

EDITORIAL

# La Salette

VISION & MISSION



By Fr. Thomas Vellappallil, ms

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*Dear Co-missioners,*

I was so fortunate to visit the La Salette mission in Madagascar from October 31st to the 15th of November in 2013. It was an eye opener for me as I consider Madagascar as one of the most difficult missions of our Congregation. Many thanks to Fr. Meme, the Provincial Superior who was my guide and translator during this visit.

Madagascar lies in the Indian Ocean off the southwest coast of Africa. It is twice the size of Arizona and the world's fourth largest island with a population of over 22 million people. Half the country's population is Christians and the other half practice traditional Malagasy religion. 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 to 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% of the people have access to water while 9.5% have access to electricity services. The quality of education is poor and there is a high drop-out rate. The majority of the roads in Madagascar are unpaved and are impassable during the rainy season. Living conditions are often shockingly basic.



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## History of American La Salette Missionaries in Madagascar

During my visit 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 the freedom to quote from the introduction of the 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 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 Donald

## Highlights of My Visit

I stayed in three major cities; Antananarivo, the capital city, Antsirabe and Morondava. There is a very strong La Salette presence in all three places. The La Salette major seminary is located in Antananarivo with 39 philosophy and theology seminarians. Antsirabe, which is about 100 miles from the capital, has what I would call the "La Salette Complex". There are different houses for the various levels of formation to the priesthood and religious life here. There is a high



school with 600 students, a house for the candidates who want to enter La Salette after high school, Postulancy and Novitiate while con-houses, a house for preparing the candidates for Perpetual Vows, La Salette Spirituality Center, a Shrine Chapel, La Salette Facsimile and a gazibo with an altar where thousands from around the diocese gather on the feast of Our Lady of La Salette. In total there are seventy two seminarians in various levels of formation and forty candidates who live with them

sidering religious life. Vocations are still flourishing in Madagascar. They have a large farm with various crops and raise hundreds of cows and pigs to generate funds. Fr. Dominique is the Vicar for the Province and is in charge of the farm. All four parishes in Antsirabe have been served by La Salettes at one time. Today they serve only at St. Theresa Parish. There was a



special celebration as Fr. Honore, one of our priests, was honored for his service to this parish for seven years and had been transferred. The church was overflowing with people. There were at least 1000 people inside and probably 500 outside the church. It was a moving ceremony. In an orderly manner during the offertory everyone stood up and carried their offering to one of the basket stations while songs were sung. I was touched during the exchange of peace. They did not bow, shake hands or hug each other but everyone held hands and swung from side to side and offered peace to each other as the choir led the singing. After Communion, Fr. Honore told the people “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 National Director for the Handicapped. He said later that the people’s gift will go to help those in his care, the handicapped.

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 sellot of attention to their dead and spend much effort on ancestral tombs. They are opened from time to time so the remains can be carried in procession, then rewrapped in fresh shrouds before being replaced in the tomb. They call this practice “famadihana”. It is an occasion to celebrate the beloved ancestor’s memory, reunite with family and community and enjoy a festive atmosphere. It is widely believed that by showing respect for ancestors in this way they may intervene on behalf of the living. The veneration of ancestors has led to the widespread tradition of tomb building for each family. Fr. Meme said, “One family may have 100 cows and be quite rich. They will not sell a cow to take care of the sick but they will kill as many cows as they need to celebrate their dead ones. Likewise, a family may own hundreds of pigs and by



Province of Mary, Mother of the Americas Website: [www.lasalette.org](http://www.lasalette.org)

ing a pig they may be able to send their children to school but they won't. But they would be willing to kill 10 pigs to celebrate their dead with their extended families and friends." The people of Madagascar are very hard working. But they don't make much for their hard work. A dollar or two is a day's wage. Most people own at least a small piece of land and a small home where they toil. I didn't find a single place with air conditioning and it was the beginning of the summer season. Electric fans offer quite a relief if you can find one. I wanted to see the inside of a typical Malagasy house. Fr. Meme and I visited a family of fishermen. It was heart breaking to see how this family lived in a hut by the shore. They were making dried fish on the fire. They make their livelihood by selling a few fish that they catch. They don't have many ways to make a decent living. They literally live in absolute poverty. We went inside the house. It is just one room with one bed and a cooking place in a corner. I was told that everyone sleeps on the floor. They begged for some money for taking a picture with them. Of course we shared a little bit but it was not much for a family of more than ten members! This is not the story of one family but most people live in such, if not worse, living condition. Deep inside I said to myself: How could I take God's many blessings for granted?



Fr. Meme

The bishops of Madagascar were having a bishop's conference in the capital city. About twelve bishops were invited to the La Salette Major Seminary for dinner one evening. These are bishops with special ties to La Salette as some of our priests minister in their dioceses. All the bishops were humble, very friendly and down to earth. During the social hour I had a chance to meet with each one of them. 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 when I heard them say how great and devoted the La Salette priests are who serve in their dioceses. Shortly after midnight on the fifteenth of November, Fr. Meme brought me to the airport and I bid "veluma" (goodbye) after my unforgettable first trip to the amazing island of Madagascar.



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