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Centres for Handicapped Children in Madagascar

by Vincent Carme, CM

Beginnings

It was 1968. I was on my rounds in the bush in the Tanala sector, in the jungle. At a certain point the catechist who was with me pointed to a wretched straw hut, not far from the track, saying: "*There is a child there with a curse on her*". I told him rather abruptly that there were no accursed children. He then explained that it was a case of epilepsy, and that in Madagascar that affliction, just like leprosy and lunacy, was considered a punishment from God. "*Let's go and look*", I said.

The little girl, whom we'll call Baou, was lying on her back, her head propped up against the wall of the hut. Her eyes were closed and she was dressed in rags. She had dribbled all down her neck and chest; she was in the throes of an epileptic fit. You could see the pain in her young face -- she was 15 or 16. I knelt beside her, moved to tears. In a moment she opened her eyes, and when she saw my missionary cross hanging round my neck she grabbed it with both hands and began to pray: "*Jesus, Saviour, have pity on me, have pity on me. And you, Pastor, take me away; I'm in too much pain here*". (Baou was a Protestant and took me for a minister). Her voice, weak at first, became a shout: "*Jesus, Saviour, have pity on me*". I was flabbergasted, and was crying. And then, without really knowing what I was getting involved in, I took her two hands: "*Listen, Baou, I'll do something for you and others like you*". Very much later I was to look on these words as the act of foundation of what are now called the "*Centres for Handicapped Young People*".

Baou died a few months later. I had, however, time to send her a doll and some nice dresses.

Baou was dead, but my promise was still alive. That promise really turned into a call. I had, of course, spoken to both my religious and diocesan superiors. They approved, but made me wait: "*You are the only person in a huge area of bush; wait until another confrere joins you, and then get started*". And the bishop added: "*Unless Providence gives you some sign*".

Two years went by and I was still on my own. Then in 1970 Philip arrived one day. He was an 18 year old boy, severely handicapped physically. His legs were all twisted, and to get around he had to use a stick. He had come 8 km to see me. "*I've had my fill of living in the bush, with people making fun of me, so I've come to stay with you*". Was this the "*sign*" my bishop had spoken of? Through Philip's pain I heard Christ challenge me: "*Well, what are you waiting for?*"

Philip stayed, the first resident of the Centre which did not yet exist. He shared my hut. The next day I went to the bishop again; he thought I was a bit quick to see "signs", but he added: "*Draw up a plan in writing for me. Tell me where you'll accommodate your children, who's going to look after them, where you'll get the money*".

These were unanswerable questions. For accommodation, I had only my wretched little hut. There wasn't anyone to look after the children during my long rounds in the bush. As for money, there was literally nothing in the till. What I'd brought back from my holiday in Europe had gone to help those hit by the terrible cyclone Dany.

When I was thinking about all this a few days later there was a knock on the door; it was the postman. He gave me an unsigned letter saying that 300,000 Malagasy francs were being sent "*to help unfortunate children*". What a relief! It was more than a "sign", it was an answer from Providence, a smile from heaven.

But that was not all; there was another knock on the door. It was a little old woman carrying a little boy of 7 or 8. The child had club feet, completely twisted round. "*Look at this child*", she said, "*He's my grandson. Because of his feet no one loves him. I'm the only one who loves him. Take him as your son and then I can go and join my ancestors*". I took the child in my arms. The old woman died sometime later, at peace.

Once again I headed off to the bishop; he listened to me, and then gave me the green light to make a start.

Getting Organised

The first Centre was born, but everything had still to be done. We needed a house: it was built in five days, 5 by 3 metres in size, roofed with foliage. It had to be enlarged several times later on.

A more serious problem was who was going to be the first house-mother for the Centre. There was no shortage of good Christian women in Andemaka. During my long reflection on the problem I went over them all. Every time I did so it was Kalandy's face which kept cropping up. She was an illiterate mother of nine, but full of kindness and very religious. Everyone in the village loved her. But among her nine children two girls were mentally retarded, and the youngest son, aged three, was physically handicapped and bed-ridden. What was more, her husband was seriously ill and was to die some months later. No, one really couldn't ask her to get involved in the Centre. But I went down the list of Christian women, and Kalandy's name forced itself on me. I had got that far in my search when Kalandy followed me to my house after mass one morning. She went down on her knees, somewhat embarrassed, and said: "*After going to bed last night I was told in a dream: 'Go to*

Communion tomorrow morning, and after mass follow Father into his house and say this to him: You want to ask me something and you are reluctant. Make him tell you what he wants of you and do it; it's my will" That's how Kalandy became the first house-mother of the burgeoning Centre, and her family were none the worse off because of it.

The children arrived. Soon the thirty mark was passed. The older handicapped girls helped the house-mother and took her place when she wasn't there.

At the start the Centre had its difficult moments, with money and rice in short supply at times. At those times we used to go begging for the day's rice in nearby villages. We were usually well received by the people, even though they were poor. We went from door to door, and after each gift thanked God and the people in song and prayer.

One day a Swiss lady came to see me. She introduced herself. *"I'm a Swiss tourist called Karlotta. I'm a kinesitherapist in Europe. When passing through Fort Dauphin I heard from Bishop Zevaco that you were involved in helping handicapped children. Could I stay with you for a couple of days?"* She stayed in the Centre for two months, captivated by what she would later call *"the marvellous initial mess"*. It was she who told me that the majority of the children could be cured: first surgery, then plaster-casts, then rehabilitation. With her the Center went into orbit. She left with regret after her two-month stay, but returned many times afterwards. The Centres owe a lot to her.

Another visit was from the Medical Inspector from Manakara. When I heard he was there I was afraid, because I had heard he was very strict and had closed several unauthorised establishments. However, he was very good to me. Probably noticing some fear in my expression. he said: *"Don't worry, Father; I come as a friend"*. And he went on: *"Before coming to make an inspection I made some enquiries about what you're doing, and what I heard was good"*.

It was he who strongly urged us to open a major Centre, promising his support. Shortly after that he was to become Secretary of State for Health, and then the weight of his support was to be of great help to us. Meanwhile the Jesuits had come to Andemaka and helped us a lot in the building of the future Centre.

The Arrival of the Daughters of Charity

From the very start the Daughters of Charity surrounded the handicapped children with love and attention. My Provincial had told me that sooner or later the new Centre would be entrusted to them. It was obvious that they would be very pleased to take it on. So, as soon as the new Centre, big and airy, was built (with the help of Caritas-Suisse) they were contacted. What made them hesitate was that their purses were empty. They said to me: "*At least some money is needed for a start*". I decided, then, to put it to them one last time to take on the Centre, even with empty purses. I wrote this letter on my knees in front of the tabernacle. It reached them in the middle of their Provincial Council meeting, a day or two before St Vincent's Day. The Visitatrix read it out to the others, and then they voted on it. The Centre was accepted, unanimously, and with great enthusiasm, as they told me later. That's how the handicapped children acquired mothers, in St Vincent's Daughters. Two months later I set out for Tanandava, the section of bush newly assigned to me by my superiors. As soon as I was out of Andemaka on my motor-bike I burst into tears: tears of sorrow at leaving these kids whom I loved, but above all, tears of joy because I saw that my job with them was completed. But God decided otherwise.

The Workshop-Centre in Tanjomoha-Vohipeno

Our children, from the start, received treatment at the Rehabilitation Centre in Antsirabe. In that town, more than 900 km from Vohipeno, they underwent surgery and received rehabilitation treatment, before coming back to us. The return of the first children after treatment were scenes of triumph. Parents, children, townsfolk, all came running to see these children walk, children they had been used to seeing crawling on the ground.

But a worry underlay this joy. How were these children, with their orthopedic footwear and other equipment, going to earn their livelihood, since they couldn't go into the rice paddies? The Workshop-Centre was the answer for the handicapped youngsters of Vohipeno. It started in 1986. 70 young boys and girls learn one or more trades there. The following trades are taught: Tailoring, sewing, weaving, basket-work, carpentry, cobbling, tannery, smelting, sculpture, Antaimoro paper, blacksmithing, bookbinding. The staff consists of four Daughters of Charity, two Vincentian brothers and two postulant brothers, several young people trying to determine their vocation, and nineteen salaried staff, and myself.

The young people study for three years at the Workshop-Centre, and then go back to their villages and tribes, provided with the equipment for their trade: sewing machines, boxes of tools, etc. Of 56 young handicapped who have gone home it can be said that 31 are managing well, 17 have run into problems, and we know nothing about the other 8.

In reading the above you will have seen that the aim of the Workshop-Centre is to help these young patients find a place in their social environment. We want to

help them become parents, earning their living, happy at being alive and being witnesses to God's love.

I was nearly forgetting to mention that the buildings, or at least the first ones, were a former domestic economy school which used to be run by the Daughters of Charity but which was abandoned by the pupils because it was too far out of town. The buildings are set in 17 hectares of grounds, partly wooded, which allows us to have several gardens and keep some livestock. Unfortunately the soil is poor.

The St Vincent Centre, Antsirabe

Right from the start of our work with the young handicapped we wanted to be part of the Malagasy state health system. But there is only one rehabilitation centre for the entire island, situated as I've said in Antsirabe. This meant a lot of uncomfortable and dangerous travel. On top of this, in view of the number of young handicapped coming from all over the island, our youngsters had to find lodgings in town while awaiting their turn for surgery; this caused a lot of problems. The management at the Centre advised us to build a hostel near the big State hospital. It was the Daughters of Charity who had the courage to establish this third Centre; it has a lovely name: The St Vincent Centre.

It is a transit Centre where the youngsters receive pre-surgery preparation. After surgery they are brought back to The St Vincent Centre and cared for by our Sisters. The Centre was set up to receive the Andemaka and Tanjomoha children, but it also accepts other children from the four corners of the island, especially the poor who do not know where to go.

As I've said, The St Vincent Centre is a transit centre. That's true, but not limited to the physically handicapped. Many people are drawn there, attracted perhaps by the magnet of charity. They come to seek care for the soul. They find peace there, joy and lots of love.

Postscript

I can't finish without saying a little about myself. I'm led to this by the Workman of these Centres, Jesus.

Any time visitors -- and there are lots of them -- come to the Centres they heap praise and congratulations on me: "*What you've done is marvelous! Congrats!*", etc. This sort of thing annoys me no end, and sometimes gives me shivers up the spine. If I were to accept them I'd be a thief and liar.

These Centres are the work of Jesus, and only Jesus. They are one more proof of his love for the poor. In the old days in Palestine he cured the blind, lepers, the lame, and other sick people. He still does this, that's all. And my role in all this? I was never trained to work with handicapped children. To go into the bush and preach the gospel with my limited talents, yes. That was my work and I was

completely happy at it. Then one day little Baou challenged me, and I obeyed. It's Mt 21:3-32 all over again, where Jesus says: "*Untie that donkey, the Lord needs it*". I obeyed, like the little donkey, without really understanding what he expected of me.

Why did he want to need me, a poor specimen, with so many others who would have done better? I think it was in order to demonstrate that he was the only workman in the Centres.

To end up, I'll add just this: in order to keep strictly within my role as a minor instrument I never did anything, thanks to God's grace, without asking my superiors' permission. By acting in this way I was being obedient to the advice given by one of my former teachers, Fr Contestin, who knew my poor ability and limitations: "*When you are a priest never do anything without your superiors' permission, so as to avoid making a mess of things*". I have tried to follow this advice. Many of my ideas were rejected and permission refused. I never felt the slightest resentment: God had spoken. But the Centres for handicapped youngsters came from permissions which my superiors granted and plans which they backed.

In the final analysis, in the story of these Centres, everything is grace. So, along with our young handicapped brothers and sisters I thank God.

(Thomas Davitt CM, translator).