

## ANSWERING HIS CALL WRITTEN BY: MARIA ARPINO LEE



In many subtle ways, Don Bosco has been a loving and guiding presence in my life. One day, I heard Him whisper about God's many missions, throughout the world. After giving it some serious thought, my husband and I joined VIDES Canada. We were sent to Madagascar where I taught and wrote didactic material; while my husband worked on computers.

Accepting the call to volunteer changed us immensely; the experience added a dimension to our lives, we never imagined possible.

We have returned to Madagascar twice, since our first visit, but it is our first impressions which remain the most vivid. Initially, the strong Salesians presence on the Red Island surprised us. We learned that the SDB arrived in 1981; they now run nine schools and many parishes. Whereas, the FMA came in 1986; they now operate seven schools and technical centres.

Our first volunteer assignment was in Manazary, district of Miarinarivo. We arrived in the middle of the rain season, while the SDB and the FMA were preparing to celebrate the feast of Don Bosco. The Sisters took many of us to Ijely at the SDB's school, in their jeep. This jalopy wouldn't have looked out of place in a war museum, its shock absorbers a distant memory. We traveled along a bumpy road filled with gullies, craters and huge rocks; we humorously and promptly nicknamed it the Rocky Road. During the drive, our backside received what we jokingly called the Sr. Krystyna's Spa and Massage Treatment. Hundreds of poor peasants were also traveling on this road. Many had been walking barefoot, in the rain, for over 30 Kms to come and celebrate Don Bosco. Because of the downpour, the outdoor Mass was cancelled. The church being too small, the majority stood outside devoutly

and attentively, throughout the four to five hours Mass. I felt foolish thinking of the times when for petty reasons, I didn't feel like going to our recently renovated church. Meanwhile, here I was, at the end of the world, in a shabby church with water leaking from the ceiling and with barely enough chairs to sit on.

I struggle to find the words to say how deeply I was touched by the simple spirituality of the people, standing uncomplaining in that relentless pouring rain. Slowly, I began to feel a new closeness to God. I have believed since then, that God truly IS among the poor and the downtrodden. In addition, I realized that somehow and without noticing it, I had gradually been replacing the love of God in my life, for the love of things. I also clearly saw how my ego had succeeded in obscuring an ancient truth: we are simply pilgrims on this Earth. One day too soon, all that people will remember of us is whether we loved and have been loved. It is my understanding that the opposite is also true.

After this experience, we gratefully accepted God's kindness and we believed that we had to give something back to those less fortunate.

We may not think about it often, but we live in a rich and wasteful society. Even though, we have an abundance of everything; we don't appreciate much and we are often unhappy. In contrast, life in Madagascar is difficult and often primitive; people live in extreme poverty. Things that we take for granted like jobs, food, security, education and medical help are luxuries most Malagasy can only dream of.

In the light of this, we decided to focus on projects dear to the FMA, those which would help them in their mandate to educate poor women and their children. We knew we needed help to accomplish such a complex mandate, so I ignored my natural timidity and we began contacting as many people and organizations that we could think of. Many answered His call. The response has been astounding and astonishing. With the help and generosity of many contributors, we were able to complete several projects. We helped to build new and better schools; chapels; kitchen; toilet facilities; a water cistern and a wall to protect garden produce that feeds school children. I was deeply moved by the diverse people working

together, to bring some dignity into the lives of perfect strangers. It was the best part of each and every project.

We have recently come back from Madagascar, where we assisted the diocesans with the opening of our container. The Archbishop of Antananarivo (Tana), Mgr. Odon Razanakolona, had pleaded for urgent help for his people. His call was again answered with great vitality and enthusiasm. We sent Monsignore's dioceses a container filled with books, medicine and medical equipment. We felt privileged to be in Tana and see so many happy and grateful faces. It was an exhilarating experience and a moment of great satisfaction.



There were many things in that container that will be helpful to many people, but the little ones only cared about one thing: the cookies. These treats are enriched with essential vitamins. The Sisters happily and proudly offered the cookies as part of an after school program, aimed at keeping the children off the streets. In Madagascar, as in too many places in the world, street children are often in danger of being kidnapped. Their body parts are harvested and then sold. I still shudder when I think of such barbarity, but it is an extremely sad reality in a world that cares only for profit, to the detriment of anything and anybody.

It is more important than ever to be good to one another and each gesture, no matter how small, counts. I have encountered goodness everywhere, but it is not flamboyant or pretentious, like its opposite. Goodness is humble and kind and it moves quietly and surely. I was told that the intimate and indescribable joy that people feel in their hearts, when they help and love one another, is God's sweet embrace. It is His way to say thank you for answering His call.

