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'Hope&Joy' in South Africa: How things change

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 12, 2011 NCR Today

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What is different in Johannesburg from my last visit? The airport renovations are complete, since they were initiated for the soccer World Cup held last year. It was so much faster getting through immigration and customs! You can still see signs and banners about the World Cup as you leave the airport, and a statue as well.

Workers still have to travel an hour or more to and from work, and many walk long distances. Four years ago, many women walked along the side roads carrying things on their heads. So far, I have only seen one woman do this. Maybe I have to get out more.

Our sisters have moved from a house to a new convent and conference center built next to our Pauline bookstore in Bruma, a close suburb within Johannesburg known for its flea market. On one side of the nicely maintained road is the gated middle-class housing development where we used to live (gated here means that someone is employed to open and close a gate arm when you drive in or out of the development). On the other side of the street, and where our building is located, there is a very lived-in look to the neighborhood, waiting to be improved. People, mostly men, sleep under trees. Others beg for money in the main roadways, just like they do in Los Angeles.

It was so good to see our housekeeper and several of our bookshop employees who have been with us for many years.

Going into or even driving through the "old" downtown area of sagging office buildings where undocumented refugees from Zimbabwe and other African countries live can be hazardous, even dangerous; after three years running the old archdiocesan bookshop back in the mid-1990s, our sisters had to move after patrons were attacked and the shop robbed repeatedly.

Interestingly, the new train station for the high-speed rail service to Durban (556 km away) is built right in the midst of urban blight, so perhaps there is hope. On the other hand, the working poor cannot afford to take the train and rely on the famous white minivan taxis that dominate the roads morning and late afternoon. There are new bus interchanges and new buses, however.

Most businesses open early, around 8 a.m., and close at 4:30 p.m., before dark.

Up next: The new and the old.

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. Below is a slideshow of photos she's taken on her trip.

Read previous entries:

- The beginning of the program [1]

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