

Gérard Chevillard

1926 - 2016



Gerard was born on the 18th October 1926 in the ancient county of Anjou in France, “the land of softness” as Joachim du Bellay described it. There were 15 children in the family home, eight boys and seven girls. All married except the two eldest boys, Jean and Gerard. Both became Missionaries of Africa. Terrorists murdered Jean, with three other confrères at Tizi Ouzou, Kabylia, Algeria on the 27th December 1994.

Gerard’s mother was from the city and a businessperson, while his father learned the trade of sil-

versmith in his native village. He took over from his boss when he retired. Gerard’s father succeeded in developing the business well known as the “Maison Chevillard” specialising in liturgical objects. Gerard’s parents were deeply Christian, dedicated in the local church and they transmitted to their children not only the faith, but also a sense of community life, debate, humour and optimism.

Like many young people of his age, the German occupation of France during the war and the difficulties it brought marked Gerard deeply. Two of his brothers and two of his cousins were deported to Germany. Two died there, another returned home sick while a fourth was imprisoned having been accused of organising a “Catholic parish” for French deportees. During this time, Gerard, thanks to the movement of Young Christian Students, rediscovered the person of Christ, the Gospel and the idea of sharing his love for Jesus with Africans. He entered the Philosophy House of the White Fathers in Kerlois, France in 1945.

Gerard's novitiate and theological studies were interrupted by illness and then by military service. Many times, Gerard said how much he appreciated the courses in Sacred Scripture of Fr. Paul Maurel (+2001) which gave him a taste for the Bible as a source of spiritual life. On the other hand, he regretted not being sufficiently prepared for the "mission" in Africa, for missionary life. He took his Missionary Oath in Thibar on the 29th June 1953 and he was ordained priest on the 18th April 1954 in Carthage.

In 1954, his appointment to the Diocese of Nouna (then in Upper Volta) led him to discover the Samos clan of the Mandé population. First, he was curate in Tougan and then, in 1959, he was given the job of setting up the Catholic Action movement in the diocese. He returned to Tougan as Parish Priest in 1967 having done the Long Retreat in Villa Cavalletti in May 1966. In April 1968, he was appointed to Rome to work in the newly created Secretariat of the Apostolate.

Gerard liked to reminisce about his first years of missionary life, which he enjoyed very much. He noticed with admiration how the population received the Gospel with open hearts. He, no

doubt, recognised that not everything was perfect, but he perceived how much the Holy Spirit had transformed the lives of people by opening their hearts to the words of Jesus. "I really had the impression and the joy of living out the Act of the Apostles for 14 years and that was during the 20th century," he said.

The General Chapter of 1967 had asked for the setting up of a Secretariat for the Apostolate. It was composed of three confreres coming from Francophone Africa, Anglophone Africa and from Muslim Africa. Their mandate was to list the different kinds of apostolate, the initiatives undertaken in the regions, and the solid work carried out by communities and individuals. The fruits of their work were to be presented to the General Council, to help them plan their work.

Gerard and the other confreres crisscrossed Africa and discovered just how our confreres faithfully used the rules of the Apostolate inherited from the Founder, while taking into account the local conditions, a care for the history of the people, respect for the ways and customs of the population, and using the richness of the language and the proverbs. Gerard thought they showed a lot of initiative. However, he also noted

a certain number of difficulties arising from the delay in putting into practice the decisions of Vatican II. During this period, Gerard was also in charge of the student community of the Gener-
alate.

At the end of his mandate in 1972, Gerard returned to France. He became superior of the house on rue Friant. It was his job to animate the community, listen to people passing through, and look after promoting the missions. His brief also included the maintenance of the building in a way that it fulfilled its role as a guest-house. It was a lot of things to take on and on the 9th August 1973, while cleaning a glass door, his ladder fell over and his arm crashed through the glass and he cut the nerve in his elbow. This meant an operation, convalescence in Mours and his resignation as superior of rue Friant.

Once he has recovered sufficiently, Gerard wanted to continue working, if possible in a parish. An opportunity presented itself in a parish in the suburbs of Geneva. He accepted the post of curate, then as Parish Priest in a community with two White Fathers and a Vietnamese priest. He was to work there for 18 years. Other than parish activities, there were many opportunities for ecu-

menical activities as the parish had more than 500 homes with mixed marriages. Gerard regretted that women did not have a greater role in the Church. He himself was ready to listen to them attentively and their stance on the matter beginning with his own sisters.

Gerard resigned in 1993 and returned to France, more precisely to Nantes, where he did supply work in different parishes for another 12 years. In June 2005, he finally retired and took up residence in Billère. Nevertheless, he still worked as a chaplain in a house run by the Little Sisters of the Poor. He died on the 15th January 2016. After the funeral in the chapel of our house in Billère, he was buried in Angers after Mass celebrated in the Cathedral.

Gerard leaves us with a memory of a confrere with a strong personality, well able to defend his ideas, fiercely at times but always respecting charity. He was always anxious to work profitably for the Kingdom. He did not focus on his suffering, but he was happy to show in a real way his love for the Lord.

His confreres in Billère