



## The foundation of Tchirozérine (NIGER)

### "Small rivers" of sharing in the middle of the desert

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The immense territory of Niger (1,287,000 km<sup>2</sup>) is inhabited by 4 ethnic groups (the Hausas, the Djermas, the Sonraïs, the Peuls). It is a place where Christianity made its appearance in 1931 through Father Faroud of the African Missions of Lyon. The Little Sisters of Jesus arrived there in 1953. In 1961, Father Jean Ploussard (whose travelogue has become famous) settled under a tent, among the Tuaregs, in Tchirozérine ("The little rivers"). The school, small dispensary, dormitory - everything was housed under that tent! He died in February 1962, without completing all his projects, but those who had benefited from his initiatives took over: "*Moussa continued to teach the children under the school-tree, Tambo looked after the huts and the pilot garden, Awatay was to crush the millet for all of them*". In 1965, Mother Marie Denyse carried out a fact-finding mission: Young sisters studying at the Catholic University of Paris had been "called" by the former spiritual adviser of Father Ploussard; they joined in the Superior-General's call and passion for the missions. Mother Marie Denyse was to discover Niamey, Agadez, Tahoua (her plane being caught in a sandstorm), Tchirozérine, Zinder (following a 950 km trek across the slopes). The starting point for the foundations in Tchirozérine, Tahoua and Zinder, in 1966, stemmed from this first exploration. This *Trésor d'Archives (Archive Treasure)* presents extracts of an account of the founding of Tchirozérine written by the Canadian Sister Anne-Eugénie Langlois. She died in 2012 at the age of 91. This text was written in 2002 at the request of the sisters of her community. The complete text can be found on the Congregation's website.

#### Excerpts from the account of the foundation of Tchirozérine

*By Sr Anne-Eugénie de la Mère de Dieu*

##### *The Foundation*

Four sisters have been called to the foundation of Tchirozérine: Anne de Marie Immaculée, French; Sr Anne Eugénie, Canadian; Sr Marie Bosco, Rwandan; and Sr Carmen Luz, Spanish (...). On January 19th, 1966, after the solemn mass of missionary sending, celebrated by Father Rey Mermet, author of the travelogue *Carnet de Route de Jean Ploussard*, three of the foundresses (Anne de Marie Immaculée, Anne Eugénie and Marie Bosco) flew to Niger. At 5.30am on Thursday, January 20th, we were celebrating *Lauds* and under a sparkling sky, with great emotion we recited the words of the psalm, "He counts the number of stars, and gives each one a name," (Psalm 147). At 6 o'clock, our plane was landing on the runway, and it was a surprise to feel the hot air; it was at least 30°! Mgr Berlier was there, with his fraternal joviality, and he takes us to the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles, neighbours of the bishopric, where we are going to stay while waiting for the arrival of Sr Carmen Luz a few days later. On the same day, the bishop takes us to visit the city of Niamey, with its 60,000 inhabitants, "all of them children of God," he told us. We get to know the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary who

preceded us by a few months, since they have been here since September 1965. They are responsible for the various services of the hospital, as well as the training of the nurses. After discussion with Sr Christiane - the person in charge - it is agreed that Anne Eugénie would do a 6-week internship in Niamey at the hospital and in the various dispensaries of the city which are under the responsibility of Dr Caba, a Dahomean doctor.

After Carmen Luz's arrival, Anne de Marie Immaculée and Marie Bosco leave with her by plane, in the direction of Agadez. There, Father Grenier has rented them a house near the mission. They apply themselves to the study of Tamachek with the Little Sisters of Jesus, especially little Sister Jeanie Marthe who knows all the secrets of this language.

At last, the moment came for the real founding! The sisters all meet in Agadez, and it is on March 25, 1966 that Father Grenier takes them in his old army jeep. It is total joy! Father Monnet and Brother Louis have planned everything: the chapel - *tégira* (tent) has been redone, a beautiful tent has been put up by the women of the valley, since the tent is the business of the women. A small kitchen - *tégira* and a larger one with three iron beds recovered from the military section of Agadez, for the three sisters. As is only to be expected, Anne of Mary Immaculate will live in the tent which will also serve as a refectory and community hall. We will fetch water from the well in the garden for cooking and washing. The new dispensary is under construction and, in the meantime, Anne Eugénie will care for the people and children in the 4<sup>th</sup> flat of the mansion, since there are still only three of them. The school has about 150 pupils and 5 classes (CI (Kindergarden); CP (1st grade); CE1 (2<sup>nd</sup> grade); CE2 (3<sup>rd</sup> grade), and CM1 (4<sup>th</sup> grade).<sup>1</sup> It is the older CM1s who come to act as interpreters for Sr Anne Eugénie before and after school. But Father Yakhia and Brother Louis are also happy to take a turn, since they were the ones who took on this task before our arrival.

### ***The inauguration***

Finally, 8<sup>th</sup> June is the official inauguration day of the beautiful dispensary, that has been fully-equipped thanks to the generosity of the community of Bordeaux, students and friends of this house. As is customary in our mission countries, all the civil authorities are invited, as well as the Father and the Little Sisters of Agadez, Azzel and Kerboubou. Hundreds of camel riders with their festive harnesses, women in their finest attire, assembled to strike the *Tendé* to make the camels run in a superb fantasia. The entire valley is there. Sheep roasting for a *méchoui* (barbecue) to everyone's delight. Speeches, a blessing by Father Yakhia, and a visit of the place are called for. The party goes on until the evening. It is unforgettable!

Then we visit the camps and begin talking about the school for the girls and the boarding school that will be in our camp on the banks of the Oued. A *tégira* is built, and from the beginning of the school year in October, eight little girls with long braids and bright eyes are there. It is the first little nucleus that Carmen Luz will be in charge of, while Anne of Mary Immaculate will take charge of the CP class. Things are moving along quite quickly and the following year we counted about twenty pupils; we will now have to think about building.

### ***Inculturation***

One day, Tambo said to Yakhia, "The sisters should take names from our home. For the sister in charge, it's easy. Her name is Anne, and at home, the mother is Anna. All she has to do is take this name, which is still her own. Marie Bosco - there is no problem. Her name will be Mariama.

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<sup>1</sup> American school grade equivalents of French grading system

It's a name from here. Carmen - it's easy; people like it, but the sister of the dispensary - her name is too complicated for us. There can't be two with the name of Anna. It's not possible, but if she wanted, we would call her *Tan Elher*. It's a good name from here, and for the work she does, it would be good: *Tan Elher*, 'the one of peace', 'the one of good'." After sharing their wish with us, the sisters agreed and we adopted these names in Tchirozérine, and throughout Niger we were always called by these names.

(...) At the end of the 1968 school year, our two youngest sisters left us; Mariama left to pursue secondary studies in our Fatima College in Zinder, and Carmen returned to Europe. We were then only two sisters left. Luckily, Sr Carmen Isabel from Spain was sent to us to help in the dispensary which was always very busy (...) The recruitment of the girls was going well, especially since Brother Jacques had finished the construction of the girls' boarding school: a large dormitory, a work and play room, the room of the boarding school's head, and twelve showers and toilets. Tan Elher was to be in charge of this boarding school, and the holidays would be spent sewing underwear and small corsages for the twenty-five girls expected, as well as underpants and boubous for the boys: 250 were expected, and they will all receive their sturdy, single-colour drill clothes (...)

In 1968, the great famine also began. It would last seven years and decimate a large proportion of the herds, reducing the Tuaregs to abject poverty (...) The school year begins on October 1st and most of the children are present; 250 boys and 25 girls. Anna teaches the little ones, Carmen and Tan Elher share the dispensary until Carmen has assimilated a few rudimentary notions of Tamachek and gets to know the population (...)

With so many children, it is inevitable that we sometimes encounter rather difficult times, for example, when Mumps hit about sixty of our boys. We had to isolate them for eight to ten days in a small hollow nearby, which would allow us to keep an eye on the others who would like to visit their classmates and who don't understand why we are preventing them from doing so. Taking food to the sick, doing their laundry on the spot and helping with homework and lessons for those who are less tired, will be the task of the Sisters. It is the same when Measles too broke out among the boys and girls, as they have to be protected from the sun and cannot be put in isolation in the bush. Fortunately, none of them suffered any after-effects, and they soon returned to their classes and the life of the group with the others.

### ***Commitments***

(...) In 1969, we were lucky enough to welcome an AMA (a young person associated with the mission of the sisters of the Assumption), Yveline Claude, who came to help with the school. She adapts very quickly and the children love her very much. They named her, Fatima, and come to talk and play with her freely. She has set up her tent at the other end of the Sisters' concession (...)

### ***1970-1971: construction of the chapel***

Another important event in 1970 was the beginning of the construction of a mud-brick chapel by the **OPP-Bernard**. The site was chosen on the hill halfway between the Sisters' camp and the girls' boarding school. The brother put all his ingenuity and talent into making beautiful artistic windows and a beautiful stained-glass window with coloured glass which he broke and tastefully set in a cement frame. Some Tuaregs have been asked to prepare the mud-bricks and the new

chapel will be ready for March 25, 1971 - the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the sisters in Tchirozérine..."

The founding story of other communities in Niger can be read on the Assumpta.org website in the section "Archives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century", under the title: "Niger - Story of the Foundation.

You will discover other documents using the keyword "NIGER", in particular the account of a desert crossing made by Sr Anne-Eugénie to meet up with her twin sister, Sister of Our Lady of Africa.

May this reading and these moving testimonies encourage the missionary sisters to send their stories to the Archives of the Congregation in the form of testimonies, recollections or bulletins, whether they be handwritten, digitalised, filmed or recorded!"

Document presented by Sister Véronique Thiébaud, Archivist of the Congregation

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