

Jacques Tesseraud 1931 - 2015

A candidate presented himself one day at our former house of Philosophy in Kerlois, France, in September 1961. He was 30 years of age, a medical doctor by profession and had just finished his military service in Germany. Jacques Tesseraud was born in Tarbes, on the 15th August 1931. His father worked for French Railways. Jacques followed him to Paris on his appointment as Warden of a University Residence. All Jacques' education, including his medical studies took place in Paris. He had little taste for the prestige and worldliness of this profession. His visits to the poor under the auspices of the Conference Laënnec, a Jesuit run organisation supporting medical students, and the advice of Fr. Jean-Baptiste Blin (+1977) oriented him towards Africa, something his family, especially his mother were against.

His parents came from a well off background and were much involved in their parish. Jacques had four brothers and sisters all of whom were married. During his years of training, he was always anxious to keep up to date with medical matters. With his maturity and his experience as a doctor, two years of Philosophy in Kerlois and the novitiate in Gap in 1963 were difficult years for him. The superiors hesitated and they felt he should deepen his



sense of vocation. However, they agreed that he could keep himself up to date with medical matters by doing training sessions during his years of theological studies. He was appointed to Eastview, Canada. This meant that he left Gap early and he finished the final 20 days of his novitiate in Eastview. He was able to study Psychiatry as well as Theology during his time there. He took his Missionary Oath on the 16th June 1967 and he was ordained priest on the 4th July 1968 in the Parish of Blagis, Fontenay-aux-Roses (Paris). All his life, he was a solitary person seemingly caught between two

forms of apostolate, that of a traditional missionary pastor or a life totally given to Christ in the care of the poor through his medical practice. One of his formators observed that he should become a Brother and work as a Doctor. Finding a balance between medicine and priesthood was always a problem for Jacques. He returned to France many times in his missionary career not only needing rest and medical attention but also needing time out for discernment.

Jacques was in Tunisia from 1968 to 1972. He opened the mission at Sousse with two other confreres, Jean-Marie Magnin (+1982) and Robert Caspar (+2007). He shared the pastoral work and community prayer but he devoted himself to learning Arabic and the Tunisian dialect. He did not practice medicine but gave courses to sisters, nurses and lay volunteers. While on holiday for a session on prayer, he noted that he was not getting fat, but from time to time, he suffered from bouts of tiredness! He was not enthusiastic about doing further studies but was persuaded to go to IPEA (now PISAI) in Rome during the academic year of 1972 to 1973.

Jacques accepted an appointment to Yemen in 1974. Fr. Michel Gagnon (+2004) was administrator in a new hospital in Al Hudaydah on the coast of the Red Sea and he was looking for a confrere. He thought that Jacques could do good work as a Doctor and a Priest. Fr. Roman Stäger joined them in 1978. Jacques found a big difference between Yemen and Tunisia, from a French speaking and relative

secure area to a practically all Arabic speaking and an unsettled environment. The hospital project suffered from a chronic shortage of material, resources, and qualified personnel. His health suffered, and he had bouts of asthma and malaria. Severe viral hepatitis forced a return to Paris in 1977. There were a number of family bereavements including that of his parents and a brother at this time. Doctors advised him not to return to Yemen, yet he returned there in 1978. He was asked to lead an Anti-Tuberculosis programme organised by the WHO. He preferred acute medicine but agreed to join the Anti-TB scheme. He was feeling somewhat fragile, under-employed, and alienated. In March 1980, he was repatriated urgently to France suffering from deep depression.

Jacques spent the next four years in France. He rested for six months in Mours and recovered to the extent that he made a Long Retreat at Clamart. In October 1980, he was appointed Superior of the new retirement home of the White Fathers in Bry-sur-Marne. The elderly fathers appreciated his devotion but the staff found him lacking in flexibility. A return to Africa was foreseen. Michel Gagnon had been appointed Bishop of Djibouti in 1980 and was anxious for the presence of other White Fathers. Jacques was willing to go on three conditions when his duty at Bry was finished. The conditions were, that he would be replaced at Bry-sur-Marne, that there would be a community of three confreres in Djibouti (with an appointed superior), and

that the Society would take full charge of the project. He did an academic year at PISAI from 1983 to 1984 but had some doubts and hesitations about going to Djibouti. The Society also had concerns because it could not guarantee a community of three among other things. Nevertheless, he left for Djibouti in June 1984. His role in Djibouti was not clear and he could not find any insertion as a doctor. He also found it difficult to get along with the confreres. He returned to France in 1986 and went to stay in Mours.

Jacques was then asked to try Algeria. He was appointed to the community looking after Notre Dame d'Afrique in October 1986. He needed some medical tests and eventually arrived in Algiers in May 1987. However, he never settled and he again experienced a sense of alienation and he was disappointed that there was no opportunity to practice medicine. He left after a few weeks. The assessment of the superiors was pessimistic, it was felt he was not very committed, no sense of reality and he was becoming more and more indecisive. A comment was made, "he never found a balance between priesthood and medicine." If he was odd at times, lacking flexibility, he could be sharp, and profound, tactful and charming in community according to Etienne Renaud, now the Superior General.

Jacques returned to Mours in August 1987. However, he was often absent in Poissy where he helped in a centre for immigrants from the Maghreb or at the hospital. He joined the confreres at the weekends. Howev-

er, he had no mandate or a contract; he said that he was "on holidays." When François Richard, the Provincial, informed him that Bishop Robert de Chevigny, the Spiritan Bishop of Mauritania was looking for priests in his huge Diocese, Jacques was tempted. As a precaution, he went to look at the place in October 1993 in order to see the conditions and the type of ministry he was being offered. It meant working outside of community in a huge iron ore-mining complex in Zouérat. Four White sisters were already working there. There was a small Christian presence. He arrived in Nouakchott just after a jihadist type of attack on the Cathedral when a maniac mutilated and murdered two priests.

The situation reminded him of Djibouti, especially when Martin Happe, a German White Father was appointed Bishop of Nouakchott in 1995. Although the White Sisters left in 1997, Jacques continued to live alone in Zouérat treating sick people in his own clinic despite the presence of a Regional Hospital and a Health Centre in the mining complex and doing some ministry. The diocese, which up to that time was in the care of the Spiritans, was now attached to the Province of Mali (Bamako). Jacques lived alone, poorly, without a telephone or any modern means of communication, and no domestic help. He visited and cared for the poor and helped in a library for young people. The extreme heat that often exceeded 40°C meant he returned to France every two years. A fall caused by youngsters resulted in a broken hip and an urgent evacuation

by plane in April 1998. He returned to Zouérat however and resumed his activities but with reduced mobility. He would have liked to die there and he found it very difficult to accept the end of his contract and a definitive return to France in 2013.

He lived his final two years in Mours. He seldom spoke about himself and his memories, but he prayed faithfully and silently to Christ whom he had served in his service to the poorest. He fell asleep in the Lord on the 8th September 2015, the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary in the

Georges Pompidou Hospital in Paris. His funeral was celebrated in Mours on the 11th September in the presence of many confreres, friends, and relatives. Fr. Patrick Bataille, the Delegate Superior presided. A comment of a confrere invoked Moses on the border of the Promised Land and Peter leaving everything to follow Christ and the life of Jacques, which could be summed up in three words, availability, faithfulness, and prayer

Philippe Thiriez