

# *Spiritom*

*missionary news*



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L'île Maurice ■ Mauritius





A welcoming people ...

## Editorial

# SURPRISE, SURPRISE

When on March 28, 1993, I left Edmonton, Alberta, it was a cool Canadian winter's day, 30 degrees Celsius below zero. The Saskatchewan river was solidly ice-bound and snow was falling all the way to the airport.

Naturally, I expected better weather when I arrived two days later in Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean, just north of the equator.

Guess, then, my surprise, on landing at Plaisance Airport, to find not the sun-drenched dream island of the tourist brochures, but a stark sunless landscape, lashed by gale-force winds and torrential rains. Even a hurricane was reported heading in our direction!

With telephones and electricity intermittently interrupted and all schools and many places of business closed, I began to recall the horror stories I had read of the early Dutch settlers who named the island "Mauritius" but eventually, because of its climactic uncertainties, wrote it off as a "colony impossible".

Fortunately for me, however, within a few days, the skies cleared, the thermostat rose and I could fully subscribe to Mark Twain's celebrated compliment that "Mauritius was made first, and then heaven, and heaven was copied after Mauritius".

But weather was not the only surprise. There were others. For starters, I always imagined Mauritius "a single island" but found it was a federated republic of several islands which that year (1993) were celebrating their first twenty five years of political independence and economic prosperity.

As well, when I left Canada I expected to find Cardinal Jean Margéot, one of the

most highly regarded Catholic churchmen of the Post-Vatican II period, still guiding the destinies of the Church as he had done for over 25 years. What a surprise then to find the Catholics of Port Louis diocese celebrating a double-event of historic significance - the end of a great era and beginning of a new one as Mgr Maurice Piat, a Spiritan, succeeded Cardinal Margéot as their chief pastor.

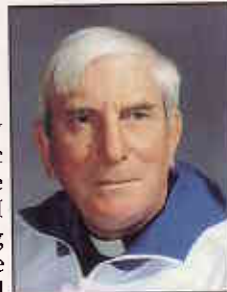
On leaving Canada, I knew something of the long-standing 152 years of continuous Spiritan presence on the island that reached back to the days of Père Laval, but I had no idea how much that presence in the future would depend not so much on Spiritans from France, England and Ireland as on the local young Spiritans of the new Indian Ocean Foundation, already themselves missioned to countries as far distant apart as Pakistan and Papua New Guinea.

And last but not least, while I had read a lot about the fabulous hospitality of Mauritians, I was still not fully prepared for the warmth of the welcome I received not only from my Spiritan confreres but from everyone I met wherever I went.

This kindness made my visit memorable and then greatly facilitated my research for this special *L'Île Maurice* edition of the *Spiritan Missionary News*. †

*Michael J. Troy*

Michael J. Troy, CSSp.



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Editorial Office,  
Spiritan Communications  
14420 McQueen Road  
Edmonton, Alberta T5N 3L2  
(403) 454-9728  
CANADA  
Editor - Fr Michael Troy CSSp

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Editor: Father Michael J. Troy, CSSp. Circulation Manager: Rose Anne Hart. All Correspondence and changes of address should be addressed to: 131 Victoria Park Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M4E 3S2, Canada

# Key to the Indian Ocean

## SMALL, BEAUTIFUL AND PROSPERING

**U**p to 400 years ago, Mauritius was little known, rarely visited and never really inhabited. It first appeared on the old Arab trade-route maps as "Dina Arobi", but little was known about it until the Portuguese in their tall ships rounded the Cape and found it a convenient "port-of-call" especially in the unpredictable cyclones that frequently swept this area in the middle of the Indian Ocean, just north of the Tropic of Capricorn and south of the Equator.

The Portuguese called it *Ilha do Cina*, "Swan Island" - possibly in honour of a flightless bird, the Dodo, now extinct but, at the time of their arrival, very numerous.

The Portuguese, however, never attempted to colonize "Swan Island" because of its geographical isolation - 1,500 miles east of Mombasa on the continent of Africa, 2,090 miles south of Sri Lanka in Asia, 3,928 miles west of Perth, Australia, and 3,300 miles north of the Antarctic Circle, Antarctica.

Today, the island although still remote even by plane (e.g. 6,060 miles from London, England), is called "Star of the Indian Ocean" and receives rave-descriptions from tourists but none greater than that of Mark Twain who once wrote that God first made Mauritius and then incorporated its grandeur into his design for heaven.

That would have been, apparently, 13 million years ago when masses of molten lava bubbled up from beneath the ocean bed. Proof of this titanic process are the giant now- weather-beaten rims of the volcanic craters, rugged, black basaltic peaks, like those of the Moka and Grand Port mountain ranges, that rise like gigantic cathedrals or castles out of the

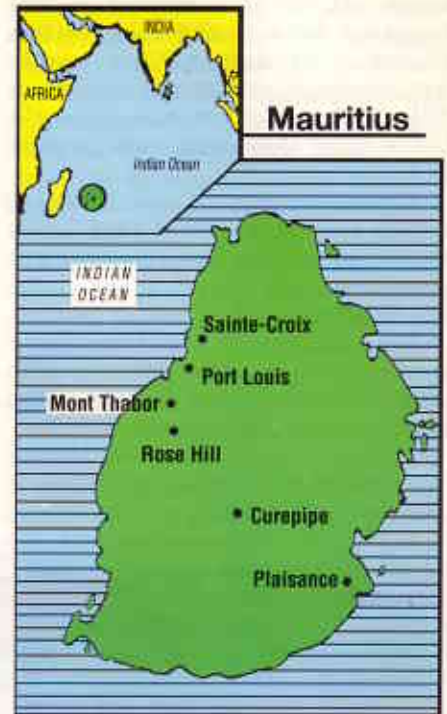
green-carpeted plains of sugar cane that cover half of the island's 35 x 29 miles land-mass.

Seen from the air, Mauritius is a sight never-to-be-forgotten. Small but beautiful, this oyster-shaped island has a magnificent 100 mile coastline of white sand beaches and peaceful coves, safeguarded from the mighty tides of the Indian Ocean by an almost unbroken close-to-the-shore coral reef. Once the graveyard of many an incoming tall ship, today this "white fringe" is one of Mauritius' greatest tourist attractions - the sight and sound of endless blue sea waves churned white as they crash across the hidden coral rampart.

### Early History

If Mauritius was once an uninhabited island, it has come a long way since then, because with over one million inhabitants in an area of 720 sq. miles or 1,864 sq. km., it is now one of the most densely populated areas of the world (570 people per sq. km.) It is also, as the Tourist Board bills it, "the most cosmopolitan island under the sun".

All this began when in 1593 when a Dutch fleet, under Admiral Van Warwyck, en route from Amsterdam to Java, got caught in a violent storm,



sheltered there and named the place "Mauritius" in honour of the then stadholder of the Netherlands, Prince Maurice of Nassau.

In 1638, Cornelius Simonsz Gooyer was named the first governor of Mauritius. There were only 26 Dutch colonists! The rest were slaves from Madagascar or convicts from Batavia brought in to develop agriculture and cut down ebony trees for export.

However, for various reasons, some macabre like the plague of rats "imported" on their own ships, the Dutch colony on Mauritius never really got off the ground and was finally abandoned in 1710. Nevertheless, the Dutch must be credited with giving the island its name "Mauritius" and introducing sugar-cane from Batavia (Jakarta), today the island's major industry and export.

In 1715, the French East Indian Company, from their headquarters in the neighbouring Island of Reunion (then called Bourbon) became interested in the "deserted" island.

In 1715, an expedition under D'Arsel took possession of the island in the name of the French King Louis XIV. They named the port of entry, Port Louis, in honour of Louis XIV and called the island, *Isle de France*.

The French ruled the island for nearly 100 years. During that period, enlightened governors like Bertrand Mahé de Labourdonnais and Charles Decaen did so much to establish French influence that even after 1810, when the French were defeated by the British General Abercrombie in a great naval



A fruitful land of waving sugar cane