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A SCHOOL CO-OPERATIVE FISHING PROJECT

"It was apparently for this reason that God, who does everything with wisdom and gentleness and who does not force the acquiescence of man, wanted me to commit myself completely to the care of the schools. He acted towards me in such an imperceptible manner and over such a period of time that one commitment led to another without my having foreseen it from the beginning." (St. John Baptist de La Salle: *"Mémoire des Commencements"*)

UNFORESEEN BEGINNINGS

I find myself caught up in a complex which started off as a simple initiative but which now threatens to take me over completely. It all began with my arrival in St. John's College, Antalaha, in the month of October 1981.

I arrived in a college about which I knew little and in a strange environment on the north-east coast of Madagascar. There were then about 600 students in the secondary department of the college. There are now 1150.

What surprised me at the start was the high degree of absenteeism. The principal cause of this, in a wooded area with a damp climate, was malaria. Poor sanitation and drainage prevent the people from effectively combatting this disease.

I spoke of this to a Jewish friend who, in turn, mentioned it to one of his friends in the "Secours Populaire Français" and to other friends who are involved with "Enfance et Partage".

Thanks to these connections we were soon able to organize the distribution of nivaquine in the college: three tablets per student per week. This is the remedy currently in use in the country.

The distribution of medicine enabled me to form personal friendships with the students and to learn about their living conditions. I soon realized that besides malaria many of them suffered from malnutrition which made them more vulnerable to the disease. The majority of our students, in fact, come from villages scattered throughout the forest areas and live away from their parents during the school year. It would be more accurate to say "survive" since their material conditions are so precarious. Few among them, for example, can afford to eat meat or fish at home. Milk products are scarce and far beyond their means.

I described these conditions to one of the men in charge of "Secours Populaire Français" when I was thanking him for a consignment of medicine. Like myself, he found it paradoxical that people living beside the ocean should find it difficult to buy fish. In the end he offered to finance the purchase of fishing equipment and the setting up of a small co-operative fishery.

REALIZATION OF THE PROJECT

Surprised by this proposition I spoke to the local fishermen and then consulted the Administration Committee of the college. Thanks to their advice and help the project gradually took shape. The delegates of the European Development Fund soon became interested and encouraged me to go ahead. That was in December 1982.

Assured of financial support I commissioned the building of a three ton fishing boat but it was still risky.

The Small Projects Office of the Republic of Madagascar showed some interest at first but the project was eventually financed jointly by E.E.C. and "Secours Populaire Français", each providing half the cost.

Essential equipment for the boat came only in July 1983 and she put to sea on 10th March, 1984. She is

a fine boat of 20 tons gross and 7 tons nett, with a 15 horsepower diesel engine. We named her "TSIMANAKAVA", a Malagache word which could be translated as "Without discrimination" or "All together for a better world".

PRESENT ACTIVITIES

During the past ten months the boat has been in service when the weather permitted. Each evening the boat's crew of four, together with four boys from the college, put to sea. The catch is sold at the college at half the price charged for fish in the neighbouring town.

Results so far have been very satisfactory:

- cheap fish can be bought by the students themselves,
- despite sea-sickness, about twenty students are really keen on fishing,
- local fishermen are also interested. There is such keen competition to put to sea that we have had to establish a rota for the crews.

Success has brought further needs:

- to improve safety measures at sea,
- to increase the size of the catch,
- to satisfy a greater number of crews.

The order for another boat has been placed but we need about 40,000 francs (4,000 dollars) to pay for the engine. For the new boat we need a 22 horsepower YANMAR 3GM diesel engine capable of powering the boat and towing one or two local dug-out canoes. The organizations which financed the first boat are not in a position to finance the second one so aid from the readers of Lasalliana would be more than welcome.

THE FUTURE

In the course of the present month we are going to introduce new techniques by installing sonar on the boat and using modern nets. I have lots of ideas in my head... This region is potentially rich but the living conditions of the people preclude new initiatives.

Unfortunately, the young people who come to the college from forest areas dream only of obtaining the baccalauréat in order to move later to the capital. They are drawn to the bright lights of the city and want to escape the harsh conditions of life in the villages. Efforts must be made to bring minimum conveniences to the villages, to provide attractive employment and to create living conditions which will encourage young people to stay in the country areas. We have already tried to introduce stock-raising and the cultivation of soya beans, but only on a very small scale.

These attempts obviously run counter to the habits and ways of thinking of the people. We do not pretend to have found the secret of getting people to take their lives in hand and to widen their horizons. Too often they seem to adopt a fatalistic attitude.

The young people entertain the illusion that manual work is too hard and that diplomas will bring easy money. I could cite other examples from daily life which could give rise to pessimism and discouragement in the face of the immense task that lies ahead but this is our contribution to the work of God and our reason for continuing.

CONCLUSION

Two expressions of the Abbé Pierre could summarize the purpose and inspiration of these activities:

- to live and to help others to live,
- to make God's love credible.

Perhaps I may be permitted to add that the activities outlined above are, for me, additional to my full-time work of teaching second cycle classes in St. John's College.

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