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## *Madagascar: 25 years of Dehonian Presence*

Umberto Chiarello, scj

**1** On November 14, 1974, the first Dehonian missionary, Fr. Nicola Giampietro of the IM Province, arrived in Madagascar.

**2** On November 14, 1999, this anniversary was celebrated by 47 Dehonian religious, not only Italians and Portuguese but also Malagasy people. As the parable of the liturgy of this Sunday says, the talents given by the Lord to the Dehonians of Madagascar have borne fruit and have grown. On June 5, 1975, after a six-month sojourn in Madagascar, Fr. Giampietro was forced to return to Italy for reasons of health. But on October 4, 1975, the first group of Italians arrived: they were the newly ordained priests Cuomo Peppino and Di Pierro Gaetano, and Br. Filippo Buti. Called by Msgr. Francesco Vollaro, bishop of Ambatondazaka. They started their missionary work in the district of Imerimandroso, in the north of Madagascar, near Lake Alaotra, replacing the Trinitarian Fathers.

**3** In addition to the Italian Dehonians, Portuguese religious also came to Madagascar. The first, in January 1982, were Fr. José Bairos Braga, Alfredo Caires and Manuel Jardim. Called by Msgr. Xavier Tabao, bishop of Mananjary. They started their missionary work in December 1982, in the district of Ifanadiana, in the south of Madagascar.

**4** With the subsequent arrival of new missionaries, both Italian and Portuguese, the field of work widened. In the North, in 1981, the Italians took the district of Andreba. In the South, in February 1985, the Portuguese took the district of Antsenavolo; in May 1987, the district of Voilava and in June 1990, they left Voilava to take the district of Ambohimanga South. Lastly, to the Center, to Tananarive, the capitol, in July 1991, they took the parish of Ambohimirary.

**5** Those are the chronological steps of the missionary commitment. To understand this commitment fully, one must specify the configuration of a missionary district: its position and geographical proportions, the number of villages and of Christian communities, the possible avenues of communication and their state for being travelled.

**6** The district of Imerimandrose covers approximately 3,200 sq. km., embraces approximately 100 villages with 30 Christian communities. It has about 45,000 inhabitants, of which approximately 12,000 are Christians. Two missionaries work there: Fr. Potenza Giuseppe and Fr. Nicolai Giuseppe.

**7** The district of Andreba covers approximately 2,300 sq. km., embraces approximately 50 villages with 20 Christian communities. It has about 30,000 inhabitants, of which approximately 8,000 are Christians. Only one missionary works there, who is also vicar general of the diocese: Fr. Di Pierro Gaetano. He is assisted by two religious brethren: Dubla Giuseppe and Buti Filippo.

**8** The district of Ifanadiana covers approximately 2,500 sq. km. It has 71,846 inhabitants, of which 15,760 are baptized Christians. Ifanadiana is in the geographic center of the district, with 125 churches grouped in 15 centers. Two missionaries work there: Fr. Dinis Rodrigues and Fr. Alvaro Rodrigues. They are assisted by the scholastic: João Nélio Simoes Pereira.

**9** The district of Antsenavolo covers approximately 2,000 sq. km. It has 100,000 inhabitants, of which 10% are Christian, grouped in 35 communities. Two tribes live in the zone, in addition to a mixed population. Two missionaries work there: Fr. Leandro Gomes and Fr. Alcindo de Sousa José. They are assisted by Br. Daniel Yemtsa from the Camaroon Province.

**10** The district of Ambohimanga South covers approximately 1,500 sq. km. It has 50,000 inhabitants, of which 15-20% are Christian. The district, which is divided in two by the Mananjary River, entails the duplication of ministry activities, which are repeated on either side of the river. There are no roads and the river is without bridges. The district contains 102 Christian communities, grouped into 13 ministry zones. In each ministry zone there are centers around which 5-6 communities gravitate. Two missionaries work there: Fr. Manuel Jardim and Fr. Armando Baptista. They are assisted by the scholastic: Paulo Jorge Moreira.

**11** The parish of Nostra Signora di Fatima (Our Lady of Fatima) in Tananarive contains more than 70,000 inhabitants, of whom 10,000 are Christian. There is only one missionary working there: Fr. Nicola Giampietro. He is assisted by the Malagasy scholastic: Justin.

**12** Each district has churches and chapels — some built in brick — the house for the missionary father, the house for meetings and for the formation of catechists: activities and structures which are managed by the missionary. Then there is the house of the sisters; they run schools, dispensaries, and a school for household management (*école ménagère*).

**13** The lay people themselves are responsible for the Christian communities and they are organized in different ways with differing tasks and titles: catechist and catechetical, the chairman of the committee, inspector, treasurer... Every Christian community has a catechist who directs the Sunday prayers

and prepares the people for the sacraments. The missionary organizes his own tour so that he can celebrate the Eucharist, sometimes bimonthly or trimonthly, in the various centers or villages; he checks the preparation for the sacraments and celebrates the sacraments. There are various Catholic associations from which vocations may come, particularly female. The formation of the catechists constitutes the basic ministry activity of the missionaries: the catechists reach the center of the district, coming from the most lost and distant villages, and participate for several days in the courses of catechesis. They form the formation directors, giving them biblical, ministry and catechetical knowledge for the various sacraments. In addition, formation for young people is organized, and preparation for marriage. Among the Church initiatives one should remember the pilgrimages to specific cult centers or to participate in a particular solemnity. The Malagasies are, in fact, a traveling people.

**14** From the start, the ministry activity of the Italian Dehonians has been linked to human promotion, with the collaboration of the ONG LTM (Non-Governmental Organization, Laity for the Third World) in the carpentry and agricultural section. An initiative which proved valid for the Portuguese Dehonians was the sending of scholastics for a training course of two years in the missionary districts.

**15** A Fundamental component of the missionary action has been the promotion of vocations. At the beginning of 1983, with the encouragement of the IM provincial superior, they started the "Foyer" for Dehonian vocations in Andreba. In July 1987, the first candidates for the novitiate left for Cameroon. In 1989, the house in Tananarive received the first Madagascar religious. In February 1996, the first candidates entered the structures for aspirants in Fianarantsoa. Lastly, in 1997, the novitiate of Antsirabe received postulants and novices.

**16** Currently, Madagascar possesses all the formative structures for Dehonian vocations. In the aspirants' house of Fianarantsoa, "Maison Notre Dame de Fatima" (Our Lady of Fatima House), there are 24 aspirants: five in the preparatory year, four in the second year, seven in the first, and eight in the last. Fr. Pedro Fernandes, Fr. Clemente Gonçalves and Br. José Manuel Ferreira are in charge.

**17** At the novitiate of Antsirabe, "Maison P. Dehon" (Fr. Dehon House), there are six postulants and four novices. The superior is Fr. Alfredo Caires and the master of the novices is Fr. Giuseppe Cuomo.

**18** At the philosophy-theology scholasticate in Tananarive "Maison S. Coeur" (Sacred Heart House), there are 15 scholastics: in philosophy there are three in the first year, three in the second year and five in the third year.

**19** In theology there are three in the first year and one in the third year. The people in charge are Fr. Rocco Nigro and Fr. Luis Ernesto Miranda.

- 20** Four other Malagasy scholastics are doing their "regency" (or training): one in Antsirabe, one in the parish of Tananarive, and two in Fianarantsoa.
- 21** In addition, there are three religious lay brothers: one in Antsirabe, one at the scholasticate in Tananarive, and one in Fianarantsoa.
- 22** Lastly there are two Cameroon religious present in Madagascar: one religious lay brother in Antsenavolo, a missionary sent by his province, and one scholastic in Tananarive, in the first year of theology.
- 23** The superior of the Malagasy Dehonian Community is Fr. Pasquale Marinucci; the treasurer is Fr. Stefano Sardini, a resident of Tananarive.
- 24** In all, there are 47 Dehonian religious in Madagascar: 10 Italians, 14 Portuguese, 21 Malagasy and 2 Cameroonians.
- 25** To these living religious should be added the names of 3 deceased religious: Fr. José de Bairos Braga, first Portuguese missionary, who died in East Providence (USA) on November 1,1998; the scholastic Philippe Rakotomarahy, who died in Tananarive on January 2, 1999; and to these should also be added Fr. Michele Bulmetti, an Italian missionary who was first in Mozambique and then in Madagascar, and who died in Albania on May 4,1999. These three deceased religious constitute the first Malagasy Dehonian Community in heaven.
- 26** The celebration of the 25th anniversary commenced with all the missionaries taking part in a week, in Antsirabe, of spiritual retreat on Dehonian spirituality and the S.C.J, mission in the "Rule of Life", held by Fr. Umberto Chiarello. After this everyone attended the assembly, including the Malagasy religious, in order to be informed of the new "Structures of the Congregation" and the Project "We the Congregation in Service to the Mission". The three groups (Italian, Portuguese and Malagasy) comprising the current Malagasy Dehonian Community, unanimously declared that they would ask the General Administration to elevate the Malagasy Community to "Regione nullius Provinciae". On November 14, 1999, in the parish of Tananarive, where the parish priest is Fr. Nicola Giampietro, a solemn thanksgiving mass was celebrated, presided over by the superior of the Malagasy community, Fr. Pasquale Marinucci. Among those present were the assistant general, Fr. Umberto Chiarello; the IM provincial superior, Fr. Trifone Labellarte; the LU provincial superior, Fr. Neto Quintas; many missionaries and all of the Malagasy scholastics.
- 27** These 25 years of Dehonian presence in Madagascar are now being rewarded by the presentation of an interesting initiative. A wealthy woman, Madame Denise Crees, intends to set up a private university center in Antsirabe. She is already financing the construction of the complex of buildings, while a female professor from Tananarive is coordinating a group of professors from the University of Tananarive who will make themselves available also to teach in Antsirabe. Initially, four facilities are anticipated:

agricultural science, informatics, communications, and economics. The start of activities at the university is envisaged for September 2000. Madame Denise, a friend of our fathers in Antsirabe, has already given the ownership of the land and of the building itself to the Malagasy Dehonians, and she also intends to give them complete possession and management of the private university. This will make it possible to promote culture on a university level in professional fields: it would be a work which justifies our Dehonian presence in Madagascar.

**28** Madagascar: mission of the two mother-provinces: South Italy and Portugal.