



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 6, 2014,
Feast of Transfiguration of Our Lord

Dear Friends,

OVER the course of his long pontificate, Saint John Paul II traveled the globe to proclaim the Gospel. On April 30, 1989, in Madagascar, he spoke these words: "I am happy to be able to come to your country to celebrate the beatification of a daughter of the noble Malagasy people, who was a 'pillar and foundation' for her brothers and sisters. From this day on, she will fulfill this role even more. Victoire [Rasoamanarivo] illustrates in a special way the unique role of women in the Church... You recognize in your first Blessed the traditional qualities of your people. Many witnesses described her patience, which was not simply a resignation to or an escape from difficulties, but rather an attitude of profound peace in the face of saddening or hurtful events, even before evils that must be condemned."

Rasoamanarivo was born in Tananarive, modern-day Antananarivo, in 1848, the fourth in a family of seven children. Her father would become Protestant. Her mother was known for her gentleness and kindness. The family belonged to the Hovas, one of the fifteen tribes of Madagascar, who live in the center of the island. Neither royalty nor aristocratic, her family became the richest and most powerful in the kingdom after Queen Ranavalona I (1828-1861) had made Rasoamanarivo's grandfather the prince consort and commander in chief of the army. The family formed an impenetrable clan that lived in large mansions near the queen's palace. The government was absolute despotism.

The girl led an idle and worry-free childhood. She was familiar with all the superstitious practices of her people, and wore an amulet intended to ward off all evil. She was thirteen when Queen Ranavalona I died, succeeded by her son Radama II, who gave permission to Catholic missionaries to establish themselves in Madagascar. The first priests to land on the big island had been the Vincentians, sent by Saint Vincent de Paul in the seventeenth century, who had founded Fort Dauphin on the southernmost end of the island. But it was only in 1820, after the Protestant pastor Jones brought the Bible to Madagascar, that Christianity began to grow. Already by 1830 there was a significant community of Christians, many of whom would die for their faith during the persecution against foreign religions organized by the queen in 1835. In 1855, Catholic missionaries succeeded in entering the country, in disguise. Thanks to the king's goodwill, Jesuit fathers settled officially in Tananarive during the last months of 1861. They were accompanied by two Sisters of Saint Joseph of



Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo

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Cluny, who opened the first Catholic school for girls in the capital.

"Someone was looking at me!"

Rasoamanarivo, who was one of the Sisters' first students, distinguished herself by her seriousness and her ardent desire to know the religion. She later recounted the following event: "I entered the church impishly, with a piece of fruit that I began to eat. Suddenly, my eyes fell on the tabernacle and I was completely taken aback, as though someone there was looking at me! I was ashamed at what I was doing, and went outside to throw away the fruit. Then I went back in and knelt to pray." On November 1, 1863, Rasoamanarivo was baptized with the name Victoire, along with 25 other catechumens. Her godmother was the superior of the Sisters, Sister Gonzaga. The newly-baptized received First Communion the following January 17 and, during the ceremony, were consecrated to Mary. This first celebration drew many attendees to the church in Andohalo, among them some Protestants and pagans who observed with some anxiety the development of Catholicism in the country.

Pope John Paul II stated, "Victoire shows Christians today how to live their baptism. As a teenager, schooled by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, she prepared seriously for her entrance into the Church. Upon discovering

God's commandments, she immediately resolved to follow them, and to fight against sin. She practiced obedience to God's law with a happy interior freedom, as someone who loves... In the sacrament of Baptism she truly allowed herself to be seized by the presence of the resurrected Christ... Confirmation completed the work of making her one of the faithful, a temple of the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle says... You should take her as an example, when you discover her great love of the Mass, which she wanted to never miss. Communion with the Body of Christ is the true food of the baptized, for it is the most intimate encounter with the Lord."

They left her no choice

At the time of her First Communion, Victoire was fifteen years old, and her family wished to marry her off. She would have preferred to become a nun, but she was left no choice. Later, during the war of 1883, she would observe, "The good Lord did not allow it. He was already thinking of what would be happening today. If I were a nun right now, it would be impossible for me to do for religion what I am able to do now." On May 13, 1864, Victoire married her cousin Radriaka; in keeping with the custom of the time, the marriage had to remain within the narrow circle of the family. With his elevated rank, Radriaka commanded a part of the Malagasy army. Shortly after the marriage, Rainilaiarivony, Victoire's uncle and father-in-law, was named Prime Minister. He was filled with a great admiration for his niece and the faith she professed. Soon everyone would know of this affection.

Queen Rasoherina, who succeeded Radama II in 1863, entrusted the education of her adopted children to Catholic missionaries, who were, however, hampered in their apostolate by Protestant rivalry. In 1867, Protestantism became the official religion, and its power grew when it achieved the conversion of Queen Ranavalona II, who succeeded Rasoherina in 1868. Pressure was exerted to draw Catholics to the reformed religion. This pressure was felt even within the Prime Minister's family. Victoire, still a student in spite of her age, was forced to go to the Protestant school. She cried over it day and night, so much so that her family sent her to the Catholic sisters' school. Rainimaharavo, one of Victoire's other uncles, was among those most determined to fight the Catholics. When he became head of the family, he intervened with his niece on more than one occasion to win her over to Protestantism, but Victoire resisted his exhortations with great firmness. One day, she answered him: "It is in vain that you hope to intimidate me with your threats. They only serve to strengthen my faith. I await the day when you will drive me from your house. Then, freed from all worry, I will go through the city, asking for hospitality from those who have some affection for me. But as for making me renounce my religion, no one on earth will ever succeed." Another time, she declared to him: "My person belongs to you, as you are the head of the family. But my

soul belongs to God. I certainly will not trade it for money."

As a result of the relativist mentality that is currently so prevalent, Victoire's steadfast attachment to the Catholic faith, which she knew to be true, may not be understandable to everyone today. To appreciate its correctness, we must remember on the one hand that "we believe because of the authority of God Himself Who reveals [these truths], Who can neither deceive nor be deceived" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 156), and on the other hand, that "all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it" (Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1).

Christ is the head!

Radriaka did not share his wife's convictions, and was far from a model of virtue. He too tried to make her leave the Church, quoting to her the sentence from Saint Paul: *Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife* (cf. Eph. 5:22-24). "Yes, that's true," answered Victoire, "but the head of both husband and wife is Christ, and it is to Him that I have given myself in giving myself to you. How could He wish that I betray Him to obey you? No, Radriaka, it's impossible!" The young woman was supported by only one cousin, Antoine Radilofera. Victoire also developed a deep friendship with a slave, Rosalie; the two of them prayed together and supported one another in the faith. Persecution strengthened Victoire and made her triumph over any concern for human respect. She practiced her faith unostentatiously but unflinchingly, responding to those who were surprised by her pious exercises: "This is how we Catholics do it!" Her courage wore out her persecutors.

One morning, after a sleepless night during which she had said many Rosaries, Victoire rose before four to go to the church. A bit later, a man broke into her home. There was a large sum of money on the table, but he did not take it. Victoire was still at the church when she was told what had just happened. "I had the sense at the time," she would later say, "that he had come to kill me. I thanked God for having protected me, and I promised to serve Him more faithfully."

Victoire led an austere existence, combining her familial obligations, her duties as a lady of the court, and an intense prayer life which she invited her friends to share. Her goodwill towards all, her works and the witness of her faith inspired respect, and gave her an undisputed moral influence at the court. In the mornings she went very early to church, which displeased her relatives, who posted slaves to throw stones at her. One night, the guards who patrolled the city arrested her and denounced her to the Prime Minister. He told them: "No one has the right to be in the street at night except

Victoire." At church, Victoire was often on her knees, recollected, her eyes on the tabernacle. Her favorite prayer was the Rosary. She knew all the sick in the parish, visited them, encouraged them, and when needed, left them alms. In keeping with the local customs at the time, Victoire, who was childless, was served by several hundred slaves. She loved them and cared for them like a mother. One day, she freed two of them, but they refused to leave her, and continued to serve her until her death.

An indissoluble bond

Despite his elevated social status, Radriaka gave himself over to his passions, in particular heavy drinking. Shameless and violent behavior followed, which made Victoire suffer greatly. Radriaka's conduct became so scandalous that his father the Prime Minister, in agreement with the queen, wished to break off Radriaka's marriage with Victoire. Victoire threw herself at the queen's feet and got the plan abandoned: "Christian marriage," she declared, "is indissoluble. It was instituted by God and blessed by the Church. Men have no power over it." To encourage her husband to convert, Victoire never missed an opportunity to do good works for him. "Her untiring patience," Pope John Paul II would later say, "reinforced her Christian conviction to remain faithful to the indissoluble bonds of marriage despite the humiliations and sufferings she endured."

Victoire honorably held her rank in the world, but amidst the worldly distractions, she never forgot Christ, who was her entire life. When, with Rosalie, she took her leave of the family or the court, saying, "Excuse us, it is time to go to church," no one dreamed of detaining or criticizing them. In 1876, Father Causseque, a French missionary, was named parish priest in Andohalo. He launched a little apologetics review, the *Resaka*, and founded a Marian spirituality movement, the Catholic Union, with former students of the Christian Brothers school. He developed the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin, to which Victoire belonged, directing her toward works of charity on behalf of the poor and lepers. Thanks to him, the construction of the cathedral in Tananarive was completed, to which Victoire contributed generously.

In 1883, the first Franco-Malagasy conflict arose, after the Malagasy government refused to grant foreigners the right to own property. In addition, the Prime Minister ordered that the French flags, which had flown since 1840 in various places on the coast where local leaders had asked for France's protection, be taken down. This conflict resulted in the recall of the French missionaries to France, and placed the Catholic community, which numbered approximately 80,000 people, in great danger. Most were still new to the faith, and nearly all came from the most impoverished backgrounds. Victoire alone had the influence necessary to defend

those who, because of their relations with the French, were considered traitors. During the days that preceded the missionaries' departure, the churches of Tananarive were filled with throngs of Christians who besieged the confessionals and prayed fervently. On May 29, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny left. A climate of fear made it impossible to recruit porters, and the nuns left Tananarive on foot, to the great scandal of the Catholics. Victoire immediately alerted her father-in-law the Prime Minister, who sent porters to join the travelers 10 kilometers outside the city. Before he left, Father Causseque convened the members of the Catholic Union and entrusted to them the fate of the churches and schools during the missionaries' absence. He told Victoire: "When Our Lord went to Heaven, MARY, His Mother, remained on earth to encourage and support the apostles and the first Christians. Similarly, during the missionaries' absence, you must be the guardian angel of the Catholic mission and support the faithful." "Father," she answered tearfully, "I will do what I can."

In the midst of the faithful

After the missionaries left, the churches were officially closed, and guards were placed at their doors. The following Sunday, Victoire obtained their reopening both in the city and in the countryside. To visibly emphasize the crucial role played by Victoire, the Christians of Tananarive begged her to abandon the out-of-the-way seat she usually took in the Church by the chapel of the Blessed Virgin, and place herself in the midst of the faithful. A pew was prepared and decorated for her along the main aisle, and from then on, Victoire knelt there with great simplicity. Her adversaries asked why she went to Church when Mass was no longer being celebrated there. She answered: "How can you ask me such a question? Even though the Blessed Sacrament is not present, do you think my spirit remains idle? I place before my mind the missionaries saying the Mass, and mentally attend all the Masses being said throughout the world. I unite myself in intention with the saints in Heaven and the righteous on earth."

Along with Victoire, the Catholic Union, led by a young nobleman, Paul Rafiringa, prepared a program of activities. Twenty or so members of the Union divided up the eleven districts around the capital to lead Sunday meetings, visit schools, and keep up the courage of the isolated teachers. In October 1883, Victoire convened all the leaders of Christian communities and Catholic teachers. "It is false," she told them, "that the Catholic religion has been banned by the government, as the Protestants claim. On the contrary, the queen and the Prime Minister allow complete freedom. May the faithful remain undisturbed by the persecutions directed at them, for persecution is the inseparable companion of the Catholic Church. You are the columns of your churches. Their prosperity or ruin depends on you... I cannot visit you all myself. But the members of the Catholic Union will do so in my place and in my name."

Many Catholics were indeed victims of true persecution : schoolteachers, imprisoned by governors of distant provinces for bringing together believers, or Catholics unfairly prosecuted in court by Protestants, were saved thanks to Victoire's energetic interventions.

The only Malagasy religious who remained in Madagascar, a Christian Brother named Raphael, was elected Director General of the Works of the Church. Raphael was a fervent and praiseworthy religious, but in his ardent zeal, he thought it best to govern the various associations as he pleased, particularly the Catholic Union, without leaving them the autonomy they needed. More than once, Victoire had to intervene to restore peace and harmony among all parties ; she even had to publicly reprimand the Brother. Her firm and courageous language saved the Catholic Union. Soon, Victoire herself undertook to visit remote Christian communities, in order to inspire them with greater confidence. She also worked, not without risk, to obtain financial support for them. But above all, she prayed, fasted, and mortified herself to obtain from God the missionaries' return.

An unfoped-for Baptism

When peace was restored in 1886, the missionaries returned to their posts, after three years of absence. Their solemn arrival in Tananarive took place on March 29. On Easter Sunday, the members of the Catholic Union went to greet the new bishop, Bishop Cazet, the new apostolic vicar of Madagascar, who had arrived on April 23. Her special mission concluded, Victoire took her humble place in the parish again, but she continued her charitable works, especially on behalf of lepers and prisoners. For a long time she had longed for her husband Radriaka's conversion to Catholicism. After suffering a fall that would prove fatal, he accepted Baptism at the last moment. Since the cathedral priest

was unavailable, Victoire herself baptized him on March 14, 1888.

Recalling this event, Pope John Paul II observed, "We also know what courageous fidelity Victoire displayed to the sacrament of marriage, in spite of the trials of her relationship. Her commitment had been sealed before God, and she refused to call it into question. Sustained by grace, she respected her husband in the face of all opposition, and maintained her love for him, in the ardent desire that he might turn to the Lord and convert. In the end, the Lord gave her the consolation of seeing her husband accept Baptism."

After Radriaka's death, Victoire went into a period of strict mourning. No longer obligated to accompany her husband at the court, she appeared there only rarely. Her union with God became more constant and intimate than ever, with the help of silent retreats in which she made herself the most insignificant of the participants. She also took care of her uncle, the former persecutor of Christians, who, after falling into disfavor and being stripped of all his possessions, and tormented by illness, had been abandoned by all.

In 1890, Victoire's health deteriorated, but she continued to visit the Blessed Sacrament and the sick. When illness made it impossible for her to go out, Communion was brought to her at home. So she had the house prepared so that the Blessed Sacrament could be received with royal honors. In 1894, her condition worsened. Nevertheless, she was keen to attend the procession for the Assumption, on August 15. The exhaustion that followed proved to be fatal to her. In her final hours, she recited the Rosary non-stop. She died on Tuesday, August 21, 1894. "Immediately afterwards," a witness reported, "her face became radiant and seemed to smile." The funeral took place at the cathedral before a large crowd.

"When we contemplate Victoire's figure in the context of the young Church in this country, we gain an even better understanding of the irreplaceable role of the lay faithful, which was so strongly emphasized by the Second Vatican Council... With her great feminine qualities, Victoire took on the missions of evangelization, sanctification, and organization. She engaged in intense activity in union with all the members of the Church" (Saint John Paul II).

May Blessed Victoire's example help us to persevere in the faith through the trials of this life, and to give witness to it until the very end !

Dom Antoine Marie
— o.s.b.

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