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A Hundred Years of Vincentian Presence in Madagascar (1896 - 1996)

by Gonzague Danjou, C.M.

The precursors sent by St Vincent

Since the beginning of its history the Congregation of the Mission has kept a privileged relationship with Madagascar.... It is to the Great Island of the Indian Ocean that St Vincent sent his best missionaries in 1648 and in the course of the last years of his life our Founder frequently turned his heart and his thoughts towards his far distant missionary sons who lived in perilous conditions and from whom he no longer received any news.

In spite of the closure of the mission decided by Fr Alméras in 1671 the Congregation of the Mission did not despair of establishing itself again in Madagascar. All through the Eighteenth Century fruitless attempts were made and it was with their eyes fixed on Madagascar that Missionaries set themselves to serve the first inhabitants of Réunion (Ile Bourbon) and Mauritius (Ile de France).

The return of the Vincentians in 1896

At the end of the Nineteenth Century when the French landed on Madagascar and placed it under their power the Congregation of the Mission was called upon to bring the Gospel once again. Mgr. Jacques Crouzet, a missionary in Ethiopia, was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Southern Madagascar; and with a small group of French and Ethiopian Missionaries landed at Fort Dauphin in April 1896. Shortly afterwards in 1897 our Sisters, the Daughters of Charity also landed and took an essential part according to their charism in announcing Christ and his message.

The beginnings were difficult: climatic conditions, lack of communication infrastructures (roads, bridges, telephone...), insecurity, scarcity of materials: all this made apostolic activity difficult. Besides, in a context of colonization, the announcement of the Gospel remained linked in the mentality of the population to the occupying political power. Although the confreres for the most part wished to remain free from the colonial administration which was often marked by the French anticlericalism of the period, the missionaries were categorised as strangers, as "vazahas". So, becoming a Catholic Christian appeared like passing over to the colonial power; to become a Catholic was to become French...

Erection and development of the Province.

In 1911 the Province of Madagascar was constituted a juridic entity and its first Visitor was the Vicar Apostolic, Mgr. Jacques Crouzet; the Madagascar Province took on the apostolate of the entire Vicariate, that is the territory situated below the second South parallel.

In 1923 the first Malagasy confrere was admitted to the Congregation, he who would become Fr. Thomas Zafimasina; in 1928 Brother Norbert Botomary entered the Congregation becoming a priest only in 1960. Then we have to wait until 1977 for the reception into the Province of Fr Germain Tata who is now the "doyen" of our Malagasy confreres.

In 1932 Mgr. Crouzet while remaining Vicar Apostolic was freed from his responsibility over the Congregation and Fr John Baptist Gratia was appointed Visitor. For this immense territory equalling about one third the size of France the number of missionaries was always insufficient. The confreres lived in very isolated postings and met one another only at their annual retreats. As well as that, because of the two world wars (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) a certain number of Missionaries were obliged to return to Europe. In 1939 the Province numbered 34 confreres. Even when reinforcements were sent to Madagascar after the second world war there were never more than 40 missionaries active in the Apostolic Vicariate of Fort-Dauphin.

In 1947 Madagascar experienced its first nationalist uprising against the colonial power in what was euphemistically called "the events of 1947". This independence movement was wrongly construed by many missionaries, but certain confreres courageously tried to avoid the excesses of the repression and to calm people's spirits. The key figure in this action was Fr Louis Deguise. At Mankara, in a region particularly affected by the insurrection, this confrere carried out peace-making efforts which contributed to bringing about calm (Cf. J. TRONCHON: "L'insurrection malagache de 1947", pub. Maspero).

Following the visit of Mgr. Lefèvre who was then Apostolic Delegate to French-speaking Africa in 1951 the territory entrusted to the Vincentians was reduced, becoming limited to the present-day dioceses of Fort-Dauphin, Farafangana and Ihosy, that is about 100,000 square kilometers. The rest was confided to the Assumptionist Missionaries (Tulear) and to the Missionaries of the Holy Family (Morombe).

In spite of this reduction of the territory confided to the apostolic responsibility of the Congregation of the Mission, in spite of the opening up of some vocations to the diocesan priesthood (Frs Michel Ramilison, Raphaël Robson, Antoine Mihamitsy, Ernest Boje, Maximin Médard), in spite of the arrival of some groups of Vincentians, the number of apostolic workers remained dramatically insufficient. The French provinces had run out of steam and were incapable of keeping up a supply of workers while entire sectors of the dioceses of the South-East (Fort-Dauphin, 1956; Farafangana, 1957; Ihosy, 1967) were untouched by the proclamation of the Gospel.

After 1958, with General de Gaulle's arrival in France, Madagascar gradually progressed towards the Independence which was peacefully proclaimed on 26 June 1960. This was a new opportunity for Evangelisation. Missionary and Gospel no

longer appeared as the coloniser's baggage and a means of conquering. At the same time, in an independent country, the field of the apostolate became more open to other non-French missionaries and the Church was showing its universality more clearly.

In 1961 there opened at last the Junior Seminary of Farafangana welcoming priesthood candidates from the South-East of the Island; but for many years it bore no fruit.

Fr. Clement Cassan, a former Chinese missionary, arrived as Visitor of the Province of Madagascar in 1953. Faced with the critical situation of evangelisation in the South he started looking for confreres from other Provinces to give our Province the new blood and the dynamism it needed. With the help of the Superior General of the time, Fr William Slattery, Fr Cassan's efforts brought about the arrival and installation of confreres from Turin (1968), Spanish confreres (1965), Slovenian confreres (1968) and Polish confreres (1970). These different groups of missionaries were, at the start, allocated their own special areas.

Towards indigenisation of the Province

From about 1970 throughout the entire Church of Madagascar the number of priestly and religious vocations experienced a gradual increase and the formation of the clergy became one of the major preoccupations of the Church. At the request of the bishops a confrere took his place on the formation team, first at the Regional Major Seminary of Ambatoroka-Antannarivo, then at the interdiocesan Major Seminary of Vohitsoa-Fianarantsoa.

In other areas the Vincentians who served in the dioceses worked with renewed energy at promoting priestly vocations to the secular clergy. Then there were opened the Junior Seminaries of Fort-Dauphin and Ihosy whose first Directors were confreres. After the death of the Vincentian Bishops of Farafangana (Mgr. Camille Chilouet) and Ihosy (Mgr. Luigi Dusio) in 1970 these dioceses were given Malagasy Bishops. Today in the territory where the majority of our confreres work only the diocese of Fort-Dauphin, with Mgr. Pierre Zevaco, is headed by a European Bishop.

But, at the same time that the number of future secular priests for Madagascar was increasing, several young men showed a desire to involve themselves "following Christ the Evangeliser of the poor" in the Congregation of the Mission. They wished to find in the Congregation a community which would enable them better to live out the grace of priesthood. Our Province has thus gradually set in place structures aimed at welcoming and forming young men whom the Spirit of the Lord is directing towards the Vincentian family. In 1983 there was the opening of the Foyer Thomas Zaphimasina at Antannarivo for our major seminarists following courses at Ambatoroka. Then in 1986 the opening of the permanent Internal Seminary in the Marillac Provincial House. Finally in 1990 the opening of our St Vincent's Scholasticate at Fianarantsoa for our students in Fundamental Theology and Philosophy who are following courses at the interdiocesan Major Seminary of the Southern Province at Vohitsoa.

With regard to our Sisters, the consistent improvement in their numbers enabled them to open several houses and to bear witness to the Vincentian charism through their new foundations in the South east.

Our Vincentian formation

The confreres however were not content to welcome native vocations. Right from the Provincial Assembly of 1982-1983 they manifested an explicit desire to set up an authentically Malagasy Province. First, by bringing about a true internationalisation of the Province: national divisions had to be surpassed in order to create truly international communities within the unity of the Madagascar Province, and then by gradually confiding community responsibilities to Malagasy confreres.

The last Provincial Assemblies gave time to reflection on problems concerning formation. We have thus been able to lay down the principal axes of this formation and to bring into focus a certain number of practical directives:

- Stage One: an effort in discernment so that the candidates might recognise God's will for them, while at the same time allowing them to clarify, purify and accept their vocation.
- Next, formation properly so called aimed at helping the young man to become adult in the faith by taking responsibility for his personal formation and his apostolic life in community. We have, for the moment, made the choice of limiting the number of those we receive each year in order to be sure of this personalised formation.
- At the end of their foundational studies the young priests are sent on mission and after a few years of ministry, they receive additional formation through the acquisition of diplomas or through systematic renewal courses.
- For Brothers: the aim is clarification of their specific vocation, technical formation and their insertion into communities.

The Province of Madagascar is then today assuming a Malagasy identity and our young confreres, in accordance with the present-day orientation of the Church and the Congregation in Africa, continues to reflect on inculturation in order to promote greater unity in the Christian, priestly and Vincentian vocation within their native cultural identity. At the present moment (1 October 1995) the Malagasy confreres of the Province are listed as follows:

- Priests: 11
- Brothers: 2
- Students incorporated: 5
- Students admitted: 31
- Bothers admitted: 3

Today's inculturation of the Vincentian charism.

In the Church of Madagascar at the present day the number of secular priests is increasing regularly. It is only to be expected that they should more and more take responsibility for parishes and ministries of which we had been called to take charge at the beginning of the mission when we were the only ones capable of assuming the ordinary pastoral care of the dioceses. In agreement with the bishops and as far as is locally possible we see ourselves as moving out of central parishes in order to devote ourselves to the specific works of the Congregation.

In the realm of apostolic activities we are at present trying to set up a team to specialise in Popular Missions. We have already begun to organise systematically Popular Missions each year, but the confreres involved in these are not totally given over to this work. During the rest of the year they take on other apostolic works. In the Provincial Plan we propose to set up at least one permanent team of confreres entirely dedicated to this work of Popular Missions.

Another avenue to be followed by our Province is that of aid to the clergy, especially through the work of Formation. For several years now a confrere has been attached full-time to a formation team of priests at the Major Seminary. To this must be added the participation of several confreres in regular courses or particular sessions in the various major seminaries of the Island. Formation of the clergy is one of the priorities established by the bishops for the Church of Madagascar at this stage of its history. In keeping with our charism we also wish to form confreres capable of becoming educators at the service of the clergy.

Finally a third avenue which we have chosen is that of "Mission ad Gentes". For the moment, because of our small number and the increased number of "bush stations" we are principally involved with pastoral work amongst Christians, and our activity amongst those who have not yet been touched by the gospel and are isolated in cut-off areas is rather limited. According as we become freed from traditional pastoral ministry we wish to direct ourselves towards these poor people who are still far from the faith.

To these fundamental orientations for the future works of our Province there must be added the Spiritual Animation of Vincentian-inspired Movements: A.I.C., St Vincent de Paul Society, Marian Youth... as well as deep commitment to charitable and social works for the promotion of the poor to which confreres were led by the Spirit of Christ.

The above are the orientations taken by the Province, and they are the field of action for the Congregation of the Mission in the years to come.

Such a future of course does not belong to us: it remains in the Lord's hands... But we know that the Vincentian charism lived by the confreres, the Daughters of Charity, the lay Vincentian associations... has now taken root in the soil of Madagascar. The tiny grain, buried in the sacrifice of the first missionaries sent by St Vincent, emergent from the earth in 1896, and today watered by the work of all those

who went before us, is gently becoming a tree which has its roots in Malagasy soil....
It is up to us now to make it bear fruit!

(Stanislaus Brindley C.M., translator)