

Selected Highlights on Pedro Opeka

the Nobel Peace Prize Nominee 2015

Padre Pedro Opeka would deserve the Nobel Peace Prize for any one of the below listed reasons alone — how much more for all the reasons combined. Here are some of the reasons why this humanitarian giant and organizational genius deserves the Nobel Peace Prize 2015

By Edward Gobetz

The Miracle Of Madagascar: 25 Years Of Akamasoa

Pedro, who kept volunteering in anti-poverty projects since his early teens and also learned from his Slovenian immigrant father in Argentina to become an excellent bricklayer, studied in Buenos Aires, Ljubljana and Paris and in 1975 became a Vincentian priest and then, as many writers point out, "a missionary fully dedicated to the poor." After 15 years of anti-poverty work in construction and on rice fields in a poor rural parish in the South-East of Madagascar and having been exhausted after several bouts of malaria, his superiors appointed him director of the native Malagasy Vincentian Seminarians in Antananarivo, the capital city of poverty-ridden Madagascar. True to his foremost calling to help the poor, he immediately started visiting the Antananarivo trash deposits. No stranger to poverty in Madagascar, South American Indian settlements and American and European slums, he was shocked as never before, seeing the very poorest of the poor, including mothers with small children, competing with stray dogs and hundreds of rats to find in the garbage something to eat or perhaps a discarded item to sell, while surrounded with a cloud of flies and unbearable stench.

On May 20, 1989, he decided that no human being should be allowed to suffer such extreme degradation. He had no money and in spite of his education in Argentina and Europe and his knowledge of seven languages, he had no clue whatsoever how he could help these poorest of the poor — first of all, how to help these human rejects to overcome their distrust of this *vasaha*, a pale-skinned, tall white stranger. Yet, unlike others, this *vasaha* kept returning, conversing in their native Malagasy language and, little by little, building bridges of trust. Then, borrowing money, he managed to secure some land and persuaded the first seventy "garbage people" to join him building a small farming community. While he managed to secure some donations for food, seeds, tools and building of modest lodgings, little by little, the former destitute rejects learned to trust this compassionate stranger of many skills, including expert bricklaying, who worked harder than anybody else. They named him Mon Pera (mon père, my father). Soon, their little village was appropriately named Akamasoa, meaning the "community of good friends." All this was in 1989.

On October 18, 2014, in the presence of the President and First Lady of the Republic of Madagascar and numerous native and foreign, secular and ecclesiastic, dignitaries, Akamasoa celebrated 25 years of existence and incomparable, mind-boggling success, uniting some 25,000 villagers, living and working in peace and friendship in 18 clean, attractive villages. This was the new Akamasoa, long known internationally, and written about in many books and articles as well as presented in many film documentaries, as "The Miracle of Madagascar."

Contributions To Education

Although Pedro's superiors correctly recognized in him a capable educator for Malagasy seminarians, he wanted to educate the masses of the poorest of the poor. In 1990, or one year after the establishment of the first Akamasoa village, he and his villagers built the first school consisting of a single hall. While statistics keep growing from year to year, according to the most recent available reports over 12,000 children currently attend 59 Akamasoa primary schools. Akamasoa education now starts with nurseries for children as young as two and a half years of age and is continued through kindergartens, primary schools and, for many, with secondary and pre-university education. Indeed, some of the first graduates have by now gone to the University of Tana in the capital city of Antananarivo. But there has been another uplifting surprise as reported in the (enclosed) French-language book, authored by Pierre Lunel, *Akamasoa: Rêves d'Enfants* (Akamasoa: The Dreams of Children, published in May, 2014). On page 156, we see the photo of the newly built Akamasoa University and on the next page, Pedro, chatting with a group of its students.

Since 1990, when the first one-hall school was opened in the very first Akamasoa village, the education has blossomed in all Akamasoa villages. But Pedro has built a total of 70 primary schools, most of them in Akamasoa communities and the remainder in various remote areas all over Madagascar. By conservative estimates,



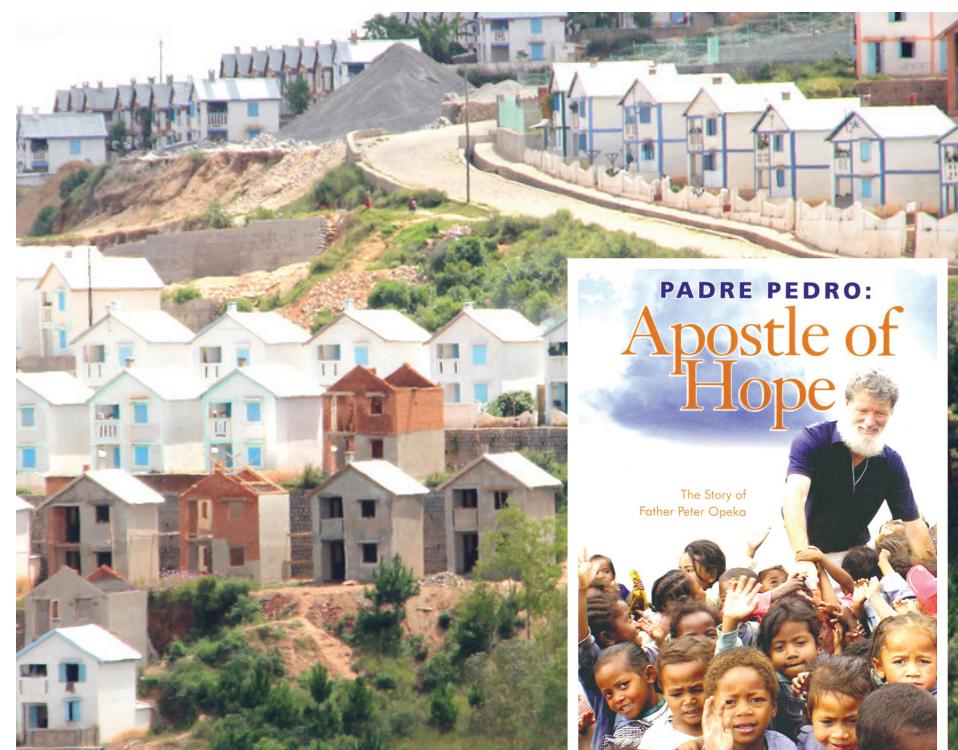
70,000 youngsters have received primary education thanks to Pedro's commitment. Not only the quantity, but also the quality of this education is impressive: graduation rates of Akamasoa students are higher than those in the capital city of Antananarivo, as are other levels of academic achievement. On pages 158-159 of Lunel's book, one can see many young Malagasy natives, all educated and neatly dressed. Under the photo we read in small print, "Le sel de la terre" — "The Salt of the Earth." Pedro's educated young people, either children from trash deposits and capital city's very worst slum areas, or born in Akamasoa villages to former garbage people, are keenly aware of their mission "to become the salt of the earth" — to contribute their share to a better world. As Pedro keeps telling young pupils: "Continue studying and working hard, and I am sure that one day someone who was brought up in Akamasoa will govern this country."

Contributions To Health

Malnutrition, living in cardboard and plastic shanty towns or even in underground tunnels of trash deposits, contamination of food found in garbage and lack of personal hygiene have resulted in high mortality, especially of mothers and young children, much sickness overall and occasional epidemics, including bubonic plague, where governments, often corrupt and indifferent to the poor, did not effectively intervene. It fell upon Pedro to improve this dismal situation. In his villages, he provided sanitary conditions, good drinking water, and simple but healthy food. Himself a starring soccer player since childhood, he is keenly aware of the importance of physical fitness and the role of sports in building healthy bodies and healthy minds ("Mens sana in corpore sano!"). Thus, children, young adults and beyond, have been encouraged to participate in sports, including football (where Pedro, in his mid-sixties, is still a much valued player or coach on any team), basketball, volleyball, running, calisthenics, and various native sports (see Lunel, pages 44-50). Among facilities serving the poor Malagasy native people, the Madagascar America Foundation has recently listed: four maternity wards, three hospitals and six clinics established by Pedro and added: "More than 500,000 people have passed through these health centers and were assisted."

Planting 50,000 Trees Annually

A glance at any of the Akamasoa villages suggests Pedro's utmost attention not only to his beloved "brothers and sisters," as he respectfully and lovingly refers to Akamasoa villagers and to trash people still waiting to be rescued, but also to the physical environment. Greenery, flowers and trees surround attractive family homes. Streets are carefully paved and kept scrupulously clean. Residents, young and old, have learned to become good stewards of the environment. Youngsters take special pride participating in Pedro's reforestation — BIO DIVERSITY — program to combat



the erosion problem. Each year, they plant about 50,000 trees. Many eroded, desert-like areas have been changed into luscious green forests, enriching large areas of Madagascar. As Lunel (pages 15, 43, 65) states, "Pedro exemplifies a true passion for the trees."

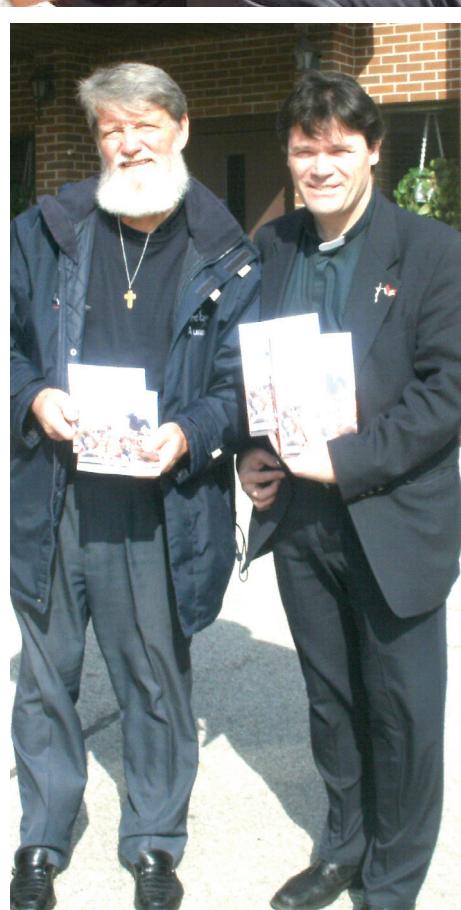
Role Model

"What we have accomplished in Madagascar," Pedro says modestly, while always giving generous credit to his Malagasy coworkers and outside supporters, could be done anywhere else." Certainly, much can be learned from his "miracle of Madagascar." Leading economists, such as Harvard and MIT-educated, and award-winning Prof. Mark Zupan, Dean of Simon School of Business of Rochester University, admire Pedro's economic wizardry and organizational genius. Generously subsidized public housing projects in America usually leave much to be desired, as projects whether in Chicago, Cleveland or Detroit, rapidly deteriorate and alienated residents are ashamed, rather than proud of where they live. While public housing areas are characterized by high concentrations of poverty, chronic dependency and crime, very few welfare agencies, church groups or neighborhood organizers ever succeed in making a notable difference for the better. Pedro, who learned bricklaying from his father, taught the villagers how to make brick and cement and build family houses and infrastructure.

Dealing with the worst possible categories of social rejects, often plagued by violence, prostitution, drugs and alcohol, he avoided large impersonal blocks of housing. He started with small temporary dwellings, increasing the motivation of the poor to eventually move into their own homes, while learning to work and observe the *dina*, the village community rules in the development of which they, too, have participated in many public discussions and through their representatives. After a probationary period, the best candidates are temporarily assigned to individual brick-built family homes, each with a small plot of land for vegetables and flowers. Keeping the house clean and in good condition, the resident pays for it in small installments and eventually becomes a proud owner of the attractive new home, while his or her payments are put into a building fund to construct new homes for the emancipated poor. Glance, if you will, through Lunel's *Akamasoa* book and see the beautiful clean villages of lovely family homes (pages 20-21, 114-115, 120-123). What a contrast with trash deposits of Antananarivo or even with crime-infested public housing projects in America!

As someone who spent much of his career teaching sociology and social psychology at Ohio State, University of Maryland and Kent State University, I, too, am immensely impressed by Pedro's ability to transform and re-socialize masses of outwardly dehumanized, destitute social rejects into highly motivated, hard-working, increasingly self-supporting, law-abiding, usually happy and smiling Akamasoa residents. And please note: they are almost always very grateful to Pedro whom they affectionately call "Mon Pera" ("mon père," my father!) and to others who rescued them from a life of extreme poverty and degradation. Unlike welfare recipients where such statements would generally be unheard of, they repeat time and again, "We have been helped. Now it is our turn to help others!"

Pedro is an outstanding role model whose sincerity, charisma, self-sacrificial



perseverance, talents and accomplishments are respected and admired by people of all persuasions: believers and atheists, liberals and conservatives; Prince Albert of Monaco, the Vatican and former communist Danilo Türk, whose candidacy for the position of Secretary General of the United Nations was strongly supported by Russia's President Vladimir Putin. If awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2015, his choice, like that of Mother Teresa, would be most widely applauded and he would shine as a noble, most positive role model throughout the world.

In my humble opinion, Pedro Opeka would deserve the Nobel Peace Prize for any one of the above reasons and certainly even more so for all the reasons combined. This is why I am very proud to nominate the humanitarian giant and organizational genius Pedro Opeka for the Nobel Peace Prize 2015.

* * *

A NOTE ON POPE FRANCIS: Should the Norwegian Nobel Committee also consider for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize Pope Francis, the two Argentineans who even studied together in Buenos Aires would make a most powerful combination as co-recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. As author Lunel perceptively states on page 112: "The two celebrities work for the same cause: the Pope from the top down and Pedro from the bottom up." It is, indeed, difficult to think of a better combination in humanity's struggle against poverty and for world peace or of a better selection of Nobel Peace Prize recipients 2015.

P.S. Since nominations are based on several sources, some on personal knowledge of Pedro Opeka and others on books, articles or documentaries published at different times and in different countries, there may be, at first glance, some inconsistencies. To list perhaps the most obvious one, some claim that throughout his most prolific 25 years (1989-2014) Pedro has helped (at least) half a million poor, while others put the number at over a million. The discrepancy is due to a completely understandable and justifiable decision about what to count. The former count only the routine help in Akamasoa villages, employment, education, or help in maternity wards, hospitals, clinics, etc. The latter include help to the transients, some 800,000 poor persons who were given help with food, clothing, medical care, counseling and sometimes money for transportation, staying at an Akamasoa reception or welcome center from one day up to several weeks, which together amounts to way over a million recipients of help. Either case represents a uniquely splendid charitable achievement.

See Pierre Lunel, *Akamasoa: Rêves d'Enfants (Dreams of Children)*, Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2014.

How you can help: everyone can pray for the success of Pedro's work and also for his Nobel Peace Prize which would enable him to help and educate even more of the poorest of the poor, while the prize would also positively reflect on all missionaries, on the Catholic church and also on Slovenia. At the time of this writing, there were destructive typhoons and horrible floods in Madagascar when countless victims again turned to Pedro for help. If you can, please consider sending a contribution, a check to Catholic Mission Aid Society, marked "for Pedro Opeka," giving or sending it to Mrs. Marica Lavrisha, 1004 Dillewood Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44119; or to Mrs. Anica Knez, 17826 Brian Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44119. Thank you.