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Dear Everyone,

Can you believe it. A whole year has gone by and here we are looking Christmas, 2007 in the eye in 2 weeks.

I am very late this year in getting this annual letter off as we had an ordination to the priesthood here in our parish on Dec. 1st, and at least the whole month (and more) was devoted to making this the event of the year (which it was). All other matters were put aside until this feast was over. It is a week since the ordination and we are still picking up the pieces and doing the clean up and trying to trace those things that somehow got lost in the beautiful chaos of the events of the day.

I don't know where to begin. It was a year of hard physical work, as I explained last year. It continues to be a challenge to keep the mission from drifting back into disrepair. I think I am going to have a green complexion from cutting (weed-eater) so much grass. There are always things to be repaired, and because of the expense of having someone called in to do repairs, you try to do as much as you can yourself.

One outstanding memory is of the wedding of Mark and Melanie Cameron in which I took part in April in the States. The wedding itself was beautiful, as was to be expected, but the frosting on the cake was to have a chance to talk to Mark's mother who had, not long before, had a triple transplant—heart, kidneys, liver. Holy Moses! I call her the miracle girl.

We had the usual retreats for the youth (all two showed up), the St. Anne's ladies, the Sacred Heart ladies, etc. and were trying to prepare some of our lay leaders from the small Christian communities to take over liturgical leadership roles, e.g. to lead services in church when the priest can't be there and, a bit down the line, to lead funerals, which are plenty every weekend. Lots of hitches and obstacles because there are so many other happenings that force people to change their (and therefore "our") schedules. Often a class was prepared but had to be cancelled at the last minute because people were involved in preparations for an unexpected funeral, or something else.

Funerals continue to be the main obstacle to building community. Sunday funerals are a curse, but even Saturday funerals (hardly anyone is buried in mid-week) involve preparations that run through the whole week and even have a follow up in the home on Sunday so that few people pitch up in church on Sunday because of funeral commitments at home. I get the feeling that the overriding concern for the dead is killing the living.

Service delivery has become a catch word in South Africa. Whether it is electricity, phones, water, housing, whatever, the lack of service delivery is causing grief and headaches. We have had no water (from the government) for at least 6 months now and people have just adapted. That is, they have to climb the hill with

wheelbarrows or big containers to fetch the water from the spring and bring it to their homes. It could easily be as far as one or two kilometres. It has just become the normal way of life.

The school (government school on private-mission-property) has not maintained its toilets (built by Fr. Macarius in such a way that they could be cleaned out from time to time without having to dig new pits each time) with the result that the faeces had turned to concrete and it cost a fortune for the honey sucker to come and try to clean it out. We took advantage of his presence to have our septic tanks “sucked” (sisters, priest’s house, conference center). He couldn’t do the job properly because people had thrown all kinds of things into the septic tank. (old tins, bottles, sticks, huge stones, (like 30kgs), old overalls, I even found two goat heads. I had to climb down into these places to try to get out as much of this stuff as possible so that he could suck properly. I cursed the guys who threw these things in the septic tank in the first place.

As far as South Africa goes, the elections are coming up and there is a split in the ANC’s cadres as to who they would like to see being their leader—one being the present president of the ANC and the country, Thabo Mbeki, and the other being a populist, Jacob Zuma, who seems to have the touch, but whom, I feel, is lacking the smarts one would look for in a leader. For instance, he had sex with a young woman (who claimed that he raped her) and then took a shower so that he wouldn’t get AIDS. Hmmm!

I have been touched by the ordinary “faithful”, mostly all women, ageing, and their simple faith and faithfulness. Most of them get stuck having to raise their grandchildren because their sons and daughters have died of AIDS and have left the children behind. They are long past the age when they should be looking after these tiny tots, but they do it so lovingly and caringly, that one has to be touched.

There have been many challenges this year, as always, but, with the coming of Christmas, we look to see where Christ can help us to make new beginnings and prepare us for the challenges that are to come in 2008.

The Bishop has asked me to take over another neighboring parish because of the shortage of priests. I am exhausted from trying to keep up here at Landsend and we are just beginning to make some headway in building a sense of community against all odds, and I wonder how I will be able to cope with an added parish.

I look forward to the visit of a classmate of mine, Gerald Gettlefinger, the bishop of Evansville, who, like me, is fast approaching the 75 yr. mark, meaning retirement. He will be coming in February and I relish just the thought of renewing our friendship which started in the seminary back in 1951. I also look forward to my home leave which is due this year. June, July and August 2008. I am a family junkie (and friend junkie) and this is my 4 yearly “fix” to which I look forward with great anticipation.

I take this opportunity to wish you all a very blessed Christmas and new year full of blessings (disguised and otherwise) that will help you to cope with the challenges that 2008 will bring. Climate change, ecology, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the middle East, ongoing conflict in the DRC, Sudan, and other parts of Africa, lies and corruption in high circles, the continually growing gap between the haves and have nots (and more) all guarantee that anyone who is intent on making this a better world will have his/her hands full for this coming year, again! And within it all, may you all find time for some joy, hope, and peace of heart, through the one who has “been there, done that”, the one whose birth we celebrate again as the one who brought fresh life and hope to the world when many had given up on it. Thank you for your love and friendship over the years. Love and Peace, Cas.

PS. I look forward, too, to a “bush-free” world—elections 2008

