

Personal testimonies: Discovering God's love in my life

COCKEN (Madagascar)

My name is Cocken and I come from Madagascar. I am president of the National Catholic Youth Federation (2009-2012). I was a little nervous about agreeing to tell my story. Why? It is because there are many things about our parents that we young people do not manage to see and comprehend. I was often sick when I was growing up. I could never have imagined that I would be able to complete my secondary schooling. It is thanks to my parents' care and my desire to study that in 2001, at the age of twenty one, I passed my baccalaureate examinations. It was then that I understood the importance of parental responsibility. I was really happy. I thanked my father and promised him that I would be just as good a father as he had been for me. I also told him that as I now had my baccalaureate, I had decided to continue my studies at the Law Faculty at the University of Antananarivo.

We lived in Mahajanga, a provincial town on the west coast of Madagascar, 600 kms from Antananarivo. He said that as I was often sick and suffered from poor health, it would be hard for me to manage there alone with no one to take care of me. I replied that he should not worry. I would do my best and prove to him that all he had taught me was important to me. I told him that now it was my duty to serve him. Moreover, God is with us. My father encouraged me very much. He told me many things about our family. I am the second of eight children, but he told me the family history and about the family assets so that I would be able to take things in hand when I finished my studies. I then left for Antananarivo to continue my studies, and only one month later, my father died (8 February 2002). He was not ill before he died, and he did not have an accident. We were told only that it was a "natural death". I went through a crisis at that time. Just when I had discovered the beauty of parental love, the Lord had taken my father to Himself. I left the Church at that time. I no longer went to Mass on Sundays. After six months, thanks to the Holy Spirit, I received a light that showed me God's plans for me. I looked back on my life and discovered the signs of his active presence. He had prepared everything in advance. It was not for nothing that my father had told me the family history. It was a way of passing on to me responsibility for the family. Therefore I had to learn to love my family. If not, how could I hope to love the family that I myself would have in the future.

An important lesson I had learned was that God does not do things by chance. History does not happen by chance but comes from the will and action of God. God just asks us to live in trust, faith and courage. This led me to take care of my family and the person that I had met. The suffering I felt after the death of my father gave way to hope. I felt him near me. I also went back to being involved in the Church with even more commitment. I was involved in the Young Catholic Students (YCS) movement (national president 2007-2010), and I was on the Catholic Chaplaincy committee of the University of Antananarivo (2002-2006). I have helped many young couples to prepare for marriage. I came across many difficulties with their families and some priests who did not want to officiate at the weddings of young people who were not active in the Church. I continued to insist on their behalf so that they could fulfil their dream of starting a family. I completed my law studies and began to work with an international organisation present in Madagascar that worked for women's rights (2004-2006). There were

still traditions in our country that made parental authorisation obligatory before young people could marry. The minimum age at which girls could marry was 15 and boys 17. In most cases, the families organised the marriage without consulting the people involved. These young people complied out of respect for their families, even though they may not have loved each other. While I was working for this NGO, I often wondered if that tradition could be the will of God. We conducted a study and sent the government a proposal to raise the minimum age for marriage to 17 for girls and 18 for boys. We also proposed that young people should be able to marry without parental permission when they reach the age of 21. Since that time, young people have more freedom in choosing their partner, and even parental permission comes more and more together with the consent of the two young people. As for me, I really felt disturbed by the social conditions in Madagascar, and so in 2007 I took up studies in Professional Sociology. I am now a National Legal Consultant and social planner. This is what I wished to share with you. I would like to tell you that everything is possible for God. We must just have faith, hope, trust and courage so that there will be joy in our lives.