

BLESSED VICTOIRE RASOAMANARIVO (1848-1894)



Queen Ranavalona I, reigned over Madagascar from 1828 until her death in 1861. A relentless enemy of the Christian religion, she venerated *sampy* (a type of idol) and performed thousands of superstitious practices for her own protection and for that of her kingdom. Next to the Queen's family, the most powerful clan in the country was the one into which Victoire Rasoamanarivo was born. Her grandfather, Rainiharo, had been Prime Minister to the court for over twenty years. Two of his sons, Raharo and Rainilaiarivony, succeeded him in his duties. Rainiharo had a daughter named Rambahinoro, to whom was born Victoire Rasoamanarivo. She was the third of seven or eight children from the marriage of Rambahinoro to a cousin.

She was born in 1848, a year that seemed to be - as an old Malagasy proverb says - "like the long distance appointment a rooster has with the sun." That year was marked by both the industrial and proletarian revolutions and the reawakening of nationalism.

In this context, Victoire's life would have a profound impact on her society, shaping its destiny and prompting the admiration of those who knew her. In November of 1861, after the death of Queen Ranavalona I, the first Catholic missionaries arrived in Tananarive (today Antananarivo). Victoire was thirteen years old and one of the first students to enroll in a school administered by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Clun. She distinguished herself by her modesty and devotion, and above all, by the care she took to attend Mass with piety and devotion every morning.

She was baptized at age fifteen, on November 1, 1863, and made her First Communion on January 17 of the following year. A few months later, on May 13, she was married to Radriaka, her cousin, the eldest son of Rainilaiarivony. Later, she would insist that at that time she wanted to become a religious sister, but added that "Providence had decided otherwise." Her new vocation, however, did not separate her from the Sisters. She continued to attend the school because the housework was carried out by servants.

Her difficulties began as her parents and their families tried to convert her to Protestantism, which was the state religion and the one most commonly practiced in high society. She was irreproachable and patient. She did not complain but pointed out to her husband the wrong that the families were doing to her dignity as a woman. Her husband, aware of how right she was, sometimes kneeled beside her to pray. She was further burdened by infertility and quietly endured the social stigma that came with it, as many wondered if this was the result of spousal neglect. Rejected by her own, Victoire then began to make the Church her second home. Despite many threats, she would spend seven or eight hours a day there, beginning at 4 o'clock in the morning. She created an oratory in her own house where she frequently spent time on her knees, prolonging her prayers until late evening. Victoire had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, so the rosary never left her hands. Her intense prayer life, rather than taking her away from her domestic duties, in fact, helped her to fulfill them with total dedication. She looked after her house, which included about thirty servants; she often visited the sick without any class distinction; she gave frequent alms; and she received poor and sick people in her house.

When the lay congregation of the Blessed Virgin was founded in 1876, Victoire was its President, endeavoring to instill in her companions a zeal for charity. She created a workshop for making clothes for the poor and for lepers. She also helped the poor churches, constructing a chapel of the sacred city of Ambohimanga. As a member of the Prime Minister's family, Victoire was a lady of the court. Forced to present herself at the Palace, she went there as a Christian, with her rosary visible in her hand, and prayed before and after lunch. At the sound of the bell, she apologized and took her leave to go aside to recite the Angelus. When she was asked for the reason, she simply replied, "It is the custom of us Catholics." There was no stiffness, ostentation, or bigotry in her, simply faith, fidelity to God, and absolute respect for others.

What most earned the admiration of the royal court was the heroic patience that Victoire demonstrated toward her unworthy husband for nearly three years. She never uttered the slightest complaint against him. However, his behavior was such that the Prime Minister, in agreement with the Queen, tried to arrange for her a separation and divorce from him. When Victoire became aware of their intentions, she begged her father-in-law to renounce the plan because, she said, Catholic marriage is indissoluble.

On May 25, 1883, a persecution broke out against the Catholic mission. All of the French missionaries were expelled and the Catholic faithful were accused of being traitors against the customs of the island, that is, of their homeland. On the very day the missionaries were expelled from Tananarive, an ordinance decreed by an unknown authority and publicized by civil and religious officials, proclaimed that since Catholicism was the religion of the enemies of the homeland, its followers would be considered traitors.

On the Sunday following the exodus of the missionaries, Catholics looked sadly at their closed churches, but did not even dare to approach them. At nine o'clock in the morning, Victoire arrived in front of the Cathedral. Seeing it closed, she sent a message to the Prime Minister asking if the queen had forbidden Catholics from entering the church. There was no such order. Then Victoire, approaching the official at the door, ordered the doors opened. "If you oppose this by force, my blood will be the first you will shed. You have no right to prevent us from entering our churches to pray." The doors were opened. Victoire entered first and many Christians followed her. It was a first victory, a most important one, since it established the principle of freedom of prayer. During the Franco-Malagasy war, the presence of missionaries of French nationality jeopardized the future of Catholicism, since it was seen the religion of the aggressor. Victoire had no prejudices against the French missionaries with whom she had excellent relationships but she wrote abroad to ask that, in view of the local situation, British missionaries be sent instead to Madagascar. But the expulsion was, in fact, applied also to the only English national missionary in the country, demonstrating opposition to Catholicism itself, regardless of the nationality of the missionaries. Father Causseque, a priest of the Cathedral, founded an association of men called "the Catholic Union," which became the instrument Victoire used to maintain faith and the practice of worship throughout the mission.

The members of the Catholic Union reopened chapels, gathered Christians together, and restored schools. It was not easy. Victoire sometimes visited people in the main squares of the town, offering courage by her presence to those who were weak. Some reports of the time describe the expressions of enthusiasm that these visits aroused. "Have confidence," Victoire said. "The Catholic religion is not prohibited. The French left, but religion remains."

When the missionaries finally returned to their posts, Victoire resumed her simple, modest, and humble life. The only thing that still concerned her was her husband's conversion. She prayed and had prayers offered for that intention. Her last work of "spiritual maternity" concerned her husband. One evening, they brought him home drunk, after a fall that would prove fatal. Victoire convinced him to be baptized, which was administered on his deathbed in 1887. She mourned as a widow until her own death, which came seven years later. She had many Masses offered for her husband's soul and took the occasion of her mourning to wear even simpler clothes and to withdraw almost completely from the court. Her most cherished children were the humble: the sick, the poor, the cruelly chained prisoners, lepers tormented continuously by their disease and banished by society.

After a brief illness, Victoire died on August 21, 1894. Two months later, the missionaries were exiled again, until 1895. On her deathbed, Victoire raised her hands to heaven and holding her rosary beads uttered three times, "Mother, mother, mother," and then expired.

She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on April 30, 1989, in Antananarivo. The Catholic Church celebrates her feast on August 21.