

Mission and Consecration in the Current Context in Africa and Madagascar

by Marc Benjamin Balthason Ramarason, C.M.

Bishop of Farafangana

What is expected of a consecrated person in the current socio-economic-political-cultural context in Africa and Madagascar? What means are at our disposal to live out this vocation? What are the obstacles?

I. THE PHENOMENON OF BELONGING

By means of an introduction to this humble article, I would first like to speak very briefly of a phenomenon that has left its mark on our era: the “phenomenon of belonging, and of the ways in which we belong.” This may help those consecrated persons who read this article to situate themselves on the level of society.

At the outset, I refuse, for the purposes of my analysis, to assign a moral connotation with regard to what I call the phenomenon of belonging. The goal is to lead us to an understanding of certain ambiguous types of behaviour on the part of the members of ecclesial communities, and particularly those of members of religious communities.

What is “belonging”? It is “the state of someone who belongs to a collective or a group,” according to the *Petit Larousse*. In the past, “belonging” did not pose any problems, since we were in an all-encompassing society in which people’s attitudes were largely homogeneous, in which everyone knew — and helped — one another. In short: conformity was the ideal. In this type of society, in which order is the model to be followed, each person easily finds his/her place, his/her role.

On the other hand, with the advent of globalization, we have shifted from an all-encompassing society to a fractured society, whose points of reference change according to one’s point of view, in a society in which roles change according to where you are located.

It is for this reason that we speak of “ways of belonging” and no longer just of “belonging.” In this kind of fractured society, since the one constant is *change*, dialogue and goals become the key terms. Unfortunately, the immediate consequence of such a situation is that in it members are engaged in an unending search for their identity.

Keeping in mind this new phenomenon which can clarify certain types of behaviour, let us launch into our subject. For this article, I have been inspired above all by the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*.¹ As we know, the general theme of the synod was evangelization, the evangelization of Africa on the eve of the end of the second millennium: “The Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission as the Year 2000 Approaches: ‘You Will Be My Witnesses’ (Acts 1:8).” This theme is, in addition, the key point of the pontificate of John Paul II: “The new evangelization.” It was a *leitmotif* for him. Since the points raised in this article are developed in that exhortation, we will profit from the Pope’s approach.

But what do we mean by evangelization? First and foremost, it is the announcing to the world the Good News that God, who loves us, has saved the world through Christ. Both in terms of its methods and its goals, evangelization must seek to offer the Good News of Christ to the world. That was at the heart of the message of the synod, which the Pope himself described as “a synod of resurrection, a synod of hope.” The goal of the synod was, therefore, to find “appropriate ways and means whereby Africans would be better able to implement the mandate which the Risen Lord gave to his disciples” (n. 29): to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8).

It is for this reason that today, in our own context, we must find (new) ways to announce the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel offers an irreplaceable opportunity for Africa and for Madagascar, but the announcing of Christ in Africa and Madagascar is also an opportunity for Christianity, as a priest from Congo (then Zaire), François Kabasélé-Lumbala, states in his book *Christianity and Africa: A Mutual Opportunity* (Karthala, 1993).

When we speak of evangelization, it is good to also keep in mind two situations which we must distinguish, but which may overlap in a given sector: these involve (1) the first evangelization (or even “pre-evangelization”) for those who have never received the announcement of the Gospel message, and (2) in-depth evangelization, for those who are already within the Church (n. 47). Nevertheless, from their status as “mission churches,” the Malagasy Church and

¹ In 2009, the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa will take place. Its theme is prophetic: “The Church in Africa: At the Service of Reconciliation, Peace and Justice.”

the African Church should be able to come to a point where they are “Churches engaged in mission.” We should be “our own missionaries”: “Since by Christ’s will the Church is by her nature missionary, it follows that the Church in Africa is itself called to play an active role in God’s plan of salvation. For this reason I have often said that ‘the Church in Africa is a missionary Church and a mission Church’” (n. 29).

This already raises a question when we observe the local reality — what is happening around us: *in a country saturated with bad news, how can the Christian message be “good news” for African people in their daily lives? In the midst of despair which seeps into everything, where are the hope and optimism that the Gospel is supposed to bring? How must the Church live, so that its message of “resurrection and hope” will be credible?* (n. 40).

It is precisely here that the crux of the message lies. In the face of these realities, the Church (that is to say, every baptized person first of all, and consecrated persons in particular), as those “on the front lines,” must be “the Good Samaritan” on the road to “Jericho”: *“For many Synod Fathers contemporary Africa can be compared to the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; he fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him and departed, leaving him half dead (cf. Lk 10:30-37). Africa is a Continent where countless human beings — men and women, children and young people — are lying, as it were, on the edge of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalized and abandoned. They are in dire need of Good Samaritans who will come to their aid. For my part, I express the hope that the Church will continue patiently and tirelessly its work as a Good Samaritan”* (n. 41).²

II. A RAPID OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Let us try to get an overview of the situation of the (African) continent, and of Madagascar in particular, to help us respond to our vocation as consecrated persons, recognizing that the majority of the congregations which are working in Madagascar are apostolic.

1. *Situation*

There is no need of sketching out the situation here. We already know it (n. 51): a rising level of poverty (more than 75% of the population lives below the poverty line; source: World Bank), extremely poor administration and management of the scarce

² The highlighting here is my own.

available resources, “political cacophony,” caused by a poor grasp of democracy, poorly controlled urbanization, international debt (Madagascar has \$ 4 billion in debt, or 4,000 billion *ariary*), lack of safety, rising levels of illiteracy, demographic problems (400,000 people per year, while the growth of the active population is only 220,000 people per year), deterioration of health services and educational opportunities, AIDS, an economy “held hostage” to politics, etc. In short: we are “adrift,” as the media, unfortunately, loves to repeat. In an interview in *Jeune Afrique* magazine, Michael Camdessus, the former Director-General of the IMF, summarized the current situation in Africa quite well: “As long as Africa does not put greater order into its economic affairs, and does not affirm — with concrete measures — the political will to take charge of its own destiny, it will only be able to rely on subsidies scrounged from the administrators of charitable funds” (no comment). “In Africa, the economy is completely the prisoner of politics!” Because of this situation, Africa risks being left by the side of the road, abandoned by the international community (if it is not already!). Who, then, could be the Good Samaritan that Africa needs?



Participants at the Provincial Assembly in Fianarantsoa, Madagascar

2. Consequence: loss of confidence, loss of identity

What is certainly the most serious issue in all of this is that this situation leads Africans, and the Malagasy, to underestimate themselves, to lose confidence, to resign themselves (to their fate), to believe, fatalistically, that their destiny is cursed. They sink deeper into this lack of self-esteem when events seem to confirm exactly what they believe (such as the fire in Rova, a symbol of national pride from the time of the Merina royal line, which burned down in 1995. The cause of the fire has never been determined). Researchers need to investigate these conclusions further, since it seems to me that it is not merely a sociological phenomenon or a psychosis, but rather something rooted in certain ways of thinking: there are many people who have the strange feeling that a divine curse is hanging over them. Some think that the Africans and the Malagasy refuse development because of this “mental block,” if we are to accept Axelle Kabou’s book *Si l’Afrique refusait le développement* (L’Harmattan, 1991).

This is a real identity crisis, and a very serious one. We must come to recognize that Africans and the Malagasy no longer know where they are — they doubt everything — they no longer know what to do. This is particularly noticeable among the young. They no longer want to reflect. Many of them no longer have any ideals. They have no guideposts. All of their actions are, therefore, guided by instinct. No longer is it an uncommon thing to learn about acts, committed here and there, which utterly exceed anything one could even imagine. In this context, it is difficult to speak about development, for there cannot be true development unless people believe in their own future; the real force of (human) development is trust in one’s future (the first goal that the World Bank established for the development of Africa and Madagascar was to give the population hope once again!). We often speak about changing our ways of thinking. There are already changes occurring in people’s way of thinking (in Africa), but they are changes “in the wrong direction.” While he was still Prime Minister, Mr. Emmanuel Rakotavahiny declared: “The obstacles are many, and the problems are countless. **But what is painful is the present state of people’s way of thinking and acting**” (speech offering his best wishes to Iavoloha in the Presidential Palace, January 22, 1996).

3. Authentic development: development for every person – development of the whole person

Africans and the Malagasy need more than simply an economic-political “take-off” (rapid or accelerated development — our leaders confuse *speed* and *rashness* — which is lasting). What they need is an authentic liberation of every person, which can only take place in a

properly-adapted educational programme. And this is the role of evangelization, something that the post-synodal message strongly emphasizes: “Integral human development — the development of every person and of the whole person, especially of the poorest and most neglected in the community — is at the very heart of evangelization” (n. 68). The document quotes Paul VI: “Between evangelization and human advancement — development and liberation — there are in fact profound links. These include links of an anthropological order, because the man who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions. They also include links in the theological order, since one cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored. They include links of the eminently evangelical order, which is that of charity: how in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic advancement of man?” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, n. 31).

According to the exhortation, the role of the Church — and thus the role of consecrated persons — is clear: they must “become the voice of the voiceless” (n. 70). But, in this foundational role, the document underscores (here quoting *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*): “Proclamation is always more important than condemnation, and the latter cannot ignore the former, which gives it true solidity and the force of higher motivation” (n. 70). This is now the challenge after the synod, and most especially in Madagascar and Africa, in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the coming of democracy. This is the reason why the theme of the new special assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa is: “The Church in Africa: At the Service of Reconciliation, Peace and Justice.”

Up to the present time, the Church has always had more of a “tendency” to “denounce” rather than “to announce.” Its true role, however, is the prophetic task, the fruit of a discernment of the signs of the times. Otherwise, we risk destroying what we have gained (which is exactly what risks happening here in Madagascar, with the Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches [FFKM], if it continues to meddle excessively in politics, as it has done these last few years).

4. But what are we announcing, and how shall we do it?

The post-synodal exhortation has no “miracle solution” to suggest. It simply wishes to highlight that the Church is part of this society in distress (cf. GS, n. 1: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs

and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts”). To be in a position to accomplish its true mission, *the Church must be in constant dialogue, and in a relationship of friendly solidarity, with the society in which it finds itself*. Truly, faith exists only as an incarnate truth, since it is a way of life. A faith that does not become part of culture is a faith which is not fully welcomed, completely thought through and faithfully lived out. From this springs the need for inculturation, with the goal of “incarnating” the cultural and socio-political structures of the country in our pastoral work. This demands a good level of knowledge of the Church’s social doctrine, as well as of local realities.

5. Cries in the face of these sad realities

Although we know that there is no “miracle solution” which could be applied to every situation, it is nevertheless important to be convinced that love alone is the path to be followed, since it is “infinitely inventive” (Coste XI, 146), and there is no lack of examples of this down through the centuries, as well as today. They are almost cries of distress.

- The cry of SCEAM: During its 7th Assembly in July 1994, SCEAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) chose the poor as its preferential option. “To be the voice of the voiceless,” since there cannot be any authentic evangelization without progress on a human level: “The person who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being, but the subject of social and economic questions.”³
- The cry of the Vincentians: As Vincentians, we cannot help but be an active part of this option. We should even go as far as to say that for us, it is not like the “preferential option” of certain other institutes. For us as Vincentians, it is our very *raison d’être*.
- This sensitivity is certainly not new. But the reality which prevails in Africa and Madagascar at this start of the third millennium urges us (“the charity of Christ urges us” 2 Cor 5:14) to discover something to stimulate us once more to engage in a life of community with those who are marginalized all around us. It is in this sense that the call of Paul VI in Kampala is to be understood: “Henceforth, you are your own missionaries.” *“We must be our own missionaries, that is to say, bearing a concern for our own continent, and not simply allowing only non-Africans to cross thousands of kilometers to come and proclaim Jesus Christ*

³ Pastoral Exhortation of the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar, SCEAM, July 1984, n. 89.

to our brothers who are sometimes only a few kilometers from our own homes, in which we are prisoners forever.”⁴

- **This requires Christian communities, which are responsible, mature and inculturated, in order to address these many challenges.** In fact, the poor suffer today, not because there is a lack of charity, but because service to the poor needs to be inculturated. *“Here, he said, there is plenty of charity being practiced — but it is not well-planned. These poor sick people will receive too many supplies all at once, a part of which will be spoiled or lost, and then afterwards they will once again fall back into their original situation of need.”*

This quotation from Saint Vincent speaks to our present situation, for we know very well that it is not the assistance that is lacking, but what is missing is the willingness and the proper way of assistance. The problem of the total or partial cancelling of debts illustrates well this sad reality. International financial institutions increasingly recognize that the weight of this debt on the world’s poorest countries constitutes an obstacle to their economic development, and provokes disastrous social consequences. This subject deserves to be developed further, but it goes beyond our topic. Nevertheless, a fundamental question deserves to be asked: “Who is really an expert on poverty? He/she who sees and contemplates it, or he/she who lives it?” Unfortunately, there is no shortage of theories — but what we would like to witness, and to experience, is the concretization of these theories.

III. THE CHALLENGES

Having analyzed the current situation, let us now try to examine the challenges which the Church in Madagascar and Africa must face.

1. ***A Church which is young, both in terms of the institution and its members: an advantage and a weakness at the same time***

First of all, we need to know that this Church is still young, and so it possesses all the strengths and weaknesses which characterize youth: freshness, vitality and energy, which allow (African Catholics) to face their challenges and struggles. Youth implies growth and maturation. If crises should arise in the course of this process of coming to maturity, normally they involve crises of growth, out of

⁴ PIERRE TCHOUANGA, “An Open Letter to All African Priests,” in *Afrique Nouvelle*, Dakar, 11-17 July 1984, p. 15.

which people normally emerge more mature. This is a Church which finds itself in a transitional phase, between being a mission Church and a Church engaged in mission, stretching its wings and seeking its own path toward maturity.

2. The source and foundation of evangelization is the Church-as-family, which was a key concept at this synod⁵

In order for this evangelization to be rooted in the (African) culture, it must be thought of as building up the family of God here on earth. This concept of Church-as-family calls for a further exploration, since it is a broad new subject. Here, too, I can only spell out a few points of interest.

a) First of all: why this new concept?

This concept has deeper roots in the culture than other concepts of Church: Church as People of God, or Church as Communion. It expresses more deeply the values which are dear to the Malagasy, and connects well with concepts in the Gospel: *fihavanana*,⁶ that is: communion, brotherhood, solidarity, peace, companionship. A sense of belonging, the idea of a corporate personality. The concept of family (which is very strong among Africans and the Malagasy) expresses in a concrete image the profound ecclesiological notion of communion.

⁵ *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63: "Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the *Church as God's Family* as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa. The Synod Fathers acknowledged it as an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust." See also the pastoral letter of SCEAM in November 2001, *The Church as Family of God: A Place and Sacrament of Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Peace in Africa*: "The plenary assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar is a privileged moment to confirm the option of the Church as family of God, a particularly appropriate expression of the nature of the Church for Africa (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63) and for determining more precisely concrete consequences, with a view to a pastoral strategy that is increasingly adapted (to the African context)" (1).

⁶ *Fihavanana* can also be translated as "familyness," a neologism which could be compared to the "spousality" of John Paul II. If for John Paul II, "spousality" primarily underscores the bond and relationship at the heart of a couple, then "familyness" is what which makes for the bond and the relationship at the heart of a Malagasy community having the same origin as *aina* (the breath of life). I think that this concept, even if it is called by different names, can also be found at the heart of African society.

The notion of “extended family” is one which is deeply anchored among Africans and the Malagasy: the whole of humanity is, in a certain way, the family of God for them. The only goal of evangelization is to invite humanity to participate in the very life of the Trinity, so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 1:28). Furthermore, if this concept of “Church-as-family” is understood and accepted, it also allows a way out of the dilemma of the dichotomy between daily life and faith.

b) *How can we conceive of this “Church-as-family”?*

The Church-as-family is that in which God has taken the initiative in creating Adam — that which Christ, the New Adam and Heir of the Nations, established by the gift of his body and blood — that which reveals to the world the Spirit which the Son commended to the Father, so that it could be the communion uniting all people. On the basis of this concept, it is not hard to rediscover categories which are already rooted in Malagasy culture: *Anaran-dray* (the ancestor who bears a name, and who, for us as Christians, is God the Father, *Andriamanitra Ray*); *Iray rà iray aina* (having the same blood and the same source of life through baptism); *Iray Dina* (the Bible, as a living Word, is the Word of the Covenant of the divine family [Trinity], together with the human family which it creates and saves); *Iray vatsy* (Viaticum; Eucharist); *Iray lova* (inheritance; eternal life). All of these points deserve to be studied further.

c) *Concretization of this notion of “Church-as-family”*

This new concept clearly calls for a new approach in terms of pastoral practice. The experience of *Basic Christian Communities* can help us in reaching this goal. It is within these living ecclesial communities that the riches of the Church-as-family must be verified and developed, especially in terms of responsibility and the witness of one’s life. They should not be merely a place of reflection, of prayer, of listening to the Word, as in other ecclesial movements, but should be an “authentic centre of community life,” just like a family: a home (*ankohonana*). Thanks to the Basic Christian Communities, everyone is responsible for everything, from his/her own personal life right up to the level of the whole Church, including one’s own society. In short: we come to have a “unity in one’s life,” which is the source of integral development. This theme of a “living Christian community” is important. It calls for a deeper analysis, which goes beyond the scope of this exposé. I would just like to point out in conclusion that we are not *born* into the Church-as-family, but it is something we *become*. This calls for a real *journeying*, for the Church is a gift of the Spirit before it is a human construct. We must keep this in mind in our pastoral approach.

d) *The Family as the Domestic Church*

The concept of Church-as-family demands that it be rooted, first of all, in a true family-as-domestic-Church — that is, in a profound evangelization of the family. Cardinal Thiandoum's report underscores this: "A profound evangelization of the family should allow us to eliminate the dichotomy which exists between people's faith and their way of life." In connection with this, the Malagasy concept of *Fihavanana* — the vital link which unites children to their parents, which unites man to woman, and individuals to their environment — could open up a new perspective. But until an authentic theology of marriage and family is developed, one which takes into account inculturation — and thus includes local realities, particularly traditional marriage — this concept will remain forever at the level of pious wishes in our different sectors, even in regions where the faith has already been implanted. This is a real challenge, because it is we (and when I say "we," I do not mean only theologians, but the entire Church, including the laity) who must put this "theology" into practice — always keeping the universality of the Church in mind, of course. Unfortunately, this synod did not even sketch out a beginning solution. The paragraphs which speak about it are short and overly general (n. 50 and n. 83).

e) *The place of the laity and new ministries*

This notion of the Church-as-family demands a re-thinking of the place of the laity and new ministries. Here, too, the document is not presenting anything new; it merely takes up what is said in previous documents (*Christifideles Laici* and *Redemptoris Missio*), to emphasize that lay people must honour their mission as baptized and confirmed Christians (n. 90). The situation and the context call for new ideas which will allow us to properly develop this initial mission. Here, I am particularly referring to the status of "catechists" who really do not have any ministerial status. Bishop Zévaco had already raised this problem in an August 1973 article about the Church in Madagascar in the journal *Lumière*, and it deserves to be explored further.

Along the same lines, I would also like to note that the formation of laypeople in the socio-political realm is an extremely urgent issue, so that we will have truly responsible laypeople (n. 54). The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* already underscored this need: "Great care must be taken about civic and political formation, which is of the utmost necessity today for the population as a whole, and especially for youth, so that all citizens can play their part in the life of the political community. Those who are suited or can become suited should prepare themselves for the difficult, but at the same time, the very noble art of politics" (GS, n. 75, para. 6).

f) *The Church and the formation of agents of evangelization*

Everyone agrees on one point: the future of the Church as Family of God is closely tied to the quality of the formation given to pastoral agents, and to their life-witness. The increase in the number of vocations is, thus, a grace for the Church, and at the same time a challenge.

IV. THE CHURCH AND DIALOGUE

In order for this “Church-as-family” to truly root itself, the Church needs to know how to dialogue with other religions — both traditional religions and the great religions (of the world). This interreligious dialogue is a privileged means of promoting peace and unity. However, the great challenge for us is not ecumenism with the mainstream churches, but the proliferation of sects. The majority of their members are young people who come from our own societies. I am a bit surprised that the post-synodal document, and the different interventions (apart from that of Cardinal Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) did not mention it. Similarly, we must also take into account the pressure of Islam, especially in certain regions of the island, notably in the north, on the west and southeast coasts. The Church in Madagascar must address this also — but how? The experience of other churches (e.g. in Sudan) may be of help to us.

1. *The Church and youth (n. 115)*

The Church in Africa and Madagascar is youth. Youth make up the most important part of our Church, not only in the present but also in the future. By helping our young people to achieve their full potential, by fighting against illiteracy, drugs and unemployment, the Church is preparing for its own future. This calls for a true pastoral strategy for youth, anchored in their culture and context.

2. *The Church and the mass media (nn. 122-124)*

The Church cannot ignore this area. We must acknowledge that the media are developing extremely rapidly, much like different radio stations. The document even speaks of an “invasion” (n. 52). We have to admit that they have a great deal of influence on people’s lives. They are the “new schools” as we begin this new century. “The first Areopagus of modern times is the world of communications, which is capable of unifying humanity and transforming it into — as it is commonly referred to — ‘a global village.’ The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial,

and social behavior. We particularly recommend that dioceses and conferences or assemblies of bishops ensure that the subject of the media be address in all pastoral plans.... Bishops should seek out the collaboration of media professionals” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications).

Today, we speak a great deal about the “information highway.” The synod’s final message emphasizes that this is a “new culture”: “First of all, [the media] constitute a new culture that has its own language and above all its own specific values and counter-values. For this reason, like any culture, the mass media need to be evangelized.” Included in this new culture is what we are accustomed to call “modernity,” which calls for a profound discernment, especially on the part of young people. The Church has the duty of accompanying them, and must have an authentic pastoral strategy for the media.

3. *The Church as a school of liberation*

– *Henamaso et fialonana*: If there is a single plague which is sapping the life from society in Africa and Madagascar, it is what is called *henamaso* (a type of excessive hesitancy which blocks healthy, frank relationships; one is afraid to speak the truth for fear of harming good relations). It is this *henamaso* which governs relations with others. Out of a fear of hurting the other, and in order to preserve the harmony of relations based on *fiHAVANANA* (familyness), no one dares to condemn the evils which are eroding the relationship. There is no dialogue into which the terms “fear,” “being afraid,” “out of fear that” (*sao dia* in Malagasy) do not enter. Although it is omnipresent, this fear is hidden — but just barely.

But alongside this *henamaso*, and inseparable from it, we find *fialonana*, jealousy. Because of this jealousy (*fialonana*), everything possible is done to prevent someone from rising higher in society, on the basis of his/her work or merit. Each person refuses to allow anyone else to surpass him/her or to have a position of authority over him/her, especially if it involves a family member.

Social relationships will be freed when *henamaso* and *fialonana* are finally overcome.

– A concept of authority understood as *Ray aman-dReny*: The social context has changed, but a certain concept of power and authority is still deeply rooted in people’s ways of thinking: an understanding (of power) as *rayaman-dreny* (parents, elderly persons) still persists, together with associated customs.

This situation can be beneficial in certain situations when, after long deliberations, a compromise is reached. But it can also lead to a “blockage” of development, since it makes for inefficiency in

organizations which need quick, clear decisions. It even happens that, because of this concept, no one dares to criticize others. On a more serious level, we find ourselves in situations where no one accepts responsibility.

- *The meaning of law*: The meaning of what we call “law” is another challenge. Law is confused with the meaning of *fady* (that which is forbidden by custom; taboos). Later, a new concept of law came with colonization: law imposed by the state, which becomes confused with the colonization — and thus as something imposed and never accepted — leading to a lack of a sense of the common good and of the public good.

There are still other points that are worthy of further exploration, such as *ethnic and caste problems*, which are also slowing any social evolution. In this field, more than in any other, a well-incultured consecrated life should be a path of liberation, so that there are no longer coast-dwellers or plateau-people, neither nobles nor free people nor slaves. Our communities should be a school of liberation for the people around us.

4. *The Church and traditional religion*

This expression itself is a recent one. In the past, European ethnologists, in designating the religious beliefs of Africans for example, spoke of “primitive” or “animist” religions. In 1961 in Abidjan, a colloquium was held on African religions and the participants (mostly anthropologists and missionaries) decided to abandon the term “animism,” and to replace it with “traditional religions.” The expression is not satisfactory, since “tradition” is usually opposed to “innovation.” Today we can see that the “traditional religions” of Africa are very much alive and that, in some cases, they even tend to “phagocytize” world religions such as Christianity or Islam. These traditional religions are resisting, are adapting to the current crisis in Africa, and are demonstrating creativity, as Achille Mbembe states in his work *Afriques indociles* (Karthala, 1988). Characterizing them as “traditional,” therefore, seems overly simplistic. No doubt this is why the term “animism” has begun to reappear, although timidly, in the world of certain African researchers today.

A characteristic of these traditional religions is their link to particular cultures. Religion thus constitutes the bond of the culture. In certain ethnic groups, there is no word to designate religion, since this is an integral part of daily life: to be a member of the ethnic group is to belong to that ethnic group’s religion. We could call these religions “Religion-cultures.” This is the case for Malagasy traditional religion, in which all of Malagasy culture is steeped. All

efforts to inculturate Christianity in Madagascar and Africa must, therefore, take into account the need for dialogue with traditional Malagasy religion.

So, what should we do?

Unfortunately, for the moment — both because of lack of time, and because of lack of in-depth research — we will have to remain “hungry,” while yet realizing that this point is fundamental for a consecrated life in Madagascar and in Africa. Certain ambiguous situations that we are witnessing in our communities show that this is needed — and urgently. This is another challenge which awaits us.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this article, we could perhaps be left with a somewhat pessimistic outlook. Certainly, we feel very small and insufficient when faced with the immensity of the work which is to be done. This reminds us, however — and rightly so — that we are only humble servants, and that it is the Lord who works through us. But he does not wish to accomplish anything without us. What he asks for is our trust and our cooperation. This is what Saint Vincent taught: “I agree with the maxim that we are to make use of every licit and possible means for the glory of God, as if God were not going to help us, so long as we expect everything from his divine Providence, as if we have no human means at our disposal” (Coste IV, p. 366).

(Translation: MURRAY WATSON)