

Interview with General Secretary of the Missionary Childhood Association

The following is a translation of a recent interview conducted by the National Office of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Spain.

"MISSIONARY CHILDHOOD IS SHARING" Dr. Baptistine Ralamboarison, SPEAKS OF THE MISSIONARY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION AND AGAIN AND AGAIN CONFIRMS THAT THE MONEY SENT TO THE MISSIONARY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION IS MONEY THAT HAS BEEN DONATED BY CHILDREN.



Born in Madagascar 61 years ago, Dr. Baptistine Ralamboarison knew the world of poverty of children before being elected to the post of General Secretary of the Pontifical Missionary Childhood Association, based in Rome, for the entire world. Since 2010 she has been responsible for reviewing all projects that are proposed and allocating funds received from each member country of this work. She reiterates again and again: Missionary Childhood money is money donated by children.

What is the Missionary Childhood?

The Missionary Childhood for me is one word: sharing. When one speaks of the Missionary Childhood, it seems like a very elaborate and difficult thing. I do not know if in Spain it is the same but usually in Italy or France, the word "missionary" is not received with pleasantness. When people hear "I am the General Secretary of the Missionary Childhood" it seems very outdated. So when I say that the Missionary Childhood is children helping children, it is better understood.

But it is not First Aid....

It is not a humanitarian society; it is evangelization, which is very important. Prayers and material goods help a lot but no one thinks of prayers. And this is what makes the Missionary Childhood different. It's very good because it educates children to grow and be responsible people because they are part of society and the Church.

How is this formed in children?



Missionary Childhood is an education in sharing for children, in saying no to selfishness. Because in today's world we see that we always think of ourselves and not others, who are also people like us. This is what is necessary to inculcate in children. This is what the animators and leaders of the Missionary Childhood have to help children understand. It is basic education, telling children: "You belong to a family that is the Church, you have brothers and sisters around the world, and as a family, when one is well everyone is happy, when one has a need all ask what can be done?" For example, if a family member is sick others take them to the pharmacy, to the doctor. This is the Missionary Childhood. For example, when there is a birthday, the cake is not only enjoyed by the birthday child but the whole family. That's sharing, that's being a missionary.

And the prayer of which you have spoken to us about?

The most important thing is prayer, which has unmeasured force. Therefore, being a missionary is to pray for all children in the world who are my brothers and sisters. I do all I can do for everyone not just for myself. That's being a missionary, only that. I don't think it is a difficult thing, but very joyful and lovely.

In how many countries does the Missionary Childhood Association exist?

There are 140 national offices worldwide, and usually, the national directors are the directors of the four Pontifical Mission Societies – The Society for the Propagation of the Faith, The Missionary Childhood Association, The Society of St. Peter Apostle and Missionary Union of Priests and Religious.

Which country has the strongest Missionary Childhood?



It is hard to say, because if its strength is measured with the prayers, I think they are all very strong. If instead it is measured with money, it is relative, because the West is richer, and Africa, Oceania and Asia are poorer. So if a country like Spain gives us more than 2 million dollars, it is great; but if a small country in Africa gives us 1500 euros for me it has equal value. It's not the quantity but the quality of what is given.

Who starts the initiatives?

I always tell the directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies and animators of Missionary Childhood Association to please let kids do whatever they want. It is necessary for adults to support and accompany children but when the child has mastered the sense of the Missionary Childhood we must let him or her take the initiative because they can do a lot. A priest told me that ever since the Missionary Childhood got started in his parish more people have started going to church on Sunday. Because children understood what it meant to go to Mass and the parents followed because children can draw in their parents. I think they can lead to more conversions than an adult, because being young, pure and innocent the adult is more receptive to what the child has to say. Children can do so much. You have to let them act as they want because when they have understood the meaning of the Missionary Childhood they can't do bad things. Adult supervision is fine but the initiative has to come from the children.

How does this affect their lives?

Crisis and war are adult words. When children have understood that life is to be shared, all is well. They don't think about there not being enough money. These are all adult matters.



The first education for a child is telling them "You can ". Although he or she might be orphaned and have nothing material. I remember I once asked a sister about her children's contribution to the Missionary Childhood and she replied angrily that the children did not have anything. This is lethal to children because they will grow up with the idea that because they are poor they always have to beg and have nothing to give. A child can give much, they can pray. So you have to tell children they can. Children see that the spiritual dimension is also important rather than only the material. But as I always say, the material is a logical consequence of the spiritual side when a child has understood the sense of solidarity, the material is automatic.

How does the Secretariat function?

Each country collects funds nationwide which then establish the Universal Fund. With this fund, we answer the needs of children worldwide. The General Secretariat receives 4000 requests for help each year, and we are only in the position to respond to 3000 petitions.

How are funds distributed?



We offer two types of subsidies. What we call "ordinary subsidies" help bishops promote the spirit of the Missionary Childhood in their dioceses. All initiatives to promote the Missionary Childhood Association by a diocese are funded with this money. It is a right of all dioceses in mission territories. But although it is a right, it is not automatic. The bishop has to send a report on the situation of children in his diocese and which initiatives are taken to promote the Missionary Childhood. They also have a collection for the Universal Fund because it is not only receiving but also giving. If this report is acceptable we send the money. We need to know what the dioceses are doing for the Missionary Childhood and we need to verify. Then there are "extraordinary subsidies" for specific projects: schools, hospitals, orphanages ... All initiatives of the diocese in order to help children. But for the direct needs of the children, not adults who care for them. The child helps another child, not the adult!

What are the most frequent requests?

We have many requests for school construction which is a vehicle to evangelize. In Catholic school children are surrounded by Christian values. It is very important and very expensive. We move ahead

little by little. Education and health are areas in which more is invested. There are also many requests for the placement of children in orphanages.

How do you distribute the money?

We prepare the projects and each national director reviews. These are then presented to the General Assembly, held in May, and it is decided there. We only propose and national directors approve in the Assembly.

How do we encourage the missionary dimension in a secularized society?



This would require that animation leaders of the Missionary Childhood go to children. Institutions are often far away from children. They have to go to meet them. For example, a bishop of the Congo had no children in his parish. He wondered, “Where are the children?” In a country like this there are children everywhere. He learned that during Mass time they were playing soccer. He approached the field and began to speak with the children. Days later he took several soccer balls for them to play with. After playing with them for several days, he asked them how many went to Mass and invited them to go to church the following Sunday. The bishop went where the kids were and the children saw his interest in them. Do not wait for children to come! This is the way the Missionary Childhood can reach out to a challenging society. We can work hard and be committed from our office space but if it does not reach the child it’s useless. I see it with my nephews. If you talk to them about Jesus first, they say nothing. You have to start talking to them about their interests and slowly there’s an awakening in them, a concern to help and to ask themselves what they can do to make things better. And we can then show them that things that happen to us are not by coincidence.

What are the main challenges of the Missionary Childhood Association in the world?

We only know about the ones we receive. Through the requests we see that a big problem is the lack of education. Many of the children in the street become drug addicts and prostitutes because money is needed. There’s nothing one can do if there’s a lack of education. Another big problem is healthcare. There are diseases that have cures which, in poor countries, are fatal. They have no money to buy medicine, no pharmacies, no hygiene.

Health and education are the two main problems of children worldwide.

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