

Servant of the Gospel, and Witness of Jesus Christ in Madagascar

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Two months ago, 23 September 2001, I had the great joy of planning and concelebrating the episcopal ordination of my successor, Bishop Vincent Rakotozafy.

Vincentian bishops have worked for 150 years (1896-2001) in the mission field of Fort-Dauphin (Tolagnaro) in the south of the “Red Island” (Madagascar). In the footsteps of our ancestors, Bishops Jacques Crouzet, Charles Lasne, Antoine Sévat and Alphonse-Marie Fresnel, I had the honor of handing on the apostolic flame to a son of this country. The previous missionary Church, begun in 1648 by the first sons of Saint Vincent, Fathers Nacquart, Gondrée and Bourdaise, has at last become the local Malgache diocesan Church. With my predecessors, and with our blessed father, Saint Vincent—whose heart, Father Richardson had brought with him to Fort-Dauphin for my episcopal ordination—I can now sing “Nunc Dimittis, Domine...”.

What are the main pastoral choices that guided my way and marked out my activity during my nearly thirty years of service as a bishop (beginning with my appointment by Paul VI on 26 September 1968)?

1. “My Activity” This isn’t the correct word! I should say “Our Activity.” The priests, brothers, sisters, laypersons, and certainly the catechists, have carried out the Mission together in the diocese. Isn’t the role of the bishop especially to be the center of **communion** of all pastoral workers? Isn’t it his role to animate, to inspire and to coordinate the activities of all those responsible for the Gospel? It is first of all here, in this activity, that the bishop is the “Servant of the Gospel.”

This communion in the presbyterate of Fort-Dauphin was even more needed because of the various origins of those who assist in the pastoral ministry. There are Malgache diocesan priests, Lazarists from France, Spain and Poland, along with our sisters, the Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Cenacle of Thérèse Couderc, the Teaching Brothers, the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, both Malgache and Canadians. We have worked and lived together, alongside our lay Malgache brothers and sisters, a family united in the diversity of our charisms and mutual talents. This was sometimes a delicate experience, but nonetheless a very enriching one!

2. Being a physician as my “first vocation” has allowed me to live out a dual but special vocation of service to the sick, following Vincent and inspired by him to care for them “corporally and spiritually.” The service of those ill with leprosy at Ampasy, and a regular pediatric consultation, at least during the first fifteen years of my life as a bishop, gave me the joy of being the “lieutenant” of Jesus the Good Samaritan, and of encountering him and serving him in his suffering members, those who are “our Lords and Masters.” Beyond these encounters with the sick, there have been numerous daily encounters with the poor, “other Christs” who gather at the bishop’s door. Isn’t it right there that the bishop shows himself as “Servant of the Gospel and witness of Jesus Christ for the hope of the world?” Isn’t it right there that he allowed me to be and live out my preferential vocation of being an “Evangelizer of the poor?”

3. As a son of Saint Vincent and according to the wish of our blessed Father, constant attention and effort have been given to the “Mission among the poor country people.”

Although the long popular mission of the Vincentian tradition, led by several priests, brothers and students, has been given in only four parishes of the diocese (Fort-Dauphin, Ambovombe, Amboasary and Tsivory), the bishop’s annual pastoral visits have focused on the twelve district centers of the diocese, amounting to 450 centers for prayer and churches in the bush. The spiritual animation of the laity, of parish committees and of strong parish teams, such as Catholic Action groups for adults, youth and children, have looked to the spiritual, apostolic and missionary formation of the Christians, who live in a 90% “pagan” environment. They are “Salt of the earth and light of the world.” The work of evangelization has always tried to respect the ancestral traditions written in the culture of the Malgache people, through the work of such groups as “Preparation for the Gospel,” “Stones in Waiting,” and “Seeds of the Word.”

4. According to the spirit of the Congregation and of our Common Rules, special attention has been given to the **promotion of the local clergy**, with their formation and their animation through on-going formation. The proof of this is the opening of the minor seminary Fort-Dauphin, and our participation in the formation of the major seminarians at the interdiocesan seminary of Fianarantsoa.

Wasn’t the support of the diocesan clergy one of the main concerns of Father Vincent, who animated the Tuesday Conferences, and founded the first post-Tridentine seminaries? Didn’t he say that we should be “the most diocesan of the religious?”

5. All during this long service as a bishop, I have tried to remember daily that “the whole purpose of the Congregation is. . . to have a genuine **commitment to grow in holiness**, patterning ourselves, as far as possible, on the virtues which the great Master himself graciously taught us in what he said and did.” It has been my joy to live in Vincentian community, with important periods for prayer and for Eucharistic concelebration and in fraternal life. From this, I have drawn strength, courage and advice in difficult moments. My confreres and I have tried to live as best we could the evangelical counsels and the five missionary virtues, with preference for simplicity and humility, the source of meekness and zeal for the salvation of souls, through a genuine renunciation of self. I have tried to truly live out the motto I chose at the beginning of my episcopal service: “Caritas Christi urget nos”.

6. At the moment of my retirement, now that I am former bishop of Tolagnaro, what a joy it will be for me to be able to be **fully reintegrated into the Community**, our Vincentian Family, which I never, in fact, left! I heartily thank the priests, brothers and sisters for the confidence they gave me by receiving me as an older brother, even counselor at various times. At the general assembly of 1968, my predecessors, Bishops Fresnel and Chilouet, had asked me to have the members of the assembly treat of the reintegration of Vincentian bishops at the end of their pastoral office. This has been accomplished in our Statutes, and so here I am as a member of the formation team of the Saint Vincent Scholasticate of Fianarantsoa, working with Fathers Gonzague Danjou, François Benolo (the first Malgache priest whom I ordained), and Honoré Ramanambintana. We are responsible for the formation of our own confreres, the future missionaries of their own country, the future evangelizers of the poor in the country areas of Madagascar.

Therefore, I thank the Holy Spirit, the guide of the mission, the spirit of Jesus Christ, the first missionary.

I thank the members of the Vincentian Family, who have allowed me to live out my vocation as a priest-physician, following Father Vincent and living according to his thinking.

I thank each one of my formators who, after my parents, have made me who I am.

I thank God the Father for his grace, “which has not been vain in me.”