

## *Dehonian Presence in Madagascar*

Interview to Fr. André Perroux, scj

Giuseppe Manzoni, scj

**1** Fr. Manzoni interviewed Fr. André Perroux on return from his visit to the Missions in Madagascar (5 September to 5 October 1989). The text of the interview is given below.

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**2** *Fr. Manzoni: Fr. André, just prior to this interview, I read the report you wrote on your first visit to Madagascar, from 20 October to 11 November 1983. I was surprised to learn of the difficult situation in which our missionaries are working and, in particular, those of the Portuguese Province - one of the poorest areas from the socio-economic and religious-ecclesial point of view. The coming of our religious brought with it an air of vitality, youth and enthusiasm, but it certainly did not lighten a very difficult apostolate, which requires unlimited patience and perseverance. Practically speaking, everything had to be started again from scratch - the Christian communities, parish committees, catechetics etc. You have just returned to Madagascar for a second time now - What are your impressions, not only from an ecclesial, religious viewpoint, but from the social, political and economic aspects also?*

**3** **Fr. André:** My first impression was that of progress. There is greater freedom of expression for the press, it is easier to enter and leave the country, there are fewer police checks and fewer military vigilantes on the streets. You can see lots of little local markets. The shops in the city have a greater stock of goods for sale. Roads have improved, with some notable exceptions, for example the stretch between Fianarantsoa and Ifanadiana, which is of particular relevance to the Portuguese fathers.

**4** *Fr. Manzoni: These are your first general impressions, then. But what do the people themselves feel?*

**5** **Fr. André:** The Malagasy say that these impressions are superficial, that they give an incorrect image. Buying power is continually decreasing. The annual income per inhabitant of 240 dollars (about 324.000) has gone down by 25% between 1980 and 1987. Foreign debt is increasing. It represented 80% of exports in 1985, exports which were very inadequate as a result of instability and stagnation in the price of coffee. There are State subventions for schools, hospitals and transport, but these are not sufficient. To give a concrete example: an average worker earns about 2000 Malagasy francs a day - which is about one dollar (approximately 1500 lire). A bottle of beer costs 750 Fmg, a kilo of rice 400 Fmg, a kilo of meat 1500 Fmg. The Malagasy Franc was devalued by 55% in 1986.

**6** *Fr. Manzoni: What is the true political situation in Madagascar?*

**7** **Fr. André:** There is a persistent crisis in the social field, and this is on the increase. There is both misery and malnutrition, extensive disoccupation, widespread begging, especially in the capital, insecurity and frequent theft, a continuous exodus towards the cities...

**8** On the political level, the country continues to search for its original way of life, according to the "socialist Malagasy revolution", which took place after decolonization (independence came in 1960), through crises which were sometimes very violent. At present there is relative calm, however. The last elections (24 October 1989) which had been postponed for a year by the Government, who were afraid of losing, show the weakness of the ruling power in relation to the consensus of the population - more than 50% abstentions. Regionalism is increasingly prevalent. The position of the current President, who has been in power for fourteen years now, is growing weak and there is uncertainty regarding his possible successor. The recent strike on the part of the university students was quite tough.

**9** *Fr. Manzoni: There are no signs of change in political orientation, then?*

**10** **Fr. André:** After a fierce period of Malagasy nationalisation and a privileged relationship with the socialist countries (USSR and Cuba) there was a growing leaning towards the countries of the West; towards the EEC - especially France, and the USA.

**11** Some companies reverted to private ownership once again - 18 in 1988. There was part-freedom for commerce. There are new employment opportunities and there has been a fight against inflation, which was reduced to 30% in 1988.

**12** One of the more serious problems affecting our pastoral work is the enormous demographic expansion, about 3% each year, which overcomes all efforts towards economic improvement. This is the reason for the propaganda on birth control accompanied by rudimentary contraceptive practices, abortion etc. At present the island has 11 million inhabitants, i.e. 18 inhabitants per sq. km. Antananarivo (Tananarive), the capital, was a large village a hundred years ago, now it has 1.300.000 inhabitants.

**13** Other problems. The difficulty in maintaining a healthy agricultural situation. Eighty-five percent of the population is living in rural areas. I should emphasise the detrimental exploitation of the forest, the general habit of burning the earth every year, the catastrophic erosion of some areas in particular, especially the part between Antananarivo and Andreba, where our fathers are working.

**14** *Fr. Manzoni: How are our fathers organized in the Madagascar mission?*

**15** **Fr. André:** We must distinguish between two areas: one is in Antananarivo and comprises the missions of Andreba and Imerimandroso in the diocese of Fianarantsoa, a city 450 km from Antananarivo. These missions are entrusted to the fathers of the Southern Italian Province.

**16** The second area is in the diocese of Mananjary and comprises three communities besides the far-off mission of Namurnoa. These missions are entrusted to the fathers of the Portuguese Province.

**17** *Fr. Manzoni: Let's begin with the missions entrusted to the fathers of the Southern Italian Province.*

**18** **Fr. André:** They are the missionaries of the first area. There are 11 of our religious in Madagascar, distributed among three communities, while Fr. G. Cuomo is at present in Italy for missionary animation. There are three confreres in the Andreba community, just as in Imerimandroso. There are two confreres in the new community of Antananarivo, with two newly professed Malagasy fathers: Aimé-Georges and Evariste, who spent their postulancy-novitiate in Cameroun. They will continue their religious and professional formation for at least another year.

**19** Finally, there is Fr. Umberto Cardillo, a missionary who is the parish-priest of Ikalamavony, in the diocese of Fianarantsoa. His pastoral work is due to terminate in April 1990.

**20** The three resident communities form one single community from a juridical point of view. The Superior is Fr. Gaetano Di Pierro. Members of the Council are Fr. Giampietro and Fr. Potenza, who is also the only bursar.

**21** In 1983 there were only five missionaries. There are now two newly professed Malagasies and another who is a postulant in Cameroun. Having just one superior and council is a step ahead.

**22** *Fr. Manzoni: What is the actual work of our religious?*

**23** **Fr. André:** They are involved in the pastoral life of the diocese. Their relationship with the bishop of Ambatondrazaka is good and also with the clergy and trinitarian religious. Fr. Giampietro is responsible for the family pastoral work of the diocese and is part of the pastoral council.

**24** The desire of the bishop would be that of giving us the area of Andilamena, 60 km north of Imerimandroso - an important centre but it has very difficult communities. It would be impossible for us to accept this task right now, due to lack of personnel.

**25** A greater understanding of the language and the local culture would enable the pastoral instruction to be closer to the people and make for a more “living” liturgy. Collaboration between the two districts of Andreba and Imerimandroso is progressing in all spheres, but priority must be given to formation of the catechists who are the true animators of the Christian communities and to whom the priest makes a visit every two or three months.

**26** Every month they organise two days of revision and animation for catechists (one from each Christian community, presented by the community itself and nominated by the Father). The work undertaken during the month is reviewed and also the life of the communities. Following this, the liturgies and topics of discussion for the following month are prepared. Two sessions of longer duration are also held annually.

**27** At the cost of heavy financial burdens, the two districts invite one or two young people (with their families) to the school at Fianarantsoa for two years’ catechetical formation.

**28** *Fr. Manzoni: After all these efforts and sacrifice, are the results encouraging?*

**29** **Fr. André:** Certainly, with regard to the catechists. And their Christian communities become sensitised too, (even though they are very poor), so that they also contribute financially. There is also a “charity sale” of clothes received from Italy. The catechists take care of the community buildings - often very rudimentary ones - the church, catechism hall etc. and take charge of helping the poorest of the various communities.

**30** *Fr. Manzoni: Are there any problems of particular concern?*

**31** **Fr. André:** Family problems need to be followed with particular care. Polygamy is not very widespread in Malagasy families. The family setup is very fragile, however. There are frequent separations, especially in the case

of sterility. Because of 'seasonal' work or problems involving "clans", members of the same family often remain separated for long periods.

**32** Many Christian men and women are united without the sacrament of marriage. The meaning of Christian marriage, and its preparation are problems which come up again and again in pastoral work. Three complementary sessions for engaged couples are organised on a frequent basis and the couples are obliged to frequent them before celebrating marriage.

**33** *Fr. Manzoni: We know that, at the start, the presence of the fathers from the Southern Italian Province was linked to the project known as "Laici per il Terzo Mondo" (Laity for the Third World). Our confreres joined the lay people involved in this project for furthering human development and evangelisation. Did this project become a reality?*

**34** **Fr. André:** The initiatives launched by LTM in Imerimandroso are continuing with a certain dynamism and success. The denture workshop has taken up again, part time, thanks to a doctor and his wife. The carpentry school is also continuing, animated by Malagasies trained on the spot, and has 35 young people. It is a three-year course. The equipment is very rudimentary, however. The school for domestic economy is carrying on with the help of the Salesian Sisters, while the agricultural sector seems to be in difficulty.

**35** These are all initiatives which propose very useful and much needed formation. They are also an excellent means of being in touch with the young people. Our fathers are considering launching a new project.

**36** All in all, it must be said that the group of eleven missionaries show great generosity and seriousness in living their religious life and ministry, and their pastoral work is so intense that it seems, at times, to be almost impossible.

**37** *Fr. Manzoni: Let us now take a look at the second area, the Portuguese province.*

**38** **Fr. André:** This group is made up of nine religious, of which six fathers, one brother and two scholastics, spread over three communities, situated between Fianarantsoa, Mananjary and Ambositra. There are the missions of Ifanadiana with two fathers and one scholastic, of Antsenavolo with one father, one brother and one scholastic, and Vohilava with two fathers. A Portuguese confrere, Fr. A. Vicente, belongs to the community at Antananarivo, and is responsible for formation.

**39** The three resident communities were constituted into one single territorial community "sui juris" in June 1989, with a superior, Fr. José Bairos

Braga, two father counsellors and one brother, bursar. This group, too, has grown. In 1983 there were only three fathers.

**40** The Portuguese province is engaged in sustaining the missionary effort. It is a very young group: the average age is 34.

**41** *Fr. Manzoni: What is your impression regarding the missionary life and work of this group of our religious?*

**42** **Fr. André:** Although I wasn't able to participate in the meeting of the whole group at Ifanadiana, in the presence of the Father Provincial, Fr. Fernando Rodrigues, I managed to meet personally all the religious in their communities of residence and the general impression was a positive one.

**43** The group has grown in number, while maintaining its cohesion and community sense. The recent creation of the territorial community will help even more in this sense. Each residence has its own community rhythm. Once a month they all meet together for a day of prayer-reflection-fraternity. There is a good atmosphere of understanding, help and exchange, of joy also.

**44** The beginning, seven years ago, was very hard on the precarious health of some of the religious, because of malaria and the surprise of having to face a situation which was more difficult than had been foreseen. All is resolved now, and there is only a memory of the difficult past.

**45** Each of the religious gives an impression of serenity and zeal in a ministry which is very demanding.

**46** *Fr. Manzoni: Can you speak to us in detail about the apostolate there?*

**47** **Fr. André:** The three districts where they are carrying out their apostolate are relatively close to each other: Ifanadiana is about 90 km from Fianarantsoa and you reach there by a very precarious road. It is 500 km from Antananarivo, the capital. Antsenavolo is 60 km from Ifanadiana and the road is a good one. Vohilava is 90 km from Antsenavolo, and the roads are good.

**48** These three districts are part of the diocese of the city of Mananjary, which is an active city and a port, 50 km from Antsenavolo. The natural surroundings are savanna-woodlands and very populated but not easily accessible. Many places can be reached only through a long trek through the forest. There are situations of extreme poverty there, of misery and abandon, just as on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines.

**49** The pastoral work is fairly difficult because of the marginal position of these coastal populations in relation to the central Altipiano, more developed and prosperous. This is especially valid for the Tanala tribe ("people of the forest") who populate these areas.

**50** The bishop, Msgr. Tabao, wants to entrust the evangelisation of the entire Tanala tribe to our missionaries. As a result, next year, probably, our

fathers will leave the residence at Vohilava to take on the district of Ambohimenga Atsimo, about 90 km north of Ifanadiana.

**51** As I mentioned earlier, in my first report in 1983, our religious have brought both youth and enthusiasm this very needy diocese. Everyone recognises this. Msgr. Tabao, bishop of the diocese, has told me so repeatedly, and also his apostolic Vicar. The bishop admires our religious for their serious preparation, their pastoral zeal, their closeness to the people and their importance for community life.

**52** The risk is one of overwork, to the point of not giving sufficient time to personal life, to greater study, in order to improve their knowledge of the local language, to on-going formation in pastoral theology, etc. as the animator of the clergy at Fianarantsoa pointed out.

**53** *Fr. Manzoni: What are the ministries in which our missionaries are particularly involved?*

**54** **Fr. André:** There is the pastoral commitment of following up on the slow take-up of the Christian communities, some of which need to be completely rebuilt after years and years of abandonment. There is a great need to form catechists and animators of these communities. Some buildings have been constructed with this aim in mind, at Ifanadiana, with assistance from the general help fund.

**55** A special commitment regarding pastoral work in relation to the family and pastoral presence among the rural youth, especially through the EMTK movement. Fr. Alfredo Cairois is the diocesan father responsible here. It is a movement which proposes the human and Christian formation of youth, prolonging the often rudimentary schooling, and has an agricultural apprenticeship for work in the woods. The Eucharistic Movement for the young and the Children of Mary group are equally active.

**56** Our missionaries can count on the precious collaboration of Malagasy religious: excellent collaboration in Antsenavolo from the Augustinian Sisters of Notre-Dame de Paris, some of whom have a specialist formation in catechetics or in theology; in Vohilava, from the Sisters of St. Joseph di Aosta, who were the animators of the district for three years, without a priest. This collaboration is a little less evident in Ifanadiana where the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres are working. This religious is clearly beneficial for our confreres, both in relation to helping in carrying out the pastoral work and in getting closer to the people and feeling stimulated in religious life.

**57** We should add that, at the request of the bishop and with the help of the Portuguese province, a sanctuary was built, dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima at Ramonafana, a thermal spa at 20 km on the road to Ifanadiana. The sanctuary was solemnly consecrated last September, by the bishop of

Fianarantsoa. It should be a place of pilgrimage and spiritual animation for the whole diocese.

**58 Fr. Manzoni:** *Is it possible to carry out work on getting vocations in this area served by our Portuguese missionaries, a pastoral which has already brought fruit in the areas where our Italian missionaries are working?*

**59 Fr. André:** It is obvious that our missionaries are also engaged in work for vocations, but the region they are working in is a very difficult one, even for evangelisation. The Catholics are only 5%, and the families are very unstable. Male vocations, that of priests and religious, are very rare in these populations. Lack of vocations, even in the diocesan seminary, is something of great worry for the bishop of Mananjary, Msgr. Tabao.

**60 Fr. Manzoni:** *Unlike the area in which the Italian missionaries are working, the area served by our Portuguese confreres has some religious students too. What do you feel about this experience?*

**61 Fr. André:** One student, Leandro Garces, has already terminated his three-year period at Madagascar and has returned to Portugal to take up his theology studies. There are now two other students of religion, Carlos de Oliveira and Luis Miranda who began their “stage” in 1988 and should continue for another two years or more. One must bear in mind the time required for settling in and the need to learn a difficult language. A six months course gives you the minimum knowledge: the two-year “stage” is barely sufficient.

**62** The students of religion work as group animators and go into the savanna on visitation, as well as participating in the activities of their area.

**63** My personal impression was excellent. They are very well integrated in their respective communities and have the possibilities of maturing in a less protected, more personal way of life. They are initiated into pastoral work in a united and generous group and are in contact with the province and especially with the Scholasticate, stimulating the missionary commitment.

**64** Brother Jose Manuel Braz Ferreira is also happy with his vocation as a brother. He has already had a good pastoral experience in Madeira. Besides his work as bursar, he participates in pastoral work, especially in catechetics and liturgical animation.

**65 Fr. Manzoni:** *Is there any collaboration between the Italian and Portuguese groups?*

**66 Fr. André:** The physical distance between the two areas is very great - about 1000 kilometres separate Imerimandroso from Ifanadiana and the roads are frequently difficult to use. The two groups are independent and in direct rapport with their respective provinces. They would like to collaborate and

try to do so. They organize two annual meetings of four days duration, at which all participate. Three of these are dedicated to a retreat on Dehonian topics.

**67** There is a commission on formation, in which both groups are represented and this has been in practice for two years now. The superior of each group participates, alternately, in the meetings of Major Superiors of Madagascar and they occasionally exchange visits.

**68** It is a very hesitant collaboration, since both groups have different backgrounds, in relation to the history of their Province; the characteristics of each nation and the history of their presence in Madagascar. Their desire for fraternity is beyond discussion, but the road to stronger collaboration is still far away.

**69** A mixed community has begun in Antananarivo with a view to organizing a common house of formation. Collaboration has begun precisely in the vocational and formative field.

**70** *Fr. Manzoni: This means, then, that generally speaking, vocational perspectives in Madagascar are good.*

**71** **Fr. André:** In the broadest context of Christian responsibilities for the life of the church, in particular for priestly vocations for the diocese and for female religious vocations, already numerous, the two groups are engaged in vocational animation.

**72** According to many opinions, the present situation in Madagascar is fairly favourable for vocational work. There is the stabilisation of relationships between the Church-State, which were always fairly peaceful, in spite of the government's socialist orientation. There are many young people without prospects for the future; the difficulties of scholarisation; more committed pastoral work; the Papal visit... all facts which explain this favourable moment for vocations. The major interdiocesan seminary at Antananarivo has no more places available and unfortunately it lacks formators too. The religious congregations, e.g. the Trinitarians, the Jesuits and Christian Brothers who have been in Madagascar for a long time now, have a good group of Malagasies religious.

**73** At the same time, it must also be said that various bishops, priests and formators stress the difficulty of true discernment, of a solid formation (studies, celibacy, community, minimum family independence etc..).

**74** The Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, Msgr. Marchetto, who presided at the concelebration during the inter-zone meeting at Antananarivo, encouraged us in Dehonian pastoral vocations because "there are vocations and they are numerous; it is a situation which might not last for long".

**75** Our confreres already possess a certain amount of material, e.g. the life of Fr. Dehon translated into Malagasy and Fr. Marinucci's audiovisual aids. Most of all, there are vocational groups, sessions, retreats etc.

**76** *Fr. Manzoni: If vocational possibilities are so favourable, in general, we must also be prepared in the field of formation.*

**77** **Fr. André:** There is, in fact, a formative committee common to both groups. Through Fr. D. Pierro (IM) it is connected to the Inter-African francophone commission for formation, which comprises Zaire, the Cameroun and Madagascar. It held its last meeting in Madagascar from 11 to 13 September 1989 on the subject of the application of *Ratio Formationis Generalis* in the African context.

**78** A formation programme exists for both groups. For the pre-novitiate period there is a "foyer" at Andreba for young people who are studying for their degree, presented by both groups. There should be four or five this year. There are also four young candidates being tutored by the Portuguese group; two of whom are provisionally at the seminary in Fianarantsoa and two at that of Ambositra.

**79** At present, following a year of prepostulate studies at Andreba and perhaps soon at Antananarivo, the candidates will spend their postulance and novitiate at Ndoungué (Cameroun) for two years. This experience proved to be positive for the two first Malagasies religious who were professed on 12 August 1989. They are two lay brothers who will continue their professional and religious formation at the new house in Antananarivo, for at least two years, under the direction of Fr. Alberto Vicente (LU).

**80** *Fr. Manzoni: You spoke several times about the house at Antananarivo, which seems to be a rather special case.*

**81** **Fr. André:** This house was built by a French professor who eventually returned to France. It is in an excellent position, surrounded by hills, right in the heart of the university area which is rapidly expanding. It is four km from the major seminary where the philosophy and theology courses are held and is very close to the minor seminary. It is a small house with three rooms, a refectory and kitchen. The out-house has been turned into a chapel. The house is surrounded by approximately one and a half hectares of property. Good ground, relatively flat with gigantic eucalyptus trees. It borders on another large property belonging to the Swiss Embassy, which up for sale. A reception centre for young people could be set up there, and a university parish, even though the commitment for such work should really rest with the diocese and the university. The question is still under discussion.

**82** On the other hand, Msgr. Razafimahatratra, archbishop of Antananarivo, who welcomed us to the diocese, orally expressed as a condition, the setting up of a parish or district.

**83** There are many complex problems, however. An urgent one is that of collaboration, in light of the unity between the two groups. People say: "For six years now the two groups have followed along parallel lines, even though they often meet. Isn't it time to do something more now?". While awaiting the growth of the group of young Malagasies religious, it is necessary to plan better coordination between the two groups and prepare the different mentalities, with a view to unification.

**84** The general impression is that of a very vital missionary presence which, with the grace of God, promises much because of the generosity and seriousness of the religious working there - both Italians and Portuguese - and the two Malagasies brothers who have joined them.