

That Which Unites Us

Fr. Jack Nuelle

(Excerpted from 1981 June *Worldwide Family Spirit* magazine)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of a letter from Fr. Jack Nuelle in Madagascar to Tomm & Fran Nuelle He gave us permission to share this with the readers of the Spirit. Fr Jack is a LaSalette Missionary who brought the Weekend to Madagascar.]

March 29, 1981

This is our second Weekend for Madagascar. Last weekend was the first. What a joy it is to be able to share with these tremendous couples, priests and religious, to share my love, to be able to see in them the Church which I married at the time of my ordination, to feel privileged and thankful that Jesus loves me so much that he asks me to incarnate in my life His love for His people.

My feelings these two Weekends have taken me on a real rollercoaster ride. Needless to say, with no back-up community on hand, there was the whole material set-up to take care of: selection of the place for the Weekend (done last October), typing the handout sheets and running off the stencils (to make a photo-copy here would cost \$1.00 per sheet!), workshopping the talks (8) for our two Malagasy couples, writing all my talks in French. All this taking place here in the capital, over 500 miles (800 KM) from Morondava. I don't know how many trips I made up here.

Then, besides, we also had to do all the recruiting. This is the hardest and most deceptive part. Things are not too calm here at the moment. People are living on touchy nerves; and, here we go, branching out into something new when everyone is searching for a stable foothold. Political riots less than a month ago caused the death of about 16 people mostly teenagers.

Parents are afraid to leave their children alone or with "strangers" (non-members of the family). The economic situation is bad; many people haven't received a paycheck for over two months. The actual cost of the Weekend is not excessive, about \$40.00 per couple, but when you haven't been paid for two months and you only make about \$25.00 per week, that means almost two weeks' pay to make the Weekend. Talk about giving from your substance!!!

All these things accumulate to work against us, including a curfew (no one out on the streets) from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. and a small riot last Thursday night. The result was that out of about 20 couples who should have come, only four couples arrived, plus two priests and two sisters. Some of those who should have come were military personnel, but they are on a 24-hour call. With the teams, of which two were Malagasy couples, the Admin couple who arrived from Quebec, Canada, and myself, we were only 19 persons for the first Weekend.

After all the work and sweat of these last months to have only such a small number was a real disappointment. But I felt consoled by the thought that we had done our best and it was only during the talk on Confidence that I was able to let go and put everything back into the Father's hands. Friday's disappointment led to Saturday's struggles, and Sunday's radiant joy. We were few, but we were powerful. It was like the birth of a new baby: she is fragile and needs care, but she is beautiful and fully alive.

What a tremendous happiness to see how the values proposed on the Weekend serve to deepen the love and understanding between couples *all over the world*. What a power-filled joy to be again a part of that vision to change the world, to be half-way around the world from where I made my first Weekend, and see the miracle, a real 1981 miracle that these Malagasy couples, priest, and sisters are working in the hearts of each other. Yes, it was worth all that effort. We are alive with hope!

It was invigorating during the week to meet a few of the couples, the sisters, and one of the priests, to see their radiant faces, to have an ordinarily timid person approach you in public and give you a big hug and a kiss, to receive a "yes" from those who were asked to delve more deeply into various aspects of our young M.E. life, to have someone on the other side of the street flash you the "I love you" hand sign, and to know that the M.E. sticker was now visible on the windows of a few homes and cars. One couple whom I met during the week shared that their children noticed a change and told them: "We don't know what happened on the Weekend, but we like what we see. Bravo Marriage Encounter!"

Our recruiting is hampered by the curfew; we were able to sign up 15 couples for our second Weekend, but again only six, plus two sisters, arrived Friday night.

The two greatest detriments are the children and the money. We have to find a solution to both. The Malagasy have an innate fear of leaving their children in the hands of others, even good friends. Financially, we will not be able to cover the cost of our Weekends at first, but have confidence that the Father will see us through. Transportation is also a problem; for example, not a single couple on this Weekend owns a car. I was able to borrow a small pick-up to bring the couples here to the Weekend location.

Friday night, two days ago, I had hoped for about 15 couples. When only six came before the curfew went into effect, I felt down-hearted and abandoned and in danger. Somewhat like the feelings I experienced a few months ago. We were four people in a small canoe crossing a big river. We were part-way across when the wind began to blow strongly. We began to take on water. There was a small island, about the size of your yard, in the middle of the river, and so as not to sink, I got off on the island and let the other three cross the river in safety.

But this is a river full of crocodiles and there I was alone, somewhat abandoned, and in danger while waiting for the canoe to return. Thank God, no crocodiles came and I got across safely. It was that same type of feeling, alone and in danger that I

experienced on Friday night. The new life which began last Weekend seemed in danger because people were not coming to the Weekend to give us life. I felt threatened and doubtful.

But when we began, and I was face-to-face with those couples and sisters, I was able to recognize my bride. I felt very touched, very tender, very important when I told them I loved them. This has been another wonderful Weekend, very different from the last, but just as grace-filled. As I listened to the song "The Impossible dream" a few moments ago, I was very struck by the words: "This is my quest, to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far!"

At times, I felt very hopeless. I felt somewhat like we used to feel years ago while mountain-climbing. I felt tired and wondered if it was worth it all, a constant up-hill climb, a struggle to continue. But as always, the tremendous beauty to be seen once we arrived at the summit made me shudder to think that I could have given up half-way.

Remember those feelings of being up above the clouds, with clarity and an intensity of light that made all the colors so outstanding and bright, and the cool refreshing thin air of the mountain top? The vision is clearer and sharper. My vision for the couples in Madagascar is more alive than ever. We have reached our first mountain top, but we have the whole range to conquer-no matter how hopeless, no matter how far.

At the moment, including those who made a Weekend in the states and Canada, we are a small family of 14 couples, six sisters, and five priests who are striving to live our Weekend values. The Weekends of July 10-12 and 17-19 will see our numbers growing by leaps and bounds. With two back-to-back Weekends also planned for October and December, our vision for Madagascar is limited only by the deep blue-green waters of the Indian Ocean which encompass our island.

It is those same waters which unite us all, because they touch your shores also. In the ocean, where does one drop end and the next begin? The drop which sprays our beaches touches the drop thrown by the waves upon your shores. The vast expanse of ocean does not separate us, but is the link which joins us together, and together we can change the world.

I love you, Jack