

BLESSED LUCIEN BOTOVASOA (1908-1947)

Lucien Botovasoa was born in 1908 in Vohipeno, a small village in the Diocese of Farafangana, on the southeastern coast of Madagascar, more than one thousand kilometers from the nation's capital. His parents were poor farmers, like many others in this region, always struggling with weather-related risks. They followed the traditional religion but were open-minded. When the villagers discovered the Christian faith, many converted and asked for baptism. Among them was Lucien, baptized at the age of 13 on Holy Saturday, April 15, 1922. His parents converted to the Christian faith much later. Lucien was confirmed the following year, April 2, 1923. From his childhood, Lucien was intent on living his faith with commitment and seriousness.

Lucien's ideal of life was to be a good Christian, an apostle of Jesus in the heart of the world. What most characterized his martyrdom was his love for his compatriots and his persecutors. It is no coincidence that he was called Rabefihavanana, the Reconciler.

Following the motto of the Jesuit Fathers, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, Lucien studied in Ambzontany Fianarantsoa, at Saint Joseph College, for four years. After he obtained a teacher's diploma, he returned to Vohipeno as teacher and assistant director of the parish school. Even then, he still had the desire to read and continue to learn everything. He was a wonderful educator and an exceptional, competent, conscientious, and zealous teacher, explaining all the school subjects to his students with clarity and kindness. But he was also a Christian teacher and always concerned himself with the religious education of children, to whom he taught catechism both

during school hours and after classes. Every evening, after school, he read the stories of the saints to those who wanted to hear them. But what he loved most of all were the lives of the martyrs; he knew how to tell them with a very particular fervor that set fire to the hearts of those who listened.

On October 10, 1930, Lucien married Suzanne Soazana. The couple had eight children, of whom only five survived. Lucien loved his children, educated them, and taught them to pray. But he also spent a great deal of time taking care of the children of others, visiting the sick, teaching in the evening, leading various groups – the Crusaders of the Heart of Jesus, the Honor Guard of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Young Malagasy Catholics – to learn the catechism. Suzanne, at home, had a great challenge: she wanted her husband to leave the role of teacher to become an accountant. Lucien, however, continued his service of forming others in the Christian life with joy and generosity. He spent much time at church, playing the harmonium and conducting the choir, not only during Sunday Mass, but also weekdays at the early morning six o'clock Mass.

Around 1940, looking for a book on the life of a married saint to be taken as a model, Lucien discovered the Franciscan Third Order (since 1978, called the Secular Franciscan Order) and studied the Rule. With Marguerite Kembarakala, who had formed him to the faith, he established a first community of brothers in Vohipeno. The rule was demanding, and Lucien applied it to the letter. Lucien Botovasoa began to excel in piety and poverty. Every night he got up several times to pray kneeling at the foot of the bed, then he went to church at six for an hour of meditation before the tabernacle. On Wednesdays and Fridays, he enlivened the family meal but, following the rule, he fasted himself, provoking Suzanne's discontent.

In October 1945 and then in June 1946, political elections were held in Madagascar. The two political parties wanted Lucien Botovasoa as their candidate. But Lucien categorically refused their invitation, insisting, "Your politics are nourished by lies and can only end in blood."

Sunday, March 30, 1947, Palm Sunday, Lucien's father sent Lucien and

his brother into the forest. The two took refuge there as insurgents attacked the city. The fighting lasted until Wednesday. The massacres carried out by the political party known as the Parti des déshérités de Madagascar resulted in a bloody Holy Week. The result was a total massacre, with eighteen churches and five schools burned. Naturally, on Easter, it was not possible to celebrate the Eucharist in the parish church. On the Second Sunday of Easter, Lucien returned to the city after having taken his family to safety in the forest. Here he succeeded in bringing all the refugees together in a common prayer, in which Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims participated. Lucien commented on the Gospel, urging everyone to revive their faith and to have the courage to face martyrdom in the event that it was necessary. He spoke and led the song with intense joy.

On April 16, 1947, King Tsimihono, the local leader of the Malagasy Democratic Renewal Movement (MDRM), summoned everyone to eliminate all the party's enemies from the city, including Lucien. On Thursday, April 17, the king offered a key position to Lucien Botovaso, inviting him to become the secretary of the MDRM. Meanwhile Lucien had communicated to his wife that they would condemn him. Suzanne wanted him to hide, but Lucien refused and, taking a picture of St. Francis from the wall, said, "He will guide me."

After a quiet lunch with his family and some prayer, Lucien replied to those who had come to arrest him without the slightest hesitation, "*I am ready.*" He was taken without the least resistance. He knew he would die and when they called him, he came forward. Sitting at the king's right hand, in the place of honor, he said aloud, "I know you are going to kill me, and I cannot fight it. If my life can save others, do not hesitate to kill me. The only thing I ask of you is not to touch my brothers."

If he had accepted the role as MDRM secretary, he would have saved his life. But he said, "You kill, you burn the churches, you forbid prayer, you let the crucifixes be trampled, and you destroy the sacred images, rosaries, and the scapulars. You want to desecrate our church, turning it

into a ballroom. Yours is a dirty work. You know how important religion is to me. I cannot work for you.” About thirty boys from Ambohimanarivo, mostly his old students, accompanied him to the Mattatoio, the place where executions took place, at the south exit of the city, in a place called Ambalafary. Lucien said, “Tell my family not to cry, because I am happy. It is God who takes me. May your hearts never abandon God!” He walked like a free man, a conqueror.

The group of boys arrived at the place of execution. Three men designated by the king were already in place. To reach them, the procession had to cross a canal. Before crossing it, Lucien asked for time to pray and was given it. He prayed, “O my God, forgive my brothers, who now have a difficult task to face. May my blood be shed for the salvation of my country!” Lucien repeated these words several times. He also prayed in Latin, and perhaps intoned the song of Lent that he loved so much: “Save, O Lord, save your people, may your wrath not remain forever upon us!”

Then they wanted to tie his hands, but he refused, saying, “Do not bind me to kill me. I bind myself.” And he crossed his wrists one on top of the other, holding the cross of the rosary in his hand. Once on his knees, he prayed again, repeating the words already spoken before: “O my God, forgive my brothers.” He forgave the executioners first and interceded for them, while they mocked him: “Your prayer is too long! Do you think it will save you?” Some of those who had remained on the other side of the canal were shouting insults. But Lucien answered, “I have not finished! Leave me a moment longer.” He raised his hands to heaven and prostrated himself three times on the ground, like Jesus during the Passion, then turned to them saying, “Hurry up now, because the spirit is ready but the flesh is weak.” While they killed him, the executioners mocked him, saying, “Now go play your harmonium.” Given up for love of Christ and his Church, Lucien’s body was thrown into the Matitanana River. Recognizing his martyrdom and his witness to his faith, the Catholic Church beatified him on April 15, 2018, in Vohipeno, Madagascar.