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## LITURGICAL SPACE AND INCULTURATION IN MADAGASCAR

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The following is an account of my pastoral liturgical ministry in Madagascar. As a Catholic missionary I worked for eight years on the “Ile Rouge”, where I return from time to time. Here I shall be referring particularly to the East Coast of the “Main Island”, the region I know best. In 1971 I began my priestly ministry in a missionary district which stretches from the Indian Ocean to the forest of the great cliff.

I had already lived in Madagascar two years since 1966 on the learn the language. I came from Italy. I knew France a little during the time I studied theology at Lyon-Fourvière. What then did I encounter on returning to Madagascar in 1971?

### **1. THE AWKWARDNESS OF AN IMPORTED LITURGICAL MINISTRY, OR MORE PRECISELY, THE DISORGANIZATION OF SACRED SPACE**

At the beginning, as I shall repeat several times, I was aware neither of this awkwardness nor of this disorganization. It was only after I had experienced the bringing together of the habitual setting of the Christian liturgical space and the setting of ancestral customs that a careful consideration of the two made me aware of the problem.

#### **1.1. The placing of churches**

The churches in Madagascar, like the majority of European churches, are now built oriented towards the main street or the square. This expression is clearly inadequate, for to

“orient” really means to “turn towards the east”. Instead of saying that they are “oriented”, it would be more correct to say that they are “streeted”, turned towards the street, or “squared”, turned towards the square. Yet as a European Christian, I did not even notice this wholly “disoriented orientation”.

## **1.2 The presider like a senior altarboy**

When I presided at the eucharistic celebration, at the beginning I used to find myself in front of a stool placed just at the side of the altar. Around me, in front of the benches, stood the altarboys, dressed in black and white or in red and white like a miniature clergy. Going back to that first experience, I realize now that I, the priest, was like the senior of the altarboys.

A little farther away in the first benches were the other children, then the young people (boys on the right and girls on the left), and then the women. At last, at the back of the church, there stood a few men, the most courageous of whom had taken their place in the last benches, while the others stood beside the door as if they had to hold it up.

I still remember the invitation the men addressed to the children when I entered their village for my pastoral visit: “Go on, children! Your father has arrived. He will let you sing in church and entertain you with little stories”. Fathers of families hastened to send their children to church, but did not come themselves for, in their eyes, Christian prayer was not a man’s occupation.

Yet at that time I did not worry so much about all this. I even attributed the reticence of the adult men to come to pray in church to the well-known fact — at least from the time of St Paul (Acts 16:13) — that men are by nature less religious than women.

## **1.3 The wandering ambo**

Those were the years after the liturgical reform of Vatican II. Even in the churches of Madagascar they had already discovered the ambo as the supporting stand for the word of God. In the large churches of the towns, as well as in the small churches of the countryside, the ambos were always improvised and flimsy, so that they could easily be moved around. The ambo was moved to the right, then to the left; it was pushed forward, or moved backwards at the whim of the reader, or of whoever desired to move it. Sometimes after the last reading, realizing that the ambo was not needed anymore, someone would hasten to remove it and store it against the wooden partition. Even in the face of this continual moving of the ambo, at first I remained totally indifferent.

## **1.4 The multipurpose altar**

Not far from me was the altar. It was a wooden table already turned facing the people. On the altar nothing was lacking: cross, holy water sprinkler, candles, pots of flowers, sometimes statues or small reliquaries, a songbook, a pencil and rough notes for announcements, water and wine cruets, oil containers, matches. The paten, the chalice, and the missal were already prepared on the altar at the beginning of Mass. The old catechist, who was far-sighted, used to place his glasses on the altar absentmindedly each time he prepared to read or to speak. At the end of Mass, those responsible would sometimes count the collection on the altar in

the sight of all, so that everyone might see what was going on. I must admit that, at that time, I accepted all of this as almost normal.

When I left the center of my missionary district for a tour in the forest, I was sumptuously received. I used to arrive towards evening and would find a whole hut at my disposal. Knowing that I was a stranger and that I was not accustomed to sit on the mat, the people used to bring into the hut a table with a stool that they had borrowed from the village schoolteacher. That table had known many battles. At least it was a table! I contemplated it, appreciating the zeal of my Christians for their guest, and I felt truly grateful.

The next morning, on entering the little church, I saw that everything was ready. I noticed my stool not far from the altar and the benches of the altarboys. Then, letting my eyes rest on the altar, I exclaimed: “I know that table! It’s the same one that was in my hut! I wrote notes for the catechism examination on it, then I had supper with the catechist on it, and this morning I had breakfast on it!”. Obviously they had arranged for it to be rapidly carried to the church by young people, for it was the only table in the village. I considered this as quite normal. It did not surprise me at all; I looked on, and so let them continue.

## **2. ORGANIZATION OF SACRED SPACE IN DAILY LIFE AND IN THE ANCESTRAL LITURGY**

I was always very interested getting to know the life, the mentality, and the customs of my people. Being always among them, I looked, enquired, and questioned with a discreet insistence and registered in my mind what I discovered. I noticed that in village-life the space is perfectly organized, both outside and inside the house. Yet this organization of space has nothing to do with the simple exigences of agreeable arrangement, harmonious style, aesthetic taste or social politeness.

### **2.1. Sacred space outside people’s houses**

Looking at the houses, I noticed fairly quickly that they are always perfectly “oriented”, i.e. turned towards the east. They have two doors: the east door through which no one comes, for it is reserved for the Creator and the Ancestors, and the west door, through which everyone comes in and out.

To the east of the House of the King (also called the “Great House” or “Common House”), in front of the door reserved for the Creator and the Ancestors, there stands the sacred pole or *fatòra*, a name which means “link”. It is in fact what links the living to the Creator, through the mediation of the Ancestors.

Quite often in the Tanàla country (i.e. the forest region), the *fatòra* consists of two pieces of wood, the male pole and the female pole. The first, which is sculpted from the heart of the hardwood *mahanòro* tree (which means “that makes blessed”), is the longer one and shaped to a point; it represents the male Ancestors. The second is shorter, made of the soft *volombòro* tree (which means “bird’s plumage”); this wood, not barked except from its top shaped to a round, represents the female Ancestors. A flat stone is kept on the ground near the female pole. It is placed on the top of the female pole during the sacrificial rites when the

fat from the sacrificed ox is burnt on it along with incense. Part of the larynx of the ox is stuck on the point of the male pole as a symbol of the life offered to the Creator. The two sacrificial poles — or in certain groups, the single pole — constitute the common altar of the village. These poles are surrounded with great respect and veneration.

In addition to the common sacrificial altar, reserved for the worship of the Creator and the Ancestors and always placed in the center of the village, there are also some minor altars. These are the family altars, usually formed by placing a stone of greater or lesser size on legs. They are not easy to see, for they are often in hidden places in the forest or at the side of small footpaths.

It was by chance that I first encountered a family altar, and I was surprised. It was a flat medium-sized stone, erected on four legs at the side of a footpath. Not knowing what it was, I asked my companions for an explanation. They said to me: “It’s an altar of our ancestral religion! We place on it the sacrificial offerings, that the family offers to the Creator and the Ancestors”. They explained that the stones of this type of altar are “forged by the hand of the Creator” (*vita-nanahàry*) and not by human tools. I exclaimed: “Just as it was in the Old Testament!”. In order to obtain the explanations which were already coming to my mind, I asked rather naively: “If someone were to stop by the side of such an altar, could they, for example, lean their stick against it, or place on top of it their hat, coat, or some such thing?”. They replied together at once: “Oh no! Absolutely not! This altar has a sacred dignity (*hàsina*); it is holy. It is reserved for the worship of the Creator and the Ancestors”. Then they added many other interesting details.

However I must add that, in the village of Behazavà (i.e. “Where the light is great”), there is next to the wooden sacrificial poles, at the very center of the village, a stone altar made by a large flat stone placed on legs and carefully protected by a wooden fence. This splendid altar, which is also called *fatòra*, is not a family altar. It is the clan altar, the altar of the whole village, and forms one body with the wooden *fatòra*.

## 2.2. Sacred space inside people’s houses

Inside the houses, which are deliberately built facing east, the space is rigorously organized.

One notices the two doors: the west door through which people come in and out, and the east door which can be opened and closed but through which no one may pass, as it is reserved for the worship of the Creator and the Ancestors.

To understand better the organization of the sacred space, let us consider the arrangement of places when a guest is received in any kind of house. Here I remember what happened each time I was received into a house.

The place for the Master of the house is situated to the south of the east door. This place is strictly reserved for him and he can give it to no one else. He sits on the mat or on a small straw-stuffed cushion.

The Distinguished Guest sits on the other side of the east door. It is his place and he must take it. He too is seated on the mat or on a small straw-stuffed cushion, just like the Master of the house. To the right of the Distinguished Guest all the Elders who enter the house

take their places, first the guests and then the village Elders, according to their age and social function. If the east wall is not long enough for them all, the Elders continue to arrange themselves along the north wall. As the east wall is specifically reserved for them, they are called the *Atsinàna lamòsy*, “Those who turn their backs to the east”.

While the Elders place themselves with reference to the east door, the young people sit in relation to the west door. The first sits very near the door, towards the north side. The second sits at his left, and so on, everyone would be watching that they do not cross the middle line from north to south.

The women sit in the southern part of the hut, to the left of the Mistress of the house. Her place is strictly reserved for her alone, for she must stay right beside the fire, facing her husband. The young girls place themselves next to the adult women, careful to stay rather close to the west door. Lastly, at the west door, in fact on the ground just outside the house, the children remain standing; they make no noise and pay great attention to all that happens inside the house.

### **3. AN ATTEMPT AT INCULTURATION OF THE SACRED SPACE**

One day my Christians and I decided to build a church in the geographical center of the Tanàla missionary district. The district was too large and the villages too scattered.

The mission possessed a piece of land called *Maroakòho*, a name which means “Where there are many chickens”. In fact, it was not a question of laying hens, but of spirits which sometimes manifested themselves in the form of chickens. It was thus a haunted domain. The previous owner had generously offered it to the mission, thinking that the Christian faith would have the upper hand over the evil spirits.

We had thought of building this church for quite a long time. It had to be a small wooden church with a corrugated iron roof. Although it would be small, it had to be large enough for it would gather together all the Christian delegations of the forest.

#### **3.1. The church like a large “oriented” house**

In the context of several formal and informal meetings, I then began a discussion which proved to be, by what later happened, a veritable mystagogy. I listened; I let people speak; from time to time I asked naive questions which, like a magic wand, provoked lively and vigorous interventions, and sometimes I gave some suggestions.

We had before us two possible models for building. On the one hand, there were the Europeans’ houses as well as the churches built by European missionaries, inevitably built turned towards either the street or the square. On the other hand, there were the people’s houses which were correctly oriented. We decided, we had to build our church in line with the houses of those who know how to distinguish east from west.

We fixed the day for the laying of the foundation stone, or rather for the planting the first wooden post. We got up early, well before dawn, so that we could find the exact orientation. Some said: “The east is here”. Others were more precise: “Yes, just a little more to the

right”. Still others: “A little to the left”. At last the sun, rising on the horizon, put an end to our discussions and everyone cried out: “Look, the east is there!”.

Of course, building our church like the people’s houses demanded certain adaptations. The church had to be extended towards the west, since it had to welcome large numbers. The fire was omitted: there was no reason to have it in church. Then we did not build the east door, although I now believe that including it would have produced very interesting discussions about theological inculturation.

Once the framework was in place, measuring some 12 by 5.5 meters, we had to think about internal architecture in the following order: first, the presider’s chair; second, the ambo for the proclamation of the word of God; third, the altar for the celebration of the eucharist.

### **3.2. The construction of the chair**

The presider’s chair was of primary importance, for without it we could not have a liturgy, whether just a liturgy of the word or a eucharistic liturgy. It was not difficult to agree on the location of the chair. We had only to place it in the location reserved for Master of the house or for the Distinguished Guest. Both enjoy equal dignity. A solution was quickly found when we omitted the fire, which obliges the Master of the house to sit in front of his wife. To emphasize the importance of the chair, we fashioned it out of rosewood and buried its four long legs in the ground.

Next to the presider, who is truly the Master of the house of prayer, we placed the Elders, the *Atsinàna lamòsy*, “Those who turn their backs to the east”, on fixed benches on his right and on his left.

### **3.3. The construction of the ambo**

Then we had to construct the ambo for the word of God. This was fairly easy. We located a large rosewood tree in the swamp and skilled hands quickly fashioned an ambo out of its trunk. This too was fixed in place by pushing it deep into the ground.

### **3.4. The construction of the model altar for the church of Maroakòho**

Finally we had to build the altar for the eucharist, because after the liturgy of the word follows the eucharistic liturgy. This time I have to describe our attempt at inculturation in greater detail.

While in the small churches of the forest, people had been happy with a wooden altar, sometimes made of a rickety table, in the large churches of coastal towns (Farafangàna, Manakàra, Vohipèno) the churches had stone altars. The missionary builders had them brought by train and truck from the quarries in the suburbs of Antananarivo, some 700 kms away. I remember that, even for a church in one of the suburbs of Antananarivo, one of my confrères, not quite happy with the fine local stone, imported an altar made of white marble from Carrara (Italy). This trade in altars was the exact opposite of inculturation. The wooden altars of the forest had nothing to envy the marble and granite altars of the town churches.

Speaking to my Christians, I said to them: “For some reason or other, all these altars lack sacred dignity (*hàsina*): our wooden altars, for they bear the mark of the provisional, and

in addition are even put to profane use; their stone altars, for they have been ordered, sold, and transported just like any other merchandise. That's why Christians, otherwise so sensitive to the idea of *hàsina*, do not respect them. Why shouldn't we build for our church a stone altar like those of the ancestral cult?". Unconsciously, I was thinking of the ancestral altar at Behazavà, which stands there on its four legs, to the east of the King's House, in the center of the village and well protected by its wooden fence. There was no further need to plead for the project. The Christians were ravished by the idea. We had just to locate the stone.

It was not at all easy to find a large flat stone that could meet our needs. Therefore, all of us, the young and the less young, set out to locate it. During my various pastoral journeys, I did not lose the opportunity to detour into the region of Maroakòho to view this or that stone



which somebody had pointed out to me; that gained me the name of *Mompèra mirèmy vato* (i.e. "The Father who seeks the stone").

In the end we found a stone which could do for our church. As it was of a size that could be carried, we had to transport it on a stretcher, since in the customs of the people a stone carried by hand possesses greater *hàsina*. The transportation took place on Palm Sunday, 1974. It was a great event. After the location and the transportation of the altar stone, we had to find and transport, always by hand, four equal stone legs.

I must add that the search, transportation, and preparation of the material to be used in the construction of the chair, ambo and altar, were done free of charge by the adults and the young people, as a sort of mystical experience.

Some months later Mgr Victor Razafimahatràtra, then bishop of the diocese of Farafangàna, and now cardinal archbishop of Antananarivo [P.S.: he died October 6,

1993], came to consecrate this typical, model altar of the forest. *L'Osservatore Romano* of March 24, 1990 gave us the honour of printing a photograph of this Christian altar, the first to be inculturated in the ancestral faith.

### 3.5. The construction of the altar in the large church of Andèmaka

After the model altar in the church of Maroakòho, I had to look after the construction of the altar in the church of Andèmaka, built earlier by my confrère in the other missionary district for which we were jointly responsible. It was a large, solid building. A table top, resting on a tree trunk, had been placed as a provisional altar. Yet in the choice of the tree trunk,

my confrère and I had given more thought to the form of the trunk than to the quality of the wood. It was a wood of no value, which the people calls *ampalibè*. Seeing it, our Christians used to say to themselves: “Oh, it’s only *ampalibè*! It has no sacred dignity (*hàsina*)”. And they would smile with a kind of understanding. After the experience at Maroakòho, it did not take the Christians too long to decide for building a stone altar.

In the region of Andèmaka, a name which means “Flat ground”, finding stones is not so easy. Every children have difficulty in finding pebbles for their slings. There are some rocks about 15 kms upstream.

I cannot describe in detail the adventure that started once the Christians had made up their mind. I will just give a summary. My collaborators and I searched high and low among all the rocks of the region: I could count them on my finger-tips. We found one which, we thought, could do for an altar. We brought a stone cutter from quite some distance: we had to plane and flatten the upper part of the stone, while keeping its appearance as stone “forged by the Creator” (*vita-nanahàry*). Then we needed to make a huge bamboo raft to transport it by river. And lastly, we needed to haul it on to the raft and depart.

Unfortunately, on passing through some rapids between rocks, the raft capsized. Luckily, no one was hurt. Fortunately too, the stone, well tied with strong creepers, remained attached to the middle section of the raft and ended up by gently coming to rest on a sand-bank, some 2 meters deep. At the cost of unforgettable efforts we managed to recover the stone, re-



build the raft, and replace the stone on it for the definitive departure. Arriving at our destination, we dragged the stone from the river bank to the church of Andèmaka on a sort of wooden sledge: it was too heavy to carry. Then we needed to provide four huge legs to support the altar stone.

This was truly an affair in which the whole village participated: Protestants as well as Catholics, and even the non-Christians who are quite numerous in the region. This was their altar; so during the various difficulties and vicissitudes of the work, the people freely volunteered their help, since no altar can ever be bought at the market.

#### **4. THE RESULTS OF THE INCULTURATION OF LITURGICAL SPACE**

##### **4.1. The sacredness of the chair**

The results of such inculturation were immediate. From this time onwards, the Christians understood the sacredness of the chair. It was no longer simply a functional piece of

furniture on which someone might sit. It symbolized, like the *cathedra* of the early Christian basilicas, the calling of the Christian people to prayer. It was not reserved exclusively for the bishop or the priest, as some continue to do in our European churches. It was the presider's chair, and anyone presiding at the celebration was obliged to sit there. Thus, in the absence of a priest, the catechist sat on it, or else one or other of the Elders called to preside the Sunday liturgy.

Besides, the presider no longer appeared to be the senior of the altarboys. Even the altarboys took their places with the other children. The presider was henceforth the senior of the Elders, truly the "presbyter", even if he remained layperson. The *Atsinàna lamòsy*, "Those who turn their backs to the east", sat on either side of him. I remember that in the large church of Andèmaka the Elders, and notably the old men, used to arrive first at the Sunday celebration, at the sound of the first bell and well before the young people, for they knew that they were the first to be involved. From this point, they felt Christian prayer to be their affair, or rather the affair of the whole community which the Elders represent in an eminent way.

#### 4.2. The sacredness of the ambo

In the same way, the Christians quickly understood the sacredness of the ambo. It was no longer a place where the missionary read little stories which amused the children. It had become the place from which the readers, who were necessarily adults, proclaimed the word of the Great King. The ambo became the supporting stand for the word of God, or the "Great Writing" (*Sora-bè*), as the people liked to call the Holy Scriptures. The choir director or the person who announced the notices no longer used the ambo.

#### 4.3. The sacredness of the altar

Lastly, and above all, the people understood the sacredness of the altar. They no longer called it by the strange and insipid name of *otèly*. This Madagascanized form of the French *autel*, concocted by the missionaries, lacked all resonance of the sacred. In addition it's pronounced exactly like another neologism, *hotèly*, derived from the French *hôtel*. This unhappy homophony baffled even those open to Christianity who, on hearing of a Christian *otèly*, did not know such a thing could be like or what purpose it could serve. Then the Christians used to call their new stone altar rather *vàto fisàofana*, which meant "sacrificial stone", or to translate literally, "stone of confession" (cf. Hebrew *tôdâ*), "stone of thanksgiving", "stone of the eucharist". Clearly no one was tempted any longer to place flowerpots, songbooks, announcements notes, eyeglasses, nor even the bishop's skullcap on it.

This experience of inculturating the liturgical space enabled me, a Christian and a priest from Europe, to learn some things which I never thought of before.

First, I learned, at the school of the ancestral faith, that the celebration of the Christian cult is carried out around a triad of signs imbued with sacred dignity (*hàsina*): first the chair, then the ambo, and finally the altar.

Second, at that same school I learned that in the celebration of the Christian cult these three signs, together with the liturgical space they create, need to be deeply inculturated in the ancestral liturgy, so that they can radiate their full force and dignity.

Third, I learned, always at the school of ancestral liturgy on the East Coast of Madagascar, that every community celebration has as a primary requirement the active participation of adult men, “those who turn their backs to the east”. Without their presence our churches, especially the Catholic ones, risk being seen, during their liturgies, as kindergartens.

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