

The Missionary Spirituality of the first Malagasy Lay Christians

Bruno Hübsch

1 When one speaks of Mission and the foundation of local Churches, the accent is above all placed on the evangelizing ministers, priests, brothers and female religious, as well as on their work, their difficulties and their successes. One more or less evokes their local collaborators, but it is difficult to clearly discern the face of those who have received the Word, given it their faith and constituted the first Church. The written material which permits the reconstruction of the history of those initial efforts is above all made up of letters or reports written by the missionaries: they speak of the new Christians, of their zeal and their piety, but according to how it appears to them. What did these new disciples of Christ think? What were the evangelical values to which they adhered? More often than not it is difficult to know.

2 In Madagascar there now exists a “journal” which was kept by the Malagasy Catholics whenever it was possible. Reading this chronicle lets one know what their reaction and action was when they were obliged to take over the progress of their Church. In effect, in 1883-1886 (and this was to occur again in 1894-95), the foreign missionaries had to leave the country following the war which broke out between France and Madagascar. The young Church which they had brought to birth was only a little over 20 years old. A group of young people¹, united in an association called “The Catholic Union”, first undertook the job of activating the 4 parishes of the capital, Antananarivo, and then concentrated on the communities spread out in the surrounding countryside and beyond. They met every Saturday, reported on their visits, expressed the problems they had met, discussed them and made decisions for the following week. The

¹ They called themselves “young people” although they were between 25 and 35 years of age: in Malagasy society one is a “recognized person” from the age of 40.

secretary wrote an account of each weekly meeting and we now have a journal of what occurred, somewhat rare in Catholicism, during 33 months of the life of a *Church of the laity*.

3 Conserved in the archives of the archbishopric of Antananarivo, the text was carefully published by a historian, Pietro Lupo, who accompanied it with substantial notes and various French or Malagasy documents. All of this permits us to establish the authenticity and the validity of what is reported in the “Histoire de l’Union catholique” (History of the Catholic Union), (from now on referred to as HUC)².

4 By means of this writing it is possible to understand that which was “burning” in the heart of these young people, and to discover the missionary feeling which animated them. Through their action, their decisions and their reflections we can comprehend how they achieved a fecund way of fulfilling their mission as baptized Christians³.

5 But before starting this article it is important to know a little regarding the situation of this Catholic Church in Madagascar. Then, having assessed the measure of the adventure of these “young people”, it will be possible to understand some of the elements which nourished their missionary feeling.

I. THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

6 It was in the 17th century that the first attempts at missionary work took place: those of the Portuguese Jesuits, in the south and the west of the

² Pietro LUPO, *Le Catholicisme à Madagascar à la fin du XIXe siècle. 1 - Les Laïcs - (Catholicism in Madagascar at the end of the XIX Century. 1 - The Laity) Documents 1883-1886*, duplicated copies. Secretariat of the Bishops Conference of Madagascar, Antananarivo 1977. The text of the History of the Catholic Union is in Malagasy. We have translated the quotes which we present in this article.

³ At the time of the 2nd war between France and Madagascar the same experience of the Church of the laity was renewed. There still exists the “diary” (journal) kept by the man who was elected “Prefect of the Church”, Paul Ratiringa; a manuscript of 800 pages in which, for himself, he wrote down the events, the meetings, the information received, the conversations and the encounters he had. This text was studied by Pietro LUPO for his thesis in Paris at the Sorbonne, published as “*Une Eglise des laïcs à Madagascar. Les catholiques pendant la guerre coloniale de 1894-1895 d’après l’Histoire-Journal de Paul Ratiringa*” (A Church of the Laity in Madagascar. The Catholics during the Colonial War of 1894-1895 according to the History-Journal of Paul Ratiringa), (1894-1895). Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Published by the National Center for Scientific Research) Paris 1990.

One can also read François NOIRET, *Pierre Ratsumba (1846-1919), Le fondateur oublié de l’Eglise de Fianarantsoa* (The Forgotten Founder of the Church of Fianarantsoa), (Madagascar), Karthala-Paris and Ambozontany-Antananarivo 1999. This Malagasy Christian, who shared the adventure of the “young people” for 18 months, until he had to take refuge in Antananarivo, is an extremely fine example of a Christian.

island (1613 - 1630), then those of the French Lazarists associated with the establishment, in the south with a commercial base at Fort Dauphin de Tolaaro (1648 - 1674); but these attempts remained fruitless. The projects of the 18th century did not become concrete because they were opposed by the authorities of the islands of France (now Maurice) and Bourbon (now La Réunion) which refused to see their slave trade spoiled⁴.

7 It was after 1815 that a double opportunity arose: the aspirations of Radama I, King of Antananarivo, who was desirous of obtaining the military means to conquer the island and adopt foreign techniques, and those of the Governor of the island of Maurice, who was anxious to abolish the slave trade and extend British influence. The resulting treaties of 1817 and 1820 permitted the pastors and the artisans of the London Missionary Society (LMS) to respond to the desires of both parties.

8 Starting from December 1820, little by little, the entire educational network was organized and the translation of the Bible rapidly began (1823). Texts from the Scriptures and the catechism, used as educational material, thus linked instruction and Christianity. The first baptisms were not celebrated until 1831, under the reign of Queen Ranavalona I (1828-1861). Soon after succeeding her husband, she began to become worried about this religion, which was casting doubts upon the sacred traditions on which her power rested. In March of 1835, she forbade her subjects to profess Christianity. While the clergy were finishing the printing of the Bible (June 1835) a group of Christians who had remained faithful organized themselves clandestinely and would meet to read the Scriptures and pray together. There were numerous arrests and, in waves of persecution (1837 - 1840 - 1849 - 1856), about a hundred people were martyred and many others condemned to irons and slavery. Thanks to the believers, the word spread through the villages of the island, who survived at the mercy of their fears and of deportations. In this way a courageous and missionary Church developed, carried along by the local people themselves.

9 On the Catholic side, Madagascar rose against the Island of Réunion. In 1832, there was an attempt, on the part of the apostolic prefect, Henri de Solages, to reach Antananarivo. But he was impeded and died alone, carried off by fever. In 1837, a diocesan priest, Pierre Dalmond, who had come to the Indian Ocean with Solages, finding it impossible to enter Madagascar, disembarked near the east coast of the Island of Sainte Marie - a dependency of France. For 3 years he worked on initiating and nurturing a small community; he then went to the islands of the northwest, where the

⁴ Cf. B. HÜBSCH (edited by), *Madagascar et le christianisme. Histoire œcuménique* (Madagascar and Christianity. An Ecumenical History) ACCT, Published by Ambozonofany-Karthala, Paris 1993.

princes were asking to become a French Protectorate (1840). When he was nominated apostolic prefect of Madagascar he sought out collaborators. In 1844, passing through Europe, he obtained the assistance of the Jesuits. When he died, in September of 1847, it was they who continued along his course, on all but the “little islands”. The great island was closed to them and they could only prepare the catechism material by working on the language and printing texts. In 1855 Fr. Finaz had the chance to go to Antananarivo incognito and, through his many talents, managed to stay there for two years. It was necessary to wait for the death of the aging queen (August 16, 1861) for her son, Radama II, to proclaim religious freedom.

10 The Protestants were then able to appear in broad daylight and soon built their first churches. The Jesuits very quickly got to the center of the island, well received by the king who had known Fr. Finaz. He gave them the possibility of settling there, of founding four parishes and of opening schools. It was the pupils of these schools who, two years later, were among the first to be baptized. There too, education and Christianity were intimately linked.

11 The presence of the two confessions brought about a situation of rivalry which also became a competition between nations. The Protestants urging on their British pastors, the Catholics supporting the French fathers. Although, after the assassination of the King (May 1863), the Prime Minister, Rainilaiarvony, tried to establish a policy of equilibrium, it was rather towards Great Britain and Protestantism which he leaned. The high society of Madagascar was also inclined in this direction.

12 In 1868 the new Queen, Ranavalona II, as soon as she had “appeared to the people”, indicated her choice of Christianity as opposed to the traditional religion. In February 1869 her baptism as a protestant was announced, as well as that of the Prime Minister whom she had married. Even though religious freedom was officially proclaimed it was quite clear that Protestantism was the “religion of the Queen”. Many people in the realm were drawn to follow their sovereign. Churches were built; the ministers took the cue and the military favored a movement which seemed to be going along with the royal will.

13 In this context the Jesuits, often called upon by their former pupils, spread to the country areas in the center of the island and founded chapels and schools. They went to the south (to the province of Betsileo), 400 km from Antananarivo (1871). But very often their action was hindered or harassed by the ministers of the Queen, marked by all the anti-papist prejudices which made them regard Catholicism as idolatry. The Catholic missionaries, for their part, had no better opinion of their rivals.

14 All the same, the two rival confessions continued to extend and in the Capital a whole network of teaching was organized: that of the Protestants with a school of pastoral formation and a college, which was to develop, in 1881, into a school of medicine; that of the Catholics, borne alone since 1866 by the Brothers of the Christian schools, who prepared distinguished instructors. At that same time the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, who had been present since 1861, trained a number of female instructors. The printing works provided books in Malagasy, especially religious ones, and each Church had its magazine: the Teny Soa (The Good Word) (1866) for the Protestants, the Resaka (The Conversation) for the Catholics. A considerable educational effort was made by both sides, above all in the royal city. In the outlying districts the different religious adherence was often revealed by the difference in liturgy, but it was the priests who lived in the various areas who were able to provide a more profound evangelization.

15 Broadly speaking that was the religious situation when, in 1883, the war between France and Madagascar broke out. Many subjects of the dissension had poisoned relations: the Madagascar refusal to give property rights to foreigners, the Kingdom in the northwest of the island refusing to recognize the French claims that it was a protectorate. And there was also the scheme, pursued by the notables of Réunion, to make Madagascar into an outlet for their population.

16 When the bombardment of Majunga was announced the Malagasy government decided to expel all French citizens, this included all the Catholic priests, brothers and female religious (the only Malagasy priest, ordained in 1873, had died two months previously). The only religious who were left were the first Malagasy brother of the Christian schools (28 years of age), Fr. Raphaël Rafiringa, and 3 novices of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny. But there was the Catholic laity...

17 Compared to the 135,000 baptized Protestants and all their adherents, there were 23,500 baptized Catholics and about 40,000 sympathizers spread over 316 locations, of which 80 were in the south at Betsileo. There were also 19,000 pupils in the Catholic schools with 350 male and female teachers⁵.

18 The letters which the missionaries wrote after their departure show their dismay and their fears of seeing this little Church destroyed⁶. But they had not taken into account the faith and the missionary feelings which they had generated in hearts.

⁵ P. LUPO, *Les laïcs* (The Laity), p. 16.

⁶ P. LUPO, *Les laïcs*, p. 19 and Document 2, p. 220.

II. THE CHURCH OF THE LAITY

19 In this Church of the Laity, who were the principal characters with the ability to animate their community? I here present them and describe their work; one can understand their motivations by reading their journal.

20 Three days after the departure of the Fathers, the Catholics found themselves before barred and guarded churches. The Prime Minister's daughter-in-law, Victoire Rasoamanarivo, arrived. She, being a person with governmental connections, when informed of the problem, was able to have the doors opened. The faithful were able to join together in prayer. This woman was not only close to the powerful she was also recognized for being a Christian of great piety - courageous without ostentation. Lady in waiting of the Queen, she bore witness to her faith. It was known that her husband led a debauched life but, in spite of the advice of her father-in-law and of the Queen, Victoire would never hear of divorce. Dignified, patient, she hoped to see her husband, who scorned her, changed in the end. Mistress of her house, she saw to running all that took place within it - instructing domestics and slaves with sweetness and trust. Involved in the work of her parish in the Association of the Children of Mary, of which she was president, she used to visit the sick and poor or she would look after them in her own home. Before he left, Fr. Caussèque, spiritual advisor of these associations, told her "When Jesus was taken up into heaven, Mary remained on the earth to encourage the Apostles and the faithful. Being daughter of the Prime Minister, and pious as you are, you can do much for these faithful". She received these words and saw in them a mission: for 33 months she did everything to get things working. It was essential for the Catholics to have such a woman as a guarantee because, by her position, she was the symbol of the religious freedom which her father-in-law wished to maintain⁷.

21 Because he was a religious and because of his moral qualities, the adult Catholics of the capital elected the first Malagasy brother "Prefect of the Church". He was a very religious and highly competent man, deeply devoted to his work. But, having had the clerical authority of the priests as his model, he thought that everything should come under his authority. He had not taken the young men of the Catholic Union into account: this Marian Association, consisting of former pupils of the religious brothers, had been founded in 1878. It appeared that during their monthly meetings

⁷ Victoire Rasoamanarivo (1849-1894) was beatified on April 30, 1989 at Atananarivo by John Paul II. To see the way in which Victoire is presented in the HUC, Cf. B. HÜBSCH, *Victoire et les jeunes hommes, Aspects du christianisme à Madagascar* (Victoire and the Young Men, Aspects of Christianity in Madagascar) (Periodical of the Superior Institute of Theology of Ambatoroka-Antananarivo) New Series I.8, pp. 345-358 (1986).

they had received a high level of Christian formation. These young men, from 20 to 30 years of age, were the functionaries or teachers of the Mission. They quickly decided that they had to take over the Sunday prayer at the four parishes and preach when it was necessary.

22 During the first four months after the Fathers had left, some of these young men had the occasion to travel in the countryside surrounding the capital, either for their work or because they had to respond to some family situation. They found that there were Catholic communities which were no longer functioning; sometimes the instructor, who was at the same time the catechist and the leader of Sunday prayer, had gone away in search of paid work. The Protestant communities put great pressure on them to draw these Christians without priests into their sect. Accusations of being traitors, of conniving with the enemies of the country weighed upon these faithful... The young men met again at the beginning of October, determined to respond to those needs they had perceived. In his journal,⁸ the secretary, Isidore Ramahatafandry, wrote: "Their hearts were burning with compassion because they realized that it was their duty and their responsibility to fling themselves into this business and to bring it to a successful conclusion. Were not many of them among the first baptized of Antananarivo? They knew the Christian life well, and they were the people who had received the best formation. In it they saw the will of God and they could not make the good which they had received from Him into something useless".

23 They called on Victoire Rasoamanarivo and on some of the elite class and organized a meeting with Br. Raphaël, under the leadership of Paul Rafiringa, the elected authority of the group. At that time, when there were no more priests [16(64)], they considered this task of animation as a substitute for confession and penitence and they placed themselves under the protection of the Virgin. Having taken various organizational measures they heard Victoire ask them to collaborate with the Brother whom she had invited, and she asked the Brother to come to an understanding with them: "If we are unable to come to an agreement among ourselves, our religion will be destroyed". She set up an office for mediation and she pursued it all the way through, never hesitating when it came to organizing discussions that would set the two parties face to face, always taking drastic action to remove the venom so that they could start again on a healthy basis.

24 Once the principle had been established the following meeting permitted the setting of a certain number of rules for the visits: in order to emphasize the specific Catholic character of the visits they were to take

⁸ When quoting from the HUC - the first number refers to the pages of the manuscript; the second figure refers to the pages in the book by P. LUPPO, *Les laïcs*.

place in the name of Victoire and her brother-in-law, the only son of the Prime Minister to be a Catholic. The visits were to be made without payment and local communities were to be structured by means of the election of a responsible authority.

25 It was indeed a mission in the Church; and for these young men, within the framework of their movement, it was a commitment which was, at the same time, among themselves and for others - "like a vow" said their journal [15(63)].

26 The adventure began: Saturday after Saturday they met together to report on their visits. Sunday after Sunday they could be seen out early on their different roads, covering a radius of up to 15 or 20 km around Atananarivo. Often they would go on foot, but sometimes "to give themselves importance" they were carried in sedan chairs. Their role: to visit the communities, arouse them, fortify them, teach them, watch over the functioning of the schools, support the teachers and encourage them, promote catechism - not only for children but also for adults, and in particular the catechumens. They would also baptize and without delay prepare people for marriage and receive the statements of consent.

27 But there were communities which were further away, and to visit them took several days. At one meeting, the president indicated that an envoy was at the door; he was from a Church situated 45 km to the East which was waiting to meet with a delegate of the community. There was a consultation and it was decided which member was to set off immediately: "Vincent accepted and left". Then the secretary adds: "Thanks be to you, all powerful Lord, who has given to your servant a loving, obedient and courageous heart. He did not give a thought to how long a trip it would be, to the heaviness of the summer rains nor to the unexpectedness of his nomination; as a soldier of the Lord he paid no attention to these inconveniences and thought only about the visit which he had been asked to make"⁹.

28 Others were assigned to longer tours, both in the North and in the South of the central province. The mission was to go to the isolated communities and calm their fears, to assure them that they had not been abandoned¹⁰. They also kept up an active correspondence with the South (Ambositra is 250 km from the Capital), writing to a catechist instructor

⁹ "A decision was made by everybody and two people were selected to act as the delegates. They both accepted since a vote of the assembly was a designation from God: one could not refuse it" [120(111)].

¹⁰ "After they heard the reading of the places where they were to go", wrote the secretary, "each one manifested his joy. Not one complained because of the distances to be covered, but each one promised to work where he had been assigned in accordance with the will of God" [79(93)].

who valiantly kept up his community. On the other hand, in Betsileo, after Pierre Ratsimba had gone, those people who were responsible for the school where the instructors were trained, bore a remarkable witness of courageous faith. The communities had been reduced to silence as a result of the government's desire to eliminate the "French prayer". Pierre Ratsimba had managed to find refuge in Imerina where, for 15 months, he took part in the work of the Catholic Union.

29 Little by little, the action of the young men became structured. To insure a continuity in their work, they divided the former districts of the Fathers into two sectors. On the initiative of Victoire, they began to give importance to enlarging their association. Until that point, their action took its impetus from their generous enthusiasm, but it was necessary for them to have an authority figure. On January 25, 1884, seeing there was a need for experienced adults, Victoire proposed that the people in the four parishes of the Capital should elect some additional members of the Catholic Union. In this way, wherever they went the young men would be considered as representatives of the Church and, as such, their activity would be authenticated. With regard to Fr. Raphael, elected by the Christians and involved in a large sphere of spiritual animation, they excluded him and gave him an ecclesiastical mission which dealt with the country districts. In *A Church of the Laity*, it was the community which delegated its authority and it did so through elections.

30 The group continued to pursue its mission with perseverance. When war operations started up again - because there had been periods of negotiation - they all committed themselves to comforting their sectors: Victoire herself went to visit nine communities, going to a different one each Sunday. Every so often it was necessary for the leader of the group, Paul Rafiringa, to shake up his brethren a bit, they were falling asleep, and re-launch the conferences which they held together, in order to encourage and reanimate the values on which their action was founded.

31 Every Saturday the young men met together to access their visits, to prepare the liturgical services, to organize collections in favor of the soldiers and to organize the work in a more expedient way than that of the local representatives. It is undeniable that the charisma and the smile of Victoire greatly inspired this constancy in action. But the fact remained that without the young men neither she nor Fr. Rafiringa would have been able to succeed in revitalizing this Church.

32 When, after the negotiations and the signing of the peace treaty (December 1885 - March 1886), the Fathers were able to return and celebrate the Eucharist, for which the Christians hungered, they discovered a living and structured Church; one in which the animators had discovered their mission and had put it into action as baptized Christians.

III. THE ELEMENTS OF THEIR SPIRITUALITY

33 In fact, the “young men” did not use the word *mission*, which in any case did not have any equivalent in the Malagasy language. Certainly the French word *mission* was known: it described the overall work in which the Fathers, Brothers and Female Religious were employed. But if one runs through the material of their catechism¹¹ then in use, it can be seen that the notion of “mission” was never developed as a task to which all believers were invited. Whatever there may be with regard to the Holy Spirit or the Church in the explanation of the Creed, whatever there may be in the presentation of the feasts such as Epiphany or Pentecost, mission never appeared as a duty of Christian life; it was not part of the doctrine taught. However, it seems that it belonged to the domain of spirituality, existing in the invitation made to Christians to let their faith be known and to attract non-Christians (and the Protestants...). In any case, this must be an element of the formation given by the Catholic Associations, as can be seen in the reaction of the young men when they set out on their adventure. They knew that they were among the first baptized Christians of the Church [11(61)] and that, according to an expression they used quite frequently, it was to them that “God’s business” was entrusted. This was not some other place, this was the Church to which they belonged and it was up to them to make it live. They were to look after the “people of God”¹², as they used to say.

34 Their association is a component of the Church, not only because it was recognized by the Fathers, but also by the very brotherhood which exists within it. They freely call themselves “Roman Catholics”, which is certainly the label given them by the Protestants, and in this way they indicate their attachment to the Pope¹³. However, it is also the way they emphasize that the fact that they belong to a universal Church does not mean that they are in any way to be identified as being part of the “French prayer”, as they were accused of by their adversaries. In the framework of the teaching received, their Church, for them, was the only means of

¹¹ Cf. B. HÜBSCH, “La mission dans la catéchèse in Madagascar (The Catechesis Mission in Madagascar) (1865-1957)” in *Iconographie, catéchisme et missions* (Iconography, Catechism and Missions). Acts of the Missionary History Conference of Louvain-la-Neuve (September 1983), CREDIC Lyon 1984.

¹² This expression appears twice [149(121)] and [219(151)]. For example: “All of us have been designated and elected by our parishes to lead *the people of God*, so that when there is something the Christians should do, or something they should have done, we, after first speaking about it, reflect on what would be the best thing to do. That is what the Christians who elected us want, and that is what commits us to intensify our action. Our task is difficult and we must examine it together”.

¹³ “What is the Church?”, asks the little catechism, “It is the whole body of Christians who obey the Pope”.

salvation. This explains both the way in which they regarded the Protestant Churches, and the way they desired to avoid any imitation of them, even down to their use of hymns.

35 To nourish their faith, they had, in addition to the Malagasy translation of the “Christian Manual”, a Malagasy translation of the four Gospels and of “The Epistles and Gospels for Sundays, with Explanations”. When one reads what some of them have written in the HUC, one sees that these texts were very familiar to them, they quoted them by memory, in the same way as they integrated numerous examples drawn from the Old or from the New Testament.

36 In the beginning, at each meeting, it was their custom to put their money into a common pot; but many were embarrassed and, as the secretary wrote: “It is not that they refuse to give, they just do not have the money: most of them being truly without funds” [228(155)]. This did not stop them from going out on their frequent trips and, when one of them was to be sent out “on mission”, they could be seen saving up those little sums that would be needed.

37 They also helped each other through prayer. It was fourteen months since they had started their work (August 23, 1984), and the secretary wrote: “The work we do is very good, we put our whole heart into it for the glory of the Catholic Church. We see, according to the custom of the Church and according to our faith, the history of the Church and of the Holy Scriptures; and in them we see the works associated with the culmination of our prayer. We see in the history of St. Dominic that, when he found himself in a situation of trials for Christians, he turned towards Mary and she taught him the Rosary. When he had started regularly reciting the Rosary he realized what it demanded of him. I then read them the passage¹⁴. The scriptures also said the same about Judith. After the reading the members of the U.C. reacted and lowered their heads. They became aware that God never abandons those who do not despair. It was decided that we should start doing the living Rosary, the mysteries of which we would discuss the following week” [201/202(144)]. Which was done.

38 The *living Rosary*, which spread in the Church, is an invention of Pauline Jaricot (about 1827): a group of 15 persons is established and they portion out the 15 decades of the rosary, each person receiving one mystery; for the following month they were to meditate on this mystery during the recitation of the Rosary. And thus, each day the Rosary was prayed by the entire group.

¹⁴ The secretary read a little work, *sur les Fêtes de Sainte Marie* (On the Feasts of Holy Mary) which had appeared a few years before. The Catholic translation of Judith had come out in 1878.

39 This insistence on prayer (individual within a collective framework) thus marked the group. One should also take note of the fact that about the same time that they were deeply involved in prayer, there was a proposal to restart the Propagation for the Faith in the parishes of the Capital, following the system imagined by Pauline Jaricot. From 1873 on the Fathers had been organizing this work, of which the Malagasy Church was the beneficiary. Through the offerings of its members the work would now be able to be a part of the missionary effort of the world (as of 1880 Madagascar's contribution is mentioned in the annals of the Propagation of the Faith). Reviving this humble devotion of the Congregation emphasized their belonging to the Catholic Church.

40 While involved in the task of animating young people one can see that an important place was also given to the Mission's leper hospital. Founded in 1873, it had been the first attempt to receive those lepers that had been rejected by society. They were provided with a roof and also with land, for those who could still work: about one hundred people were thus assured of assistance.

41 When the Fathers left, one of the English pastors, thinking of the abandonment into which these unfortunate people were about to be plunged, went and took them an offering, promising to have it renewed each week, either by himself or by someone he sent. Aroused to their duties by Victoire, who had made a tour of the outlying districts, the "young men" took the idea, of visiting the lepers each Sunday, to heart. They decided that the entire group would go, one pair after another, two by two, to pray with them and to visit the dwellings of those whom they often called "God's precious treasure". This care for the poorest of the poor could be seen again when, on January 25, 1885, they all went out together, with Victoire, to a nearby village. They were going to take part in the baptism of three lepers who had received their preparation formation from one of the young men. "The people of the surroundings were amazed to see all of us taking care of the lepers" [262(171)].

42 Every week, in principle, each one of the young men delivered an exhortation to his comrades. Isidore, the secretary, kept the texts in a dossier which has disappeared. But his successor copied two of them from among the many records of their meetings. In this record of their public discourses one can see that he expressed what he thought would touch the heart of the young men. Thus, François Randriamamahatra, after recalling the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul which was celebrated during the week, made a point of speaking about the apostolate and about it being based on the words of Jesus "I have come to set the earth on fire" (Lk 12:49). Having evoked the example of the two Apostles, in whom the Holy Spirit had consumed by fire that which was holding them back, (fear for Peter,

vainglory for Paul) he addressed his comrades: “This fire already burns in us because we have received God’s Holy Spirit; it is up to us to make it flame... I therefore ask each of you these questions: Catholic Union, has this transmission of the fire of the Lord already started a burning in you? If it does not burn well, or, even more pressing, if it is nothing more than a flickering flame, must you not make it flame higher and brighter? Yes! You are always bound to this task, in order to fulfill the words of the Lord ‘I have come to set the earth on fire...’, but especially now.

43 “Why do I say ‘especially now’? Because each of you is one of the few remnants whom God will use to bring His fire, so that it will burn everything which is impure in this country which belongs to you. You must remove, from the heart of men, the love of that which is vain, and of making only the love of God reign. You are the only one left to carry the great flame which will dry that which has been made humid and will make it burn. It is you who will make the love of God burn in the heart of those whose zeal and ardor have faded, either because of false beliefs, fruits of their imagination, or because of the quest of an aimless and pointless glory. To say it in one word, it is to you in particular, it is to you alone that the Lord has entrusted His Church, in these days when He is pruning it and putting it to the test.

44 “So what can you do to show yourself worthy of this great responsibility, to perform this unavoidable task? The Lord has brought the fire to your heart and you must make it burn brightly, vitalizing your love for God by perfectly accomplishing what you must do, with the help of God. Take no account of fatigue. Do not complain to Him of your difficulties. Above all, as you work in the Lord’s vineyard, do not let yourself be discouraged: for, according to the words of St. Paul: ‘We know that all things work for good for those who love God’ (Rom 8:28)” [307-310(197-199)].

45 This rather long quotation seems to depict well what these young men were living and how they wanted to live. Certainly the departure of the missionaries had been a call for them to fling themselves into action, but, in fact, it is their vocation as Christians (“we have received the Holy Spirit”) which drove them to transform themselves in order to transform mankind. Is not their mission that of transmitting the fire sent by the Lord so that it can burn and flame in the hearts of others?

46 One can see that this spirituality of the young Malagasy Christians did not develop for its own sake: it was lived and expressed either in their actions or in the reflections during the course of their action. Conscious of their place in the Church and of what they had received, they committed themselves to animating the community as if it was a way of taking on their state of being believers. At the start they even added that their work was a

substitute for penance: relying as they did - without actually saying it - on the fact that charity “will cover a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:20).

47 They connected the position they took to their relationship with God. It was “God’s business” they were occupied with. It was God who directed their activities through His Church. And when one or another was chosen for a mission, he could not refuse, for through the voice of the others, this decision meant that he had been given a sign from God.

48 They knew themselves to be weak and they knew that they needed to help themselves or to be helped by their friends. Thus the group’s President went himself to visit each one of the members to remind them of their duties.

49 They never forgot prayer. Certainly they had the prayer of the Church which they animated and directed on Sundays, both in the towns and in the countryside, but they also felt the need for that personal prayer which, through the *living Rosary*, could meld with the prayer of others.

50 They understood that the service of God is performed in the care and concern for the poorest of the poor. Their solicitude with regard to lepers was a touchstone; it seemed emblematic to them when they all subsequently visited the lepers’ homes.

51 Could one better summarize a Christian life inspired by the Gospels, founded on God and directed towards others? Is not this the heart of the Sermon on the Mount? This was care for others put into action (Cf. Mt 5:20-48), this was a relationship with God (Cf. Mt 6:1-7,11), from which springs genuine charity (Cf. Mt 7:12), to put into practice the two missionary exhortations on salt and light (Cf. Mt 5:13-16).

52 The story did not stop there. When the priests returned, the Bishop invoked them to learn how to profit from the dynamism of the lay people. During the following eight years, without any sizeable increase in the number of missionaries (48 to 51), the number of people baptized doubled... When the second Franco-Malagasy war broke out, the lay people once again went to animate their Church. Many among them were those who had taken on this work before, from 1883 to 1886.

53 Colonization was to crush this impetus. The Malagasy became French “subjects” and there was no longer a possibility that they would be left to their own inventiveness and initiatives. The Fathers, in the eyes of the new administration, were the only ones who spoke for the Church. It was only towards 1914 that the youth movements started up again. To encourage them, appeals were made to their important elders who, as collaborators, had been called to the rank of auxiliaries.

54 During all this time, the missionary feeling remained alive. So many Christians, as a result of migration or because of administrative problems, have themselves been the initiators of new communities. It is not rare even

today, to see some teacher or some nurse being sent into distant regions to work on the creation of a little Church.... Is what they have in their hearts so different from what was in the hearts of their elders?

*(From the periodical Aspects du christianisme à Madagascar
- Aspects of Christianity in Madagascar -
No. 8, Fianarantsoa, 2000)*