

Dear Father Victor & Friends at Holy Innocents,
December 2023

These are a few lines to greet you as we approach the Feast of our Saviour's birth. I returned to Liberia on August 16, after the surgery. And thank God, everything is alright.



But I want to also extend my sincere appreciation to all of you in the Parish. For over the years, you have been assisting our students from the Interior, especially young people from villages in Gbarpolu County, who otherwise, may not have had the opportunity that has been afforded them. Thank God, they are nearing graduation.

James Nyanku was 12 years old, when he came here from Fassima. Having finished High School at St Dominic's, he attended university and graduated with a BSc in Biology; he then passed the entrance exam to the Medical College. After five years of study, James is expected to complete medical studies after two more semesters.

At the beginning of the year, John Geeton graduated with a BSc in Environmental Science. His family are living within the Gola Forest, and he is naturally committed to environmental issues. He was awarded an internship, at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Here, in Bomi Hills, Vedanta, a major Indian Steel Company, has reopened the Iron-ore mine that had been closed since 1977. Samuel Seh, Nicholas Siryon and Sumo Gelois. have been granted internships for three months. They have been given the assurance of permanent employment, after graduation. Samuel is expected to obtain a BSc in Civil Engineering after Christmas, Nicholas and Sumo, next August.

Monday, December 4, was the feast of St Barbara. Some members of the top management are from Goa, and they invited us to celebrate Mass at the mine, as is their tradition. Barbara is the patron Saint of Miners. And from my reading of her life-story, I suspect that St Barbara may be a good saint to intercede for us here, when there is fork lightning. For we seem to get more than our share, perhaps because we are living on top of a whole lot of iron and other minerals.

In an attempt towards 'sustainability', I have sought the assistance of Emmanuel Boakai, one of our former students, together with Able and Dominic, from the village of Beafine, to develop a farm for St Dominic's Parish. So far, we have managed to cultivate 25 acres out of the 75 acres of the land that the local community gave to the Church. We have planted 766 Cocoa trees. However, in the absence of the required termite control 'chemicals', many of the tender saplings were destroyed, leaving us with about 400 trees.

However, we have been more successful with the 642 oil palm trees that we have planted. During the first three years of growth, we lost only 40 palms that were destroyed by the hungry *Thryonomys swinderianus* (or the greater cane rat),. Thankfully, the oil palms are now mature enough, and the fronds have developed hard, sharp thorns that protect the terminal bud. By the end of 2024, over 50 trees should be producing palm nuts. After that the harvest will gradually increase. Therefore, there will be a need for a manual oil mill by the end of next year.

After Christmas, more land will be cleared, in order to transplant from the nursery, an additional 300 palms; this still leaves about 1700 palms to be replanted in the future, if possible. When there is extensive work to be done, then more people from Beafine are called to assist; accordingly, they leave their own subsistence rice farms to help.

Every year in the Archdiocese of Monrovia, on the Saturday closest to the 8th of December, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we congregate at the shrine of Our Lady Queen of Peace, in the countryside outside of Monrovia. The late Archbishop Michael Francis, of blessed memory, initiated this annual celebration during the protracted Civil War.

This year's celebration was attended by thousands of people from the various parishes. The Stations of the Cross was followed by the sacrament of reconciliation and then the Eucharist.

On personal reflection afterwards, I thought of Mark 1: 1-8, when the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding parts of Judea, went into the wilderness to listen to John the Baptist. Similarly, our people left Monrovia with its large population and went into the countryside, to honour Our Lady and heed the Baptist advice to seek repentance.

With the advent of the Dry Season, we are able to reach more village communities. This coming Sunday morning, December 24, I'll be celebrating

Mass in Jawa Jei at 8:00 a.m. and then I'll visit another outstation, Maher-zoe-gbande, for 11:00 Mass. In the afternoon, Musa and I will travel 55 miles to the fishing town of Robertsport, for the Christmas Midnight Mass.

On Sunday December 31, in the morning, we'll have Mass at Gayah Hills, which was my first outstation, when I moved to Bomi County, in 1977. In the afternoon, we'll travel again to Robertsport, for the New Year's Midnight Mass. The welcoming of the New Year is very, very important, for the Liberian People.

Wishing you all a very merry Christmas. And may the Good Lord bless you, as we come to the end of yet another year and enter 2024.

With an assurance of my daily prayers,

Kindest regards Fr. Garry.