

Italo Carugno FSC (*)

BROTHER RAPHAEL-LOUIS RAFIRINGA

(1856-1919)

Native missionary in Madagascar

Rome, 2009

(*) Freely adapted from Fr. MARTIAL-ANDRÉ MERTENS, *Sous l'ardent soleil malgache*, Imprimerie J. Duculot, Gembloux, Belgique, 1927

FOREWORD

The pages of this booklet tell of the human and spiritual journey of Br. Raphaël-Louis Rafiringa, the first Brother of the Christian Schools from Madagascar to achieve the glory of Beatification. Furthermore, through the evolution of this son of the country, it is the whole history of a period of profound transformation in Madagascar, which is briefly related. When Rafiringa was born in 1856 in the Mahamasina quarter of Antananarivo, the country had but few contacts with the outside world. At the time of his death in 1919, having become a French colony 20 years earlier, Madagascar was open to Christian civilization.

The life of our Brother, however, began in a traditional framework, continued under Anglo-French influence and finally was under totally French influence. The context in which he had to evolve, projected onto him a special light which made him a very significant interpreter of what was happening in his country. Br. Raphaël-Louis Rafiringa thus appears as the new Malgache situated on the crest of two epochs. And he arouses yet more interest because he evolves in different surroundings: pagan, Christian, school, literary, political and finally judiciary.

It has been said that *people resemble their epoch more than they resemble their parents*. In fact, what an enormous historical and psychological discordance there is between Raphaël-Louis Rafiringa and Rainiantoandro, his father, captain of the royal blacksmiths! The former crossed the limited horizon of his land whereas the destiny of the second, although a diligent and honest chief blacksmith, evolved in the context of the traditional Imerina. Between the one, an illiterate devoted and faithful to his queen, and the other, capable of reaching the Malgache Academy and fervent servant of the King of kings, the differences are substantial. Just two generations but what a contrast! What separates them, in fact, are two cyclones which profoundly marked the large island: Christianity and western colonization.

It is mainly in the spiritual domain that the personality of Br. Raphaël-Louis Rafiringa acquires its full significance. He was, above all, a man of God led by circumstances to come out of the restricted domain of a small school in order to respond to a demand whose full repercussions he himself probably did not fully understand.

He was the first disciple of St. John Baptist de La Salle in Madagascar. Endowed with great intelligence and a strong will he defied the ambitions of his family and asked to join these "strange" missionaries, non-priests, who had arrived on the island a short time earlier. The Brother in charge of accompanying him during his formation kept him as an 'apprentice' for 7 years! During this time he had matured humanly, culturally and spiritually in a surprising way. The school, translating French works into Malgache, writing school text-books, occupied him constantly up to the expulsion of foreign missionaries provoked by the independence movements which had broken out in the island. He was then elected by the people as head of the Catholics. In these unforeseen circumstances he gave admirable proof of his extraordinary capabilities by training catechists, organizing meetings and paraliturgies all over the island, while writing booklets and summaries of Catholic doctrine, hymns and poetry. When the missionaries were again able to return, they noted with admiration that the Christian communities had become more numerous and more fervent than at the time of their departure.

This pagan who became a worthy son of St. John Baptist de La Salle is a magnificent proof of what the grace of God can do when in encounters fertile soil. By his intelligence, his actions, his sanctity he is one of the most authentic glories of which the island of Madagascar can now be proud.

I thank Br. Italo Carugno, who has given brilliant new life to the booklet *Sous l'ardent soleil malgache* (Under the burning Malgache sun), written by Br. Martial-André Mertens in 1927 and Bros. Jean-François Morlier, José Martinez and Luke Salm, who have translated it respectively into French, Spanish and English.

Br. Rodolfo Cosimo Meoli
Postulator

Rome, April 7th, 2009
Feast of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

Curriculum Vitae

- 1856 Born at Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar, May 1, (?), November 3, (?)..
- 1866 He meets three French Brothers, recently arrived in Antananarivo; he attends their school.
- 1869 (October 24) He is baptized and takes the name Raphael
- 1873 He agrees to serve as assistant teacher in the Brothers' school
- 1876 He asks to enter in the Congregation of the Christians Brothers and begins his postulancy
- 1878 March 1. He begins the Novitiate and is given the name Brother Raphael-Louis.
- 1879 (November 21) He makes the annual profession.
- 1883 The foreign Missionaries are expelled and he is elected President of the Catholic Union for all Madagascar.
- 1889 November 14. He makes his perpetual profession.
- 1902 He is named a member of the Academy of Madagascar.
- 1903 (May 2) He is honored with the Medal of Civil Merit by the General Joseph-Simon Galliéni, French Governor of the Isle for the success of his efforts to normalize the relations between France and Madagascar.
- 1919 He dies on May 19 at Fianarantsoa.
- 2009 He is declared Blessed under Pope Benedict XVI

FROM ONE ISLAND TO ANOTHER

The island of Madagascar, where Blessed Brother Raphael Louis was born, lived and died, is the third largest island in the world. It is situated only 800 kilometers north the much smaller island of Reunion where the saintly Brother Scubilion Rousseau FSC died and where he was beatified by Pope John Paul H on April 29, 1989. The 37-year old Brother Scubilion had come to the island of Bourbon, as Reunion was known at the time, in 1834. He had always desired to set out some day for that "much larger island." In a letter sent to his Provincial in France on December 8, 1885, he wrote as follows;

For several decades the Jesuit Fathers have been struggling to bring the Catholic religion to Madagascar: they had to suffer a great deal, but so far the effort at evangelization has made little progress ... Let us pray that the tree of the Cross might someday be planted on the highest peak of the Malagache mountains ... Let us hope that the moment will come as soon as possible when the disciples of our venerated Father and Founder will be spread in great numbers over this country ... It is now more than twenty years that I have been asking God for this favor. Personally, I would love to be in the number of those who would have the good fortune to go there.

But divine Providence had other plans and Brother Scubilion had to remain in Reunion for the rest of his life. His extraordinary and persistent apostolic activity led to the abolition of slavery on that island. In 1867, when Brother Scubilion died, our Brother Raphael Louis was only eleven years old, but he was destined to continue in his native land the work of Brother Scubilion. He would become for half a century the person who would play a ever more decisive role on the Madagascar scene. Thus there was a transition in gospel witnessing between two strong personalities, between two saintly Lasallian Brothers in two neighboring but very different islands.

A GAZELLE IN THE MALAGACHE COUNTRY

Firinga was the name of our "beatus" before he received at his baptism in 1869, the name of Raphael, and "Ra" (monsieur) was added to Firinga. He was born on May 1, 1856 in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. His father, an official with the title of captain (supervisor) of the slaves, descended from the Hova family, a caste of the nobility. But the work he performed could hardly be called noble, involving as it did keeping the slaves in chains and depriving them of their liberty. But in the absence of a more humane ethical system, and out of respect for the tradition of his country, his cruel and bloody work did not pose any problem for him. He thought it was allowable because the highest authority of his considered it so, because it guaranteed him an enviable material wellbeing, and because he was considered as a member of high rank in the social scale on a level with the superior officers. He had served under the terrible Queen Ranavalona I, who during the thirty years of her reign eliminated by exile, poison, or the dagger more than 200,000 of her troublesome subjects. And the father of Firinga had taken part in the incessant cleansing because the responsibility he had required it.

The arrival of this second child (the previous one from an earlier marriage had lived for only "five moons") was a source of joy to the father who chose for him the name Rakatonirina, "desired one." But the Mpisikidy, a sorcerer, intervened: "Not that name!" When she explained that this beautiful name implied that the child would die before he reached "twenty-two months just as happened with your other son," the father replied "*Mpanandro* (the divinity) has spoken. In order that our son may live, we shall call him Firinga (dust bin). *Marina izany!* (Amen)."

Although he had been so very much desired, the little Firinga grew up according to the local custom, that is, without anyone caring very much about him. Firinga saw his father only rarely, during the daily meal. Then the father would return to his work and the son with full freedom would go his own way among the ivory and tamarind trees, agile and svelte as a gazelle in the woods. No chains constrained his feet.

He had no need of clothes: a loin cloth attached to his cincture covered all that was necessary. He wore neither shoes nor straw hat, despite the burning sun that burnished his skin. When night came he went to bed without embracing his parents: it was said that this austere custom served to develop the character and personality of the children. Firinga received neither within his family nor elsewhere a regulated education or any kind of instruction. His teachers were the sorcerers, and so his knowledge developed exclusively from contact with that superstitious and credulous world.

The sorcerers would speak of good and evil spirits that fluttered around every human being. "If you want to protect the land against robbers, tack on the door of your house a stick of bamboo and top it with a wisp of rice straw, then look in the fields for the magic herb to protect yourself against misfortune and keep it always with you." The cult of the dead was very well developed: "They have a superiority to all others, superior even to that of the king or the sorcerers; they decide the fate of the living whose happiness or misfortune depends on their occult power. Keep them always present to you and obey the orders that they will give you in the secret of your conscience or through the intermediary of dreams. There is no oath more sacred than that made in the name of one's ancestors."

Firinga imbued himself with these teachings. Would he remain forever a slave to them, he as svelte and agile as a gazelle, so fundamentally good and generous? Would he remain all his life beholden to the teachings of the sorcerers who kept people enchained in error, as his father did to the slaves? How many times did he, once he became Brother Raphael, regret the hours wasted in these erroneous practices! Firinga, his eyes fixed on the horizon, would feel deeply within his heart that a human being has wings for flight and that no one has the right to clip those wings or to bind him in chains.

THREE SORCERERS IN WHITE SKIN

Firinga had just turned ten years old (1866) and was playing in front of his house when suddenly he saw in front of him three men that he was sure he had never seen before. They wore a black habit with a white collar and a three-cornered hat very different from what people usually wore. Over their shoulders they wore a black mantle which floated in the wind as they walked. Who were they? Were they three new sorcerers? Something strange aroused his curiosity. The three sorcerers in white skin walked in silence, their facial expression reflecting joy and serenity. In their hands they fingered a strange object with many pieces to it as they moved their lips muttering to themselves. How different they were from the sorcerers he knew! But why had they come to Antananarivo? Firinga, an attentive lad, intelligent, with a lively mind, determined to find an explanation. During the following days after contact with the "three sorcerers in white skin" he was able to discover all that we are now going to summarize.

In the sixteenth century, precisely in 1540 and again in 1585, three white Dominican Fathers had tried to found a Catholic mission in Madagascar. But that all ceased when they were killed. The attempt by the Jesuits between 1613 and 1630 did not enjoy any greater success, even though Andrea Ramaka, the son of a native chief, had been baptized at Goa. It was thanks to the foundation in 1642 of the French colonial fortress of Fort Dauphin in the southern part of the island that regular mission activity could begin. The Paulinian missionaries landed in 1648. Despite enormous sacrifices (20 priests and 19 lay brothers were victims of the traitorous tendency of the native savages) the results were quite meager. With the closing of the French colonial fortress in 1674 the mission was over. Other attempts by the Paulinians in 1724 and in 1784 fell flat.

Nevertheless, the Protestants were able to get a foothold in the island and their work there met with some success, but the island still remained closed to the Catholics. In 1829 the Portuguese priest Enrico Solages was named Prefect Apostolic of the southern islands of the Indian Ocean, comprising the islands of Mauritius, Bourbon (Reunion), and Madagascar. In 1832 he decided to go personally to Madagascar, but he died while en route to Antananarivo. His successor, Francois Dalmond, a priest of the Spiritain order, had better luck since he was able to establish a mission on the small island of Sainte Marie to the east of Madagascar and on the islands of Nossibia and Mayote to the west. It became a Prefecture Apostolic in 1848.

That same year, 1848, Madagascar became a Vicariate Apostolic and in 1950 it was entrusted to the Jesuits who made one attempt without success in 1856. Finally in 1861, when Radama II, son of the queen, mounted the throne, they succeeded in founding a stable mission among the Hovas in Antananarivo. The new king officially authorized the teaching of religion in his lands. The Catholics as well as Protestants profited thereby. The Protestants, however, had the benefit of more powerful financial resources and so, after the tragic death of Radama II, they could win the favor of Queen Ranavalona 11.

Despite that, the Jesuits did not consider themselves overcome. Convinced that the basis for adhesion to the Catholic faith was rooted in teaching, they called upon the Brothers of the Christian Schools from the neighboring island of Reunion to come to help them. They arrived on the big island in 1866. They were the ones that Firinga thought were the "three sorcerers in white skin." They did not come to conquer or to pillage, much less to put in chains those who refused what they were proposing. They arrived, respectful of the local customs and traditions, respectful of the patterns of thinking, of speaking and of being, in order to seek out the young who would be able to help them transform the minds and the lifestyle of others, thanks to their acceptance of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

They had been prepared for their missionary task by learning the language before setting out. Such preparation was indispensable, because they knew that to civilize a people does not mean to take from them an ancestral way of living in order to impose upon them another. Rather it involved accepting the what was of value in the local culture and bringing it to a development that would seem to be a mature stage of the past itself, of its preexisting character, feeling, and ethnic thrust. There would be no more efficacious way to achieve this than by speaking the native language.

Consequently, when they arrived in Antananarivo, the "three sorcerers in white skin" already had an adequate knowledge of the Malagache language with its delicacy, precision and unusual regularity. They made their own the realization of their founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) that all teaching, and especially the teaching of religion, if it is to be effective, ought to be given in the mother tongue. Would they reach their target? Would they be capable of opening these people to the unique Truth that makes us truly free? That was their hope. The three Brothers settled as best they could on the hill that dominated the city. The school that the Jesuits handed over to them consisted of a wooden shed divided on the ground floor into three parts to serve as classrooms, while the upper story would serve as their community residence.

One day Firinga met with his usual playmates and aroused their curiosity about the modest residence of the "three sorcerers in white skin." He could not believe what his eyes beheld, while some rather weighty thoughts began to trouble his mind. On one of the walls he saw two framed pictures. One of them showed a mother and father bending over their newborn son lying on a bed of straw. Why, he asked himself, would a father show so much tenderness to his son? He himself had never experienced anything like that. The other picture portrayed a man, certainly a slave, half naked and covered with blood, and nailed to a cross, with no chains on his feet. Nevertheless his face expressed only serenity and tenderness. Who was he? Why had they treated him in this way?

Then the gaze of Firinga fell upon one of the "three sorcerers in white skin." He was an attractive man, lively and svelte, and was totally occupied in explaining something to a group of children. He said that the scenes represented by the two pictures had taken place more than a thousand years ago in a country far from the land of Malagache, but not far from Egypt and very near the place where thousands of men were now working to complete a huge canal for ships to pass through. Firinga felt himself overcome with a powerful emotion that took his breath away.

As soon as he returned home he told his father that he wanted to go to that school. His teacher was Brother Ladolien who was distinguished by his amiability, his profound piety and an education that anyone might envy. In fact, he would before long write treatises and translate into the Malagache language numerous textbooks for use in the school. Firinga was fascinated by the man, because each morning he would offer to his students a short "reflection" on ethical and religious subjects. This always ended with the statement: "A child of Mary will certainly save his soul because she is the terror of demons and the gate to heaven."

Three years later, when he was 14 years old, he realized that the moment had come for him to follow the teachings based on love that were preached by that "slave nailed to a cross without chains on his feet, but whose face expressed only serenity and tenderness." And so he was baptized on the 24th of October 1879, feast of the Archangel Raphael. For that reason he received the name Raphael and possibly the addition of "Ra" (monsieur) to Firinga.

A "QUALITY" SCHOOL

During the time that Raphael was attending "his" school, the political horizon of Madagascar would frequently become ominous and then return to calm. The throne was occupied successively, due to procedures more or less deceitful, by several members of the royal family until it became the turn of Queen Ranavalona II. Her candidacy clearly had the support of the powerful Protestants, English Methodists, in the capital, but it also brought with it a sigh of relief in the Catholic community on the island. In fact, according to the chronicles of the time, at the coronation ceremony, contrary to the ancient tradition, there were in the royal tribune no statues of idols, but instead there were in living flesh and bone the three Brothers of the Christian Schools with members of other religious congregations. Besides that, in the discourse of the Queen and in that of the Prime Minister, it was solemnly affirmed that "prayer is a gift of God and every Malagache would be free to choose whatever form of prayer suited him."

While the Prime Minister with many other officials was on his way to present himself to the French Consulate, he heard the resounding ovation "Long live the Prime Minister!" coming from the group of students of the Brothers lined up along the street in front of the school. The Prime Minister stopped the procession, greeted the Brothers and mentioned to the Director that his own young son was a pupil at the Brothers' college in Paris.

All these favorable events and circumstances prompted the Jesuit priest who was looked upon as the leader and undisputed guide of the Catholics of Antananarivo to ask for the authority to build a Catholic cathedral that would be worthy of the capital city. As soon as he received the authorization, he entrusted Brother Gonzalvien with the architectural design. The result was a beautiful cathedral in the distinctly gothic style, much to the admiration and satisfaction of our Raphael. But the Methodists looked upon this development with a jaundiced eye and were waiting for an opportune moment to act.

Unfortunately the construction of the cathedral made for extra work for the Director of the school and for his Brothers. Soon good Brother Yon, the third of the three Brothers, fell victim to typhoid fever and within a short time he rendered his soul to God. Such a loss was a blow for the Director, Brother Gonzalvien. He didn't know what to do. There could be no question of asking France for a replacement. It was thus that a heavensent inspiration led to a decisive turning point in the life of Raphael.

Skipping the preliminaries, the Director asked him point blank: "Raphael, I know your worth and your love for Our Lord. Would you like to be a collaborator with us as a substitute teacher?" Raphael pursed his thick lips tightly in the characteristic way of the black leaders and replied: "Brother Director, it shall be as you wish." This reply would be the first step which later would lead him to join with this educated group. Without altering his distinctive physical appearance in any way, he would return to exert on the Malagache people a profound moral influence so as to change them into a people profoundly Catholic. Many years later, someone would phrase it in categorical fashion: "It is a wise principle to transform Africa through the intervention of Africans."

THE GREAT TRANSITION

At the funeral ceremonies for Brother Yon, Raphael was at the head of the group of students from the school. His fervent demeanor drew the attention and admiration of his compatriots. At the same time the son of the Prime Minister arrived in Antananarivo having completed his studies at the Brothers' college in Paris. These events, plus a mysterious and persuasive voice which for some time had been whispering thoughts that were hard to resist, led him to a concrete decision of great significance for himself, his family and for the whole city, where he was esteemed more for his devotion to the Brothers than for the fact that he was the son of the captain in charge of the slaves. The great day of decision had arrived: he would become totally and for everyone a Brother of the Christian Schools.

With fear and trembling he spoke to his father who could not believe what he was hearing. How could you renounce marriage and having children? Or how renounce your paternal inheritance, living apart from society like a leper, and leaving yourself open to the vengeance of your ancestors? Young Raphael spent several sleepless nights, but finally his decisiveness carried the day. Twenty years of age, on Easter Sunday 1876 Raphael, the son of the supervisor of the slaves, *officially* requested and received approval to begin the required preparation for entry into the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The better informed among Raphael's former companions, unprejudiced and without preconceived ideas, felt a certain pride that one of their number would be admitted to the world of the Brothers to take part in their prayers, their religious lifestyle and their meals, all the while keeping his Malagache identity.

Beginning with the first day of his new life, Raphael read the book of the Rule, with curiosity at first and then with edification. The two Brothers with whom he lived were for him were for him the living reality of the severe prescriptions of the Rule. Thus the apprenticeship in the Rule was easy for him because he read it in the very actions of the two Brothers. Under the guiding force of the prudent Director, Brother Gonzalvien, the young postulant Raphael advanced with a firm step, anxious to realize his heart's desire as quickly as possible. On several occasions, he asked for the favor of being clothed with the religious habit of the Brothers. But the Director, well aware of the unstable character of the Malagache people, was in no hurry and so he kept the petitioner hanging for a long time. Eventually, on March 11, 1877, Brother Gonzalvien, gave to Raphael Rafiringa, son of the supervisor of the slaves, the habit of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. From that day forward Raphael would be Brother Raphael Louis.

The fact that he was now wearing the habit in no way limited the commitment of Brother Raphael to teaching his students. On the contrary, the local needs imposed on the young recruit, still bearing a pagan mentality, the need to exercise greater care to become more refined so as to be integrated as much as possible into the professional and religious community. That is why Brother Raphael needed a period of initial formation much longer than what was customary for French novices. His novitiate lasted for three years at the end of which he would be able to pronounce annual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, indispensable for membership in a religious congregation.

The example of the two Brothers with whom he lived, expressed concretely the meaning of the commitments he had assumed. If one were to mention humility, the most eloquent exhortation one could make would be the self-abnegation of Brother Gonzalvien. Although he felt proud to belong to a worldwide religious congregation, he kept heroically silent when either ignorance or jealousy gave the credit to someone else for the design of the beautiful cathedral that was under construction. If someone were to recommend to the young novice that he carry himself in a dignified manner, he had the magnificent example of Brother Ladolien who walked with a measured step, appearing in church like an *officer* in the presence of his king, and he always treated his pupils with great respect.

At home with the other two Brothers, Brother Raphael admired the profound piety that gave meaning to their daily actions: morning prayer, recited in common and interspersed with frequent pauses, was recited slowly with a rhythm like that of a Greek melody while their faces reflected the burning love in their hearts. Whenever they went out or returned home, they never failed to stop by the church to greet "the Master of the house." We would never finish if we tried to catalog all the examples of virtue, by which this religious enclosure, saturated with a supernatural atmosphere, offered to Brother Raphael a practical illustration of the precepts that he ought to observe.

A detailed daily program kept him in check without letup: in depth study of Christian doctrine, reflective study of the Brothers' Rule and their ascetical books, professional study, assigned tasks to carry out, working constantly on his personal perfection. Such was the daily routine that Brother Raphael was expected to follow during the three years that followed the taking of the religious habit until the day when he would make his first vows. To any who might find fault with such a prolonged and implacable period of testing, Brother Raphael would reply: "That is not too long a time to reform a pagan Malagache into a true son of John Baptist de La Salle. There is a great gap between the dissolute life of the one and the supernatural life of the other."

Scarcely had Brother Raphael finished his novitiate when the Lord called the exemplary Brother Ladolien to his eternal reward. Even the Protestants and the infidels esteemed him for his great virtue. But from the height of heaven the saintly Brother Ladolien would become the protector, the intercessor and the guide of his disciple whom divine Providence was about to submit to a trial without precedent in the history of Madagascar.

CONFLICTING PRESSURE GROUPS

As has already been noted, the Methodists did not look kindly on the construction of a Catholic cathedral in Antananarivo. Then an opportune moment came with the death of the French consul. There was an attempt to convince the new government authorities, who had embraced the Protestant religion, that the Jesuits on the island (all of them French) were planning to destroy their traditional customs. They would constitute a danger for the nation, and that made it necessary to get rid of them and confiscate their goods. The first attempt to do so had no success, and that proved to be providential since Brother Gonzalvien was in the process of constructing a new building to replace the original school.

Nevertheless the struggle between the Catholics and Protestants gave rise to a more profound crisis between the French government and the Malagache authorities. A connection was made between the Catholics and the French who maintained important colonial properties on the island. Little by little, under the pretext of opposition to the Catholics, pressure was exerted against the French. On May 17, 1883, a French naval flotilla was ordered to seize Majunga, the principal port of Madagascar, by armed force if necessary. In the face of this situation, the Malagache government reacted rapidly: As of May 30 no Frenchman would be allowed to remain on the island. The native pagans and the Methodists were delighted. Since Brother Raphael and a few other members of religious congregations were Malagache they were not subject to expulsion from the island. Despite fear and consternation, they remained where they were.

On May 29, 1883 Brother Raphael knelt at the feet of Brother Gonzalvien who was preparing to depart with his meager baggage, Brother Raphael received the blessing of his Director who instructed him. "After we have left, confirm your brothers in the faith. In the face of every danger remain faithful to God and to the Rule of the Institute. May God bless you as I bless you." He then traced a wide sign of the cross on the forehead of the young Brother. From that moment on Brother Raphael would remain in the breach all alone and without his Brothers.

At the same time, a Jesuit father addressed similar words to Victoria Rasoamanarivo, the daughter of the Prime Minister, a pupil of the Sisters, baptized in spite of her parents when she was fifteen years old. Now at age thirty-six she was ready to make any kind of sacrifice to guarantee that the light of the faith would not be extinguished in her country. This gave rise to a saintly alliance between Brother Raphael and Victoria which would produce great and unexpected good results. During this time, Brother Raphael, in order to reflect on his mission and to avoid running unnecessary risks, resumed wearing his native costume, the "lambda," and he took refuge with his family. This was a "strategic retreat," quite short, but during which he received numerous visits from Catholics as disquieted as he was.

THE BIRTH OF A LEADER

The word among the Catholics was not to surrender. Thus on Sunday June 3, at the hour of the parish Mass they all headed for the cathedral. There they found that the Protestants had posted guards to prevent their entrance, Disconcerted by this set-back the faithful did not know what to do, Then Victoria, the daughter of the Prime Minister, came forward. It was the Prime Minister himself who had given the order: "No one may enter by order of the Queen." The young woman replied forcefully: "If you want blood, you will have blood, and mine will be the first. We are not afraid and we intended to enter the church. No one has the right to prevent us from meeting for prayer." Without another word, with a determined step and without fear, Victoria crossed the entrance to the cathedral followed by all the others. A short while later Brother Raphael dressed in his religious habit arrived on the scene. Accompanied by the children from his school, with head held high he walked right past the helpless guards.

The question now was what to do without a priest to celebrate the Eucharist and administer the sacraments. Brother Raphael realized that all eyes were turned in his direction and so he went up to the altar to direct the community in prayer. When that was over, Victoria made a very clear proposal: "If there is anyone who can guide us in our journey of faith, it is certainly Brother Raphael." Everyone applauded enthusiastically, except for Brother Raphael who was not quite ready for that just yet and who asked for time for reflection.

The community decided to come together again in the afternoon after having first discussed and decided what action to take. By afternoon the church was filled to overflowing. The suggestion that got the greatest response was to choose a leader. When Victoria repeated her proposal, instinctively the assembly rose to its feet in approbation and shouted the name of Brother Raphael. His nobility of birth, his religious habit, his strength of character, the marvelous results obtained at the school, and his evident charism were the obvious reasons that assured them that their choice was the right one.

Brother Raphael, overwhelmed by the responsibility they would entrust to him, expressed his doubts, muttered something, and pleaded with them. But finally he agreed to become the President of the Catholic Union of Madagascar. But he set two conditions: that nothing at all would be changed in whatever the missionary priests had done, and that he be given a Council of Consultors. He had learned from his teachers that one ought never to work alone but should share responsibility with others, even if the leader always has the last word. The proposal was accepted with enthusiasm: a leader had been born! This first decisive meeting ended with a prayer after which the crowd left the church full of enthusiasm and hope. The canon shot, which at the end of the day indicated the beginning of the curfew, required that they all return to their own homes. One could suppose that during the evening the topic of conversation for the inhabitants of Antananarivo would have been the momentous events of that day.

For some time, the Catholics were left without annoyance and their religious practices did not meet with any particular obstacles. At seven o'clock each morning, to replace the daily Mass, Brother Raphael would bring the students of his school to the cathedral for the recitation of the rosary and hymns. On Friday there was scheduled the Stations of the Cross and on Saturday the Litany of the Blessed Virgin was sung before the statue of Our Lady surrounded by lighted candles.

The Action Committee decided to end to the Sunday assembly in the cathedral and selected instead several persons, especially prepared by Brother Raphael himself, to preside at smaller assemblies in the villages. For a period of three years, with the exception of some additions suggested by the people themselves, this type of organization proved effective in keeping the light of faith burning and even served to increase the number of the faithful.

It would evidently be wrong to suppose that such an important responsibility would not attract the resentment of his adversaries in dealing with Brother Raphael. He had to endure the sad experience of the words of the Gospel: "A prophet is without honor in his own country." In fact, the Protestants did not consider themselves vanquished. Without any other way of approach, they delighted in circulating the criticisms that some of the Catholics themselves were whispering against Brother Raphael: "Why so much austerity? Why does he insist on wearing that strange black habit? Why doesn't he give us control over the school? Why? Why?"

To preserve the Catholic Union Brother Raphael agreed to some modifications. He resumed wearing a long white robe and appeared in public wrapped in the ample white tunic of the Malagache, with a broad brimmed straw hat on his head. But he could do no more than that. To make more trouble, the Protestants increased the pressure. But they made their plans without counting on the man involved, much less on the woman. For the belligerent Victoria was always on the alert and would control the situation, ready to intervene in case of imminent or serious danger.

CATHOLIC AND MALAGACHE

The expulsion of the French was followed by a revival of patriotism on the island and, in view of the possibility of a military attack, the government ordered that every Malagache capable of bearing arms be trained for military service. Brother Raphael, good citizen that he was, adjusted to the situation and even became in a certain fashion a military instructor. He assumed the responsibility for group training in the courtyard of his school. The coronation of the Queen Ranavalona II was the occasion for an imposing military parade. When a 21 gun salute from the canon announced the arrival of the Queen, the crowd expressed with evident appreciation its admiration at the superb spectacle of the military students who, under the command of Brother Raphael, served with skill and precision as her escort.

Another event that drew renewed sympathy for Brother Raphael was the ceremony at the closing of the school year. For several years this event had featured a competition between the students of different schools. The Prime Minister himself was invited to the ceremony and he sent several officials to represent him. At the end of a series of questions on various subjects, the officials were enthusiastic in their praise for the knowledge, intelligence and deportment of the students from Brother Raphael's school. Their success was so remarkable that the official newspaper of the city published a detailed report of the competition and its brilliant success.

The results in the school were nothing in comparison with what Brother Raphael was able to do in the area of religion. The most significant and fruitful step was the creation of a group of catechists who were trained and motivated by him and were spread among the villages and other locations where there were Catholics or potential Catholics. Once a month they returned to give an account of what they had done, to prepare a new cycle of instruction and, after a week, return to continue their work. At the same time Brother Raphael organized meetings and retreats for the religious Sisters, wrote pamphlets and, of course continued to direct his school. On Sundays he brought all these groups together to the cathedral for a common quasi liturgy that they all looked forward to and appreciated.

It might be asked how Brother Raphael, occupied with so many duties and projects, would be able to preserve his personal intimacy with God and to have time for quiet reflection. The answer lies in the fact that Brother Raphael was most careful not to neglect the smallest practices of the Rule, fortified by the divine directive: "Walk in My presence and you will be perfect." The observance of the Rule was an assurance as much for what pertained to his interior spirituality as for its external prescriptions.

In due time, an accord was reached at last between the French government and that of Madagascar. Peace was signed on board the admiral's flagship in December 1885. It was decided that a French representative together with a military detachment would be settled in the capital; in return, the young Ranavalona was recognized as Queen of Madagascar. In consequence the missionaries themselves were allowed to return. It was for them an agreeable surprise to learn that the Christianity they had left behind had remained strong thanks to the Catholic Union of which Brother Raphael was President.

THE SCHOLAR

After the Peace of 1885, the life of Brother Raphael became once again more tranquil and laborious, entirely devoted to his commitment to be a religious educator. In 1889, one year after the beatification of the Founder, John Baptist de La Salle, Brother Raphael pronounced his perpetual vows, committing himself for his entire lifetime. By this act, he consecrated himself entirely to God in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

This very unusual native Brother attracted the attention of the new representative of the government of France. There was much to admire, especially the impeccable educational, artistic and athletic displays he organized. The representative charged him at first to organize a special course in the French language for 120 young people, and then an advanced course in the Malagache culture for a different group of young people recently arrived from various French universities.

In spite of the exhausting school work, Brother Raphael yet found time to devote himself to serious scholarly activity. He began with a series of articles that appeared in the Catholic periodical under the title *Ny feon ' ny marina* (The Voice of Truth) intended for parents and teachers. In these articles he showed that he had thoroughly assimilated the teaching of Saint John Baptist de La Salle who, so to speak, shone through on every page. Other articles in the same publication were intended for missionaries from abroad. It is amazing to read the suggestions he made concerning native customs and usages. It is almost like reading a modern treatise on inculturation, that is, how to incarnate the Gospel into an autonomous culture, and also how to adopt and transform the rites and beliefs of non-Christian cultures to give them a Christian meaning. He used to say that nothing so distances a people from the acceptance of Christianity than the desire to suppress customs that are thousands of years old in order to replace them with others that are foreign.

For all of these cultural achievements and for the responsible positions that he filled with zeal and competence in favor of his people, he was one of the first to be named a member of the newly founded Academy of Madagascar, established by General Gallieni in 1902.

Unfortunately, out of the many and diverse literary publications of Brother Raphael very few have survived. The reasons for their loss are diverse and go back to the vandalism of the soldiers when he was arrested in 1915. After an inquest focused on his writings that might prove that he was a member of the secret V.V.S. sect, they carried away everything he had in his room. Then there was one of the Brothers who destroyed some of his writings that were thought to be "too patriotic." Besides all that, conformable to the custom in the Institute, and out of humility, many of his writings did not bear the name of the author. The fact that we have been able to report something about his writings is due to Doctor Roland Martin of the University of Antananarivo, who published a rather useful inventory in 1970.

THE WOUNDED GAZELLE

Thirty-eight years had passed since the day when Brother Raphael donned for the first time the Brothers' habit. Thirty-eight years of hard and constant work, consecrated to sanctify himself by the observance of the Rule and accomplishing the tasks assigned to him. Despite all that, he seemed to feel himself far from the kind of sanctity he dreamed of attaining. In front of the Blessed Sacrament he knelt down with arms extended in the form of a cross and from the depths of his heart uttered this prayer: "Lord, I beg of you ardently, grant me one great trial that will contribute to my sanctification." The response from heaven came in the form of a drama of which Brother Raphael became a memorable victim.

The explosion of the first World War in 1915 resulted in bloodshed all throughout Europe. Many of the Malagache, taking advantage of the circumstances, thought they could overcome the political problems of their country by overthrowing the pro-French monarchy and by proclaiming themselves a republic. For this purpose they created a "secret society" strongly nationalistic and made up for the most part of the intellectuals in the capital. The police found out about the group and set about putting its members under arrest.

Strangely enough, Brother Raphael himself was caught in this trap. This was due to the fact that the leaders of the society, knowing how much the Brother loved his country, without his consent had listed his name among the first adherents as a way to attract a large number of members. To the amazement of the Brothers, on December 24, 1915 the guards came to arrest him. They ransacked his room and confiscated a box of his manuscripts which they supposed contained all kinds of political and military secrets. Unfortunately, no one knows what became of this material: it was all destroyed and lost forever.

Brother Raphael was confined underground in a narrow and filthy cell. A broken down table and a covering of wool was all that was provided for his use. Brother Raphael did not complain but he knew deep in his heart that you cannot lock in a cage an eagle that is born to fly in the open blue sky. Only a few hours had passed when he heard the rattle of the iron gate of his little cell. With torch in hand, a guard entered to give him some food. "Thank you, my friend," said Brother Raphael, "I appreciate the gesture but today is the Vigil of Christmas and we Catholics are obliged to fast." The guard went away astonished. During all his life as a jailer he had never experienced anything like it. He asked himself how a man of such faith and goodness could find himself there, locked up like a bandit.

Shortly after midnight - it was already Christmas - the door of his tiny cell was opened again. This time it was the first of the investigators. "Do you know why you have been arrested?" "No, Sir, I have no idea." "It is because you have participated in a plot against the state. Have you anything to say?" Brother Raphael could not believe what he had just heard. After a moment he replied "Sir, I have nothing against the government, nothing against the state or against any person. My only preoccupation is to do good among the young Malagache by spreading the message of the Gospel. There is surely some error." His reply did not convince the inquisitor.

During the following days there were more interrogations and the confiscated manuscripts were examined. None of them contained anything compromising. The day of the hearing arrived with the prosecution witnesses. What were the accusations? One after the other of the accusers could only manage to mutter expressions such as "In reality, I heard it said that ... ; One of my friends told me ... ; As for me, I saw nothing but everyone was saying" In the face of such general uncertainty and such restrained reticence, the judge was convinced that the accused was innocent. But the judicial process required that the witnesses for the defense be heard. Suddenly the tune was changed. The parade of witnesses was endless and the praise and gratitude toward Brother Raphael grew into a crescendo with never a false note. As a result on February 18 the trial of Brother Raphael came to an end with a public

demand for apology on the part of the judge and an order for his immediate release. The gazelle wounded by treachery could run again in freedom.

It was eight o'clock in the evening. A joyful populace filled the streets and accompanied the Brother to his home in the community of the Brothers. All those who could get near enough kissed his hands, the hands that had been kept in ignominious chains. Although he was physically weakened but with a serene and noble mien, the son of the supervisor of the slaves walked with his head held high. On this occasion his closest friends were admitted to the Brothers' house to be present for the return of their friend and for several hours they vied with one another to congratulate the victim of this hateful intrigue. These demonstrations of joy continued for several days accompanied, according to the local custom with the presentation of gifts. The bishop himself came to meet with his "substitute during the years of exile." He revealed to the Brothers a secret, namely, that the day after he was set free Brother Raphael had come to him to ask for a new rosary because his had been completely worn out during his incarceration.

EPILOGUE

The gazelle was running once again it is true, but he carried in his body the effects of the time he spent in prison and the wounds he suffered there. The days spent in his filthy prison cell, dark and freezing cold, even for such a short time, resulted in serious damage to the Brother's health. Ever since, he had frequent bouts of fever. With the hope that a change of climate would be able to restore him to health, the superiors sent him to Fianarantsoa, the second largest city in Madagascar. There the Brothers had a tranquil property on the side of a hill called in Malagache *bel sito*. It was a veritable earthly paradise, close to beautiful Fianarantsoa, adorned with all the beauties of nature, rich vegetation, plenty of birds and flowers. It was like having exchanged his tattered rags for fancy garments.

However that might have been, for Brother Raphael, who had deep in his heart a great love for his own city, Fianarantsoa seemed like a land of exile. He left the capital out of a spirit of obedience without a murmur, leaving behind the city where he was born, where he was baptized, where he became a religious, where he pronounced his first vows, where for forty long years he had worked to fight and suffer for the cause of Christ. He would not see Antananarivo again with its beautiful cathedral, its wonderful school, the places where he had played games, free and happy as a gazelle.

Brother Raphael lived at Fianarantsoa for only two years during which he tried to be useful as far as his strength would allow. On May 15, 1919 the exhausted Brother brought himself to the principal church of the city to participate in the celebration of the feast in honor of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who had been canonized during the Holy Year of 1900. This was his last time out of doors. On May 19, after having received the last sacraments, fully conscious, Brother Raphael Louis Rafiringa fell quietly asleep in the peace of the Lord. He was 63 years old.

The great number of people who admired Brother Raphael, especially those in Antananarivo, were grieved by the news of his death and by not being able to pay him their last respects. Gradually as time went by, they became less and less resigned to the notion that his mortal remains were buried so far away from the scene of his intense activity. They decided to take the necessary steps to have the body of their beloved teacher returned to Antananarivo where they would build a suitable mausoleum. It was in 1933 that the long-desired transfer took place. There was tremendous surprise when the body of the Brother emerged from the ground, as intact as if he had just been buried. A faded photograph from that period shows him standing there in the midst of his Brothers and former students.

The procession from Fianarantsoa to Antananarivo was a triumph. Particularly impressive was the stay at the cathedral during the night, a source of many favors and graces. Among these was the cure recognized as a miracle by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints which would lead to the beatification of our Brother.

THE MIRACLE

Monsieur Pierre Rafaralahy was 65 years old when, in 1927, he became aware of a paralysis in his lower body. For several years he was aware of an inexplicable weakness in his legs. This produced some apprehension in his outlook that developed eventually into a kind of obsession. Instead of disappearing, the weakness kept increasing until, in 1927, it had spread to the point of a total paralysis.

Pierre Rafaralahy was born in 1862, only six years younger than the Malagache Rafiringa who would later become Brother Raphael. His association with the missionaries who spent time in his village resulted in his conversion to Catholicism. When in 1883 the missionaries were forced to leave the island he was among the zealous disciples of Brother Raphael, the chosen leader of the Christian community. From 1895 to 1927 he served as a catechist in several communities on the island. Meanwhile he married and founded a Catholic family. The premature death of two of his daughters was a source of great grief to him. One of his adopted daughters testified that it was this that brought on some cardiac difficulties with, according to her, consequent problems with his lower limbs.

The problem was where to find a doctor, and even more a specialist. He might consult sorcerers and healers, but that would probably not be worth the trouble. Good person that he was, Pierre bowed his head in submission to the will of God, without disputing it or worrying very much about it. Brought up on the principles of the Catholic religion, and aware of the efficacy of the intercession of the saints, he had not forgotten his teacher, Brother Raphael, whom, as did his comrades, he considered a saint. When he learned that the remains of Brother Raphael, during their transfer to Antananarivo, were going to stop for a time in the cathedral of Antsirabe, he arranged to have himself taken there to pay a final tribute to his teacher and to ask (why not?) for his help.

The miracle took place. After the celebration of Mass, the coffin was displayed in the center aisle of the cathedral. Pierre approached hobbling on crutches. As he placed his hand on the coffin, he experienced a tremor going through his whole body and felt he could stand up without support. He did so without difficulty; in fact he was cured. Good Pierre, keeping steady on his own two legs that had remained useless for six years went immediately to the priest of the cathedral and left his crutches, now no longer needed, as a remembrance of the event. That very day, after accompanying the cortege for some distance as it headed for Antananarivo, he returned joyfully home, walking a distance of some ten miles.

The recipient of the miracle with renewed energy resumed his normal activity in his family and in society. He died in 1940 at age 78 without experiencing the least relapse of the paralysis he had suffered in his lower limbs between 1927 and 1933.

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