

PENTECOST ON THE MANAMPATRANA RIVER

In the wake of the cyclone Gretelle in Madagascar

You will recall the terrible cyclone which hit the Farafangana area of south-east Madagascar on 24 January 1997, an area where our confreres have an important mission (cf. Nuntia, January 1997, # 4). The article below was published in the July-August 1998 issue of Missione Vincenziana, p. 5. It shows that something magnificent, while totally unexpected, emerged from this catastrophe. God knows how to draw something good from misfortune.

By Luigi Elli CM
Visitor of Madagascar

I am writing from Farafangana, the little town on the east coast which was almost completely wiped out at the end of January 1997 by the cyclone Gretelle.

Life has slowly resumed its course. The houses have been repaired or rebuilt. The rice fields have been cleared of sand, and other types of farming have started up again with new enthusiasm. It has been hard, especially in the beginning, but the dark days are now behind us.

I have been on the coast now for two weeks, and tomorrow I return to Fort Dauphin, but will be setting out again after three days. I began my stay on the coast with canonical visitations of our houses in Manakara and Vohipeno, more to the north. Then, last Wednesday, I arrived in Farafangana. Fr. Philippe Chan-Mouïe had asked me quite some time previously to accompany him on a tour of his bush stations. His ministry is to the stations in the valley of the Manampatrana, the river which flows into the sea north of Farafangana.

The area of which he is in charge was one of those most devastated by the cyclone, with all cultivation completely destroyed and 90% of dwellings flattened. Thousands of people were threatened by famine. Thanks to the aid, which the generosity of yourselves and others sent, we have been able to give on the spot assistance. Fr. Philippe, helped by the sisters and some lay people, threw himself into the work with generosity and dedication. Over a period of months rice, maize, milk powder, medicine and clothing have been distributed to the most needy, without distinction of tribe or religion. In the little village of Alamantira alone, and in its surrounding area, 2,800 persons, adults and children, profited from the aid which was sent, and there were no complaints about the method of distribution. After that, attention was directed towards rebuilding dozens and dozens of small dwellings and the bush chapel. By now the distribution of first emergency aid has been suspended; instead reconstruction is going ahead. The Christians themselves have asked that preference be given to rebuilding their churches.

And it is in this that Pentecost has been fulfilled. After the wind of Gretelle which flattened to the ground houses and plantations it is the strong wind of the Spirit which is putting people and communities back on their feet.

Hundreds of persons of all ages, amazed by the selfless dedication of Fr. Philippe, whom they did not hesitate to call "our saviour," are asking to be instructed in the Catholic faith. Some people might think that there is something suspicious about such a development. I, personally, do not think so. During the time when food and medicine were being distributed no distinction was made between Christians and Animists, and everyone was given what they needed, and there was no pressure whatsoever to attract non-believers to the faith.

It is now some months since the distribution ended but the impetus of coming to the faith is continuing, like a real epidemic.

I have here in front of me the statistics on catechumens, which I expressly asked Fr. Philippe to provide. One bush chapel serves several parishes in the hinterland, and for ten such chapels 1,910 persons were listed as preparing for baptism, 856 adults and 1,054 children.¹ Among the adults were about 60 couples preparing for marriage as well as for baptism.

In three or four places Fr. Philippe had arranged for his Christians to come together and he brought me to meet them. They came in their hundreds to welcome me. This year, apart from the cyclone, almost continual rain during the month of February and the first days of March had breached the rice fields and ruined them. Traditionally 15 March is the last day for transplanting the rice. The people therefore were at this work, and needing to work rapidly. Yet, in their hundreds, they left their urgent task in order to welcome me and thank me for the aid which had been sent to them.

I explained to them that it was not myself personally who should be thanked, but you. I had been only an agent and intermediary, but it was you who, through your generosity, were responsible for getting help through to so many people in difficulty. I told them I would pass on their thanks to you, as I am now doing. You know that, thousands of kilometres away thousands of people who do not know you are saying thanks to you and praying for you. On Sunday all the masses are celebrated for benefactors.

And also it is due partly to you that the Spirit is breathing today on the Manampatrana.

Thomas Davitt, CM, translator

¹ On the feast of the Assumption 1998 about 800 persons, after a very fervent period of preparation, were baptised. And since then, the movement towards conversion to the Christian faith, far from easing off, is continuing regularly in the area.