



The son of deeply Christian peasants of modest means, Jacques Berthieu was to rise to the greatest height that can be reached by men here below, which is to serve at the altar.

He was born on November 27, 1838, in the heart of the Massif Central, on a farm called Monlogis, which is near Polminhac, in the department of Cantal, in France. His childhood was spent working and studying, surrounded by his family. The early death of an older sister made him the oldest of six children. He entered the minor and then the major seminaries of the diocese of Saint-Flour, and was ordained to the priesthood on May 21, 1864. His bishop, Monseigneur de Pompignac, named him vicar in Roannes-Saint Mary, where he replaced an ill and aged priest.

The years went by. He began to feel attracted to the religious life, and received permission from his bishop to pursue that calling. On October 31, 1873, he entered the Jesuit novitiate in Pau.

While he was pursuing his training in the seminary of Vals, near Le Puy, he heard a new call, and asked his overseers to send him to the mission field. In a letter dated July 28, 1875, he confided the following to one of his friends: "I have been designated as a future apostle to the Malagasy (Madagascar); am supposed to leave Vals at the end of August, and then Marseilles and France, on September 26, probably to never return, which is fine with me."

He arrived in Tamatave on December 10, 1875, only to be informed that Father Cazet, the Superior of the mission, had appointed him to the island of Sainte-Marie. He began language study and his initiation to missionary life. Mindful of his farming background, he was happy to cultivate the kitchen garden that supplied the station.

The decrees of 1880 were applied, forbidding members of unauthorized religious congregations to remain in French territories, and the Jesuits were forced to leave Sainte-Marie, which had been tied to France since 1750. Berthieu left the island in early October of 1881.

He was sent to Ambohimandroso, which was the mission station that was the farthest from Antananarivo, being in the far reaches of the Betsileo and Bara regions. However, in June of 1883, the first Franco-Hova war forced him to go to Mananjary with a group of twenty others: nine priests, seven Brothers and four Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny. They had to make their way on foot, which was often a forced march. An English schooner made for six ferried them all, "literally stacked together like sardines," to Tamatave, where they arrived on the 10th of July.

For a year and a half, he "languished in Tamatave," as he wrote, "far from my poor exposed and abandoned flock." He became a volunteer chaplain, and took up "the real missionary life" once again, in Vohemar, in the northeast. He wanted to found, or try to found something in yet another new place.

As soon as the treaty was signed on December 17, 1885, Berthieu was anxious to be reunited with his flock, but he was named Superior of the mission in Ambositra. When he arrived in early 1886, there were six country stations to serve; when he left in 1891, there were fifteen. At his departure, he said, "I was quite torn when I left Ambositra, as I had spent five and a half years living, working, and suffering there."

His new mission field was Andrainarivo, north of Antananarivo, "eight solid hours away, on horseback, with no time for fooling around." He added, "I started the real missionary life, alone, with no companions, in a huge district. I have eighteen stations or parishes to serve, and some are very far apart."

The second Franco-Hova war forced him into exile again, although it was shorter than the last. He came back thirteen months later, in December of 1895.

Although a peace accord was signed, there was no peace of mind. A rebellion started by the *Menalamba* ("those who wear red *lamba*") west of the Imerina reached the north. The instigators kept saying that the most recent events that befell their country came about because the people were no longer practicing ancestor worship. Without distinction between what was religious or political, the rebels went after whatever was foreign. They eventually managed to infiltrate the region of Andrainarivo, which led the military authorities to order the population to evacuate. Berthieu had a horse and could have taken the lead, but he chose to tie his fate to that of the people. He loaned his horse to a mission employee with a wounded foot who could not walk. On the afternoon of June 8, 1896, he fell into the hands of a gang of *Menalamba*. "Renounce your nasty religion, and stop leading the people astray," said the chief, "we'll make you our chief and counselor, and

we won't kill you." Berthieu fell to his knees, saying, "I absolutely cannot do such a thing; I would rather die!" A few minutes later he was felled by a shotgun blast, and then killed by another point-blank shot. His body was dragged to the Mananara and thrown into the water.

On October 10, 1916, the Vicar Apostolic of Antananarivo, monsignor de Saune, opened a formal inquiry into the exact circumstances of his death. In 1933, following a request from the Congregation of the Sacred Rites, the proceedings of the ordinary began, ending on April 8, 1964, when Paul VI officially declared Berthieu a martyr. He was proclaimed "blessed" on October 17, 1965.

Bernard Blot

<http://www.dacb.org/stories/madagascar/berthieu-jacques.html>

Canonized on October 21, 2012

From a Letter to the entire Society of Jesus

“The Society of Jesus rejoices that the Church canonizes a new saint from among us, proposes him as a model to all the faithful, and invites them to seek his intercession. Certainly the historical context and the modalities of mission have changed from the end of the 19th century to our time; it is the role of historians to investigate more closely what actually happened and of hagiographers to identify the most significant aspects of holiness.”

Adolfo Nicolas, SJ... Superior General of the Society of Jesus ... Oct 15, 2012