

COMBONI – ECCLESIAL LIFE:

A CENACLE OF APOSTLES, INTER-CULTURALITY AND CONSECRATED OBEDIENCE

1. EVENTS IN COMBONI'S LIFE

Up to age 26, the life of Daniel Comboni was spent in the triangle Limone-Verona-Trento. It was lived in tranquillity, like the life of most priests in the Veneto region, in northern Italy.

Contacts with some missionaries, who shared their life experiences while he was a student at the Mazza Institute, led him to take an interest in the African continent.

No one person, document, letter or witness could foresee where this passion would lead him. In 1857, still a young priest, he left for his first journey to the “dark continent.” A few years on African soil were sufficient to turn Comboni into one of the strongest and most original personalities of his time. Africa had branded Comboni.

The Africa that Comboni dreamed of while still within the walls of the Institute in Verona, was not the one seen in reality. Even though he prepared himself to be a missionary while in Verona, Africa itself was his university; it changed him just as it had changed all those who had come to know it in depth. Comboni lived in person the experience of mission; he became a missionary on the battlefield and this is why he could say in a letter to Card. Simeoni:

“In order to be able to rely on a missionary, and to say that he can be counted on in Central Africa, he must first spend at least two years in the battle field. If he resists for two years, then he is reliable. We should not rely too much on Europe-based fervour.” (S 6751; see also 5397)

His mission experience moved hand in hand with the experience of responsible obedience to the Church, that guided him throughout all his life. Comboni clearly professed his obedience to Rome: *“I do not want to start anything without the approval of the Church; what the Church does not like, I do not like.”* (S 971).

Love and a prophetic consciousness on the one side, and communion with the Church on the other, joined together in Daniel Comboni, missionary and prophet.

2. COMBONI – ECCLESIAL LIFE

A. CENACLE OF APOSTLES

Each prophet appears in the Bible with a “personality” and a vision. The call he receives has a unique and personal character. As a prophet, Comboni lived the experience of the prophet in his double passion for God and for the peoples of Africa.

At a time when there is a crisis of vision, we must put ourselves in the Founder's shoes and imagine how he wanted his missionaries to be like.

We know that Comboni did not want to found a religious Institute in the style of those he knew. He was led to it by the needs he discovered in the mission.

The Rule of 1871 is one of the most beautiful gifts Daniel Comboni gave us. It is *“the fruit of serious reflections, lengthy studies, accurate consultations, and full factual knowledge”* (S 2643-2646) and of his missionary experience.

In the founding of the Comboni Missionary Institutes, Comboni dreamed of an ecclesial religious missionary experience that would be like a Cenacle of Apostles: *“This Institute therefore becomes like a small Cenacle of Apostles for Africa, a source of light beaming to the core of Nigrizia as many rays as there are zealous and virtuous missionaries surging from its bosom: and these rays, that burn together and give warmth, by necessity reveal the nature of the Center from which they come”* (S 2648). He wanted to live the experience of missionary consecration in harmony with interculturality.

The expression **“small cenacle of apostles”** carries a dialectic reality that reveals two movements: ad intra (cenacle) and ad extra (apostolic), two realities by necessity in need of each other, mutually attracting, sustaining each another and occasionally causing tensions in our communities.

- By the adjective “**small**” it reminds us down to this day that, compared with the great religious orders, our Institute is a small seed, like the mustard seed (Mt 13,31-32). Missionary life is not meant for many people. We are called to be a presence that will generate change, to be an agent of transformation. It is the proclamation of a new way of being and of acting for the sake of the Kingdom.

- “**Cenacle**” is a word that brings to mind the hearth, family, hospitality, brotherhood, life shared with others. Comboni was always opposed to his missionaries living or working alone. The Founder always referred back to the reality of the Cenacle and reminded them that the Master was always with his disciples. A community where Jesus is not at the centre of its life is a closed community where selfishness, individualism, competition, rivalries will easily arise. Cenacle is the place where one can give up his own project to place himself at the service of others.

- “**of Apostles**”: The goal we embrace as a community consists in cooperating to the spread of the Kingdom. We live in communities to experience love, to share ideals and to get prepare for the journey. The apostle is one who is sent. Community means project, style and accomplishment, but the goal is the Kingdom, understood as a totally new style of life among the people who are the most abandoned.

Comboni speaks of rays emanating from the Centre of the cenacle and spreading their warmth where the need is greatest. It is the ardour of the heart of the Good Shepherd who reaches all of humanity.

Biblical reflection on the theme

The entire activity of Jesus moved towards an experience that took shape in the cenacle: “*I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you*” (Lk 22,15). In this experience of the cenacle Jesus, through his attitude, through words and gestures, reveals a new vision of things, a new order, a new starting point. He offers and proposes basic points that must inspire Comboni Missionaries to live as a CENACLE OF APOSTLES:

- the call is free and personal: “*He called to himself those whom he wanted...to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message*” (Mk 3,13;14) so that later on he could tell them: “*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you*” (John 15,16)

- Authority must be used for service (Mt 24,28). “*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*” (Mk 9,37; Mt 20,26). We must wash one another’s feet (Jn 13,14)

- Jesus reveals God as a Father who loves all (Mt 23,8-9); and this is the deepest root of brotherhood. He asks that we imitate God as Father: “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect...for he makes the sun rise for the evil and for the good*” (Mt 5,43-48).

- Jesus joins love for God and love for neighbour: he states that these two commandments are similar and cannot be separated. They are the two sides of the same coin. Faith and life must be united (Mt 22,34-40)

- Jesus renews from within the relation man/woman and calls for a renewal of the unity that was in the mind of the Creator (Mt 19,1-9).

- Jesus proposes a new cult with a new content (Jn 4,20-24). The core of the Paschal celebration now has a different point of reference: love and service (Jn 13,1-6)

In this experience of a cenacle of apostles our primary mission is not social or catechetical. Literally it is mystical. It is the mission of John the Baptist: to reveal Christ, the Lamb of God, who walks hidden among his people (Jn 1,29).

With Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we must allow the “living water” of the Spirit to spring from the heart of the cultures to whom we have been sent (Jn 4,14).

Questions for reflection:

Do I believe in the strength of what is “small”, worthless in the eyes of the world? How do I live through the tension which is often present in our communities, between brotherhood and apostolic activity?

How do I live the Comboni spirituality in its dimension of incarnation and redemption in our community and missionary life?

B. INTERCULTURALITY: Internationality as an expression of Catholicity

On November 9, 1864, while travelling from Cologne to Magunzia, Comboni jotted down some pointers in order to ensure that evangelisation in the heart of Africa would work. He was actually putting in writing the ideas he had discussed with the Pope and with Card. Barnabò: *“This work must be Catholic, not just Spanish, French, German or Italian. All Catholics must help the poor Africans, because no one country by itself will be able to help the African race”* (S 944).

Mind you, these were the days when mission was deeply connected to the nationality of the missionaries and to the government that protected it; there was a lot that was “human” in missionary activity. Comboni wanted to set himself apart from that style. He saw that his area of operation has wider horizons, and insisted that the responsibility must be shared by all and must not depend on base interests contrary to the Gospel. Therefore, it could not belong to any single nationality. This is one of the most beautiful expressions of Catholicity in the history of mission.

Unlike other Institutes, born as the missionary expression of a particular country or episcopate, Comboni opened the doors to anyone who wanted to cooperate. We know that, a few short years after the foundation of the Institute, the members already belonged to a dozen or so nationalities.

This is a heritage that the Institute has made its own down to this day, despite shortcomings and new beginnings (RL 18). To live with others, especially when there are many differences and distances between the members of the same family, is an opportunity to demonstrate the Trinitarian dimension of our vocation and become living parables in a world which seems to be bent on division and discrimination, even though we fill our mouths with words of globalisation and integration.

Biblical reflection on the theme

Even in the Word of God we find the seeming contradiction between a search for one’s identity and the desire to go to those who are the farthest away, the people on the fringe, who do not fully belong to the people of Israel. Experiences, such as the slavery in Egypt and the years of exile, increased the scorn and intolerance towards strangers. Fortunately, the preaching of the prophets contributed to widening the horizons of devout Israelites, often very narrow, who would get lost in their little problems and the insistence of their belonging to a specific people.

The task of the prophets is deeply rooted in daily history: they were able to read events through God’s eyes and then pass them on.

Even though in the Gospels we do not find a systematic reflection on missionary activity among pagans, we find several passages that deal with opening up to strangers and to those people who, at the time and for various reasons, were despised and kept at the fringe of society (Mt 8,5-13; Mk 7,24-30; Mt 11,20-24). Jesus picked up this trend and brought it to its fulfilment by siding with the least, with those who have no power.

To live the experience of a cenacle of apostles implies the experience of interculturality, a process of getting together, particularly at this moment in history in which we live and which we call modernity.

A community that lives along the lines of interculturality chooses an experience in which the “adopted culture” takes charge of the message, reads it according to its own parameters and gives it new shape according to its needs.

Faced with this challenge we think that community itself becomes the school. It is the venue of mutual formation where we learn to listen to our differences and to forgive one another personally and culturally. This way, we will proclaim and actively prepare for the Kingdom of God, which does not know borders and which shows itself in the richest diversity of peoples and cultures.

Questions for reflection:

Do I believe in the witnessing power of a work that has interculturality in common? Am I ready to work with others even though they are “different” and do not think or work as I do?

Can we state that, beginning with the presence of Comboni Missionaries, we have contributed to the birth of a Church which is inculturated and has its own identity?

C. OBEDIENCE

Comboni learned to obey through the experiences of his own life (Eb 5,8). He was convinced that God's will was the most important thing. He did not have any problem in giving up and sacrificing anything that was needed in order to fulfil the plan of the Father. *"This is why I move forward towards the goal that I have chosen, without stepping back for fear of obstacles and without stopping in front of adversities, because I firmly believe that I am doing God's will and that I am on my way to the conclusion of my sublime and arduous mission."* (MDC 83)

In times of doubt and difficulty he always remembered the words Fr. Marani had spoken when he had had doubts as to whether he could go so far away, leaving his parents behind: *"Go, because I am giving you my blessing, and trust in divine Providence, because the Lord, who inspired this generous plan, will know how to console and protect your parents"* (S 13).

His fidelity to the Spirit allows him to see in the signs of the times the presence of God at any particular time, both in his own personal history and in the history of the peoples of Africa. Just as Jesus was faithful to the hour of the Father, Comboni discovered the hour of Africa. From this perspective he loved the Church unconditionally. He was not afraid to say:

"I have sold my will, my life, and my whole self to the Holy See, namely, to the Vicar of Christ...; and I would even refuse, if by the grace of God I could, to convert the whole world, if it were without the order and the authority of the Holy See" (S 2635).

He not only discovered the missionary hour of Africa, but gave to this hour a clearly ecclesial dimension. He was not afraid to remind the Church of the clear principle of the universality of salvation brought by Christ, and of the missionary nature of the Church itself. He knew fully well that the Church is the subject of mission and that missionary activity is not the private initiative of congregations and religious institutes.

His entire life, activity and writings point to Comboni as a man at the service of the Church, endowed with great compassion for the poorest and most abandoned he discovered in the Africans, since he felt that through them he was called to accept the Kingdom of God as a servant of the poor... He accepted to be "poor and useless", but servant of the Church down to his death... Comboni lived the experience of an active ecclesial obedience and apostolic meekness with a disposition to dialogue: He used to set forth his reasons, clarify obscure points, push for necessary decisions and inform about the urgent situations of the missions. There was nothing passive about his obedience. He told Card. Barnabó in all honesty:

"The lamentable destitution of the poor Africans weighs immensely on my heart, and there is no sacrifice that I wouldn't embrace for their own good. If Your Eminence will not approve the Plan, I will write another one; if you will not accept this one, I will prepare a third one, and on and on until death." (S 4049)

In 1876, a few years before his death, he wrote: *"27 years and 62 days have past since I swore to die for Central Africa: I have faced the greatest difficulties..., the Heart of Jesus has preserved my spirit... and perseverance, so that our battle cry until death will be: Africa or Death!"* (S 4049)

Biblical reflection on this theme

The concept of obedience in which Daniel Comboni received his formation had its roots in the teaching of the Bible and of the Fathers. It was the radical acceptance of the decisions coming from constituted authority (Rm 13,1-2), because he believed it came from God himself. Even though St. Paul meant the civil authorities of his own time, we know that for a long time this unsophisticated model took hold in religious life. With the passing of time and the influence of other factors, the understanding of it has changed.

For Comboni a spirit of sacrifice and renunciation of any aspiration were indispensable for his missionaries. This is a teaching proposed by Scripture, which takes Jesus Christ as a model: *"I can do nothing on my own: I judge and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will, but the will of him who sent me"* (Jn 5,30), and the same thought is repeated later: *"for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of the one who sent me"* (Jn 6,38)

If it is not easy for us to live by obedience, neither was it easy for our Founder and for the One we regard as the main point of reference we need to follow. The synoptic Gospels give us these very dramatic words Jesus uttered in the context of his passion: *“And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass for him. He said ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible: remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want’”* (Mk 14,35-36)

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, keeping in mind the experience of intense sorrow lived by the Master, presents suffering as the way to learn obedience: *“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of universal salvation for all who obey him”* (Heb 5,7-9; see also 10,9-10 and Philemon 2,8)

Questions for reflection:

Am I aware of the fact that I am cooperating to an activity that belongs to God? How do I accept the decisions of those who ask for things that are not in my personal plan? Starting from the experience of Comboni, what does it mean today for us Comboni Missionaries to “be in tune with the Church?”

3. UNDERLYING VALUES FOR MISSIONARY LIFE

- Sorrowful and joyous incarnation. Bethlehem and Golgota are the two poles of the same love. The mystery of the incarnation will never be totally understood outside the dynamics of redemption.
- The contemplative and patient solitude of the suffering servant.
- Building up of the Church into a model proper to the culture of the people to whom we have been sent.
- Humble and discrete daring; a life commitment to the situation of the people with their specific faults and signs of holiness.
- Total abnegation of the apostle: *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain”* (Jn 12,24) Incarnation, understood as a way of becoming one with a history and a particular culture, by necessity has this dimension.
- Acknowledging the “signs” of the active presence of the Spirit of Christ in particular situations and in their specific cultural environment.
- Development in the Church of a deep feeling of contemplation, capable of seeing God in this history of salvation which is not yet complete.
- Solidarity as a process of *kenosis*. We learn to deepen our defence of life starting from every day’s reality.

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