

THE VOHIPENO MISSION

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"A year of grace, a year of prayer"

That's how I would describe the mission which took place in Vohipeno, in the diocese of Farafangana (Madagascar) from the 7th to the 21st of August 1994. It was organized under the direction of a group of missionaries, Vincentian priests and a priest of the diocese of Ihosy, along with a certain number of seminarians, Vincentian and diocesan. Fr Tonino Cogoni was in charge. I find it difficult to give a detailed account of how the mission went, but I would like to share these few ideas with you.

1. The mission was the decision of the parish as a whole.

The actual experience of the Christian community in Vohipeno forced them to ask themselves questions about their Christian identity: they were facing the challenges of Islam, their relationship to ancestral customs, and moral problems. Taking stock of this situation seemed to us, the priests of the region, to be a call from God to deepen Catholic faith: that was the basic reason for the Vohipeno mission. On the other hand, being still a young Vincentian and convinced about parish missions, I wanted to have personal experience of being a parish priest in charge of the preparations for a mission.

From November 1993, Vohipeno parish decided to organize along with the Vincentian mission team, a parish mission for August 1994.

2. Preparation, a necessary condition for a mission.

We were convinced that "A mission needs a year of preparation".

Fr Cogoni, in charge of missions in the Province, came to Vohipeno twice to create, with the local Christians and priests, the spiritual environment for a mission.

a) The Feast of Christ the King

Fr Cogoni's first visit, in November 1993, was in order to get to know the place and to work out a plan for the mission with the Christians. The year's programme was to be ready by the Feast of Christ the King:

- A prayer for the mission was drawn up and was to be said every day, in the parish church and in families.

- Taking into account the Christians' wish to deepen their faith, the theme of the mission was based on Jesus' words: "**BUT YOU, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I**

AM?", and so the areas to be examined in depth during the fortnight were focused on that theme.

- The timetable of the preparation was divided into three stages, according to the liturgical seasons.

b) Advent and Christmas

For the Christmas season the aim was:

- To launch the daily prayer for the mission, in the church and in families;
- To visit people in positions of authority, in the social and administrative fields, in the parish;
- To invite lay volunteers to form a group for animating the mission.

All this was to be done within the normal pastoral work of the parish, making use of the parish's own vitality.

c) Lent and Easter

Before Lent the mission team had to be prepared, so that it could be missioned on the First Sunday of Lent. Preparation for Easter, then, was marked by the mission team going to the different districts of the parish to get them ready for the mission. There were 26 persons in the team, six Daughters of Charity, six lay people and fourteen young persons. By making two visits a week the team visited all 500 families of the parish during Lent. Prayer was organized as follows:

- every day, in the family;
- every Saturday evening families met together, by districts;
- every Sunday evening, people from all districts met in the church for prayer together.

d) The month of May, the heart of the preparation

The month of May was the peak of the preparation. By then everyone was supposed to know all about the mission. The task of the team was to let each district know the mission programme by distributing invitations.

During this month of May Fr Cogoni's visit allowed us to organize masses in the districts and to finalize details of the programme for the fortnight's mission. Each district chose a Patron Saint.

These four preparatory stages were the four pillars of the mission. It is good to point out also that a catechetical programme for all the parishioners took place in the parish every Sunday evening to tackle the different themes chosen for the mission. Every Wednesday evening a youth mass was celebrated, to deepen understanding of

the mission themes, and every Friday evening there was a children's mass with suitable preaching. All this was animated by the team.

3. The mission fortnight

Seven priests and seven seminarians from the major seminary gave the fortnight's mission. At the opening the bishop, Mgr Charles-Remy Rakotonirina, blessed the missionaries.

Each of the seven districts of the parish was given to a missionary. Group animation, for children, youth, women, men, was also shared out according to the missionaries' talents.

a) The first week

As in all missions given in the Province the first week was devoted to home visitation in the districts and group animation. There were between one and two hundred people at mass each morning. The attendance at the evening talks increased day by day. At the end of that first week there were masses in the districts with the distribution of mission crosses

b) The second week

During the second week a special theme was allotted to each day:

- Monday (15 August): Marian day with Rosary procession;
- Tuesday: Day for the sick;
- Wednesday: Youth day;
- Thursday: Family day;
- Friday: Day of the Cross;
- Saturday: Children's day.

All this was celebrated with enthusiasm. The closing of the mission, Sunday the 21st, was the feast of our Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo.

I can certainly say that this Vohipeno mission was a success, both on the part of the missionaries and that of the Christians. The missionaries blended together into a good team for work and prayer in common.

For my own part, I have had the opportunity to work on eight out of the twelve missions given in the Province, four while a seminarian in the major seminary, three as a priest-preacher and one as a parish priest.

I thank the Lord when I observe the efforts made by the Province for Vincentians to extend their charism in Madagascar. I believe in a Vincentian presence in Madagascar. I thank all those who prayed for this Vohipeno mission, and I know that it was your prayer which was heard.

I can humbly state that "*Providence smiled on Vohipeno*".