



# PARADISE IS AN ISLAND

*Story of an inexhaustible friendship between Emilia-Romagna and Madagascar*

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written by Jacopo Azzimondi  
illustrated by Elena Bardelli

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UN'AMICIZIA INESAURIBILE

ISTITUTO DI PROMOZIONE TURISTICA E CULTURALE DELLA REGIONE EMILIA-ROMAGNA

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# PrefACE

**I**t's been more than 55 years since the diocese of Reggio Emilia-Guastalla approved the invitation to set off to Madagascar, the big red island of the Indian Ocean. From that far 1967 many priests, consecrated persons, families, young volunteers, collaborators, and friends, went through Africa and seas to literally get to the other side of the world. They have been years of grace and discovery, support and rescue to a part of the Madagascan population but especially of cultural and spiritual enrichment for us from Reggio Emilia. It's very complex to take stock of an experience that has lasted so many years and that was born from the missionary impulse of the diocese of Reggio Emilia from the light of the invitation of the second Vatican Council, that has recently finished, to go into the world to support young and poor churches. Many were the projects put in place, countless were the benefactors and volunteers who visited on the spot what they were trying to do, offering their own duties, their own heritage, their own skills and even their life, completely serving this portion of humanity that was given to them. The human and spiritual benefits are incalculable, so we can certainly say that the experience brought unexpected fruits, that continues to give life both the protagonists of this story: who sends and who receives!

A limitless friendship that, between us from Reggio Emilia and the Madagascan population, has a history, a present and we are sure that will have a future. We are conscious that meeting between the cultures represent the solution to many contemporary problems that affect the incomprehension, fear

and racism.

All the initiatives, that help children, young people and adults to know their surroundings in this world so rich and complex but at the same time small and in need of peace, are blessed.

A thanks to all who deal with international cooperation and to who animates and supports these cultural and charitable initiatives. They create bonds between the population that change the perception and contributes to the realization of those bridges of solidarity and fraternity that we need so much in this precarious and uncertain times.

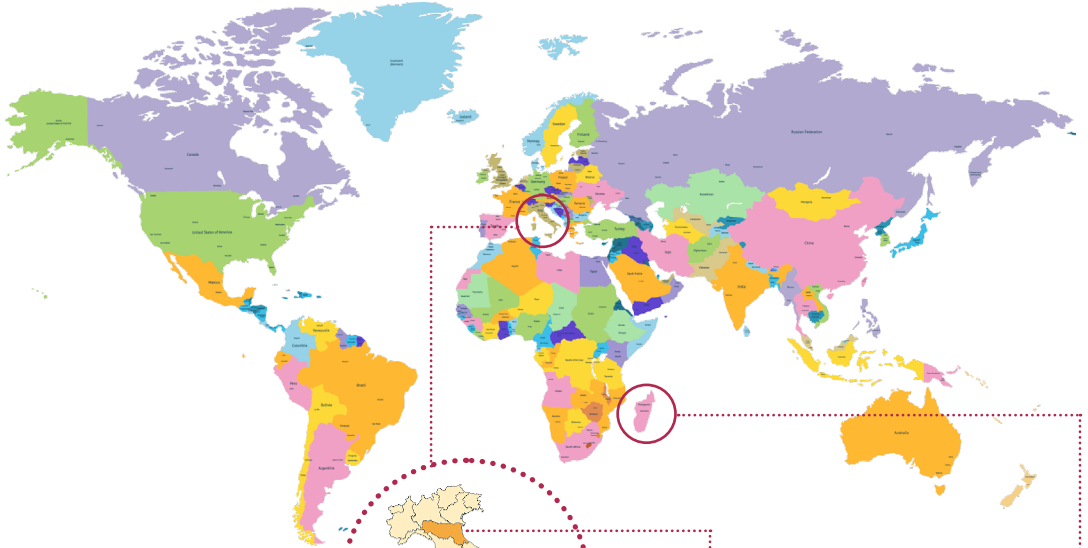
*Priest Luca Fornaciari*

*Priestly community "Familiaris Consortio"*

*Pastor of Manakara*

*Fidei donum for the diocese of Reggio Emilia-Guastalla to the diocese  
of Farafangana in Madagascar*

# Friends' Houses



Italy, Emilia-Romagna Region  
Google Earth, 2023





*The 17th of April 1947 Lucien Botovasoa was sentenced to death and killed near the village of Manakara, because of his faith in God. Beatified on 15th oh April in 2018 by Pope Francis, is one of the most known and important Madagascan martyrs. The population of the island also dedicated him a national holiday.*

*My story is set a week after his death. I imagined Fabien, one among the eight brothers of Lucien, as a poor Christian fisherman. The man, who became widower after a very short time, has a 5-year-old child, Rèmei, who decided to board in a pirogue in the middle of the night to escape the persecutions. He wants to take him to the north, where he wishes to keep the child far from the war for the time required.*



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Fabien opens his eyes. He hasn't used his alarm for years, he doesn't need it: he was used to waking up in the middle of the night since he was little, when his father forcefully got him out of bed to go fishing off the coast of their beautiful red island. Instinctively he reaches out his hand looking for his spouse but then he remembers Lala is no longer here: a terrible illness took her to heaven a few years back, when she was still beautiful like the morning sea. A melancholic sigh slips out his mouth. He was used to his alarm, but Lala's absence was another matter. You don't ever get used to these kinds of things.

Still there is no time to lose. With the sight of the woman, he loves still in his head, Fabien gets up. The room he's in is bare, dark and from the little hut's open windows leaks in the night's thin breeze but no light. Luckily the moon is covered, this will help them in their escape. The man puts on a jacket open on the front and worn-out trousers, then checks that in the knapsack with the supplies, prepared the day before, there was the little he needed for the journey. He leans over the bed. In the dark he



hears the light breath of his son Rémi. He can almost see; he spies him in the dim light: the tip of his nose, his closed eyelids, his messy curls. He isn't even six years old yet, he doesn't know anything about the world: he doesn't know the war, the evil, he doesn't know that in all the region bad people are hunting who believes in God. This is why Fabien wants to escape, because he sure believes in God. He carefully puts a hand on his son's skinny chest. The little boy gasps and grabs his blanket.

"*Amin'ny firy izao?*"<sup>1</sup> he mumbles, not opening his eyes.

Fabien smiles: "*Efa alina be ny andro*"<sup>2</sup> he answers. "We must go, son. Tonight, the moon is covered so the ocean will be kind. If God wants to, at sunrise, we will come back with full fishnets." Fishing is a lie, but it is necessary to persuade his son to follow him: if he told him the truth now, Remi will be scared.

"You go dad, I'm tired..."

Fabien shakes him with more force, they must be quick.

"Let's go Remi, I need your help. You can sleep when we will go back. Who knows if you hurry, we might see some sharks..."

Remi's now interested. He loves sharks but, unlike most of his classmates, he hasn't seen one alive yet.

The only ones he saw were hanging to dry or lying on the stalls of the fish market every morning.

He blinks, slowly.

"Do you really mean that"

"*Ia*"<sup>3</sup>, trust me. There are many around this time, even near the coast. So, you're in?"

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<sup>1</sup> "What time is it" in Malagasy.

<sup>2</sup> "It's late at night" in Malagasy.

<sup>3</sup> "Yes" in Malagasy.



“All right dad: I’m coming with you”.

As soon as they leave home, the sun is still hiding from the other part of the world. The lights of the village, which sparkle like fireflies in the middle of the peaceful forest, are nearby. Rémi feels a shiver down his spine. Without the calming light of the moon, the heart of the Malagasy night is dark and full of cracks, squeaks, hisses and whispers. Among the fronds of a palm, big eyes of a *maki-maki*<sup>4</sup> shine in the dark to vanish who knows where a moment later.

“Pa’.”

“Tell me, Rémi.”

The voice of the little boy is trembling, almost like a whisper.

“I’ve seen a spirit of the night.”

“You better stay near me then” replies Fabien, “If they take you, you’ll never come back. Are you ready?”

“No, I’m scared.”

“You don’t have to, I’m there. Come on.”

Dad and son walk towards the beach. Fabien loads with knapsack hold the child’s hand. Restless, he looks behind him persistently. In the past days came to him dramatic news: rebels everywhere, churches burned, people captured...or worse. The image of his brother comes to his mind. “Oh Lucien” he thought to himself, “What did they do to you?”. He banishes the thought and keeps moving on leaves and roots, following a trail that he knows like the back of his hands. Rémi follows him, with open ears and his little legs ready to run away at any sign of trouble, scared but

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<sup>4</sup> Name by which the inhabitants of the island call the lemurs.







also excited for that new overnight adventure. Observing his father fills him with bravery. When Sanda, his teacher, asks him what he would like to do when he grows up, Rémi answers that he would like to become like him.

“Where are we going?” he asks his father, after some minutes of a silent walk.

“At the beach, the one where you always go picking up crabs with Faly, Joseph and Tina. Our pirogue is there.”

“And then?”

“Later I’ll take you in the middle of the sea, my son. We have to...” Fabien has a moment of hesitation, “We have to go in a place together. Rather, you better be careful when we’re on the boat, alright? Tonight, the moon is not appearing, so make



sure to stay put, to not stick out of the boat and to obey me. The ocean is not friendly with the little.”

“I’m not little, I’m five years old! I’m big, daddy!”

“Well, you’re not very kind even with the big ones. Now be quiet, we’ve arrived.”

The sand between the toes is blue, cool, and crumbly; in a few hours, the night has evaporated all the heat from the previous day. The dark silhouette of the canoe lies on the shore. The sea’s undertow brushes against the tip of the prow and retreats with a hurried rustle, as if it wanted to escape after tickling it. The waves are long and frothy; the ocean breathes calmly in the darkness. It’s scary even from the shore, let alone sailing on it. As if that weren’t enough, thick dark clouds clutter the sky and cover the moon and most of the stars, making it almost impossible to see anything. Fabien checks the oars, begins to fiddle with the nets.

“Watch and learn, son,” he says, while adjusting the sail under Rémi’s careful eye.

“Come on, let’s push her into the sea,” he adds, wasting no time.

“Put your hands here, above mine. That’s good. Now push.”

The two press their hands on the palm wood hull.

“They clench their teeth and flex their muscles (actually Rémi doesn’t flex anything, his father’s strength is more than enough): after a short push, the wobbly canoe slides into the water.

“There we go,” Fabien mutters.

Now comes the hard part, the one he and the other fishermen face every night: leaving the shore to head out to sea. In those

parts, the ocean deceives you, setting very dangerous traps, and its fury is not softened by any coral barrier. Every time a fisherman sets off from the island, he puts his life and the lives of those accompanying him in God's hands. But that night, even the ocean feels safer than the mainland.

"Please," Fabien pleads silently, "stay close and guide us to our destination."

At that moment, a gunshot echoes from deep within the forest. Fabien casts a worried glance towards the trees: the noise came from afar, but there's no time to waste.

"What was that, dad?" Rémi asks, frightened.

Fabien doesn't answer. He leaps onto the canoe, reaches out his arms to grab the little one, and lifts him aboard. Then, he unfurls the sail and lets the wind carry them away.

More than an hour goes by. Fabien's shoulder muscles hurt with each pull of the oars, because he has to do by himself the work that is usually done in two. Neither of them speak: the father just keeps rowing to get away as much as possible from the shore and the son fills his eyes with each thing he sees. For him everything is new. The swirling water raised by the strokes is black like the ink that he and his classmates use to write on the schoolbooks. He asks himself how it is possible that the sea that is so blue to appear almost green during the day and now is all dark. But the ocean is not only saltwater. There is also a lot of sky above them, an immense mantle long to the horizon, as if that little piece of the world wanted to cover itself with a long blanket to not catch cold. But the thing that strikes Rémi's attention the most is the beautiful red island to its back. Now

it's neither red, nor green, nor white; it is only black. The dense silhouette of trees of the "great lands" sleeps on the bed of the sea behind them, like a gigantic creature, dotted with scattered lights like freckles over a dark face. A wave more impetuous than the others hits the side of the pirogue, the small mast crunches and the boat tilts.

"Dad"

"It's all right, my son. Don't worry, the ocean is just a little stormy."

The wind blows, the sail swells, Fabien gently turns the boat to change direction. They travel fast and quietly, keeping themselves parallel to the coast but fairly distant, dark shadows



in the dark, invisible like ghosts. “What was that noise in the forest before?” asks Rémi at a certain point. Fabien doesn’t answer right away. He keeps rowing while he watches the night which embraces things like a mom made of shadows. The image of his brother Lucien appears again in his mind for a moment: a man with dark eyes and plump lips, always humble and smiling, who loved God and his family more than anything else in the world. They captured him a week before, was forced to appear before King Tsimihoño and he never returned.

“That was the sound that bad men make, son,” Fabien finally says, “You know, of those who hate everyone and are afraid even to adults like me.”

“Why do they hate us?”





“Do you remember what your Uncle Lucien used to say?”

Remi wrinkles his forehead to think about it. He loved his uncle, they even went to visit him sometimes in his beautiful home at Vohipeno, but for long they’ve not seen each other. Dad said that it was better to stay close to Manakara. Before that moment however, Lucien had managed to talk to Rémi about so many things.

“Yes, of course,” he replies, “He said that God created our island and put men in it so they could make it a bit like Heaven, but I don’t really know what it means.”

“See Rémi, those men don’t want this land to become heaven. They hate it.”

“Why? Isn’t it a nice place?”

“Of course it is, my son, but many do not want to go there. They are too busy playing at who is more powerful, who has more money, who scares others the most: for this reason, they make war.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, Rémi.”

They remain in silence, absorbed in their thoughts, while the pirogue sways at the mercy of the waves.

“I want to go there though” Rémi replies after a while, “In Heaven, I mean. You have to help me build it.”

“Why is that?”

“Well... because then Mom can be with us again.”

Several hours later, the night begins to fade. Fabien’s arms tremble for the effort, the little Rémi instead, fell asleep on the bottom of the boat. To their left, the land line has reappeared, Fabien knows exactly where to go. Now that they are far enough





from Manakara, they no longer run the immediate danger of being spotted by the rebels and can get closer to the shore. His hope is that his sister Haja, who took refuge in the village of Loharano a few months before, may welcome him and his son into her home, for as long as it takes. He doesn't know if the war will come there, he does not even know if it will ever end, but he does not have much choice: he can only escape far enough to save himself and the small one from that madness. He does not want his son to live in fear. He wants him to study in a beautiful school, perhaps on the continent; he wants him to grow happy and realize all the dreams he still doesn't know he has. He wants him to build his piece of heaven in a place where no one can take that away.

He stops paddling and stretches her sore arms while the sky over the ocean is tinged with pale pink. The sun is going to rise, the first houses of Loharano appear in the distance. As the light rises, in that moment of magic that precedes the dawn, Fabien almost seems to see his bride: the eyes bright, the same as Remi, thin fingers, dark skin like ebony. Lala dances in the streets of Manakara, dressed up with flowers of *ylang ylang*<sup>5</sup> in her hair. Around her the *hira gasy*<sup>6</sup> resound while the whole village sings, dances and plays. War is just a distant memory: churches do not burn, people do not cry, and the light of the sky colours all the houses. Perhaps, thinks Fabien, his brother Lucien was right: Heaven is an island.

And God is Peace.

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<sup>5</sup> Beautiful yellow flower growing on the island, much appreciated for its perfume.

<sup>6</sup> Folk songs typical of the Malagasy tradition.



# THE STEPS TOWARDS PEACE

## 1 HEAVEN IS AN ISLAND

“(Lucien) said that God created our island and put men in it so they could make it a bit like Heaven, but I don’t really know what it means.”

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“Why is that?”

“Well... because then Mom can be with us again.”







## 2

# A Life Given for Peace

“Do you remember what uncle Lucien always said to you?” Rémi screw his forehead to think about it. He loved his uncle, they even went to visit him on occasion in his beautiful house in Vohipeno, but they haven’t seen each other in a long time. Dad said that it was better to remain near Manakara. Before that moment, thought, Lucien was able to talk to Rémi about a lot of things.





## WHO IS LUCIEN, REMI'S UNCLE?

Blessed Lucien Botovasoa is the first blessed Malagasy and the story of his life is very significant: he was a family man, a catechist, a peacemaker, who loved his country. He is a faith martyr, and an example of love to Jesus and to the Christian community, and an instance of forgiveness to enemies.

### **His early life**

Lucien Botovasoa was born in 1908 in Ambohimananarivo, a fraction of Vohipeno, in the South-Est of Madagascar. He is the eldest to 9 sons. His family was one the first to convert to Christianity in his village: his father was baptized in 1902, and his mother several years later in 1925. Lucien starts his studies in the local school. Sunday 15th April 1922, on easter day, he was baptized in the church of Our Lady of the Assumption: he was fourteen years old. The following day he approaches the sacrament of the Holy Communion. A year later, on the second of April, Easter Monday, he receives the sacrament of Confirmation: since then, he realises he needs to commit and witness himself to the gospel in a coherent and joyful way.

### A Jesuit's teacher

In 1924 he was sent to the college Saint Joseph, a school of formation for teachers run by the Jesuit fathers. He left four years later with a master's degree and a solid training in every subject. Already in October 1928 he was assigned to the parish school of Vohipeno. The people of his village, who have always appreciated him, even in this new role of teacher, recognize him authoritativeness and consider him a model of believer.

### The marriage

On 10th October 1930, in the parish church of Vohipeno, he marries Suzanne Soazana, who will give him eight children, but only five of them will survive. A nun, sister Marie-Joseph, asks him: "Master, who are so pious, you could have been a priest: don't you regret getting married?", Lucien, without hesitation, replies: "No regret; in contrast, I'm happy with my status, because God asked me to be secular, married and schoolmaster. So, I can live among the people and do what you, priests and nuns, cannot do, since here they're still pagans. I can show them an aspect of Christianity that they can understand, because I am not a stranger to them."

### The love for Jesus and the Church

The educational method of master Lucien gives a lot of space to the examples of the Saints: he reads about their lives to the students after lessons, but also on his own, he always tries to discover more. One day, he finds a manual from the Franciscan

Third Order, a group of lay people who are inspired by the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi. Joining the Third Order changed his life profoundly. He begins to dress soberly and takes on a sort of uniform, consisting on shirt and khaki trousers. Under his clothes, around his waist, he wears the rope, a sign of his commitment to following the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi. He gets up very early to pray, at four in the morning he is already in church. He never misses an opportunity to recite the Rosary, even while on the street: for this reason, his students nickname him “pikopiko seed”, referring to a plant whose seeds resemble the beads of a rosary crown. His detachment from money becomes proverbial, after he returned a bag of money, he had lost to an oxen merchant, refusing the reward he would have been entitled to. Even today, in Vohipeno, it is said ironically: «Like Botovasoa who found money and instead of taking it, gave it back to the owner». Lucien maintains his cheerful character: many witnesses said they had never seen him angry. He is a skilled trumpet and a harmonium player, with which he accompanies services in the church of Vohipeno. He is very good at languages: he knows classical Malagasy, French, Latin, some German, English, even Chinese (learned through the village traders).

### **A difficult political situation**

In 1947 various independence movements began to rise (for the independence of the Malagasy people from the French). Missionaries and those who follow them are accused,

sometimes wrongly, sometimes rightly, of supporting the French colonialists. A man like guide Botovasoa seems the right person to become a political leader: both sides in the war dispute it, but for those who want to enter politics, Lucien justifies his rejection in these terms: “I am totally foreign to politics. You all know what I love: religious issues and they absorb all my time”.

### The “last Function”

In the afternoon of Palm Sunday, March 30, comes the news that the rebels are coming to the city. Lucien agrees to follow his father and brothers into the woods, to the land they possess. A few days later, he learned that there had been massacres in Vohipeno. He returns on Holy Week Wednesday, because the rioters threatened him that if he did not return to the city, they would kill his family. In the village there are no more nuns or Lazarist fathers who lead the mission: the parish priest, Father Pierre Garric, took refuge in the nearby city, under the control of the French. In addition, the church doors are locked. The Sunday after Easter, Lucien gathers all the Christians, Catholics and Protestants, staying in the village in his school. The nuns bring their harmonium, and he plays and sings, then comments on the Gospel. Some of the present defined that celebration as «the last function of the teacher», technically it is an improper statement, because it celebrated only one liturgy, but in fact it had played a sort of “priestly substitution”.

### Farewell to the family

On Thursday, April 15, Lucien is, together with his family, in the house reserved for the teacher, near the church, when a woman, panting, reaches him: the head of the village wants to summon him to the «Great House» that is his residence. His wife, two months pregnant, begins to cry. Lucien, instead, seems calm and says: I have always waited for this moment, I am ready. I do not fear death, indeed I desire it, because it is bliss. My only concern is to leave you». He entrusted his wife and children to his brother André and spent the rest of the afternoon praying.

### The process

The village chief, also called king, interrogates the master, accusing him of being an ally of French foreigners and, for the last time, asks him to become president of the party. In response, Lucien states: “You kill, burn the churches, prevent prayer, have the crucifix trampled on and you want to transform the church into a ballroom. I know you will kill me, and I will not take that away. If my life can save others, do not hesitate to kill me. The only thing I ask you is not to hurt my brothers”. These words are worth the death sentence. Before going to the place of execution, he still has a few words for the chief: “Before dying, you will be baptized, you will have to die a Christian. It will be hard for you, but don’t be afraid: I will be there, not far from you”.


### **The martyrdom**

Brought to the shore of the Matitanana river by some young people, including ex-students, he asks: “Why do you want to kill me?” “Because you are Christian” “Do it - he said - I want to defend myself. May my blood on this earth save my homeland. A witness saw him while he asked to pray and he heard him whisper: “Oh God, forgive my brothers who have a hard task to fulfil towards me. My blood, poured on the ground, may be the salvation of my ancestor’s land”. The killers hesitated to hit him, but he encouraged them: “Please, stop playing with your axes and try to cut my head properly with one stroke”. The third executioner hit him, but he doesn’t detach the head completely. Finally, when all of oppressor wet their weapons in his blood, they pushed the cadaver in the river: he got stuck in a bay, but they released him and let him be taken by the current. It’s the night between the 16th and 17th of April 1947: Lucien is 39. After 15 years, in 1964, the head of the village, on the verge of death, he sends for a priest, Father Vincent Carme, a Lazzarist missionary, he tells him the revelation of the words that Lucien told him. Father Vincent brought him to hospital, where he receives the Baptism and, a week later, he dies.

### **The eulogy of the martyrdom and the beatification**

The 4th of May 2017, Pope Francis approved the promulgation of the decree of the martyrdom of Lucien Botovasoa. His beatification was celebrated on the 15th of April 2018 in Vohipeno, by Cardinal Maurice Piat, as a representative of Holy





Father. Lucien Botovasoa is the first Madagascan martyrdom.  
The Church celebrate him on the 17th of April, day of his  
martyrdom.

***From:***

<https://www.causesanti.va/it/santi-e-beati/lucien-botovasoa.html>

<https://www.santiebeati.it/>

**Blessed LUCIEN BOTOVASOA**  
**A Life Given for PEACE**



# JACOPO AZZIMONDI

## Author

Jacopo Azzimondi was born in Reggio Emilia in 1996, he lives in Sant'Ilario d'Enza, he attended from the Primary to the High School “*Immaginache*” school of “*Familiaris Consortio*” movement and today he attends master's degree in Italian studies in Bologna. In the meanwhile, he also decides to teach as a professor in the Middle School.

Avid and very precocious author of fantasy books he falls in love with writing since the Primary School in that years he started to produce first attempts to tell what the fantasy inspired him. Since then, he has never stopped. Imagination, the power of the words and telling stories fascinates him. You can find many works, in his personal blog: [www.jacopoazzimondi.com](http://www.jacopoazzimondi.com)

## Elena Bardelli

### Illustrator

Elena Bardelli was born in Montecchio Emilia in 2002, she lives in Sant’Ilario d’Enza, she attended from the Primary to the High School the “*Immaginache*” school of “*Familiaris Consortio*” and today she attends master’s degree in architecture–engineer studies in Bologna. She spends her time as an educator for teenager. Since she was a child, she has always had an intense passion for painting, in particular for watercolours. She cultivated and carried forward this talent by creating various projects and paintings, for example the Statue of “Our Lady of the Family”, realized by Michele Bruni and now is situated by the “*Immaginache*” schools in Sant’Ilario d’Enza. She likes the poetry, photography, and every form of art and architecture.

## Afterword

# LIBRETTI DA VISITA: SO THAT FRIENDSHIP HAS NO END

The series of illustrated short stories 'An Inexhaustible Friendship - The Forces that change history are the same as those that change the Heart of a Man' stems from the living relationships that St Catherine of Siena ETS and its associates have forged and nurtured over the years. In these pages, writers and illustrators have portrayed the testimonies of six communities from complex and/or conflicting contexts to tell what allows them to live positively even where it would not seem possible, and to discover that the forces that change the Heart of a Man are the same ones that also change history...

We like to call these publications 'libretti da visita', images and fictional stories freely drawn from real friendships, stories of friends of friends, friends not to be missed.

But what is the small contribution each of us can make to build Peace? We have discovered that preserving relationships and relations is a real business: friendships met 'by chance' but which determine our history, friendships that do not leave us alone, friendships that force us to come to terms with our human stature, in a work that becomes an adventure and a responsibility to commit to ourselves every day, because the one who tells us 'Be with me' is the Only One capable of this inexhaustible fidelity.

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<sup>1</sup> In Italian, intended as booklets used in a way that a meeting becomes an opportunity, an opportunity to see each other again and forge a long-lasting relationship.



# UN'AMICIZIA INESAURIBILE

LE FORZE CHE CAMBIANO LA STORIA SONO LE STESSA CHE CAMBIANO IL CORRE DELL'UOMO

is an initiative of



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Luigi e Zelia Martin



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PER I POPOLI DELLA TERRACARENTA



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Jolanda di Savoia (FE)



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shared working environment



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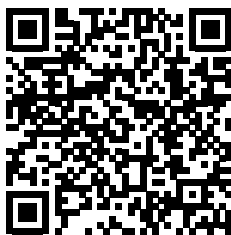
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Paradise is an island  
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*original title:*  
Il Paradiso è un'isola  
*Storia di un'amicizia inesauribile tra Emilia-Romagna e Madagascar*



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of an inexhaustible friendship...



UN'AMICIZIA INESAURIBILE

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