

## Playing our part in life

From <http://www.mafrwestafrica.net/content/view/156/71/lang,en/>

In September 2005, the White Fathers opened a new community at Sfax, Tunisia to live more closely with the Tunisian people. The team consists of Erik Bladt, Belgian, Pierre Songré, Burkinabé, and Simon Gornah, Ghanaian. Erik, 66, has had a long experience in Algeria and Tunisia. Simon, 45, worked for a long time in Tunis for Caritas and the Tunisian Association for Aid to the Deaf, (ATAS). Pierre, 36, began his ministry after ordination in the diocese of the Sahara, Algeria, before accompanying Simon to improve their knowledge of Arabic and Islamology in Cairo and Rome.



*In September 2005, Simon, Pierre and Erik were sent to Sfax. Mrs Kitty, born in Sfax, a descendant of Italian and Maltese families who settled in Tunisia during the XIX Century, volunteered to cook the local seafood for them*

We firstly had to integrate into the life of the Christian community at Sfax, where Pierre was appointed parish priest. Erik is our bursar and I was appointed head of the team. All three of us attach great importance to living at the core of our Christian community. It consists of two teams of Sisters, (Little Sisters of Jesus and the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul), some Christian students from south of the Sahara sent to the University here, some married Christians and a small number of Sfax inhabitants of European origin. In the line of our predecessors, the door of our house is wide open to Tunisians for conversation and encounter. All this demands knowledge of the language and the Arab-Muslim culture as well as the ability to listen and dialogue, sometimes in French, but often in Tunisian Arabic too.



*Pierre is the Parish Priest of a congregation where most of the members are Christians from Sub-Saharan Africa and studying at Sfax University.*



In terms of time and energy, our White Father team (in Tunisia we do not use the word 'missionary' and the word 'Africa' often means that part of the continent south of the Sahara) expends itself without counting the cost to accompany young Christians who study at Sfax University. They number about a hundred, coming from around twenty sub-Saharan African countries, Burkina, Gabon, the two Congo, Burundi, etc. They come essentially from French-speaking African countries.



The diocesan church recognises this presence under the title of JCAT (pronounced Jee-Cat): 'Jeunesse chrétienne africaine en Tunisie' (African Christian Youth in Tunisia). It could be said that in the main towns of Tunisia, JCAT is the face the most visible of the Church. In any case, it is true of Sfax, a southern Tunisian university crossroads town. We try to provide input and coordination among the students for an improved integration into the Tunisian Church and society.

It should be pointed out that His Lordship Maroun Lahham our Bishop is a Palestinian Arab born in Jordan. Cardinal Lavigerie was the first Titular Bishop of Tunis/Carthage, from 1884-92. The general estimate for the number of Catholics in Tunisia is 20,000. Our presence in Sfax however, goes beyond the frontiers and confines of the Church. It is no longer quantifiable in numbers alone.

Nonetheless, the prime objective of our White Father team is to play our part in the human community of Sfax. How can we be in solidarity with the Tunisian people? The diocesan priests who work in the region before our arrival have shown us the way. They were able to do so quite naturally, as often they were born in Tunisia and they chose to remain here after independence. They opened doors for us so that we could become involved in one or other of the many associations of social assistance, founded and directed by the people of Sfax. Several days a week, I work in a children's village, 'SOS Enfance', thirty-two kilometres south of Sfax. 'La Maison de la France', which depends on the French Embassy to Tunisia, is a few minutes from our house. There, they asked me to give a few French courses (yes, even of me, a Ghanaian), to some adults who need to improve their French to write their theses, or quite simply to help them better integrate into the world of work that requires a minimum knowledge of French. I also recently accepted a new commitment. I am helping a young Tunisian lady to set up a cinema club for children. We have already had four matinees.

However, I would like to say a few words about another commitment that has won my heart and that takes up all the rest of my time: the Association Errabii (Springtime) that supports adults with disabilities. I was initially led to work with this association as director of an agricultural project, a little farm of five hectares 14 km from Sfax. In the first year, I also acted as driver to transport the disabled, while waiting for the association to buy a vehicle. Every day, we carry 10-15 adults with disabilities.

Errabii was founded to provide follow-up for adults who were looked after as children with disabilities by other associations. We also take in housebound adults, who were sheltered from any outside relations due to shame or ignorance as to the nature of their disabilities. The ultimate aim is autonomy for the person with disabilities. How can they take their place in society if they remain at home day and night, closed in on themselves and becoming an impossible burden to lay on their ageing parents? Some of the more capable ones only had begging or petty theft as a lifestyle beforehand. Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that responsible self-reliance is a very difficult ideal for some to achieve.



Founded by Tunisians, the Association Errabii takes in people with mental disabilities that do not have the possibility of being integrated into a protected workplace. Their dignity is respected and the Association tries to bring out the hidden potential of these men and women affected by genetic or accidental disabilities.

This is done little by little through activities where they can express themselves (some did not know how to speak), produce (some were like vegetables) and relate to the world outside their family.

Justifiably, these families feel relieved of a huge burden, sometimes borne long and in secret. Errabii helps families to gather information, to act, to support and organise themselves. Some of these families have slender resources. Others are able to contribute financially and give moral support. The Tunisian State participates in the financing of the Association. Local and overseas benefactors are also approached. For example, at our request, we received support from the Generalate in Rome, from the Solidarity Fund of our Society.



Here are some examples of projects recently submitted to benefactors: raising sheep on our farm and building a stable; specialised medical assistance for people with disabilities and fees for the carer; purchase of footwear and clothing.

The three of us in community, everyone to his talents, try to remain ready to play our part in the life of the Christian and human community of Sfax.



**Simon Gornah**