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The Little Girl in Rags and Pope John Paul

The Start of an Adventure on the “Great Island”;
the Poor Get Back on Their Feet

by Pedro Opeka, C.M.

Province of Madagascar

I am delighted to accede to your request to write something on Akamasoa which, in Madagascar, struggles against poverty in this part of the world.

After 15 years of missionary activity in Vagaindrano, in the southeast of Madagascar, facing the Indian Ocean, I was, at the end of 1988, put in charge of the young Vincentian scholastics at Antananarivo. There I discovered the unheard of poverty in which thousands of families and children lived in the capital of the “Great Island.” I saw these families in the street without a thing to their name. Certain families had been driven back from the city centre, transported like cattle in lorries and abandoned on the hills of Ambohimahitsy and Andralanitra, in a totally deprived state with nobody bringing them even the slightest aid that they might at least survive there! So, their misery was well hidden so that it might be totally ignored.

I am the son of emigrant parents. My parents fled the totalitarian regime of Slovenia in order to emigrate to Argentina. The memories of our family life were brutally brought back to mind. We had lived a very hard life; but one in which hope for a better future was always present. Certainly, the conditions of life and work had been very difficult. So, could such a hope be possible for the poor of Antananarivo? I was constantly asking myself what I could do to give such hope to the families in order that they themselves might find a way out of their poverty.

From 29 April to 2 May 1989, Pope John Paul II visited Madagascar. One day, I was in the midst of thousands of young people who had come to see the Holy Father. During the course of this ceremony, a little girl in rags, who was carrying her little brother on her back, went up to the podium. No one knew how she had

managed to get near the Pope, evading the police guard. The Pope responded by taking her in his arms and giving her a big hug. It was as if the Pope were embracing all the misery of the world. This little girl had certainly found the comforting tenderness for which she was hoping. The gesture bowled me over. It was a renewed call from Jesus. This was an irresistible challenge. Both my heart and my reason spoke to me: "Now, you have to do something to improve the suffering of human poverty, the misery of this little girl and of so many others!"

The life of St. Vincent, our founder, inspired me once again. After years of maturing, St. Vincent himself found his true treasure in the life of Jesus Christ, who divested himself of everything in order to become our brother, taking on himself our frail and sinful human condition in order to give us the dignity of the children of God. Jesus, the "One Sent," came to live on our earth to announce to the poor the Good News of their deliverance, to proclaim liberty to captives and new sight to the blind. This example of Jesus, who took on this hope with a radical fidelity even unto death, inspired St. Vincent's life. Three hundred fifty years later, the example of St. Vincent is still hugely relevant and is a guide for so many people of good will in the world. St. Vincent was a practical man, a man with his feet on the ground. He was constantly going about visiting the poor, to bring them material help and to bring them the comfort of a hope that is lived in Jesus. As a son of St. Vincent, my priestly commitment is thus reaffirmed in committing my life to the poor of Antananarivo, while I was called there as educator and formator.

On 29 May 1989, I visited some families. I had to crawl in order to get into the little shelter made of boxes and bits of rusty metal which served them as "lodging." The unsanitary condition of these shelters was incredible and I saw children living in dirt that is impossible to imagine without seeing it. In the course of the following days, I went to visit other families living on the hill of Ambohimahitsy in the district of Ambohimangakely. It was always the same sight of overwhelming filth, sickness and unrelenting hunger. I knew families, with sometimes as many as seven children, torn apart and broken up: the father having abandoned the mother and children; the mother having to prostitute herself; the children stealing what little they could from the rubbish in the public dumps and both adults and adolescents sinking into alcohol and drugs. The violence, which dominated everything, was terrifying. At the beginning of our meetings, the families were fearful and distrustful. I took time to listen to them. Little by little, we built up trust among us. I promised to do all I could in order that they might be able to get themselves out of this inhuman and revolting way of life in order, by their own work, to live a normal life.

What could be done to bring some initial urgent help to these people: care for the sick and food aid? How could one do away with this mountain of misery, which is totally unacceptable as a condition for human beings? How could one give back a life in society to these people, overwhelmed by despair and surviving under such violent conditions? I had nothing in my pocket to help them and aid them in their distress.

I went begging among the religious communities of Antananarivo who gave me a little money and gifts in kind. I quickly understood that, alone, I could do nothing. Happily, I knew some Malagasy youths, who were students at the university. I went to see them and suggested that they reach out to the poorest. They accepted. They responded to God's call: they had the desire to come to the aid of their compatriots, who were the most deprived and excluded from society in their country. But they did not know what to do. Their response was both great comfort and great encouragement for me. I have always read the gospel and I know that poverty is not fatal. Together, here, we would undertake to fight it. Thus it was that in January 1990, the Akamasoa Association (the name means "good friends") was created. This non-governmental organisation (NGO), with its humanitarian aims, was necessary in order to facilitate our relationships with government authorities, various organisations of Malagasy civil society, the foreign embassies and other worldwide humanitarian organisations.

Our first action was to organise a welcome in Antolojanahary for the first families coming from the streets and the public dump of the capital. It was the first village that we created, 60 kilometres northwest of Antananarivo, on the road to Mahajanga, and where there are currently 70 families living by their work on the land. We then created four other villages in the suburbs of the capital and we are working in two other regions of the province of Fianarantsoa, 400 kilometres south of Antananarivo, as well as at Vaingaindrano, 800 kilometres from the capital. In the five villages in Antananarivo, there are 15,560 people (2,926 families), including 8,409 children who are educated from primary school through secondary school examinations. Poverty in Antananarivo is still enormous and, in 2003, we brought immediate and urgent aid (food, health-care and tools) to more than 20,000 people. We built 1,544 brick dwellings and we still have to build a further 426 in order to replace temporary wooden buildings. The association pays 3,419 people who work in our centres for occupational training. One hundred eighty-nine teachers conduct the school. Thirty-three people (doctors, nurses, midwives, and nurse's aids) furnish our health services. We also have 29 social workers. Finally, seven people manage the overall activities of Akamasoa.



Above, Bemasoandro (Madagascar), with a primary school.

From the very beginning, we tirelessly followed the same objectives: the physical, psychological and moral rehabilitation of people whose life on the margins had dehumanised them; access to work in order to be able to gain a decent wage; to have a “home of one’s own” worthy of human beings in order that the family might flourish; the education of the children (the majority of their parents have had no schooling); civic instruction in order to build up a more humane society and Christian instruction in order to value the gift of life given by God.

I cannot say that this work is easy. The truth is that it is hard because it is filled with daily difficulties. After 14 years, I have learned a lot. The collaborators who surround me and who dedicate themselves to this work with courage and faith have also gained greater experience. We learned that the most impoverished are also broken physically, psychologically and morally and that they no longer know how to live in a human society that is based on respect for oneself and others. It takes limitless patience in order to help a person who has suffered so much to live again, especially when he has reached the point of losing confidence and hope that he can ever “live like others.” It takes a lot of time for these people to be able to stand on their own two feet and begin to walk again. It requires personal contact in order to convince them that they have to take the first steps themselves, through work and discipline. At times, one has to fight with them in order to calm spirits that are stirred up by alcohol. There are many slips: no one can be forgotten or neglected; so, one has to renew the dialogue. One cannot change the behaviour of another; each person must do it for and by him/herself. Sometimes disillusionment threatens us; but one must not give in to it. Firstly, because we are filled with joy and encouragement to see that, little by little, so many thousands of people have found new life, for themselves and their families. It is also a great happiness to see so many children and young people who have confidence in themselves, and workers who participate actively in the social life of Akamasoa in choirs, sports activities, local meetings and prayer groups. I praise God for all these graces which he has bestowed on the entire Akamasoa team, in order that it might accompany the poor who have come to us to rebuild their lives.

From the very beginning, I was conscious that this work was a challenge which was beyond my own strength. This battle against poverty could only be undertaken with a team; a team which also includes the poor themselves. We can say that poverty is in the process of being overcome in the Akamasoa centres, even though there remains a great deal still to do. Our work is a drop of water in the ocean of poverty that devastates millions and millions of families and children in the world. Our experience allows us to bear witness to the immensity of the task. It allows us to assert that poverty



A family in its new house in Akamasoa (Madagascar) with P. Opeka.



The wooden houses are disappearing little by little, but this depends, you can be sure, on people's generosity.

cannot be overcome once and for all and definitively, because human selfishness is a reality in all times and in all societies. That is why poverty is always a threat and future generations will always have to battle against it. I reiterate: I object to the argument that poverty is inevitable, because that argument is merely a mask for not taking responsibility. Battling poverty is the task of each adult, on behalf of the children. Accepting that selfishness can dominate is to tolerate poverty, and, therefore, working for development is in vain. But our work in Akamasoa has convinced us that, if we institute personal and communal rules to ensure solidarity and equity, in order to put some boundaries on human self-centredness, then this development work can bear real fruit. These rules must deal with social relationships but also with matters of economy, education and culture, for the causes of poverty are to be found in failures in all of these areas. If these rules are not established at the heart of each country and among nations, then it simply becomes a matter of rule by the strongest, which leads to the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming more and more deprived of all that a human person needs in order to live life with dignity. That, unfortunately, is the reality that we see throughout the world. States and International Organisations must commit themselves to this work of solidarity and equity, instead of intervening only at the last moment, simply in order to assuage their consciences. More than isolated aid is needed to combat poverty. The poor must be ensured the possibility of being able to work and to have their children instructed. It is a never-ending work. It is a work that cannot simply be done by technocratic means to get "quick-fix" solutions. Besides material development aid, which must allow the poor person to work in order to earn a living, this work is also humanitarian in that it demands that one give of one's own humanity.

The work of Akamasoa would not have been possible without prayer and union with Jesus Christ. Holy Scripture teaches us that "the poor of heart" put all their trust in God; they hand their lives over to him. The "poor of heart" are aware of their imperfections and their limits. So, they undertake to listen to the Word. Evangelical poverty is a quality toward which we must strive since it is the Source of Love and of Goodness, which opens us to the gifts of God and disposes us to receive the graces from on high. It is by this Christian education that my missionary vocation has allowed me to guide and sustain the perseverance of all, in order to support the trials. The gospel nourishes our commitment to stand with the poor and to live with them, in order to understand their difficulties and to love them. Our actions are not convincing, if we do not know how to be with those who suffer and who await the life-giving word. It is thus that the miracle at the pool of Bethesda repeats itself daily. The paralytic was alone and resigned to his fate, since no one came to

plunge him into the healing waters. When Jesus asks him: "Do you want to be well?" he asks the poor of our world of today: "Do you have the will to heal in order to live?" It is because this man answered the call of Jesus that he rose up, took up his mat and set off, becoming the protagonist of his own life.

Dear confreres and friends, I invite you to be with us by your prayers. In the communion of the hope given by Jesus, your prayers will give us strength to invite the poor to stand up again in order to live in the dignity of the children of God.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)