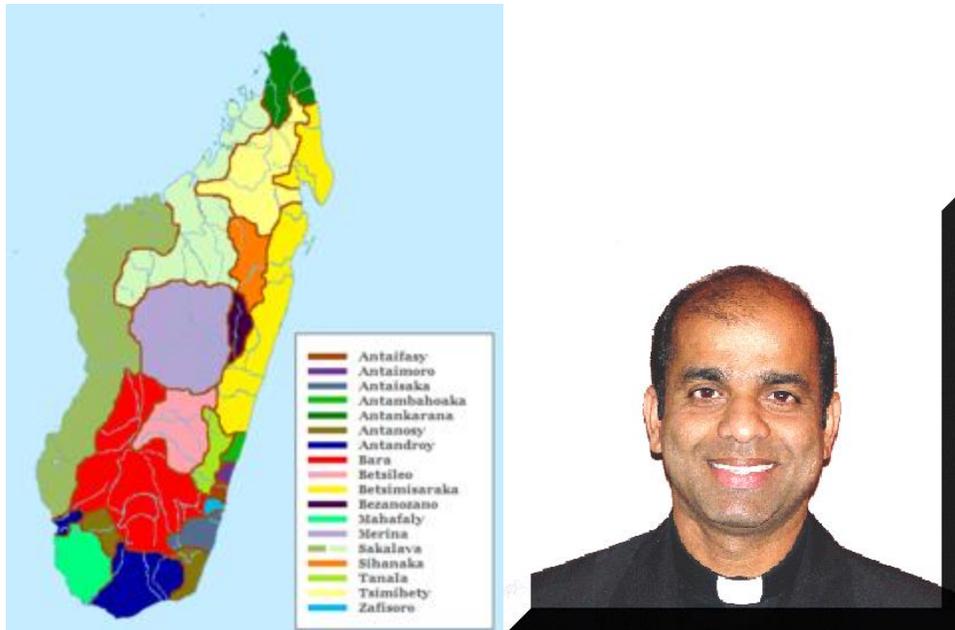


My First Mission Visit to Amazing Madagascar

By Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, MS



What is La Salette? La Salette is a place in France in the French Alps. On September 19th, 1846, the Blessed Mother appeared to two children, Maximin, 15 years old and Melanie, 11 years old. They were shepherds taking care of the sheep when she appeared to them. She was sitting on a rock, her face was buried in her hands and she was weeping. She was weeping for a reason. Back in the 1800s, Europe was in turmoil. Not many people went to church and faith was not practiced much at that time. So God sent his own mother to these two little shepherds with the message of reconciliation, prayer, penance and zeal for the Word of God. Today there are 850 La Salette missionaries working in 27 countries especially in the missions of Madagascar, Angola, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Philippines, Myanmar, India and Haiti, bringing the message of reconciliation to the hearts and homes of people we minister to.

Introduction

I was so fortunate to visit the La Salette mission in Madagascar a couple of years ago. It was an eye opener for me as I consider Madagascar as one of the most difficult missions of our Congregation. Madagascar lies in the Indian Ocean off the southwest coast of Africa. Twice the size of Arizona, it is the world's fourth largest island and has a population of over 22 million. The Malagasy are thought to be descendants of Africans and Indonesians who settled on the island more than 2000 years ago. Around 92% of Malagasy live on less than \$2 per day. Poverty and competition for agricultural land have put pressure on the island's dwindling forests, which are home for much of Madagascar's unique wild life and key to its emerging tourist

industry. Running water and electricity are supplied by a government service which is unable to service the entire population. Only 6.8% have access to water while 9.5% have access to electricity. Most roads in Madagascar are unpaved and impassable during the rainy season. The quality of education is poor and there is a high dropout rate. Half the country's population is Christian and the other half practice traditional Malagasy religion. Many Christians integrate their religious beliefs with traditional ones related to honoring their ancestors.

History of American La Salette Missionaries in Madagascar

I had the opportunity to spend time with Bishop Donald Pelletier, Bishop Emeritus of Morondava, Madagascar. He is gathering data on the history of American La Salette missionaries in Madagascar and he gave me permission to quote from the introduction of a book he has begun writing. "American La Salettes have generously served the Church of Madagascar for well over ninety years. It has been not only a long but very successful mission: one we can be proud of, one that deserves to be known and remembered as it highlights the missionary spirit of American missionaries. To this day the La Salette Missionaries are the only religious community of men to evangelize on what is known as the Red Isle. They were the first to take up residence, moving in to an area that had never seen a Catholic priest. When the first three priests and a brother arrived in 1928 there was nothing and they had nothing. They lived in a rented house using crates as chairs and tables. Today there are three flourishing dioceses because the first missionaries laid solid foundations of the faith by sowing the seeds of the Word of God among whom they lived. Never could they have dreamt in 1921 how God would bless their self-sacrificing gift of life for the Good News."



Fr. Thomas with Bishop Emeritus Donald Pelletier

Journey of a Lifetime Begins

I arrived in Antananarivo, the capital city of Madagascar, after a 22 hour plane ride. Fr. Meme, who is the Provincial Superior of La Salette Province of Madagascar was my guide and translator throughout my trip. I quickly obtained my visa upon arrival

but it took forever to get my luggage – They had only one luggage carousel that served about 420 travelers that night. It was a nightmare.

We left for Antsirabe which was a two and a half hour drive and about 100 miles from Antananarivo. It is here that the La Salette missionaries began their work in Madagascar. We arrived at the Provincial House in Antsirabe in the afternoon and stayed for 5 days. Antsirabe can be compared to Bangalore in India or Tagaytay in the Philippines. It is known as the little Vatican of Madagascar because many men and women religious communities have houses here.

Fr. Meme had arranged a meeting with Bishop Philippe, the Bishop of Antsirabe. The bishop was very cordial and welcomed us warmly. The La Salettes could be called the founders of this diocese as they did so much to establish the Church here. Now the diocese has its own seminaries. Our Lady of La Salette is the patroness of the Antsirabe diocese. The bishop and the diocesan priests work hand in hand with the La Salette missionaries. This was very clear when meeting with some of the diocesan priests later that day. We had a good conversation with Bishop Philippe who is very appreciative of the work the La Salette missionaries do in his diocese.

I had a tour of the large farm where the La Salettes grow crops and raise cattle and pigs to raise money. Fr. Dominique, the Vicar for the Province, is in charge of the farm. The school has about 600 students and although November 1st and 2nd were national holidays, there were some students and a few teachers at the school. I was introduced to the students and thanked them for their warm hospitality. Next to the school is the house for the forty candidates who would like to enter the seminary after high school. They were working on the farm. I joined the eight postulants for noon prayer and the local community for lunch. They eat rice three times a day and most of the time a vegetarian dish, a meat dish (chicken or beef) and sometimes fish. They always have mango and bananas for dessert. In total there are seventy two seminarians in various levels of formation and forty candidates who live with them while considering religious life.



Fr. Meme with priests and laity

At one time there were four La Salette parishes in Antsirabe. Now there is just St. Theresa Parish which has three masses on Sunday for thousands of families. The Church can hold about a thousand people. There were at least one thousand people inside and five hundred people outside for the celebration of mass. It was a moving celebration as it was a special occasion. The pastor, Fr. Honore was getting transferred after 7 years of service. During the offertory everyone moved in an orderly manner to one of the many offertory stations and place their offering in a basket while songs were sung. I was impressed during the exchange of peace. They did not bow, shake hands or hug each other. Instead, they held hands and swayed from side to side and wish peace to each other as choir sang. Fr. Honore who received a parting gift spoke after communion said, "We are one church, one people and we are one in spirit wherever we are. Your expression of love is not just for me but for the whole church and for our Lord. Your gift I accept, not as a gift for me, but for those who need it." Fr. Honore was appointed the National Director for the Handicapped. He later said that their gift will go to help the handicapped in his care.

I was curious about the tombs I had been seeing everywhere. Fr. Meme told me about the relationship between the dead and the living in the Malagasy culture. The Malagasy pay a lot of attention to their dead relatives and put much effort building ancestral tombs which are opened from time to time so the remains can be carried in procession before being rewrapped in fresh shrouds and replaced in the tomb. They call this practice as "famadihana". It is an occasion to celebrate the beloved ancestor's memory, gather with family and community and enjoy a festive time together. It is believed that by showing respect for ancestors in this way they may intervene on behalf of the living. The veneration of ancestors led to the widespread tradition of tomb building. There is no cemetery, tombs are built by the homes. Fr. Meme explained that a family may have one hundred cows and be quite rich. They will not sell one cow to take care of the sick but they would kill as many cows as they need to celebrate their dead. Likewise, a family may own hundreds of pigs and not sell even one to send their children to school but would be willing to kill ten to celebrate their dead with their extended family and friends.

We had lunch at a popular restaurant called "L'artisan". Here in the courtyard we were lucky enough to experience an extraordinary performance of Malagasy folk dance accompanied by wonderful live music. This was the most incredible cultural experience I enjoyed in Madagascar. We strolled around the streets looking at souvenir items before returning to the Provincial House in the evening.

As the roads were very poor, and made worse by rain, it took us about 45 minutes to drive to Ambano, 4 miles from Antsirabe. In the afternoon we were invited back to the school to visit the students. David, an Italian La Salette brother whom I met in the Philippines during his visit several years ago, was the only person I knew. He teaches English. The students were able to introduce themselves in English but not able to carry on a conversation. I was told that as the students reach higher grades they gradually drop out and only less than 30% will proceed to college.

Bishop Donald told me that the people of Madagascar are very hard working but they don't make much money for their hard work. A dollar or two is their daily wage. Most people own at least a small piece of land and a small home. Bishop Donald commended the CMI fathers from India for their commitment, selfless service and enthusiasm in serving the people of Madagascar, especially in the diocese of Morondava. The pastor in Ankilizato had returned from celebrating Mass in a mission about 5 miles away that can be reached only on foot. He had walked about 10 miles that day.

Finally after a 10 hour trip we arrived in Morondava. Morondava was a pagan area when the La Salettes started mission here and it remains a less civilized and a less educated a region. I didn't find a single place with air conditioning and it was the beginning of summer here. Electric fans are quite a relief if you can find one. Morondava is hotter than other places and the humidity makes it feel worse. Electricity and water are big problems in Morondava. The city of Morondava is corrupt and does little for the well-being of the people.

We visited a family of fishermen. It was heart breaking to see the way this family lived in a hut by the shore. They were drying fish on a fire. Their only means of making a little money is selling a few fish they are able to catch and they live in absolute poverty. They let us see their one- room home when I asked. It had one bed and a cooking area in the corner. I was told that everyone sleeps on the floor. They begged for money for taking a picture with them. Of course we shared a little bit but what good is a little for a family of more than ten members?! How could I take God's many blessings for me for granted?



Family of Fishermen

Bishop Donald was the main celebrant at the La Salette church in Morondava on Sunday. The Mass started at 6:30 am and lasted for two and half hours and the church was full. After Communion the president of the Parish Council expressed gratitude for our presence and, according to their tradition, as a sign of welcome they presented us with a "satroka" (a hat) and "lambahoany" (a cloth to wrap around our waist). The choir gave me a CD of their Malagasy music. The president spoke about how happy the whole parish was with our presence among them and

wished me good luck, good health and safe journey home after my visit. In response to their hearty welcome, I told them how grateful I was for their hospitality and appreciated their liturgy, which was very lively with beautiful music and great participation by the assembly. They express their faith with great devotion and love for the Eucharist.

The bishops of Madagascar were having their bishop's conference in the capital city. About twelve bishops were invited to the La Salette Scholasticate Seminary for dinner. These bishops have special ties to La Salette as some of our priest minister in their dioceses. All the bishops were very friendly and down to earth. During the social hour I had a chance to meet with each of them. I spoke to them more formally during dinner. I appreciated their simplicity and admired their enthusiasm to change the face of Madagascar through their service to God's people entrusted to them. It was a highlight of my visit where I heard them say how great and devoted the La Salette priests are who serve in their dioceses. We spent the rest of the evening playing cards and having fun. Shortly after midnight I was brought to the airport and I bid "veloma" (goodbye) after my unforgettable first trip to the beautiful island of Madagascar.