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PADRE PEDRO

**Apostle of
Hope**

The Story of Father Peter Opeka

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FOREWORD

When I met Peter (Pedro) Opeka during a visit to Madagascar in 1977, I wrote in my diary: “Arriving in the courtyard of the mission center in Vangaindrano, we were surrounded by a swarm of chattering, inquisitive children. Out of the crowd there came forward, like a young Moses in the midst of his people, the warm and personable Peter Opeka. There is something indestructibly young and refreshing about him. It is of such stuff that heroes are made.”

When now, over thirty years later, I remember the expression “a young Moses in the midst of his people,” I realize how prophetic that comparison had been. After fifteen years of service in Vangaindrano, in southeast Madagascar, Opeka came to the capital Antananarivo, where he was confronted with the unspeakable poverty of the people living in the city’s slums, or even worse—in tunnels dug under the heaps of rubbish. Seeing thousands of children and adults scavenging the rubbish dumps in order to find something to eat or sell, he was horrified.

He said to himself: “I must do something for these people. I must first of all awaken the sense of hope in them.” He befriended and encouraged the poorest of the poor who were devoid of hope, telling them, “Even if everyone has neglected you, God has not forgotten

you.” He was convinced that Christianity’s essential message was to provide hope for each and every person.

“When I began visiting these incredibly poor people on the streets and rubbish dumps, I had no idea what would come out of this,” says Peter. Then, in 1989, he founded the association Akamasoa—meaning Good Friends—which has worked ever since to unite the poor in the desire to rise above the humiliation and despair of poverty and to achieve the dignity of a life worthy of a human being.

A bricklayer’s son, he began teaching the poor how to work hard, to make bricks and build family homes, and in this way strengthened in the people the consciousness of their own worth. Today, the Akamasoa boasts seventeen impressive villages. Almost every family has its own home (which it gradually pays for in small installments), while working hard and following the rules democratically established by the delegates of the entire Akamasoa community. The settlements have all the necessary infrastructure: schools (which, according to the most recent report, are attended by over 9,000 children, from kindergartens to high schools and lyceums), dispensaries, shops, churches and a huge multipurpose sports hall where on Sundays and holidays from four to six thousand worshippers gather to pray and sing.

The inhabitants of these new communities hope to become self-sufficient and independent of foreign aid as soon as possible, while multitudes of other poor are waiting to take part in this unique journey to hope, with dignity and hard work. They work in a quarry and on construction projects. There are many different enterprises, including woodworking, metalworking, and mechanical and tailoring workshops, which produce items necessary for domestic use, as well as for sale. By now, the Akamasoa Welcome Center has also provided food, clothing, counseling, or emergency medical aid about 200,000

transient destitute visitors; in 2007 alone 7,739 families and a total of 28,584 individuals were helped.

So daring and large-scale an undertaking by the missionary Opeka could not go unnoticed. Books and articles in French, German, Spanish, Slovenian, and other languages were written and film documentaries were produced about his and, as he constantly reminds us, his people's amazing accomplishments. In 1994, he was voted Madagascar's Man of the Year. In 1998, he received the French National Order of Merit (Ordre National du Mérite). In 2001, the ambassador of the United States of America to Madagascar presented him the recognition by the Habitat for Humanity International. The Kiwanis World Service Medal was awarded to him in 2005 by the Kiwanis International, headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana.

In January, 2008, France named him the Knight of the Legion of Honor (Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur), and in December of the same year Pope Benedict XVI and the St. Mathews Foundation recognized Father Opeka's splendid work by presenting him with the Cardinal Van Thuan's Award, while the Slovenian Catholic Conference honored him with the St. Cyril and Methodius Medal, its very highest form of recognition. In addition, the representatives of Madagascar and of Slovenia, together with Prince Albert of Monaco (now His Royal Highness Albert II), a friend and benefactor of Father Peter, are among those who support him for the Nobel Peace Prize. His many friends in the United States also hope he may soon be recognized as the CNN Hero, or Hero of the Year, a role model of immensely dedicated and exceptionally successful humanitarian work.

Peter Opeka, born in Argentina of Slovenian refugee parents, the spiritual child of St. Vincent de Paul, having saved thousands of people from the bondage of poverty and despair, has become internationally known and has often been compared to Mother Teresa whom he deeply admires.

PADRE PEDRO: APOSTLE OF HOPE

It is only fitting that the English-speaking world, too, should become acquainted with him. That is why I welcome with great pleasure the English translation of the book *Un Viaje a la Esperanza (A Journey to Hope)*, which has been written by Opeka's Argentinean friend, Jesús María Silveyra. I hope it will reach a wide audience, and that through it as many people as possible will come to realize that the spiritual dynamism of Jesus' words, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40), continues to inspire heroic deeds. The missionary Peter Opeka is a witness to this.

CARDINAL FRANC RODE

*Prefect - Emeritus of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life
and Societies of Apostolic Life, Vatican*

PART ONE

ONE

LANDING IN MADAGASCAR

I am on the plane that is taking me from South Africa to Madagascar. When the captain informs us that we are about to land and we descend to an altitude of ten thousand feet, I can see through the window the landscape of the “Great Island” (the fourth largest island in the world), whose name was mentioned by Marco Polo in the chronicles of his travels. My first impression, while flying over the central high plateau where the capital is situated, is that I am arriving in a well-known place that is engraved in my memory: green hills colored red by the soil, sinuous roads disappearing from sight, flooded brown rivers, lagoons of different shapes, rice paddies that become greener in the valleys, scarce or no forestation.

My fears rise to the surface once again. First, concerns about my health—I had the hepatitis B vaccination before leaving home in Argentina, and yesterday in the hotel in Johannesburg, I took the weekly pills to prevent malaria. In addition, I carry the recommended antibiotics in case of cholera, but I am still worried about yellow fever. “Vaccination is only required for people who travel from an infected country,” the specialist in infectious diseases told me. However, the fear of catching something still prevails because a few days before my departure, Peter’s sisters mentioned the case of a Slovenian relative who

had visited him some time before and had suffered the first attacks of malaria only after he had already returned to Europe.

My other fear, even more profound and visceral, haunts me: that of descending into the world of poverty, with all the prejudices I have created for myself before my departure—especially whether I will be able to put up with twenty-one days in close contact with it. It is true, there is poverty everywhere, and today it is Argentina’s greatest problem, with figures soaring—but I have always been an external observer, never getting personally involved. I do not know if this is due to lack of opportunities, fear, indifference, helplessness, or a mixture of all these.

We land at the Ivato airport, situated on the outskirts of this capital that has such a difficult name, Antananarivo (“The Thousand Towns”), which the Malagasy simply call “Tana.” The aircraft taxis on the asphalt runway, the tires and the brakes screech, the aircraft shakes. I leave my fears behind; it is too late to back out now. As Father Peter said in his first email, when we decided to go ahead with this book: “Once you step into the boat, there’s no turning back.”

We have arrived. “The Divine Adventure,” as Father Peter referred to my trip, is beginning. I look for my backpack. I am hopeful that I will not encounter any problems, either with the visa I must request upon arrival or with customs on account of all the medication (and candy!) I am carrying with me. I go down the steps. It is not as hot as I imagined it would be, and it’s not raining either, which I thought would be the case at this time of year. We walk to the arrivals area. For the time being, I do not wish to look ahead into the distance to see if Father Peter is waiting for me, as he promised.

First step: join the queue for those still needing to buy visas, with the letter of invitation from the Akamasoa humanitarian organization in hand. I buy the stamp for the visa. “Twenty dollars,” a dark man says.

I'm thankful that I had the foresight to bring cash. A lady with Asian features next to him hands me my change—one dollar—and stamps my document. *Voilà!* It is strange, the people here look like a mixture of Asians and Africans, but it is understandable: this Indian Ocean island, two hundred fifty miles off the East African coast, received its first inhabitants of Malayo-Indonesian origin at the beginning of the Christian Era, followed by Arab merchants bringing slaves from Africa. It is a unique place, amalgamating these different races into its unusual island environment.

“Le billet d’avion, s’il vous plait.” The man is simply asking for my airplane ticket, but in accelerated French I do not understand immediately, despite the ten hurried lessons I took in the hope of being able to communicate with the people of the island. He realizes I have not understood and repeats in English: “Ticket. Plane ticket.” I hand it over. My passport and ticket pass from one hand to another. I follow the procedure from the other side of the small window, surrounded by people of diverse physical features, predominantly from the Merina ethnic group. This group is the most Asian-looking and their features are the most common in this part of the high plateau.

Having retrieved my passport, I go to look for my suitcase as I would in any other airport in the world, a world recently shaken by the terrorist attacks in Madrid. While I'm waiting by the conveyor belt, I listen to Malagasy being spoken, which I suppose comes from Indonesia but is mixed with Arabic words and tribal sounds of the northeast coast of Africa.

The customs officer asks for my passport and tells me to open my suitcase but not the backpack in which I am carrying candy for the children of Akamasoa and the jumble of medication to protect me from so many potential dangers. As the man begins his inspection, I

hear the unmistakable voice of Father Peter telling him there is no need for that. “He is one of ours,” he says, referring to the inhabitants of the Akamasoa villages (which in Malagasy means “Good Friends”). I watch him as he comes over to meet me, with the bushy gray beard which makes him stand out and gives him a prophetic aura, the blue eyes under a creased forehead due to the years that weigh on his shoulders, the very white skin with reddish blemishes typical of Slavs, his athletic build, and those long arms which I recognize from our first encounter in Buenos Aires.

“Oui, Mompera,” the man answers, closing the suitcase. “Mompera” (“My Father”) is how all Malagasy refer to priests. I suddenly realize that he must have recognized him because Father Peter is not wearing any vestments, with the exception of the large distinctive cross that hangs from his neck.

TWO

FATHER PETER

This Vincentian missionary, an Argentinean of Slovenian origin, was born in 1948 in the San Martín province of Buenos Aires and baptized Pedro Pablo Opeka. I met him in Buenos Aires when he came to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of his father, Alojz Opeka, with his family.

It all began on Sunday, July 21, 2003. I opened the newspaper *La Nación* and noticed an article entitled “The Priest Who Has Rescued 17,000 Africans from the Streets.” I devoured the good news about Father Peter. We are so used to bad news that when something good appears, it is worth pausing for a minute. And that is exactly what I did. My spirit soared when I read the subtitle: “In what was formerly a rubbish dump, he has created a small city.” Some details about his life and work appeared in front of my eyes. When I read that Father Peter “approached men on the streets and explained to them that there was a way out of that kind of life: work,” it was as if a thunderbolt crashed in front of me that Sunday morning.

“Faced with extreme poverty, Peter suggested they could create a new life of work and solidarity for themselves,” the article read. “This is exactly what needs to be done!” I exclaimed to myself. This is true in Argentina, and everywhere in the world where marginalization and misery devastate

man's dignity. "Give a man a fish, and you will feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you will feed him for a lifetime," the proverb says. The article added the following remark by the priest: "Poverty isn't a consequence of our destiny; it's something caused by men, especially by politicians who make promises and don't keep them."

Powerful words pronounced by a man with a beard and curly hair... words that touched my heart, as I thought of the political novel I had published the year before entitled *To Die with Glory*. In it, I imagined a president of the republic who, as soon as he had taken office, began building houses himself, inviting the outcasts and the deprived to join him in his project, thus creating "Centers of Hope" all over the country. Of course, that was fiction and the president was killed five months after taking office. Father Peter, on the other hand, was a real character who was alive and, moreover, visiting Argentina.



The next day, I made up my mind to find him and invite him to do an interview on the weekly radio program I host with my wife and some of our children. But how to track him down? I knew from the article that his parents lived in Ramos Mejía and that he was a member of "The Congregation of the Mission," founded by St. Vincent de Paul (whose priests are called "Vincentians" or "Lazarists" after the hospital of St. Lazarus in Paris, which was their first priory). First, I contacted the Vincentians. Everyone knew Father Peter, but no one knew his telephone number. Finally, thanks to directory assistance, I found the numbers of the only two Opekas living in the Ramos Mejía district. I dialed the first number, and Marija Marolt, Father Pedro's mother, answered. "Yes, he's here. Please wait a minute," she said in Spanish with a foreign accent.

Father Peter's simplicity and good disposition became obvious as soon as we started talking. We arranged a meeting for the following day. Afterwards came the interview, full of emotion and that magnetism which emanates from his personality, transforming my fantasy world into reality and making it possible to discuss those ideals in a practical and concrete way.

After the first radio interview, we had several meetings during which he told me about his life and the Akamasoa project. It was in October, after a farewell Mass together with his friends and relatives, that I proposed writing a book in Spanish. "I agree, but let's put it in God's hands. What will be, will be," was his answer. So I started trawling the world of publishing companies, looking for one that would be interested in the project.

Finally, at the end of February 2004, a possibility appeared, and then another one. I wrote Father Pedro an email to which he replied: "If you could meet with me in mid-March, it would be better because I have to go to Europe to look for donations for the hospital we are building." And he added: "It would be a good idea if you could stay at least until Palm Sunday." As simple and down to earth as that, even though I had not anticipated traveling so soon.

I analyzed how best I could arrange any pending business; I examined the pros and cons of making such a big trip so soon; I talked it over with certain people; and eventually I made up my mind to travel, despite the fact that I had decided a few months before to devote some time to financially more profitable activities. But the proposal also gave me an opportunity that I considered unique: that of immersing myself in the life of an exemplary man and in a great humanitarian project in this world so void of content and examples. Bearing that in mind, it was impossible to be overcome by doubts.



The life of Father Opeka (in the Slovenian language, “Opeka” means “brick” or “tile”) was marked from before his birth by his parents’ sacrifice, suffering, and effort. The lives of Marija and Alojz must be taken into account in order to gain a better understanding of their son. To do this, we must revisit Slovenia at the end of the World War II, but not without first mentioning something about this nation which has only recently joined the European Union.

Slovenia, a small country in central Europe, began consolidating its ethnic identity with the arrival of the Slavs in the sixth century AD during the Carantanian dukedom. In 1335 the dukedom became part of the Hapsburg Empire (which later became the Austro-Hungarian Empire). During the economic crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, some of the inhabitants of what is today known as Slovenia emigrated to the Americas, especially to the United States, and the first Slovenian immigrants to Argentina date back to those times (even though it was a very small group). At the end of the World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dismembered and a third of the Slovenian territory went to Italy (including the great port of Trieste). The rest became part of the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, which in 1929, under King Alexander’s dictatorship, became known as Yugoslavia.

Alexander was murdered in Marseilles in 1934, and in 1941 Germany and Italy invaded Yugoslavia. At that time, several resistance groups sprouted up in the Balkans; the most prominent ones were the communist partisans of Josie Broz (better known as Tito) and the monarchists (or “chetniks”) commanded by Mihajlovic. In Slovenia, the domobranici (the Home Guards) did not align themselves with either

party, hoping for independence from any foreign power. When the war ended, Slovenia recovered most of its territory that was under Italian rule, except for the port of Trieste and Gorizia. At that moment, the territory of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia fell into the hands of Tito, who established a socialist economy and subordinated and persecuted all noncommunists. Finally, after the fall of the Berlin wall and the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union, the new world framework encouraged the outpouring of independence movements within Yugoslavia. Slovenia declared its independence on June 24, 1991, and became a sovereign country.

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