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Montfort EurHope 10: A Malagasy Missionary in Pont-château

PONT-CHÂTEAU, France - Father Hervé Rafalisoloherinirina, 39 years of age is a member of the community of Calvary in France for nine months now. He shares his experience.

Self-presentation

I was born on March 25, 1980 in Sandrandahy in the Diocese of Ambositra, Madagascar. I am the 4th from a family of 6 children. My father, a retiree since 2002, was both a primary and a middle school teacher while my mother is a housewife and a seamstress. In their modest condition, they educated their children the best way they could. In 2003, I joined the Company of Mary as a pre-candidate for Tamatave. Then, I continued my studies in Philosophy at the Grand Seminary of Antsirabe. And just after 3 years of philosophical studies, I did my novitiate in Antananarivo and I professed on September 8, 2008. After the novitiate, I did a year of pastoral internship in the villages. Then, I started Theology at the Grand Diocesan Seminary in Antananarivo. The studies lasted for three years and was followed by a pre-diaconal training period. On March 16, 2013, I pronounced my Perpetual Profession and the next day, I was ordained deacon in Antananarivo by Bishop Alfredo de Mananjary. On September 15, 2013, I was ordained priest by Bishop Désiré Tsarahazana (who became the Cardinal of Madagascar, 5 years later) at Saint Theresa Salazamay Tamatave Parish. Since then, I have had four assignments in my life as a priest. Almost every year, I had a new obedience: 2013-2015: Vicar of the District of Anivorano-Est; 2015-2016: In charge of the young pre-postulants and Vicar of Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus Parish in Salazamay Toamasina; 2016-2017: Training for formator at Antamponankatso, responsible for postulants and Vicar of the Holy Name of Jesus Parish, Andraisoro Antananarivo; 2017-2018: Vicar in Brickaville; 2018: new obedience for France.

Assignment for France.

During the last years of my pastoral life in Madagascar, I was responsible of the formation house and vicar in the parish. It was a hard time living in difficult material conditions, but I felt good. On

the other side, it has been a beautiful experience. In July and August 2017, I was sent to France to participate in the FIM. This is the moment in which I discovered France particularly Montfort places. Returning to Madagascar, I may say that the mission in France is not for me. From then on, I became involved and focused more on the mission in the villages, my new obedience after two years in the formation house. It falls perfectly! And I devoted my whole being in doing pastoral work among the grassroots by launching at the same time the Montfortian Spirituality so that the Montfortian mission will be incarnated. After just a year in Brickaville, here is another new obedience. It was on August 15, 2018 when Father Arnold Suhardi, SMM during his visit to Brickaville came to tell me that the Generalate will send me to the Calvary of Pontchâteau. It was a new mission again and I asked myself, why me?

When I was told to go to France, I had no desire to leave because doing the mission outside did not interest me. Fear, worry and doubt made me feel upset. Doing the mission in France, in this highly secular country seemed to be very difficult and it scared me. The religious obedience however did not give me the opportunity to say "No". I said "Yes" even though I felt some hesitations in my heart. It took me a long time to understand this mission, which seemed too big for me. I remember that just after this obedience, I spent sleepless nights. So, I opened my Bible and read John 21 where my motto is: *"You know that I love you"*, the response of Peter to Jesus. Beyond the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, this Gospel enlightened me on the true meaning of my religious life, on my relationship with God and especially on my mission. After His resurrection, Jesus manifested Himself to some of His apostles at the lake, then He took Simon Peter aside. He will entrust him with a mission: *"Be the shepherd of my sheep."* I could relate this evangelical dialogue to myself. Certainly, I do not have the same mission as Peter but for me, I am also entrusted with the dual condition: *Love and follow Jesus*. After this time of reflection and discernment, I felt an inner appeasement. I was ready to leave without being prepared for at least a year before. I left Madagascar with courage and confidence on December 1, 2018. So, for nine months, I am now here in France.

My community and my mission in France.

The community of Calvary is an international community. We were only seven when I arrived here. But a few months later, Father Raymond JARNIER left for Saint Laurent because of his illness. Our community was, then, composed of two Italian priests: Fr. Santino and Fr. Efreim; two French: Fr. Marcel and Fr. Jean; and me, Fr. Hervé, from Madagascar with Fr. Willi from Indonesia. Fr. Efreim returned to Italy definitively in mid-August. This year, our community will welcome three new members: the new parish priest, Father Didier DRONNEAU and the two brothers of Saint Gabriel, Jean FRIANT and Michel LE GALE. We will be eight in the community by September. I would like to mention the different "inter" that live in our community and challenge our way of life:

Intergenerational: a reality in our community that helps us strengthen our fraternity. We can offer the community the enthusiasm of youth on one side, and the experience and wisdom of our elders on the other. "Youth could, old age knew."

Intercultural and International: Remember that there are four different nationalities in our community: French, Italian, Malagasy and Indonesian. Living the difference! This is not easy and it always needs an adaptation: How to establish a community when the cultural references are different? I just hope that this cultural difference is really a tangible sign of the universality of the Church. It is also considered as a richness in our community because the way of life of everyone is not an obstacle but rather a way to live *unity in diversity*.

Inter-congregation: This year, two brothers of Saint Gabriel and a diocesan priest will be parts of our community. This inter-congregational initiative, if one can say it, responds to the apostolic and missionary realization especially to community life. How to make answers to calls of the Church when the number decreases? With the contribution from the different experiences of each one of

us, we can easily realize our mission at Calvary and the parish. We welcome the Brothers of Saint Gabriel and the priest who choose to live with us. I believe that by uniting the forces of three institutes (Montfort Missionaries, Brothers of Saint Gabriel and Secular priest of Nantes) miracles may happen because in union, there is strength.

About the mission, Father Arnold simply told me in Madagascar that the mission that awaits me in France is to give a helping hand to the parish, to the various spiers around Pontchâteau and to launch a pastoral ministry to the young people at the Calvary. So I came to build the international community here at the Calvary and also to ensure the continuity of the Montfortian Mission in different retirement homes and in the surrounding parishes. To do this, we organize together a pastoral service and the functioning of our community life. We have a community meeting every month. From there, we already assigned everyone's responsibility for the next month. This year, four parishes, namely Pontchâteau, Savenay, Guérande and Herbignac, asked for our help. But we must know that at the beginning of this new pastoral year, with the new priest and according to the request of the Bishop of Nantes, Mgr. Jean Paul JAMES, we (me and Father Willi) commit ourselves more to the service of the parish. It will certainly improve our vision because our field of work is expanding; and working with the parish priest could gradually facilitate our Montfortian mission: to go to others and proclaim the mystery of God's love. The center of our mission is here at the Calvary. Our commitment to the parish can be a way to bring people to Calvary and we are thankful to the different knowledge and mutual recognition. This year, we have already welcomed the pilgrims to Calvary. Many people come here especially during summer. The pastoral reception covers very different realities such as a permanence in the place where we welcome all visitors: confession, accompaniment, mass, animation, etc. We share our work here, we lived "doing it together". Share the work so that everyone is responsible and able to adapt gradually to the mission that has been assigned. And that the desire of Father de Montfort spread to the ends of the earth.

The first months in France.

Arriving in France in the middle of winter was not easy. It was already a trial. At first, I experience various difficulties. Despite of this, I could still overcome some obstacles. In fact, I couldn't fail to thank all the confreres who continue to teach and encourage me.

Coming to France as a priest, I share my ministry between pastoral and community life. In pastoral life, I continue to adapt to pastoral care because the reality in France is quite different from that of Madagascar. Fortunately, I had the time to participate in the session in Paris to know more about France, its environment and culture. These days of session helped me a lot, comforted, reassured, made me solid to my mission, and able to testify. We also had meetings with other religious, rich exchanges, and convivial moments. All of these gave me strength and courage. We have created fraternal links to be able to share permanently and continuously our missions in France.

During the first months of my arrival, I discovered the difficult conditions of the clergy in France and even the poor condition of the Church. The number of priests is decreasing, and young people no longer come to the Church. It is the elderly who join the church every Sunday. At the pastoral level, there are always difficulties to overcome. And it challenges me to take courage, be comfortable and testify my religious life to the mission. As one bishop said: "History makes us understand that the Church has never had an easy journey on the path of evangelization, but she has always had great witnesses, credible people who have proclaimed the Gospel tirelessly".

In fact, my first few months in France are just moments of learning at the mission. For now, I do not have much to say. It's just a time of adaptation in the culture as well as in the mission.

Fr. Hervé Rafalisoherinirina, SMM