“Virtue in the extreme is worth nothing”: Mortification and Mission in Madagascar, 1648–1674

Seán Alexander Smith

Work on an early modern missionary frontier often challenged settled expectations regarding the holding and application of ancient spiritual values. The experiences of Lazarist missionaries who laboured from 1648 to 1674 in the distant French colony of Fort Dauphin, a narrow peninsula on the extreme southeastern coast of Madagascar, perfectly illustrate this problem. One of the most crucial values to them lay in the practice of mortification, a popular form of Christian asceticism. Although mortification has frequently been adopted by many laypeople, particularly lay women, over the centuries since Christ’s crucifixion, in the Christian tradition it is most often connected to forms of cloistered religious life.1 Discussion of ascetical practices on missionary sites is thus much rarer, a surprising fact given that the apogee of mortification coincided with the époque missionnaire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Missionary institutes flourished in this very same period, buoyed as they were by the forces of the Catholic Reform. France was especially invested in the creation of embryonic missionary Churches and thousands of its missionaries left the metropole to work in far-off lands.2 This essay explores if a spiritual value

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like mortification, which encouraged its practitioner in suffering and self-abandonment, was compatible with the pastoral impulses of the burgeoning missionary movement.

I Missionaries ... Must be Mortified

The Congregation of the Mission, whose members are commonly called Lazarists, was founded in Paris in 1625 by the famous churchman and saint Vincent de Paul, along with three companions, as a charitable association with the specific pastoral goal of evangelising ignorant Catholics of the French countryside. Vincent de Paul, of course, had few designs on far-off islands when he began his ministry, but his Congregation soon radiated beyond the French frontier, later sending missionaries to Tunis (1645), Algeria (1646) and Ireland (1646). However, when pressed by the nuncio to France to accept a mission to the miniscule French colony in Fort Dauphin, de Paul agreed to dispatch two missionaries, Charles Nacquart and Nicolas Gondrée, who arrived at the settlement in 1648. The Lazarists were late arrivals to this global mission work. At a time when the Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans already enjoyed a virtual monopoly on missions in France’s other colonies – especially those in Nouvelle France and the Caribbean – Madagascar was one of the few remaining missionary stations unassigned to a religious institute in the imperial zones.
