

# Madagascar: hope after the dump

Poverty can be beat. People who seemed condemned to a life of poverty have found the dignity and joy to live. The example of Akamasoa is important for all of Africa.

from Fabio Meloni and Anne Aubert, Friends of Father Pedro, Italy (October 2009).

TOJO HAS JUST RETURNED FROM PARIS WHERE SHE HAS SPENT TWO YEARS IMPROVING HER KNOWLEDGE OF FRENCH THANKS TO A SCHOLARSHIP. Despite a job offer to remain in Paris, she has chosen to return to her country, Madagascar, to be close to her people. When she was nine years old, life seemed to have condemned her to an irreversible path.

She had seen five brothers and sisters die with her own eyes, her parents had no jobs, no money, no house. Along with her eldest sister, she survived malnutrition and disease. In these conditions, Tojo and her family were found living in the enormous landfill of Antananarivo, the capital. They rummaged among garbage to find something to eat and slept in huts made of hemp propped between mountains of waste. It is there that Father Pedro saw them for the first time in 1991, blackened from dirt, wearing clothes made of rags, marked by the absent look and sunken faces of hunger.

The rubbish dump of Antananarivo is Hell with its stench from mountains of garbage and plastic bags, rusted steel and animal carcasses. Today

many families still live there and it is from there that we decided to begin our journey into an extraordinary world – a world difficult to imagine after discovering Madagascar under the airy gaze of a tourist. We met children who played in the garbage, mothers who nursed, old and young blackened by smoke and dirt, all trying to find plastic bottles or pieces of metal to sell by weight. When a truck loaded with trash arrived, people literally threw themselves into it, hoping to find new a treasure. One could not imagine anything further from such a world.

It is here that, twenty years ago, Father Pedro Opeka's adventure began. He had been sent to Madagascar to head the seminary of priests from the Order of Saint Vincent de Paul, but

## Facts

The **non-profit Amici di Padre Pedro association (*Friends of Father Pedro*)** began in Italy 2007 with the aim to support Father Pedro in his fight against poverty. Thanks to his relentless work, he has succeeded in giving dignity and hope to thousands of families and children in Madagascar.

**Akamasoa** is the name of the community Father Pedro founded in 1989. It is made up of 17 villagges on the edge of Antananarivo, where over 17,000 people live. Sunday October 11th 2009 was celebrated as the 20 year anniversary of Akamasoa.

To help, you can participate in the events organized by ***Friends of Father Pedro***, make a donation and raise awareness of the work of Father Pedro.

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1991: Father Pedro in the dump with Tojo and her family.



2009: Father Pedro in Akamasoa with Tojo and her family.



**Women rummaging among garbage (Antananarivo, Madagascar)**

when he saw the garbage dump from the hills of the city, he decided to see this scene that was part of everyday life for himself. People called the place “Beirut” because of the violent atmosphere where people killed for a few crumbs in a fight for survival.

### **Courageous adventure**

Pedro father did not just observe, he mustered the courage to speak with those he met, to convince them that they could and should leave that misery and abuse. It was during one of these outings in the “Beirut” of Madagascar that he met Tojo’s family.

After 20 years of neverending work, he has recuperated a great part of the land that is today inhabited by the community of Akamasoa (“good friends” in the local language): the association founded by the poor who listened to Father Pedro’s appeal and who decided to fight for a better life. The community is made of small villages of

brick houses that Father Pedro, who was a mason in his youth, taught them to build. Over time schools for all levels of teaching, pharmacies and handicraft centers were constructed. Today some 17,000 people live there and, though most are still poor, they have finally found the dignity and the confidence for a better future.

It is a true miracle created from the work of this untiring Argentine clergyman. Born to a family of Slovenian origin who emigrated to Argentina after World War II, as a boy he worked as a mason alongside his father. Like a true Argentinian, he was passionate about football and yearned to become a professional soccer player. But his vocation won out and he became a missionary. For the last 40 years he has lived in Madagascar, now his adopted land. His relationship with the people of the “Red Island” is so deep that, during the recent upheavals that led to a coup d’etat in March 2009, his call for peace was published in the

most important national newspapers.

His commitment to helping the poor has been internationally recognized: in 2008 he was conferred the French Legion of Honor and in 2009 the Vatican awarded him the Solidarity and Development Prize on the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Bill of Human Rights.

Father Pedro is fully dedicated to the aim of giving dignity to those neglected and abused from hunger, to those who have lost all self-esteem and hope. The pillars of his activity are work, education and health. Because life is worthy of its very name, every person needs a paying job, to receive an education and basic health care. Although the premises of these principles are simple, they are very difficult to achieve in a country where public infrastructure is nearly non-existent.

For a family to become part of the community, adults must accept to work

according to their abilities and to send their children to school. In exchange, they will have a roof and the services that Akamasoa can offer: medicine, outpatient emergency treatment, help during childbirth, assistance for the elderly and the handicapped. Rules must be carefully respected because a system of effective rules is the only way to build dignity and to allow a sense of community to replace the fight for the survival. The association accepts abandoned mothers, families without any means and the sick as a matter of priority.

The main source of work are the stone quarries near the villages. We visit them with Father Pedro. The site is impressive: thousands of people, men and women, work from dawn to dusk breaking enormous stones that will be transformed into bricks, gravel for roads and other building material. These materials are used by the community or sold in the city. The noise of the jackhammers is deafening, but it is music for the clergyman mason who, in the midst of these workers, finds special energy: he shakes hundreds of hands, transports stones himself and also has us carry some so that we realize how heavy they are. We scramble higher up the cliffs so he can proudly show us how sturdy the

houses of Akamasoa are compared to many of the shacks in the capital. In the main quarry they are preparing a stone altar to celebrate mass on August 15th. This is what Father Pedro considers the real Cathedral of Antananarivo: not a magnificent monument, but a simple place of prayer, carved into the rock by the sweat of many workers, little by little, every day.

### **Skilled artisans**

Another important job opportunity, especially for young people, is in handicrafts. Carpenters manufacture doors, windows and indoor furniture in the traditional Madagascar style. The quality of the work is excellent and the furniture can be sold abroad. A French association has donated equipment to make the work easier and more productive.

The embroidery workshop is the association's true flagship: the large tablecloths embroidered with traditional motifs are befittingly popular with visitors. The manager, Madame Leonide, shows us how it works: everything is done by hand and even the smallest design can be reproduced in a matter of days with dozens of copies made from a single pattern. The result is beautiful

and superior in quality to similar products found around the country.

Another of Father Pedro's miracles: he has transformed the people of the landfill into workers and highly-skilled craftsmen who are proud of their work. And he has given a chance to many young people who otherwise would not have ever studied and themselves become education professionals. Take Zo, a 22-year-old English teacher, who acts as our guide and interpreter during our stay. He is cheerful and friendly and speaks excellent French. When he arrived to the "hills of courage", as some have called the area where the community villages rise, he was 6 years old, had lost his father, his mother had no job and he had to look after a younger brother and sister. For a few months they were housed together with other families in the shelter. Later, they were placed in a dormitory together with another family. Finally, after three years, they had a house to themselves with blankets and two pots. Like everyone else, they paid a rent of one euro per month, a symbolic figure that serves to empower the people. After five years of rent paid regularly, the home is owned by those living there. In the meantime, Zo studied to become a teacher at the middle school in the village where he lives with his family and today earns 35 euros a month. With this salary he has

### **The pillars of his action are work, education and health.**



Stone quarries are the main source of work for Akamasoa



The embroidery workshop produces top quality products



Father Pedro with Zo, a young English teacher

helped his mother decorate the house with furniture bought at the carpentry workshop. If he had not climbed the hill with his mother, showing up at the shelter, he would have become one of the many children forced to beg on the streets of the capital. Many young people, after completing high school in the community, become teachers in those same schools, thus finding a secure and stable job.

Schooling is crucial to Father Pedro – it is through education that children from the dump flourish and are formed to be the future citizens who will contribute to a better Madagascar. Akamasoa welcomes over 9,000 students a year, from kindergarten to high school. The percentage of successful high school exams is 80%, much higher than the national average of 54%. Students also come from nearby villages because the teachers are among the best trained on the island. While we were there, final exams were to begin for 105 students: some, like Tojo, would receive a

**Every year  
around  
30,000  
persons get  
assistance  
from the  
shelter in  
Akamasoa.**

scholarship in Europe; others, like Zo, would become community teachers and trainers. “It’s for the future of these kids that I cannot be discouraged by difficulties, that I cannot stop,” says Father Pedro. Some will even go to university, like the two sons of the hotel manager who are studying to become dentist and general practitioner, respectively.

The shelter leaves us speechless. Here all the needy who have been rejected by society are listened to, comforted and helped: single women who have just given birth, abandoned and sick elderly, poor families, even the sick who are refused by the public hospital and sent directly to Father Pedro! The staff at the shelter focus primarily on emergencies, then try to understand the real needs of people and, after a period of treatment and care, encourage them to return to their villages with material support (agriculture equipment, tools, blankets) to resume an activity, especially in the fields. In fact, too many people leave rural areas to go to Antananarivo in

search of fortune, and find themselves alone, without work, and in conditions of great misery. In this country rich in natural resources and arable land, agriculture is underdeveloped and most of the population undernourished, whereas it could reach food self-sufficiency.

### **Self-esteem and dignity**

To set an example and encourage families to apply themselves to farming, Father Pedro has created a rural village, Antolojanahary, 80 km from the capital where more than 100 families now live (about 600 people). After the dump and the barren hills around the city, the scenery is breathtaking: all around are forests, rice fields and gardens, it could almost be in the Alps! The biggest project involves the reforestation of Antolojanahary: for the last twenty years, on an area of 450 hectares, trees have been planted, especially pine trees, and the results are now clearly visible. Father Pedro is proud of what has been achieved, largely because it is common in this country to log and burn wild forests in order to grow rice on the land.

The young people of Akamasoa are actively involved in the reforestation project. During the summer holidays youth from other villages come to plant trees and eradicate weeds. It is good way to pass on to younger generations the importance of respecting and loving nature: “burning trees is a little like burning our souls,” the priest never stops repeating. In Antolojanahary there is a school, a dispensary and a building to accommodate visitors who wish to spend a few days immersed in nature in a place that offers beautiful walks in the woods.

Around the villages of Akamasoa we are struck by the warmth and hospitality of the people: we are surrounded by smiling children who want to play, to have a picture taken.

Anyone who has even heard that we are here greets us with: “Bonjour, comment t’appelles-tu?” (Hello, what’s your name?), asks us where we are from, is curious to know our history and, almost always, tells us his. Nobody ever asks us for money or help – begging is banned.

None of this is due to a particularly easygoing people, explains Father Pedro, but to the hard work that, day after day, for twenty years, has given people self-esteem, dignity, a sense of solidarity and friendliness to others. “We have pacified this place,” he tells us. “Where there was violence and brutality, there is now a community of free people.” Where before there was waste there is now a village more welcoming than many other districts of Antananarivo.

There are 410 staff in charge of the administration and coordination of Akamasoa activities – all Malagasy, without exception. In particular there is Mademoiselle Bao, the president of the association and the priest’s right hand, who has been here nearly since the beginning of this adventure. She pays the weekly salaries of teachers, nurses, foremen and the rest of the staff. With this team it is now possible to plan for the future: to build new houses and raze those closest to the dump, to provide new classrooms for the school given the growing number of students, to expand the shelter and, above all, to insist on closing down the open landfill. “The day we can close it, we’ll have a big party!” says Father Pedro.

The sense of dignity and joy of living of these people is seen during Sunday mass which is celebrated in a huge gym that now serves as a church because, for these twenty years, Father

Pedro has been more concerned by helping the poor, not in building churches. The mass is exciting, vibrant, full of colors. The entire community celebrates with all its energy, an energy truly unimaginable in a church of the wealthy West. It is incredible to see these people dressed in their best clothes, carefully following the songs and dances with enthusiasm and surprising delight. Malagasy rejoice despite the difficulties of everyday life. Mass is attended by over 4,000 people and is so spectacular that many guides will bring tourists. However this is not

to attend a show, but to participate in the celebration of praise to the Lord for life rediscovered after so much suffering.

This extraordinary work has been made possible thanks to contributions

from many donors from around the world, especially from Europe, who believed in a priest claiming that poverty is not an unfortunate fate, but a real injustice. The daily struggle against poverty is enormous and has not yet been won. We realize this when we visit Zo’s house: there is still no electricity or running water, coal is used to cook and smoke blackens the walls of the tiny kitchen. Essential services can be obtained only at great cost in Madagascar.

There is still so much to do: there are still too many children dressed in rags, too many families living in unsanitary conditions, so many people still without proper housing and stable employment. Like the family that we met with Father Pedro in the village closest to the dump: they are eight living in a dark and suffocating room. We look out the front door and find that they share that space with two pigs. Father Pedro, making a face torn

**The daily struggle against poverty is enormous and has not yet been won.**



**Father Pedro with a girl who lives on the edges of the landfill with her family**



More than 4,000 persons participate in the Sunday mass.

between surprise and anger, turns to the mother with a questioning look, as she hides her face in her apron, visibly embarrassed. The husband recovers pieces of fabric from the dump that he sews into large bags and resells to local farmers. This is their only source of income. For them, there is still a long way to go.

Despite this uneven battle against poverty and injustice, one thing is always certain: the smile of the women who rummage through garbage, of the children who care for their brothers and sisters from their earliest years, the old men stricken by sickness and suffering... the smile is always there, lighting up their faces, making their eyes laugh, accompanied by an outstretched hand to greet, to exchange a sign of affection, a bit of warmth, a testimony of love, even if it lasts only an instant. ■

## The authors

**Fabio Meloni and Anne Aubert** met Father Pedro during a trip to Madagascar in 2006. Upon their return to Italy, they decided to begin the non-profit Amici di Padre Pedro association (Friends of Father Pedro), of which Fabio Meloni is president.

In August 2009 they stayed in Akamasoa, sharing daily life with the inhabitants of the village of Andralanitra (one of Father Pedro's villages in Antananarivo).

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## On the Web

- **Wikipedia page:**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padre\\_Pedro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padre_Pedro)

- **YouTube channel:**

<http://www.youtube.com/akamasoa01>

- **Photo album on Flickr :**

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/akamasoa>

- **Twitter account :**

<http://twitter.com/akamasoa>

- **Official Web site :**

[http://www.amicipadrepedro.org/index\\_en.htm](http://www.amicipadrepedro.org/index_en.htm)