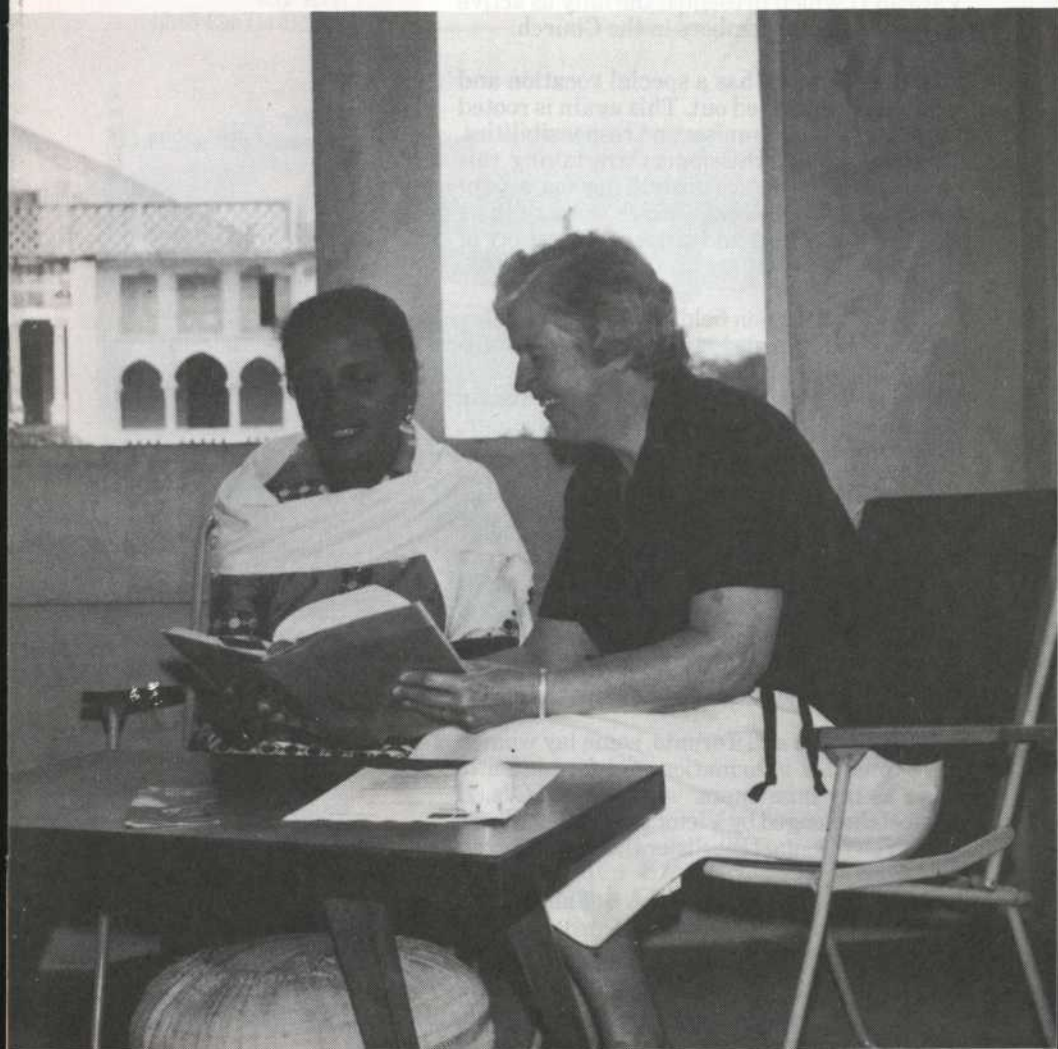


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MIC

MISSION NEWS



THE MISSIONARY SISTERS OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Dear friends,

As the Church is preparing for the Synod of October, many people are praying for its success. The theme, "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World" is of prime importance today. It has deep roots in Vatican II which presented the laity as active and responsible members in the Church.

In life, each one has a special vocation and mission to be carried out. This again is rooted in our baptismal promises and responsibilities. Today, many lay missionaries are taking this responsibility very seriously. They too, accept to be sent by their local Church to share their faith with brothers and sisters in a variety of ministries.

Even in the mission field itself, lay missionaries are springing up and are becoming real witnesses to others. Such is the case of Victor, a Bolivian lay missionary, who relates his mission expedition with a team of religious women, including one M.I.C., Anita Perron.

In far-away Madagascar... a mission we seldom speak of... there too, we find lay people becoming more and more involved in Church activities so as to share their faith at a deeper level. The article on the Malagasy mission of the M.I.C.'s shows how they cooperate with the lay people in their effort for development and education.

In Longueuil and Toronto, some lay women have come for information and formation to serve as lay missionaries, with the M.I.C.'s. If you feel challenged by Victor's words in "Where Were You?" contact the Sisters in these Centres.

The Editor.

Cover photo: Denise Bourgeois, M.I.C. with a young Malagasy woman.

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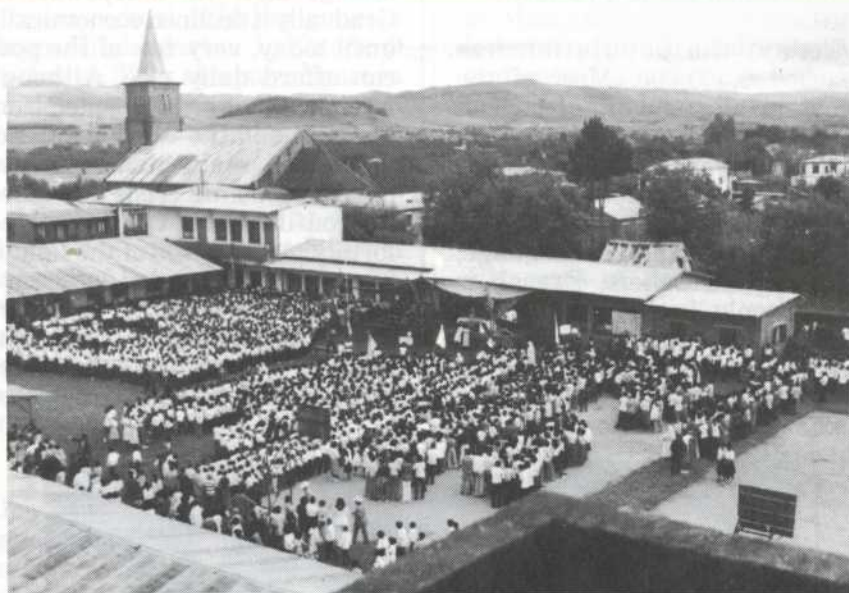
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Fighting for Survival



School assembly at Antsirabe.

Across Mozambique Strait, about 400 kms. from the African continent, stretches the 1500 km. long island of Madagascar. This red-soiled land, often called Red Island, is divided by a high plateau of about 1400 m. high.

Although various tentatives were made to colonize the island by the Portuguese and others since 1527, nothing came out of the efforts until the French came in and set it up as a French Protectorate, in 1885. This ended in 1958; in 1960, Madagascar claimed its independence as the new democratic Republic of Madagascar with Didier Ratsiraka as President.

Today, the population has reached 9,400,000. Most of the people are descendants of African or Malaysian seafarers who arrived there 1500 years ago. The 18 different ethnic groups now form one nation bound together by a common Austronesian language, customs and beliefs. French is spoken only in the main cities now. The population is dispersed over the tropical island known for its unique flora, fauna and wildlife.

When the M.I.C. Sisters arrived in Madagascar in 1952, they found that 85% of the population was engaged in some form of agriculture. The people cultivated rice as their main food and exported coffee, vanilla, spices, sugar and sisal.

But the Sisters saw the country change after its independence. Gradually it declined economically until today, very few of the poor can afford daily rice. Although foreign aid has been accepted from the East and the West, it has not yet solved the socialist government's economic crisis nor eased the conflict about the devastated forests. Already 4.5 of the land is barren. The wounded landscape is caused by land-hungry farmers who have slashed and burned the trees to grow their subsistence crops. As soon as the soil is depleted



Group of M.I.C.'s at a community meeting with Assistant General, Marguerite-Marie Legendre, M.I.C.

of its nutrients, these same farmers will turn to other parts of the forest to clear. These trees also serve for kindling wood since the poor cannot afford kerosene for cooking purposes.

In Madagascar, the M.I.C.'s serve the Malagasy Church in many ways. In the capital, Tananarivo, (700,000) they manage a large private school offering courses from Kindergarten to Grade 9 inclusive. They also participate in parish catechesis and carry on pastoral work of all kinds, including adult education courses.

It is in Tananarivo that young M.I.C. Sisters receive their initial formation in religious life. Actually, 4 novices are preparing to take their first vows, and 5 postulants are studying whether or not they can follow Christ in the missionary life.

Although the people are poor, they are creative. Denise Bourgeois, the Provincial Superior, explains how they managed to set up a canteen for the poor and the elderly. "A committee of social aid was formed. Each year they organize concerts, bazaars, flea markets to raise funds. The proceeds are used to help poor children enter the schools. A sort of credit union has been formed to get small business projects off the ground. Houses have been constructed to house the needy, milk has been distributed to babies and small children. Each day they serve as many as a hundred the one meal of the day. Sr. Estelle Fontaine,

Sr. Doris Trottier and myself often go there to give a helping hand to the volunteers."

In the second largest city, Antsirabe, (75,000) several Sisters work in a religious diocesan bookshop. They carry on another type of evangelization. They meet from 600 to 900 customers a day. Their religious books are either French or Malagasy. Sr. Adrienne Guay loves her work. "Sr. Claire Guerard and myself love working here. We meet so many wonderful people with whom we can chat and discuss books. We see our work as a very good means to bring the Word of God to our Malagasy brothers. We are not mere clerks, we are witnesses of Jesus Christ. We witness by our joy and welcoming smiles."

In the same city, the Sisters also manage another school. Sr. Estelle Messier, MIC, has been Principal there for the past 20 years, directing over 1,000 students.



Elisabeth Methot, M.I.C.



Fernande Gouge, M.I.C. in Morondava.

In Ambohibary, besides the large school of over 1000 students, the Sisters also maintain a Centre for the Promotion of the Malagasy Women. There, Sr. Elisabeth Methot has spent many happy hours helping young women and mothers develop their talents so that they would be able to help their families financially and socially.

In this village, the LaSalette Fathers maintain a neo-catechumenate centre where several Sisters offer a helping hand. This

Centre is organized for Christians who wish to deepen their faith. Sr. Rose Blanche Noel is one of them. "The first time I attended the Eucharist after my return to Madagascar, I was struck by the way the people were praying and their total absorption in the Word of God. The same persons I had seen so timid previously, were now expressing themselves with a most remarkable simplicity. It helped me understand how God's grace works in the hearts of the simple and the pure, regardless of their educational level or their poverty.

Three of us joined the courses and pursued a real spiritual itinerary with them. It was demanding for all of us but more so for the tired workman who had to attend two meetings per week at night and spend a whole day in recollection one Sunday each month. And we were all expected to carry on some of the community tasks as to prepare the hall for the Eucharist, or bake the bread for the ceremony, list up the Biblical texts for the reading and meditation. But rain or shine, they all showed up.

Every Saturday evening, the Eucharist would last for two long hours. All kinds of petitions were raised to God for the families, the crops, the needs of each one. Supported by the Word of God, they returned to their families hearts filled with courage to face the difficulties of their hard lives. They had been nourished and satisfied."

On the west side of the island, at Morondava, another group of M.I.C.'s are also managing another school for the poor. Sr. Rita Plasse, a Canadian musician, directs the music in the school and teaches others how to conduct choirs. In nearby Mahabo, one of the Malagasy Sisters, Josephine, is in charge of the catechetical centre. (Incidentally, these Sisters were able to view Halley's Comet with the naked eye!)

Now, the Malagasy Sisters, all daughters of Delia Tetreault, are being sent out to other missions outside their own country. Two of them are now working in Cuba alongside the Cubans and Canadians. One is studying in Haiti.

The 43 Sisters of Madagascar, still count 29 Canadians in their ranks. Vocations are bountiful, thanks to the Catholic schools and large families that keep the faith alive in the hearts of the children and young people.



Suzette Jean, M.I.C. in class.

And So It Happened!



(Left to right) Fenecia Dapitanon, Lucie Gagné and Irene Ferrer, M.I.C.'s at Chi Ma Wan. The heavily guarded camps are in the barracks facing the sea.

The M.I.C. Sisters have novitiates in various parts of the world. Young ladies aspiring to religious life, now may enter the formation centre within their own country. After completing the first two years of initial formation in religious life, they pursue studies in the spiritual life.

To offer them a lived experience as a member of an international missionary institute, they are then sent to an interprovincial scholasticate for further study, apostolic work and prayer.

Hong Kong is now designated for the interprovincial scholasticate of Asia. Young Sisters from Taiwan, Japan, Philippines and oftentimes Canada, live out together a spiritual missionary experience accompanied by a team of formators.

For their apostolic work, many of them are engaged in activities in the Vietnamese Refugee Camps. Sr. Lucie Gagné, M.I.C., one on the formation team, recently sent us this article about their first Christmas in Hong Kong.

"It happened on Christmas Day. Seven of us took to the road early on Christmas morning so as to catch the ferry boat heading for Chi Ma Wan. There, over 1,300 people are detained in "closed camps".

This was our first Christmas as we had come in from different countries. We were eager to share the Good News that Jesus had brought us that first Christmas Day.

First we attended Mass with the 150 or so Catholics in the Camp. We had brought along our guitar so that we could all sing together the universal language of love. After the celebration, we



Theresa Chang M.I.C. with young Vietnamese refugee.

held an impromptu get-together outside the chapel. We sang carols in French, English, Tagalog, Mandarin, Cantonese and Vietnamese.

The spirit of Christmas was in the air. Everybody was jolly. The children hugged their toys and sucked their candy while the adults shared in a humble agape feast prepared by the Catholic and Protestant groups.

We came back that night, tired but hearts filled with joy. We had met Jesus in our brothers that day, just as the shepherds had met him in the arms of Mary."

Lucie Gagné, M.I.C.



*Fenecia Dapitanon,
Irene Ferrer,
Elvira Madolorosa,
Theresa Hsiao.*

Kesayo Sato, M.I.C. giving out candy.



*Fenecia Dapitanon, M.I.C.
with some of her students.*

Lucie Gagné, M.I.C. with some refugees.



Where Were You?

Sr. Anita Perron's heart was singing as she left on a mission expedition for the remote and neglected village of San Antonio, nestled somewhere in the mountains of Bolivia.



Victor, Anita and Betty crossing a large river.

She wasn't alone. With her was a Bolivian Sister, Betty Natusch, member of the congregation of the Daughters of Ste Anne. Leading them was a lay missionary, Victor Hugo Aranda, a zealous apostle if ever there was one. The team had been organized at the express wish of the Bishop, Mgr. Roger Aubry.

This itinerant team was being sent to evangelize people of this far-off village which had not been visited by missionaries for the past 20 years. Victor tells us about this mission in his own way:

"We started off toward the village of San Antonio where the Aymaras lived. What a shock when we reached the place! We could read in the people's expression the disfigured face of Jesus Christ. Like Him, in Golgotha they were saying: "Why have you abandoned me? Where were you?"

True enough that the aim of our mission had been a response to the Church calling for more collaboration with the pastoral ministers of the area. With them now, we would seek to renew the faith of these people while we were forming leaders to animate their Christian community.

It sounds easy, doesn't it? But it wasn't quite that easy. The Aymara peasant is a very special person and needs to be approached very carefully. For many real and historical reasons, he now mistrusts everyone. He is a meek and introverted person, so his reflections run deep.

To be one of them, to be fully accepted by these Aymaras, we had to walk along with them, accompany them on their journey of life. So we joined them in harvesting the cacao, the yuca, the corn. This solidarity warmed them towards us.

No need to tell you how tired we were at night. Our feet were worn out, often bleeding, standing on them for 8 to 10 hours a day. But what was that when we learned that school children of 6 and 8 walked 10 kms each day to attend school.

We felt so powerless alongside all this suffering. The pitiful looks of the women, the elderly, the young children, revealed to us their broken lives. They had so little to live for.

Sr. Betty Natusch and Anita Perron, M.I.C. leaving to visit families.





The Sisters with a family in front of the house constructed for the mission team.

But believe it or not, these people were hungry for the Word of God. True enough that some had given up religion; others had joined sects where they found some nourishment. They admitted that the Catholics had not visited them for the past 20 years! Will you and I ever get to fully believe the words of Jesus: "The harvest is great but the laborers are few!"

During that month of intensive mission, our best food was prayer. In these we found the energy to carry on another day; we forced ourselves to be one with these people as Jesus had done in Galilee.

These brave colonizers had left their homes, their little plot of land of the Altiplano some 20 years ago. They had come with the hope of finding greener pastures. What they discovered was a

land calcinated by the rays of the sun, a place where all sorts of insects bit them day and night, where bats often sucked the blood of their sleeping babies, where contaminated waters still take the lives of young and old.

We cannot speak of evangelization without coming to grips with the stark realities of the life of the people. Real evangelization obliges us to work on the human, social and often the political level. The hour had come for us to put our two feet on the ground and become involved in a radical and Christian commitment with our exploited brothers and sisters. I was happy to be there, to share their hard lives. And so was Betty, so was Anita. We all agreed that these people had in some way evangelized us in their turn.

I cannot close without telling you of the beautiful sign of self-giving, of willingness to carry on, that the two Sisters gave me. I can still see them dragging their feet, longing to see the setting of the sun so as to get away from its intensive rays. I can see their arms and legs puffed up by insect bites. I can hear them telling one another about their troubled digestion. It was no joke to eat only rice, eggs and fried bananas for a whole month.

I saw them lacking drinking water. I saw them living without adequate light in the evening, without tables, chairs, windows, just like the people did. I kept saying to myself, they are really living out their vow of poverty.

The Lord saw the seeds that we scattered here and there in the village of San Antonio. We didn't like to think that we were offering them "sweets" then withdrawing them as soon as they tasted them... We told them we would come back some day to share their life, their work and to pray with them. For the present, the responsibilities fall on the shoulders of the pastoral agents of the area.

Hopefully, this unique, itinerant mission is not the only one in the Church of Bolivia. I ask you to pray that many more expeditions of the sort will be carried out. But remember, the responsibility does not fall only on the shoulders of the religious missionaries. It is also the work of us lay missionaries. We are all invited to share in the



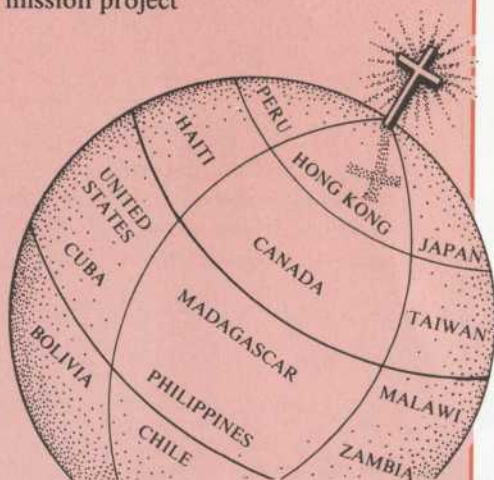
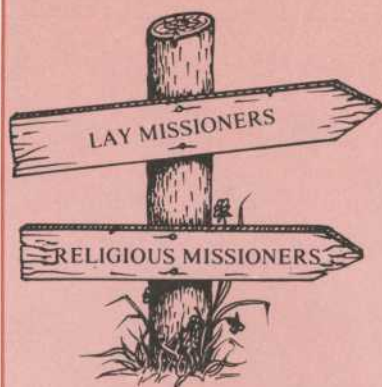
*Sr. Betty Natusch and
Victor Hugo Aranda.*

mission of the Church. We cannot just sit back at home and be satisfied with a few prayers, a few dollars we donate. We have to give something of ourselves, even if it hurts. We cannot simply be bureaucrats in the work of salvation... we must be out there in the field as well, building up the Kingdom of God.

The words of Jesus are meant for you and me: "Go throughout the world and preach the Gospel to all mankind. Mk. 16, 16. What are you waiting for?"

(Adapted from a Spanish report sent by Victor Hugo Aranda.)

The Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception
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