

Hope&Joy in South Africa: An interview with Raymond Perrier, part one

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 28, 2011 NCR Today

Raymond Perrier, 45, is the director of South Africa's Jesuit Institute. He looks younger than his years, has a ready smile and is known for his outgoing personality. He is engaging and articulate, and it is easy to see how his energy might be interpreted by some as ambition rather than passion to do something meaningful for the people of God in South Africa.



The "["Hope&Joy" program](#) [1] is a two-year project that Perrier initiated

and then launched in collaboration with a network of dozens of Catholic organizations in South Africa. He was hired away from [the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development](#) [2], England's CARITAS agency and the country's largest Catholic organization, in 2009.

Perrier replaced the then-director, Jesuit Fr. David Smolira, former Jesuit Provincial in the UK, who had just been named regional superior of the Jesuits in South Africa. A former Jesuit himself (Perrier left after the regency or full-time ministry period of Jesuit formation), he had lived and worked for two years in the United States at St. Francis Xavier Parish in lower Manhattan, N.Y., and he had a corporate background, having worked as a consultant for businesses in the United Kingdom and South Africa before entering the Jesuits.

Perrier was born and raised in the United Kingdom, a son of Indian parents.

"I grew up in a home steeped in a strong sense of Catholic culture," he said. "My parents, generations of my family, came from Goa where being Catholic is the norm. Both my mother and grandmother taught in Catholic schools and I had three aunts who were nuns. There is a strong Jesuit or Ignatian culture in Goa as well."



After spending almost three weeks in Johannesburg and Pretoria speaking to and

interacting with teachers, catechists, librarians, school media specialists, students, clergy, religious and lay, including non-Catholics, about media, media literacy, communication and culture stemming from "Inter Mirifica" (Declaration on the Means of Social Communication, 1963 and its follow-up document on the theology and spirituality of communication, "Communio et Progressio", 1971), I sat down with Raymond to ask about the "Hope&Joy" initiative. I went for deep background because I found the "Hope&Joy" initiative fascinating.

NCR: Where did the idea for "Hope&Joy" come from?

RP: The idea for "Hope&Joy" arose out of my experience at CAFOD. I had inherited a project there in 2007 that had been started to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's "Populorum Progressio" (["On the Development of Peoples,"](#) [3] released March 26, 1967), the document that became the blueprint for Catholic social agencies such as CAFOD.

What was the purpose of this project?

The project, "Life Simply," aimed to create a platform for collaboration among different Catholic agencies involved in social justice and to distill the message of "Populorum Progressio," communicating it in a way that ordinary busy people would find it immediately accessible and meaningful.

Specifically ...

By bringing different people together who have different interests in Vatican teaching, you can get the message across more effectively. For "Populorum Progressio," the message was summarized as "Live simply, sustainably and in solidarity."

Then we brought the celebration of "Populorum Progressio" into events that were already in existence so as not to create a burden on schedules and budgets and so that it could continue after the anniversary itself.

Tell me more about the Jesuit Institute in South Africa.

The [Jesuit Institute of South Africa](#) [4] was founded in 2000 as "Vuselela: The Center for Ignatian Spirituality" by three young lay women: Annemarie Paulin-Campbell, Frances Correia and Puleng Matsaneng. Its aim was to teach and develop Ignatian spirituality in South Africa. They came to the Jesuits and said that since there was no coordinated effort to share Ignatian spirituality in South Africa that they would take it on through retreats and other projects and they were successful in doing this. David Smolira, SJ, assumed the directorship of the now Jesuit Institute in 2008, to which added to the spirituality work other activities that involved Jesuits in teaching and writing. The specific mandate for the Jesuit Institute is to build bridges between the church and the wider South African society. I was hired on in 2009, I think because I had just the right combination of "J" and "lay".

Where did "Hope&Joy" come in?

At the institute, we were looking for a way to get Catholic organizations working together. The realization that the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council was looming just ahead seemed to provide a way to offer people in South Africa a positive message about and from the church, one of 'hope and joy,' one coming directly from Vatican II, the opening words of the final document, "[Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.](#)" [5] Having a two-year run up to the anniversary would give the church time to engage the world rather than retreat from it.

As I am listening to you, it sounds like this ministry project was becoming personal for you.

After being here nine months and observing the church and society, I made a retreat to discern the next best step for the institute and my role in it. I realized that unlike the church in the U.K., which is also small numerically, the church in South Africa was not making much noise, especially since the death of Archbishop Denis Hurley, OMI, of Durban in 2004. He was not only a major framer of the Second Vatican Council but a fierce opponent of apartheid.

[If you want to read about him, a new biography just came out: "Guardian of Light: Denis Hurley Renewing the Church, Opposing Apartheid" by Paddy Kearney. Hurley was born in Cape Town in 1915 and lived and went to school on Robbin Island between 1918-1921, as his father was a lighthouse keeper there.]

After the free elections in 1994 and the official end of apartheid in South Africa, the church was not making much noise. And if the church was known for anything, people thought of the church as a bit of a nag.

During that retreat, I was really looking for a particular reason to stay on, not just a general one. There was an advantage to being an outsider; I didn't have much baggage, I had the positive experience at CAFOD with "Live Simply," and I thought I could get people to talk together.

But how do you get Catholics with different perspectives all working together in "hope and joy"?

When I was in the United States between 1999 and 2001, I saw a church there clearly divided into two groups. Instead of talking to each other from either end of the spectrum, they just shouted at each other. This way of being a church seemed just ghastly to me. Polarization only works because both ends need each other to perpetuate it, and the resulting stalemate solves nothing. Here in South Africa, this kind of thing has not really happened. With few exceptions, the church in South Africa is basically mainstream: just Catholic.

We wanted a chance for a mainstream project that any Catholic organization or person could be part of. In fact, if your organization is listed in the Catholic Directory of the [South African Catholic Bishops' Conference](#) [6], you can be part of the "Hope&Joy" network, because we are going ahead on the assumption that Vatican II is our common heritage.

Are there any organizations that do not belong to the "Hope&Joy network"?

As we began to bring "Hope&Joy" together, a group of sisters called "Sisters for Justice," who are in their 60s and 70s and who had worked for justice all their lives, began giving a series of talks suggesting that it is time for a third Vatican council. On their agenda were issues that could be divisive. We did not want to do this because it had the potential to turn off about 98 percent of the people and create a tension. I am pleased that many of the individual members are part of "Hope&Joy" through other agencies they belong to or work in.

It is the same for a small group of influential white Catholic political liberals based in Cape Town who launched a local chapter of "[We are Church.](#)" [7] The organization is not in the directory, but again, many members are part of the "Hope &Joy" network because they belong to groups that are in the network.

Then there is [Opus Dei](#). [8] They have one parish in South Africa, Mother of Sorrows in Johannesburg. We invited them to become part of the network as they are included in the directory (they came into the diocese 15 years ago). They answered our letter saying they would consider it. Ten months later, they are still thinking

about it. They have not said no, and there is still time. However, the South African Catholic magazines and newspapers are available at the back of the parish church and all of these are running articles in each issue about "Hope&Joy."

[Read the second part of the interview here.](#)[9]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.hopeandjoy.org.za/>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/www.cafod.org.uk>

[3] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html

[4] <http://www.jesuitinstitute.org.za/>

[5] http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

[6] <http://www.sacbc.org.za/>

[7] <http://wearechurchsa.blogspot.com/>

[8] http://www.catholic-johannesburg.org.za/dms/contacts/dms_contact-view?contact_id=4424

[9] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/hopejoy-south-africa-interview-raymond-perrier-part-two>