

By Rabbi Yaakov Glasman, my Reflection on Faith, Life and a Sacred Mission in Zambia

Recently, I had the privilege of meeting a remarkable individual whose work left a deep impression on me. Abraham Muma, the Health Services Coordinator at Chilonga Mission Hospital in Zambia, is visiting Melbourne for a fundraising event for an important cause. He chose to visit St Kilda Shule alongside colleagues from Catholic Mission's National Office. Their mission was clear: to shine a light on the silent suffering of mothers in rural Zambia and to share their commitment to doing something about it.

They told stories that were difficult to hear: of women walking for hours — sometimes days — while in labour, simply to reach the nearest medical facility. Of mothers giving birth on the side of dirt roads. Of preventable deaths. In Zambia, more than 30% of women still give birth without medical assistance. Postpartum haemorrhage remains the leading cause of maternal death. The statistics are disturbing, but it's the human faces behind them that stayed with me. And how we in the west so often take these necessities as a given.

Abraham shared with humility and quiet strength his work in maternal healthcare. He didn't speak in abstractions or grand language — just about his responsibility, as a man of faith and compassion, to ensure that no woman dies because she cannot reach help in time. He spoke of building trust in remote communities, of finding solutions one clinic, one health outpost, one mother at a time.

Fascinatingly, Abraham shared with me his knowledge of the Hebrew language which he had learned as a devout Catholic, to understand the origins of his faith in the Bible. He told me how he learned the Alef-Bet in his younger years together with the nekudot – Hebrew vowels!

In Judaism, the value of *pikuach nefesh* — saving a life — overrides almost every other religious obligation. There is no higher calling. Listening to Abraham, I saw that same value reflected in Catholic Mission's work in Zambia. Though we come from different traditions, our belief in the sanctity of life is shared. This, I believe, is where interfaith solidarity becomes real — not just in words, but in action.

Their approach isn't charity in the traditional sense — it's something deeper. It's empowerment. Abraham sees part of his religious role having been ordained by Zambia's head Bishop, to lead these grassroots projects across the region — a recognition of both his deep faith and his deep compassion.

The work he is doing isn't just about infrastructure. It's about restoring dignity. It's about ensuring that being born in rural Zambia isn't a death sentence for a mother or her child.

In Judaism, we speak of *chesed* and *tikkun olam* — repairing the world. It's not enough to pray for a better world; we are obligated to build it, step by step, brick by brick.

That model of charity is deeply moving. It very much reminds me of the parallels we have in Judaism. It's also what drew me into conversation with Catholic leaders here in Australia, including

Archbishop Peter Comensoli, with whom I travelled to Israel last year as part of an interfaith delegation to show his support for our Jewish community. That experience profoundly deepened my appreciation of the spiritual ties between our communities — ties that feel more important now than ever before.

In a time when many Jewish people, myself included, have felt particularly vulnerable, I've been deeply moved by the solidarity shown by so many Catholic communities. Their support has reminded me that we are not alone, that friendship across faiths is both achievable and vital.

So why am I, a rabbi, writing about a Catholic project in rural Zambia?

Because both the Jewish and Catholic faiths value life so deeply. Because suffering knows no borders, and compassion doesn't check for religion. Because if we can come together across faiths to save even one mother, even one child, then we are doing G-d's work. And because the best way to thank those who have stood with us is to stand with them, and with those they serve.

The Jewish community has long been committed to supporting legitimate and worthy causes beyond its own. From disaster relief to healthcare and education initiatives, Jewish philanthropy extends far and wide, guided by a deep moral responsibility to heal the world. As it says in the Talmud, "Whoever saves one life, it is as if they saved an entire world."

I feel inspired by Abraham and those working with him on this sacred, life-saving task. They are not just treating symptoms. They are building a future — one where every mother has the chance to survive childbirth, to hold her baby, and to live.

Our sages teach us, "Why is wise? One who learns from all people". I feel privileged to have learned from Abraham and his team, and wish them every success in their life-saving work.

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About Catholic Mission

Catholic Mission is the Australian agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies – the Catholic Church's global organisation dedicated to continuing Jesus Christ's mission in the world: that all may have life to the full. Catholic Mission contributes funding and project support to critical church-run initiatives in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and South America. These include spiritual formation, pastoral care, education, health, sanitation, and agricultural programs. Here in Australia, we form people to go out and be missionary in their professional and personal lives; to pray, advocate and act for those on the margins. Catholic Mission has offices in 27 Australian dioceses.