

## From South Africa

By Rachel Beggs

Sanibonani,

~JMJ~

There is a very large tree outside my bedroom window that has once again fringed itself with bright red, yellow and orange - just like last October when I first arrived - a reminder of how time has passed and of all things in between.



I've heard many times that the red African soil is a result of all the blood that has been spilt over the years on this continent. But my eyes feast on this red earth juxtaposed to the azure sky and the bright, fresh green of the sugar cane fields. It's a kaleidoscope of intense colour that I never grow weary of.

Colour plays a big part here in South Africa, most unfortunately in the colour of skin. The effects of Apartheid are far reaching in every aspect of society: in economics, religion, culture, politics and education. I understand now what "White Skin" stands for and what "Black Skin" seems to say. South Africa is a land of extreme contrasts. In Durban, for example, there are palatial White residential areas and on the "other" side of the street you see Black shantytowns with "houses" made of plywood and sheet metal roofs. Although slowly, there is a "Black" middle class that is taking shape and becoming more of a positive influence in the country.

Many of the Africans, in their poverty, have turned to drugs and theft, resulting in many acts of violence. Most people I know have been targeted; friends have been hijacked at gun point with their cars stolen, mugged at knife point, beaten up by groups of thugs, while Jabulani-the self help centre for poor women down the road-was held up with machine guns, Sisters were assaulted and one man, Ali, was beaten with the butt end of the gun resulting in much damage to his face. Some recent violence occurred while driving on a major highway, Saturday afternoon; a man had just been shot at the side of the road and lay face down, covered in blood. Two men were standing over him, one with a gun in his hand. We weren't sure if they were the perpetrators or if they were friends who had witnessed the event. And of course, last May; extreme acts of violence were carried out against refugees in the xenophobic attacks throughout the country-epitomized by the grotesque newspaper photograph of a man from Mozambique who was set on fire. A very grim picture but nevertheless, these criminals are few compared to all the good people who struggle everyday with caring for their families and want to move on with their lives. The "new struggle" is hard on them, it taxes them and yet they continue on, just like they always have, whether they receive help or not.

Resilience, perseverance and patience in adversity are indicative of African character and have become a turning point for this country, although the change is happening at a very

slow, yet steady pace. Some are looking inwards, not out of inferiority, but to find collectively their strengths, their beauty, their talent and their genius on their own terms. Despite all the negativity that pervades society Africans hold tight to this wonderful concept of “ubuntu” meaning, “I am a person through other people.” People and relationships are of prime importance. I have one student who comes earnestly every Friday, after school, for piano lessons. His name is Bonga (meaning Thanksgiving) and he is an absolute treasure to teach. Instead of holding a gun, he is using his hands to create music; instead of doing drugs and focusing on all the things wrong, his face shines when he can learn something new and pass it along to his fellow students and friends. I have become more of a person through this one young man, and he has become more of a person through me even though we are from completely different backgrounds and cultures. Black and White...Male and Female...South African and Canadian. God is good!

The colours are so deep here and from them the beauty of Africa is painted!

***Rachel Beggs is from the Cathedral Parish in Peterborough and at VEYO a member of YACs (Young Adult Catholics). In September of 2007 she left for South-Africa with the Pfanner Lay Mission Companions (PLMC), an organization established in 1966 by the Congregation of the Mariannahill Missionaries (CMM) and the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood (CPS). Rachel is scheduled to return to Peterborough in January.***