

# Vincent and Madagascar

*A Vincentian Student*

In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Vincent sent missionaries to Madagascar. Armed with St Francis de Sales' *Treatise on the Love of God* and *Introduction to the Devout Life*, they were unwittingly cast into what was to prove the most demanding mission in the history of the Congregation of the Mission. On face value the mission is a disaster and there are numerous deaths. Such is the turmoil and evident failure of Madagascar, that the wisdom of Vincent's decision is vehemently questioned by his confrères. The impact is such that questions still remain today. The Madagascar mission of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century is frequently referred to as Vincent's crowning glory, his most fulfilling mission. It would be more apt to describe it as Vincent's crown of thorns. As passionately as Vincent believed in the purpose of this particular mission, he had his detractors, and they numbered many. This essay aims initially to give a summary of the Madagascar mission and then proceed to provide an insight into what could have been the rationale behind Vincent's apparent obsession.

## Summary of events

In 1642, the French East India Company obtained a charter from Cardinal Richelieu to establish a combination of Colony and Trade Post on Madagascar. The initial appointment of a priest did not work out well. The Company then decided that the religious situation could best be helped by employing a community. On consultation with the Papal Nuncio in Paris, Niccolo Cardinal Bagni, the Congregation of the Mission was suggested. The Nuncio was unaware that the Discalced Carmelites had already been allocated this Apostolate. Saint Vincent had many friends in the East India Company and it was these urgings along with the Nuncio's orders, that persuaded Vincent to accept the Apostolate.

In 1648, Vincent chose Father Charles Nacquart and Father Nicholas Gondree for the first Mission to Madagascar. The voyage to Madagascar lasted 6 months. They arrived to find the French on the Island, quite hostile in their behaviour towards the natives. They found sexual promiscuity to be rife among the natives along with many other daunting problems and so it comes as no surprise the new missionaries longed to return home. Even though the Huguenot colonists had returned to France some years earlier, their efforts made evangelisation somewhat easier. Nacquart made contact with a local chief, Ramaka, who had been converted and educated by the Jesuits. However the mission was still difficult physically and theologically. Fr Nacquart, even though cautious when administering Baptism, was having some success, especially in baptising the children. The mission however was dealt a blow when Father Gondree died from fevers prevalent on the Island. Left alone, Nacquart continued his work, principally using illustrations as tools to evangelise, as instructed by Vincent. The children who he baptized never seemed to die from the illnesses and this increased Nacquart's standing amongst the natives. One of the healings was the grandson of Ramaka. However, the chief refused to become a convert until his village received its own resident priest.

Nacquart had long term plans for the Island, such as the church at Fort Dauphin. He wanted to return to France to talk with St Vincent and see what steps could be taken to improve conditions on the island. He requested for a diocesan priest to be his replacement for the time being. However, when it came time to leave the natives protested to such an extent that his replacement had to leave

instead of Nacquart. He continued his work and redoubled his efforts to such an extent that he contracted a fever and died on May 29, 1650. He did however leave a literary legacy. After the death of Gondree, Nacquart feared for his own welfare and so began to draw up a French Malagasy Catechism, which was eventually published in 1657.

It was 2 ½ years since Vincent had received news from Madagascar and when he eventually learnt that Gondree and Nacquart had died, he prepared to send more confrères to Madagascar. During this time there were battles between the natives and the Colonists, and the Carmelites withdrew from Madagascar, leaving it open for the Vincentians. Fathers Bourdaise and Mounier and Brother Rene Foret eventually set sail in 1654. When they finally arrived on the island they found that the inhabitants had been living for almost 4 years without a priest. The Missionaries began by driving out prostitutes with whips as part of an attempt to re-Christianise Fort Dauphin. In 1655 the mission suffered a setback when nearly the entire fort was ruined by fire. The Chalices and furniture were the only items salvaged.

In 1655, Mounier led an expedition into the interior to reach friendly natives and help injured French soldiers. The expedition failed miserably as many were killed by natives and Father Mounier was left in a village with 11 others. Bourdaise rushed to him but on May 24, 1655, Mounier died.

In 1655, a competitor of the East India Company sent 4 vessels to Madagascar. Vincent was advised that there would be room for 2 priests. He sent three. They were Fathers Claude Duffour, Nicholas Prevost and Mathurin de Belleville. De Belleville caught a fever and died at the harbour at Sierra Leone. Prevost went to St Marie and Duffour to Madagascar. Arriving on the Feast of Corpus Christi, Duffour admonished Bourdaise for some liturgical lapses. He immediately announced his intention of joining Prevost on St Marie. Upon arrival, his extravagant zeal saw him contract a fever and die. Prevost soon followed. Once again Bourdaise was alone. Not long after he died as a result of a severe case of Dysentery. His death meant that no priest returned to Madagascar for six years.

In expeditions that followed, Boussordee, Hebron and Delaunay never reached their destination due to a combination of heavy storms and internal politics in the East India Company. After this, an expedition consisting of LeBlanc, Arnaud, Desfontaines and Daverroult was hampered due to storms and pirates. After his Desfontaines was joined by Etienne and Feydin who also were hampered by logistical problems. After finally boarding ship, they encountered heavy storms and had to return because the vessels were very badly damaged. They returned to Paris in 1661 only to learn that Vincent had died. They embarked straight away on plans to return to Madagascar. Their immediate work was giving Missions to the French Colonists and natives. They also set up a Novitiate and a hospital. In 1664 during the first week of Lent, Etienne, Brother Patte and some natives led an expedition into the interior to convert a tribe led by a well-disposed chief named Managa. The chief refused to be converted but insisted upon giving them a farewell banquet where he planned to poison them. Patte died from the poison whereas the others showing no ill effects, were clubbed to death. Meanwhile, Father Manie did not survive his confrères long enough to see the new expedition arrive from France in 1665. The new expedition saw casualties as a result of the small boat being swamped by a wave. Boussordee and Brother Pomade died whilst the rest reached Madagascar in July 1665. There was one more failed expedition before Fr Jolly recalled the Vincentians in 1671. The journey back also took casualties.

The Madagascar mission lasted 25 years and cost nearly a life a year. Vincentian missionaries returned there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are still there today in Fort Dauphin continuing the work started by Nacquart and Gondree.

## Analysis of the decision

In the midst of this madness, for over 20 years Vincent stood by his decision to persevere with the Madagascar mission. Many put it down to Vincent's salvific theology. Many people of the time believed in a vision of salvation that only included those who were baptised and were aware of the Catechism. Hence Nacquart's efforts to teach the catechism. They would have considered the natives of the island as pagans who were in need of saving. It is concern for their salvation that many say is the driving force behind Vincent and Madagascar. I am not as convinced as some on this point. There were many truants, lepers and despicably poor people on the streets of Paris during the latter years of Vincent's life. Vincent's primary aim was not to give them education in the faith and catechism. His main concern was to provide for their basic needs. He also refers to them as his masters and great teachers. Vincent, among other things, was a practical man, and any assessment of his theology must consider this. We must also consider that Vincent truly believed in the notion of seeing Christ in the poor. This would also have been his thinking towards the natives of Madagascar. With this in mind, it becomes difficult to accept the position that Vincent went to Madagascar primarily because he thought the pagan natives were doomed to damnation.

Madagascar was in need of priests. The Jesuits had abandoned it because of its great difficulty and there was not one left to pick up the pieces. Vincent at that time was not aware of the agreement the Discalced Carmelites had in relation to Madagascar. However, in light of this, it makes perfect sense that he sees the Vincentians as undergoing work that no other order wants. The very fact that the Vincentians follow the Jesuits fits in very well with how he saw the Congregation in relation to the other orders. We were not to have the sophistication of the Jesuits but were just sufficiently fit to carry their luggage. It is this kind of humble yet dedicated service to the abandoned missions that makes Madagascar more attractive to Vincent. The later decision by the Discalced Carmelites to abandon the mission reaffirms Vincent's decision to accept the request. As time goes on, the struggles in Madagascar are further evidence to Vincent that he had made the right decision.

Vincent's refusal to abandon the mission offers us an insight into his vision of priesthood. Vincent's priesthood is a heroic vocation. He, on many an occasion borrowed metaphors from wars and conflicts to convey his thoughts. In a famous speech which was essentially a defence of his position, Vincent eloquently questions the character of those who question him. He talks about cowardice and manliness, giving us an insight into what kind of person Vincent held as an ideal priest. He compares the Congregation to an army of God who has suffered a few casualties in a war that has to be won. Cowardly motivations are frequently cited. However these examples do not adequately communicate his idea of heroic. We must also consider that he sees meekness, humility, simplicity, poverty and zeal as primary virtues. The Vincent de Paul priest is a heroic figure but a figure who does not necessarily seek or receive the adulation that most of our contemporary "heroes" do. He is a figure that carries out his vocation in the cold hard silence of anonymity and zeal. It is in this distinct treatment of the hero concept we begin to understand Vincent's idea of priesthood. Consequently it is also within this concept do we begin to appreciate the significance of the Madagascar mission.

For many of the confrères, at the time Madagascar was madness and totally unjustified. The numerous deaths seemed to many a clear sign that the wrong option was taken. To Vincent, these events were also a clear sign. Vincent, although genuinely saddened by the deaths of his fellow priests, sees their deaths as an ideal enactment of the priesthood. Madagascar represents the ultimate sacrifice and challenge. It allows for a sincere living of Christ's passion, death and resurrection to his missionaries. He sees the shedding of their blood as the life blood of the church. He truly believes that the blood of these Christians is the seed of Christianity. Vincent rarely regrets his initial

decision because the call of God to live His life is continually evidenced in the struggles and deaths in Madagascar.

As the confrères become more animated and agitated, Vincent becomes increasingly reassured. One could say that Vincent's greater concern during that time was the attitude of his opposing confrères rather than of those dying in Madagascar. The latter had embraced the true spirit of the priesthood while the former had not realised this fully. Controversially he sees a greater danger in the waning spirits to the future of the Congregation than the physical death of confreres. A spiritual death for Vincent is the greater tragedy. Vincent addresses this. He sees his decision as not just existing in the present but in the past and the future. This decision is a reaffirmation of what he had envisaged when the Congregation first began. The dead Confreres are the price the Congregation pays to keep itself alive. Vincent too pays the price of his credibility. It takes great courage and exemplary leadership to put your credibility on the line. He also gives us a profound insight into death at an individual and institutional level. It compels us to question periods of death and life during our own life. It could be said that Vincent was concerned with the salvation of souls. However what he considers as salvation and which souls he was most concerned about, requires further analysis.

Vincent's missiology is not given enough genuine credence, then and today. Evangelisation is never a one sided affair. It is the journey towards God of all concerned. The Jesuits and the Carmelites were not fortunate enough to have leaders with Vincent's foresight. Maybe it is a bit harsh to accuse them of this as we are not aware of all that went into their decision making. However what I am trying to illustrate is that in devastation, Vincent sees opportunity and hope. Madagascar is more than his theology, Vincent turns it into his cornerstone example for members of the Congregation and beyond. He sees the Madagascar mission as a call to do the will of God. Vincent's quest to do always the will of God could never have allowed him to abandon Madagascar. Nothing tests a firmly held belief like the consequence of death does. This would have been the underpinning of his resolute determination not to give up more than anything else and rather than diminishing this realisation, Madagascar deepens it.

Vincent liked to approach issues from a wide spectrum of viewpoints. Therefore his views on Church, salvation, discipleship, priesthood and care for the poor are all areas we need to consider. However, when it comes to testing times, human nature readily rejects what is not deeply internalised. It is too easy to dismiss Vincent's decision as hasty or a product of a questionable theology. We must never forget to consider that Vincent was a man ahead of his time and was meticulous in his decision making. Haste was not a word readily identified with Vincent. He stuck with the Madagascar Mission till his death, for a period spanning approximately 20 years. He was not a person averse to correcting himself or reversing his decisions. Madagascar offered him all these options but he was resolute. To him it was confirmation of God's Divine will, communicated through an event.

## Conclusion

Madagascar is an interesting case study because it presents us with a challenge. The evidence points to it being a momentous failure. This is undeniable when initially encountered. Twenty five deaths in as many years average out to a death each year. Some never even set foot on the island. The benefit of years of hindsight seems not to help its cause much either. However the madness of it all, compels one to dig deeper. The Madagascar experience helps us understand the essence of vocation. Madagascar is not about statistics, it is about witness. It is a timeless example, able to be accessed by all Vincentians till the end of time, of the demands and cost of a sincere answer to the call of Jesus, in the context of a consecrated life. Madagascar is significant because centuries later, those wanting to follow Vincent can read and understand what Vincent wanted us to be. In

Madagascar we continually discern two calls. The call to the priesthood and the call to a Vincentian understanding of Priesthood. The values latent in the Madagascar experience are also of benefit to all confrères during various stages of their vocation. Experiences such as failure, loss, alienation and doubt are all significant points in consecrated life. Madagascar reassures of the Christian contradiction, that at many points in our life, success can, at times, come disguised as failure.

Vincent could have given into pressure from within the Congregation and withdrawn from the mission. However, he chose to stick with what he truly believed was God's will, even amidst what might have been serious self doubt. Human existence, whether on an individual or global level, depends on decisions that are made on a personal, community or institutional level. Decisions set a precedent and reaffirm a tradition. Consequently, the factors that affect and that are affected by these decisions, are too overwhelming for the human beings to adequately consider alone. Vincent's great humility and spirituality to hear and do the will of God, compensates for these human limitations. In those years of knowing and not knowing he would have at times questioned his own motivations as well as making concerted efforts to understanding God's rationale. God's truth does not primarily seek to correlate with the prevailing human thought position. The more difficult part of God's job is not so much doing the right thing or discerning what the right thing to do is, but convincing his children of its validity of the Divine intention. The collaborative nature of God's engagement with his creation therefore requires a human effort to ponder the ways of God. The Madagascar event is a prime example of this occurring in in the Vincentian tradition. It is a prime example because it illustrates the fruits of and problems with good decision making. We see the tremendous example sent down through the ages along with the deep polarisation that can occurs as a result. It is a situation faced in the Congregation day after day in every community around the world. The easy answer to the problem is that things would be a lot easier if all were of the same mind and spirit. The difficult part however has always been that each individuals' mind and will is not forced but is given the choice to make itself receptive to the will of God.