

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 13, 2011 at 1:45pm

'Hope&Joy' in South Africa: New things, old things and things that are the same

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today



The new business center of Johannesburg is in Sandton, north of the city. New office

high-rises dot the horizon and the convention center and underground shopping center at Nelson Mandela Square is world-class and impressive.

One night last week, after speaking to a group of academics at St. Augustine College, we had to cross the city to get home. We were stopped by police at a check point so they could verify the driver's license. Often, I am told, the police ask for money when they stop people. It's illegal but it happens anyway. There are cameras on the roads and highways to check for road or speed violations (just like home) as well as unregistered vehicles. I am not sure how offenders are tracked down.

There are several major shopping malls here. I had to replace the adapter cord for my laptop one morning and our driver (we employ two local young men who have now been with us for years) took me to a nearby mall, where I found what I needed with no trouble.

There are security guards everywhere. Indeed, churches and shops employ guards to watch parking lots so people can feel good about leaving their cars while they shop and safe when they return to their cars.

Very few homes are "stand-alones," that is, without a gate, no matter the area or economic status. Homes have a series of locked gates within their yards and houses. Crime is rampant, though not obvious to the

newcomer or sometime visitor. I don't feel nervous, but I know people are watching out for me and they stay close. We walk to Mass at the Opus Dei-run Mother of Sorrows church in the mornings; it's two minutes away. It even has a linen-covered double kneeler in the front of the church so people can kneel to receive communion if they wish. A former mayor of Johannesburg lives right next door, and this morning, his bodyguards were outside. One of the sisters told me it's not unusual to see them around.

Joblessness, poverty, education and HIV/AIDS continue to be major problems in South Africa. The government wants to nationalize the diamond business, run mostly by U.S. and South African corporations now, but this does not seem to be a popular idea in some quarters. Some (including a friend of mine, now a professor, from our days in London studying for our master's) want to reinstate the death penalty because of the horrific crimes committed, many by Africans from neighboring countries coming to South Africa because life in their countries is intolerable. But here, the infrastructure to care for refugees is minimal.

I arrived in South Africa via Cairo, one week before the attack on the Christian church Sunday and following riot, and before that I spent a week in Rome and Sardinia. If you've been to the Vatican and visited the shops nearby lately, did you notice how many are owned by Chinese people? Indeed, China is everywhere in Africa these days, too, and is South Africa's main trade partner.

But if you watch TV or read the newspaper, you'd think that sports, any kind, were the most important things going on in South Africa.

What's on television? Four years ago, South African television made a move to promote local programming. Even Oprah was moved to channel 3 and from afternoon primetime to another timeslot. But there's not a lot of money for local productions now, and those that do air are "soapies." U.S. and British programming dominates. A group of youth ministers told me that it is prohibited to advertise baby formula on television as the government wants to promote breast feeding.

There isn't much nightlife in Johannesburg unless you are well-off and can get to and from a mall or busy shopping center safely. I asked a group of youth ministers if they went to the movies, and they said they did not; they mostly wait for the DVD, Internet downloads or "films are available for illegal download almost immediately so there is no need to go to the movies for many people." They did say that midnight screenings for the "Twilight" movies and "Harry Potter" were quite popular, but again, only in the safest of areas: the upscale malls.

Meanwhile, I have met or become reacquainted with many people who are active Catholics, and they make me feel right at home. There are not so many Catholics in this country of 50.5 million people, about 7percent, but they are authentic, joyful, hard-working and "just plain Catholic" ? just like home.

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The monthly clergy meeting at which I presented a talk on "Theology and

"Spirituality of Communication" was not so well attended, a reality I was assured was normal. And some of the priests who came were late (just like home!), but one black priest explained this by saying that "God gave the white man clocks but he gave Africans time." I like that; I relish the thought of what it means.

I think I came away with more than I gave. But if you ask me, the priests should have come to the meeting just for the lunch, fellowship and the South African wine if nothing else. Catholic parishes know how to extend hospitality here, that's for sure. The priests were from South Africa, Ireland and Portugal. Father Tony, who came from Portugal as a child, speaks English with a Scots brogue; even he is not sure how that happened.

Up next: My interview with Raymond Perrier and more on the "Hope&Joy" project.

Sr. Rose Pacatte, NCR's film reviewer and media critic, is traveling in South Africa this month. Periodically, she will be sending stories from South Africa and reflections on her trip.

Read previous entries:

- The beginning of the program
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