simple way of evaluation. We can read it with different questions in mind—like, “Where can we discern the finger of God?”—“Where would we like God and the Church to intervene?”—, or “Which of our activities were life-giving to people and to ourselves, and which ones tired out the pastor together with the faithful—making even the written account boring to read?” It also makes us proud that we were part of a story and of the concrete life of the people we serve.

Let’s just write—it’s not that difficult!

Bernhard Udelhoven