

FR FRANCESCO PIERLI MCCJ

OUR INHERITANCE

COMBONI MISSIONARIES OF THE HEART OF JESUS

ABBREVIATIONS

ACR	Archivio Comboniano Roma.
AG	Ad Gentes, Vatican II, 1965.
CA	Centesimus Annus, John-Paul II, Ency. Let., 1991.
CA	Chapter Acts.
ChL	Christifideles Laici, John-Paul II, Apost. Exort., 1988.
DM	Dives in Misericordia, John-Paul, Ency. Let., 1980.
EN	Evangeliis Nuntiandi, Paul VI, Apost. Exort., 1975.
EP	Evangeliis Praecones, Pious XII, Ency. Let., 1951.
FD	Fidei Donum, Pious XII, Ency. Let., 1957.
GS	Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, 1965.
LG	Lumen Gentium, Vatican II, 1964.
MC	Marialis Cultus, Paul VI, Apost. Exort., 1974.
MI	Maximum Illud, Ency. Let., Benedict XV, 1919.
MuR	Mutuae Relationes, Congregation for religious, 1978.
NA	Nostra Aetate, Vatican II, 1965.
PC	Perfectae Caritatis, Vatican II, 1965.
PO	Presbyterorum Ordinis, Vatican II, 1965.
Positio	Positio super virtutibus Servi Dei Danielis Comboni, Roma 1988.
Prp	Princeps Pastorum, John XXIII, Ency. Let., 1959.
Ratio	Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum, Comboni Missionaries, Rome, 1991.
RC	Redemptoris Custos, John-Paul II, Apost. Exort., 1989.
RD	Redemptoris Donum, John-Paul II, Apost. Exort., 1984.
RE	Rerum Ecclesiae, Pious XII, Ency. Let., 1926.
RL	Rule of Life, Comboni Missionaries, Rome, 1988.
RM	Redemptoris Missio, John-Paul II, Ency. Let., 1990.
S	Scritti, the writings of Daniel Comboni in Italian, EMI Press, Bologna, 1991.
SD	Salvifici Doloris, John-Paul II, Apost. Let., 1984.

PREFACE

Being heirs to the Apostle of Africa was made the dominant note for the immediate future when the 14th. General Chapter chose the motto "With Daniel Comboni Today." So I am happy to present these outlines of Comboni missionary spirituality written by Fr. Pierli as a help to deepening, appreciating, and living the charism of Comboni.

The themes presented are important and thought provoking. Even more so is the approach based, as the author says, not on theory but on direct contact with missionaries in concrete situations. Anyone who has taken part in the retreats preached by Fr. Pierli in the four continents where we work, will find an echo of his love of the Heart of Christ, his enthusiasm for the founder, and his experience of the Society.

Of the principle sources mentioned in the Introduction, I want to underline the importance of the official documents of the Society: the Rule of Life, the Chapter Acts, and the Letters of General Superiors (of which some seventy are quoted!). These put us in direct contact with our own tradition.

The book lends itself both to individual and to community reflection. In each case it is important to root the message in the experience of everyday life and, as the concluding prayers at the end of each chapter suggest, to transform it into a conversation with the Father.

I want to thank Fr. Pierli, and those who helped him, for this book. The hope is that contemplating these basic mysteries of Jesus Christ "with Daniel Comboni today", each of us becomes a good shepherd of the pierced heart. That is, an authentic Comboni Missionary.

Father David Glenday MCCJ
Superior General

INTRODUCTION

To get the best use from this book it will be helpful to know something of its origin, method and its aims.

1. The origin. The book is a development of a number of retreats preached, in the main, to Comboni Missionaries who wanted to pray and reflect on their charism, to own it anew, and to live it with joy and enthusiasm at a personal and community level. They work in all kind of situations which are often very poor, insecure and full of tension, profoundly testing the motives for their presence there.

This is not a book which was born in at a writing desk but one based on contact with the various situations in which the Comboni Missionaries live and work. Hence its conversational tone, with the emphasis on different themes according to circumstances where the retreats were given. Some sections, such as community life and evangelisation are more developed than others because in these areas the problems are more urgent and complex, and merit more attention. Many of the important areas were suggested by the decisions of General Chapters emphasising them.

2. Method and sources. In choosing a method I was helped by the conciliar decree *Perfectae Caritatis* where Vatican II puts forward the basic principles for the renewal of the Institutes of consecrated life, that is: a) the following of Christ as proposed by the gospel; b) the original inspiration as lived by the Founder; c) the place of each Institute in the Church of today according to its charism.

To enable each person to make these points their own I gave three meditations each day: on Christ, on the Founder and the third on the everyday living of the charism in the missionary context of today.

Consequently the three main sources are Scripture, the Writings of Comboni, the Rule of Life and Chapter Acts, the letters of the Superior Generals and their Councils, the history of the Institute and the documents of the Church.

3. Themes. The themes of the eight day retreats are made up of the mysteries of the life of Christ the Good Shepherd whose heart has been wounded for us, this being the centre of the Founder's experience of Christ. These mysteries are considered in a dynamic way, in the sense that they are contemplated in the way that Christ himself lived as became the Good Shepherd. However, they are not presented in a chronological way, keeping in mind that in some way every mystery contains all the others. The Incarnation, for example, is not complete at Nazareth and Bethlehem but lasted throughout the earthly life of Jesus. Likewise the Passion which, while it culminated on the cross, was part of the life of Jesus from the cradle.

4. Aim. At the request of many confreres and sisters who took part in the retreats, I have taken the trouble to put the conferences into writing. In doing this I hope to be able to help the Comboni family, be it in the beginnings of formation or in on-going formation, to internalise the charism of Comboni. This is in a spirit of obedience to Vatican II which declared, "It is to the Church's advantage that the Institutes have their own identity and role. Therefore, everything that makes up the heritage of each Institute, as well as the healthy traditions, should be interpreted according to the Founders's own spirit and aims" (PC2b).

5. Title. "OUR INHERITANCE" is based on Comboni's phrase, 'like heirs'. He saw himself as heir to the missionary effort and commitment of those who had worked before him to spread the gospel throughout the world and particularly in Africa. It is interesting to note how in Comboni the word 'heir' implies continuity and discontinuity, tradition and newness, faithfulness and creativity. In fact, he speaks of accepting the heritage of his predecessors precisely when, with his Plan, he proposes a change in outlook and method.

Faithfulness and continuity are profound motives, implying dedication to the mission 'ad gentes' until death and they make the love of the Good Shepherd present and visible. Creativity and discontinuity imply both an acceptance of and a rethinking of the situation of Europe, Africa and the Church, particularly with regard to missionary efforts. Faithfulness sustains and motivates creativity, and this makes faithfulness meaningful in new situations. Comboni succeeded in marrying continuity and discontinuity showing himself to be a true master of 'remembering' in the scriptural sense. This book wishes to further this way of being 'comboni', faced as we are with the enormous challenge of mission in the new millenium which demands courage and creativity without precedent in the two thousand years of the Church's history.

6. The Appendix presents saints to whom the Founder made frequent references and under whose protection he placed the Institute (S2649; RL 51.3-4). Their memory has been part of our history and they make up part of our 'healthy traditions'. In them we can read the outline of our relationship of co-operation and tension with God and with the mission to which we have been called.

I want to thank Fr. Piergiorgio Prandina who is *co-author* of the book. He worked at length to reorganise and document all the material.

I entrust this work to Mary, Queen of the missions and Virgin of the Cenacle, to St. Joseph, humble and untiring workman of the Kingdom, and to Daniel Comboni, father and founder of whole comboni missionary movement.

THE AUTHOR

Chapter I

VOCATION

The missionary vocation is born out of a deep experience of the Kingdom of God which, at a given moment demands to be announced. The Kingdom is that of the Father who wishes to be "all in all" (*1 Co* 15:28). That is, he wants to make sons and daughters of everyone, filling them with the inexhaustible resources of his love through life, strength, joy, hope and light. The Father does not live in isolation and being Father continually gives, shares and makes communion with others.

The missionary vocation presupposes a clear awareness of the paternal-maternal presence in the world of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father and God of all consolation" (*2 Co* 1:3). This awareness involves a sense of God communicating with us, a sense of divine tenderness that enfolds us, of reassuring gaze which frees us from fear and from the anguish that comes from the confusion of life and the harshness of the desert which we find we have to cross¹.

The missionary vocation consists in the call to share in the intoxicating experience of the Kingdom, and to spread the good news that the Kingdom of the Father is not only possible but is already present and available to all. The missionary is one who, like Christ and Comboni, has experienced and can proclaim with joy the truth of psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing".

THE VOCATION OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Ez 34: The Shepherds of Israel

Jn 10:1-21: The Good Shepherd

Jn 17: The Priestly Prayer of Christ

The keeping of a promise

Among the various promises made by God to the people of Israel, wounded, exploited and despised by their own leaders, is one that often recurs: that God will punish the inept and evil shepherds and that God himself will guide his people. "Woe to the shepherds that scattered destroy the sheep of my flock. Oracle of the Lord. Behold I myself will gather my lambs from all the places where I have let them roam and I will bring them home to the sheep-fold. They will increase and multiply. I will place shepherds over them who will lead them to pasture. Thus they will no longer fear nor be aghast. They will lack nothing" (*Jr* 23:1,3-4).

Coming into the world Christ said, "Behold, I come O God to do your will" (*Heb* 10:7). By will he meant the will to keep a promise. There is no doubt that from the beginning Christ saw his life in the context of the Father's plan and acted in the service of that plan. In the Temple when he was only twelve years old, Jesus said to his astonished parents: "Why are looking for me. Did you not know that I do my Father's work?" (*Lk* 2:49). Christ knew that his Father felt a debt towards the suffering Hebrew people, and towards all the poor and suffering of this world. Without hesitation Jesus placed himself in line for the fulfillment of that promise.

¹ The biblical idea of "mercy" clearly implies the paternal-maternal aspect of the love of God; cf. *DM*, note 52.

The prophet Ezechiel's description of the dire situation of Israel is real and not just poetic. Many sheep are ill, wounded, scattered and abandoned. The shepherds forget their duties, not caring for those who suffer. Instead they seek riches, caring only for the "fat sheep" in order to share their wealth. And the others? Could God pretend not to see them? Could he exclude them from his mercy? No! "Behold, I myself will find my sheep and care for them. I myself will lead them to pasture and make them lie down. Oracle of the Lord" (*Ez* 34:11,15).

Every promise is an obligation. To keep the obligation of the promise that he made, God had to send his people a shepherd who would carry the burden of their situation. A shepherd able to cure the sick, bandaged the wounded, gather the lost, and console the despairing. This is the mission of the Son: "the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep" (*Jn* 10:11).

The situation of the People of God at the time of Jesus was not much different from the time of Ezekiel. This is illustrated by the texts which precede ch. 10 of John's gospel in which Christ declares himself to be the Good Shepherd. We see the confusion of the Samaritan woman at the well (ch. 4), the powerless resignation of the "great number of sick, blind, crippled and paralysed" at the pool of Bethesda (ch. 5), the "great crowd" of hungry people on the shore of the sea of Galilee (ch. 6), the confusion of the leaders of the people (ch. 7), the condemnation, without appeal, of the woman taken in adultery (ch. 8), and most of all of the sad story of the man born blind and rejected as someone cursed by the superstitious people and by the religious and political powers, then expelled from the synagogue because he followed the Nazarene (ch. 9). To this disgraced and disinherited people without hope, exploited and fleeced with impunity (cf. *Zc* 11:4-5), Christ presents himself offering Blessing and Union (*Zc* 11:7). Immediately he sets out in search of the lost sheep for the joy of finding them and saving them (cf. *Lk* 15:4-7).

But let us concentrate on chapter 10 of John's Gospel.

The Father and I

"As the Father knows me and I know the Father" (*Jn* 10:15). Christ's vocation has its roots in a unique experience of the love of the Father. Only Christ knows the Father and is able to reveal him (cf. *Mt* 11:27). At the beginning of his public life Jesus says, "The time is accomplished and the kingdom of God is at hand" (*Mk* 1:15). He is not talking of something far off but of himself and of his intimate relationship with the Father. He is speaking of his sense of being continually brought into being by the Father. That is, of continually being wanted, welcomed and loved so much that Jesus is able to say, "All that is his is mine" (*Jn* 17:10) and, "The Father and I are one" (*Jn* 10:30).

It is especially in the Gospel of John that this deep intimacy between Christ and the Father continually appears. Similar texts appear throughout the New Testament. There are Old Testament passages too which find their fulfilment in Jesus: "You are my son and today I have begot you" (*Pss* 2:7), and "Sit at my right hand" (*Pss* 110:1).

The vocation of the Good Shepherd flows from the experience of the love between the Father and the Son which the Father wants to share with all humanity. Jesus' attitude towards the people is part of this. He never approaches people from the position of superiority or domination but is meek and humble of heart (cf. *Mt* 11:19) because he knows that the sheep do not belong to him but are placed in his charge by the Father (cf. *Jn* 10:29). He lives and works for his sheep. If he invites them to become his disciples it is not to make them his own but to introduce them to the tenderness of the Father to whom they belong. Father's love is the source of the vocation of the Good Shepherd, love which the Son lives and enjoys in unique way but which is available to everyone.

Life in abundance

"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (*Jn* 10:10). This declaration, which is like a chorus in John's gospel, has its best commentary in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. After comparing himself to the serpent set up by Moses in the desert which saves all those who look at it, Jesus speaks in terms of rebirth, of eternal life. He adds: "God has so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not die but have eternal life. God has not sent his Son into the world to judge the world but that the world might be saved through him." (*Jn* 3:16-17). This is the point, Christ did not come to judge and condemn like the Grand Accuser of the Apocalypse who comes cast out of heaven, but to bring about "the salvation, the power and the Reign of our God" (*Rv* 12:10). He comes so that the sheep may have life in abundance. Thus he becomes light for the blind, strength for the cripples, bread for the hungry, pardon for sinners and resurrection for the dead. It is the triumph of life at all levels. Indeed "eternal life" that Jesus has come to give to all those whom the Father has given him (cf. *Jn* 17:2-3) means not only life beyond but life which through his sacrifice already explodes on this earth and is never diminished.

"For this the Father loves me: that I offer my life in order to take it up again. No one take it from me. I offer it myself, because I have the power to offer it and to take it up again. This is the command I received from my Father" (*Jn* 10:17-18). Jesus always sees his death as an offer of life because he knows that the Father does not want his death for the sake of death but as a principle of life for the sheep. Thus, when Christ breathes his last, we are not witnessing the triumph of sin and death, but the triumph of life, which coming forth from his heart and his whole body becomes the source of life for all.

My sheep

"I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (*Jn* 10:14). It is the vocation of the Good Shepherd to offer love and life. We can understand this vocation by looking at the relationship which he has with his sheep. Jesus distances himself from the pastors who stay in palaces, separated and well protected whilst the sheep die of plague. Instead he walks the highways and the sheep follow him. He knows them well. He calls them by name and establishes with them a relationship which is brotherly, one of daily sharing and common cause.

"And I have other sheep which are not of this sheep-fold" (*Jn* 10:16a). The Good Shepherd does not stay with the sheep who have already received the Kingdom. He knows that there are many others to whom the experience of the Father has not yet been revealed. However, whilst he takes care of the sheep-fold, he also goes out in search of all his sheep. "These too I must lead, so that they will hear my voice and become one flock with one shepherd" (*Jn* 10:16b). Here we are confronted with the unceasing dynamism of mission. That 'I must' has moved thousands of missionaries towards those whom Paul describes as "with hope and without God" (*Ep* 2:12), and whom Peter calls "a non-people, outside of mercy" (*1 Pt* 2:10).

It is the unceasing dynamism of mission which makes the pastor "itinerant", despite the pressures the he suffers from the people. Was not this the experience of Christ? "At daybreak, we ready in Luke's gospel, he went out and found a deserted spot. But the crowd searched for him, joined him and tried to persuade him not to leave them. However, he said, 'I must announce the Kingdom of God in others places too. This is why I was sent'. And he continued preaching in the synagogues of Judea" (4:42-44).

One who intercedes for the people

The love of the Good Shepherd is also expressed in his interceding for the people. Christ brings to fulfilment the passionate and effective prayer of several Old Testament figures: the moving intercession of Abraham for Sodom and Gomorrah, the ceaseless supplications of Moses for Israel, the spirited prayers of Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Baruch, Daniel and many other prophets, as well as the heroic deeds of Deborah, Judith and Esther expressed in memorable prayers of intercession for their people.

At the Last Supper Christ crowned his life on earth by interceding for his disciples and for all those who would believe in him. Thus in a clear way he reveals an aspect of his ministry which all the evangelists, especially Luke, often alluded to with phrases such as: "he went to a lonely place to pray" (Lk 5:16). It is particularly in the priestly-missionary prayer recorded by John (17:1-26) that we find the content of the intercessory prayer of the Good Shepherd. Let us examine it briefly.

"Father, the time has come, glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you" (v. 1). To understand this phrase, which might seem like self-praise, we need to recall the deep meaning of the biblical term 'glory'. Glory is the presence of God (richness, wisdom and life) in creation. Asking that his own humanity becomes the temple of the glory of the Father, Christ makes a moving appeal that death might be completely defeated so that, as he foretold in the parable of the Good Shepherd, he might give life in abundance to his sheep by sending the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 10:10).

"Protect in your name those you have given to me" (v. 11): may they always feel held by the Father, even when they walk in the valley of darkness (Ps 23:4), so that "the love with which you have loved me may be in them" (v. 26). Thus might they have the experience of resurrection and achieve great things.

"May they have the fulness of my joy" (v. 13). May my joy, which no what the world gives, always fill their hearts as a witness to all the peoples that "lovely is you dwelling place" (Ps 84:1), and "it is good and pleasant brothers dwelling together" (Ps 133:1).

"Protect them from the evil one" (v. 15). May the over come all temptations as I overcame them. Through the bread of eternal life and the blood of the new covenant of reconciliation, may they flee all the destructive works of the devil, "a murderer from the beginning" (Jn 8:44).

"Consecrate them in the truth" (v. 17). May your word remain in them so that they may bear abundant and lasting fruit (cf. Jn 15:7-17).

"Send them into the world" (v. 18) so that through their work the sheep that are still far away might enter my sheep-fold so that there will be "but one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10:16).

"As you Father are in me, and I in you, so may they be one in us" (v. 21). May the experience of being a child of the Father lead to deep and strong community. Let them not fall into an individualistic religiosity. Make them "one body" (1 Co 12:12), cohesive and accepting of one-another.

"May they be with me where I am" (v. 24). At the end of their earthly pilgrimage may they share the infinite joy of being seated with me at your right hand.

PRAYER

Father, in Christ you Son
you kept you promise to send us
a shepherd according to you own heart,
to gather the scattered sheep,
care for their wounds,
and give them fullness of life.

We pray:

help us to know the heart of the Good Shepherd,
to share his motives, his feelings and his attitudes
so as to be able to live our missionary vocation
as his presence in the world today.

We ask this through same Christ our Lord.

Amen.

THE VOCATION OF DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 3-11: Now troubled, now hopeful

S 13: I have decided to go abroad

S 2568-2569: I am convinced that I am doing the will of God

S 6885-6886: Your vocation is one of the clearest

The grace of the Heart of Jesus

To understand Comboni's vocation we need to remember the profound experience of faith which he had in his family and above all in the Mazza College which was a concrete demonstration of the God's providence helping the poor. This faith had its clearest expression in the devotion to the hearts of Jesus and Mary. The God whom the young Comboni met is a merciful Father and a compassionate Shepherd who allows his heart to be pierced for our salvation.

The contact which Comboni had with the Work for the Ransom of Slaves, and his reading about the Japanese martyrs also contributed to Comboni's positive experience of the Father-Shepherd. He was likewise influenced by meeting Fr. Vinco and by his daily contact with Fr. Mazza. All this enabled him to see that the God in whom he put his faith is deeply in love with human beings and able to produce in the Church strong figures to help the poor.

On the 6th. of January 1849 Comboni decided and swore to go to Africa. He was only 17 years old but his faith experience was already so deep and positive that it became a spontaneous apostolic demand. He was drawn to go and preach the gospel to those people whose importance and beauty he had already recognised. The "grace of the heart of Jesus" began to take possession of the young Comboni to make him the historical presence of the Good Shepherd. Much later, two years before his death, Comboni wrote to Cardinal Simeoni saying that it was this particular grace which had carried him along despite many difficulties:

"I am writing only briefly because I am overcome with fever, troubles, tiredness, and torments of heart. By the lovely law of Providence the Works of God must be founded at the foot of Calvary. The Cross and martyrdom are the way of the apostolate among the pagan nations. Central Africa is certain to be converted through crosses and martyrdom. Although worn out in body by the grace of the Heart of Jesus my spirit is healthy and vigorous, and I am resolved as I was thirty years ago (since 1849) to suffer everything and to give my life a thousand times for the Redemption of Central Africa" (S 5522-5523).

Yes, for Comboni the missionary vocation is the result of the dynamic presence in our hearts of the same Holy Spirit who made the heart of Christ beat with charity. The "grace of the heart of Christ" is above all the loving charity of the Father which Christ has experienced in a "passive" way during his

life until the resurrection. This "grace" is also the loving tenderness, and welcoming pardon of Christ the Good Shepherd towards people during his ministry and above all in his passion. The love received from the Father is basic to Christ's ministry and is the source of his love for people. Thus Paul calls his vocation the "grace of the apostle" (*Rm* 1:5 - 'grace' is the felt experience of love) and he loves this Christian communities "all the feeling of Jesus Christ" (*Ph* 1:8). The words the Lord: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (*Jn* 20:21), acquire new and deeper meaning in this context.

The great works of God

Comboni was deeply convinced that mission is primarily a "great work of God" (*S* 1185). God takes the lead in this work. He it is who has decided that the hour of Africa has arrived. He it is who calls Africa so that he can reveal his face and his fatherly love. The mission which Comboni first glimpses and then embraces is not a human enterprise even though it was begun by men under the obedience of the Pope and of Propaganda Fide. It is basically a divine initiative: "God, through his Vicar on Earth, has entrusted this mission to me, and I have given me life to this holy work that I have taken up" (*S* 2569). Because of this Comboni was never discouraged when faced with obstacles that seemed to block everything. If he occasionally halted it was only to rest or to let others rest, whilst "awaiting new movements of the Spirit" (*S* 464). Always forward! convinced that the mission is inspired from on high: "We are not alone in the great works of God. There is also God, our Lady and many powerful mortals who want it to succeed. If God is with us, who can be against us?" (*S* 1185).

Comboni's vocation had deep roots in the conviction that missionary work was part of the Father's plan to transform the world into his Kingdom, freeing it from the power of darkness and the unending slavery by which it was oppressed (cf. *RL* 2). The "hour of Africa" which Comboni often refers to, was also seen by him in the context of the history of salvation, of the progressive extension of the Kingdom of God to all peoples.

A passage from the Report to the Society of Cologne illustrates Comboni's understanding on this matter. Writing in 1866 Comboni says: "This is a work of great charity which God, in his inscrutable mercy, has decided to work in this unfortunate time, in which the light of truth seems to be extinguished in many hearts which, among the blessing of Catholicism, are blinded by errors, by pride and human passions. It seems to me that exactly at this time when many Christians rebel against God and Christ, the Sacred Heart of the eternal and divine Shepherd turns towards the great, remote unknown places on earth, and towards the millions of lost sheep living in the shadow of death. Yes, the work of the regeneration of Africa is God's work. Now is the hour of grace risen which Providence has designated to call all these people to take refuge in the peaceful shade of Christ's sheep-fold. For many years already the prophetic voices of Libermann, Olivieri and Mazza echoed in the Church. With their work for Africa these men were the heirs of the apostolic spirit of Peter Claver. And the admirable works of the same kind in Vienna, Cologne, Paris and Lyon have responded to this call and the distant lands of Africa were watered by the sweat and blood of new apostles of Jesus Christ. 'The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity' said Tertullian. Like heirs to these generous athletes of Jesus Christ, and faithful children of the Church, we must transplant the Work of the Good Shepherd of souls in these unknown lands, to illuminate them with the light of the catholic faith. Now this prodigious light which the divine child brought into the world appeared for the first time in the stable at Bethlehem, and the Magi were the first followers of idolatry who were illuminated. (...) Pray to the Good Shepherd who wants to gather all the lost sheep and the unfaithful under the shade of the tree of life, so that all the nations of the Earth become one flock with one shepherd"².

It is the awareness that the main protagonist of history is God himself, the God of the Exodus, God incarnate of the roads of Palestine that produces in Comboni a great confidence in God and profound humility by which he describes himself as God's kitchen servant, useless puppet, inept clown, son of a servant and a gardener, the last of the sons of men. To Bishop Luigi Canossa he writes: "I am embarrassed by the praises of the Jesuit Bishop Meurin, because I am deeply convinced that I do not deserve them, and that I am the most useless servant on this earth" (*S* 1972). "I know with deep conviction that I am nothing, only a poor sinner, quite a useless servant" (*S* 2427).

The biblical phrase "I am a useless servant" which Comboni repeats many times is interesting because it puts God in first place in missionary work. Comboni like Mary and Paul considers himself one of the many "useless servants" (*Lk* 17:10) of the Kingdom of God. "Servants", at the service of a project that belongs to another; "useless" in the sense that the energy used in the service comes from outside oneself: is the power of the Most High (*Lk* 1:35), the initiative of the Holy Spirit (*Mt* 1:20), the gift of God (*1 Co* 15:10).

I have decided to go abroad

On the 13th. of August 1857 Comboni wrote to his parish priest, Fr. Peter Grana: "I have definitely decided to leave next September" (*S* 13). How did Comboni arrive at the conviction that God wanted him involved in his plan for the salvation of Africa? We have already seen how openness to the missionary world came in the context of the Mazza Institute from the work of the Institute itself, from related reading, and most of all from the example of the missionaries who travelled back and forth to Africa awakening and exciting the hearts of the young men in the Institute. But between the awakening of the interest and enthusiasm, the decision to leave and the actual departure there was a long road. How did Comboni make this journey?

Above all there is the action of the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who prepared setting, gradually developed the awareness of Comboni and bringing him the turning point of 1849 when, after meeting Fr. Vinco, he swore at the feet of Fr. Mazza to dedicate himself to the missions. Most likely Comboni did not think of all the consequences of his decision. However, from that moment his studies, his training, all his life took on a clear orientation in line with the openness of the Mazza Institute to the missionary world.

Difficulties arose, hesitancy and indecision coming mainly from the family situation, only son of poor parents who had were in debt. What was he to do? The need to discern his vocation brought Comboni into a private conversation with his spiritual director. During a retreat, which in the Ignatian tradition provides the best moment for important decisions, facilitating the interior freedom to discover, accept and embrace the will of God, Comboni met with Fr. Marani (9th. of August 1857) and threw of any reservations. He was helped by openness to the Holy Spirit and recourse to the mediation of the church. Later, Comboni would strongly underline the latter. No one can presume to discover his own vocation, especially when faced with difficulties, uncertainties and the pros and cons of a choice of life. It should be noted that Comboni made use of spiritual direction not only in particular moments such as this one. Fr. Marani knew him well when he was an altar boy and so "he had in mind, as under a microscope, all his life, his plans, his main faults, etc." (cf. *S* 6879). Because of this Fr. Marani's word was decisive and convincing.

"I have finally finished the retreat, and after taking counsel of God and men I had the idea that the mission is my true vocation. Indeed, Fr. Marani, the successor of the great servant of God Fr. Bertoni, told me that given that he has a picture of my life and circumstances, past and present, he could assure

me the my vocation to the mission of Africa is one of the most clear and evident. Therefore, despite my parents' circumstances, which I openly presented to him, he told me, 'Go! and I give you my blessing. Trust in providence, and the Lord who inspires this generous plan will console and take care of your parents'. For this reason I have definitely decided to depart next September" (S 13).

"I have decided". It is Comboni who decides, not his spiritual director. Indeed, the positive outcome is that this will always be a point of reference for Comboni which will sustain him in moments of difficulty. In the last year of his life he wrote to Fr. Sembianti: "Do you know why I quote Fr. Marani's opinion about my vocation? For no other reason than to say to you that in the course my laborious and difficult project, I often felt as if I was abandoned by God, by the Pope, by the superiors and by every human being, and I often felt tempted to give up everything. Well, what stopped me diminishing my vocation, what sustained my courage to stay at my post until death, was the conviction of the certainty of my vocation. It was always everything to me because after careful consideration, Fr. Marani told me on the 9th. of August 1857, " (S 6885-6886).

Apart from the help of his spiritual director, Comboni continually confirmed his vocation through dialogue with Propaganda Fide. The famous phrase of Pius IX 'work like a good soldier of Christ,' which Comboni immediately repeated to Fr. Mazza (S 930), to Fr. Ludovic da Casoria (S 938), to Canon Mitterutzner (S 939) and indirectly to Fr. Noecker (S 943) and to Cardinal Barnabo (S 958), put wings on the feet of Comboni. He repeated this continually, almost to give himself courage.

More than once in his life Comboni had to reflect on his vocation recalling it during moments of crisis and accusation. Like Paul (cf. Ac 22:6-21), Comboni found the strength to continue in the most tragic circumstances in the certainty that his vocation was genuine because he had accepted it after 'taking counsel with God and men' with the Holy Spirit and with the Church.

Discerning with the church is an essential part of every vocation. It is a solemn call pronounced by the ecclesial authority which, in a certain way, incarnates and reveals the unfathomable mystery of God. It has to be accepted and believed with deep faith, especially in moments of crisis when our heart no longer has tangible reasons to continue along the chosen road.

The glory of God is the health of souls

"My goal is always the glory of God and the health of souls" (S 917). With this phrase Comboni summarised the aim of his ministry.

In the Bible the phrase 'glory of God' is full of deep meaning. On the one hand it describes the life, the splendour, the goodness of the "merciful Father and God of all consolation" (2 Co 1:3) who gives himself to humanity. On the other hand it underlines the response of the people when they recognise this Fatherhood. Comboni 'consumes' his life in order to develop this revelation and response, the marvellous covenant between the God of Jesus Christ and Africa.

Consequently, work for the 'health of souls' means struggle against all the obstacles that prevent the flowering of life such as personal and social sin, oppressive regimes, slavery and poverty at all levels. Moreover it explicitly means bringing the light of faith in Jesus Christ. It means ensuring the active presence of the Holy Spirit who gives a new way of understanding events and a new capacity for loving and self-giving. Working for the 'health of souls', Comboni struggles for the 'regeneration' of Africa which, 'immersed in darkness and the shadow of death', is enslaved by innumerable plagues both physical and spiritual.

PRAYER

Father, we thank you
for having given Daniel Comboni
"the grace of the Heart of Jesus",
which made him constant, vigorous and resolute unto death
in the missionary service of the peoples of Africa.

We pray,
give the same grace to all your sons and daughters
who are working throughout the world
for the coming of your Kingdom,
so that they may never be discouraged
or afraid of the struggle.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE VOCATION OF THE COMBONI MISSIONARY TODAY

Readings:

RL 1-2: Total dedication the missionary cause

RL 10-11: Community of Brothers and Plurality of Service

RL 80-81: Vocation and Formation

Ratio 141; 207: God's initiative and man's response

In the context of today's culture, especially in the West, life is seen more as something that we own, to be managed as we want. Self-development, self-satisfaction and self-fulfilment are placed at the centre of life.

In this context of marked individualism with the concept of life as something to be used and not as a demanding gift, does it make sense to speak of 'vocation'? If my body, my inclinations, my talents and my dreams are untouchable, where is the space for a call from God?

We need to give a clear answer to this question if we want to live the vocation of the Good Shepherd and that of Comboni who is our model. The more we understand Comboni, the more we understand our own situation, our future and the profound meaning of our vocation.

We must not forget that a positive response to our vocation is already a clear sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God. That is, the Lordship of God in the world by means of the acceptance of his word and his plans. Whoever discovers the will of God and accepts it, enters the Kingdom and the Kingdom enters him.

A specific way of following Christ

"The Institute derives its identity and specific manner of following Christ from the charism of the Founder, lived in consecration in the light of the sign of the times" (*RL* 1).

Essentially the comboni vocation, like every other Christian vocation, is first of all a grace of God, an intervention of the Father who attracts us to Christ and who helps us to discover him, love him and imitate him. In other words, the comboni vocation, before being a specific ministry to do something, is a following of Christ by entering into a deep relationship with him.

The comboni missionary's following of Christ is not something general but has a specific identity given by the Founder. The Rule of Life says that the experience of God, to which the time of formation is meant to lead the candidate, must be "characterised by the ideal and experience of Daniel Comboni as they are lived in the Institute" (*RL* 81).

No-one can come to Christ if the Father does not call them (cf. *Jn* 6:44). No-one can persevere if they do not keep their gaze fixed on Christ who initiates faith and brings it to perfection (cf. *Heb* 12:2). However, there is a way of allowing oneself to be attracted, a way of following and contemplating which is specific to Founders and which produces a particular 'family style' which needs to be taken on. In the Rule of 1871, for example, speaking about norms "designed to cultivate the spirit and virtue of the students" (ch. 10), Comboni specifies the way in which his missionaries must "keep their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and always trying to understand more what it means to speak of God who died on the cross for the salvation of souls. If with living faith they contemplate and taste such a mystery of love, they will be happy to offer themselves and lose everything, and die for him and with him. The separation which they have already made from family and from the world is only the first step. They will strive to go on, offering their holocaust, renouncing every earthly affection and becoming used to not considering their own comfort, their own interests, their own opinions or anything regarding them" (*S* 2721-2722).

If it is true that every call to a life of special consecration depends on the Founder's experience of Christ, then it is important that we know Comboni better and his own religious experience. Unless we are able to refer constantly to this example, we risk not understanding our vocation and we risk its developing out of harmony with the Founder. Because of this the Rule of Life says: "The missionaries draw inspiration for their personal life and missionary services from the Founder's witness of life. His writings are an integral part of the programmes of formation and renewal, of missionary and vocational promotion" (*RL* 1.1). "A knowledge of the Founder's life, and of the Institute's history is a necessary means for fostering and maintaining identification with the Institute" (*RL* 81.2).

Clearly this is not referring to Comboni just as an object of study, but also as a point of filial affection and constant devotion. He is alive, and intercedes for us so that the grace which the Father gave him becomes ours. Without knowing and believing deeply that Comboni continually works with us and for us, it is not possible to establish an intimate relationship with him or to share his religious experience.

From all of this it is clear that if someone is not interested in or attracted by the personality of Comboni then they do not have a vocation to the Institute. Our vocation is linked to the mystery of Christ as lived by Comboni. Just as it would be absurd to accept someone who was not attracted by Christ, so it has no sense to accept someone who is not interested in Comboni. Knowing the Founder is an essential part of growth in vocation.

Sense of belonging to the Institute

Through the Church, his body, Christ is present in history in a visible way. Thus to be his follower a personal encounter with him is not enough. It is necessary to become part of the community of disciples by joining the Church which provides the guarantee of a genuine following of Christ. The catechumenate leads to membership of Christ and membership of the Church. There cannot be a conversion to Christ without a conversion to the Church.

This principle can be applied to the Comboni community. Like every Founder, Comboni is present in the movement which he set up. The vocation to become a disciple of Comboni and to live missionary life as he did implies acceptance of the group which represents him. It implies joining his 'mystical

body'. The Rule of Life says: "The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus are a community of brothers called by God and consecrated to him through the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience for missionary service in the world, according to the charism of Daniel Comboni. They share the same life with equal rights and duties" (*RL* 10).

Thus the comboni vocation is also a call to community life, to become part of a group of people who see in Daniel Comboni their living and dynamic life-project. Community life is not something secondary but is an essential element of the comboni vocation.

Speaking about the purpose of the Institute, the Rule of Life says: "The missionary manifests his membership of the Institute by accepting in faith the persons who make it up and the superiors who lead it, its purpose, way of life, fields of work and all the concrete choices that it has made during its history according to the Founder's charism" (*RL* 13.2). It is the community dimension of vocation: the acceptance of a specific group of persons, seen as the here-and-now presence of the Founder.

It would be false to present membership of the Institute as simply preparation or training to go to the missions without including the community dimension. Someone who could not live in community or work in a team would lack an essential aspect of the comboni charism.

Today there is a greater emphasis on community life. Internationality means that we have to be more accepting of one-another, and since the Council, religious life is seen much more as community in the Lord. The attraction of the early Christian community is the way in which the disciples "were one in heart and mind"; this itself gave witness to the Lord's resurrection and was an invitation to join the community (cf. *Ac* 5:32-35). The Rule of Life puts it like this: "By his community life the missionary witnesses to that new brotherly community in the Spirit which he is sent to proclaim and make present among the peoples he evangelises. The presence of the different members enriches him, thus rendering his evangelising efforts more complete and effective" (*RL* 10.3).

Being a "sign of the new humanity born of the Spirit" (*RL* 36), community life itself is a missionary event, making known Christ who breaks down barriers and unites hearts. Thus to go to the missions whilst refusing to accept community life is a contradiction. The Kingdom of God is made visible in the apostolic community which becomes a kind of nuclear generator of the future Christian community.

Availability for missionary service

Another aspect of the comboni vocation is the type of service to which we are called. In the Rule of 1871 Comboni wrote: "No one will be admitted to the Institute unless they are prepared to consecrate themselves unto death for the work of the regeneration of Africa" (*S* 2654).

The Christ whom we follow in Comboni is the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the flock and goes in search of the lost sheep to lead them back to the sheep-fold. Following this example, Comboni realised that Africa represented the most abandoned and forgotten sheep where the Kingdom was not yet established. Thus, evangelisation and the development of peoples who have not yet heard the Good News is the primary aim of the Comboni Institute (*RL* 13).

Following the indications given by Comboni, the Rule of Life specifies that "In virtue of his vocation the missionary is ready to go forth in faith and obedience to the peoples or groups of peoples among whom the Institute performs the work of evangelisation. The superiors are duty bound to make this possible for each missionary according to the charism of the Institute" (*RL* 15). The leaving of one's own culture is an integral part of the comboni vocation and living it fully means to allow oneself to be challenged by the difficult experience of exodus. Mission in the home country is not the same as the leaving of the home Church and country. The comboni vocation can only be fully lived by leaving one's own country.

To go on mission is not only a duty, it a right which the superiors are "obliged" to respect (*RL* 15). Leaving one's own country is a human and spiritual experience which provides a way of understanding the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son who left the bosom of the Father in order to reveal the goodness of God.

On-going development

Like every vocation the comboni vocation can only be fully understood by living it. In accepting the initial call, a person cannot know how it is going to develop. It demands entrusting oneself into the hands of God who alone knows his own project of love for each one of us.

No one can know in advance the details of their vocation. Accepting a vocation means trusting God, believing fervently that through the Church he guides us along the right way. We cannot have guarantees. Today there is the tendency to test one's vocation in order to be sure, as if it were possible to exhaust every possibility for all time. But this is not part of God's plan. Basically a vocation is always a step into a future known only by God, especially for missionaries who have to be open to every possibility.

Like a man who gets married, not knowing whether he will have children, or whether they will be healthy or sick, boys or girls, good or bad, someone who joins the Institute does not know what the future holds. Things change and so does the Institute. As the Rule of Life says: "Periodically and especially during the General Chapter, the Institute reviews, in the light of its purpose, its commitments and the activity of its members" (*RL* 14.3). "The Institute on its journey of faith in the world is intimately connected with humanity and its history. Consequently, while the missionaries live and interpret events in the light of the Gospel, they remain open to new questions and situations, and revise their attitudes, institutions and methods and seek new solutions" (*RL* 16).

Over the years there have been some confreres who never accepted certain events, such as the opening of missions in other continents. Closed in themselves, like some people after Vatican II, they lose their liveliness and contact with the Institute, becoming angry and bitter.

We need to remember the history of the Institute. Linked to Comboni's charism, the Institute remains the same but open to change and renewal. Change will only end with the final resurrection. Rather than being blocked at one stage of development, we need to accept growth with joy.

PRAYER

Father, we thank you
for the vocation of our Founder
and for that of our brothers and sisters
in the Comboni Missionaries.
We thank you for our parents,
families, relatives,
friends and benefactors
who have supported us in our missionary work.
Give your Church and the Comboni missionaries
new vocations
to fulfill your command
to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter II

CONSECRATION

In the preceding chapter we have seen how are all called to identify ourselves with Christ the Good Shepherd to be, like Daniel Comboni, his historical and dynamic presence in today's world. Given our natural limitations, and above all the wound of sin that we all carry in our hearts, how is it possible to achieve such heights? How can we possibly fulfil the "works of God", to become a sign and instrument of the Kingdom of the Father?

Consecration follows vocation; this is the extraordinary work of sanctification by which the Father, through the Spirit, who enables his missionaries to be in and for the Kingdom. As Isaiah exults when expressing the reality:

The spirit of the Lord is on me
because the Lord has consecrated me with oil.
He has sent me
to bring joyful news to the poor,
to comfort the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom to slaves,
liberty to those in prison,
and the Lord's year of mercy.
(*Is* 61:1-2).

THE CONSECRATION OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Jn 10:22-39: He whom the Father has consecrated

Mt 3:13-17: The Baptism of Jesus

He whom the Father has consecrated

The passage from the gospel to which we are referring is the second part of chapter 10 of John on the Good Shepherd. The background is the feast of the Dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem. This detail is significant because in the John's gospel references to the temple are always made to reveal some aspect of the mystery of Jesus, the true and definitive temple, of whom Jerusalem is only a symbol (cf. *Jn* 2:21).

With the clarification that, "at that time in Jerusalem it was the feast of dedication" (that is of the consecration of the temple by the Maccabees: cf. *1 Mac* 4:36-59), John wants to say that here we are dealing with the consecration of Jesus, with the Father's taking total possession of him. The Father overshadows the Son with the Holy Spirit taking possession of him just as the cloud overshadowed the Temple of Solomon, symbolising the presence of God (cf. *1 K* 8:10). In this same passage of John's gospel Jesus, pushed by the open opposition of the Jews, calls himself "the one whom the Father has consecrated" (v. 36) to be the presence of his love in the world.

This consecration comes through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is this Spirit who anoints the prophets and kings. The Spirit who overshadows the Temple and Mary, who solemnly consecrates Christ on the day of his baptism, remaining with him (cf. *Jn* 1:23). In this way Christ becomes the place of the presence of God in the world, the charismatic par-excellence, the one who speaks and acts "led by the Spirit" (*Lk* 4:1), and who is completely docile so that scripture, the plan of the Father, may be fulfilled (cf. *Jn* 17:12). This is the underlying meaning of consecration.

Often, when we speak of consecration, we underline the human response of the person who consecrates themselves to God. In fact, the main element of consecration is the work of God, three times Holy (cf. *Is* 6:3) who transforms hearts, purifying them of all that does not conform to his way of being, which is love (*1 Jn* 4:8), and forming them according to his own attitudes and behaviour. Before it is a human response, consecration is a sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit who makes a person pleasing to God, an object of his delight (*Mt* 3:17), and able to be associated with the salvation of the world. Even the coming of the Kingdom is linked to such an experience of consecration: "The Kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (*Rm* 14:17).

To consecrate myself

During the priestly prayer at the Last Supper, Jesus says "I consecrate myself" for my disciples (*Jn* 17:19). Some commentators translate "sacrifice myself" because on the human level consecration always takes place on the altar of sacrifice. In fact, consecration and sacrifice are almost synonymous, because at the heart of consecration is the sacrifice of self. The statement of Jesus, "The Father loves me because I offer my life" (v. 17) makes clear the connection between consecration worked by God and Jesus' sacrifice of his life as the complete and total expression of consecration. Real martyrdom is the shedding of one's blood. However, martyrdom is also expressed in the acceptance of a prolonged missionary service in difficult and dangerous situations with very little reward, in the living of community life, which can be heavy at times, and in the acceptance of sickness (cf. *CA* 1991, 13).

The sacrifice which Jesus makes of his life from his first wail at Bethlehem to his last breath on Calvary, is for the good of his sheep and is part of his mission as Good Shepherd. Obedient to the Father "until death and death on the cross" (*Ph* 2:6), Jesus "offers himself with the eternal Spirit" (*Heb* 9:14) to give life eternal to his sheep.

The consecration of the Good Shepherd is handed on to the sheep who become capable of listening and of following in the apostolate. "My sheep listen to my voice and I know them and they follow me" (v. 27). Because of the sacrifice of the shepherd, the sheep themselves share in his charism, receiving the Holy Spirit which urges them towards a radical involvement in the coming of the Kingdom of God.

My Father's concerns

Jesus was only twelve years old when he said that his first duty was to be busy with his Father's concerns (*Lk* 2:41-50). His obedience to the Father is the principal sign of his consecration in the Spirit. Christ is not guided by his own desires, does not make his own plans, does not develop his own projects according to the logic of the world with its perverted attitudes and behaviour. He is obedient to the Father and that is enough. "Do not love the world, or what is in the world. If anyone does love the world, the love of the Father finds no place in him, because everything there is in the world - disordered bodily desires, disordered desires of the eyes, pride in possession - is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world with all its disordered desires is passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains for ever" (*1 Jn* 2:15-17).

Christ is the consecrated one par-excellence because he can say, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (*Jn* 4:34). He does not live an independent life, but stays in communion with the Father, because he knows that only in fidelity and obedience to him can he "complete his work". That is, establish the Kingdom of the God in the world. Obedience is also a fundamental characteristic of the Kingdom. This is a filial relationship and not selfish independence. It is control of the impulses of a corrupt heart and not surrender to the dictates of the world. Because of this the Good Shepherd acts only when "his hour has arrived" (*Jn* 13:1). "The hour" is the will of the Father expressed in historical circumstances, daily sought by Jesus with effort and careful attention, because he knows that outside that will his mission is destined to failure.

Here we see the unbreakable connection between consecration and mission. In the dynamic of life, consecration generates mission, and mission verifies and deepens consecration. Thus it was that Jesus spoke of himself as "the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world" (*Jn* 10:36). Such conviction was deeply rooted in the early Christian community of the Acts of the Apostles. The following words of Peter summarise this conviction, "God consecrated Jesus of Nazareth in the power of the Holy Spirit. He went about setting free and blessing all those who were under the power of the devil because God was with him" (*Ac* 10:38).

PRAYER

Father,
on the day of our baptism
and religious profession
you consecrated us with the same Spirit
with which you consecrated Jesus in the Jordan
to set him apart for missionary service.
We pray,
that the Holy Spirit continue to guide us
so that we can be real witnesses
to the presence of your Kingdom
and generous servants of our brothers and sisters.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE CONSECRATION OF DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 462-464: The movements of the Spirit

S 2308; 2790-2791: The Spirit in the bishops & faithful

S 926; 4799: The Plan inspired from on high and brought to perfection from below

The movements of the Spirit

Comboni led a very active and, in some aspects, adventurous life. After deciding to dedicate himself to the missions he never stopped. He studied, wrote, travelled, opened mission stations, founded two Institutes, continuing like this until his death. However, this giant of a missionary was not looking for fame. Like the Good Shepherd, and like every true disciple of the Lord, Comboni was also a mystic, someone "passive" in front of God. He was aware of being "consecrated" by God, the only real actor on the stage of history.

An examination of Comboni's writings to discover his deep sense of depending on and being guided by the Spirit is difficult because of the language of the time. In the last century references to the active presence of the Holy Spirit, so common in our own spiritual and theological language, were quite scarce. The mystery was lived, because God is always Trinity and the Spirit has never ceased to work in the world and in the Church. In the carrying out of the mystery, the part reserved to the Spirit was decidedly modest.

In his writings Comboni speaks explicitly of the third person of the Trinity some forty times. More numerous are texts where references to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit are implicit in the language of the time, such as charity, flame, grace of the Heart of Jesus, pure love of God, the spirit of the charity of Christ. But there are some texts which have indirect references to the Spirit and which are of real importance.

Comboni emphasises the presence of the Holy Spirit in Mary, "indescribable dwelling of the eternal Divine Spirit" (S 4003). And above all in the Church in general, in the Pope and in Propaganda Fide. This vision of faith in the Spirit acting through visible mediators, helped Comboni to be obedient unto martyrdom and to have a strong faith in the hierarchy even when faced with unwelcome replies. It helped him return continually to the attack, presenting his ideas from another point of view, with an attitude of lively respect.

Comboni also saw the Holy Spirit in the bishops. In his circular letter of the 24th. of June 1870, sent to the Council Fathers to invite them "to do everything possible so that Africa unites itself to the Catholic Church", he based his text on the Acts of the Apostles (20:28) and writes, "This is required by the office entrusted to you whom the Holy Spirit has chosen to be pillars of the Church of God" (S 2308).

Above all it is in Comboni's personal life that we see his living faith in the Holy Spirit. After the death of Fr. Oliboni in 1859, when Comboni was ill with fever and had been recalled to Europe by his superiors, he wrote, "(...) against my will, I was advised by everyone to abandon central Africa, at least for a time (...). What could we do then? Nothing other than cheerfully resign ourselves to the will of the Lord, ever blessing his holy plans. Return home for now and await new movements of the Spirit of God, every ready to sacrifice all and to overcome everything, in order to follow and fulfil the will of the Lord" (S 462; 464). For Comboni, searching for the will of God implies faithful attention to "new movements of the Spirit". It is the Spirit who suggests the time and the kind of missionary work.

Above all it is in relation to the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa that this strong and exceptional presence of the Spirit is present in Comboni. He always attributed this to an extraordinary intervention of God and the light of the Holy Spirit. On the 20th. of October 1864, a few weeks after drafting the Plan, he wrote to Don Mazza, "I believe that this Plan is the work of God because it suddenly came to my mind on the 15th. of September while I was making a triduum of prayer to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. On the 18th. of September when the Servant of God was beatified, Cardinal Barnabo finished reading my Plan. I had worked on it for almost sixty hours continuously. Despite this, before seeking the approval of the Holy See, I prepared many printed copies to distribute to all the Societies for Africa and to the most distinguished prelates in the world. I listened to the advice and suggestions of everyone and then, after making improvements, presented it to the Holy See" (S 926).

The conviction that the Plan "is the work of God" does not excuse Comboni from the task of research, of consultation and debate. He does not say that this comes from God so it cannot be changed. In him there is a dynamic faith and profound sense of communion with the church. His opening remark is significant "it suddenly came to me". It reveals a man convinced of the active presence of the Holy Spirit and open towards his inspirations. The inspiration of the Spirit is a dynamic intuition, full of possibilities. To put it into practice in the stream of history and of the Church in co-operating with other pastoral agents demanded serious commitment to reflection and consultation. The greatness of the one who receives the inspiration is not in the gift, to which he has no claim, but in the way that he is able to make it understood and accepted by the Church.

For Comboni the charismatic experience of 1864 is so clear and strong that he can say without a shadow of doubt, "God alone is the Author of this Plan" (S 2475). And twelve years later, in his report to the Society of Cologne, he returns to this with the same liveliness and language and with the same details of the first moment of inspiration, "On the 18th. of September in 1864, whilst I was in Rome, during the beatification of Margaret Mary Alacoque, in St. Peter's, the thought came to me like a flash of lightening to suggest the new plan for the conversion of the poor black peoples. Each point came to me like an inspiration from on high" (S 4799).

Unto death

Only when the person called actually responds does consecration by God become the work of salvation in history. Comboni's response is total, "I gave myself completely, unto death". The Plan that he wrote under divine inspiration opens and closes with two very significant phrases: for the regeneration of Africa "we would be happy to shed our blood to the last drop" (S 809), and "for the conversion of Africa we would be happy to consecrate our weak energies and the whole of our life" (S 844).

In 1867 Comboni wrote to Canon Mitterutzner in a similar vein, "Kirchner sees no hope of my plans succeeding in Africa. But my friend, I want to try every way. (...) Even if I succeed in nothing God will be content with my good intentions. Certainly I will not spare tiredness, travel, nor even life itself for the success of the enterprise. I will die with Africa on my lips. A swarm of crosses has landed on my head, but I am more lively than before" (S 1441).

Comboni's famous motto "Africa or death" finds its rightful place in this context of joyful and unlimited consecration. "With regard to me and my missionary companions, you know that with great joy we consecrate our lives for the good of this part of the world which is still almost unknown and lies in great misery until we win it for Christ. With the help of God, and using every prudent method and human caution, the only programme we want to complete is this, AFRICA OR DEATH!" (S 2941).

The meaning of this consecration "unto death" is also expressed in the oath for the brothers, drawn up by Comboni himself: "I (...) of my own free will swear, in front of God, perpetual service to the missions of Central Africa under the obedience of the most rev. bishop and vicar apostolic (for the time-being), and of the legitimate immediate superiors, and I promise under oath to serve in perpetuity in those places and in those offices which will be assigned to me under obedience, without ever going back from this my firm decision, not even in face of death. I abandon myself entirely into the arms of Providence under the guide and command of the Superiors" (S 2654).

It is impressive to see that "availability unto death" is a necessary characteristic which Comboni wants in his missionaries. This is the full meaning of Christ's phrase "I consecrate myself", which was on his lips in his priestly prayer. This theme is developed further in an passage from the Report of 1872 to Cardinal Barnabo, in which Comboni outlines the identity of the missionaries whom he wants for central Africa:

"The African missionary completely strips himself and deprives himself of every human comfort for God, for the most abandoned souls on earth and for the sake of eternity. He is motivated by the pure vision of his God who nourishes and abundantly him in all circumstances. The missionary is not concerned about having a long life or short life, or about whether he gathers the fruit of his work and apostolate himself or if is gathered by another. His heart is always warmed by the love of God, and his gaze illuminated by faith contemplating the great advantage, the importance of the sublime, eminent apostolic work for which he has sacrificed all. Impoverishment, continual privations, and the hardest

works become for him *a paradise on earth*. Death itself and the most painful martyrdom are the crown of his sacrifice. Thus, this thought, always turned towards the end of their apostolic vocation necessarily engenders *a true spirit of sacrifice* in the students of the Institute. They develop this frame of mind by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly, and always trying to understand more clearly what it means to speak of a God who died on the Cross for the salvation of souls, and by often renewing the offering of themselves in mind and body to God. In certain circumstances of greater fervour everyone will make a communal, *formal and explicit consecration of themselves to God*, being humble and confident in his grace unto martyrdom" (S 2890-2892).

In the conclusion of his study of the Rule of 1871, Fr. Baritussio writes, "Rightly, the value of mission-consecration-martyrdom is one of the main ways of interpreting the constitutions. In concrete the Institute is seen as a dynamic reality which is the result of the action of grace, but through consecration, is also a response to God who calls in order to entrust a particular service in history".³

Evangelical Counsels

Comboni was not a religious in the strict sense of the word, and so he never wrote particularly about religious consecration. However, he had a profound sense of that consecration which is the essence of religious life. With regard to religious life itself he feared its rigid structures which were not adaptable enough to include the spirit of flexibility and of incarnation demanded by missionary situations. On several occasions in fact, he was scathing of what he called "religious selfishness" (S 2387) when the interests of an Institute took precedence over the interests of the missions. For Comboni, the principal result of consecration was the spirit of sacrifice, the ability to face the harshness of the missionary life and that calm forgetfulness of self which allows everything to be risked.

Lozano writes, "For Daniel Comboni, the missionary vocation required a strong spirit of sacrifice that would embrace everything, from the most ordinary everyday matters up to the loss of health and life, including the possibility of martyrdom".⁴ "Whoever does not deny himself, says Comboni, goes to the devil. Everyone must mortify themselves, and the missionary above all" (S 6023). Comboni came to this conclusion, influenced not by the Jansenist asceticism of the last century but by the demands of the missions and aware that the works of God are born at the foot of the Cross.

(a) *Obedience* is the main evangelical counsel which Comboni underlines as an indispensable virtue for fraternal life and collaboration in the apostolate. In the Rule for missionaries in Egypt we find this significant text, "Our missionaries, priests or laymen, live as brothers with the same vocation. Without competition or pretensions, they are dependent on and under the direction of the one who is appointed as local Superior of the Institute. The missionaries are ready to do all that they are ordered to do, willing to suffer together and to help one-another" (S 1859). Thus, in the Rule of 1871, obedience takes first place in the instructions for postulants, "The first lesson which the postulants need to learn is to die completely with regard to their own will and to sacrifice themselves entirely unto death by means of perfect obedience to the legitimate superiors" (S 2681).

If obedience is important for the internal life of the Institute, it is essential for the planting of the Church. No one can work for the Kingdom without complete obedience to the hierarchy of the Church. This is the attitude of Comboni towards the authority of the Church. In the *Positio*, we read, "There is not a single impulse of the Spirit that Comboni does not submit to the judgement of his superiors"

³ BARITUSSIO A., *I "frammenti" comboniani delle Regole del 1871*, Rome 1983, p. 169.

⁴ LOZANO J.M., *The Spirituality of Daniel Comboni. Apostle - Prophet - Founder*, Houston 1989, p. 182.

(*Positio*, p. CXXIII). Comboni's most important writings are the result of an intensive consultation either with his superiors or with experts and people competent in the field. There are the four editions of the Plan and more than twenty reworkings of the Postulate, with corrections based on suggestions and criticisms which he had accepted.

(b) Comboni makes few references to *chastity*. In the Report to the Society of Cologne he explicitly asks that candidates for the missionary life "should be gifted with proven chastity" (S 2484). In the Rule of 1871, this chastity is defined according to the thought of the times with its negative aspects of renouncing. However, the aim is positive, to attain that freedom of Spirit which allows a person to act in the midst of inevitable dangers with sensible and open attitude to everyone.

In this context it is useful to note Comboni's efforts to promote co-operation and team-work between priests, brothers and sisters, and the importance that he gave to the consecrated women in the work of evangelisation. Reflecting on how he had succeeded where others had failed, he wrote that it was "because in agreement with Pius IX, I solemnly consecrated the Vicariate to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to our Lady and to St. Joseph, and because in all the great churches of the world that I visited, and all the most fervent monasteries and Institutes of Europe they pray fervently for the conversion of Africa, and because in the apostolate in Africa I was the first to introduce the all powerful ministry of women of the Gospel, sisters of charity who are the shield, the strength and the guarantee of missionary ministry" (S 5284). Here again Comboni was ahead of his time.

Fr. Meroni, in the *Positio* gives evidence that, "The servant of God was celibate and chaste". A coptic christian who knew Comboni personally witnessed that, "The face of the saint was joyful. His pure and chaste body smelt of the goodness of Christ" (pp. CXXV-CXXVI). Faced with a universal mission, Comboni embrace chastity without hesitation. Towards the end of his life, when insinuating rumours were spread about him, he was deeply hurt and protested, "No. The only passion that burnt in my heart was for Africa" (S 6983).

(c) Comboni's attitude towards *poverty* is seen in the facts. He laid down the principle that "everyone lives communal life, content with the food, clothed and provided with books and other things according to the means of the Institute" (S 2497). He reduces the norms to a minimum such as those regarding offerings and stole fees, which are the property of the mission (S 5568), and correspondence, which much be checked by the superiors (S 6012). For the rest he makes only recommendations: not to light too many candles (S 6511), "not to buy in small quantities things, such as oil, which can be bought in bulk!" (S 6514).

Comboni did not refrain from using money on the technological advances of the time. In his letters he is enthusiastic for steamships, the railway and telegraph at the service of the missions. He was the real successor of Knoblecher who had had the courage to introduce the "Stella Matutina", the first of series of glorious Nile steamers. For Comboni, poverty did not mean renouncing the things that Providence had made available for evangelisation. Quite the contrary!

All the same, not many people lived poverty as Comboni and his missionaries did, trusting daily in divine Providence. This how the *Positio* presents our "father of the poor": "The gradual schooling (of Comboni) in the spirit of poverty can be found in the uncertain situation of his family, and even more noticeably in the life of the Mazza Institute and the uncertainty about how they would find their 'daily bread'. These were preparation for the great apostolic privations beginning with the first expedition to Africa (1857), where the first dwelling at the Holy Cross mission was like a stable. It was precisely this experience of poverty that gave the Servant of God the courage to overcome his embarrassment and become a 'beggar' for the poorest and most abandoned" (pp.CXXVI-CXXVII).

PRAYER

Father,
you made Daniel Comboni
docile to the movements of the Spirit
and ready to put them into action
in dialogue with the Church.
We pray,
let us hear the voice of the Holy Spirit
in the depths of our hearts,
in the teaching of the magisterium
and in the signs of the times.
Give us the humility and the courage
to accept the help of the community
in the making of our decisions and choices.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE CONSECRATION OF THE COMBONI MISSIONARY TODAY

Readings:

RL 20-35: Consecrated Life

RL 162-166: Administration of goods

LG 44-46: Religious Life

PC 12-14: The Vows

Initiative of gratuitous love

"The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus acknowledge that their consecration is first of all an initiative of gratuitous love by which the Lord calls to himself those he wants, he transforms and strengthens them with his Spirit and sends them to carry his name to the nations. In freedom and in gratitude they accept God's call and pledge themselves to correspond to it in the concrete choices of their life" (*RL* 20).

The Rule of Life rightly underlines that consecration is "first of all" God's initiative, not ours. Consecration has its origin in the 'mystery' of the Father. It is part of his divine plan to unite all of creation in Christ. In this sense it is a development and deepening of the sacrament of baptism, God's first consecrating action in the life of an individual. "The missionary's consecration is rooted in his baptismal consecration and is a fuller expression of it" (*RL* 20.1).

The great protagonist of our consecration is the Father who wants to attract us to Christ. He wants to bring us to full identification with the Son so as to be "well-pleased" with us as he was with Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan and at the Transfiguration. By consecration, the Father inserts us into the dynamic of following Christ so that he love us as he loves Christ, and so that we can bring that love to others. For Paul, the apostle, Damascus precedes mission. After he has been "taken over" by Christ (*Ph* 3:12), evangelisation becomes an unavoidable necessity (cf. *1 Co* 9:16).

"The missionary is called to follow Christ: remain with Him, and to be sent by Him into the world to share His destiny" (*RL* 21). The following of Christ is demanding and is never the result of a simply human conquest. More than once in the gospel Jesus speaks about the possibility of being scandalised by him. After his sermon at Capernaum and after his arrest in Gethsemane many abandoned him, scandalised by his hard words and by the reality of the cross. By consecrating us the Father makes us, through the Spirit, immune to scandal. He develops in our hearts the fascination with Christ which is the foundation of discipleship. Only after realising that we have been conquered by Christ can we leave everything and following him (*RL* 21.1), sharing his destiny with death, and experiencing and witnessing to his resurrection (*RL* 21.2).

In this context we can understand how the fundamental importance of the vows lies not in the fact that they make us more available for our missionary work, but in the fact that they make us more like "Christ, who being chaste and poor redeemed human beings with his obedience unto death on the cross" (*PC* 1). The Christological dimension of consecration is central. If a person live the vows only from the ascetical point of view as a personal search for perfection according to the dictates of the gospel, he would not live the vows in the Christian sense, because it would not be an expression of the following of Christ. An example of this would be the poverty chosen by Diogenes, which was based on a philosophical choice. What makes the vows "christian" is the desire to clothe oneself with Jesus Christ, to live today like him.

The Comboni missionary, says the Rule of Life, lives his consecration "according to the specific demands of the Institute's missionary service" (*RL* 22). This precision is important, but it should not become a trap. The specific missionary character of our vows aims first at identification with Christ, sent by the Father, before being concerned with apostolic effectiveness. Paul writes, "Life is Christ for me" (*Ph* 1:21), and, "Whatever might be gain for me I consider as lost for Christ's sake. In fact I will go further: I consider everything as loss if I can know Christ, my Lord. I accept the loss of everything for his sake, and I consider everything as rubbish in order to win Christ and to be with him, not with the justification derived from the law but with that derived from faith in Christ" (*Ph* 3:7-9).

The ability to renounce "good things which are highly valued" (*LG* 46) comes to the missionary, as to Paul, only by being deeply attracted to Christ who brings to identify ourselves with him. Without this profound motive the values renounced with the vows will keep all their attraction and ability to conquer us. They can be given up only through a greater love which is the fruit of consecration. Thus consecration becomes God's intervention by which the kingdom is rooted in us, and which "above all is manifest in the person of Christ" (*LG* 5), and which urges us "to spread it to every corner of the earth" (*RL* 22.1). By moving attention away from ourselves and onto Christ and others, consecration frees our energies and gives us zeal which was one of the Founder's basic virtues.

Consecration in the community

The fruits of the Spirit which make for consecration are first of all love, solidarity, and peace (*Ga* 5:22). The first visible fruit of consecration is fraternity, the communion between those consecrated. The vows become a message of salvation when they are seen in a community context, "By his consecration the missionary enters a community of brothers called to share the difficulties and joys of missionary service. In this way, he lives his witness to Christ, not as an individual, but in a life of fellowship with his brothers" (*RL* 23).

The great missionary value contained in consecration is the fact that by generating community it makes present the "new people" which we are called to be. "By his community life the missionary witnesses to that new brotherly community in the Spirit which he is sent to proclaim and to make present among the peoples he evangelizes" (*RL* 10:3).

Our understanding of this theme can be deepened by a careful reading of the section of the Rule of Life on community (36-45). Linked to this is a section of *Lumen Gentium* which, in speaking about the People of God, makes eloquent reference to the community produced by consecration:

"For, those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the Word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people... You who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God' (*1 Pt* 2:9-10). That messianic people has for its head Christ, 'who was delivered up for our sins, and rose again for our justification' (*Rm* 4:25), and who now, having won a name which is above all names, reigns in glory in heaven. The heritage of this people are the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in his temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its goal is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time. Then Christ our life will appear, and creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God' (*Rm* 8:21)" (*LG* 9).

It is difficult to find a clearer description of community born of consecration.

The same theme is taken up and developed by *Gaudium et Spes*, which links the community of believers with human solidarity but always as fruit of consecration:

"As the first-born of many brethren and through the gift of His Spirit, He founded after His death and resurrection a new brotherly community composed of all those who receive Him in faith and in love. This he did through his body which is the Church. There everyone, as members one of the other, would render mutual service according to the different gifts bestowed on each. This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day on which it will be brought to perfection. Then, saved by grace, men will offer flawless glory to God as a family beloved of God and of Christ their brother" (*GS* 32).

The relationship between consecration and fraternity is often forgotten. This leads to the danger of changing consecration into an excuse for selfish egoism, which prevents involvement in community life and is always ready to defend rights and privileges. Meeting and sharing oneself with others is rejected. Individuals become isolated in the privacy of their own niche where no one is allowed to enter. Comboni must have had painful experience of this type of religious whom he called, "stiff-necked people selfish and full of themselves" (*S* 6656). When someone does not accept the clear link between consecration and community, they are avoiding the ordinary kind of adaptation with regard to age, health, personal tastes and a certain discipline which the members of any family accept. Without community and sharing, religious life simply becomes a search for the advantages which it undoubtedly brings, and it becomes more sign of selfishness than of love. Hence the Rule of Life speaks of community in the context of consecration (cf. *RL* 23).

The vows of the Comboni Missionary

The vows are considered in detail in the Rule of Life. Here I want to emphasise their missionary dynamism and their capacity to transform the world into the Kingdom of God. With regard to this, John-Paul II says in *Redemptionis Donum*, "(...) it is not difficult to note the fundamental importance of the evangelical counsels in the plan of salvation. Evangelical *chastity* helps us to transform that part of our interior life which has its origins in the concupiscence of the flesh. Evangelical *poverty* transforms all that has its origins in concupiscence of the eyes. Evangelical *obedience* permits us to transform in a radical way all the concupiscence of life that arises in the human heart. (...) The evangelical counsels essentially serve 'to renew creation': through them, 'the world' must be subject to man and given to him so that man himself is perfectly given to God" (n. 9).

The vows then, are three formidable values of the Kingdom of God, a sign of his presence which has "already arrived" because as Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk 17:21). The vows also help us not to mistake the world as it is for what it is yet to become. They have great eschatological meaning. They are a reminder of what is "not yet", and they bring it nearer with their apostolic dynamism. The Comboni missionary, says the Rule of Life, knows "that by his very consecration he is bound to labour to implant and strengthen the Kingdom of Christ in people and to spread it to every corner of the earth" (22.1).⁵

(a) The vow of *obedience*, with its dynamic of knowledge, reflection and community discernment, is a formidable antidote to the serious presence of activism and individualism which recent General Chapters have criticised.⁶ Obedience leads to an attitude of co-responsibility and participation. This is brought alive in genuine, active commitment to the community council and the provincial assembly as ways of discovering the will of God at community and personal level. Experience teaches that when confreres avoid these moments they tend to live separate lives. Even if they speak about obedience they go their own way. Each confrere's personal contribution is not optional. It is a necessary condition for real discernment.

The vow of obedience implies a certain corporate discipline. As members of an organisation (Institute, provincial and local communities) we must carry out commitments taken on without our agreement or even against our will. This applies not only to commitments but also to ways of working. We can certainly change and improve things, but only through community discernment, not by changing everything immediately.

The acceptance of the ministry of authority is an importance and sensitive aspect of the vow of obedience. Authority, whether of the Church or Institute, has an important and irreplaceable function in the making of decisions. Indeed, it is the superior who takes the decision (*RL* 106). He does this, not in the way of parliamentary democracy, following the majority, but by being faithful to the values of the Gospel, the charism, the word given at the time, and the good of the people whom we serve. At times the will of the majority can be that of mediocrity which undermines prophetic choices and contradicts the challenge of the gospel. Pity Jesus if had to subject the will of the Father to the consent of the majority! Sometimes the majority needs to be woken from the accepted routine!

There is no doubt that real crises of conscience can arise between obedience and the prophetic role to which the Lord may call a person. The same role inherent in our own charism can bring us into conflict with the hierarchy. In the Kingdom of God there exists a "meeting of opposites" which cannot be avoided. The solution to this lies in the cross and divine patience. The experience of Comboni is rich in this respect.⁷

b) *Poverty*, insecurity and lack of power are essential to the living of mission which means leaving a world where we are secure to become part of a different and culture and church. This is an experience of "kenosis". Without giving up self, the missionary cannot communicate the richness of his faith nor be enriched by the values of others. Christ's way was, "from being rich he made himself poor for your sake, so that you might become rich by means of his poverty" (2 Co 8:9). Along this road we arrive at solidarity with the people and become part of those to whom we are sent. According to S. Fausti, "Inculturation, besides all the theological arguments, will be possible to the extent that you are poor in every meaning of the word. If you go with riches, power and culture, you dominate others and colonise them, taking your own sin everywhere. From your preaching will be born a weak church which finds it hard to take off, with leaders

⁵ On the relationship between consecration-Kingdom, cf. PIERLI F. & Council, *circ. lett.* on "The Centenary of the First Religious Profession: 1887-1987", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 156, part II, pp. 5-10.

⁶ Cf. CA 1991, nn. 4.6, 29.1, 43.2.

⁷ Cf. LOZANO J.M., *op. cit.*, ch. 7.

who love money, power, prestige, drink, etc (cf. *1 Tm* 3:3). Don't complain about them. You have been their model and have only yourself to blame".⁸

Another important aspect of poverty is sharing possessions with confreres, overcoming the destructive logic of wanting what is mine. Unfortunately such logic seems ever more common in our communities. We are influenced by our culture with its tendency to possess one's own things, such as car and everything-else. In some confreres the aversion to sharing is so strong as to discourage any consideration of the idea. Yet the model to which we aspire is that of the community of the Apostles where "no one called his own that which was his, but everything was held in common" (*Ac* 4:32). The Rule of Life says, "In the common use of goods, the missionary models his life on the ideal of the first Christian community. He shares with his brothers both material things and his experiences of faith. He does not seek privileges for himself" (*RL* 27.3). And again, "The witness of poverty of the Institute is made manifest through communion, sharing and self-limitation of economic goods, in accordance with the spirit and practice of the early Christian communities" (*RL* 164).

The increase in the number of confreres joining the Institute from the young Churches is a reason for sharing. Their own Christian communities can only help in a limited way. Different classes will appear in the Institute, with the consequent tensions and divisions, unless there is a common, accepted sharing of possessions.

Our poverty demands seriousness and openness in administration and accountability, such as in respecting the intentions of the donors. The money is not ours. We are only the administrators, every ready to give account. We need to react against the feeling that we are not being trusted when we are asked to be accountable. The obligation to account for our expenses is a help towards being serious and honest (weakness in this area is very great) and an example which pastoral helpers need to see.

The vow of poverty asks us to take up and live the law of work with responsibility, even when this is not very satisfying (cf. *RL* 27.2). Given that we are fully provided for, we run the risk of being parasites, eating bread which we have not earned (cf. *1 Th* 4:11-12; *2 Th* 3:7-11). We lead lives without commitment unless we bring consistency and organisation to the work with which we are entrusted. Again the Rule of Life says, "The missionary is committed to his work and makes a sincere effort to find the necessary material assistance for the Institute's existence and activity, even with personal sacrifice" (*RL* 162.2).

(c) The foundation of the vow of *chastity* is a profound love for Jesus Christ, for Comboni, for the confreres and for the people. All this is beyond our energies and possibilities. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit which we must humbly ask for each day. The Council speaks of "a remarkable gift of grace" (*PC* 12) and the Rule of Life says, "By living the gift of consecrated chastity the missionary responds with undivided heart to Christ's love. Consecrated chastity leads him to inner freedom and enables him to give himself wholeheartedly for the service of the Kingdom" (*RL* 25).

We live in a culture that challenges the value of chastity, and often does not believe us, not least because of our failures. Nevertheless, we value it even if we must sometimes admit to uncertainty. For the rest, we know that not only the living but also the understanding of this value is already a gift of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, "Not everyone can accept it but only those to whom it is granted" (*Mt* 19:11).

The devotion of the Heart of Jesus is a helpful resource to chastity because it leads us to take on the feelings of Jesus in his relationships with men and women, children and adults. It helps us to understand how he lived his sexuality. We take a vow of chastity because we want him, the Good Shepherd, to continue loving in us and through us. We want our own bodies, sensual yet chaste, to be a kind of sacrament of the love of God. The message of Paul is ever true in the case of the apostle who seeks to be chaste, "the body is not meant for immodesty but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (*1 Co* 6:13-14).

⁸ FAUSTI S., *Lettera a Sila*, Piemme 1991, p. 45.

So that all of this does not just remain poetry, but becomes the presence of the Spirit in us, a real struggle is necessary in order to overcome the instincts beginning with genital pleasure, then eating, drinking, smoking, etc. Apart from physical damage which takes away valuable energy from the apostolate, gratifying these desires leads to the development of a sensual mentality which then dulls the sensitivity for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Christ used strong words to put his disciples on guard against the consequences of such behaviour, "Be careful lest your hearts are immersed in licentiousness, drunkenness and the affairs of the world" (*Lk* 21:34). Fast and abstinence are practices having strong biblical roots.

In this context some words on the mass-media are appropriate. In the words of the General Counsel of 1987, "The mass-media has a strong presence in all our houses on every continent. We speak of TV, cinema, magazines, newspapers, novels. There is the danger of being entirely passive in their use, without a critical reading that helps us to understand that their influence is not always positive, especially with their pagan view of life and their ideological understanding of social and political situations. At the same time they distract from prayer, from study and from community life. For a missionary, mass-media must first of all be a means of communication, of announcing the gospel, of knowing people, etc. The community councils and other meetings should evaluate the use that we make of mass-media in order to use it in a more considered, disciplined and motivated way".⁹

Speaking of chastity, it is important to note how men and women work together in the apostolate. The emergence of women in all areas of work has been acknowledged by John XXIII as a sign of the times.¹⁰ But the outcome is far from being finished, and neither is it easy to see the future. There is uneasiness in the Church, and it seems likely to increase. As was mentioned above, we have a Founder who was particularly sensitive and creative in this area. Here too we need to be like him.¹¹

Finely, we need to recognise with humility that we are weak. Prayer, therefore, is essential. Both 'agape' and self-control are gifts of the Holy Spirit that we need to ask for every day. Experience also teaches us that regular use of the sacrament of penance and openness with one's confessor and spiritual director are of great help to a life of chastity. If we use these means we will not be overcome, and even the so-called "crises of affection" can be transformed into moments of grace and growth.

PRAYER

Father,
you have consecrated us with the Spirit
which flows from the heart of the Good Shepherd,
and you wanted us to enter into a nuptial covenant with him
through our religious profession.
We pray,
help us to understand ever more
the values of our consecration
so that we can live the following of your Son
in a radical way,
and carry our missionary vocation
with greater zeal.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁹ PIERLI F. & Council, *cir. lett.* (26.6.87) in *MCCJ Bulletin* 156, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Cf. JOHN XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 22.

¹¹ Cf. LOZANO J.M., *op. cit.*, pp. 168-170; *Positio*, doc. XVII, pp. 774-883.

Chapter III

CONVERSION

Conversion is a process of liberation, of transformation and growth which God brings about in us and in our communities by means of the Word, the Spirit and the events of history. It is the mystery of redemption already realised in Christ, and now present in us through our faith in him who "was put to death for our sins and brought back to life for our justification" (*Rm* 4:25).

Conversion is a process in the sense that it continues throughout life and ends only at the resurrection. It is a process of liberation because it frees us from the bonds of sin which prevent us from adhering to God, receiving Christ and accepting our brothers and even ourselves because we are full of fear, suspicion and selfishness, which are obstacles to our capacity to love.

Even in this process of liberation, which Paul calls "redemption" (*Rm* 8:23), the main protagonist is God who has taken away "the sin of the world" through his Son (*Jn* 1:29), "because in Jesus Christ the blessing of Abraham passed to the gentiles and we receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (*Ga* 3:14). The particular sin of the world is the refusal to accept God as Father and, consequently, of the Kingdom of love which he has established in the son and which must be spread throughout the world. In the final analysis then, the sin which needs to be converted is the refusal of God in the concrete on him, the refusal to re-model one's life according to his, the refusal to say with Paul,

*Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
who has blessed us in Christ
with every spiritual blessing in heaven (Ep 1:3).*

CONVERSION IN JESUS CHRIST

Readings:

Heb 2:5-18, 5:1-10: Like his brothers

Ph 2:1-6: He deprived himself

Mt 4:1-11: Tempted by the devil

To become a high priest full of mercy

Strictly speaking, conversion is a process which cannot be applied to Jesus Christ. No one was able to convince him of sin (*Jn* 8:46). What we are describing here is the growth of Christ towards the fullness of his relationship with the Father and the offering of himself for all of us which reached its high point in death and resurrection, making him "the great shepherd of the sheep" (*Heb* 13:20). This was not an easy journey for Christ and it enlightens and encourages us on our journey of conversion.

According to the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus had to "make himself like his brothers in order to become a merciful high priest" (2:17). Despite our familiarity with the statement by Luke, "Jesus grew in wisdom, age and grace in front of God and men" (*Lk* 2:52), we are still used to thinking that Christ was perfect from the beginning identifying his perfection with the absences of sin. In fact this is not true.

It is well known that there was no sin in Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews, that we have chosen to help us understand the dynamic of on-going conversion in Jesus, clearly says that Jesus "was tested in everything like us, except sin" (4:15).

The absence of sin is the absence of sin and no more, it is not perfection. To be without sin means we are able to reach the city of mount Zion, but to get there we have to climb! The difference is that whoever has feet weighed down with sin is unable to move forward. Jesus who is innocent has the energy to reach Calvary. However, he has to climb. Anyone who stays put and does not reach the summit cannot pretend to the perfection of the Good Shepherd.

Christ became "the great shepherd of the sheep" through genuine growth based on difficult and painful experiences. "Because he has been tested and has suffered he is able to come to the help of those who undergo the test" (*Heb* 2:18). If we are now able to approach him "completely trusting" (*Heb* 4:16) it is because, whilst preserving his innocence, he shared our historical situation of sin.

At the incarnation Christ was immersed in this situation of sin and he experienced the pain of it in the difficulty of following the Father's will. Gethsemani and Calvary speak clearly. The offering of himself in obedience to the Father meant a daily struggle against temptations, obstacles and the incomprehension of the religious and cultural environment in which he lived. If it is true that his food was to do the will of the Father (cf. *Jn* 4:34), it is no less true that the digestion of that food was very difficult. The Letter to the Hebrews lifts the veil for us, "During his life on earth he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who could free him from death. Though being Son, he learned obedience in suffering" (*Heb* 5:7-9). We know that Jesus was not born with a heart of stone, but with a heart of flesh, a new heart full of a new spirit (*Ez* 36:26-27). This being filled with the Spirit, however, was something gradual, and was only completed at the end when the Good Shepherd had offered his life for the sheep. It is one thing to offer oneself by preaching, labouring and working miracles, it is another thing to die on the cross. Only on the cross did the heart of Christ arrive at spiritual fullness, and by being pierced, become the fount of the Spirit for all (cf. *Jn* 7:37-39).

The Christ of the Letter to the Hebrews is a Christ in "on-going formation", a Christ who gradually embraces reality through his own experience and development mind and heart. Only when he breathed his last could he say, "It is accomplished" (*Jn* 19:30). Not for nothing does he have "the name which is above all other names" (*Ph* 2:9). It was not given to him at the Incarnation but after his "consummation est". Only then was he "proclaimed by God as high priest of the order of Melchizedek" (*Heb* 5:10). The faith of the early christian community with regard to the resurrection was, as Peter says repeatedly, that "God has made Lord and Christ that Jesus whom you have crucified" (*Ac* 2:36).

He did not consider it something to be held onto

In Christ the first element of becoming a merciful shepherd was accepting to be "the first-born among many brothers" (*Rm* 8:29) without considering "his equality with God as something to be held onto" (*Ph* 2:6). The Father wants to make of the Son the "heart of the world", and the Son does not rebel like the first Adam, but willingly accepts that with him and in him, everyone through grace becomes what he is by nature, that is a child of God. This is how he overcomes the temptation in the desert, where Satan tempts Christ to put himself in a position of privilege in regard to God, through easy bread and a road cleared of stones and through power over all the world (*Mt* 4:1-11).

When Christ says he has come to give us life in abundance (*Jn* 6:10), and when he prays that we may know the one, true God (*Jn* 17:3), then he is placing at our disposal his "treasure", that he could hold onto, that is his divine nature. Part of this is his own knowledge and experience of the Father and made available to us.

In his second Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, "Jesus Christ, rich as he was, made himself poor for you so that you might become rich through his poverty" (8:9). Jesus grows into keeping to the plan of the Father every time that he accepts to share with us the "fullness of his divinity" (*Col* 2:9), to make of us other sons and daughters of God and his brothers and sisters. This he does when he accepts that his heart be torn so that the Spirit that fills him is poured out to others. Because of "his fullness we have received grace upon grace" (*Jn* 1:16) and he has become the "supreme shepherd" (*1 Pt* 5:4).

Taking the Role of slave

To become the Shepherd promised by the Father, Christ had to follow the road of "kenosis", the out-pouring of himself, renouncing the glory that was his by right and which he might have expected to be reflected in his humanity as it was on the occasion of the Transfiguration (*Mt* 17:1-8). Through this "emptying of himself he took the condition of a slave and became as men are" (*Ph* 2:7).

With the word "slave", which is the opposite of the title "Lord", Paul sends us back to the suffering servant of Isaiah which was not popular in the time of Jesus. The messianic hopes of that time were triumphalistic and Jesus would have heard the debates between excited Galileans and fanatical Zealots in the synagogue at Nazareth. In order to take on the Role of a slave, Jesus had to convert himself to an idea that was completely foreign to the religious culture of the time. This was an idea which, to a certain extent, he also found difficult to accept. Thus we can understand how the slow and laborious digestion that he had to make in order to assimilate the idea. We see the importance of the baptism in the Jordan, his retreat in the desert, the place of temptation, his growing intimacy with the Father, all so that he might become convinced of the necessity of the plan of suffering, so as to overcome inner rebellion and the requests of the people.

The need to impose the "messianic secret" on those whom he healed, on the disciples and even on the demons (*Mk* 1:34), speaks volumes on the nationalistic and warlike idea of messiah which the people had, and on the efforts of Jesus not to fall into the temptation to satisfy them. Because of this he is less open during the second part of his public ministry. And from the moment that the crowd tries to make him into a king (cf. *Jn* 6:15), he is more guarded and the miracles are reduced. Even he did not find it easy to understand what it really meant to be Servant in a religious atmosphere which did not help him but actually led him astray.

Commenting on the verse "becoming like men" (*Ph* 2:7), the Jerusalem Bible says, "becoming therefore, not only a real human being but 'one like the others', sharing every human weakness, except sin". Among these weaknesses there was certainly the difficulty of appearing "in human form", to be completely "taken as a man by his appearance". Jesus had to convert himself to this day by day by means of a continual discernment. He had no role-model or outline to follow.

Making himself obedient unto death

The growth and formation of the Good Shepherd reaches perfection when, identifying himself with the Servant of Yahweh, he humbles himself "making himself obedient unto death and unto death on the cross" (*Ph* 2:8). It is on Calvary that Jesus says a definite "no" to the people who invite him to come down from the cross, and his definite "yes" to the Father. But the process of accepting this full obedience was long and difficult. It led through the desert of suffering and temptations, through the apostolate of weariness and misunderstanding, through Gethsemani with its fears and sweating of blood in mortal anguish. Jesus' acceptance of death on the cross was a cultural, social and religious death as well as a physical death.

Today, if "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ" (*1 Jn* 2:1) it is because this "just one", taking on our human condition, has experienced "the death that is at work in us" (*2 Co* 4:12). He met this in the opportunism of the crowd, in the envy of the unbelievers, the malice of those opposed to him, in Pilate's collusion, in Herod's craftiness, in the cruelty of the jailers, in the weakness of the disciples, who were the first to try to dissuade him from going up to Jerusalem and then abandoned him at the final test.

How did Jesus react to this betrayal? "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (*Lk* 23:34). This is the clearest revelation of the compassionate heart of the Good Shepherd. He does not accuse or condemn like the great dragon of the Book of Revelation, "the accuser of our brothers, the one who accuses them day and night in front of God" (*Rv* 12:10). Until that moment of betrayal no one had felt the bitter experience of the depth of our personal and communal sin in the way that Jesus did. The piercing with the lance is the sign in his body of the radical evil of the human heart subject to sin and murderous like Cain, David, Judas... At that moment, faced with the forces of sin (trial, condemnation and execution), Jesus pronounced words of pardon which clearly defined him as the Good Shepherd. Such words, in fact, radically changed the hearts of the crucifying sinners and give that fullness of life which he came to bring. The centurion, the good thief, etc. represent the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Zechariah, "On that day (...) I will pour out on the house of David, and on the people of Jerusalem, a spirit of grace and of consolation. They will gaze on the one they have pierced" (*Zc* 12:10).

PRAYER

Father,
we thank you for giving us Christ
a great shepherd and high priest
who knew how to share our sufferings
being tested in everything except sin,
and one who learned obedience through suffering.

We pray
that the awareness of our limits and sinfulness
will help us to become, like your Son,
every more understanding and compassionate
towards others.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CONVERSION IN DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 2483-2484: A difficult time of trial

S 4305, 4328-4329: Pardon from the heart

S 6655-6656: Holy and capable

Holy and capable

Like Jesus Christ, Comboni had to follow a long road to become, in time, Africa's good shepherd. But what was the missionary ideal which Comboni tried to live and then propose to the members of his Institute? This is how he wrote in 1881 to Fr. Sembianti who had charge of the "formation of holy

apostles" (S 6877), "With regard to religious education, continue as you have done until now, and as you intend to continue. I am well aware of your spirit and intention that they be *holy and capable*. One without the other is of little use to someone following the apostolic career. Missionary men and women *do not go to heaven alone*. Alone they go to hell. Missionary men and women go to heaven in the company of the souls they have saved. So first of all *holiness*, that is to be humble and strangers to sin and any offence to God. But that is not enough. They also need *charity*, which will make them capable. A mission as arduous and laborious as ours cannot be lived superficially by people who are stubborn, selfish and full of themselves and who do not care for the salvation and conversion of souls. They must be fired with charity which has its source in God and the love of Christ. And when someone really loves Christ then privations, suffering and martyrdom are sweet" (S 6655-6656).

This text has a particular value as a spiritual testament because it was written only a few months before Comboni died, at a time when he felt he would never see Verona again. It indicates not only the aims of missionary formation, but also those suggested by Comboni himself: holy apostolic zeal, charity and missionary enthusiasm "which has its source in God and the love of Christ".

The expression "holy and capable" in other letters becomes "holy and zealous" (S 2207), "holy and brave" (S 3710). It describes an apostle who is fervent and courageous, who does not become afraid or give up in the face of the difficulties of mission. One who "fears neither heat nor death", and for whom "love of Jesus and the poor of Africa is greater than all the loves on earth and in the Universe" (S 5537). The opposite is the missionary closed in on himself, who protects and takes care of himself, whose religion is a veneer producing stubbornness and an inclination to defend his own interests rather than reaching out to others.

In Comboni therefore, conversion essentially consists in appropriating for oneself the love that flows from the heart of the good shepherd, love that reaches out to others, stretches out with renewed enthusiasm to the great, remote, unknown land of Africa. "Pray so that we can all become saints by saving Africa", Comboni writes in 1880 to Fr. Giulianelli (S 5976). Having a good idea and making pious resolutions does not produce holiness. A serious radical conversion to Christ is necessary so that the charity and zeal of his heart enter deeply into us and makes us dynamic, stout-hearted and ready to face everything unto death.

Comboni died in action. But to arrive at that he had to struggle along the road of renunciation, patience and mortification (S 6537).

The struggle of Comboni for holiness seems enormous if we consider the strong temptations to which he was exposed at the beginning: his attachment to his parents and the sensitive relationship with the Mazza Institute; the repeated suggestion to forget Africa and take up a career in Rome; the obstacles placed before his Plan and the "Work of the Good Shepherd"; the meanness of the accusations of some of his missionaries who daily put his fraternal love to the test; the controversies with the Holy See, with the Congregation for Religious, with civil authorities influenced by Free-Masons, with fanatical Moslems, with the slave-trade... To all this we need to add the inherent difficulties of Africa. We should not be surprised if Comboni was perhaps discouraged or rebelled when faced with all these difficulties. Instead we need to marvel at his total conversion to Christ, to the Church, to his missionaries and to Africa, in line with continued growth in sanctity. In 1869, with regard to the training of his students, he writes, "They will need a spirit of self-denial, prudence and patience in order to overcome worldly prejudice and all the other difficulties they will meet along the way to the redemption of Africa. But with the grace of God they will succeed" (S 1992). This was the road which the grace of God enabled Comboni to travel.

I am a great sinner

In a letter to Cardinal Barnabo, in 1868, Comboni complained about the harsh treatment he had received from the cardinal because of false accusations. He then went on to say, "I deserve more than this, because I am a great sinner and I have a debt to repay to God. Therefore I thank you with all my heart" (S 1693).

Comboni was aware of his own human limits and failings, because the missions reflect a person's heroism but on the other hand they also reveal the weaknesses. They provide moments of truth in which all the good and bad appear. So, looking at himself, Comboni confesses to being a sinner and full of failings, "I am greatly lacking in sanctity and deep learning. Indeed, I lack the basics of perfection and the prudence of the souls" (S 2569). Then he manages to joke, "In part I know my own faults. Woe to me if I knew them all!" (S 1555).¹²

Comboni was also aware of the ecclesial dimension of sin and its negative influence on others, especially since he felt himself to be a "leader and founder". In 1880 he wrote to Fr. Giulianelli, the rector and administrator of the house in Cairo, who found the new job difficult, "God will give you the necessary grace, and if you have to suffer something it will be on account of my sins and not yours" (S 5973).

It is characteristic of all the saints to be profoundly aware of "the sin that oppresses us" (*Heb* 12:1), of its disruptive power and the endless suggestions that come from an evil and corrupt nature. Jesus, too, although "holy, innocent and without fault" (*Heb* 7:26) strongly felt the presence of Satan in the world, the sin that disfigures people, destroying the covenant with God and making community impossible. In Jesus this awareness led him to proclaim the Kingdom. In Comboni it becomes the desire to free others from the dominion of sin and the desire for personal conversion by the means which faith and the Church make available: prayer and meditation, the daily examination of conscience, confession, spiritual direction, the monthly day of recollection and the annual retreat.

Comboni was faithful to fervent and continual prayer. He writes in 1876, "Wherever I find myself, two or three hours never pass without a prayer" (S 4320). And in 1881, defending himself to Fr. Sembianti against the accusations of Fr. Roller, he assures him that he has only rarely omitted the meditation, and the breviary, never. (S 6474). Comboni prayed that he might remain in grace (S 434), that he might discern and fulfil the will of God (S 913), not to be over confident in the good times or discouraged in bad (S 3169) and that he might share in the concerns of the Good Shepherd (S 4949). "Holiness is the daily bread of our missionaries, and is seen to be very necessary in order to remain fervent in one's vocation in these places where, unfortunately, it is easy to forget God and one's religious duties" (S 1867).

This last quotation from the Regulations for Missionaries in Egypt, in 1869, is followed by a long list of religious practices for daily, weekly, monthly and annual observance. Among these is the daily meditation without which, suggests the Rule of 1871, there is "no fervour for spiritual things or study of the interior life or living desire for perfection" (S 2706). And writing about the examination of conscience Comboni says, "I fear no one in the world, apart from myself whom I examine everyday" (S 6437).

With regard to the sacrament of penance and spiritual direction we read in the Rule of 1871, "Every subject whilst keeping a reasonable amount of liberty in the choice of confessor for ordinary confession, will also have Spiritual Director whom he will keep fully informed of his conduct, making to him the annual general confession and some of the monthly ones" (S 2692). In order to make progress in sanctity "one should respect the voice of the Spiritual Director as the voice of God, and be fully open with him about interior things as well as one's whole conduct" (S 2710).

¹² On the main characteristics of Comboni: cf. LOZANO J.M., *op. cit.*, pp. 20-23; VOLPINI D., "Uomo di punta", in *Nigrizia*, XCIX, march 1981, pp. 60-63.

As a comment on this, it is sufficient to quote a letter of the 12th. of February which Comboni wrote to Fr. Sembianti. After noting with some bitterness "how certain members of the Mazza Institute and in the diocese judge according to how I was when I was a student of theology, and take no account of the twenty-six years of my being a priest and bishop" (S 6460), Comboni says that he has chosen "as counsellor and confessor" a priest who, three months later, he would call, "rigid, unjust and ruthless censor" who saw as black and white what everyone-else saw as red and yellow" (S 6475). "(...) God allowed Rolleri to come to the Sudan although he has contradicted me for five years, I believe that Jesus has also allowed this for my spiritual advantage because since Rolleri is austere, pigheaded, bitter and hair-splitting, above all in judging me. As long as I stay with him and put up with him, it is a good opportunity for me to practise patience, to pay attention to how I am, to correct my serious faults, chatter and sins. So, indeed, listening to God's inspiration who is all love and charity, I chose the rigid Rolleri as my confessor, counsellor and intimate friend (up to a certain point). In this way I will be careful to make fewer blunders not in governing the Vicariate (of which I know more than him, and he is narrow minded), but with regard to my own conscience, ascetical life, my soul, my personal conduct and with regard to the missionaries. And to tell the truth I find it helpful, and feel I have done well" (S 6475-6476). There is no doubt that Comboni took "serious care of his own sanctification" (S 3672) with all the means available.

On-going formation

As the Rule of 1871 clearly shows - especially the first part of Ch. X (S 2698-2706) - Comboni knew that the missions exhaust people out, and there is always the danger as Paul says, of losing oneself whilst seeking the salvation of others, "I run, but not like someone who beats the air, indeed I treat my body hard and I keep in enslaved lest after preaching to others, I am myself disqualified" (*1 Co* 9:26-27). Comboni makes Paul's words his own (S 2229) and then expressed the same idea with the same phrase, "And after having run at a great pace along the road to God and holiness not to arrive in heaven" (S 2375).

We have already noted how Comboni saw the spiritual duties as important for on-going formation so that, in the Rule of 1871, they set the rhythm of missionary life. However, if they helped to maintain a certain fervour, they did not assure the quality of the apostolic work. Comboni saw that to reach an acceptable standard in missionary work a specific formation was necessary. This began in Verona, continued with introductory courses in Cairo and was continually updated by personal study.

In 1887, in his Report to cardinal Barnabo, we read that the two Institutes for Africa "have as their aim the formation, by means of a solid and regular education, of truly apostolic men and virtuous missionaries, so that after a novitiate of more than two years in Verona and three years in the houses in Egypt, they can consecrate themselves to the African missions" (S 2884). This "second novitiate" was "a initial school of practical knowledge for the missionaries of Africa" (S 2896), where they studied languages and local customs. They deepened points of catholic doctrine attentive to errors, prejudices and evil tendencies in the local people. They were introduced to a certain missionary method and so on. Given the demands of the missions, no knowledge was to be considered "useless" or "unworthy" (S 2726).

Comboni always maintained his commitment to study in general, and in particular to languages. He considered the capacity to learn languages so important as to make it a criterion in judging a vocation. Ability with languages is a priority and indicates a vocation in the candidates: "Whoever has a vocation will seek this, the most important thing after holiness and a good life. I urge this and I will always urge it" (S 6599). Comboni kept this resolution with numerous recommendations to his missionaries, but above all with his example. He knew several languages, and never ceased to read, keeping himself informed, analysing everything that concerned the history and methodology of the

missions, the nature, the traditions, the social conditions and the religious ideas of Africa, to avoid the mistakes of the past (*S* 2636) and to find better ways of evangelisation (*S* 2483).

In addition, when he was in Europe, Comboni never missed an opportunity to take part in study days and academic meetings which he saw not only as occasions of missionary animation but also as an opportunity to keep up to date. His commitment to writing reports and articles also kept him intellectually active. Likewise his subscription to a serious magazines such as "La Civiltà Cattolica". In February of 1881 he wrote to Fr. Sembianti, "Since Fr. Giulianelli never reads magazines, not even 'Civiltà Cattolica' nor 'Unità Cattolica' because he says it is not spiritual reading (?!), so send it directly to me at El-Obeid (Cordofan), the same with other newspapers which you usually send to Cairo, and also ask Fr. Bussinello for 'Verona Fidelis'" (*S* 6456).

Comboni's conversion was one of purification but also one of growth. It was a journey of holiness and humanity, never separate from a serious commitment to on-going learning.

PRAYER

Father,
we thank you
for giving your servant, Daniel Comboni
the awareness of his own limits,
the wisdom to use the ways of purification
offered him by the Church,
the humility to accept fraternal correction
and the strength to pardon those who made him suffer.
Help us, we pray,
to imitate him
so that we can be the kind of
holy and capable missionaries
that he dreamed of.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen

CONVERSION IN THE COMBONI MISSIONARY

Readings:

RL 47: Listening to the Word

RL 54: The Sacrament of Reconciliation

RL 82; 85: Growth throughout Life

Ratio 517-521: On-going formation and its objectives

CA 1991, 38: On-going formation

Conversion and mission

There is a profound link between conversion and mission. First of all because there cannot be missionary commitment which is not part of an real joyful experience of conversion. And also because conversion is the vital condition for receiving the Kingdom. "The time is ready - Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his public ministry - and the Kingdom of God is near, be converted and believe the Gospel" (*Mk* 1:14).

Characteristic in this regard is Paul, the apostle of the gentiles. It was the transforming event on the road to Damascus which thrust him into the work of evangelisation. That was the beginning of his powerful experience of passing from the old to the new man, from death to life in the Risen Christ. Paul often speaks passionately of his conversion (*Ga* 1:11-24), not only to authenticate his preaching ("he appeared also to me": *1 Co* 15:9), but also to attain the energy necessary for his difficult apostolate, and above all to remind himself that "the proclamation of the Word of God aims at christian conversion. That is at the full and sincere following of Christ and his Gospel through faith" (*RM* 46). "The conversion of Paul, therefore, coincides with his vocation as an apostle, the one is a logical consequence of the other. You cannot see Christ with your own eyes, discover him and experience him as the only sense of history, anticipated as the only means of salvation by the secret longings and hopes of the Moses and the prophets, without experiencing a deep desire to shout this discovery to all men, so that they too open 'their eyes' and be converted from 'darkness to light' (...). On the road to Damascus not only is a christian born, but so too is the greatest Apostle of all time".¹³

All this is valid for us. No one can evangelize in any great depth unless they appreciate the freedom that faith brings, releasing the energies of love and dedication. Anyone can make a contribution on the level of human development and social justice, but certainly not on the level of transforming hearts and minds. This is where hidden choices are made between love and hate, goodness or selfishness, exploitation or justice, adultery or fidelity, the devil or the Spirit. It is the Spirit who enables us "to observe and put into practice" the law of God (*Ez* 36:28) so as to become "a pleasing sacrifice" (*Rm* 15:16).

Peter's speech which began the Church's missionary era on the day of Pentecost, concludes with the words, "Be converted and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ" (*Ac* 2:37). Conversion is the door which admits to the Kingdom. It is a key-event for the understanding of mission, and it is an essential experience for becoming a missionary.

In 1972 Fr. Agostoni wrote, "Conversion is a complete and radical transformation of the life of a person or a people. It goes beyond a simple relationship with God. It involves relationships with others and with the cosmos. Its focal point consists in the new ability to 'have in Christ a personal relationship with the Father' (*AG* 13). Clearly it is impossible for a missionary to be teacher of this slow and progressive personal encounter, if he has not experienced it and if he does not continually live it. He will inevitably feel incapable of the service that is required of him".¹⁴

Conversion as a living dialogue

To be really christian, conversion must come about as the result of an encounter with God, which is begun by God and continued by God. Conversion, in other words, cannot be reduced to sadness about wrongdoing or psychological frustration when faced with one's own moral and human limits. "Is it possible for the Ethiopian to change his skin or the leopard its spot?" (*Jr* 13:23). Without divine intervention it is not possible to "search for Yahweh" (*Am* 12:23) and "fix the heart on him" (*1 Sm* 7:3).

A glance at the Miserere (*Ps* 51) can help us to understand conversion as a living dialogue.

Through the message of the prophet Nathan, God helps David to become aware of his evil conduct in regard to God and his neighbour. That is, he reveals the vertical and the horizontal dimension of sin. It is destructive in both a personal and communitarian way. Hence the confession of David,

"I recognise my fault, my sin is always before me" (v. 5).

¹³ CIPRIANI, S., *Le lettere di S. Paolo*, Cittadella Ed., 1968, p. 24.

¹⁴ AGOSTONI T. & other Missionary Superior Generals, *Circ. Lett.* (Easter 1972), "The prayer of missionaries", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 98, p. 17.

God does not stop at indignation against sin, which David now shares in his unhappiness over his own sin (v. 9). God moves towards a creative intervention, entirely his own, which is measured more by his deep paternal love than by the desire for renewal in David. Out of this comes the King's request,

*"Create in me, O God, a pure heart,
renew me with a steadfast spirit"* (v. 12).

The outcome of this divine intervention is immediately present in the joy of salvation at a personal and community level (v. 14) and in the restoring of Jerusalem (v. 20). This intervention profoundly changes the individual and makes the religious rituals pleasing to God,

"Then you will be pleased with the sacrifices, the burnt offerings and oblations" (v. 19).

The ritual, no matter how splendid, will be rejected by God if it does not come from a changed heart. As Isaiah says, "This people (...) honours me with their lips whilst their heart is far from me" (29:13). Only a straight dialogue of co-operation between God and the sinner, be it David or the prodigal, assures that the dynamic of conversion - a truly human-divine happening - will achieve its end. That is, the renewal of the covenant between God and man, who is changed from enemy into friend. Thus Paul calls the whole process of conversion "reconciliation" (cf. *Ep* 1:10, 2:14-16; *Col* 1:19).

The Rule of Life

With the editorial of the *MCCJ Bulletin* 128 (June 1980), the General Council presented the Rule of Life as a fundamental document "to unite the Institute, deepen our identity and define our missionary method". The General Council spoke explicitly about "conversion". In their Christmas message the year before they wrote, "Recognition by the Church assures us that the Rule of Life comes from God as a gift and an indispensable means of strengthening our consecration to him, our community life and our missionary zeal".¹⁵ Here it adds that the lengthy period of community discernment is over, the period of 'if' and of 'but', "we are entering a new era of conversion", that is of "change, reform, restructuring and improving our way of life and apostolic work (...). 'Conversion' demands courage and humility in allowing ourselves to be educated, influenced and measured by this document which indicates the will of God for us (...). This courage is not the fruit of human wisdom and effort. It is the result of the defeat of individualism and selfishness by the Spirit of the One who came, not to do his own will, but the will of the one who sent him (*Jn* 8:28-29)".¹⁶

The comboni missionary's way to conversion is, therefore, that of the Rule of Life, which is full of helps and suggestions "with which to live, according to our charism, the consecration to God for the missions".¹⁷ When taken seriously the Rule of Life offers a means of continual conversion "in a life-long growth process" (*RL* 85).

In this context particular attention should be given to what the Rule of Life says with regard to the following: listening to the Word (47), the signs of the times and discernment (16, 33), fraternal correction (38.5), rotation (34:4), difficulties and demands of apostolic work (4.2, 58), and periods of rest (42.1). From all these passages which help and favour conversion, a few words on the Sacrament of reconciliation, spiritual direction, the daily examination of conscience and study.

¹⁵ CALVIA S. & Council, "Christmas Message 1979", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 127, p. 2.

¹⁶ CALVIA S. & Council, *Circ. Lett.* "The Rule of Life", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 128, p. 2.

¹⁷ PIERLI F. & Council, Letter of presentation of the Rule of Life, in *RL*, p. 15.

The sacrament of reconciliation

Our awareness of the reality of our own sin, of our lack of freedom, of the need to release our positive energies to be able to take part in the new life of the Resurrection encourages us towards the sacrament of reconciliation.

Since "God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ not blaming men for their faults" (2 Co 5:19), the sacrament of reconciliation is first of all a divine intervention directed towards freeing us from the "wound of sin" (1 Co 15:56) with the same power that was applied to Christ as he lay victim for sin in the tomb. In this sacrament, the lethal germ that afflicts us, corrupts us and carries us towards the "second death" (Rv 2:11) is destroyed by God, so that where sin once abounded, grace abounds still more (cf. Rm 5:20).

The celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is a clear call to God to come and set us free, to convert us and renews us continually. Without this liberating and transforming intervention by God, we cannot be authentic missionaries. The Rule of Life says, "The daily experience of personal frailty tends to diminish missionary charity and gives rise to the need for continual conversion to the Lord. This will for conversion finds its fullest expression in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in which the missionary experiences the Father's merciful love, is reconciled with the Church and with his brothers, and gains strength to resume his journey of faith" (RL 54).

In the sacrament of reconciliation we appeal not only to God but also to our brothers so that they pray for and with us. In fact the priest, as well as representing God, represents the Church. He brings to the penitent prayers for conversion and renewal which the christian community makes every day, in particular in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours.

So that this reality of the Church can appear more clearly it is important to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation in a community way. "Such a celebration helps to stress the consequences of sin for the whole community and is an expression of common conversion" (RL 54.1).

On the occasion of the Holy Year of the Redemption, the General Council summarised what has been said so far: "The Rule of Life (53) reminds us of our experience of our frailty which through sins, omissions and shortcomings, weakens our covenant with God and threatens the seed of reconciliation sown in us at baptism. Hence it is necessary to celebrate the sacrament of Penance frequently so as to co-operate in a willing and joyful way with the action of the Father. This work of God frees us as a community from attitudes, feelings and actions which prevent us from living reconciled to him and the people (RL 53.2). It is necessary to underline that community life, sign of our union with Christ and necessary for an effective apostolate (Jn 17:20-21), is impossible without continual mutual forgiveness, without a constant renewal of personal relationships which are damaged by everyday life. A word of warm appreciation goes to those communities which have found a place for a community celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation (RL 53.1)".¹⁸

Because it is part of a process of growth it is important that the sacrament of reconciliation is celebrated with a certain rhythm, which keeps alive a sense of sin and the desire for continual conversion. Before 1969 this rhythm was specified: confession must be weekly. Correctly the present Rule of Life leaves greater freedom. But this does not mean it is less important, especially since the frequency of confession has greatly declined not only among the laity but also among priests and religious. Indeed, sometimes the laity complain about the priests' unwillingness to hear confessions. Experience teaches that someone who goes only rarely to confession comes to a point where they no longer understand the role of the sacrament and abandon it altogether. Because of this the Rule of Life

¹⁸ CALVIA S. & Council, "Reconciliation: experience and ministry", in *MCCJ Bulletin*, 141, p. 1.

states the comboni missionary "makes frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation according to personal need, bearing in mind the directives of the Church" (*RL* 54.2). Now the directives of the Church, taken in the widest sense, speak of a rhythm which is "regular and convenient" which we could define as between fortnightly and monthly. Any less frequent rhythm would not continue the process of conversion, and confession would become an occasional thing without any point of reference in life. We know that the saints went to confession frequently so as to deepen their co-operation with God's reviving work, without which we cannot grow in the "life according to the Spirit" (*Rm* 8:3-13).

In 1945 Fr. Vignato, who was rich in spiritual experience, gave an instruction that all the confreres should be given a sheet of paper, signed by the confessor, which would serve as "evidence of the weekly confession". This would be presented to the major superior on the occasion of his visit to the community! Such an idea has no sense today, but the underlying motivation is still valid. Fr. Vignato wrote, "Take it as a help to preserve you from fallen human nature which tends to be look-warm. Often the first step towards this coolness and confusion of soul is to stop giving an account of one's conscience, so much recommended by holy spiritual directors and by our Rule. But the second step, almost always a consequence of the first, is to omit confession, which must be weekly at least. Long experience has persuaded me that the directive will be useful to many and necessary to those who less reflective so as to avoid worse evils".¹⁹

Spiritual Direction

Another important help to permanent conversion is spiritual direction. The Rule of Life says, "Spiritual direction is a means that should not be neglected in the missionary's journey of conversion and in his growth in Christ. By spiritual guidance he is enlightened to discern the Lord's will, in his regard, and encouraged in moments of discouragement and difficulty" (*RL* 54.3).

Quite often the nature and aim of spiritual direction is not understood so the description which the *Ratio* uses is helpful: "Spiritual direction is characterised by openness of heart and conscience with another person as a verification of the journey according to the Spirit and to receive light to follow this journey. The main aim of spiritual direction is the person's relationship with God through prayer, feelings, the discernment of spirits and self-control. Frequent and sound spiritual direction is essential for a person's interior growth and indispensable if one is to make life commitments, such the perpetual vows or ordination, with peace of mind, and grow in faith and self-control throughout life" (226).

Experience derived from the rather large numbers of those leaving the active ministry in the Church shows generally that someone who uses spiritual direction has a better chance of recovery in the worst moments of crisis or mistake because there is help to find the positive meaning of the event. On the other hand, someone walking alone, who is not helped by spiritual direction, will find it difficult to discern between one spirit and another, between that which comes from God or from the devil, from the pagan culture around us and from one's own wayward instincts. It is easy to lose the way.

In 1948 Fr. Todesco published the "Practical norms for Spiritual Fathers" and reminded them of "their serious responsibility". Seven years later, in a second letter on the subject, he wrote recommending "the living and practical concern to give our religious family the spirit of religion which we inherited from our predecessors".²⁰ This illustrates how the Institute has always been concerned to make available to its members those spiritual guides who can offer the gospel values and stimulate a

¹⁹ VIGNATO A., *Circ. Lett.* (1.3.1945), in *MCCJ Bulletin*, Dec. 1945, p. 319.

²⁰ TODESCO A., *Circ. Lett.* (10.1955), in *MCCJ Bulletin*, 45, p. 990.

process of growth. But if it is important to make people available for this work, the desire to profit from spiritual direction is also important, in the conviction that the kind of daily discernment that ensures fidelity to the Spirit demands spiritual direction. Without this help we enter into deep confusion, growth is blocked and we find ourselves in an arid and mediocre routine.

Examination of Conscience

The Rule of Life says, "The missionary examines his conscience every day" (54.2). The Liturgy of Compline recommends it before the opening hymn: "At this point, it is helpful to have a short silence for the examination of conscience". Usually, however, the pause is very short, as at the beginning of Mass. This is not what is intended! At the end of the day the examination of conscience should last about five minutes and cover the following points:

(a) how did I sense the presence and action of God during the day. This exercise helps to develop a spirit of contemplation, to discover God in one's own history and elsewhere.

(b) a growing awareness of the motivations and feelings that lay underneath what was done or not done, such as the glory of God and fraternal love, or selfishness, personal interests, envy, fear. With regard to this important exercise of discernment John says, "Dearest friends, do not believe every inspiration, but test it, to know if it really comes from God" (*1 Jn* 4:1). In the turmoil of everyday life we risk losing contact with ourselves and the deep roots of our actions without this daily growth in awareness. We risk destroying the quality of our actions and life.

(c) We give thanks and praise to God for the day, and ask pardon to renew our resolution to stay in communion with him and in the service of others.

Study

Another important help to conversion is study, which the Rule of Life links directly to evangelisation (57.1,3), missionary animation and with on-going formation (99-101), which is the responsibility of everyone. "The individual missionary, who is the first to experience the need for on-going formation, has the primary obligation to take the initiative. He makes time for a programme of study and reading suitable for his spiritual growth and his personal and professional development" (*RL* 100.1).

As a comment on this important directive passage, I recall what I wrote in the Letter for the Centenary of our first religious professions where, among the practical initiatives to recover and live out our charism, there is also the "revaluation of study":

"Without time for reflection and study our work can become activism, that is commitment without planning, activity without method.

"This causes great harm: it halts on-going formation, reduces our critical ability to understand the events around us, making us unable to read the signs of the times.

"Study is also a way of interiorising values, of eliciting new motives and of deepening attitudes. Without study we remain anchored in the theology of the past, out of step with developments in the magisterium such as Vatican II. And this is a time when laity and religious are becoming more educated in theology.

"In the Church religious have always been leaders in developing theology and spirituality among pastoral workers. Comboni came from the intellectual formation of the Mazza Institute which was characterised by seriousness and openness which enabled him to be at home in many different contexts".²¹

²¹ PIERLI F., *Circ. Lett.* (26.6.1978) in *MCCJ Bulletin*, 156, pp. 13-14.

The need for holiness in the missions

In concluding this chapter, I want to emphasise how our conversion depends on the acceptance, in faith, of the inevitable events of history, such as health or sickness, age, the people with whom we live, the changes of position or job, which at times disrupt our habits and security. Seeing the unpredictability of history from the point of faith, and accepting it with hope is the best means of our conversion to a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts (cf. *Is* 55:8-9).

The missionary encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* makes clear the link between "the universal vocation to holiness" and the "universal vocation to mission":

"Missionary activity demands a certain spirituality with regard to those whom God has called to be missionaries. Such spirituality is expressed, above all in living fully docile to the Spirit. It prompts us to allow ourselves to be moulded by him so as to become more like Christ. We cannot give witness to Christ without reflecting his image which is brought to life in us by the work of the Spirit" (*RM* 87).

"The call to mission comes from the call to sanctity. Every missionary is genuine only if he lives a life of holiness. Without holiness the Church's mission of salvation cannot be accomplished" (*RM* 90).

"For their part, missionaries reflect on the duty to be holy, which the gift of vocation requires of them. Day by day, they renew their spirit as well as their doctrinal and pastoral knowledge" (*RM* 91).

PRAYER

Father, you call us
to the life of the perfect man
so that we come to full maturity in Christ,
never let us be content with the level arrived at.
Give us the desire to use the means of conversion
which the Church and the Institute recommend and offer us.
Let us not be mere tools
but also signs of that conversion to the Gospel
which we preach to others.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ADDITIONAL READINGS:

- 1) AGOSTONI T., & Missionary General Superiors, *Circ. Lett.* (Easter 1972), "The prayer of missionaries", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 98.
- 2) AGOSTONI T., & Council, "Invitation to Conversion", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 107, pp. 17-24.
- 3) CALVIA S., & Council, "Reconciliation: experience and ministry", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 141, p.1.
- 4) *Ratio*, nn. 517-546, "On-Going Formation".
- 5) JOHN-PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliation and Penance*, Dec. 1984, nn. 14-18, "The Mystery of Sin".

Chapter IV

COMMUNION

Since the first days of Christianity the community of believers has itself been a significant missionary event, revealing the God's presence as the Father who calls, the Son who reconciles and the Holy Spirit who reunites.

In Acts (2:42-48; 4:32-35), Luke connects the common life, which characterised the early community, with the "good-will of all the people" and the conversions that happened "every day". According to Luke, the fact that the first christians were of "one hear and one mind", praying together and sharing everything, awoke in the people a great admiration and desire for conversion through "joining the community".

Vatican II, in rediscovering the idea of Church as community, underlined the missionary effectiveness of common life in the Lord. The Church is a sign and means of unity for all peoples precisely because it possesses community. "So it is that this messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and may more than once look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a fellowship of life, charity and truth, it is also used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth" (LG 9).

Behold how good and how pleasant that brothers dwell together!

The Lord gives them blessings and life for ever (Ps 133:1,3).

THE COMMUNITY OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Mk 3:13-18: The call of the Twelve

Jn 17:20-26: The Prayer of Jesus

He called Twelve

Christ was sent to "unite the scattered children of God" (*Jn 11:52*). With these words, put in the mouth of Caiaphas (and referring to Ezechiel, ch. 34), John outlines the Good Shepherd's difficult mission to make of humanity "one flock" (*Jn 10:16*). This difficult mission begins first of all with the Twelve, whom Jesus had chosen "to be with him" (*Mk 3:13*). The Twelve were not in any way united, neither with the Master nor among themselves. The Upper Room, as a place of community to which three thousand people were attracted in one day (*Ac 2:41*), was the fruit of Pentecost, and a far cry from the early reality, marked as it was by division and conflict, and a constant challenge for Christ.

The first obstacle that Jesus met in trying to build unity among the Twelve was their difficulty in understanding his mission. At different times, with reference to a miracle, or a saying, or a parable of Jesus, the evangelists conclude by saying that the disciples "were astonished and had not understood anything". These words, referring to the multiplication of loaves (*Mk 6:51*), return with new shades of

meaning when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman (*Jn* 4:27), at the end of the discourse on "the leaven of the Pharisees" (*Mk* 8:17-18) and elsewhere. After telling the parable of the Sower and seeing the confusion among his disciples, Jesus says with a sigh, "If you can't understand this parable, how will you be able to understand the others?" (*Mk* 4:13).

Above all it is in the context of speaking about the passion that the incomprehension of the Twelve appears in all its crudity. At the end of the third prophecy, Luke notes: "But they make nothing of this. What he said was quite obscure to them, they had no idea what it meant" (*Lk* 18:34). Because of this they tried to dissuade him from going up to Jerusalem. Then one betrays him. Another denies him and the rest abandon him to his fate.

During his life Jesus never enjoyed great community; he sought always to build it. The Mark's phrase "he 'made' them Twelve" indicates Jesus' desire to unite the Apostles as the symbol of Ancient Israel. However, just as ancient Israel was never a real, stable union of the Twelve tribes, neither was the group of the apostles. Tensions were the order of the day. Their strong, different characters contributed this. We think of Peter with his impulsiveness (*Mt* 16:22; *Jn* 18:10), of James and John, the "sons of thunder" (*Mk* 3:17) who wanted to cast down fire on the Samaritans who refused to welcome Jesus (*Lk* 9:54), of Simon the Zealot, who wanted to resolve everything immediately with violence. Again we recall the sons of Zebedee, who were ambitious and determined to have the first places, to the extent of using their mother to speak for them. This roused the anger of the others who were equally determined to be first (*Mt* 20:20-24). The discourse in which Jesus invited them to distance themselves from the "leaders of the nations" and instead to seek to serve, is spoken with regard to the spirit of competition among the Twelve, more than because he was already close to the passion (*Lk* 22:24-27).

Those whom you have given me

Before choosing the Twelve, Christ went up a mountain and spent the night in prayer, in dialogue with the Father (*Lk* 6:12). He prayed at this time to ask for light. Jesus had to choose from his disciples those whom his Father had already chosen as apostles; those Jesus would later describe as "the ones you have given me" (*Jn* 17:24; 18:9). Jesus also asked the strength to make the Father's choice his own so as to welcome with generosity those entrusted to him. It was in his acceptance of the Father's choice that Jesus' "yes" to the Twelve acquired its value. It was a choice that he had to make repeatedly his own, after every difficulty and disagreement, after every moment of incomprehension and disappointment, including his acceptance of Judas, already on the road of betrayal.

From the beginning the choice of Matthew must have puzzled Jesus and his "fishermen" with their provincial mentality. His earlier collaboration with the Romans as a tax-collector could not be easily forgotten. He was always there to evoke from people that contempt reserved for 'public sinners'. A real challenge for Jesus! But the case of Judas is clearly the most symbolic for understanding the community of the Good Shepherd. Judas was a permanent source of tension between the Master and his disciples. How are we to understand Judas? It was always very clear the Judas did not share Jesus' work. Did not believe in what he said. Being responsible for the money of the group he only followed his own interests "because he was a thief" (*Jn* 12:6). We can imagine the heated discussions. On the one hand there were his companions who wanted to get rid of him, on the other hand Jesus who did not want to lose him but wanted to protect him and help him (*Jn* 17:12) give him another chance because "the Lord is patient with you; not wanting anyone to be lost, but allowing everyone time to repent" (2 *Pt* 3:10).

Jesus' attitude towards Peter can only be understood in the light of this growth in acceptance of "those you have given me". Jesus appoints him head of the Twelve only after the Father has given a sign: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jona because it is not flesh and blood that has revealed this to you,

but my Father who is in heaven" (*Mt* 16:17). Later, faced with Peter's arrogant profession of loyalty, Jesus limits himself to saying, "I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail you. And once you have recovered, you must strengthen your brothers" (*Lk* 22:32).

Jesus' acceptance of his disciples was not based on their merits, but on the will of the Father: "you gave them to me and I welcomed them". This is the foundation on which he builds his community.

New covenant in blood

All the Twelve were an example of the divided and lost sheep that the Good Shepherd came to unite. At the Last Supper Jesus had no illusions, only divine intervention could create unity among his followers. Hence his conclusion: "It is good for you that I go" (*Jn* 16:7), otherwise the Holy Spirit would not come and the apostles would be left incapable of reaping and living the distinctive characteristic of the new covenant, the "new commandment" to love one-another as he had loved them (*Jn* 13:34). Thus Jesus made his long and moving priestly prayer, in which the last part is a grieving invocation for the coming of the Holy Spirit to establish the trinitarian community in the group of the disciples so that "the love with which you love me may be in them, and I may be in them" (*Jn* 17:26).

In this priestly prayer, which together with the Our Father is a summary of all his prayer, Jesus clearly shows us his community spirit, not only because he prays for the unity of his followers but because he says to the Father: you gave them to me and I accept them. I love them even if in a short time they will deny me and abandon me. Real community is always referred back to the Father. The 'others' become 'brethren' who are loved and of whom we are not ashamed (*Heb* 2:11) because we understand that they belong to the Father who desires to unite us, even at cost to ourselves. Because of this Jesus seals his repeated attempts to form a community with the mystical celebration of his death, which is the celebration of the new covenant in his blood (*Mt* 26:28), the covenant between the Father and humanity. It is also the covenant between human being themselves, represented here by the Twelve. In his hymn to Christ in the letter to the Colossians, Paul affirms that "it pleased God to place every fullness in (Christ) and through him to reconcile to himself all things, making peace by his blood on the cross; peace between heaven and earth through him" (*Col* 1:19-20). Thus enemies come to share the same blood, members of the same body and people.

Reflection and gift of the Triune God

The unity among his disciples for which the Good Shepherd prayed and sacrificed himself, can be understood only in reference to the trinitarian life, of which it is the reflection and gift. Jesus prayed: "As you Father are in me and I in you, so may they be one in us" (*Jn* 17:21).

For Jesus, this unity is possible only in the joyful discovery of the love with which the Father loves the Son and gathers together the disciples with all their eccentricities and limits into the same love. In the experience of this marvellous and mysterious welcome, we find the model to imitate and the strength to accept the others, entering into a wonderful circle of love. "Whoever accepts you accepts me, and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me" (*Mt* 10:40). Thus community becomes the high point of the experience of God, the sharing of the same life, the meeting of the first and second commandments. "My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. (...) God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God and God lives in him" (*1 Jn* 4:7,16).

As John says, "love comes from God". Unity cannot be other than a divine gift, a gift so beyond our capacity to make the mission of Jesus believable. "May they be one (...) so that the world may believe that it was you that sent me" (*Jn* 17:21). "By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (*Jn* 13:35). Jesus knew that the future of his Church would depend on unity as the sign and instrument of a more loving world. Without unity there is nothing. What meaning has Christ? What meaning has the Church?

Here we note the strong, clear words of John: "This distinguishes the children of God from the children of the Devil, whoever does not practise justice is not of God, neither is the one who does not love. Because this is the message that you have heard from the beginning: that you should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who was evil and killed his brother. (...) We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Who does not love remains in death. Whoever hates his own brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. We know what love is from the one who gave his life for us. Therefore we too should give our lives for one another" (*1 Jn* 3:10-12a, 14-16).

The ability to live as "children of God", seeing one-another as children of the same Father, comes from the Holy Spirit: "The fact that you are children is proved by God sending into our hearts the Spirit of the Son which calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (*Ga* 4,6). It is the Spirit of the Son that helps us to discover in God a loving Father, and to see others with the eyes of the Father as his children and therefore our brethren (cf. *Ep* 4:1-6). This double discovery sets in motion the dynamic of a very concrete faith, from the Father to the brethren, from the brethren to the Father. The cry 'Father' produces love in us, and love makes us cry together, 'Father'. It is in solidarity, in generosity and in sharing that we discover and experience the meaning and value of divine fatherhood and vice-versa. We can think of the example of Francis of Assisi who, on the day that he embraced the leper, made a real leap forward in his relationship with the Father.

Total sharing

Sharing is an essential, fascinating and demanding aspect of the community of the Upper Room, which arises from the life of the Trinity and returns there in a circle of faith. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Remain in my love" (*Jn* 15:9). To stay in the love of Jesus means "keep my commandments" (v. 10). That is, act according to his vision of life, take on his ways of thinking. Among these is a total sharing, pushed to the limits of the impossible. With his followers, Jesus shares everything, his knowledge, his house and his glory, "so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full" (v. 11).

He shares his knowledge: "I do not call you servants, because the servant does not know what his master is doing. I call you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (v. 15). Jesus shares his state of life with his followers. Between him and his disciples there are no more secrets.

His dwelling and his glory: "Father, I want that those you have given me be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me" (v. 24). Shortly before he had said, "I go to prepare a place for you (...), so that you can also be where I am" (*Jn* 14:3). This is the summit! Jesus dreams of paradise together with these individuals who were complete pains in the neck with their petulance and short-sightedness. They tested him more than once, and now they were ready to betray him! This is the faith that produces community, which catches sight in the other of a great capacity for love, of which they are unaware but which is there and can grow and bear fruit.

Just as the Father shares everything with his Son, Jesus shares everything with his followers. A deeper sharing cannot be thought of. John was certainly thinking of Christ when he wrote, "If someone who is rich sees his brother in need and closes his own heart, the love of God does not dwell in him. My children, we do not love with words or language, but with deeds and in truth" (*1 Jn* 3:17-18).

The water of forgiveness.

The five chapters in which John describes the Last Supper open with a remarkable gesture, the washing of the feet. In the Upper Room there is a mood of tension. The Devil has already put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus (*Jn* 13:2), and once again Peter does not understand the Master's actions: "Lord, do not wash my feet!". Jesus says in reply, "If I do not wash you, you cannot have any part of me". And then the conclusion: "If I your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you too should wash the feet of one-another" (*Jn* 8:14).

What is this water that Jesus pours in the basin to wash his disciples' feet? It is the water that will flow from his pierced side, the water of purification, the Holy Spirit who heals and revives.

The first and the last aspect of the community of the Upper Room is mutual pardon. It the pardon that Christ gives to his slow and unfaithful followers, and which the disciples in their turn must take as their own normal way of being with one-another. Without pardon - which consists essentially in kneeling in front of the offender to wash his feet, to take away the dirt which has poisoned our lives - there is no possibility of forgiveness.

Peter asked: "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother if he sins against me? Seven times?". Jesus replied, "Not seven times but seventy times seven times" (*Mt* 18:21-22). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus insisted on this new teaching: "You have heard how it was said, 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy', but I tell you love your enemies and pray for your persecutors so that you can be children of your heavenly Father, who makes his sun to rise on good and bad alike, and makes the rain fall of the just and the unjust. In fact, if you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don't the Publicans do the same?" (*Mt* 5:43-46). It is inevitable that we will offend one-another, that we do evil. Sin sometimes makes us crucify one-another. We become like the centurion who is ready with his lance to wound and make a someone's heart bleed. To live together in love we need continually to repeat the gesture of Christ: wash and let our feet be washed, say and let others say, "Father, forgive" (*Lk* 23:34), to lead one another to the shores of the lake to asked and be asked, "Do you love me?" (*Jn* 21:15).

John's gospel closes with the appearance of Jesus on the shores of the sea of Galilee. Here Jesus 'renews' Peter through forgiveness that is total. First he restores to him the role of fisherman, "Cast your nets out to the right" (*Jn* 21:6). Then Jesus restores him to duty he had earlier given him saying, "Feed my sheep" (*Jn* 21:6), and calls him again saying, "Follow me" (*Jn* 21:19). Peter's bitter tears were empty without Jesus' forgiveness (*Mt* 26:75). Certainly his tears could not build the community. It is only in forgiveness, given freely in love and against common sense, that community among sinners can grow and prosper.

Jesus' community of disciples is the model and inspiration of every community because it is born from the heart of the Good Shepherd, who has offered and shown love without limits.

PRAYER

Father,
you gave Christ your Son
the patience and tenacity to transform
the divided and quarrelsome group of the Twelve
into a community of love,
a sign of your new people.

We pray,
grant also to us
the patience and tenacity of the Good Shepherd,
so that we never lack in commitment
to building community in the Church
and in the Comboni Missionaries.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE COMMUNITY OF DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 2507-2510: Different members

S 4264-4366: Consistent groups

S 5564: Community life

Vae soli! (Woe to the one who is alone!)

Like many founders of missionary institutes in the last century, Comboni strongly insisted on the need for community life among his workers and on the need for community structures to discourage isolated and fruitless initiatives. In studying the history of Europe he had already seen how it was evangelised mainly by the great benedictine abbeys, from which missionaries would go out and to which they would return. This system provided continuity and coherence in the missionary activity and had produced very positive results.

Guided by his own experience and influenced by the benedictine model and by other founders such as Lavigerie, Comboni chose to bring the gospel to Africa through communities of a certain numerical consistency. Thus in his General Report to Cardinal Franchi in 1876 we read, "the male personnel of every mission station is sufficient when there are three priests and two brothers" (*S* 4165).

In defending this structure Comboni did not hesitate to disagree with the Camillian fathers, in particular Fr. Carcereri who thought it better "to multiply missions, build huts and put one priest and one brother in each" (*S* 4241). There is an irony in the fact that Comboni, who was not a member of a religious community, found it necessary to defend community life against someone who had chosen it as a way of life. This irony appears even greater if we consider that the quarrel with the Camillians was one of the reasons which held up the beatification of Comboni. Defending community life as a positive part of the missionary method of evangelisation caused problems for Comboni not only on earth but also in heaven!

What were Comboni's reasons for defending his "missionary system" which had been "approved" (cf. *S* 4364) by the Holy See? In an addition to the report of 1876 we read, "Carcereri's plans was not acceptable to me for several reasons: 1) such a plan would never provide permanent Missions because buildings, would have to be reconstructed every year after the rains, and one priest in a hut is not enough to have any effect; 2) the missions, being at a distance of twenty days travel from one-another, would be too disconnected, and with only one priest in each they would not be able to help one-another; 3) there would be no protection against all the physical and moral difficulties of such isolated places" (*S* 4241).

Comboni had two main reasons for wanting communities of missionaries: efficiency in the apostolate required stability and the influence of the community on the people; the physical, moral and spiritual needs of missionaries working in areas where there was sickness, poor communications and difficulties of every kind.

Comboni returns to these two important reasons in the Reply to Carcereri's arguments (cf. *S* 4364-4366) which Comboni sent to Cardinal Franci in 1876. Earlier in 1866 he had written to Cardinal Barnabo, "I will never approve a system which leaves one missionary (...) in a remote and dangerous place" (*S* 1317). But he was already convinced of this in 1873 when, shortly after his appointment as Provicar Apostolic (May 1872), the Franciscans handed over the mission of Khartoum in "a miserable state". This had been caused by "exhaustion of spirit, into which the Gospel worker falls imperceptibly, no matter how well prepared and disposed, when he remains alone and isolated, far from the supervision of the Bishop, in very difficult surroundings. If I did not know the sad experience your Eminence already had in other missions of the 'vae soli', I would suggest with great concern that a mission station never be left with only one or two missionaries in it" (*S* 3188-3189).

"Considering how few were Comboni's helpers for the immense work, his faithfulness to this principle shows how convinced he was. At the time of his death the five comboni communities had the numerical consistency required by the founder".²² That is: Verona 15; Cairo 6; in each of the missions of El Obeid, Khartoum and Delen there were two priests and several brothers.

With this in mind we can consider some fundamental points of the type of community wanted by Comboni.

Unity in diversity

In his relationships with the people around him, Comboni repeated the difficulty that Jesus had with the Twelve. He hints at this himself in his Report to the Society of Cologne in June 1871. Here he gives a full description of the situation of his missionaries, the atmosphere in the group and the work they were doing, "I did not waste time even to think about my difficult position in relation to the members of the Institute. There were religious priests whose way of life was different from the secular priests. Then there were French, Italian and Lebanese sisters, African girls ransomed by various benefactors and educated in different institutes with different ways. These were all very diverse individuals whom I, first of all, had to help to live in perfect harmony, and then unite them in a common purpose under the same banner" (*S* 2507-2508; cf. also *S* 2222).

The diversity in the personnel of the apostolic vicariate of Central Africa was certainly impressive. Comboni was prepared to accept everyone, without thinking too much about the consequences. Thus he was working with diocesan priests, with members of religious institutes and with lay-people of different nationalities from very different formative backgrounds. Even though all were very motivated in the service of Africa, the differences were so strong as to make living together almost impossible. Even when from time to time someone went away voluntarily or others were asked to leave, the tensions among those who stayed were inevitable.

The expression "diverse elements" hides the very sad experience of Comboni's patient work as founder and leader trying to keep the group united. The results were not always satisfying. Without a doubt, Comboni did succeed in creating a certain "unity of purpose under the same banner" and certainly it came about after his death. Despite the destruction caused by the Mahdi's revolt, the difficulties because of health and distances, his missionaries remained united and continued his work. What was it that held them together? "We are all motivated by a common ideal, by one burning flame: to sacrifice our lives for God, for the love of his church and for unhappy Africa. And, most illustrious friends of the noble Society of Cologne, we are ready to suffer martyrdom for the faith! Yes we are ready to die for this" (*S* 2510).

²² MARTINS DO VALE J. A., *La comunità comboniana alla luce della Regola di Vita*, lic. thesis (Claretianum), Rome 1984, p. 142.

Cenacle of Apostles

In Rule of 1871 Comboni describes his Institute as "a small cenacle of apostles": "The aim of this Institute is not strictly connected with the office of priesthood. It is the fulfilling of Christ's command to his disciples to preach the gospel to all the nations. It is the continuation of the ministry of the apostles (...). This Institute, then, becomes a small cenacle of apostles for Africa, a point of light that sends out to the heart of Africa as many rays as are the zealous and upright missionaries who set out from its centre. And these rays, shining together and warming, reveal the nature of the Centre from which they emanate. The Institute is consecrated to the most sacred heart of Jesus (...)" (S 2647-2649).

There is also a reference to the cenacle in the Report to Cardinal Franchi in 1876, "All this was done after leaving for ever the old, private Mazza Institute which was already sterile, with the intention of founding a new Institute for the Missions of Africa, a new Cenacle of apostles for Africa" (S 4088).

It is worth taking note of the words Comboni uses because they have a particular depth. We have seen how the Cenacle represented the height of the Apostles' formation in community. All the mysticism, the spiritual theology and the practice of the community of the Twelve we find them in the cenacle, summarised in chapters 13-17 of John's gospel. The fact that Comboni referred to the cenacle as a concrete 'place' and as a 'fact' of history, indicates his intention to continue the work of "the ministry of the apostles", with all the limits ("small") and changes ("new") that people and times bring. In other words, Comboni did not view his group from a mere social point of view, but from a theological one.

This theological view is confirmed by his consecrating the Institute to the heart of Jesus and in the relationship he had with his followers through the heart of Jesus. Writing in 1879 to Fr. Sembianti, Rector in Verona, Comboni says, "May the heart of Jesus always be the centre of communication between me and you. So that by being united, we can do our best in the interests of his glory and of beloved, unhappy Africa" (S 5869).

Comboni's relationship with his followers in one that is mediated by the heart of Christ, the same relationship that appears in the priestly prayer of the Lord. For him basic motives of community are supernatural, not human, even if these are important and to be valued. We know that Fr. Sembianti was virtuous and loyal, a valued helper. But we also know that he had no experience of the missions. Verona was his world. Consequently, he often did not understand Comboni's vision or his choices. Comboni had a big heart, the courage of a lion and looked ever forward; Fr. Sembianti was afraid when faced with any small difficulty, and continually wrote letters to Comboni. Comboni was grateful to him, supported and encouraged him, but he also felt the burden of this kind of help. However, the communion between them was never reduced. It was centered in the heart of Christ which enabled the two of them to work together and deal with the needs of Africa for the glory of God.

It can be said, without fear of lying, that the fraternal communion, which characterises our Institute and which is traditionally linked to the devotion to the Sacred Heart, comes from the experience and intuition of Comboni.

Study the person with great care

There cannot be communion without giving a great deal of attention to the individual members. Comboni knew this. In 1871 he wrote to the Society of Cologne, "with great care I studied the character, the gifts and the attitudes of each, so as to guide each one, and make the best use of him to benefit the growth and prosperity of our great enterprise" (S 2508).

Here the attention to the individuals seems to be concerned with the efficiency of the apostolate rather than community, but we know that for Comboni they were closely linked. Writing about this to local superiors in the document just quoted, Comboni says, "On all these points everyone, priest or lay-person, should act in perfect agreement with the will of the Superiors. These, in turn, will act towards the others like a father or a brother. They will try willingly to support them in their efforts and to meet their just requests. And they will help them by dividing the various offices noting what each one would like to do and what they are capable of" (S 2495; cf. also S 1861).

"Everyone lives in a community" (S 2497). But each one has his own talents, which have to be kept in mind for the good of the person and the missions. No one can do everything. "My dear Fr. Francis, (...) it seems to me that there is discontent in Cairo. So try to treat everyone well and with gentleness. If it is not possible to obtain the highest level of perfection, let us be content with what is possible, even if it is just the first level. Then when I come I will try, as far as possible, to do the divine will. For the time being be meek" (S 6111). Community is not bringing everyone down to the same level. It demands respect for individuals, and in the final analysis, respect for God himself who is the source of everyone's gifts and possibilities.

Because of this, the Rule of 1871 established that the Superiors of the missions in Africa should keep Verona informed not only of the conduct but also of the "hopes" of each missionary (S 2674). In his correspondence with direct helpers Comboni always keeps in mind the "hopes" which they have. He never has difficulty finding the right words to appreciate them, encourage them and give them confidence. In 1880 Comboni writes to Fr. Francis Giulianelli who is unhappy in his new position of bursar in Cairo, "I have received all your letters. It seems to me that the infinite goodness of God is helping you to carry out your duties. And I am very happy with that" (S 5976).

The *Positio* summarises the community spirit of Comboni: "Those who lived in daily contact with the Servant of God bear witness to the spirit with which he met and resolved apostolic difficulties; always as a loving father who knew how to love and sympathise. When he was overcome with tiredness he would encourage the others with words and by his example to put up with the privations. He always found new words of comfort. He was continually concerned with their health, but above all he prayed and was concerned to preserve them in their vocation" (p. VI).

Forgiving all

In 1868 Comboni wrote to Bishop Canossa of Verona to defend his missionaries against the accusations of Fr. Zanoni. Comboni admits, "My Lord, I am quick to canonise others" (S 1668). This admission is important in trying to grasp the great capacity for understanding and forgiveness which characterised the life of Comboni and which made community possible among his helpers.

Understanding and forgiveness are essential virtues for brotherhood in the Lord and for teamwork in the apostolate. Comboni practised both of these with great magnanimity. The clarity with which he saw the limits and also the sins of his helpers was tempered from the beginning by a profound charity which gave him the strength to excuse, to forget and to begin again with renewed faith and hope, seeing everything as the will of God. Eight months before he died, referring to the problems brought on him by Fr. Losi, Comboni wrote to Fr. Sembianti, "From this you see how good is our dear Lord when he allows even those I love to make me suffer" (S 6467). The year before, following the calumnies from Fr. Roller against Fr. Martini, Comboni had written to Cardinal Simeoni, "In short, I have experienced a martyrdom. But I am happy with that, because the Lord wanted it, and I pardon everyone" (S 6100).

The understanding which Comboni had for others was rooted above all in his humility. As we have seen in the last chapter, he knew his own limitations and he was not scandalised when others threw his shortcomings and mistakes back in his face. "I am a sinner, full of failings - he wrote to Fr. Bricolo in 1865 - but there is the forgiveness and help of God" (S 976).

There is no real understanding without a realistic knowledge of human nature which is made up of good and bad. Comboni was certainly not lacking in this knowledge, so much so that he made fraternal correction an indispensable part of community life. In the Rule of 1871 he writes, "Everyone should make it his duty to ask quick and humble forgiveness when he realises he holds a grudge against someone" (S 2716). In the Regulations for missionaries in Khartoum, Comboni writes, "It is absolutely forbidden to refer to or to divulge, even in the house with externs or with members of other mission stations, any gossip, chatter, or other rumours that may disturb the order of the mission or the peace and tranquillity of its members. In such circumstances the precepts of the gospel with regard to fraternal correction and christian charity should be strictly observed" (S 5566).

Understanding and forgiveness are easy words while they remain on the page. But when they refer to real situations and particular circumstances, then they assume their real weight and come alive.

Comboni worked alongside Fr. Stanislaus Carcereri for years, describing him as "a conscientious man, with character, orderly and firm, with profound knowledge of the Plan of the work, of the upmost zeal and well able to run an Institute" (S 2223). This is the description, given by Comboni in 1870 to Cardinal Barnabo, of a man who was already beginning to crucify Comboni with his individualism, his demands and by not fulfilling his duties. And he was preparing a coup in favour of the Camillian Institute! Even when his proposals became clear, Comboni found words to excuse him and appreciate him: "What I really have at heart is to keep Fr. Stanislaus in the mission. He has his faults (...), the result, I believe, of the bad health which he has. But he has such good qualities, virtue, constancy, positive vision and humility that I would be greatly hurt if I lost him for Africa. (S 2368-2369). "In short - he writes to Fr. Artini in 1870 - I tell you, Fr. Stanislaus is *terrible*; however, he is a great, upright man, and this is why we try to keep him, and make great efforts to do so" (S 2377).

Even Fr. Carcereri's confrere, Fr. Franceschini, agreed that he was 'terrible'. And he cannot be suspected of being on the side of Comboni! Fr. Franceschini wrote to Fr. Stanislaus in 1876, "The language that you used in the last few months in regard to the Pro-Vicar, is certainly not a language of love. (...) Your stile is so dry, bitter, pugnacious, arrogant. It would touch the most sensitive nerves even of the dead" (S 4240). A few months later the Camillians had to pack their bags on the orders of Propaganda, but Fr. Carcereri had no intention of giving in. Comboni writes, "All the Camillians are in Verona except the great Fr. Stanislaus who is here in Rome threatening fire and flames. But he won't succeed in anything. My faith is in the justice of eternal Rome, and in that Divine Heart which beats also for Africa" (S 4595-4596). If we put together all the praise given by Comboni to Carcereri there would be a small volume! The final separation cannot be put down to lack of understanding.

Another missionary who enables us to appreciate the large heart of Comboni is Fr. Losi, "a holy madman", who "has a small brain and is light-headed and a zealous apostle with the real piety of a saint" (S 6462). We are in 1881 and Fr. Losi did not approve the nomination of Fr. Bonomi as vicar general. He wanted Fr. Roller, "the cause of all the woes in the vicariate" (S 6095). Fr. Losi sent letters to Propaganda and to the Austrian consul in Khartoum causing considerable confusion. Comboni suffered a lot, defended his choice, but concluded, "I will save Fr. Losi for the African mission" (S 6468). But Fr Losi, "made great blunders through lack of thought and judgement. More than once in order to get a youth married he would make a christian of a girl and two days later the couple would leave and become Moslem. And this happened in 1875 after I had formally forbidden him to perform the marriage (...). Moreover, Fr. Losi has said he will always write about me to Propaganda and to the

cardinal of Verona when in conscience he feels he has to. Let him do it. I forgive him from the heart, and instead use his good qualities for the good of the missions" (*S* 6686-6687).

In a letter to Fr. Sembianti in 1881, Comboni refers to conversation with Fr. Losi who had accused him to Cardinal Di Canossa of leaving the missionaries in El Obeid "without even a penny". Comboni said, "My son, write whatever you want to the cardinal about me. Write to Rome as well, to Propaganda and to the Pope. Tell them I'm a criminal and should be executed, etc. I will always forgive you. Just stay in the missions, and convert and save my dear Nubians, and you will always be a dear son to me, and I will bless you until I die" (*S* 6851). Any comment is unnecessary.

I would gamble the mitre

Comboni, like Jesus, dreamed of heaven together with those who had made him suffer "martyrdom" and who had severely tested his capacity for understanding and forgiveness (cf. *S* 6100): "Ah, if Fr. Losi, Fr. Luigi and I manage to find ourselves together in heaven (and even more if Fr. Bortolo Roller is there too, as I hope), we will have to laugh at the amusing comedies we produced here on earth" (*S* 6468). About a month later (5.3.1881), still to Fr. Sembianti, Comboni writes, "I hope I will not be so small and proud as to justify myself to Cardinal Canossa or to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda. For myself nothing. But I will gamble the mitre and defend the innocence and fidelity of my missionaries in front of the Supreme Pontiff. They have given their lives for Africa" (*S* 6521 cf. also 6485).

Such generosity of spirit was possible in Comboni because of his great capacity for friendship. "My friendship for the people I love is strong and eternal, and does not become cooler because of great sacrifices. Even if it meant sacrificing the success of my Plan, I would never relinquish a single spark of the affection I have for you, nor would I be able to deny these thoughts, even before the judgement seat of Nero" (*S* 1165). These words, written in 1865 to Fr. Bricolo, who was also forced by circumstances to leave the Mazza Institute, reveal a man who, once he had chosen a friend, kept him "continually in (his) heart" (*S* 633) with feelings of loyalty and fidelity, of confidence and recognition, sharing fully their joys and sorrows.

When his parish priest, Fr. Peter Grana, was elected Archpriest of Tuscany, Comboni wrote, "No, no, my Fr. Peter, not because you were the parish priest of Limone, nor the comfort of my lonely parents, nor for other secondary reasons did I seek to have a close friendship with you, even if we were separated by great distance. It was because of affection. We were two hearts happily made one. It was the closest and sincerest friendship that moved the two of us to stay close from afar through warm and mutual correspondence" (*S* 323-324).

For Comboni, community was nourished by sincere friendship that "looked to the heart" (*S* 634), and was not afraid to give "all the heart" (*S* 1194), because "God is the centre of communication between me and you" (*S* 667). It is worth recalling that the people with whom Comboni cultivated such friendships were religious and laity, men and women, rich and poor, high and low. This is significant if we keep in mind that the last century was marked by a strong sense of class, a general reticence in friendship between a priest and a woman.

We help one-another

Comboni wrote to bishop Luigi Canossa in 1871, "whoever trusts himself, trusts the biggest ass in the world" (*S* 2459). This was after his first, modest beginnings in publishing his great project to win Central Africa for Christ. Comboni's confidence was above all in Jesus, "in him who died for Africa" (*S* 2459). He was confident, too, of his helpers in Europe, and particularly, in his missionaries in Africa. Without their

support and advice he could not go forward: "(...) I have confidence in you my valued priests, my brothers and my sons in this Apostolate. Together with my angels of counsel, you are my arms to direct the Lords' people in his ways" (S 3160). These words, taken from the homily which Comboni preached on the occasion of his solemn entry into Khartoum (11.5.1873), contain a pointer towards something of great value in community and apostolic life for Comboni missionaries: cooperation.

Comboni was a volcano of ideas and activity. But he knew that his work would have no future without the involvement of everyone, both at the level of planning and of putting into action. Hence his constant search for other opinions and his efforts so as not to be indispensable. In his Report of 1870 to cardinal Barnabo, Comboni wrote, "I never failed to submit to the judgement of my priest companions many things of importance regarding the Institutes. I also wanted everyone to be informed about the work and affairs of the Institute (this is something which will be very useful when the work develops). Thus, I first meditated and reflected very deeply on every step, every action, everything concerning the Institute, and I carefully consulted and discussed with others, and every decision was carefully taken by me in the name of the Lord. (...) I value the intelligence and the hearts of my companions, and they have my full esteem and affection. We are all of one mind (...)" (S 2224). "For the rest - he wrote ten years later to Fr. Sembianti - I listen to everyone without weighing in any direction. I never make a decision without first listening to the superiors" (S 5966).

The last paragraph of the Report on the Vicariate sent to Bishop Luigi Ciurcia, in February 1870, is very significant: "We work for no reward other than to win more souls for Christ. We help one-another. There is one wish, one aim, one purpose, the commitment of all those who love Jesus Christ, that of conquering unhappy Africa" (S 2182).

Finally, the spirit of unity and co-operation among Comboni's missionaries also derived from the fact that they could not hope for fruit immediately. This would come only from continuity and from the convergence of many different missionary forces: "The central African missionary (...) must often be content to sow a seed with infinite labour and in the midst of a thousand privations and dangers. He must see himself as an unobserved individual among many labourers who await, not so much the result of their own personal work, but that of the convergence of a continuation of workers managed and utilised by Providence. In a word, the African Missionary must often meditate and reflect that he works in a calling of the highest merit, but extremely hard and difficult. He is a stone hidden underground which will perhaps never be seen and which is part of the foundation of a huge new edifice, which only future generations will see rise from the earth" (S 2700-2701; cf. also 2889).

Brothers together

The sense of brotherhood within the cenacle of Comboni rested on a relationship of equality between priests and laity. In the "Regulations" of 1869 for the missionaries in Cairo we read, "Our missionaries, be they priests or lay, live together as brothers with the same vocation. They are under the direction of and dependant on the one appointed as Superior of the Institute, without competition of pretension, and ready for all that they are ordered to do, available to suffer together and help one-another" (S 1859; cf. also 2495).

This equality of rights and duties is much more surprising because later Constitutions and Rules agree in theory but water it down in reality. For example, in the Common Notices of 1895, forms of address for the fathers and the brothers are set out (6); "as a sign of respect according to the rank of each, when the brothers meet one another they should raise their caps, but take it off completely when they meet the superior or one of the priests" (14). The regulation 247 from the Constitutions and Rules

of 1924 is even more direct: "The priests should treat their confreres who are not priests with love and kindness, avoiding arrogant and offensive ways of dealing with them. And those who are not priests should guard against the vanity of wanting to be equal to the priests (...)".

None of this would have made any sense to Comboni for whom diversity in community was possible without any loss of respect. For him respect was based on role not on 'grades'. Hence the importance which he gave to local Superiors and to the Rule "to keep a holy link of brotherhood between the missionaries" and to "create that uniformity of method and spirit which is the strength of the Institutes" (S 2696).

The Preface to the Rule of 1871 helps us to conclude our understanding of the community/family which Comboni dreamed of and tried to build day by day: "To achieve the aim of the new Institute for the Missions for Africa, only the fundamental principles are laid down, and they serve as a few norms with which to journey forward in full agreement and with that equilibrium of spirit and exterior conduct by which members of the same family can be recognised" (S 2642).

PRAYER

Father,
you asked our Founder
to unite individuals
of different mentalities, culture, education and sex
into a small cenacle of apostles.
You gave him the grace to accept in faith
all the suffering that this community implied
and to forgive hurts and calumnies.
We pray,
help us to believe fervently
in the importance of being a cenacle of apostles,
and help us to give our personal contribution
to the building of community
in a spirit of service and forgiveness.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE COMBONI COMMUNITY TODAY

Readings:

RL 3.3; 10-11: Community in the Lord

RL 36-45; 84; 111-112; 162: Community Life

Ratio 80-85: Life-Style: new cenacle of apostles

CA 1991, 28-33: Comboni Missionary Community

Sign of the Kingdom

The Comboni community is a missionary community. Sometimes, in speaking about religious community life there is the risk of emphasising its internal rhythm and separation from the world and forgetting that, in our case, the purpose of religious life is the following of Christ with a view to missionary service.

In the history of our Institute there was a time when the religious dimension, seen in a monastic way, threatened contact with the outside world, seeing in the people a danger for the community. As we will see, a certain tension is inevitable. However, we must never forget that in order to be faithful to the charism, our communities must above all be missionary communities strongly orientated towards the world and the frontiers of faith. Fr. Agostoni wrote in 1970, "The essential aim of our missionary activity is to develop the 'community of believers' among peoples. The Church, in fact, is the Family of God whose supreme life and law are a close relationship with the Father and a similar relationship with one-another through Christ in the Holy Spirit. This basic principle enables us to discover the real meaning and apostolic value of our community life. We first of all try to establish among ourselves, as perfectly as possible, the reality which our vocation calls us to build in the world. We want to create among ourselves that communion of hearts and that new brotherhood in Christ which our apostolate must announce and produce among men".²³

In the second chapter we saw how consecration, being the action of the Father through the gift of the Spirit of the Son, makes us brothers and sisters and takes us naturally to community. The fruits of the Spirit, in fact, are aspects of communion: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control" (*Ga* 5:22). These are opposed by the works of the flesh which are anti-community: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hostility, discord, jealousy, dissent, division, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and such things" (*Ga* 5:19).

Now, in world torn by divisions, hatred, racism, class, prejudices, injustice and oppression of every kind, the comboni community wants to be "a strong the effective proclamation of the good news" (*EN* 21), a clear sign of the Kingdom of God which attracts and converts. In fact, "the nature of the Kingdom is communion among all human-beings and with God" (*RM* 15), in our own community "there is a first gesture of evangelisation" (*EN* 21).

In line with the Magisterium of the Church and developments in missiology, the Thirteenth General Chapter made clear the link between mission and Kingdom and, in trying to make it practical, also linked it to community life (cf. the second priority). The Chapter of 1979 stated that, "we comboni missionaries evangelize as a community" (*CA* 1979 no. 37). The 1985 Chapter, while noting "the progress made in community life in the last six years", found it opportune to underline that "there is still along way to go" (*CA* 1985, no. 22). If we keep in mind that the priorities of the Chapter are the result of a discernment made in the light of God and as part of the charism of the highest decision making body in the Institute, it means a commitment to building a real community. This is a choice for God, as the psalm says, "If the Lord does not build the house, the builders labour in vain" (*Ps* 127:1).

During my time of office in Rome I read all the minutes of our General Chapters. The decisions taken were always good ones. However, looking back, what is to be regretted is the lack of practical implementation. If there had been more obedience, there is no doubt that the life of the Institute and the quality of our missionary service would have been better. The Chapter of 1985 makes a strong appeal to us to believe in the "mystical strength" of our communities. If we live together and are united in the Lord, our strength is greater than the sum of the members of the community, not only as a consequence of the sociological principle, "unity is strength", but also and mainly as a result of the theological principle that community is the sacrament of the presence and action of the Blessed Trinity. It is a serious mistake to see our community as just a human reality made up of the talents of individuals and the organisation of the group. Rather, community is the place of the action of God. The energies of individuals are the potential presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What should make us afraid is not the difficulty or challenge of community life, but the tragic possibility of undervaluing the spiritual strength of community through lack of faith or individualism. This was what I wanted to say in my first letter as Superior General, "Forward together in the Heart of Christ".²⁴

In the light of this we can understand the insistence of the recent general chapters on having a consistent number in our communities, many of which are still outside the rule. In 1979, when it was decided that "every comboni missionary should belong to a local community" (*RL* 40), and a "local community is made up of at

²³ AGOSTONI T. & Council, *circ. lett.* (10.10.1970) "Community Life", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 92, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ PIERLI F., *circ. lett.* "Greeting after election", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 147, p. 1.

least three missionaries" (*RL* 40), we did nothing other than put ourselves in line with the great tradition of the Institute. We have seen how our Founder insisted on communities of a consistent number. The return to the idea of a community of "at least three missionaries" was, therefore, an act of faithfulness to a tradition which was kept until the fifties, when for various historical reasons (ease of communication, increase in funds, etc.), it became easier to live alone, losing though the credibility and effectiveness of community life.

Glorious distinction

In the first edition of the Constitutions and Rule of our Institute in 1895 we read, "This congregation is consecrated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus" (no. 2). In the second edition of 1924 the following words are added, "whose spirit of charity, zeal and sacrifice we intend to imitate" (no. 2). These remain practically unchanged until the Chapter Acts of 1969. In the edition of 1924 there are also details which refer to community life: "All the members of this Congregation (...) recognise that the proper spirit of the congregation is the spirit of charity, which must unite them all as sons around their father, the Divine Heart of Jesus" (no. 243). "Thus all those who glory in the name of sons of the Sacred Heart should love one-another with real charity, like brothers (...)" (no. 244).

Therefore, before numerical consistency and other characteristics of our comboni community, what is above traditional in our Institute is brotherhood, the "spirit of charity".

A clear acknowledgement of this tradition remains in the Rule of Life of the reunited congregation (1988) under the heading "The Heart of Jesus": "The contemplation of the pierced Heart of Christ, which gives birth to the Church, is a challenge (...) to that fraternal charity which must be a distinctive sign of the Comboni missionary community" (*RL* 3.3).

To say that charity is a "distinctive sign" of the Comboni Missionaries could sound pretentious and conceited. However, that is how it is! If we look around, above all in the missions, we realise that in our communities there is something specific which other congregations envy in us. There is that "spirit of charity" that has marked us from the beginning and which all the Superior Generals have kept alive with clear instructions and letters of encouragement.

In 1903 *Fr. Angelo Colombaroli*, first Superior General, wrote: "It was truly by divine decision that Fr. Asperti (...) wanted to entrust us to the most Sacred Heart", because "we would have a secure model to which we could conform ourselves and in which we would have abundant life and the principle of that charitable union which must reign among us. (...) The virtue for which we must all aim even more, and for which we must show a special choice, as the one which makes us like our most lovable Father, is the virtue of charity. Charity is the chosen virtue of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. It must be our chosen virtue. The virtue which must form the special characteristic of our Congregation".²⁵

It was *Fr. Federico Vianello* who wrote the most famous letter on "comboni charity" during a moment of particular tension in the Institute. In 1914 (especially in the Sudan) the tension was beginning which would lead, thirteen years later, to the terrible blow of the division of the Congregation between the Italian and German groups (cf. *RL*, Introduction). In May 1914 the danger of division in the two groups appeared on the horizon. The Superior General wrote a letter which is a genuine hymn to fraternal charity, expressly calling it, "characteristic, banner and seal" of the Institute.

Fr. Vianello wrote: "Prostrate at the foot of the Tabernacle, with forehead in the dust, in the poverty of my spirit, I asked Jesus himself what would be the right words, the right greeting that I could send to you. It seemed to me that the divine Redeemer, pointing to his Sacred Heart, surrounded by flames said to me, 'for my Sons, for the Sons of my Heart I have no more ardent desire than *Charity*. No-one is or ever can be a Son of my Heart unless they excel in *Charity*. This is the characteristic, the banner, the seal which must distinguish him in a particular way among all men, among all Christians, among all religious'. (...) May there be *Charity* in everything, may it be our most greatest honour, our highest glory, our brightest crown".²⁶

²⁵ COLOMBAROLI A., *circ. lett.* (7.6.1903), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 1, p. 6.

²⁶ VIANELLO F., *circ. lett.* (21.5.1914) "Fraternal Charity", in *MCCJ Bulletin*, Dec. 1927, pp. 15-17.

There is no doubt that the division was serious act of infidelity to our comboni spirit, a sin which weighed heavily on both Institutes until the Lord reunited us in 1979 and thus ended the long process towards "one, complete communion in the Sacred Heart in faithfulness to the Founder".²⁷ From the process of reunion there came not only the "new time", beginning with and flowing from Vatican II, but also the echo of all the appeals of the Superior Generals to keep our "flag" flying high. Here are some other significant texts from former Generals.

Fr. Paolo Meroni wrote: "Let us work at our salvation according to the spirit of our Institute. (...) What is the spirit of our Institute? It is none other than the spirit of the Sacred Heart of Jesus whose sons we are (...), the spirit of real charity which excludes selfishness".²⁸

In *Fr. Pietro Simoncelli* we read: "United, one in heart and mind, we try to follow better our sublime vocation, and while we do good for ourselves and for the souls of others, we give God, the angels and men that example which gladdens the Divine Heart and his Church".²⁹

From *Fr. Antonio Vignato* we hear: "The cloak of the Sons of the Sacred Heart should be charity, meekness. This is the great lesson which the Divine Master wants everyone, but especially us, to learn from him".³⁰ "This is the true recognition to give to the Lord: (...) to enliven the genuine spirit of our Congregation, the spirit of the Sacred Heart, the spirit of love, of zeal and of sacrifice".³¹

From *Fr. Antonio Todesco* we hear: "The glorious distinction of our Institute" is the devotion to the Sacred Heart from which must flow "the charity which includes everyone in a large fraternal embrace".³² "We read in our Constitutions, 'This Congregation is consecrated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus whose spirit of charity, zeal and sacrifice we intend to imitate'. Here is the starting point of the formation of all the sons of the Congregation (...). Teach that our charity must be universal (...). Insist that strong regional or national feelings do not exist among our students and future confreres. Our charity embraces all the Sons of the Sacred Heart, just as they are, without distinction, from any nationality, region, of high or ordinary education, easy or difficult, intelligent or not very open, sociable or timid, full of initiative or slow in making decisions, superior or subject... Thus, people who are very selfish, rough and mean, find it difficult to adapt, always unhappy with the superiors and confreres; those who are not inclined to mutual understanding and respect for others, sarcastic and despising others, those who are not inclined to forgiveness, egocentric, always concerned about themselves and never with others, critical, grumbling, tending to accuse others, these should not be admitted to the Congregation".³³

Fr. Gaetano Briani wrote to the confreres in Brazil in 1960 saying: "Celebrate the Feast of the Sacred Heart with people from outside. People need to know it is our feast. Love the confreres and put up with their faults. Encourage fraternal charity with a greater family spirit".³⁴ "Love one-another! We all are members of the same Congregation, Sons of the Sacred Heart".³⁵

On the time of reunion *Fr. Tarcisio Agostoni* and *Fr. Georg Klose* wrote: "We are now 'Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus'. This is the name by which the Church recognises us and the name that unites us all wherever we are in the world. The name's meaning encourages us to love one another and to love all peoples as Christ loved them. This name stresses our missionary character, the memory of our Founder and the Heart of Jesus, Redeemer of all and the Centre of the universe and of history. Let us endeavour that the name's meaning does not remain a dead letter or just another symbol, but rather becomes a programme of life".³⁶

²⁷ BROSIG G., "The Decision to begin the dialogue in view of reunion", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 97, pp. 21-22.

²⁸ MERONI P., *circ. lett.* "Word in confidence", in *MCCJ Bulletin*, 2. p. 22.

²⁹ SIMONCELLI P., *circ. lett.* (1.11.1931) "Greeting after election", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 6, p. 142.

³⁰ VIGNATO A., *circ. lett.* (9.9.1939) "Let us imitate Peter Claver", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 18, p. 562.

³¹ VIGNATO A., *circ. lett.* (8.12.1945) "The war is ended", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 21, p. 315.

³² TODESCO A., *circ. lett.* (5.12.1947) "Letter to Scholastics", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 26, pp. 574-575.

³³ TODESCO A., *circ. lett.* (oct. 1955), p. 991, 994.

³⁴ BRIANI G., *circ. lett.* (5.7.1960) to Confreres in Brazil.

³⁵ BRIANI G., *circ. lett.* (25.9.1960) to Confreres in Mexico.

³⁶ AGOSTONI T. - KLOSE G., *circ. lett.* (29.7.1979) "Letter concerning the name of the Institute", in *RL*, p. 180.

Fr. Salvatore Calvia wrote: "The love of the Heart of Jesus, lived in the life of Comboni, should be our supreme law of life and action".³⁷

In the past twenty years the comboni community has been profoundly transformed, becoming not only more international but even intercontinental. Consequently our community is presented with new challenges with regard to human relations, mentality, different cultures, minority groups, etc. To live this kind of communion there is no other way than faithfulness to our "distinctive sign", fraternal charity.

Different ways of belonging

The fact that we belong to different groups, in different ways can hinder our full integration into the comboni community. On taking the vows we become members of the Institute with all that that implies. We acquire a sense of identity and belonging which describes and guides us. Religious profession, however, does not do away with all the other ways in which we belong. These cannot and must not be denied. They keep their importance. We belong to our family, to the local church from which we come. We could perhaps belong to other professional bodies, for example a teachers' union. We could be part of an association for religious or a church movement which offers us support or in which we are interested.

All these experiences of belonging are real facts, often valid, sometimes problematic, but almost always inevitable. The point is how we prioritise them, deciding which sense of belonging is the basic one around which we arrange all the others. Now it is clear that we belong first of all to the comboni community. If in other groups we do not present ourselves as comboni missionaries our specific charism enriches no-one. At the same time it cannot be enriched by others.

In the recent history of the Institute two "subordinate" types of belonging have become problematic: belonging to the church we are sent to, and belonging to a particular church movement. The experience of mission is sometimes so demanding and engaging as to make us forget the demands of the group that we basically belong to. Sometimes, when faced with unexpected or unwanted requests, people choose to leave the Institute saying, "I do not move from here. The Institute prepared me for this work; let me get on with it in peace".

The same considerations can be made with regard to church movements. In regard to this we can recall the indications given by the Chapter of 1985 (CA 161-164) and the letter of 1986, which I wrote on the General Council's decision with regard to "itinerant confreres".³⁸ Sometimes church movements, even though they are authentic signs of the action of the Spirit and of the power of God, have certain tendencies which seem to damage the unity of the Church. They have a certain exclusiveness as if they possessed the fullness of the christian message and experience, forgetting that they are only a small flame in the great fire of Pentecost. There is sometimes a certain rigidity of method with regard to language and forms of celebration which go against basic aspects of the missionary church, such as inculturation and the incarnation of the message. Sometimes a kind of parallel church develops. This is where the incompatibility arises between belonging to the Institute and full involvement in the life and action of the movement which, because it is a movement, tends to create spiritual dependence and an alternative methodology and community.

The growth and multiplication of movements was noted by the Chapter of 1985 as "a sign of the presence of the Kingdom" (CA 40). Thus the comboni missionary is open to the values proposed by such movements and offers its help, "in so far as they do not enter into conflict with the aim of the Institute and its commitment to community" (RL 84.3). Our openness to church movements comes from

³⁷ CALVIA S. & Council, *circ. lett.* (25.12.82).

³⁸ PIERLI F., *circ. lett.* (19.3.1986) "Comboni missionaries and Church movements", in *MCCJ Bulletin* 150, pp. 7-8.

the Fifties and has produced a lot of fruit, if not always peacefully. In 1956 Fr. Todesco forbade the joining of the Focolari.³⁹ In 1977 Fr. Agostoni took a similar position with regard to the Neo-catechumenate: "We believe that when belonging to a neo-catechumenal movement comes into serious and prolonged conflict with the real psychological and spiritual sense of belonging to the Institute (that is, to the people of whom it is composed), it is harmful for the individual and for the comboni community in which he lives (...)"⁴⁰

If on our part co-operation with church movements is not to become an alienating dependence, a deep awareness of our charism on both the individual and community levels is necessary. Without this continual deepening we run the risk of losing our specific comboni charism by being absorbed in the local church and into movements. This is not the 'fault' of the local church or the movements but comes from a weakening of our sense of identity.

Experience shows that missionary animation is a good way of developing our comboni identity and, at the same time, enriching the local church and the movements. Encouraging the mission "ad gentes" with suitable methodology, that is concerned with the inculturation of the gospel, is our contribution to the growth of an effective local church. Sometimes, perhaps, we are too receptive and submissive in relations with the local churches and with movements. Instead our duty is to challenge them with the prophetic dimension of our charism and the richness of our experience.

Gift to plead for

The human vocation has a community nature. Vatican II emphasised this: "God, who has fatherly care of everyone, wanted men to form a single family and to treat one another with brotherly love". This means that "man cannot fully find himself except through the gift of himself" (*GS* 24). Our Rule of Life refers to this text when it states that, "fellowship of life corresponds to the social character of their nature as created by God" (*RL* 36). And, "Man reaches perfection, i.e. he grows in all his natural and supernatural capacities, only by relationships with others, the fulfilment of mutual obligations, and dialogue with his brothers" (36.1; cf. also 84.1).

The community dimension, therefore, is something natural. Openness to the other, the desire for intimacy and co-operation is written deeply within each person: "It is not good for man to be alone" (*Gn* 2:18). In reality, however, there is a great gap between this deep aspiration and reality. This is the mystery of sin which frustrates our efforts, confuses our images of God and community and prevents us from satisfying our desire to love and be loved. Despite our strong desire to enter into communion with others, we are blocked in a thousands ways by Evil, by ordinary human limitations, by negative experiences and so on. Consequently communion cannot be achieved without the direct intervention of God. Because of this and in line with Scripture and the Tradition of the Church, the Rule of Life see community as a gift of God which we ask for each day: "The missionary continually asks the Father for the gift of unity, which derives from Christ through the grace of the Spirit, for he considers it essential to his life and activity" (*RL* 36.2). Fr. Agostoni wrote in a letter on community life, "Our community becomes 'Church' only around Christ who gathers it together in the Spirit by means of the Word. It would be an illusion to think that we can love sincerely without him or the Spirit, that we are able to comprehend one another, forgive, have patience and overcome our limitations if He is not present in all our attitudes. It is an illusion to believe that we can overcome our inevitable differences of nationality, age, formation and the contrasts of our different mentalities without the help of his grace and his Love. Thus, to form a real comboni community it is very

³⁹ TODESCO A., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 45, p. 1005.

⁴⁰ AGOSTONI T., *lett.* (1.10.1977) to Kiko Argello.

important to be united and to know how to dialogue, but it is even more necessary to unite ourselves to Christ and to know how to dialogue with him in prayer".⁴¹

So that our community life does not become "a mere external living together but rather is expressed in a true fellowship and brotherhood in the Lord" (RL 36.3), and following "the example of the first Christian community that was united heart and soul in continuous prayer, the missionaries form a praying community" (RL 50). Without prayer community falls away; with prayer the community renews itself continually, overcoming the inevitable tensions and difficulties. We must believe it.

In 1927 in the Prefecture of Equatorial Nile, "dissension, animosity and unease" were so much present that Fr. Meroni had to send "suitable norms and directives" to "re-establish, smoothly, the peace which was so disturbed". Aware, however, that dissension and peace come respectively from the Evil One and from God, Fr. Meroni writes, "It was to expected the demon would seek to trap the Sons of the Sacred Heart in that which is their most beautiful boast, their characteristic note, fraternal charity. Now it is up to you, dear confreres, not to give him the victory in any way. Remember that peace is a gift of God, which our Lord Jesus Christ brought on earth at his birth. If peace is a gift of God, the first thing we must do is ask him for it. *Yes, pray. Pray much so that the Divine Heart calms the hearts of everyone.* Nothing is refused to prayer, and be sure that the Divine Heart will not omit to give the good spirit if you ask (Lk 11:13), even more so if those who ask are his Sons".⁴² Four years earlier there had been the decree of the division of the congregation which was seen as "the only way out".⁴³ It was taken with relief and indeed with gratitude: "However much the word separation sounds unpleasant to you, nonetheless in our case we must say that this step was a great good, a remarkable blessing that God has done for us".⁴⁴ The fact that the one hundred and fifty of the "Italian" group (F) who had been working from the beginning in the Sudan had distanced themselves from the fifty of the "German" group (M) was not enough! The rejection of internationality, together with the hope of resolving community tensions reveals all the limits of a mistaken solution. The reality is that "each confrere is also a challenge to my faith".⁴⁵ It is not enough "to get together to recite a psalm".⁴⁶ This creates, at the most, "a peaceful co-existence which does not satisfy christian demands"⁴⁷ but, sooner or later, diminishes communion. Among the "challenges to the comboni charism today", Fr. Calvia puts also the life of prayer: "As well as looking at the time which each confrere and each community gives to prayer I would say that there should be *more attention to the quality of the prayer itself*, which if it is genuine, leads us to stop judging and to be converted to God's way of thinking and doing".⁴⁸

Among the "various forms of prayer" to which we are committed and which generate unity (RL 50), I want to recall two: listening to the Word of God and the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Word dwells among us

The comboni community is a community of faith. It is not just a group of human workers with political or economic interests which excludes certain nationalities or races. Our community is born from the Word of God and has its foundation in the Word: "Love one-another intensely, with a true heart. Be regenerated not

⁴¹ AGOSTONI T. & Council, *lett.* (10.10.1970), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 92, p. 10.

⁴² MERONI P., *circ. lett.* (25/3/27) to confreres in Equatorial Nile.

⁴³ MERONI P., *circ. lett.* (8.12.1923), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 1, p. 20.

⁴⁴ *Ib.*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ PIERLI F., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 154, p. 43.

⁴⁶ AGOSTONI T., *Reflections & experiences*, Verona 1974, p. 41.

⁴⁷ AGOSTONI T. & Council, *circ. lett.* (1.12.1974), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 107, p. 21.

⁴⁸ CALVIA S., *circ. lett.*, in *MCCJ Bulletin* 145, p. 3.

by a corruptible seed, but by one that is immortal, that is, the living and eternal Word of God" (*1 Pt* 1:23). "My mother and my brothers are those who listen to the word of God and put it into practice" (*Lk* 8:21). Hence the recommendation of Paul, "Let the word of God dwell among you" (*Col* 3:16).

Our communities have an intrinsic need to hear the Word of God in community. This practice of the early Church which was later somewhat abandoned, was strongly reclaimed by Vatican II as an essential part of fraternity. It is now followed with enthusiasm in the basic christian communities, by church movements and other groups, especially of the young. Sometimes in our communities we cannot find time. This leads to the danger that we lack that divine energy in our work, that life-giving part of community which makes us more able to live together as brothers, that is, the living word of God which enlivens and enables and searches the thoughts and feelings of the heart (*Heb* 4:12).

"The sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful, especially religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the 'excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ' (*Ph* 3:8). For 'ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ'. Therefore, they should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose" (*DV* 25).

To strengthen the spirit of brotherhood it is not sufficient that all the members of the community listen to the same Word proclaimed in the Mass or the liturgy of the hours if everyone then goes and meditates on his own. From time to time it is necessary to share the response which the Word evokes in us, otherwise we lack a common vision of faith and risk breaking up as a community. Like the Church in general, so the comboni community "needs continually to hear what it is that it believes, the reason for hope, the new commandment of love. It always needs to hear 'the great works of God' proclaimed (*Ac* 2:11), which were the cause of conversion to the Lord, and to be called together again and reunited by him" (*EN* 15; cf. also *DV* 21.25).

It would be sad if we had to admit that with regard to community listening to the word of God, we are more backward than many church movements, bible groups, prayer groups, or the small christian communities of our parishes that "seek their food in the word of God" (*EN* 58). This listening together promotes conversion and community witness, and strengthens the sense of belonging.

Breaking the bread together

"In the sharing of the one word, the one bread and the one cup, the community is renewed in its bonds of unity" (*RL* 53). The Eucharist is the celebration of the covenant between God and humanity and, consequently, of the communion between us as a people gathered round the same Word and inspired by the same Spirit. As Augustine says, when we receive Christ, "head of the Church which is his body" (*Ep* 1:23), in him we receive everyone. We welcome them into our heart with no possibility of refusal or discrimination.

The Eucharist, where Christ takes the main role, clearly shows that communion is a gift of God and not merely the result of our meetings and discussions. Discussions can make the divisions bigger rather than overcoming them. Instead when we meet around the Eucharist, we become a sign which both "expresses and causes" our unity (cf. *LG* 11). Paul says, "The blessing cup which we bless is it not communion with the blood of Christ? And the bread that we break is it not communion with the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we being many, become one" (*1 Co* 10:16-17).

In the Mass there is an awareness of the divisions and splits between us because Christ is sacrificed on the cross by his own brothers, but there is also the discovery of the healing power of forgiveness because Christ forgave those who crucified him. In the Eucharist therefore, we who are wounded and who wound others, find the strength to give and receive words of peace.

The Mass is also the place where our efforts and failures are received in a vision of faith and, indeed, transformed into an offering to the Father for the salvation of the world. The celebration of the Eucharist is the central beam of the missionary community. We often say, quite rightly, that small christian communities or other church groups have the 'right to the Mass' in order to live. We should not forget that our own community needs the same support. Hence the norm, "To strengthen the bonds of brotherhood and to express the joy of living together in the Lord, the celebration of the Eucharist is given special solemnity once a week, in which all members of the community participate, keeping themselves free from other occupations" (*RL* 53.1).

It is sometimes difficult to understand this point of the Rule of Life and so every excuse is used to get out of it. Instead we must take it seriously because of the importance of community life. Community does not last if it is not constantly renewed in faith and humbly asked for in prayer. As the Rule of Life suggests, "The missionaries continually ask the Father for the gift of unity which derives from Christ". (36.2). In this way we would significantly reduce those unpleasant and scandalous situations of unresolvable disagreement which end with someone saying 'Either he goes or I go!'.

Together with the thirst for love there is an enormous selfishness in each of us that drives us to be evil and aggressive, blind and deaf with regard to our confreres. Because of this, providence has put at our disposal a sacramental event during which we gather together around the Lord in a formal and explicit manner to renew the covenant among ourselves, to free our hearts of hatred, indifference, prejudice, spite, revenge and where we can place all these feelings. At the Last Supper Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: love one-another as I have loved you" (*Jn* 13:34). We cannot love the members of our community if we do not gather together as a community to celebrate these words of the Master. Above all it is in the context of the Mass that our hearts are liberated from jealousy, envy, rancour, anger, frustration, and are opened to fraternal communion.

Vatican II has no doubt about this: "No Christian community can be built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist. Here, therefore, all education in the spirit of the community must originate" (*PO* 6).

The challenge of internationality

Like many other congregations we pride ourselves on being international. And indeed, the figures show that our Institute is becoming more international every year. But is it also growing spiritually in calm acceptance of the implications? The scars of the division of 1923 remind us of how fragile internationality is and how it is difficult to accept and live it.

The Rule of Life speaks of 'universality' as a characteristic of Comboni and his first group. Comboni "sought missionaries of different nationalities so that his work would be neither Spanish, nor French, nor German, nor Italian, but Catholic" (*RL* 8). We know how new this idea was in the last century when each of the colonial powers wanted to have its own missionary institute.

The Rule of Life underlines the missionary value of internationality: "Composed of members from different countries and cultures, the Institute is an expression of brotherly friendship and solidarity, and a sign of the catholicity of the Church. It gives concrete witness to that fellowship in the Spirit which is proper to the people of God. It does not suppress diversities, but makes them factors of unity" (*RL* 18).

Speaking to missionaries in 1944 Pious XII already noted: "Your international character and your fraternal way of working make visible and almost palpable the distinctive sign of the Catholic Church which is the negation and the living opposite of the discord by which the nations are disturbed and disrupted. We want to say that the universality of faith and of love goes beyond all wars and all national borders, all continents and all oceans. It is this universality which encourages you and pushes you towards your goal: to make the boundaries of the Kingdom of God reach the ends of the earth (AAS 1944, p. 207). In his encyclical *Evangelii Praecones* of 1951, Pious XII called missionaries, "messengers of human and

christian goodness towards all, announcers of that fraternal solidarity which is not linked to the borders of any nation or to differences in people".

The Pope's words and those of the Rule of Life are wonderful, but the reality is a bit less, even in the Church. The fact that the Church is 'catholic' by nature does not prevent insularity or divisions. It is enough to look at history. From the division of the Eastern Churches and then with the separation of those in the North, the 'catholic' church was mainly Western and Latin. Only in the last three hundred years, with the great missionary renaissance has she achieved a catholicity never seen before. But will the Church be able to work with it? The unease which exists in some local churches, the growth of sects and similar phenomena are signs of difficulties that still exist.

And will we be able to manage our growing internationality? The question is very important in that our internationality is more radical than that of the Church itself and of many other Institutes. The Church is international in the sense that it welcomes all peoples, but then in reality everyone stays in their own country, culture, language and rites. This is also true for many religious Institutes which are a kind of federation of different national groups. The Institutes are international, but the provinces and the local communities are national based.

Comboni internationality, unlike other missionary Institutes, goes outwards. It is internationality of the fullest kind, an extraordinary and somewhat new challenge to the Church. Until forty years ago the missionary Institutes were almost totally western, and internationality was continent-based. Today this internationality is becoming inter-continental with an extraordinary depth of meaning and missionary value. However, it also poses problems which need to be kept in mind. There are the problems of unity and pluralism. Linked to this is the problem of minorities, who must be carefully protected by special legislation, if we do not want to create situations which set off negative reactions such as suspicion, victimisation and aggressiveness. In addition to the religious dimension of internationality, which reminds us of the catholicity of the gospel, there are sociological and cultural differences which cannot be faced only by a call to faith and recourse to prayer. They require appropriate ways of living together.

Other than beautiful words, 'internationality' means accepting the cultural, religious and characteristic diversity of every people. To comfort ourselves with the idea that 'deep down we are all the same' means to start off on the wrong foot. To pretend that our group is 'naturally international' is a presumption which is even more mistaken and dangerous. *We are not born international; we become international.* The Rule of Life says clearly, "The missionary acquires an international disposition and outlook only gradually. By personal effort and adequate training he becomes able to compare and share views and experiences originating from the diversity of cultures and to understand and respect other people in their differences" (RL 18.1, cf. *Ratio* 158-160).

Many tensions, especially in local communities, come from this lack of "effort and training", which encourages cultural and psychological vagueness, and mere impressions concerning another's spirituality. John XXIII spoke of "a charity which refuses every social, linguistic and racial discrimination, which opens its arms and heart to everyone" (*PrP* 33). This requires serious commitment.

I am convinced that international Institutes such as ours are genuine melting-pots of encounter between peoples, exceptional laboratories for brotherhood. However, as always happens in laboratories where the first experiments are made, explosions can happen. Let us work for internationality, keeping in mind that the difficulties lead not to death but to life. Let us roll up our sleeves and begin. In order that growth in the internationality of our Institute "becomes a blessing and not a boomerang, we need to recognise it and accept it as a sign of the times. Both in the early stages of formation and later, we must acquire the attitude and openness to internationality asked for in the Rule of Life, becoming ready to accept the changes in ourselves and in our structures which internationality may demand".⁴⁹

⁴⁹ PIERLI F., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 167, p. 4.

Communication and shared responsibility

The comboni community develops on three levels: local, provincial and at the level of the whole Institute. Among the notes of Fr. Meroni for departing missionaries we read that our charity, "must not be restricted only to our own house, but should extend without distinction to all the confreres in the missions and in the Congregation".⁵⁰ Although the charity that we experience is mainly that of the local community, it is important to keep in mind the other two levels, otherwise the community becomes a small ghetto closed to encouragement from outside and unable to enrich the Institute.

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Paul VI speaks of a principle which is valid for local communities: "The more a local Church is united with strong links of communion to the Universal Church, the more it is able to draw on the universal heritage and share the experience and life of its own people for the good of all" (EN 64). Speaking to the Provincials of Europe and America in 1976, Fr. Agostoni described the local community as being the creator of communion with other communities in the Province and in the Congregation: "It is necessary to challenge individualism in every community and to live as a family at provincial level. The old saying, 'the religious are brothers, the houses are not', needs to be left behind. The Congregation, then, is one body even though its life and welfare depend on all the members. In the Congregation will there not be the same fault that there is in the universal Church? The Church is the hierarchy, the Congregation is the major superiors?"⁵¹

To avoid similar distortions it is good to remember the means of communication suggested by the Rule of Life and to use them to keep a sense of being involved.

(a) *At local community level* there are two important channels of communication: the community council and the community charter.

"The Community Council is the meeting of all the members to seek the common good, to promote fraternal communion, to plan and verify their activities, and to participate in the important decisions of the community" (RL 111). "If prayer builds up the community in its relationship with Christ, the Family Council will become the most useful way to promote agreement and co-operation among the members of the community".⁵²

The Community Charter was introduced by the Chapter of 1985 (CA 83). Such a charter should clearly described the aim of the community and the method for achieving it such as how, when, who and by what means. Above all it is important to described the roles of the different confreres so that they are clear to the people too. Often the unease in a community comes from the fact that some confreres do not have a clear vision of what is expected of them. They carry out orders given from day to day. There is no dignity in this. This indicates improvisation and fragmentation rather than method.

To try to live community life without making use of suitable means of communication, co-responsibility and evaluation makes it impossible to achieve our goals, and causes continual frustration. Sometimes a community gets into difficulties because these means are not used or not used properly. Their regular and correct use is a moral responsibility linked to sin, because at risk is our consecration and our missionary witness.

(b) *At provincial level* there are plenty of means of communication which help us find the will of God together. These is the provincial assembly, the directory, regular meetings for the different areas of work, the provincial newsletter giving information and providing enrichment and linking with other

⁵⁰ MERONI P., in *La voce della Congregazione*, Verona 1957.

⁵¹ AGOSTONI T., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 114, pp. 7-8.

⁵² AGOSTONI T. & Council, *circ. lett.*, in *MCCJ Bulletin* 92, p. 11.

provinces. Here I want to recall what Fr. Calvia said at the opening of the Intercapitular in 1982: "In the last three years we have realised how each Province is so occupied with itself as to forget the rest of the Congregation, even if gestures of solidarity, particularly financial ones, have not been lacking. A recent study of the government of the Congregation and the replies to our document regarding personnel reveal a notable lack of information and awareness of what is happening outside the Province. And yet we are in an age when the church is very aware of collegiality and co-responsibility".⁵³

(c) *At the level of the Institute* the highest expression of collaboration and co-operation are the Chapter and the Intercapitular Assembly. Also important are meetings for provincial superiors and sector meetings (evangelisation, missionary animation, formation, finance).

I want to underline the value of the Bulletin to which everyone is invited to contribute so that it truly becomes the voice of all. In 1927 Fr. Meroni asked, "What does the Congregation expect of us? The reply, that we remain good and holy religious, we are aware of all that concerns our family, that we try to ensure that charity reigns supreme among all the members of the Institute, in each house and between one house and another, and between one mission and another, so that we can say that our Institute is truly of one heart and mind. With the aim of nourishing this spirit of solidarity, of unity and charity in the Congregation we are considering the idea of an internal bulletin for the Congregation such as other Institutes have".⁵⁴ The Bulletin is there. Let us use it for the purpose for which it was started.

I also want to emphasise three initiatives concerning prayer which help us keep a sense of oneness with "all the communities of the Institute" (RL 43):

- the monthly intention of the Superior General: "As a sign of unity with the whole Institute each missionary, as far as possible in community, celebrates the Eucharist once a month according to the intentions of the Superior General" (RL 53.2).

- prayer for the deceased: "The life of fellowship extends also to the deceased members, who intercede with the Father. Their memory is a spur to live the missionary vocation with generosity. At the notification of a member's death each priest celebrates a Eucharist in suffrage, preferably in community. The deceased missionaries are remembered during the Eucharistic celebration or another community prayer on the anniversary of their death" (RL 42.5). This tradition goes back to Fr. Vignato who, after recalling that, "the charity which must unite all the members of our Institute suggests that the living should be generous in their prayers for those who have died"; he adds, "Now to encourage greater charity towards our deceased confreres I propose that all of them be remembered every year on the *day of the anniversary* of their death".⁵⁵

- Finally, the daily recitation of the prayer for the three Comboni Institutes, which unites our global missionary movement.

The Service of Authority

In 1923 Fr. Meroni wrote concerning to the government of the Institute: "It is first of all necessary for everyone to have a clear idea of the form of the Institute's government, that it is *based essentially on the subordination of authority*: Superior General, Superiors of the Missions (in the fields of work) and local Superiors. The Superiors themselves should be fully aware, in front of God and the Congregation, of the responsibilities of their office, which is to rule the communities entrusted to them, certainly

⁵³ CALVIA S., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 138, p. 9.

⁵⁴ MERONI P., *circ. lett.* (8.12.1923), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 1, p. 27.

⁵⁵ VIGNATO A., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 20, p. 690.

paternally and charitably, but also with due vigour. This is so that each member of the Institute can find in the healthy religious spirit in their own community a real help for their sanctification and perfection, to which the success of the apostolic work is linked".⁵⁶

Apart from the language we cannot disagree with this. At that time the Superiors were perhaps very aware of who they were and of their duty to rule the community "with due vigour". Some years later in fact Fr. Meroni put down "norms for Superiors", which were found among his unedited manuscripts. These ideas are still interesting and illuminating. I summarise them but without changing the words:

"(1) The office of Superior is not given as reward or recognition for work or merit, and is not to be considered as a place for taking it easy. (2) The nomination of the Superior is not a 'diploma of competence'. Often it is none other than the lesser evil. (3) Someone who is offended by advice or suggestions just because he is Superior would be very thick-headed. (4) The Superior should see himself as the *servus servorum* of the house. He should not expect all the others in the house to be at his service, to please him. The confreres made their religious profession with the intention of dedicating and consecration themselves to the service to God, not men. (5) The first duty of the Superior is to be a *good subject to the major superiors*. (6) He should see in his religious subjects true brothers, and rather than behaving with the pomp of Superior, he should be the first among equals. (7) The Superiors should guard against treating their confreres like children. They are adults and should be treated as adults and brothers. (8) The Superior should not centralise everything so that no-one can move a finger without him. (9) The Superior is not the owner of the house, only the ruler. Therefore he should not give into the madness of changing everything his predecessor did. (10) They should guard against despising newcomers with the stupid pretext that they are not properly prepared for the apostolate. (11) The superior of today should remember that tomorrow he find himself as subject of someone who was his subject".⁵⁷

Enough said! It needs to be added, examining the writings of our Superior Generals, that authoritarian attitudes lasted until the forties. Fr. Simoncelli wrote, "The Superior is not, as those in the world may believe, a 'boss' but a good father, who has in mind only the good of his sons and of the family in the way he exercises authority".⁵⁸ Fr. Vignato wrote, "There are some people who have such a high sense of the duties of their office that they are unable to believe that they could give part of their responsibility to their subordinates".⁵⁹

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge! After the second world war things began to change quickly and the writings of Fr. Todesco are often to defend the ill-treated superiors. He writes, "I believe you are all in agreement with me in admitting that the charity which must unite you all should be practised above all in regard to your Superiors, true representatives of that Heart which must be the centre reason for your charity. We should be as afraid of making the Superiors suffer as we are of making the Heart of God suffer".⁶⁰ He also wrote to the formators, "Encourage everyone to love the Superiors as confreres, to show understanding towards them, to understand their anxiety, their sufferings, their difficulties, to feel loyally drawn to pray for them, to feel compassion for them, and to co-operate with them".⁶¹

At the time of Vatican II we find that the Superiors were very uncertain of their role. The Council provided clear indications for a long period of study to recover the lost values of authority.

⁵⁶ MERONI P., *circ. lett.* (8.12.1923), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 1, p. 29.

⁵⁷ MERONI P., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 68, pp. 803-804.

⁵⁸ SIMONCELLI P., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 9, p. 265.

⁵⁹ VIGNATO A., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 16, p. 498.

⁶⁰ TODESCO A., *circ. lett.* (1.11.1948), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 28, p. 755.

⁶¹ TODESCO A., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 45, p. 995.

Perfectae Caritatis was clear: religious "submit themselves in a spirit of faith to the superiors who take the place of God and through the superiors they make themselves available for the service of all their brothers in Christ". The superiors "exercise authority in a spirit of service towards their brothers, expressing the charity of God who is love" (*PC* 14).

This line is adopted in full by the Chapter Documents of 1969 and then by the Rule of Life, and it is behind all the writings of Fr. Agostoni who distinguishes between authority and authoritarianism, between authority and its exercise.⁶² Likewise Fr. Calvia clearly places authority in the category of service and obedience, and he speaks of it as a real challenge.⁶³ I wrote two editorials for the Bulletin on the ministry of the provincial and local superior, a ministry which sometimes lacks incisiveness and which needs to be rediscovered and accepted by all.⁶⁴

As I said, following the profound social, cultural and religious changes of the last ten years the role of authority has gone into crisis, or better a certain way of governing has gone into crisis and has not yet been substituted by something more credible. There have been various reactions. Some are still rigidly attached to the old model, "I am the superior and I command here". Others indeed have denied the role of the superior, reducing it simply to co-ordination of the work.

Now, after thirty years of uncertainty and trials a new model of authority is emerging, that of the Superior who is more sensitive to the values of each person, to brotherhood and the co-operation of everyone as a sign of community. The Rule of Life gives good directives for the following of this new vision (cf. *RL* 102-108).

Here I want to emphasise the importance of the service of authority. Without this ministry communities go astray because the aim of authority is the growth of communion according to our identity. Experience teaches that any community, be it a small christian community, a parish or a diocese, is blocked and lost when it lacks a proper guide. In 1919 Pope Benedict XV wrote to the heads of the missionary hierarchies: "The outcome of a mission depends on how it is directed, because the inability of the one who governs can do a lot of damage" (*MI*, par. 7). It is like this as we well know, which is why we make great efforts to train good leaders, catechists and other ministries for our christian communities. If these do not function the community becomes discouraged, closes in on itself and falls into lifelessness.

We need to have the courage to say the same thing about our comboni communities. It is essential that the Superiors, at all levels, have faith again in their role as guides for the good of the community. They need to be convinced that they share in the authority of Christ himself (cf. *RL* 102) and that the Founder is present through them.

Apart from the religious vision of the service of authority it is also important to learn to deepen certain practical aspects which are demanded by this role. If a local Superior does not know the Rule of Life and the Provincial Directory, or does not know how to plan or run a community council, how can he manage as Superior? It is not enough to have the right theological vision of the service of authority. The practical skills to carry it out are also necessary.

The service of authority costs. Therefore those who are not Superiors should demonstrate a little gratitude towards those who do carry it out, but above all accept it peacefully, without fear or aggressiveness, precisely because it is a service. Comboni wrote: "Our missionaries profess to the religious superior filial obedience in everything for the love of God, for good order and for the real progress of the sublime and holy work to which they are consecrated" (*S* 2495).

⁶² AGOSTONI T., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 101, pp. 8-11.

⁶³ CALVIA S., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 128, pp. 19-23; ID., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 145, pp. 7-9.

⁶⁴ PIERLI F., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 152, pp. 1-2; ID., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 166, pp. 1-5.

With the people

"The community participates in the life of the people in prayer, work and simplicity of life-style" (RL 45). "The community is an integral part of the civil and social milieu in which it lives" (RL 45.1).

These words should not remain empty because an evangelizing community or one doing missionary animation has no sense without regular and meaningful contact with people. And here there is a tension that can put our sense of unity to the test. How can we balance the necessary internal rhythm of the community with the demands of missionary activity? We cannot give abstract remedies. In the light of the Role of Life and of relevant indications from general and provincial levels, each community must evaluate the actual situation in which it finds itself and guarantee the necessary space and rhythm to the community and to the apostolate.

In general, when community life is poor people throw themselves into frenetic apostolic work. They become lost in activity because they are afraid to spend time with their confreres. In these cases, more than as a service to the people, initiatives are set in motion to get away from community life. Thus, community life tests the real motivations of our work.

On the other hand, there is the danger that too much insistence on the demands of the privacy which every community needs can become a fine alibi for keeping away from people and for not being involved in apostolic work. We should not forget that we are a missionary community, and the community exists to enable the missionaries to do their ministry.

Referring to the sense of unity with the people, the Rule of Life insists on solidarity: "The missionary becomes one with the people among whom he lives, divesting himself of every prejudice which might impede his fellowship with them and sharing in their joy and hope, grief and anguish" (RL 60.1). In line with our Founder, this solidarity needs to be made real especially in a clear commitment to justice and human development. In 1981 the General Council wrote, "The situation in the world, the tragic reality of many of the peoples among whom we work, demands a real critical awareness of social sin and a greater sensitivity to the social-political dimension of salvation. This sensitivity is translated into the capacity to read events in the light of the Gospel, and to denounce in a prophetic way what is opposed to the demands of God and of the poor. It means re-examining our spirituality and our pastoral methods".⁶⁵

The re-examination of our spirituality and pastoral methods is not something which can be done individually. Community life needs to be lived and discerned at provincial and general level (cf. CA '85, no. 32). Community is the natural home for our spiritual and apostolic growth.

PRAYER

O Father,
who through Daniel Comboni
have shown us a marvellous example of love
for you and the peoples of Africa,
grant that through his intercession
we too may be transformed by the love
which flows from the Pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd.
Grant that by imitating his missionary zeal and his holiness
we may consecrate ourselves entirely,

⁶⁵ CALVIA S. & Council, *circ. lett.* (3.12.81), p. 4.

as a community of apostles, to the regeneration
of our poorest and most abandoned brothers and sisters.
And we bless you, O Father
because, in your Church,
you give us the grace to venerate him among the Saints,
to the praise of your glory. Amen.

ADDITIONAL READINGS:

- 1) AGOSTONI T. & Council, *Community Life*, in *MCCJ Bulletin* 92, pp. 8-12.
- 2) CALVIA S. & Council, *Message for the Intercapitular*, in Supplement to *MCCJ Bulletin* 138, pp. 5-12.

CHAPTER V

MISSION

The Father's intervention, which consecrates us with the Spirit of Christ and makes us brothers, creates in us a style of life that makes us a sign of the Kingdom, a sign which is itself a missionary event.

However, it is not enough for the Comboni community to be a sign. Because of our charism we must go further. We must also be an instrument of concrete activity making a positive contribution to the coming of the Kingdom of God in the world so that there arises "a new heaven and a new earth where justice dwells" (2 Pt 3:13).

The purpose of the Comboni Institute, says the Rule of Life, is "carrying out the evangelizing mission of the Church among those peoples, or groups of peoples, not yet or only inadequately evangelized" (RL 13). Such a ministry is described in the conciliar degree *Ad Gentes*: "Every disciple of Christ has the obligation to do his part in spreading the faith. Yet Christ the Lord always calls whomever he chooses from among the number of his disciples, to be with him and to be sent by him to preach to the nations" (AG 23).

John Paul II writes in *Redemptoris Missio* regarding the permanent validity of the missionary mandate: "I feel that the moment has come to commit all the efforts of the Church to evangelisation and to the mission ad gentes. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty of announcing Christ to all peoples" (RM 3).

*"Go into all the world
and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15).*

THE MISSION OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Mk 6:30-44: First multiplication of bread

Jn 10:11-18: I am the Good Shepherd

A scattered people

Mark described the crowd for whom Jesus multiplied the bread as "sheep without a shepherd" (6:34). This description needs to be kept in mind if we want to understand the mission of Jesus. Just as the mission of Moses cannot be understood without reference to the situation of the Hebrews in Egypt, oppressed, persecuted, condemned to forced labour and to slaughter (*Ex 1:8-22*), so the mission of Jesus needs to be seen in the light of the situation of his people as described by the evangelists.

Mark records that Jesus "called the Twelve, and began to send them out two by two and gave them power over unclean spirits. ... They went and preached conversion to the people, casting out demons. They anointed many sick with oil and they recovered" (*Mk 6:7-12*). This text describes the situation of the people of Israel in which the presence of the Evil One is manifest in various ways. Even if, from scientific point of view, we cannot always speak of "possession", the context in which the mission of the Twelve evolves clearly indicates a situation of a lack of freedom and of slavery to Satan. The sending out the the Twelve, in

fact, is immediately preceded by an incident of diabolical possession (the Gerasene demoniac), of illness (the woman with the haemorrhage), of death (Jairus' daughter), of alarming obtuseness (the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth). It is followed by the execution of John the Baptist (a just man killed by a cruel and corrupt criminal, Herod) and by the great hunger of the people in a deserted place where night is falling.

Here 'desert' and 'night' add to the description of the event. The desert, in its negative aspect, indicates the abode of Satan, the place where people are exposed to innumerable dangers, to idolatry, to hunger and thirst, to attacks by enemy tribes, to discouragement and rebelliousness. The night which is approaching signifies disorientation and the difficulty of continuing in the right direction and of finding shelter. The Messiah was awaited "to rescue those who are in darkness and the shadow of death" (*Lk* 1:79).

The prophet Micah, foretelling to the ungodly king Ahab the division of Israel by the Aramaeans, said, "I see the whole of Israel wandering on the mountains like sheep without a shepherd" (*1 K* 22:17). Later, the prophet Ezechiel vividly described this abandoned people (*Ez* 34). At the time of Jesus things had not changed. The people suffered from the lack salvation in every way, physically, psychologically and spiritually. They felt the need for God's intervention, and the deep longing for a good shepherd was kept alive by the psalms (23 and 80).

The response of the disciples.

How did the disciples react to the the hungry crowd, in front of a situation which the people themselves, as in Egypt, were unable to face? They came to Jesus and said, "This is a lonely place and it is already late. *Send them away* so that they can buy food in the villages around here" (*Mk* 6:36). Having not yet received the Spirit of the Risen Lord, the Spirit of the Good Shepherd, the disciples measured the seriousness of the situation from their own poverty of energy and decided to forget the people and to ask them to look after themselves.

This is the same attitude that the disciples had towards Jesus during his passion. They became powerless in front of the tragedy and incapable of offering support to Jesus. They betrayed him and, despite their promises at the Last Supper, they abandoned him. When our own life is at risk we run away, rather than offer our support to save the life of another.

The response of people to far-away problems, to evils greater than their own, to the situation of death as it was in Egypt, is to turn away. Faced with the missionary challenge of today, the disciples are dismissive: "Go and do what you can. Our problems are enough and are growing. Why should we get involved with yours? Sort yourselves out".

Today as yesterday, faced with many social and political problems in the Church to which there seems no solution, the missionary can easily feel tempted to desert like a mercenary.

The Response of Christ

"Coming ashore he saw a large crowd and *felt sorry* for them" (*Mk* 6:34). Above all Christ 'sees' the situation of the people. His feeling is the result of an awareness of the reality around him.

Before sending Moses to Pharaoh, God said, "I have seen the misery of my people and I have heard their cry against their overseers. I know their sufferings" (*Ex* 3:7). The God of Exodus is not a God who is blind and deaf or distracted and absent. He watches, hears and knows of the tears and cry of his people.

Thus Jesus is not superficial in his reaction to the people, but feels from the heart. In fact Mark's phrase "he was moved" comes from the Greek verb (*splághna*) which means to "feel with the womb", meaning to feel deeply moved from the heart with tenderness and compassion. We know the in the Hebrew mentality "heart" means all that a person is in the depths of their being, in what motivates,

unites and identifies them. Consequently, Jesus' involvement in the suffering of his people is total. The emotion that he feels is the compassion, mercy and holiness of the God of Exodus, who is "merciful, holy, slow to anger and rich in grace and faithfulness" (*Ex* 34:6; see also *Ps* 86:15-16; 103:8-13; 145:8-9). More specifically, it is part of the 'heart' of God which beats in the breast of the Good Samaritan who had 'compassion' (*Lk* 10:3) on the traveller who has fallen into the hands of thieves, in the heart of the father, who "overcome with emotion" (*Lk* 15:20), runs to greet the Prodigal Son.

When Jesus said, during the Sermon on the Mount, "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate", (*Lk* 6:36), we are not being invited to the imitation of a secondary detail but of something fundamental to God, whose mercy extends from generation to generation to those who fear him (*Lk* 1:50). John Paul II made this the subject of his great encyclical, "Dives in misericordia". This is a valuable document for the study of the Heart of Jesus, describing the feelings and motives of the Father found in the Son.

In *Dives in Misericordia* there is a long note (52) which gives a scientific description of the characteristics of the mercy of God. They are basically two. The first is expressed by the term *rahamim*, meaning the attitude of the mother towards the child in the womb and her tender feelings of total acceptance. The proverbial love of a mother towards her child is thus a reflection of the love of God who is the origin of all motherhood and paternity. We should not forget that Christ comes from the bosom of the Father and that this Father has experienced first of all, the welcome, the tenderness and the sharing typical of the mother who divides her blood and her feelings with the child in her womb; all that she has and is.

The second characteristic of the mercy of God is described by the term *hesed* which expresses the basic faithfulness of active and dynamic paternal love. This love provides daily food for the child in the home and sees to the development of its talents. *Hesed* is the opposite of love made up only of fine words. It is a concrete response to the situation of the child with all its needs, difficulties, dangers and threats. It is the aspect of God as rock, rampart and fortress.

Global approach

Touched to the depths of his heart, Christ responded to the needs of those around him in a way that understood all the aspects of their difficult situations.

Above all, says Mark, Jesus "began to teach them many things" (6:34). We know that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (cf. *Mt* 4:4). Indeed, the first offer of help which Jesus extended to the people was a word that illumines and gives meaning to life. He gave a word which inspires energy and courage to confront the world (cf. *Ps* 118). The fact that Jesus sat and preached to the people is already a gift in itself because it is a reassuring presence which liberates them from the fear of the desert and the night. It recalls the pillar of fire and the cloud of Exodus which, although not eliminating obstacles, give light at night and coolness from the desert sun during the day, strength and peace, hope and the will to continue (*Ex* 13:21-22, *Ws* 10:17).

Having reassured the people with the word of God, Jesus concerned himself to reassure them with another kind of help, material food, hence the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. As James and John learned, if someone is hungry fine words are not enough. Concrete intervention is necessary (cf. *Jm* 2:14; *1 Jn* 3:17). And Christ provided it; bread and fish for everyone until they were full.

But the miracle was not enough. Words and bread are not enough if they do not go further, if they do not become the bread that overcomes hunger for all time, the bread of eternal life. Here we need to integrate Mark's account with that of John (ch. 6), where the miracle of the loaves recalls another miracle, that of the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist which provides the measure of the depth of the compassion of the Good Shepherd who comes to give himself as food "for the salvation of the world" (*Jn* 6:51).

The multiplication of the loaves, introduced by the Word and leading to the Eucharist, was indeed a full response to the needs of humanity. Faced with the situation of his people, Christ did not avoid it with an abstract spirituality nor resort to a materialism which skims over problems, leaving them unresolved. Following the logic of his miracles, Christ approaches and offers salvation to the full person with all their complexity.

Methodology

Miracles are not a substitute for human commitment. As with the whole story of salvation, a miracle is always a sign of 'synergia', or co-operation. The fact that human beings are limited and God decides to intervene with a strong hand and powerful arm does not excuse human beings from doing their part. God the saviour is never in opposition to God the creator. Therefore a miracle happens only where all human resources are exhausted. These human means are often very poor but they do exist and need to be used. The miracle of the loaves begins from this presupposition.

(a) *"How many loaves do you have? Go and see"* (Mk 6:38). First of all Christ sent the apostles to see if the people had anything to eat. As the Son of the Creator, he knows that these people have resources and he wants to begin with them, use them and complete them. The first job of the apostle, which is not to be avoided, is that of helping the people to discover what resources they do have for the good of all. In this case the outcome was discouraging, five loaves and two fishes for five thousand men! The disciples told Jesus this without comment. They would need at least two hundred denarii. But this small amount of food, given in a spirit of solidarity, was enough for Jesus to work his miracle. In so doing he throws out a challenge: not to reduce our response to the distribution of bread that comes from without, forgetting that which is within. That is, the resources and energy of the people. These are often latent, disfigured by sin or hidden through fear and ignorance. But they are there because the Creator is generous to all.

(b) *"He told them to make them sit down in groups"* (Mk 7:39). After the disciples had helped to people to discover their own capabilities, Jesus asked them to organise groups of fifty. Thus from being a disorganised crowd they become an organised people, just as the Israelites in the desert did after Moses followed the suggestion of Jethro his father-in-law and organised the people under judges (Ex 18:13-27). This is not just a small detail. Seated together, face to face, the people moved from being a crowd to being a community with its own identity, from being exploited to having an active role in history. Christ appears as the new Moses not only because he feeds the people with new manna, but also because he seeks to give this people a new identity which is the essential basis for any type of co-operation and sharing. In fact, in dramatic situations of hunger, such as this case, people tend to close in on themselves, each one thinks of his own survival and everyone risks being destroyed. Jesus teaches that to be a missionary means to help the people overcome the panic phase and pool their energies rather than just depending on others. We sometimes need outside help. Paul himself organised collections among the communities of Asia for the Church in Jerusalem. However, it is dangerous if external support destroys local cooperation without which people remain selfish, lifeless, dependent, not taking an active role in their own history. The fact that it is fairly easy these days to find help from abroad does not excuse us from finding five loaves and two fishes locally and organising the people into groups of fifty.

(c) *"He raised his eyes to heaven and said the blessing"* (Mk 6:41). The people gave what they had and were organised into groups. Jesus invoked the Father, said the blessing, broke and distributed the bread. It is a liturgy: the Word was followed by the offertory. Jesus praised, gave thanks and remembered the earlier religious experiences in the desert. He invoked the power of the Most High; he blessed and gave the communion. In this context the miracle happens. But he did not stop there. There were "twelve full baskets of pieces of bread and fish left over" (Mk 6:43). This means there will be food for the twelve tribes of Israel until the end of the world, so long as the people, and in particular the shepherds, enter into this dynamic.

(d) "*Come apart*" (Mk 6:31). The miracle of the loaves is placed between two moments of rest, reflection and prayer which Jesus wanted for his disciples. When the disciples returned from their first apostolic journey, he said to them, "Come apart to a lonely place and rest a while". After the multiplication of loaves he made the same invitation telling his disciples to take the boat and go to the other side of the lake while he "goes up the mountain to pray" (Mk 6:46). This too is an important aspect of Jesus' method. After every stressful commitment he took his disciples to a quiet place where they could report back to him and talk about all that had happened, in a relaxed atmosphere. This allowed a deep sense of communion with him and between the disciples themselves. To avoid falling into activism and losing the mystical dimension of the apostolate it is necessary to slow down from time to time and to rest in God. Failing to do this leads the disciple to see himself as the main actor. His mission, losing its dimension as a salvific event, becomes an empty and sterile human activity. For Jesus, restful pauses, reflection and prayer were not a luxury but an essential condition to allow God to act as he wanted to. Therefore, it is necessary for the coming of the Kingdom.

PRAYER

Christ, Good Shepherd, you had compassion
on the hungry and confused crowd,
and you enlightened them and fed them
through the co-operation of the people
and the help of the apostles.
We pray that we may share in your compassion.
Help us to use your method of mission
so that we can extend your presence
among the hungry and confused crowds of today.
You who live and reign
with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
for ever and ever. Amen.

MISSION IN DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 2543-2545: The disturbing condition of Africa

S 2741-2742. 2749-2754: Save Africa with Africa

The situation of Africa

I want to speak about mission `in' and not `of' Daniel Comboni because I now invite you to pray and reflect on the way in which Christ, through his universality and variety of aspects, was incarnate in our Founder.

The mission of Christ concerns all human beings in all times and in all situations. This mission was not ended with Comboni but reached only a part of humanity, the peoples of Central Africa. We need to understand their situation if we want to understand the action of God in Comboni.

"Even today a mysterious darkness still covers those remote areas which the huge extension of Africa keeps hidden" (S 2741). These words, with which the Plan begins, are an eloquent outline of the situation of

Central Africa in the last century which Comboni lists and describes a length in his writings. Among the many texts which we could quote, is a passage from the Report to the Society of Cologne in 1871.

"The Work for the Regeneration of Africa is a very urgent work, very difficult and vast. To put into action the main ideas of the project, as I see it, and to put it on a sound, lasting foundation, we need the full involvement of all the Catholics of the world. Then, together, they can liberate these poor people from the night of paganism and make the living light of faith in Jesus Christ shine over them. We must always remember that they are a tenth part of the whole human race. I cannot find words to describe the sadness I feel, and my how deep is the suffering of my heart. The desolation in which this unhappy people is immersed weighs upon me with great seriousness and intensity. I am an eye-witness to the spiritual chains and the profound misery of this unhappy people. The thought of the immense human misery which weighs on dear Africa keeps me awake at night and I get up more tired than I was the evening before after a day of hard work. In these long and anxious nights, my imagination runs to the arid lands of Central Africa, still unexplored and the theatre of even more disturbing situations" (S 2543).

Several key words appear in this quotation which show how Comboni saw the situation of Central Africa at that time: "night of paganism", on which the "living light of faith has not yet shone"; "spiritual chains" creating unhappiness; "desolation", "arid lands" which together make Africa "the theatre of even more disturbing situations". All are aspects which describe what we today call the "Africa situation". Africa, Comboni had written to the Fathers of Vatican I, "is oppressed by the gravest evils" (S 231), its people "are the unhappiest of all the most abandoned" (S 2303).

For Comboni, what were the "gravest of evils" from which Africa suffered?

(a) The first was the *lack of faith*, also seen as the result of the curse of Ham. The "glance of compassion" (S 2310) which Comboni asked of the council Fathers go direct to Africa which "still lies under the frightening dominion of Satan" (S 2312). Why is it, he asks that, "only Africa is still in darkness under the shadow of death, without Pastors, without Apostles, without Church, without Faith? Why is it that among all the nations in the world, she alone is not yet under the dominion of Christ? Until now no curse has done so much damage and caused such wounds to the human race as that severe and sad curse by which the unhappy people of Africa have been excluded from the benefits of redemption" (S 2301).

Following the theological view of his time, Comboni saw the absence of faith as danger equal to damnation and the worst sign of human misery. His cries of alarm come from a believer who sees in "deep shadows of the spirit" the worst of degradations (S 2299) and loss (S 2304), and who is moved to bring the "hope of redemption" (S 2307). The Introduction to the Plan leaves no doubts:

"The Catholic, having judged things with the light from on high, looks at Africa not with the eyes of human interest but with the pure light of faith and discovers there a great number of brothers belong to the same family, having a common Father in heaven, held under the yoke of Satan on the edge of the most horrendous precipice. Then, carried along by the flame of charity which comes from the side of the Crucified one on Calvary to embrace the whole of humanity, he feels his heart beat faster and he is pushed by divine goodness towards these barbarous lands, to take these, his unhappy brothers still under the curse of Cam, in his arms and give them the kiss of peace and love" (S 2742).

For Comboni the curse of Cam can be revoked only by the "spiritual blessing" with which the Father has blessed us in the Son. That is, the call to salvation, the predestination to be children of God, the forgiveness of sins and the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, the word of truth and the seal of the Spirit, which is the deposit of our inheritance as we await the complete redemption of those whom God has called to the praise of his glory (cf. *Ep* 1:3-14). If it is true, as Paul says, that all the promises of God have been answered by 'yes' in Jesus (2 *Co* 1:20), then we can understand why the absence of explicit faith in Christ which creates freedom and community, was for Comboni, the clearest sign of Africa's poverty, misery and situation of death.

(b) Comboni, "servus Afrorum" by vocation (*S* 6809), had taken Africa as his "love" (*S* 6752) and "the only passion" of his life (*S* 6983). He could not stop at the lack of faith. There were other evils to fight and denounce, especially *slavery*. "To save the Africans from slavery I have decided with my valued, hard-working companions, to face hunger, thirst, the heat and the danger of life" (*S* 2303). The slavery that he is talking about is symbolised by the pyramids of Egypt (*S* 2545), spiritual but also physical. It is that kind of slavery which carries crowds of people, violently torn from their land, to the markets of Zanzibar, Khartoum and Cairo" (Positio, p. LXXIV).

Comboni and his missionaries had "decided to sacrifice their lives" (*S* 3369) to eliminate slavery. In the words of Comboni the treatment of slaves was a real hell, "the greatest wound of all", "the violation of the most holy human rights", a "market of humanity" based "on the basest and most degrading interests" and on "the most shameful greed" by evil "exploiters of men" who remain unpunished whilst thousands of poor people mark "the pathways with the blood from their swollen feet". They are sold, exploited and then abandoned. They die alone with no-one to weep "tears of compassion" over their bodies which soon become "prey for the dogs and wild beasts" (cf. *S* 4953-4957).

If Comboni uses all his eloquence to move hearts and "prevent the infamous trade in slaves" (*S* 2029), who are seen "as objects which bring profit" (*S* 2524), it is not for noble or earthly motives. Above all it is because in the slave he sees a distorted image of God himself. Indeed, "the infamous traffic in human flesh, an unworthy work which humiliates and degrades humanity ... reduces the human creature, made like us with the light of intelligence which is a ray of divinity and image of the Trinity, to the vile condition of a brute" (*S* 500). The hands of the slavers, sellers and buyers, are "sacrilegious hands" because they are used against "our poor, unfortunate brothers in Christ Jesus" (cf. *S* 2067-2068).

(c) To paganism and the slave trade Comboni adds many other evils which make up the sad picture of 'his' Africa: the threat of *Islam*, the menacing *climate*, the recurring *famines*, *sickness* of every kind, *poverty* and *ignorance* keeping people vulnerable, the traditional *moral order*, which has been upset by the arrival of foreigners, *tribal feuds* which slavers exploit to their advantage making certain tribes their agents and creating *mistrust* between blacks and whites, between black and black, and between European and Arab.

Europe's response

In his Report of 1871 to the Society of Cologne, after describing Africa as "the theatre of even more disturbing situations", Comboni adds, "Then in my imagination I travel throughout the whole of Europe and look around to see if any ray of hope appears which might be of benefit to my poor Africa! And then I again resolutely prostrate myself at the feet of the monarchs and all the great ones of this earth to beseech them with floods of tears to open their hands and spend some part of their wealth to save these poor unhappy people" (*S* 2543-2544).

Africa returned to the front of the stage in the romantic atmosphere of nineteenth century Europe. Hundreds of travellers, explorers, merchants, soldiers, politicians and writers began to get interested. Their governments also became involved. These no longer saw the dark continent as an opportunity for good, for civilisation, for exploration and scientific research but only as a place for profit.

Hence the dream of Comboni: "After being freed from the wicked yoke of paganism by the wonderful force of the Gospel, Europe has the responsibility of bringing civilisation to all the world, and must develop with renewed zeal her great power for the noble ideal of working to enlighten and save this unhappy and abandoned continent, to call it to become part of the great sheepfold of our common shepherd" (*S* 2570).

But the analysis which Comboni had made seven years earlier whilst drawing up his plan did not offer any great illusions. If on the one hand it recognised "the efforts of governments and private institutions" to bring to Africa "a spark of that civilisation which is the glory of modern civilised Europe", on the other hand he took note that such efforts had produced very little and were stationary "in the face of the insurmountable barrier with which nature has separated that inhospitable land from the culture of the rest of the world." Why the surrender? Because European politicians had seen Africa "through the eyes of human interests", and were interested above all in "forcing nature, even in these immense regions, to open the great treasures of its resources for the benefit of the human family" (*S* 2741). Those political plans which were already in action, we read in the Postulate, were only "enemies of the name Catholic. Without any fear of the dangers they ardently travel those arid and boundless regions inspired by the desire for human glory and greed for profit" (*S* 2306).

We know that Comboni had received great support and financial help from various European powers but underneath there was always a political motive. Even when speaking of scientific and humanitarian expeditions the real interest of "monarchs and great people of the world" was not concerned with Africa as a people to be saved, but with geography, with history and with the races of Africa as objects of curiosity, of study and of profit.

Keeping in mind the coming of the industrial revolution, Europe had an ever increasing need of raw materials, and the treasures of Africa presented a solution to this problem. In this context the anti-slavery movement in Europe is seen differently. This was certainly the result of noble motives, but we must not forget that because of mechanisation in Europe the spectre of unemployment appeared on the horizon. Manual workers, who had earlier been in great demand overseas, were now less important because of machines. What was lacking were the raw materials which gave work to the machines and kept production going.

The response of Europe to the situation of Central Africa was marked by the colonial mentality which was gradually becoming clearer, being interested above all in the greater wealth for the great cities.

The response of the Church

Apart from North Africa which had been part of the Roman Empire, for centuries, Africa had been left untouched by the Gospel. After the edict of Milan (313 AD) by which Constantine put an end to the cruel persecutions against Christians, the Church in Africa began to flourish. However this expansion was blocked, first by the barbarian invasions (4-5th. cent.), then by the presence of the Byzantines which was never accepted, (6-7th. cent.) and finally by the coming of Islam. Towards the end of the 13th. century the Church in Africa was almost completely destroyed, surviving only in Egypt and Ethiopia.

During the Middle Ages (11-15th. cent) attempts at evangelisation were directed only at North Africa. Not until the 16th-18th. centuries does the Gospel touch Africa.

Only at the beginning of the 19th. century did the Church, under Gregory XVI, really begin the evangelisation of Africa. Today there is no country in Africa where missionaries have not worked. But our special interest is Central Africa.

"It was Fr. Maximillian Ryllo, a Polish Jesuit, who first had the noble idea of a mission for Africa" (*S* 2027). With these words Comboni begins his valuable History of the Vicariate of Central Africa, established by Propaganda Fide in 1845.

With admiration Comboni refers to all the previous attempts to bring the Gospel to Africa. He recognises the zeal, the determination and the heroism of "three sons of Ignatius". He recalls the "many worthy priests", German, Austrian, Tyrolese, "brought together by the excellent committee of the Society of

Mary and by the great help of the worthy Prof. Mitterrutzner"; the Mazza Institute, "whose name will always be blessed in the Church of Christ"; and finally, the Franciscans, "that numerous family who because of their particular vocation were ready for the worst privations" (S 2744). "However, continues Comboni, it has to be admitted that despite the enormous efforts of these valiant champions of Christ the outcome is very little" (S 2745).

In contrast to what he writes about Europe Comboni recognises the effort and intention of the Church to look at the situation "in the pure light of faith" (S 2742). However he notes a lack of methodology which has caused the discouragement of missionaries and the failure of the enterprise. As one "of the few survivors" of disastrous "apostolic expeditions" he sees Central Africa as "a well-protected fortress which cannot be overcome by direct assault but only by siege" (S 2746).

As we know, the fact that "the assault, entered into by well provided catholic expeditions" ended "always with the sacrifice of the intrepid assailants" (S 2746), brought Propaganda Fide "to the hard decision of abandoning the important mission of Central Africa" (S 2751). Not knowing what to do, Propaganda Fide decided on "tactical retreat" to await better times. The situation of extreme poverty and abandonment with which Comboni describes his Vicariate also refers to the attitude of the Church which had declared itself powerless when faced with the loss of so many people and the enormous difficulties of Central Africa.

God's response in Comboni

In deciding to close the mission to Central Africa in the hope of better times to come, Propaganda Fide made a wise, human decision. At great cost in lives and materials the mission had produced nothing: "like footprints in the sand which are covered by the desert winds, the few seeds, sown by the sweat and blood of missionaries, are all dried up" (S 2745). The decision was not taken from lack of interest but as an official act supported by the religious congregations, the Catholic associations and the various missionaries involved in the evangelisation of Africa. To continue working in such a dangerous place, without results was contrary to common sense and prudence.

It is in this context that the particular greatness of our Founder appears. Despite the enormous obstacles he did not give up or follow the dictates of common sense. Convinced that Africa's moment had arrived, and driven by the burning love of the Good Shepherd, Comboni refused to surrender. "The Church's work for millions of souls still living in darkness and the shadow of death might be put off for centuries. The thought of this deeply wounds and tortures the heart of every holy and faithful catholic who is moved by the spirit of Christ's love. Now, it is not enough to retreat and wait, it is simply a matter of "leaving the path followed so far and of changing the old system" (S 2751-2752). "We dare to give our opinion on such a difficult problem which has exhausted great minds. But we will be forgiven if we protest, hearing the cry of misery of these unhappy children of Adam and our brothers. This takes us beyond the lines laid down by common sense" (S 2754).

Through Comboni the God of Exodus is working. When God saw the situation of his people in Egypt he did not merely sigh in sadness but chose, prepared and sent a liberator. Above all Comboni is the incarnation of the mercy of the Good Shepherd who, when faced with the hunger of the crowd, puts his energies into finding a solution. In other words Comboni is the response of God to the unhappy situation of Africa. The source of his missionary energy is God's love "which was lit by the divine flame on Calvary and came from the side of the Crucified one to embrace the whole human family" (S 2742).

Comboni based his hopes for his Plan on this divine love present in every believer. "We hope that the Plan will find an echo of approval, support and help from all the catholics of the world who have a part in that love which embraces the whole world and which the Saviour brought on earth" (S 2790).

The same love which encouraged Paul along the roads of the Roman Empire (2 Co 5:14) now encourages Comboni and his companions along the footpaths of Africa. At the same time it arouses a vast missionary movement to support them. Comboni based his work of missionary animation on this love present in all believers. Comboni was untiring in this work because he knew that only the compassion of God present in the human heart could hear and respond to the cry of Africa.

The aim of Comboni's mission

In the Rule of 1871 we read, "The purpose of the Institute does not go beyond the limits of strictly priestly duties: its purpose is to carry out Christ's command to his disciples to preach the Gospel to all nations, and so to continue the apostolic ministry through which the whole world has been given a share in the indescribable blessings of Christianity. The Institute's special aim is the regeneration of the people Africa who are the most needy and most abandoned in the world" (S 2647).

For Comboni, mission consists in "fighting the Lord's fight" (S 7225) to overcome the rule of Satan and replace it by God's. This means "extending the Lord's tent" (S 4035), planting true religion and bringing people under the yoke of Christ.

Comboni uses several words to describe his missionary aim.

(a) *Regeneration*. This key word appears in the title of "The Plan for the Regeneration of Africa" (S 2741; see also S 2571, 2308). With this special word Comboni follows the logic of the multiplication of the loaves in which what is already present is used and multiplied. In the case of Africa it is the people and their cultures. The christian message which Comboni brings does not destroy this but makes it new, planting seeds of life which will produce a second birth. The words of Jesus to Nicodemus come to mind, "Unless a person is reborn they cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). Comboni respects what God has created. He works for a deep renewal of the individual, the family and of society. Faith promotes this renewal, "regenerates" it.

The word "regeneration" avoids two extremes, that of despising what already exist to avoid the effort of revitalising it with the Word of God, and that of reducing missionary service to superficial changes. These two extremes are contrary to the vision of Comboni. He had a deep respect and love for Africa and its cultures. At the same time he was aware of the evils present there, especially in slavery. For him everything would be transformed through the Easter mystery into a real resurrection.

Comboni's use of the word "regeneration" was taken up by Vatican II, and particularly by Paul VI, who wrote that cultures "must be regenerated by means of the good news" (EN 18-2).

Finally it should be noted that Comboni originally used the word "conversion" in his Plan. He later used "regeneration". This latter implies that evangelisation and human development go together and both can lead to conversion (cf. Positio p. 176).

(b) *Liberation*. Today we are very aware of this word because of the "theology of liberation". In fact, it is another word for "redemption" and above all is used by Comboni in relation to slavery. He does not distinguish between physical slavery and "the cruel dominion of the devil" (S 2298) which should move all Catholics to do something "to liberate these poor black peoples from the night of paganism and make the living light of faith in Christ shine over them" (S 2543).

The "Comboni texts on liberation", even those on slavery, are linked to the wider meaning of the word. For Comboni liberation is part of the same "mission of Jesus Christ who came into the world to free slaves and bring liberty to all" (S 4926). The "liberation from horrendous slavery (...) belongs to and is a result of the work of the Catholic Church" (S 6921).

Even when seen as the "most philanthropic work of this century", the struggle against the slave trade is always linked to "the plans of the divine redeemer of the human race, who has announced the

true liberty and fraternity of all" (S 5228). Christ is the fount of liberty and only the Church is his agent. Here is an extract which summarises these ideas:

"Only Christ who with his sacrifice on Calvary wants slavery banished from the earth, and who announces true liberty, calling all nations and every individual to a relationship with God so as to be able to say "Abba, Father", only he can liberate Africa from slavery. Only Catholicism can bring freedom to that great part of humanity which lives under the yoke of slavery. This is what makes our work so important, even if it is only seen as philanthropy. We aim to bring the light of Faith to Africa and give life to thousands of souls who still sleep under the shadow of death" (S 1820; see EN 30-33).

Like the word "regeneration", "liberation" has two meanings for Comboni. It means the liberation "from" sin, prejudice, superstition, needs, sickness, tribal conflict. At same time it means the liberation "of" everything that is positive, of energy and potential and talents. In Christ and through the work of the Spirit, this liberation "from" and "of" enables Africa to be responsible for its own future both in the Church and society.

(c) "*Catholic faith and Christian civilisation* in Central Africa, this is the noble apostolate and great work of the redemption of Africa. We march under this sacred and glorious standard, blessed by the Vicar of Christ and the Apostolic See.

Faith and civilisation were never present there. And whatever philosophers say, whatever materialists think, whatever unbelievers in their pride insinuate, the fact is that Faith and Civilisation kiss, and one cannot go ahead without the other. We are aware that the Catholic Faith, with the preaching of its dogmas, its laws, its teachings and divine morality, always brings to birth true christian civilisation. This, when it is embraced and followed by unbelievers, is drawn irresistibly and necessarily towards the true faith in which it recognises its inseparable friend, teacher and mother" (S 6214).

This text which introduces the "The Outline History of the Discovery of Africa" shows us two other words, faith and civilisation, which were very dear to our Founder. For Comboni, faith and civilisation walk together, they generate and influence each other. One cannot exist without the other. Consequently both form part of the basic idea of his Plan. In 1871 Comboni writes to the Emperor Francis Joseph: "Your Majesty, (...) following the invitation of the Holy See, I have produced the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa which aims to *plant and establish the faith and civilisation* among these tribes" (S 2409). Five years later he writes to Canon Milone, director of *Libertà Cattolica*: "Here I find myself in a new world which is awaiting civilisation by means of the faith" (S 3642).

The meaning of Comboni's "faith and civilisation" is illustrated by the fruits which he expected from the "religious and civil education" which his Institutes offered in Africa: following of the spirit of Jesus Christ, knowledge of the catechism, customs which are in accordance with christian morals, the acquiring of the rudiments of human knowledge and basic arts, so as to have "honest and virtuous" men and women who are "useful and busy" (S 826-827).

The linking of "faith and civilisation", while revealing a notable European focus typical of the times, is basically valid and still relevant. In fact, it is the antecedent of the links between "evangelisation, human development and liberation" which are part of mission nowadays (cf. EN 31-34).

Involving all the Church

"I would like to have at my disposal a hundred tongues and a hundred hearts to offer in support of Africa" (S 1215). These words of Comboni, written in 1866 to Canon Ortalda, reveal an apostle who cared not only about spreading the Gospel in places where it was unknown but also about the missionary animation of the churches, helping them to live their vocation "ad gentes" more deeply through actions.

(a) *Sphere of action*. Comboni had only one tongue and one heart, but it can be said that none of the missionary Founders of the last century was as dynamic and genial a missionary animator as Comboni. He travelled across Europe to inform and involve different groups in his work.

In the Church he involved the Pope and Roman congregations, bishops and seminaries, dioceses, parishes and shrines, religious institutes associations of lay people, national and regional assemblies, monasteries and enclosed convents (of which he had more than 200 praying for him! - S 1887).

In the political sphere from the Emperors of Austria and France to the King of Belgium, Comboni was in contact with members of various governments and royal families who were the pillars of social-political life at that time and who did not always look towards with Africa from the supernatural point of view.

Comboni had many contacts in the world of science. In his writings he listed 61 explorers (some of whom he knew personally). His own contribution to geographical, anthropological and cultural discoveries in Africa should not be overlooked.

(b) There was one *aim*: to involve everyone in the regeneration of Africa by means of information and through his own missionary enthusiasm. Comboni made this involvement practical with three words: people, money and prayers. He was a strong promoter of vocations, a daring collector of funds and an untiring animator of prayers for the conversion of Africa.

(c) Comboni used four main *means* of animating the Church and society: person contact, travel, letters and the press.

With regard to his person contacts Lozano writes, "He was a real 'public relations man'. He was wonderfully adept at 'selling' his ideas and projects and at gathering funds for his missionary work without having to have recourse to Propaganda Fide. He also knew how to win over to his cause such important personages as the Pasha of Egypt or one of his ministers, the chiefs of various African clans, the King of Belgium, the Emperor of Austria, Cardinal Barnabò (Prefect of Propaganda Fide) and even Pius IX. In his letters and reports we can see the care he took to include such data as would more readily attract the benevolence of his sponsors. On more than one occasion in his letters to the Society of Cologne he mentions the great German missionaries he had known. This was not mere servile adulation, but a genuine capacity to win the support of others for his plans"⁶⁶.

By means of his journeys of missionary animation, which were a continuation of those in Africa, "Comboni brought to the countries of Europe, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, England, the cry of his apostolic concern, his eye-witness account of the great misery and spiritual bondage of the people of Africa. From the beginning (October 1864-June 1865) of his six journeys in Europe a common theme emerges in his missionary animation. He wanted his *Plan* to be known. It was a real solution to a demanding problem that needed all the catholics of the world to join together; to ask for help as a way of establishing his institutes, promoting vocations and making useful contacts with individuals and organisations" (*Positio*, pp LXI-LVII).

Comboni wrote a huge number of letters which "ever reminds us that no other interest motivated him other than that which is expressed by his motto *Africa or death* (...)" (*Positio*, p. LXIII). In 1871 Comboni told Bishop Canossa that he had written 1347 letters in less than five months (S 2460). Two years later he wrote to Fr. Bricolo, "Now a note with two pieces of news about me since I don't have time to write. I have many distinguished benefactors that I need to keep in touch with (...)" (S 3334).

Comboni sent articles and information to the press. Some were sad appeals, others scientific contributions especially about his Plan and the Postulatum to the Council. He believed in the press, the

⁶⁶ LOZANO J.M., *The Spirituality of Daniel Comboni. Apostle - Prophet - Founder*, Houston 1989, p. 21.

only means of communication then available. There are 44 references to newspapers and periodicals which he mentions either as sources of his personal reading or to which he has written. Five years before beginning the *Annals of the Good Shepherd*, Comboni was involved in the setting up of another magazine together with the father of Marie Deluil Martiny from Marseilles. Comboni wrote, "The father of this great soul has cooperated with me in the setting up of a newspaper which will come out once a month. It will spread the glory of Jesus Christ and his dignity as contemplated in his doctrine and his example. It will be a paper which will publicise the Work for the Regeneration of Africa and further the honour to the Sacred Heart" (S 1510).

In this context it is especially the *Postulatum* for Central Africa which merits further attention, and not only because it was sent to the Council Fathers of the First Vatican Council. It is important because it shows the real aim of Comboni's missionary animation: to help the Church live fully its own missionary calling.

The *Postulatum* was the fruit of an inspiration from above and of "an effort that cannot be described" (Positio p.LXIII). It begins with an important phrase, "The undersigned Fathers, with great humility and fervent supplication, implore the Holy Ecumenical Vatican Council that while its gives its attention to the whole world and is moved by the needs of all, to deign to give at least a glance of compassion to Central Africa" (S 2310).

The aim of the document then is the request to turn a "glance of compassion" to Africa to see what can be done there, "by the bowels of Jesus Christ" (S 2304). Compassion and bowels: two words which recall the pity which moved the Good Shepherd to multiply the loaves. Comboni, in his work of missionary animation asks nothing else than that the love of the Good Shepherd continue to be made incarnate in the Church without neglecting "a tenth part of humanity" (S 2310).

(d) A characteristic of Comboni's missionary animation is the way he developed a *systematic organisation*. It is interesting to note that in order to provide stability for the future, he not only founded the two Institutes in Verona and the houses in Cairo, but he also set up the Work of Good Shepherd (*Opera del Buon Pastore*) in 1867 with the aim of providing financial support. At the same time it was to be a means of on-going missionary animation throughout Europe. Writing to Cardinal Barnabò to report its foundation Comboni says, "(...) I have judged it opportune to profit by the spirit of forming associations which dominates our times, as a means of providing for the two Institutes. It will also have the aim of making Africa known, awaken interest in its conversion and help to promote good vocations for the African apostolate from the catholic countries" (S 1417).⁶⁷

The magazine, *Annals of the Good Shepherd* (*Annali del Buon Pastore*) which Comboni founded in 1872 should be seen in this context of organised missionary animation. From the beginning it provoked "great love for the missions" (S 4166), making known the geography, the history and the customs of Africa and the exhausting apostolate of the missionaries. It noted scientific discoveries, "intending thus to give glory to Jesus Christ, who is the unifying principle of redemption and life" (S 6215-6216).

Comboni's missionary animation was not sporadic, but organised. It sought to develop both human and spiritual awareness of the problems. It looked for prayers and vocations, but also for assistance in terms of support, understanding, respect and financial help.

I do not believe that in the last century there was a Founder with such a clear vision of the importance of missionary animation. It was seen not only as an activity but also as an organised section of the work with the direct involvement and responsibility of all, including laity.

⁶⁷ See also GILLI A., *L'Istituto Missionario Comboniano dalla fondazione alla morte di Daniele Comboni* (History of the Comboni Missionary Institute from its Foundation to the Death of D. Comboni), EMI 1979, pp. 71-78.

Methodology

Comboni gave great attention to methods of working. His Plan came out of a reflection on "the system followed so far" which was "not appropriate for the regeneration of the interior of Africa" (S 808). It failed because "Every work of great importance which has a noble human idea needs an organisation which corresponds to the idea and which is knowledgeable. Such an organisation must have a clearly formulated aim as a foundation" (S 2469).

Comboni's insistence on the necessity of an efficient methodology should not mislead us. He knows that the mission is first of all God's work. In his Summary of the History of 1870, placing the poor results in perspective he writes: "Above all we have to admit that in general the work of a missionary in the midst of a foreign people does not have results which can be properly measured. The conquest of the Gospel comes about in a different way than political conquest. The result of an apostle's work is often unseen and known only to God" (S 2171). Sound methodology is necessary "to assure the coming of the religion of Jesus Christ" in Africa. "Above all we must recognise the truth that the work of God comes about in mysterious ways and begins in a small way, gradually coming to perfection. This great work of redeeming christian love began unseen like the mustard seed in the Gospel, growing slowly and in the end bearing fruit" (S 2472).

Comboni's basic text on methodology is the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* which he developed around the simple question, "Could the conquest of unhappy Africa not be better achieved by basing our work there where Africans live in their own culture and where Europeans can work without collapsing? Can we not bring about the conversion of Africa by means of Africa?" (S 2753).

Comboni's writings are rich in ideas on missionary method. Some of the more important ones are:

(a) *Simplicity*. Comboni wanted to give general guidelines which a missionary can then adapt. "It seems opportune, almost necessary, that of all the ideas that could be used in the work of the regeneration of Africa, the more important ones are those which have a unity of concept and simplicity of application. We hope that the Plan is like this. Although it is vast in its outlook, it is also simple and easy to put into action" (S 2755).

(b) *Analysis of the situation*. In his Plan Comboni first gives an outline of what has already been done in Africa. In the Summarium we read, "Previous experiences are gathered and remoulded in the 'understanding from on high' which is the originality of Comboni's Plan. He recalls almost word for word the appeal for missionary cooperation which was launched by Knoblecher in 1850. He notes the experience of the 'Mazza plan' which has already been excluded in favour of the education of Africans on the coast of Africa rather than in Europe. Finally, the Plan contains Comboni's rethinking of his ideas in the light of suggestions received in 1863 from the Cologne Society" (pp. 20-21).

(c) *Save Africa by means of Africa*. Comboni made his proposals in the light of history, theology, suggestions from others and based on an analysis of the situation in Africa. Out of this combination of ideas he developed his project of "saving Africa by means of Africa". The idea was already around but Comboni was a man "with wide apostolic and missionary experience" (S 6873). Thus he was able to grasp the demands of the situation and fully commit himself to educating African missionaries to be sent to their own people.

The project "save Africa by mean of Africa" was not only an expression of Comboni's faith in Africa; it was also the result of "years of work" (S 5094). Comboni fought prejudice against Africans. Comboni was not simply a pious and zealous missionary, but a man who understood the world in which he worked. He had a vast knowledge of Africa, its history, geography, flora and of the customs of the peoples of his diocese.

Comboni, "the humble and useless servant of the Africans" (S 6809), teaches us that understanding the situation of the missions is a basic element of missionary methodology. Without it we are building on sand.

(d) *Cooperation*. Through his Plan Comboni wanted to mobilise the whole Catholic world. In 1886 he wrote to Canon Mitterutzner, "I would like to see a hundred religious congregations divide Africa among them" (S 1228). Comboni was open to any kind of cooperation so that Christ could be preached (S 6082). He dreamed of the involvement of all: Propaganda, the bishops, the religious orders and congregations, all the Catholics of the world and of Africans themselves. He wanted them to be "apostles of the faith and civilisation among their own peoples. The Church has always found this to be the most effective method to bring a people to the true faith and to complete the mission of Christ" (S 2472).

Today there is the temptation to say that "save Africa with Africa" means "let Africa get on with it alone". This was not Comboni's idea. Comboni always based his Plan on cooperation between Africa and Europe through mutual help and integration. He always saw Africans and Europeans as working together. The novelty of the Plan certainly lay in the fundamental role given to the local Church but Comboni always wanted the involvement of other Churches and never saw the two in opposition. Later, Pius XII, John XXIII and John Paul II were to insist on the need for cooperation between missionaries and the local Churches where they work (cf. *EP* 55; *PrP* 9; *ChL* 35).

Comboni himself had three religious congregations working in his vicariate and had contacted at least seventeen others. This despite the fact that one of his greatest frustrations was the inability of the religious congregations to work together.

Comboni's idea of mission is similar to that of a world movement. "The work must be catholic, not Spanish or French, or German, or Italian" (S 944). This idea of independence from the great political powers and of internationality is a very precious part of Comboni's methodology.

(e) *Faithfulness to the Church*. For Comboni mission has a strong ecclesial dimension. In 1928 Fr. Meroni wrote that "The faith of the Servant of God was purely Roman". Not only was Comboni devoted to the Pope, but he felt sent by the Church which "does not exist without the Pope" (S 2378). In 1981 in the centenary year of our Founder's death, Fr. Calvia wrote, "Of all the ways of describing Comboni I prefer that of 'Comboni man of the Church'. In his theological insight his concept of mission is very much part of his idea of Church. His dedication to mission is his dedication to the Church. He himself wrote, 'my whole heart desires the good of the Church and of Africa for which I would give a hundred lives if I had them' (S 6438)".⁶⁸

Comboni called himself "the most useless servant of the Church" (S 2269). He knew how to be an uncomfortable prophet for the love of Africa. However, this was never at the expense of communion with the Church. "I have sold my will, my life and my whole self to the Holy See, (...) and I would refuse, if it were possible with the grace of God, to convert the whole world were it not for the command and authority of the Holy See, as it was said, 'who listens to you, listens to me'" (S 2635).

With the heading 'Loyalty and challenge' the Rule of Life sums up the attitude of the Founder towards the Holy See. "Comboni's unfailing loyalty to and love for the Church were rooted in his missionary charism. He expressed this particularly by an untiring effort to move the conscience of the Pastors of the Church concerning their missionary responsibility so that Africa's hour might not pass in vain. He himself wanted to perform his work for the salvation of Africa as a missionary sent by the Church" (*RL* 9).

⁶⁸ CALVIA S., in *Daniel Comboni nel 1° Centenario della morte 1881-1981*, Verona 1982, p. 49.

PRAYER

Christ, Good Shepherd,
you gave your Holy Spirit
to Daniel Comboni so that
faced with the difficult mission of Africa,
he might enrich the Church
with a spirituality and a methodology
for making your tenderness and compassion
present among those people to regenerate them.
We pray,
make us faithful and creative heirs
of this spirituality and methodology
as we face the challenge
of evangelisation and missionary animation
in the world and the Church today.
You who live and reign
with the Father and Holy Spirit
for ever and ever. Amen.

MISSION TODAY FOR THE COMBONI MISSIONARY

Readings:

RL 13:56-71: Evangelisation

RL 72-79: Missionary Animation

Ratio 74-76: Sense of the Church

CA 1991, 39-50: Area of work and methodology

In the service of the Kingdom of God

In order to understand our missionary service today, which is a continuation of the mission of Christ incarnate in Comboni, it is important to look at recent developments in missiology since Vatican II especially with regard to the biblical idea of the kingdom of God. This has been given a more prominent place in the theology of mission since the Synod of Bishops on evangelisation (1974) and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

Vatican II said, "The Lord Jesus inaugurated the Church by preaching the coming of the kingdom of God which had been promised in the scriptures" and by revealing it in his words and through his presence (cf. *LG* 5). The Church's aim "is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time" (*LG* 9).

Developing this theme Paul VI added, "As evangeliser Christ first of all announces a kingdom, the kingdom of God which is so important that everything is relative in regard to it" (*EN* 8).

Continuing this, *Redemptoris Missio* clearly states that "the proclamation and inauguration of the kingdom of God is the aim of the mission" of Jesus of Nazareth (RM 13). After he received the Holy Spirit at his baptism he revealed his Messianic vocation saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near. Be converted and believe the Good News" (*Mk* 1:15).

The kingdom of God cannot be adequately defined. Jesus spoke of it in parables which indicate the presence, its vitality, its laws, its power for growth and conversion as a condition of entry into it. But it remains a mystery like the mystery of God and Christ in whom the kingdom is personified. In fact Jesus, who was obedient unto death on the cross and who was raised for the resurrection of all, is the fullness of the love of the Father in the world and the highest expression of the values of the kingdom.

If it is true that "the kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, a programme, but above all a person who has the face and the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (*RM* 18), then it can be understood how the kingdom is experienced by becoming a disciple of the Lord. The Gospel says that God reveals his kingdom only to those who listen to Jesus, question him, meet him and open their hearts to his message and his life-style. Only through a close relationship with him can we enter the kingdom or the kingdom enter us.

The idea of the kingdom casts new light on the Church which "is not an end in itself but which exists for the kingdom of God of which it is the seed, the sign and the instrument" (*RM* 18) This happens with the announcement of the call to conversion, then the founding of a community of faith and love, through the spreading of Gospel values in the world. It is important to keep in mind that the Church is "a sign and instrument" if we want to develop a genuine ecclesial community. That is, a community of people who refer to God in the living of their lives, practising fraternal love and "who are committed to overcoming every form of death, of injustice, as the Father has overcome all this in Jesus Christ".⁶⁹

The kingdom with its values of solidarity, justice, peace and the protection of creation makes it clear that mission has never been simply something connected to the Church, but is the entry of God into the world to redeem and transform it. Mission, in other words, goes beyond the mere building of a community of believers and is not based on the number of Christians in a place. Mission is related to a whole set of values which enter society and touch culture, politics and religion. Many people have heard the values of the kingdom without officially joining the Church. Gandhi for example, never became a full disciple of Christ with baptism but he accepted the peace, the solidarity and the logic of the Beatitudes.

The aim of mission is the "new heaven and new earth" of Revelation (*Rv* 21:1). The Chapter of 1985 examined the values of the kingdom and made it clear that a deeper understanding of them is part of our spirituality and missionary theology (cf. CA 1985, 3rd Priority).

From the heart of Christ

"The Founder discovered in the mystery of the Heart of Jesus the thrust of his missionary commitment" (*RL* 3). Comboni had no doubt that it is the love of the heart of Christ which enables a missionary to depart and which sustains him in difficulties. "Christ is the victim offered for all the world" (*S* 3324) and "the joy, the hope, and everything for his poor missionaries" (*S* 5255). The unconditional love of Comboni for the people of Africa had no other source than the salvific love of the Good Shepherd, "I entrust myself to that heart which beats for Africa, which only wants the conversion of souls. I feel even more ready to suffer to my last breath, and die for Jesus Christ and for the salvation of the unhappy peoples of Central Africa" (*S* 4290).

The Comboni missionary knows that the commitment to mission comes from a heart, and that an intimate and constant relationship with Christ is necessary. The missionary "contemplates", which means more than reflecting from time to time on something which the Lord did or said. It means looking deeply into his personality and knowing the origin of his motives, his attitudes, his words and actions, at what makes Jesus what he is, that is, the heart of the man.

⁶⁹ PIERLI F. & Council, *circ. lett.* (3.12.1989), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 165, p. 29.

In the Rule of 1871 Comboni refers to this profound communion with Christ when he writes that the missionaries must "keep their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and always seeking to understand more deeply the meaning of a God who died on the Cross for the salvation of souls. They will be happy to offer themselves and to lose everything and to die for him and with him if they can contemplate and taste this mystery of love" (*S* 2721-2722). The words "contemplate and taste" merit further comment.

(a) *To contemplate* means to look with faith, to see with closed eyes, to be absorbed, to share in. It demands long moments of silence otherwise we cannot enter into the quiet and rest of the desert. All of this is not a flight from the apostolate but an essential pause so that it can be lived in cooperation with the Spirit rather than just as a human activity.

Contemplation initiates a conscious and personal relationship with God. It begins when I close my eyes to what surrounds me, even the bible, and in the depths of myself I fix myself on Christ, listen to his word directed to me, recalled for me and made to echo in my heart by the Holy Spirit, who enables me to taste it and who transforms me in love.

To arrive at the fount of real mysticism and missionary spirituality it is important to have this contemplative attitude. It is an essential part of apostolic life rather than a moment of extraordinary grace from God. It is part of allowing the Spirit to help us "understand with all the saints what is the breadth, the length, the height and the depth" of the love of Christ, "which surpasses all knowledge" (*Ep* 3:19). This is the revelation of God himself, who sits at table with us so that we can know him fully (cf. *Rv* 3:20).

Such contemplation helps us to see Christ in others, above all in the poor and suffering who are a special sacrament. It enables us to see him at work in other religions and cultures (cf. *RL* 6; 16; 56.2). Without this contemplation the missionary would have an atheistic view of the world and history which destroys the meaning of prayer and the sacraments. As John Paul II confidently states, "The missionary must be a contemplative in action" (*RM* 91).

(b) *To taste* means to experience the mystery of God within ourselves. When the attitudes of the heart of Christ become part of me then I 'feel' them, I 'taste' them in a kind of union in which it is impossible to distinguish what is of me and what is of him (cf. *CA* 1991, no. 13). This is a kind of tasting at times very joyful, at times very bitter but always a blessing. Paul speaks of it often, "I am full of consolation, full of joy in every tribulation" (*I Co* 7:4; see also *Col* 1:24). In 1889 Comboni writes to Cardinal Canossa in a moment of great difficulty, "The missionaries, the sisters, the brothers and the personnel of the missions have stood firm with constancy and courage ready for the greatest privations and sacrifices. We have suffered greatly yet we are happy and content because the Lord has deigned to make us sharers in his passion. He helps us to carry his Cross, the divine symbol of resurrection of life" (*S* 6403).

Although it seems incredible, the great mystics, especially those linked to the heart of Christ such as Gertrude, Catherine of Siena, Margaret Mary Alacoque and Veronica Giuliani, assure us that "to die for him and with him", to suffer for Christ the Good Shepherd is a source of great joy. It produces great fruit for the building of the kingdom of God in the world. We are at the height of missionary mysticism. This is not the reserve of a few but it is a gift to ask for and to aim at for all those who wish to be genuine comboni missionaries.

Our Founder often reveals the depths of his own contemplation. In 1858 on the death of his mother he wrote to his father, "those who find themselves afflicted have the right to call themselves blessed as they share the blessing of the saints for whom the greatest joy was to suffer greatly for the glory of Christ" (*S* 422). And in 1881 shortly before his own death Comboni wrote to Fr. Sembianti, "The ways of the Lord are merciful and God is love. I know my worth as a missionary; I know something of the greatness of the Heart of Jesus" (*S* 6582).

Also enlightening are the words written by Massaja to Comboni in 1879, "Know that I love you for your good heart and for the love of God which burns within you" (*Positio*, p. CXL).

The heart of the man

The pierced heart of Christ is the symbol of the human heart which is fatally wounded and in need of healing. Consequently the mission which comes from the heart of the Crucified is not a simple invitation towards others. It is a mandate to 'enter' the depths of the person where hatred, evil and darkness consume them. Mission does not aim to create slaves but a people who are the children of God, loving him with all their hearts (cf. *Mt* 22:37) so that truth and goodness are written there (cf. *Pr* 3:3).

The bible often speaks of "the heart" and often in negative terms so that Ezechiel describes the new covenant almost as a heart transplant! "I will give you a new heart, putting a new spirit within you. I will take from you your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh" (*Ezk* 36:26). A missionary therefore needs to implore God for "a pure heart" (*Pss* 51,12), humble, wise, just, strong, well disposed, in other words the heart of a son. The Church, says Paul VI, knows that people soon become inhuman if the inhuman inclinations of the heart are not purified or converted (*EN* 36).

If a missionary loses sight of the heart of the people and does not touch their emotions he risks creating a people who put on the mantle of Christ but at a deeper level still follow old customs and are still dominated by fear. The mission that has its source in the heart of the Good Shepherd should change a person deeply, giving meaning and value to all their actions. Throughout the world many Christians still live in fear because in the depths of their heart they do not have Christ the Liberator.

Evangelisation which does not further a deep mystical unity between God and man, between the heart of Christ and the heart of man, is an evangelisation which produces a surface Christianity without joy or hope, without freedom or apostolic zeal. Why did the disciples of Emmaus return to Jerusalem in a hurry? Because after meeting Jesus they "felt their hearts burn within them" (*Lk* 24:32).

Basic option

Each religious congregation in the Church is led by its charism to work with a particular group of people. Repeating Comboni's phrase, we work for "the most needy and the most abandoned" (*S* 2647). But this is true for the Church as a whole. John Paul II has said, "The Church wants to be the Church of the poor (...). The poor merit special attention whatever the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves (...). They are the first to whom mission is directed" (*RM* 60). Thus, if we isolate the words of Comboni they can become an empty slogan. What do we mean by the poorest and most abandoned?

The official interpretation is found in the Rule of Life, "God's call to missionary service became reality for Comboni in his choice of the peoples of Africa who at that point in history appeared to him to be 'the poorest and most abandoned of the universe', especially concerning the faith" (*RL* 5).

This specific aim is very important because it defines the sphere of work of our Institute. The world of the poor is large and varied. We cannot run to the help of all. Indeed if we want the Church to be "well prepared for every good work" (*PC* 1), we must have a particular focus (*S* 2647).

The focus of the Comboni Missionaries is described by the Founder in the Plan, "people without shepherd, without apostles, without Church, without faith" (*S* 2311). For Comboni the greatest sign of poverty is the lack of faith in Christ, so he looked towards those who had never heard the word of God or been touched by the values of the kingdom.

Whoever has been in the pagan world knows what the absence of Christ means. Our own culture could be described as pagan but it is still full of traces of Christ and his Church, in history, architecture, literature, art and in everyday life. There is a great difference between people "who have a certain faith which is badly known" (cf. *EN* 52, 54, 56) and people who do not know "Jesus Christ and his Gospel" and whose culture has never been influenced by gospel values (cf. *EN* 51, 53, 55).

For Comboni the main characteristic of the "poor and most abandoned" is "paganism". Hence the Rule of Life says, "The Institute has the purpose of carrying out the evangelizing mission of the Church among those peoples, or groups of peoples, not yet or only inadequately evangelized" (RL 13).

In 1920 Fr. Meroni wrote that "The Sons of the Sacred Heart take as their aim the word of Christ on the cross, 'SITIO, thirst. *I thirst for souls*'. The members of the congregation seek holiness by working for the conversion of unbelievers".⁷⁰

Like Paul, whom Comboni saw as the protector of the Institute, we are called to bring the name of the Lord "to the gentiles" (Ac 9:15), to announce it "in the midst of pagans" (Ga 1:16), to found christian communities and not to maintain them, because "missionary activity 'ad gentes' is different from pastoral activity among believers" (AG 6). Paul too made this distinction. He saw himself as *father* to the Corinthians whilst Timothy was *pastor* to them (cf. 1 Co 4:15-17).

According to John Paul II, "The boundaries between *pastoral care* of the faithful, *new evangelisation* and specific *missionary activity* are not easily defined (...)" ; however, the importance of the announcing of the Gospel and the founding of new Churches must not be lost because this is the first duty of the Church (RM 34). This importance is lost when the fundamental option is vague and we move towards pastoral rather than missionary situations.

In this context we can understand the significance of the Chapter of 1985 which examined our commitments. Because of the basic option of our Institute we are of necessity only 'temporary' (RL 71), and like Paul we cannot stop at Antioch or Corinth. Instead we must found the christian community and go elsewhere.

Evangelising the peoples

The basic option of the Institute brings us to the *aim* of our missionary service. This, says the Rule of Life (13), is evangelisation, and consists in bringing people to "an encounter with the person of Christ and his message, and entry into the new people of God" (RL 56). In addition to preaching the word and educating those who accept it, this implies a clear commitment to the founding of new Churches (62) and the total liberation of people (61) as the fruit of the coming of the kingdom.

(a) *A personal encounter with Christ* (RL 59) is not 'one' of the aims of evangelisation. It is the main aim. "In the message that the Church announces there are aspects which are secondary (...). However there is something which is essential: to evangelise and above all to witness in a direct and simple way to God revealed in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. (...) It is a proclamation that in Jesus Christ who has become man, died and is risen, salvation is offered to everyone" (EN 25-27).

The kingdom of God is expressed in the person of Christ without whom the holiest of plans become Utopia. The human heart is damaged and is easily taken over by hatred, war and exploitation. To announce the values of the kingdom, omitting Jesus Christ who the key to their interpretation, is to propose wonderful ideas which are destined to fail.

With regard to this Fr. Agostoni wrote, "Faith is the main aspect of the missionary announcement of the Gospel. To lengthen the life of a sick person by an organ transplant, to land on the moon, to make the world a better place means to realise some of the noblest ideas. More than anyone a christian should feel obliged to rejoice when it happens, but this is still not the answer to the questions which people ask and which the Vatican Council raised (cf. NA 1; GS 10)".⁷¹

⁷⁰ P. MERONI, in Supplement to *Nigrizia* XXXVIII (Sept. 1920) 9, p. 2.

⁷¹ AGOSTONI T., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 91, pp. 13-14.

(b) *The foundation of new Churches* (RL 62) is the fruit of the proclamation of the Gospel and the personal meeting with Christ. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* we read, "Those who receive the good news unite themselves in the name of Jesus to seek the kingdom together, to build it and to live it" (EN 13). Mission flowers in the birth of local christian communities, living cells of the Lord's body, the messianic people who "have been made by Christ into a communion of life, love and truth to be an instrument of redemption for all" (EN 9).

All the missionary encyclicals speak of the task of creating new christian communities and building the Church. Vatican II gives the reason for this insistence. If it is true that "Christ founded his Church as the sacrament of salvation" (AG 5), then "the final aim of missionary activity is evangelisation and the planting of the Church among people in whom it has not yet taken root. Thus from the seed of the Word the local Church is born" (AG 6). Accepting the Gospel means becoming part of a real community of believers, the people of God (cf. EN 23; LG 9; GS 24).

Paul who called himself "the witness to Jesus among the pagans" (cf. *Rm* 15:16; 16:26), always referred to the 'churches' which he founded and which were his daily concern (cf. *2 Co* 11:28). Acts illustrates his way of working, "Having preached the Gospel in Derbe and made a large number of converts, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them in the faith. After fasting and praying, they appointed elders in each community and commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (*Ac* 14:21-23).

(c) *The liberation of the human person* (RL 61) is not extra to the Gospel (cf. EN 30). Indeed, "there is a clear connection between evangelisation and human development"; development which the Church promotes "comes from God, as shown in Jesus the God-man, and brings people to God" (cf. *RM* 58-59).

"To say that Mission has as its specific aim the preaching of the Gospel, making the Church present does not describe everything that the Church does or can do. (...) The preaching of the Gospel is not something abstract. Its content is essentially love for God and love for others. (...) Because of this, the effort to help those in need can never be forgotten by the Church or its missionaries".⁷²

Here we need to remember that human development which does not bring about a "new *christian* social order" (*PrP* 17; cf. also *EP* 61), has nothing to do with the mission of the Church. In fact, "in preaching liberation and in associating itself with those who suffer for it, the Church (...) reaffirms the primacy of its spiritual vocation and refuses to substitute the announcement of the kingdom with the proclamation of human liberation. The Church holds that its own contribution to liberation is incomplete if it neglects the proclamation of Salvation in Jesus Christ" (EN 34).

In other words, it must be remembered that there is no kingdom of God without Christ, and no Christ without the kingdom of God which includes the cultural, social and political world.

How do we evangelise?

Having clarified our understanding of the aim of the Institute we look to the Rule of Life to answer the question, how are we to evangelise?

(a) *Cooperating with the Holy Spirit* (RL 56). The comboni missionary knows that the Spirit is the main agent of evangelisation (cf. EN 75; AG 4; RM 21). "The missionary acknowledges that the Spirit acts in each evangelizer and reveals to him Christ's mystery and teaching. At the same time the Spirit acts in the hearer and predisposes him to be open and receptive to the news of the kingdom being proclaimed" (RL 56:2).

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

We cooperate with the Holy Spirit as helpers. As Paul says, "How can they call on him, if they do not believe in him? How can they believe if they have never heard? And how will they hear if there is not someone to preach? How will there be preachers unless they are sent? As scripture says, 'how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news'" (Rm 10:14-15).

The Holy Spirit prepares the ground and makes the seed grow. We are the sowers. Hence the importance of evangelisation because without it the work remains only in the preparatory phase. The Holy Spirit was already present like a spark in the three thousand who were converted on the day of Pentecost. It was the proclamation of the name of Jesus that fanned the spark into a fire and transformed the hearers into church, into conscious and active members of the kingdom of God.

This said, the missionary knows that in the effort of sowing he can and must count on the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, like Christ, he is guided by the Spirit and has a deep knowledge of the Spirit's ways of working.

(b) *Genuine dialogue* (RL 57; 67). "This missionary discovers the cultural and religious values of the peoples, and respects their conscience and convictions, continuing the dialogue begun by the Word of God in the Incarnation and the Gospel. Thus dialogue becomes the norm for all evangelising activity" (RL 57). A missionary methodology which did not promote an attitude of "sincere and patient dialogue" (AG 11) would be a crusade without the duty of "respecting all that has been done by the Holy Spirit, who blows where he wants" (RM 56).

Respect does not mean renouncing Jesus Christ as the only Saviour (cf. Ac 4:12), it means inviting people to enter the christian community, the people of God, the body of Christ (cf. AG 7). However, our meeting with other religions is sometimes based on an attitude of prejudice and arrogance which is unacceptable. Such attitudes are rooted in the history of the Church. Comboni himself, following the usage of his time, defined non-christian religions as obscure and abominable superstitions.

Every missionary knows that in all the religions there are "seeds of the Word" (AG 11), "the echo of thousands of years of search for God" (EN 53). These are traces of the Spirit to be searched out and valued. This is why we approach them in a spirit of dialogue.

Dialogue was begun by Vatican II, not as a substitute for the Gospel or as a tactic, but as an important and dignified way of working "for common progress in the search for God and as a way of overcoming prejudice, intolerance and bad will" (RM 56). The Council says: "The Church asks its children to give witness to their faith and the christian life by using dialogue and cooperation, prudently and charitably with the followers of other religions, recognising, preserving and promoting their spiritual, moral and cultural values" (NA 2).

(c) *Open and faithful announcers of the Gospel* (RL 59). A missionary proclaims the Gospel with the witness of his personal and community life (cf. RL 58). "As soon as he perceives that the hour of grace has come, he proclaims the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, clearly and unequivocally" (RL 59). In fact specific missionary work, "is characterised as the announcement of Christ and his Gospel" (RM 34). With this work "we want to bring as many as possible in the kingdom of the Redeemer so that the shedding of his blood is ever more fruitful" (RE). We recall that the announcing of the good news is basic programme of action received by the Church from its Founder.

There is the danger that the difficulties which missionaries face will lead them to *compromise* the Gospel. As John Paul II has said, "The temptation today is to reduce Christianity to mere human wisdom, like common sense. In a world which is very secularised a gradual secularisation of salvation has come about so that only the human dimension is seen. Instead we know that Jesus came to bring full salvation to everyone, offering them the possibility of being a child of God" (RM 11). Faced with indifference and mockery we repeat with Paul the words, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is

God's power for the salvation of everyone who believes" (*Rm* 1:16). Faced with rejection and opposition we recall the words of the Apostles: "We cannot keep silence" (*Ac* 4:20).

There is also the danger of being *too conciliatory*, of searching for ideas held in common as a way of keeping the peace rather than searching for truth. Live and let live! This is to close an eye to the fact that men, deceived by evil and their own vain reason, often exchange divine truth for a lie. Then, "living and dying without God, they experience the final desperation" (*LG* 16). A missionary, as we have seen, accepts dialogue as part of his normal activity which is to evangelise and proclaim the Gospel. The Council, whilst it promoted dialogue, noted that other religions "do hold precepts and doctrines which are different from those which the Church believes and proposes" (*NA* 2).

Finally there is the danger of being *superficial*, depriving the Word of the power of God and making it incapable of entering hearts and growing to maturity. Sometimes we can be accused of only being interested in sacraments to the neglect of the kerygma and catechesis. The sacraments need to be something real rather than something "religious" which substitutes pagan rites. The real aim of missionary work is not baptism, confirmation or the eucharist, but the journey of faith which "by means of the various stages of initiation" (*RL* 67) bring people to a real celebration of those sacraments (cf. *AG* 13-14).

In *Dei Verbum* Vatican II provides "authentic teaching about divine revelation and about how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe; by believing it may hope; and by hoping it may live" (*DV* 1). Our times are notable for the large number of group in which the Word is studied and proclaimed with enthusiasm. It is up to us to deepen our knowledge of the Word of God which makes people the children of God (cf. *Jn* 1:12). Today many groups make the Word of God the centre of their lives. If we do not do the same what can we offer the world but a mere ideology?

(d) *Founders of ministering communities* (*RL* 62.3; 64). The Chapter of 1985 notes the importance of small christian communities as part of our method of work (no. 5).

The Rule of Life states that, "In order to promote a more intense Christian life and evangelising thrust, the missionary supports the formation and growth of small ecclesial communities, in keeping with the choices of the Local Church. Such communities, in communion with the larger ecclesial community, enhance the human dimension and develop the co-responsibility of their members" (*RL* 62.3). To underline their importance, John Paul II defines these communities as "a sign of the vitality of the Church and an instrument of evangelisation, a valid point of departure for a new society founded on love" (*RM* 51). They play a major part in our pastoral work.

Clearly small christian communities are not made up merely of announcers and listeners of the Word. There are other ministries for the organisation of prayer, catechesis, works of charity, human development etc (cf. *RM* 73-74). The Rule of Life summarises this saying, "It is of capital importance in missionary work to discover and promote the gifts and ministries, which the Spirit stirs up in the Christian communities for their growth towards 'the perfect Man fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself'. The promotion and formation of the local clergy are one of the most important tasks of the missionary and require adequate means and prepared personnel" (*RL* 64).

All the missionary documents of the Magisterium speak of the encouragement of local ministries, beginning of course with the development of a local clergy. At the same time they insist on the formation of "a mature christian laity" (*AG* 21). This implies non-ordained ministries which are "precious for the planting of the life and growth of the Church" (*EN* 73).

It is not enough to think only of internal church ministries. Thought needs to be given to the development of social ministry. As early as 1959 John XXIII dedicated a large part of his encyclical *Principes Pastorum* to the need to form "a local laity to the full height of their christian vocation." It was the time of the beginning of independence in Africa and many countries did not have a trained political class. This lack was very clear in some of the more catholic countries.

The foundation of small christian communities, with their relevant ministries, is based on Comboni's idea of "saving Africa by means of Africa". It recognises the need to develop all types of ministry, beginning with those which are part of the Church's structures and going on to those which are more concerned with human development. Hence the importance of the work of formation in all its aspects.

Among the ministries to be encouraged in new churches are those concerned with spreading the Gospel. Vatican II said, "Since particular Churches are bound to mirror the universal Church as perfectly as possible, let them realise that they have been sent to those who are living in that same country and who do not yet believe in Christ (...). In order that this missionary zeal may flourish among their native members, it is very fitting that the young Churches should participate as soon as possible in the universal missionary work of the Church. Let them send their own missionaries to proclaim the Gospel all over the world" (AG 20). We need to ask ourselves what we are doing to encourage this.

(e) *Promoting the values of the Kingdom* (RL 61.1-9). Human development is closely linked to preaching the Gospel. The Chapter of 1985 recognised this saying, "The General Chapter believes that enabling the values of the Kingdom of God to emerge together with the full liberation of man is one of the priorities of our missionary service" (CA 1985 no. 35).

For us who work in situations of great poverty it is clear that in the next millenium the questions of justice, solidarity, peace and the care of creation, all linked to the values of the kingdom, will be of great importance. This will involve working "to create better conditions of live and to establish peace in the world" (AG12).

The main workers in this field will be the laity, because they belong "both to the People of God and to civil society" (AG 21). As John Paul II wrote, "they have the particular vocation of building the Kingdom of God by working with temporal things and orientating them to God" (RM 71). Tomorrow's mission will be much about forming capable laity to work in the political, social and economic spheres. The apostolic letter *Christifideles Laici* (1988) makes it clear that it is the vocation of the laity to transform history into the history of salvation. In the last twenty years many laity have given their lives for this, a sign of their new understanding of their role of transforming the world. This work of transformation needs to be informed by a sound knowledge of the social teaching of the Church. It part of our role to make this teaching available to the laity.

The Rule of Life points out that the Brothers are "called to give a special contribution to those activities that promote total human development" (RL 61). However a clear commitment to justice and peace is the duty of all. Before Vatican II holiness was based on three criteria, listening to the Word, the life of the sacraments and charity. Since the Council a fourth has been added: working for justice. In 1971 the Synod of Bishops in the document 'Justice in the World', declared that, "Working for justice and transforming the world are a basic aspect of the preaching of the Gospel, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and the liberation from every state of oppression" (no. 2). Thus 'social ministry' is a real part of christian holiness.

(f) *Inculturation* (RL 69). In recent years much has been written on inculturation. The Church is aware of how people value their culture which has its own sacredness. However, culture is not absolute. It is a human reality which needs to be converted to the values of the Gospel (EN 20).

The inculturation of the faith is an essential part of the mystery of the incarnation. In his document *Slavorum Apostoli* recalling the deaths of Saints Cyril and Methodius, John Paul II offers a reflection on inculturation. He notes the difficulties in trying to be faithful to the Gospel and faithful to the culture of the people being evangelised. Without inculturation the catholic faith cannot exist.

The library of the Generalate in Rome holds a large collection of grammars, dictionaries, historical analyses, liturgical studies and catechisms. There are translations of part of the Bible, studies of languages and customs. All this indicates our efforts in the field of inculturation over the years. During the sixties and seventies there was a moment of undervaluing symbols and ritual. However, if we recall the history of the

evangelisation of Europe, we can be amazed at the audacity of the early missionaries as they adopted local customs. Even the feast of Christmas was suggested by a pagan feast. "Evangelisation - said Paul VI - loses much of its effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the language and the signs and symbols of the people to whom it is offered" (*EN* 63). Thus it is important to note the growth of independent churches and not to ignore them because they pose difficult questions with regard to orthodoxy.

For us today it is important to keep our links with our genuine Comboni tradition and to put into practise what the Rule of Life says, "The missionary is committed to the process by which the Local Church under the guidance of the Spirit assimilates Christ's mystery and re-expresses it in its own language, culture and religious forms" (*RL* 69).

It is important to remember with Pius XII that in the preaching the Gospel, the Church "does not act like someone who cuts down a luxuriant forest indiscriminately, but rather like someone who grafts new shoots onto old stems to produce delightful new fruit" (*EP* 65). This is because "new catholics should be true members of the family of God and citizens of the kingdom without abandoning their own country" (*EP* 67).

It is important to remember the criteria that guide the process of inculturation: a deep knowledge and experience of the culture being evangelised, a gradual involvement of the whole people of God and not just experts. This avoids "the risk of passing uncritically from a kind of alienation from the culture to overvaluing it" (cf. *RM* 53-54).

The work of the inculturation of the Gospel requires people who are well prepared as well as being 'men for others'. Thus Fr. Agostoni links it to availability: "Openness to the cultures of the people among whom we work and the serious study of their languages is part of the essential availability of the missionary. Being a 'man for others' he goes in search of people with whom he can form a relationship and to whom he can announce the message of salvation. If he does not succeed in speaking their language and understanding their culture with love and continual study, his contact with them will remain superficial and unfruitful".⁷³

Animating the Churches

Vatican II stated that, "All the Church is missionary and the work of evangelisation is a basic duty of the people of God" (*AG* 35). Missionaries announce the Gospel of salvation to the world because they are sent by the Church which is wholly missionary (cf. *EN* 59-60), beginning with the bishops to the last lay person (cf. *AG* 37-41). "All the local Churches, young and old are called to give and receive the universal mission and none should be closed to this" (*RM* 85).

These texts of the Magisterium bring us to the work of missionary animation among the Churches. The Institute serves not only by sending its members abroad but also "by fostering missionary awareness among the people of God at the local, national and international levels" (*RL* 14). It is part of our charism to awaken the conscience of new christian communities and to help them to live the apostolic spirit of which our charism is a sign.

Just as monks make the contemplative aspect of the Church visible and encourage people to pray, so missionaries by making evangelisation their life's work, make people aware of the need to work for the spreading of the kingdom. Contemplation and mission cannot be delegated. Everyone is involved. Again we can quote Fr. Agostoni: "In the missionary Church the Spirit distributes his gifts as a call to consecration for evangelisation. We should never forget the clear link between the life of the Church and our call to mission. We need to enable the People of God to understand this. Thus we must also develop the study and the understanding of missionary animation".⁷⁴

⁷³ AGOSTONI T., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 94, p. 16.

⁷⁴ AGOSTONI T., *circ. lett.* (Easter 1973), p. 3.

All of this is contained in the section of the Rule of Life on missionary animation. It is part of the comboni vocation. Like the Founder the missionary gives part of his time to it (*RL* 72-79). I want to underline three points.

(a) "In the work of mission promotion the Society intends to remain faithful to the Founder's *spirit of initiative and courage*" (*RL* 71.2). We have seen how active Comboni was in this area of work and since him there have many others. This work needs to be continued with creativity and enthusiasm as a real part of spreading the Gospel (*AC* 1991, n.47).

(b) The Comboni missionary encourages the missionary work of the Church "above all by the *witness of his life*, his testimony and by his departure towards the people to be evangelised" (*RL* 72.2). There is a great difference between missionary animation done by a diocesan priest and that done by a missionary from overseas who can witness with the work that he has done. It is precisely the example of leaving and going abroad that makes an impression on people.

Comboni missionary animation is born out of the work of evangelisation. We can never accept into the Institute someone who only wants to do animation in his own country by studying and taking part in meetings. The Comboni missionary animator is not one who refers to what happens in Africa or Latin America. He tells of his own experience of the joys and sorrows of apostolic work.

(c) "In missionary promotion the missionary makes use of the *means of social communication*" (*RL* 78). A missionary's personal witness only reaches a small number of people. Hence it is necessary to use all the available methods of communication particularly to provide a voice for those who suffer injustice and cannot speak for themselves. At the same time we need to offer positive experiences together with concrete and realistic plans for action.

Vocation promotion

Vocation promotion "is an integral part of missionary animation" (*RL* 77). It merits a special word because we often neglect it. At times we are afraid to propose the missionary vocation in a clear way. The Pope reminds us that among the specific aims of missionary animation is that of "encouraging vocations *`ad gentes`*", because "the poor are hungry for God, not only for bread and freedom." They need Christ's salvation and not only development (cf. *RM* 83).

The care of vocations is an important part of youth ministry. and a genuine ministry of the Church. We know that every human being has a particular vocation which is written in their heart by God, but which is at first unknown to them. In order to be happy and to contribute to the kingdom, everyone needs to discover and embrace their own vocation. Hence the importance of vocation ministry as a service of discernment of choice in life consistent with the will of God.

In this context the comboni vocation has every right to be proposed. The picture of the vocations promoter running around from left to right to make young people join the Institute is unjust and false and has no place within this vision of pastoral care of vocations. It might have existed as a mistaken way of recruiting which was the result of pressure to increase the number of students. This is not according to our tradition. We do not force anyone to become a comboni missionary. However, we do not deny ourselves the right to make a clear proposal about this way of life. Neither do we just speak about temporary experiences. The Rule of Life says, "Whilst always respecting the freedom of choice, the promoter presents the missionary vocation in all its forms, with particular emphasis on the life commitment as Priests and Brothers in the Institute" (*RL* 77.2). The danger is not that of pushing people along a certain road, but rather of denying them the opportunity of considering missionary life as they make their choice. Following Comboni's example we have to have the courage to make a clear proposal concerning the missionary vocation.

A word now on *methodology* in vocation promotion.

(a) *Prayer*. The comboni vocations promoter prays that the Father "send workers into his vineyard and cause Christians to feel the urgency of their missionary commitment" (RL 74.1). Prayer for vocations is an act of obedience to Christ (cf. Lk 10:2) and a duty to be fulfilled continually, and not just from time to time. Asking the pastors of the Church to pray to the Lord of the harvest, Pius XI wrote, "After careful reflection we speak of the constant use of the habit of prayer which is more effective than prayer said only from time to time" (RE).

At times we lament the shortage of vocations. But do we pray for them? What do we do to encourage them? In 1948 Fr. Todesco wrote to the recruiters, "The recruiter must be persuaded of the necessity of being a man of prayer. It is God who calls. The recruiter is only the minister. Thus he must feel the need to stay in contact with God and to be motivated by a spirit of faith, praying continually and getting others to pray so that the Lord send labourers into his harvest".⁷⁵

Praying and getting others to pray is another duty of the recruiter. Among the few writings left by our first superior general, Fr. Angelo Colombaroli, is one to the readers of 'Nigrizia' on the need for prayer. His tone is moving and his plea is strongly motivated, "The needs are many and urgent. It makes our heart weep to think that at the moment we are so short of personnel that if we divided our mission, each missionary would have an area larger than Italy. Placed in such difficult circumstances, it is up to us to pray that God will call sufficient workers for his vineyard in Africa where the harvest is great but the labourers are few".⁷⁶ Over the years all the superiors general have recalled this need for prayer linking it particularly to contemplation and to the suffering of the sick and elderly confreres.

I want to conclude this point with another extract from Fr. Todesco which has a typical comboni flavour by referring to St. Joseph. "Let us together, priests and brothers unite ourselves to many zealous and generous souls who constantly pray for vocations and who accept penance and sacrifices so as to obtain from God priests and missionaries for his Church. All the sons of the Congregation, from the newest entrant to the oldest priests and brothers should be united in raising their hands in constant supplication to the heart of Jesus to send labourers into the harvest. From our predecessors we have inherited the tradition of recourse to St. Joseph who has produced many holy vocations. So let us keep up this holy tradition by making novenas of prayer from time to time during the year".⁷⁷

(b) *Welcome*. The Chapter of 1985 invited our communities "to be welcoming to all", especially to "young people interested in the missions" (CA 1985, no. 52). If it is true that "every community should be a centre of animation and missionary spirituality" (RL 75), then making our communities available is a clear duty. But the welcome that we are speaking of goes beyond this. It does not consist only in opening our doors and setting another place at table. Above all it means the cordial acceptance of all those that the Lord sends us, and who question our ways. This is the meaning of internationality, a continual conversion.

Are we ready to accept young people from other cultures and with a different mentality? Are we ready to enter the process of renewal like parents who to stay alongside their children and allow them grow in an atmosphere of real freedom? The Institute has a rich inheritance to hand on, but can we distinguish between being faithful to the essential values and being tied to the past? We cannot expect the next generation to be the same as us. New people will interpret our charism in a new way.

(c) *Role models*. Many vocations are born from a meeting with a real missionary. Comboni's own vocation came out of his reading on the martyrs of Japan. It then became specifically African through his meeting with Fr. Vinco. Enabling young people to get to meet missionaries from yesterday and

⁷⁵ TODESCO A., *circ. lett.* (1.11.1948), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 28, p. 758.

⁷⁶ COLOMBAROLI A., in *Nigrizia* XIX (June 1901) 6, p. 86.

⁷⁷ TODESCO A., *circ. lett.* (15.8.1951), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 36, p. 153.

today is an important part of vocation promotion. People are fascinated by examples, not by theological or sociological discussion. Today's youth are bombarded with images of heroes who obscure the vision of faith and of sacrifice. In contrast to these we need to offer the figure of enthusiastic missionaries from the past who are able to speak to minds and hearts today.

The main role model to be presented is of course Comboni. No one can think of entering the Congregation unless he is genuinely attracted to the figure of Comboni. We are disciples of Christ in Comboni, followers of the Good Shepherd in Comboni (cf. *RL* 3). Hence the need of presenting the witness of many other confreres who have had a positive experience of mission. The Rule of Life suggests this as part of formation (cf. *RL* 74.4) as well as for vocation promotion saying, "the work of vocations promoters is enriched by the cooperation of the community and other missionaries, especially the elderly, as authentic witnesses of the missionary apostolate" (*RL* 76.2). Our Institute does not lack missionary role models. There are also a number of biographies available that we can use if we are really interested encouraging comboni vocations.

(e) *Accompanying vocations*. An essential element of vocation promotion is "personal contact" which the Rule of Life calls "the most effective way" of coming to know the prospective candidate (cf. *RL* 77.3). Spiritual direction is of fundamental importance. This is the time of discerning a vocation when a young person is seeking the will of the Lord and is in need of encouragement. The missionary vocation of our Founder was "one of the clearest" (*S* 13). However, Comboni needed the help of a man of God in order to be certain of his call. This enabled him to overcome interior conflicts and external obstacles, and to reach a definite decision.

Enthusiasm for the missions is not necessarily a sign of vocation, just as hesitation is not a contrary sign. Jeremiah did not feel attracted to his life of celibacy or his work as a prophet, but God still called him! Struggle is a part of vocation discernment. Hence the importance of spiritual direction a part of this discernment and as support. The vocation promoter who does not give time to it will not help vocations to mature and is wasting his time.

(e) *Apostolic commitment*. Paul VI writes that the evangelised need to become evangelisers (cf. *EN* 24). This is also a guide to vocation promotion. Someone thinking of being a missionary should be able to show that they have the right qualities by being involved in some apostolic work in their own Church (cf. *RL* 77.1)

PRAYER

Father, we thank you
for calling us
to follow Daniel Comboni
as apostles of the gentiles
and in the missionary animation
of local Churches.
You know the numerous challenges
that we have to face.
Help us to overcome fear and uncertainty.
Enable us to find new ways of service.
Through the intercession of Mary,
and of our Founder,
send us the Spirit of Pentecost
to give us the enthusiasm and patience
to say "we are still at the beginning".
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CHAPTER VI

PASSION

Before we explore the theme of this chapter, it is worth recalling that it was not Christ who brought suffering into the world. Neither did he invent the Cross. We placed it on his shoulders. Pilate had crucified many others before Jesus.

Suffering and death are part of our heritage. We are born in suffering and it continues throughout life with many causes: birth, illness, personal relations, natural disasters, sin. All of these are alien to Jesus Christ. To him belongs a new way of accepting and facing suffering. He gives it a completely different interpretation, changing it from a curse into a means of love and of being obedient to the Father. To come close to Christ does not mean increasing the crosses which are already part of human experience. It means having the possibility of transforming them into life. It gives us the means of being able to carry them with hope and strength as the martyrs and saints did.

It is also worth remembering that "intolerance of suffering, so prevalent nowadays, turns the natural highs and lows of life into something flat and artificial. The great waves of the ocean become mere ripples. Light and dark become a uniform grey. This is what creates deadly boredom. (...) The wish to avoid every suffering rejects an essential part of human life" (Konrad Lorenz).

*"If someone wants to come after me, let them deny themselves
take up their cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24).*

THE PASSION OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Mk 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34: Three predictions of the Passion.

Is 52:13-53:12: Fourth Servant Song.

And he began to teach them

Jesus predicts his Passion three times in the Synoptics. These are important texts which describe the person of the Good Shepherd "who offers his life for his sheep" (*Jn* 10:11). They also reveal the uncomprehending attitude of the disciples when faced with the Cross.

One of the saddest aspects of Jesus' Cross is his loneliness. As he began to understand that the sacrifice of his life was an essential part of his role as Messiah, the opposition of the people and of his disciples grew. They were expecting a warlike Messiah, armed and ready to shed the blood of his enemies, rather than his own, in order to restore national pride.

(a) It is significant that *the first prophecy* of the passion comes immediately after Peter's profession of faith (*Mt* 12:13-20). Jesus "began to teach them that the son of man must suffer much" Peter objected and was reproved by Jesus. This reproof was loud and clear because Jesus himself was afraid of breaking the dialogue with the Father about the mystery of his coming suffering. Even as he tried to prepare himself by prayer and meditation on scripture, Jesus felt, inevitably, a strong repugnance of suffering and death.

Thus, we have Jesus moving towards the Cross and the disciples walking to Jerusalem without understanding the Master's spiritual journey. Even during the Transfiguration when the Father says, "this is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him" (Lk 9:28-36), nothing changes. The opposition of the disciples to a suffering Messiah is still very strong. They are afraid. They talk wildly. Finally they are dumbstruck.

The hardness of heart of the disciples (Mk 6:52) tested the Lord and gave him no support in the face of the Cross. He was destined to meet it entirely alone.

(b) After the *second prophecy* of the passion there was an even greater distance between Jesus and his disciples. Mark observes that not only did they "not understand these words", but "they were afraid to ask for an explanation" (Mk 9:32). And to avoid facing something unpleasant they began discussing among themselves which one was the greatest! (Mk 9:34)

It is important to note that in this second prophecy Jesus clearly indicated the resurrection. He grew in his acceptance of his coming death because he knew it would not be in vain, but would be the source of life for himself and his sheep. "I am the Good Shepherd who offers his life for his sheep. Because of this my Father loves me: that I offer my life to take it up again" (Jn 10:14-17). But the offering of his life as the first stage was totally unacceptable to the disciples, and they still "failed to understand" (Jn 10:6). At this point they were so scandalised and upset at the thought of his suffering that they no longer talked about it.

(c) On the occasion of the *third prophecy* we are already at the gates of Jerusalem. The disciples were even more 'amazed': "those following behind were full of fear" (Mk 10:32).

In this case the amazement was more serious than the fear. Both feelings were natural in the face of the coming tragedy. But while the fear revealed an awareness of what was to come, the amazement revealed a complete denial that the Shepherd had to die for his sheep. Humanly speaking life does not come from death. The disciples tried to keep Jesus from Jerusalem: "Rabbi, not long ago the Jews wanted to stone you, and you go there again?" (Jn 11:8). Then the bold Thomas said, "Let us also go to die with him" (Jn 11:16). His words give the impression that finally they had understood, but they were empty words. Not having grasped the mystery, when they really had to face death, the disciples all fled, including Thomas.

The profound loneliness of the Good Shepherd in the face of the Cross is something to keep in mind because it is something that God asks of his friends. Some crosses are only for the shepherds. The others remain amazed, not understanding. Many saints had to fight against human wisdom which tried to stop them risking their lives. Despite his experience in the Transfiguration there was great suffering in the loneliness of the Good Shepherd.

A person on a cross is alone, between heaven and earth. The only thing to do is to look heavenwards, to converse with the Father, to pray the psalms and thus to illuminate the heart with the Word of God. Below, there are powerless people or, even worse, those that call us to come down implying that the cross is not a sign of love but of abandonment by God. Only by coming down can you show that God is on your side, and you on His: "He trusted in God. Let God help now if he cares for him" (Mt 27:43); "Christ, King of Israel, come down from the cross so that we can see and believe" (Mk 15:32).

At the Last Supper, as if responding to this cry, Jesus said "If you loved me you would be glad that I am going to the Father because the Father is greater than I am. I am telling you this now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not talk to you much longer because the prince of this world is coming. He has no power over me, but the world must know that I love the Father and I do what the Father has commanded me to do. Get up. We must go from here" (Jn 14:28-31).

Jesus saw the Cross as a duty given to him by God and he accepted it. Indeed, he left the table and went to Gethsemane where the soldiers waited in ambush. It was not the apostles who took the initiative to go. They followed reluctantly because they had not yet entered by the Door to become real shepherds. They were still mercenaries, for whom the sheep were a source of profit.

Later, the great missionary Paul would write, "We preach Christ crucified, a scandal for the Jews, a stumbling block for the pagans" (*1 Co* 1:23). No one has experienced this as Jesus crucified did. Right to the end the disciples believed that his giving his life for his sheep was a foolish scandal and finally they abandoned him.

The Son of Man will be handed over

In the second prophecy of the passion Jesus said, "The Son of Man is about to be handed over" (*Mk* 9:31), and in the third we find the same expression: "Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the high priests and the scribes" (*Mk* 10:33). What does 'handed over' mean? It is not possible to grasp the full meaning of the phrase because it is part of the mystery of the Betrayal. However, there seem to be three aspects to 'handed over'.

(a) First, it is the *Father* who hands over the Son. John says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him will not die but have eternal life" (*Jn* 3:16). The evangelist takes this up again in his first Letter in which he affirms that God has sent his Son into the world as victim for our sins so that we might have life through him (*1 Jn* 4:9-10). This fact is so central to Christianity that Paul often takes it up as the starting point for his theological reflection (cf. *Rm* 5).

It is the Father who hands over the Son and immerses him in our situation of sin and death. He does this to show us his infinite love in giving us back the gift of life. As the Father receives the Son's last breath he does not destroy life but hands it on to us. He ensures that the Son has "descendents". He makes him the first of many, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah regarding the fruitful death of the Servant (*Is* 53:10-12). In this is the power of God which sustained Christ, and which has always guided those who announce his death and resurrection.

In the Father who 'hands over' there is also another mystery, that of God who suffers, of the Passion experienced by the Trinity. The Cross is the greatest sign of God's love for us, of his fatherhood (cf. *SD* 14), of the 'painful birth' by which he has enabled us to be reborn in the Risen Christ.

Let us reflect on the drama of this Father who sees the agony of his Son. "Father, if you wish, take this chalice from me. Let not my will be done but thine" (*Lk* 22:42). The Father responds by sending an angel to comfort him. But the chalice remains and must be drunk. Christ sweats blood, suffers to the last wrenching cry which goes straight to the heart of the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (*Mt* 27:46). This is the great mystery God's passion. The Father offers the Son a cup that burns the mouth but one "which was made from clay wetted by the holy tears of the Potter" (Gibran Kahil, *The Prophet*). The Father, like the Son, proves "the truth of his love through the truth of suffering" (*SD* 18). There is no love without suffering in human life and this is also true for God who experienced it in the Son. "As love has crowned you, so it has crucified you" wrote the poet Gibran Kahil. Can it be different for God, who is love?

(b) The second aspect of 'handing over' is related to *Christ* himself: "For this my Father loves me, because I offer my life and then take it up again" (*Jn* 10:17-18). Jesus insists on the freedom with which he hands himself over, not only to show his genuine love for the Father, but also his to show his active role in the Passion. He accepts it and faces it alone when "the hour has come in which the Son of man is to be glorified" (*Jn* 12:23).

The account of the Passion begins with a clear reference to his *hour*: "Before the feast of Passover, knowing that the hour had come when he was to pass from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. While they were at supper, he got up from the table and began to wash the feet of his disciples" (*Jn* 13:1-5). The phrase 'he got up', is found three other times in the

gospel. In the context of the Last Supper it indicates the willingness of Christ to hand himself over (cf. *Heb* 10:5-10). The washing of the feet is a symbolic act that expresses the washing of their hearts with the water of the pierced Heart. The water of the Last Supper does not make the disciples good servants and good shepherds, able to do what Jesus has done. After this washing Peter is still ready to betray the Shepherd and to slip away. He is still a complete mercenary. But after being washed with the water that flows from the side of Jesus (*Jn* 7:3) he repents sincerely. He is able to love and pasture the sheep with generosity, and be led where he would rather not go, following the Lord to the end (*Jn* 21:15-16).

John's account (18:4-11) of the arrest of Jesus can help us to understand the meaning of his "freely handing himself over". Jesus deliberately takes the disciples to the garden of Getsemane, to show that he goes freely to face death, with head held high.

John delights in depicting Jesus' freedom in handing himself over. He is not surprised at the arrival of the soldiers, because he 'knows' what is about to happen. He makes himself known to them. John does not describe Judas' kiss as a sign of recognition. It is Jesus who says, "Here I am". Judas, in contrast to what we read in the Synoptics, is only a spectator like the others. It is Christ who directs the scene and dominates it. When he makes himself known the soldiers step back and fall to the ground. If afterwards they seize him, it is only because he has decided to hand himself over. He does not have recourse to his divine power nor to the sword of Peter.

The reasons why Christ is handed over are clear: "must I not drink the chalice which the Father had given me? Earlier he had said, 'the world must know that I love the Father and I do what the Father has commanded me'" (*Jn* 14:31). In this moment the Father commands him to become bread which is broken and water poured out for the sheep. He accepts it, "obedient unto death" (*Ph* 2:8) and consistent with his words in the synagogue at Capernaum (cf. *Jn* 6). He offers himself to show the world that he lives the meaning of the prayer which he taught in the Sermon on the Mount: "your will be done" (*Mt* 6:10). Helped by the Spirit, Jesus recognises that if he is to be the Good Shepherd, he must die for his sheep, and so he hands himself over.

This handing over of himself is even more generous when we realise that it is understood only by the Father, certainly not by the disciples, and even less by the crowd. After the raising of Lazarus and during Jesus's entry into Jerusalem the general hope was that Jesus would replace the mantle of the poor with a glorious crown and begin to reign as king of Israel. Instead Jesus says, "if the grain of wheat does not fall to the ground and die it remains a single grain. If instead it dies, it produces much fruit. Who loves his life will lose it. Who hates his life in this world will preserve it for life everlasting. (...) My soul is troubled. What can I say? Father save me from this hour? But for this reason I have reached this hour" (*Jn* 12:23-28).

Christ hands himself over in order to produce much fruit, so that the sheep can have everlasting life. The Father confirms this saying, "I have glorified him, and will glorify him again" (*Jn* 12:28). The bystanders do not understand. They mistake the voice of God for thunder. Jesus says, "This voice is not for me but for you. Now is the judgement of this world. Now the prince of this world will be thrown out. When I am raised up I will draw everyone to me" (*Jn* 12:29-33). The outcome is general horror and confusion. The people did not help Jesus to hand himself over; they simply handed him over!

(c) The third agent in this "handing over" is *the chosen people*; it is Judas, who represents his fellow disciples and all the people in putting Jesus in the hands of the pagans. The chosen people, renouncing Jesus and handing him over, give the figure of Christ an appearance which is mysteriously tragic. In this regard Jesus' own words as he weeps for Jerusalem are significant: "If only you had understood the way of peace. But it is hidden from you (...) because you did not know the time of your visitation" (*Lk* 19:42-44).

Jesus hands himself over to free the people from their blindness. In fact the gospel says that the people recognised the Saviour only after witnessing his death. They look on "the one they have pierced" (Zc 12:10). Luke has no doubt: "Having seen what had happened the centurion glorified God saying, 'Truly this was just man.' And the whole crowd who were there, thinking about what had happened, turned away beating their breasts" (Lk 23:47-48).

Jesus had to pay a "high price" (1 Co 6:20) to enable the people to change from being a murderous people to a penitent people. Such is the cost of sin. As missionaries we must accept that the reality of the passion and death of Jesus is reproduced today with the same violence. Only if we can forgive after being rejected and killed, and place our spirit in the hands of the Father (cf. Lk 23:34,46), do we show ourselves to be good shepherds, and thus open the gates of faith to the people.

Pierced for our sins

Christ is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. Jn 1:29). He carries our sin. He is the Good Shepherd who does not heal his sheep from far off. No, he lives among them and shares their wounds. As Paul wrote, "Christ has ransomed us from the curse of the law by being cursed for us. As it is written, 'cursed is the one who is hanged'. In Jesus Christ the blessing of Abraham come to the gentiles and by faith we receive the promise of the Spirit" (Ga 3:13-14).

The Cross is the work of God for the redemption of the world. This mysterious strategy is present in many messianic texts of the Old Testament which allude to the suffering of God's Anointed one. The clearest and most moving is the Fourth Servant Song in which Isaiah describes the suffering of the Servant with a realism that seems to anticipate the Lord's Passion. What is most striking in this Song is the fact that the innocent Servant bears the sins of the people and pays for all.

*"Despised and rejected
he carried our sufferings.
He bore our pain.
He was wounded for our faults,
crushed for our sins.
The punishment which gives salvation fell on him.
We are healed by his wounds.
We were all lost like sheep,
each following their own way.
The Lord placed all our iniquity on him" (Is 53:3-6 passim).*

Commenting on this text, John Paul II said, "sin in all its depth became the real cause of the suffering of the Redeemer. (...) In his suffering sin is cancelled because as Son he alone can bear the evil of sin with that love for the Father which overcomes the evil of every sin. He destroys the evil in the relationship between God and humanity, and he replaces it with good" (SD 18).

The Good Shepherd does not heal with a miraculous intervention by simply coming from heaven where all is peace and happiness. He saves us by becoming incarnate, taking a human body and dying for us and with us. Dying! As Paul says, the most important, concise and effective word of his teaching is "the word of the Cross" (1 Co 1:18).

The word of the Cross is suffering and death embraced voluntarily and innocently. This is also the basis of missionary activity. Solidarity with the people means sharing their sufferings, being disfigured as Jesus was: "by his wounds we have been healed".

This brings to mind the image of the scapegoat from Leviticus (*Lv* 16:21-22). Christ is the scapegoat who carries the sins of humanity. He is cursed, cast out, sacrificed outside the walls of Jerusalem. Reflecting on this tragic reality Paul declares himself ready to be cursed for his brothers (*Rm* 9:3). The way of mission is the way of the passion of the Good Shepherd.

PRAYER

Christ the Good Shepherd,
we are amazed as we contemplate
the mystery of your pierced heart
which bore loneliness and pain,
misunderstanding and emptiness,
ingratitude and persecution,
and which still beat with love
in Getsemane and on Calvary.
To your confused disciples you said,
"Now my soul is troubled. What should I say?
Father save me from this hour?
Yet for this I came to this moment!
Father, glorify your name."
We pray,
let your Holy Spirit write these words
in the depths of our hearts
so that we may remain firm and confident like you
when faced with the Cross which the Father prepares for us.
You who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

THE PASSION IN DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 1707-1710: I have chosen the Cross as my bride.

S 4290-4291: Crosses are the seal of God's work.

S 4771-4776: The works of God are born on Calvary.

S 6790; 6794-6796: I thank God for crosses.

Sharers in the passion of Christ

Even though the theme of the Cross in Comboni has been written about many times, it deserves particular emphasis. We cannot be Comboni missionaries without accepting, 'tasting' the Cross just as Comboni did. Following him we give God the right to make us "walk the royal way of the Cross" (*S* 5762) as an integral part of our charism.

As we take the mystery of the Cross into our own lives we need to see things in a sacramental way. The passion and triumph of Christ are made present in history through the suffering of an apostle. This becomes the source of life for people and a joy for the apostle himself.

Reflecting on his own tormented life, Paul wrote, "We suffer every kind of hardship without being upset. There is no way out but we do not despair. Persecuted, but not abandoned. Stricken but not killed. We carry the death of Jesus in our own bodies, so that his life may present too. Alive we are continually exposed to death for the sake of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may present in our bodies. In a way death is at work in us, but life is in you" (2 Co 4:8-12). Writing to the Colossians Paul said, "I am happy to bear the sufferings which I carry for you and to complete in my body what is lacking in the suffering of Christ" (Col 1:24).

Comboni comes to the same conclusion. He sees his apostolic burdens as the sacramental presence of the suffering of the Good Shepherd. In a letter of 1879 to Arnold Janssen, the founder of the Divine Word Missionaries, Comboni writes, "We have suffered much, but by the grace of God our apostolic work has saved a large number of pagans. Being sharers in the Passion of Jesus we are ever more ready to sacrifice our life for Christ and for the people of Africa" (S 5828). Nine years before he had written to Elizabeth Girelli, apostle of the Sacred Heart, saying that he prayed for "a large number of crosses...because without Crosses we cannot plant God's works" (S 2374).

On his very first missionary journey Comboni wrote to tell his father that he went into Africa "with the Cross" (S 225) because he was convinced that the mystery of the Cross of Christ must be lived in the apostle.

The Cross, my spouse

For Comboni, the Cross provided a mystical experience in the same way that Lady Poverty did for Francis of Assisi. The Cross was his friend, light and support, his precious companion, gentle comfort, treasure, sweet burden, inseparable and eternal spouse. Fr. Capovilla wrote, "The heroic love for God produced in Comboni an astonishing love of the Cross which makes us tremble. He spoke of suffering in the way that a lover of the world speaks of pleasure. And he did this when he most felt its full burden on his shoulders".⁷⁸

Worse was still to come when Comboni wrote to Cardinal Barnabò in 1868 saying he had chosen the Cross, "as my inseparable and eternal spouse" (S 1710). Comboni's reason for writing to the Cardinal was the malicious campaign against him which Fr. Zanoni had started. He had written saying that Comboni and his companions "had been cohabiting" in Cairo with the sisters and African girls (S 1697). Comboni was writing from Paris during his third journey of missionary animation and after the strain of four journeys to Africa. In Verona he had already founded the missionary society for men. His mystical marriage with the Cross gave the guarantee of success. Indeed, it seems like a real prophecy. Comboni wrote:

"With regard to the Zanoni affair your Eminence will see that in this new storm, the enemy of our human nature seeks to do me harm. You will understand that there are many tempests which oppress me, and it is a miracle that I am able to resist the weight of all these crosses. But I feel so confident in God and in our Lady that I am sure of overcoming them. I am preparing myself even greater crosses in the future. Already I see and understand the *Cross* as my friend, always near and close. I have chosen her as my inseparable and eternal Spouse. With the Cross as my beloved *spouse*, a wise and prudent teacher, with Mary as my dearest *mother* and with Jesus my *all*, I do not fear. Your Eminence, I do not fear Rome, nor the storms of Egypt, nor the tumults of Verona, nor the clouds of Lyons and Paris. Certainly, a step at a time and walking on thorns, I will be able establish the work of the Regeneration of Africa, which is the most difficult of all the missions and which many have abandoned. (...) I see the truth of what your Eminence was kind enough to write to me: time, deliberation, prudence, prayers, and I add also the *Cross*" (S 1709-10).

Comboni's choice of the Cross as his inseparable and eternal spouse is worth deepening.

⁷⁸ CAPOVILLA A., *Il Servo di Dio Mons. Daniele Comboni*, Verona 1928, X, p. 291.

(a) *Wisest teacher.* Above all, Comboni was aware that without the Cross, missionary work is not effective. The apostle must go through the "crucible of the Cross" (S 6438). Without this he cannot understand, let alone take on, the situation of poverty of the people among whom he works.

The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus became the Good Shepherd, "able to share our sufferings", because "he has been tested in everything" (Hb 4:15). Comboni had a similar view. Six months before his death he wrote to Fr. Sembianti, "The road that God has made for me is that of the Cross. But Christ was crucified by human injustice and this is a sign that *the Cross is something beautiful and fitting*. So, let us carry it, and forward!" (S 6519).

As Jesus healed by being wounded with the wounded, so the missionary liberates by becoming a slave with the slaves, wretched with the wretched. The Cross is wisdom for Comboni because he has understood that it is not possible to save a crucified people without being crucified with them. It is not possible to redeem a people who are seen as cursed without being cursed with them (cf. S 6847). To refuse the Cross separates the apostle from the effective presence of the Good Shepherd whose heart has been pierced. It makes the missionary like someone who works among the poor of the third world but lives in comfort. This was not Comboni's style.

The cross that Comboni speaks about, is part of the Cross of Christ who is present through the apostle, and part of the cross of the people with whom the apostle unites himself to free them from sin so that they become a pleasing offering to the Father. The missionary is not crucified unless he has united himself to the heart of Christ, and unless he shares the lot of the poor and abandoned. Comboni understood this. We can recall what he said on his entry into Khartoum in 1873 as Pro-vicar apostolic: "Your good will be mine. Your sufferings will be mine. I make common cause with you, and the happiest of my days will be when I give my life for you" (S 3159).

Fr. Chiochetta comments on this: "In this desire 'to make common cause' with the poor, the Cross presents itself as the wedding ring with Africa. Here Africa does not mean so much the actual geographical place but more the human condition, like a person who is still living in darkness and the shadow of death".⁷⁹

(b) *Precious companion.* In Christ the mystery of the Cross culminates in his being handed over to men as a blasphemer, a political agitator, rejected by the people and abandoned by God. This is the mystery of total loneliness which the Good Shepherd accepts for the life of the sheep. It is put forward again in Comboni who at the end, found himself alone with only the Cross as his "precious companion" (S 6821).

That Comboni died for Africa, the first love of his youth (S 3156) should not surprise us. Many others died before him for the same reason. What is surprising is the way he was crucified. "For Comboni, as for Christ, death was not just the result of physical exhaustion but of calumny, accusation, isolation and betrayal, a real sharing in the fear and strain of Gethsemane".⁸⁰ Following the poisonous gossip regarding his relationship with Virginia Mansur, which estranged him even from his father, Comboni wrote to Fr. Sembianti: "The other day I received mail that caused me the deepest pain and sorrow, and which is greater than all the afflictions which God has sent me. It put me in bed for three days, and I don't know when I will get over it. The other missionaries think it is backache because I am tired after the recent explorations on horseback. Only God and I know the real cause. It is a deep affliction which is greater than all the humiliations, injustices and unhappiness I have suffered...God will help me. Our Lady and St. Joseph will help me. I thank our Lord for crosses, but my life is an ocean of worries brought on me by those who are good and who love me" (S 6790; 6795).

The great sorrow that Comboni experienced in thinking about his elderly father dying "with a broken heart because of calumnies, suspicion and lies" (S 6938), crowned a life which began and

⁷⁹ CHIOCCETTA P., in *Archivio Comboniano* XXI (1983) 2, p. 24.

⁸⁰ CALVIA S., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 129, p.2.

finished with the sign of the Cross. Added to the inherent difficulties of leaving home and the deep sense of loss which a missionary had to suffer in the last century were other physical and moral sufferings. The last years of his life saw Comboni overburdened with work following the death of many of his colleagues. He was worn out by constant fever, lack of sleep, lack of appetite. People were leaving. Others did not understand. Poor decisions were made by Church authorities. In the end he was struck down by hateful calumnies that made him doubt his own usefulness to the cause of Africa.

By placing himself in the hands of Providence Comboni experienced the same gradual isolation which Christ had experienced. He writes to Cardinal Simeoni in the August 1880: "Two weeks ago I received your letter of the 3rd. of this month. I was in Ischo to pay my respects to the Emperor of Austria, Protector of the mission. I have understood what you write. I have been seriously wondering if, given my nothingness and my weakness, I am really of any use to the African mission which is undoubtedly the most difficult and painful in the world, or I am doing it harm. Now because of so many burdens, privations, illnesses, fevers, heartbreaks, struggles, contradictions over many years, because of the recent famine and plague, I have become really much more sensitive to the blows of adversity, and much weaker in carrying the Cross. But since I must always have confidence in God and his grace, (...) reflecting that the works of God are hidden in the sign of the Cross, I have thought to abandon myself into the arms of Providence, which is the fountain of charity for the miserable, and the teacher of innocence and justice. Consequently I place myself in the hands of my superiors, the real representatives of God" (S 6084-6085).

c) *Seal of God's work*. The last part of the quotation brings us to the aspect of the Cross as a seal, countersign, mark, imprint and characteristic of God's work. Comboni arrived at this understanding by praying and contemplating "a God who died on the Cross for the salvation of souls" (S 2721). He did this by meditating on scripture, especially the letters of St. Paul, and by reflecting on the history of the Church.

In 1879 after an exhausting journey to Cordofan which had suffered "a terrible famine", Comboni wrote to Mgr. Joseph de Girardin: "The Lord's works, especially those of the Apostolate are born and grow on the slope of Calvary. This history is made up of these two words, *cross* and *martyrdom*. The Cross is the royal road which must be travelled by those who want to arrive at the triumph!" (S 5873).

Already in 1858, during his first experience in Africa when he was grieving over the deaths of his mother and of Fr. Oliboni, worn down with fever and sadden by the thought of the imminent retreat from the mission, Comboni wrote to his father: "The Church of Christ begins on earth, grows and increases through the deaths and sacrifices of its sons [...]. All the missions, wherever the faith has been spread, where planted and grew in the midst of persecutions" (S 420-421).

Comboni's conviction that God's works grow where "he sends the Cross" (S 6488), became much stronger in his last years, particularly between 1876-77 when, according to Fr. Squaranti, the plots of the Camillian fathers seemed to be "a mystery of deep evil".⁸¹ In June 1876 Comboni wrote to Cardinal Franchi with regard to the Camillians saying, "Anyway, after many pains, by the grace of God I feel much stronger than before. The conviction that crosses are the seal of God's work comforts me. The strength of the Church and the works of God are found at the foot of the Cross. From the Cross of Christ comes that great energy and that divine virtue which will cast the reign of Satan out of Africa and which will substitute it with the rule of truth and the law of love which will win the people of Africa for the Church" (S 4290-4291).

We know that the controversy with the Camillians was resolved in Comboni's favour and ended with his consecration as bishop. However, waiting for the decision meant spending eight months in Rome absent from Africa. In this difficult time of waiting, Comboni wrote his 'Historical Outline' for the Society of Cologne. It begins with a real theology of the Cross and ends with a hymn to the Cross. In the Introduction Comboni writes: "By means of the sign of the Cross, by the will of eternal Wisdom,

⁸¹ GILLI A., in *Archivio Comb.* XXI (1983) 2, p. 109.

we see the christian world coming out of the shadows where it was held by the old law. Only the Cross has the strength to work this miracle, and so all the works that come from God must be born at the foot of the Cross. (...) This holy apostolate has the same lot as all the holy works of Christ's Church. Thus the obstacles and the hostility which they have to face can be considered as an infallible guarantee of their good outcome and their successful future" (S 4771; 4777).

Exhausted in body, strong in spirit.

"Even though I am physically exhausted, by the grace of the Heart of Jesus my spirit is strong and vigorous. I am resolved, as I was thirty years ago (in 1849), to suffer and to give my life a thousand times for the Redemption of Africa" (S 5525). So Comboni wrote to Cardinal Simioni in January 1879. Where did he find "the courage of a lion" when he was a man "broken by burdens, bitter events, and many losses and pains"? Compared to all this, "Job lived in the midst of joy and happiness" (S 5761-5762).

Writing to the Society of Cologne Comboni explains that, "all God's works, which serve his glory, can only be undertaken by means of great trials and continued obstacles and by the way of suffering. All these require extraordinary sacrifices and martyrdom. Because the missionary apostolate aims at destroying the power of darkness and replacing it with the Kingdom of Christ, it is especially marked with the seal of the Cross. Thus it is natural that this work should face continued obstacles and persecutions of every kind. The works of darkness will not easily surrender. They make us face arduous combat. They want us to experience all their power. They want to ruin us" (S 5585-5586).

Here we can note that Comboni sees the mission as part of the eschatological struggle between God, the angels and "the great dragon, the old serpent who is called the devil, Satan who has seduced all the world" (Rv 12:9), but who is conquered by the Lord of Lords (cf. Rv 19:11-21). In this vision of the struggle between the God of life and the prince of death, Comboni found that it was "quite natural" that the Church's mission, founded by the blood of martyrs, should "pass through the crucible of sorrows, sufferings and martyrdom" (S 5588).

Comboni has words of hope for his German friends who are tempted by discouragement: "The devil must be fought without fear of death, and he will be cast out of Africa. With the help of God we hope that it will be granted to our time to complete the conversion of this people who are the most abandoned and the most unhappy in the world. Yes, it seems that God has decided this" (S 5589).

At this point the "worthy burgers" of Cologne are ready to swallow "all the disgrace and the sad happenings" which have hit the vicariate of Central Africa, (famine, sickness and death - cf. S 5598-5645). Above all they are able to believe that their missionary will stand firm and not give up his commitment. "Faced with many afflictions, in the midst of mountains of crosses and sufferings the heart of the Catholic missionary remains fervent. He will not lose heart. Strength, courage and hope will not leave him. Is it possible that the heart of a true apostle be intimidated by all these obstacles and extraordinary difficulties? No, it is not possible. Never! He will triumph only through the Cross. (...) The true apostle fears no difficulty, not even death. The cross and martyrdom are his triumph" (S 5646-5647).

O Crux, ave Spes Unica

There is no doubt that the Cross, not only accepted, but searched for and loved heroically, is the dominant theme of the missionary spirituality of our Founder. From Limone to Khartoum he travelled a long Via Crucis marked by great sorrows, up to the summit of Calvary, crucified with the Crucified.

On 4th. October 1881, six days before he died, Comboni wrote his last letters. One of them, perhaps his last, ends like this: "I am happy in the Cross which, when borne willingly out of love of God, gives the triumph and life everlasting" (S 7246). This is Comboni's spiritual testament.

In this context we can recall all the confreres who live in situations of death, similar to those of the Founder. In their martyrdom they are supported by the grace of the Institute which renews its charism through them. The Chapter of 1991 spoke of them in a inspired passage:

"Comboni's experience of both betrothal and martyrdom, lived by many confreres throughout the history of the Institute, lives on today. It is manifest:

(a) in the passion of Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen again, and contemplated especially in the mystery of his Heart, which 'gives its life for the most neglected sheep' so that they become the subjects and the main agents in their own salvation history - a salvation that has already taken place;

(b) in the unconditional giving of self for the Kingdom and the Church. What Christ carried out on Calvary must now be made manifest by the Church;

(c) in the tireless effort of missionary animation to involve the whole Church in missionary commitment.

The dimensions of betrothal and martyrdom in our charism unite us inseparably to 'the poorest and most abandoned', and fill us with joy and enthusiasm even in times of failure, persecution, sickness and old age" (CA 1991, 13-14.1).

In the certainty that "the gates of hell will not prevail" (Mt 16:18), the Good Shepherd can enable us to enter into the Easter mystery, and like Comboni, give us the strength to cry with joy: "O Crux, ave Spes Unica" (S 6585). It is our responsibility to make real the "spirit of sacrifice" recommended by the Founder. This, together with charity and zeal, has been received by the Institute as an essential part of its tradition. In 1872 Comboni wrote to Cardinal Barnabo that, "the most important thing for these Institutes is that they make the right decision when selecting members, and that they educate them in a spirit of sacrifice. On this depends not only their happy beginning, but also the whole welfare and future of the Institutes, as well as the welfare of the missionaries and of the souls and the missions which will be entrusted to them in Africa" (S 2885).

PRAYER

Father, grant us to share
with mind, heart and action
in the union which Comboni had with the Cross.
Let us be convinced that
the Cross has the power to transform all the nations
of the earth with blessing and salvation.
From the Cross, "comes a goodness
which is sweet and does not kill,
which renews and descends on souls
like a refreshing dew.
From the Cross comes a great power
because Jesus, lifted up on the tree of the Cross,
between East and West
gathers all his faithful in the world
into the bosom of the Church.

With pierced hands, like another Samson,
he shakes the pillars of the temple
in which the powers of evil
were worshipped for centuries.
On these ruins he plants the Cross
which attracts all peoples to itself" (S 4974-4975).
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE PASSION IN THE COMBONI MISSIONARY TODAY

Readings:

RL 4: The Mystery of the Cross

RL 21.2; 22; 58.3: The Following of Christ

RL 60.1: Solidarity with the people

Ratio 59-61: Christ the Good Shepherd whose heart is pierced

A serious sin

Salvifici Doloris states that suffering "belongs to the mystery of man" (31). We can illuminate it with the light of Christ but not avoid it. Man is born crying and dies groaning. The culture which gives him the illusion of being able to eliminate suffering is a culture of suicide, because it makes him incapable of suffering, incapable of living.

It is a fact that in western culture the incapacity to accept the Cross has grown considerably. The serenity, or at least the resignation with which many poor people in the third world accept and put up with the difficulties of life is almost unknown among us. This is something quite negative. It is spelt out by Konrad Lorenz, Noble winner for medicine, in his book, *The Eight Capital Sins of Society*. In this he describes the main problems that threaten western society today. Among these is the intolerance of suffering. I have here included some extracts from chapter five of his book, *Exstinguishing feelings*.

"From the earliest times wise people have always recognised, and rightly, that it is not good for man to have too much success in his instinctive attempt to find pleasure and avoid pain. The earliest civilisations knew how to avoid harmful stimulants which can often lead to a *general weakening*, and indeed, to the end of the civilisation (...).

"With the development of modern technology, especially medicine, more than ever before there is the tendency to avoid suffering. Modern comfort has become so natural to us that we no longer realise how dependent we are on it. (...) Some years ago when there was a power failure in New York, many thought the end of the world had come (...).

"The ever greater domination which modern man has over his environment has upset the balance between pleasure and suffering. He is constantly exposed to more harmful stimulants and is less exposed to those which induce pleasure. This has serious consequences.

"The growing intolerance of pain together with a diminished sense of what is pleasurable, causes man to lose the ability to invest hard work in long-term plans. He impatiently demands the *immediate* satisfaction of every new desire. This need for *instant gratification* is often exploited by advertising. It is strange that consumers never become aware of how this is a kind of slavery (...).

"The wise old saying of Goethe 'hard week, happy holiday', is in danger of being forgotten. The inability to accept any kind of pain makes it difficult to feel *joy*. Helmut Schulze has noted that the word 'joy' does not occur in the work of Freud. He speaks of pleasure but not of joy. Someone who reached the summit of a mountain after a long and difficult climb and who now faces the descent, does not perhaps feel pleasure, but he experiences one of the greatest joys imaginable. Perhaps it is possible to have pleasure without the price of hard work, but not the divine spark of joy. The intolerance of suffering, (...) the wish to avoid any contact with it, is to give up an essential part of human life".

Experience of martyrdom

Konrad Lorenz's argument is important for us who, as baptised, that is, buried with Christ in his death, so as to rise again with him (cf *Rm* 6:5), have the duty to live and to hand on to humanity "the gospel of suffering" which is fertile and life-giving. It was first of all written with the Lord's blood and then with the words of his teaching (cf. *SD* 25).

(a) *Jesus Christ* never hid the need for suffering from his listeners. He spoke of the Cross as an essential condition of following him. He made it clear that "If someone wants to come after me, he must renounce himself, take up his Cross and follow me" (*Mk* 8:34). The way that leads to life is steep and narrow, while the road that "leads to perdition" is broad and wide (*Mt* 7:13).

At various times Christ said that "his disciples and believers would meet many persecutions. These happened not only in the early years of the Church under the Roman Empire, but also afterwards, and they will come again in different places, and even in our time" (*SD* 25).

The kingdom of God will only come about through a struggle which at times seems very violent: "they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to the synagogue and imprison you. They will bring you before kings and rulers because of my name. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. (...) You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives and friends. Some of you will be put to death. But not even a hair of your head will be lost. Your endurance will save you" (*Lk* 21:12-13.16-19).

Acts tells us that, at the end of his first missionary journey, Paul encouraged his followers by "exhorting them to persevere in the faith because many tribulations were necessary in order to enter the kingdom of God" (*Ac* 14:22). *Tribulation* (thilipsis) and *perseverance* (hypomene) are both key-words in the New Testament.

Tribulation indicates the difficulties, the struggles and the persecutions of the missionary Church of that time. This corresponds to the 'last days' in the eschatological discourses of the Synoptics. Such trials come to all Christ's disciples (cf. *Jn* 15:18), but above all to those who are radically involved in his mission. Paul's letters give abundant evidence of this.

Perseverance indicates patience and tenacity. It is the virtue of the Christian in situations of struggle. It is a characteristic of God himself who brings about his plan for the transformation of the world decisively but tolerantly, to enable everyone to be saved. Peter says, "The Lord will not delay to fulfil his promise, as some believe. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but allowing everyone to repent" (2 *Pt* 3:9).

Christ's words of farewell at the Last Supper clearly show that the Cross is an integral part of christian life: "If the world hates you, know that it first hated me. [...] Remember what I have told you, a servant is no greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you" (*Jn* 15:18.20). In this passage persecution appears as verification of identity with Christ and of union with him.

The Book of Revelation is clear that the last days, our own, will be characterised by a great battle between the dragon (Satan) and the woman (the Church), between Babylon (the pagan and murderous Roman Empire) and Jerusalem (the Kingdom of Heaven). The God's 'great day', his final triumph, will come with lightening flashes, thunder, cups poured out, plagues, punishments and harvests of blood. It is interesting to note that the seven letters addressed to the Churches of Asia (that is, to us) each end with the

word 'victor', as if to remove any doubt that christianity is a conflict: To the victor I will give the fruit of the tree of life (2:7); The victor will not be overcome by the second death (2:11); To the victor I will give hidden manna (2:17); To the victor I will give authority over the nations (2:26); The victor will wear a white robe (3:5); The victor will be like a column in my temple (3:12); the victor will sit beside me (3:21).

We must not forget the last Beatitude which speaks of persecution and suffering for the name of Christ: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice's sake. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you, and persecute you, and tell every sort of evil against you. Rejoice and be glad for your reward will be great in heaven. This is how they persecuted the prophets before you" (*Mt* 5:10-12).

(b) The Cross, which is part of human and christian life, is particularly present in missionary life. The second Letter to the Corinthians, written by *Paul* "in a moment of great affliction and anguish of heart" (2:4), has some marvellous passages on the apostolic ministry which "produces unmeasurable eternal glory" (4:17). However, it also involves "hardship, difficulties, distress, floggings, imprisonment, tumults, hard work, sleeplessness, hunger" (6:4-5).

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is suffering violence and is being taken by storm" (*Mt* 11:12). When we forget this law we risk forgetting that Christianity will always be a battle "against the forces of the world of darkness" (*Ep* 6:12). On the individual level this darkness represents the vices, and on the social level oppressive political structures and a culture of injustice mixed with sin.

By vocation a missionary is at the centre of this battle because he goes where Satan is still stronger than Christ. It is inevitable that when the seed begins to sprout and create space for itself, it breaks the ground in which it is sown. There is a reaction from the culture, the traditions, from human nature that does not want to change, and from the evil one who is threatened.

For Paul the difficulties of the apostolate are a gift because they make him realise that it is really Christ's work. Paul spoke about a "thorn in his flesh" to prevent him becoming proud. He is happy with his weakness "so that the power of Christ can rest upon me", "for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 *Co* 12:7-10). The crosses which a missionary meets will always seem to be obstacles to his work. In fact they are the essential for the coming of God's Kingdom.

(c) Following scripture and the traditions of the Church, *Comboni* always felt that difficulties were a cause of hope and certainty because they are the sign that God places on his work.

In 1980, during the centenary of the Founder's death, Fr. Calvia wrote, "Many of us work in dangerous political situations, in unhealthy climates, under governments opposed to the christian vision of the world. We need to rediscover the joy, the privilege and the fruitfulness of being persecuted for the faith: Blessed are you when they abuse you... (*Mt* 5:11). We seek to rediscover both in theory and in practice the unbreakable connection between mission and martyrdom, and to accept martyrdom as a privileged expression of our witness (*RL* 57:3). Vatican II outlines the spirituality of martyrdom for us, 'By a truly evangelical life, in much patience, in long-suffering, in kindness, in unaffected love, the missionary gives witness to the Lord by shedding his blood if necessary. He will ask God for the strength to know the joys that can be found in the midst of trials and poverty' (*AG* 24).⁸²

Called to courage

Today, as in the past, it is important to place the Cross within the vision of the gospel. Without this we can become sad victims, something completely against the spirit of the great apostles. We are not made for struggle and fighting. By nature we prefer a quiet life. And we are influenced by our culture which avoids difficulties.

⁸² CALVIA S., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 129, pp. 3-4.

Salvifici Doloris states that *the gospel of suffering* for the sake of Christ "contains a special call to courage and strength, supported by the power of the resurrection" (SD 25). Paul says, "All those who want to live fully the life of Christ will be persecuted" (2 Tm 3:12). Jesus reminds us: "Have faith. I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

These passages give us the courage and enthusiasm which, as the heirs of the Good Shepherd and of Comboni, we need in order to give our lives to defend the sheep from the wolves. John Paul II sees this attitude of openness and courage as typical of a missionary. He concludes: "The supreme test is the giving of one's life, to the point of accepting death as a witness to faith in Jesus Christ. In christian history, there have been many 'martyrs' and they are indispensable for the growth of the gospel. There have been many in our own times, bishops, priests, religious and laity, often unknown heroes who have given their lives for the faith. They are the announcers and witnesses of the gospel par excellence" (RM 45).⁸³

Invitation to the wedding feast

"Comboni lived out his call in the sign of the Cross, through suffering, obstacles and misunderstanding, convinced that "the works of God are born and grow at the foot of Calvary" (RL 4). The sections of the Rule of Life which develop this text, remind us that we are "invited to the wedding feast" and that we must fast because the bridegroom has been "taken away" (Mk 2:19-20). Our Founder accepted to reincarnate this bridegroom "who is taken away" from life (Lk 5:35). In other words, as followers of the Good Shepherd and of Comboni we must joyfully accept to share in the banquet of their mystical marriage with the Cross. It is part of the identity of the comboni missionary of today. If we want to be faithful to the plan which God has carried out in Comboni for the Church and for the world we have to see missionary work and missionary presence in Africa under the Cross.

The Rule of Life of the Comboni Missionary Sisters speaks of the mystical marriage between Comboni and the Cross. It links love of the Cross with the main elements of the Comboni carism (no. 4):

"4 Comboni conformed to Christ to the extent of living the total self-giving of the Cross, taking up the sufferings of the people of Africa, facing difficulties, misunderstanding and early death (S 5828). The Founder's missionary fruitfulness comes from the Cross which he embraced with joy and hope, recognising it as the fountain of salvation for Africa (S 1710).

"4.1 By contemplating Jesus Christ Crucified, we want to assimilate the mystery of his death for the salvation of the world (S 2721; 2886-2192). In him we find the real meaning of the 'spirit of sacrifice' understood as the willingness to lose all, and suffer everything for God and the missions.

"4.2 Aware that the plan of Salvation is based on death which produces life, we accept with hope the scandal of the Cross and we believe that the works of God are born and grow amidst difficulties of every kind (S 2324-2325; 5181).

"4.3 As part of a work that is mysteriously guided by Providence, we are ready to accept all kinds of difficulties and to be like 'hidden stones which never see the light', but which contribute to the building of the Kingdom (S 2701).

"4.4 Living in situations of poverty, injustice and oppression, and involved in the struggle and anxieties of the people, we are called to share and to take up this suffering, which, united to the sacrifice of Christ, acquires a real value for the coming of the kingdom".

Our own Rule of Life says, "The missionary places the crucified Lord at the centre of his life" (4.1), accepting the Cross with courage at a personal, community and missionary level.

⁸³ See also Ep 6:18-20; Ac 4:23-31.

Personal Cross

On the personal level the Cross consists in the physical, moral and spiritual limitations that mark our individual history. There are the crosses of everyday life which have to be carried with generosity such as sickness and old age which limit activity (*RL* 15.2), weakness that requires strong asceticism (*RL* 26.4) and sin which demands continual conversion (*RL* 54). Without them there is a lack of fervour "which manifests itself in tiredness, disillusionment, compromise, lack of interest and above all in a lack of joy and hope" (*EN* 80).

Regarding the vows the Cross is very personal. We are called to a radical christian experience with all its implications (*RL* 22). The evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience demand the "renunciation of values which undoubtedly merit high esteem" (*LG* 46). They engage us in an unending struggle, demanding a great spirit of sacrifice. Fr. Todesco wrote to the formators in 1955: "Above all your students must be convinced that they cannot observe or perfect their vows without suffering and struggle".⁸⁴ The vows are not a badge to be displayed, but a commitment by which we want to be more like Christ "who was chaste and poor, redeeming men with his obedience unto death on the Cross" (*PC* 1).

We have already spoken about consecration in chapter two. Here I will only note three particular crosses which are linked to it: loneliness, sharing and the renouncing of self, which are directly related to chastity, poverty and obedience.

(a) *Loneliness* is part of human life. Today it has become such a social evil that Paul VI, in his speech at the opening of the second session of the Council (29.9.1963), spoke directly about the "large number of people who, whilst living in a busy world, feel alone", because of the profound changes which have taken place in society. *Gaudium et Spes* takes up the same point, noting how modern man is enclosed in loneliness (cf. *GS* 31).

The loneliness of chastity is part of this wider loneliness in the modern world, but this does not make it any easier. There can also be loneliness in marriage, but in celibacy it can lead to discouragement and unfaithfulness. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* suggests that priests should live in community, or at least that they should eat together and meet frequently to avoid "the dangers of loneliness" (*PO* 8). Loneliness is a cross that a religious must learn to accept with serenity, as part of the vow of chastity.

(b) For those who are working in situations of 'Africa', the *sharing* that is demanded by the vow of poverty can be a real calvary. The starting point is a simple life-style based on the use of simple means, sharing our possessions with the local Church (*RL* 30.2; 164). It means sharing the same conditions of the poor (*RL* 28; 60), accepting limits (*RL* 28.1) and taking on their problems and defending them against exploitation and injustice (*RL* 28.2). The Chapter of 1985 (cf. *CA* 35-68) gave concrete suggestions with regard to sharing. This was taken up by the Chapter of 1991 (cf. *CA* 4.3; 31.5; 45).

(c) Obedience corrects in us the instinct of independence which leads us to seek our own *personal fulfillment*. What is a 'fulfilled' person, in today's mentality? It is someone who is able to do the work to which they feel drawn, as far as possible avoiding contradictions and obstacles which are seen as attacks on their authenticity. Fr. Agostoni writes, "Great people obtain a sense of their own greatness not in exalting themselves but in being like Christ crucified. They provide us with an example. When we want to obtain fulfillment through our plans, our ideas, our freedom, through the expression of our personality we must first of all be like Christ, physically and psychologically. Without this we are merely spectators of our own foolishness and self-destruction".⁸⁵

⁸⁴ TODESCO A., *circ. lett.* (oct. 1955), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 45, p. 1000.

⁸⁵ AGOSTONI T., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 98, p. 18.

We know all this, that it is in denying ourselves in obedience to the Word, to the Church and the Rule, that we attain the full stature of the new man modelled on Christ (cf. *Ep* 4:23). But between the saying and the doing, there is the reality of the Cross!

As we see, all three vows demand a real *denial of self*, something which is very difficult to swallow for our hedonistic culture, but something inevitable in the following of Christ and Comboni.

The Community Cross

Other people are our joy and our torment. They satisfy our need for community, but at the same time they crucify us. They have been placed alongside us by God without our consent. Differences in age, in social status, in nationality, in culture and race, all things which should enrich us, can become spears to wound the heart.

We reflected on community and its demands earlier. Here we simply add that community life, without a daily experience of the Cross is something unobtainable. The Rule of Life recognises "the experience of difficulty and tension in living together" (*RL* 36.3), because community life demands a great capacity to adapt and share (*RL* 37) and a desire for reciprocal pardon (*RL* 38).

We ask the Father for the gift of unity (*RL* 36.2) but if it is true that "The community makes the commandment of the Lord, 'love one another as I have loved you', the basis of living together" (*RL* 38), then we have to be prepared to suffer a great deal like Christ and Comboni. From being individuals, we become "brothers" or "sisters" through a painful process. Then we have the great joy of finding support in the community.

The missionary cross

In 1911 Fr. Vianello wrote, "The mission to save souls demands a love which is ready to sacrifice itself. Let us not deceive ourselves, the redemption of the world was completed on Calvary by the God-Man and it cannot be brought to others except through the sacrifice of those who are called to continue this work of Jesus Christ".⁸⁶

The old Rule of 1928 (valid until 1963) pointed out that missionaries must be convinced that they have not taken on a comfortable life but one of "privations, sacrifice and sufferings". There are three aspects to the missionary cross, exodus, kenosis and martyrdom.

(a) *Exodus*. "In virtue of his vocation the missionary is ready to go forth in faith and obedience to peoples or groups of peoples among whom the Institute performs the work of evangelisation" (*RL* 15).

First of all this means *separation* from one's own family. Something which becomes more difficult and more sad as parents get older. Leaving is always a cross. It was for the Israelites even though they passed from slavery to freedom. It will always be painful for a missionary. Like the Israelites he will be tempted to go back to the cucumbers and melons of home (cf. *Nb* 11:5).

(b) *Kenosis*. Missionary life cannot be lived except by reference to Christ who "emptied himself, taking the position of a slave" (*Ph* 2:7). Kenosis, which is part of the demands of rotation (*RL* 35.4) and uncertainty (*RL* 71), continually make us feel like children as we face the difficulty of learning a new language. It means leaving behind familiar customs as well as experiences which have been precious to us. Without love kenosis becomes something that fills us with annoyance and tests all our energies and resources.

⁸⁶ VIANELLO F., in *Archivio Comb.* III (1963) 5, pp. 160-161.

(c) *Martyrdom*. "Because the missionary is aware that evangelisation implies following Christ even to the extreme testimony of love, he accepts situations of persecution and is even ready to unite the sacrifice of his own life to that of Christ" (*RL* 58.3).

The most recent encyclical on the missions points out that, "Still today missionary work remains difficult and complex as in the past and requires the courage and light of the spirit. Often we are still living the drama of the first christian community which encountered unbelief and hostility" (*RM* 87). These are heavy words when we think of the all the confreres who have been killed in recent years. At the same time, the experience of war, difficult climates, illness and stressful work can produce a psychological paralysis caused by deep depression and exhaustion. These are signs of real apostles who have suffered with the people. They have made present the Good Shepherd who with his own wounds and death has sanctified the sufferings of the sheep. A missionary experiences death in a different way from a non-christian. He accepts it in Christ. This is how his sacrifice is effective.

Do not be afraid.

In the Christmas message of 1986, I invited all the Institute to accept with joy all the crosses which the Lord had been sending us. I want to conclude this chapter on the passion with some encouraging words from that letter.

"The circumstances in which many of us work are very difficult. It is important to keep faith in the coming of the Kingdom and in the presence and help of God. (...) Let us accept the invitation, 'do not be afraid. For a saviour has been born to you' (*Lk* 2:10-11). (...) The temptation to discouragement is very strong in some confreres who have had to leave deteriorating situations in Africa or Latin America. Let us keep in mind the words of the Founder: (*S* 4950)".⁸⁷

PRAYER

Father, you gave Christ
the courage and strength to continue unto death
so that we could have life and joy.
Let not the fear of suffering
or the demands of the struggle
prevent us from transforming our lives
into a gift for the poorest and most abandoned.
We ask this through the intercession of Comboni
and in the name of Christ. Amen.

⁸⁷ PIERLI F., *circ. lett.* (16.10.1986), in ACR/1.

Chapter VII

RESURRECTION

The Resurrection of Christ is present in all the topics dealt with so far: in the mysteries of the life of the Good Shepherd, as in the experiences of Comboni and of our Institute. But in this chapter I would like to be more explicit, so as not to lose some valuable aspects.

It is not easy to talk about Christ's Resurrection; it is not part of our experience, and is outside our usual mental concepts. The bible itself speaks about the risen *Kyrios* in complex language, often hard to grasp. Nevertheless, we draw close to the mystery with the help of the Holy Spirit; and not just to know more about it, but to live it better.

Without doubt, the Resurrection-Ascension of Jesus is the most outstanding missionary event. It seals the coming of the Kingdom of God which, with the triumph of the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rv 19:16) enters history in a unique and definitive manner. And to the Christian community that is born out of the paschal mystery of the Risen One, it says:

*Do not be afraid;
I am the First and the Last, the Living One,
I was dead and now I am to live for ever and ever,
and I hold the keys of death and of the underworld.
(Rv 1:17-18)*

THE RESURRECTION OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Mk 16:14-20; Jn 21:1-13: Resurrection Appearances

Ep 1:15-23: The triumph and supremacy of Christ

Ac 3:11-26: Glorification of the Servant Jesus

The Father's Initiative

The Letter to the Hebrew concludes with the author saying, "May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, through the blood of an eternal covenant, make you perfect in everything. May he work in you what is pleasing to himself through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (*Heb 13:20-21*).

The resurrection of Christ is an initiative of the God of peace, of the Father. For the man Jesus it was the high point of that divine love which had enabled him to give his life for others. Although it is difficult to enter into this mystery, perhaps we can say that in his resurrection Jesus had a deep experience of the effectiveness of the love of the Father, and through it became the great Shepherd of the sheep.

The above quotation from Hebrews is seen as a reference to Isaiah 63:11 which describes God as "the one who saved them from the sea, the shepherd of his flock". Before becoming the saviour of his

people, Moses had a personal experience of salvation which convinced him that his Lord was greater than Pharaoh. In a similar way Christ's resurrection was a personal experience of the Father's fidelity.

The theme of the decisive intervention of the Father in the victory of Christ over sin and death is developed in Peter's sermon in the Temple. "The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our Fathers has glorified his servant Jesus whom you handed over to Pilate. You called for the freeing of a murderer and killed the author of life. But God has raised him from the dead, and we are witnesses to this" (*Ac* 3:12-15).

Referring to his sheep, the Good Shepherd said, "My Father who gave them to me is greater than all, and no one can steal them from my Father" (*Jn* 10:29). Jesus experienced this truth in his resurrection. In a unique way it prepared him to guide the sheep.

Object of faith and hope

The resurrection was not something totally unexpected by the Good Shepherd. It was the achievement of a goal from which he never removed his gaze. In other words, the resurrection was always an object of faith and hope for Jesus, and formed part of his own references to the passion. Inspired by the Holy Spirit and the word of God, Jesus had no doubt that his painful future would conclude with his glorification and the vision of the Father. Without this hope how could he have faced the demands of the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, that is, of his death?

This future of life for himself and for the sheep was often the subject of the Good Shepherd's prayer. At the Last Supper he prayed, "Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son so that Son may glorify you. You have given him power over all humanity so that he may give eternal life to all those whom you have given to him" (*Jn* 17:1-2). There is no doubt that the glorification that Jesus prays for is the resurrection and ascension into glory. These events were capable of attracting and involving all those who were powerless at the time of his death. Before the Last Supper, Jesus prayed, "Now the prince of this world will be cast out. When I am lifted from the earth, I will draw everyone to me" (*Jn* 12:31). He prays that his hope will not be unfounded in all that is about to happen.

Psalm 22 can be helpful in understanding the faith journey of the Good Shepherd. It begins with the tragic cry, "My God, my God why have you deserted me". It concludes with the call to "Praise the Lord because he has not ignored the suffering of the poor. He has not hidden his face, but heard the cry for help". This recalls the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah, in which he speaks of a mysterious death followed by full life which is shared with many (cf. *Is* 52:13-53:12).

The resurrection is the fulfillment of the Father's promise which Jesus accepted in faith and held in hope. Paul, in his preaching before the Jews of Antioch (cf. *Ac* 13:16-41), quotes Psalm 22 to show that in the final moment of death Jesus experienced the deep mystery of the Trinity. First of all he too had to entrust himself totally to the Father.

Ascended to the Father

In his account of the Last Supper, John presents the Passover of the Lamb of God, and ours, as a passage from "this world to the Father" (*Jn* 13:1). With his resurrection Jesus goes up into heaven (cf. *Heb* 4:14) and is seated "at the right-hand of throne of majesty" (*Heb* 8:1). In this he becomes the way to the Father "who gives us the courage to approach God with full confidence through faith in him" (*Ep* 3:12). Having come to give the final answer to humanity's thirst for religion, Christ, risen from the dead, tears the veil of the temple and gives everyone the possibility of seeing the face of God.

Before the resurrection it was right for people to search for other ways to the Father (the law and the prophets, by contemplation and reflection). This is no longer so. Now the only Gate is the Pierced One who by his resurrection and ascension has experienced the infinite love of God and become part of our history and destiny.

Dives in Misericordia tells us that Christ's resurrection is "the last sign of the messianic mission. The sign which crowns the whole of revelation of divine love to a world subjected to evil. (...) By his resurrection Christ has revealed the fullness of the Father's love for him, and through him, for everyone" (*DM* 8).

Source of charisms and ministry.

Reflecting on the extraordinary power of God which is manifested in the risen Christ, Paul prays that the Ephesians may understand "the hope to which they have been called", and may know "the love which surpasses every understanding". In the resurrection, the fullness of the Father becomes fullness of Christ, and the fullness of Christ becomes the fullness of the Church and of all humanity (cf. *Ep* 3:15-21).

The resurrection is not only an act of love towards the Good Shepherd, but also towards the sheep who, through him, with him and in him, are filled with the fullness of God. Seated at the right hand of the Father, Christ becomes the source of all charisms and ministries (cf. *Ep* 4:8-13). It is by means of these gifts that Christ continues to be present in the world as the Lord of history, the Good Shepherd who overcomes the powers of evil and brings freedom, salvation and the fullness of life.

Paul clearly presents this vision in which the Risen Christ, the Son of God, becomes "the Son of God with power". Through this he shares with humanity the richness of his own divine Sonship (cf. *Rm* 1:1-5).

Mission as a special experience of the Risen Lord

Christ's appearance to the apostles on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (cf. *Jn* 21:1-13) shows how missionary work, rather than just being a self-emptying, is a moment of particular closeness to the Lord.

Prompted by Peter the disciples go fishing. He enables them to remember that they are "fishers of men". He pushes them towards the lake. He encourages them to accept the challenge of mission, which is as uncertain as the high seas. The port is already a temptation, especially since "they caught nothing." It is Peter who is able to see beyond the experience. It is John who recognises the Risen Lord in it. John is not looking for an excuse to return to shore, but the uncertainty of the moment enables him to become open to the Lord's presence. This mysterious presence is revealed as being so tremendously effective "that they were unable to bring the net ashore because of the great quantity of fish".

The felt-presence of the Risen Lord in the missionary apostolate, seen as the revealing action of God, achieves its fullness in the celebration of the Eucharist, to which it inevitably leads ("Jesus came up to them, took the bread and gave it to them, and the same with the fish"), and from which it departs with renewed faith and energy. The presence of the Lord is also the moment of clarification of the deep motives which encourage an apostle in his work: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these do?" The reply is 'yes!'. Thus the apostles can leave to face the sea again: "When they had eaten Jesus said to Peter, feed my lambs, feed my sheep".

PRAYER

Christ, great shepherd of the sheep
you said:

"Do not be afraid!
I am the First, the Last, the Living One.
I was dead but now I live for ever
and I have power over death and the underworld.
Behold, I am with you always
until the end of the world."
We pray, increase our faith
in your active presence in the word,
in the sacraments and in you ministers.
May we live our missionary service
like the apostles who experienced
"the Lord working alongside them
and confirming the word
with the miracles which accompanied it".
You who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever. Amen.

THE RESURRECTION IN DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 2790-2791: The Church, the word of the Risen Lord

S 4950: Twelve fishermen sure of the victory

S 7062-7063: Confidence in God

S 2459: When we will be in paradise

Longing for heaven

In reflecting on the passion in Comboni we have seen his attitude to death. In the last century there was a strong link between mission, martyrdom, and death. Many missionaries died young, and often during their first missionary experience. Hence Comboni's insistence on his followers being prepared to risk their lives in the cause of the gospel.

Like Jesus, Comboni never separated death from the resurrection, or martyrdom from future glory. Lozano writes that in Comboni, "Passion and Death appear not as a terminal event but as a passage (passover) to the Resurrection. In another text, the cross is related to triumph. It is the same thing said in other words. However, all of the other texts constantly presuppose this provisional, though deeply serious, character of the passion, and the partial value of death. (...) When we look at Daniel Comboni, we see him always animated by a firm hope, the same hope that Jesus of Nazareth had".⁸⁸ Indeed, he believe deeply in heaven, in the communion of saints and in the success of his work in the future.

(a) *Heaven*, as a source of joy and consolation was constantly in the thoughts and writings of Comboni. In his difficulties it gave him courage to continue even when stricken by humiliations and pain so that he exclaimed, "My God! says Sr. Victoria, and she is right" (*S* 6796).

In 1928 Fr. Meroni recalled Comboni's sense of hope: "With regard to hope I must say that the Servant of God was heroic, and more than heroic. The hope of obtaining the eternal prize through the

⁸⁸ LOZANO J.M., p. 97.

merits of our Lord was the centre of all his activity. He seemed transformed when he spoke of heaven, as if he saw it, felt it. And his writings give the same impression. His life of prayer, of continual work, untiring, of holy struggles, of sacrifices, of heavy crosses without number, all this was sustained by the firm hope of heaven".⁸⁹

In 1881 when he was already weak and low in spirit because Cardinal Canossa was not helpful in the case of Virginia Mansur, Comboni, wrote to Fr. Sembianti: "Even though I seem certain to succumb to many crosses, which in conscience I do not merit, if I have no consolation in this world, I will have in heaven" (S 6815). A few weeks later, again to Fr. Sembianti, he wrote: "Anyway, God will see to it that everything succeeds. So let us love him with all our heart, and place all our trust in him. Courage and keep going. One day we will sing God's glory together in heaven" (S 6987).

Comboni had no doubt that the good go to heaven and gather the fruit of their labours. This certainty was the main consolation which he offered to relatives and friends who had lost their loved ones. In 1878 he sent a long letter of condolence to Stella Grigolini on the death of her husband who was the father of Sr. Teresa, one of his missionaries. He wrote: "I am convinced that the father of such a daughter is in heaven and enjoys the reward of his goodness and of his faith. There he is able to pray for you, for Sr. Teresa, and for all his family. (...) If an angel asked him if he would like to return to earth for another hundred years of life he would say no, because he enjoys God. (...) Be happy, at peace, your dear Lorenzo is in heaven and enjoys the reward of his good christian life, and from there he protects his family here below" (S 5072-5073).

This quotation also shows how Comboni saw heaven as being involved with history through the communion of saints.

(b) Comboni believed deeply in the *communion of saints*. Without having done profound theological studies, Comboni had a deep sense of the relationship between the pilgrim Church on earth and the Church in heaven. He demonstrated this not only by his devotion to the saints, but also by his certainty that his loved ones were still at his side.

On the death of his mother he wrote to his father: "I exult with joy because she will be closer to me than before" (S 419). He wrote Mme. Villeneuve, who was mourning the death of her daughter: "Remember that after Calvary Jesus Christ rose from the dead. (...) Courage. Our holy religion, our faith teaches us that there is the church militant and the church triumphant. Those of the church triumphant are in communion with the church militant. You must see your loved ones who are in heaven as being present with you. They see you, listen to you, they count your tears, yours sighs, your joys. Courage!" (S 2831).

(c) Comboni also understood heaven in terms of prayers of *intercession and commitment for the missions*. In 1868, on the death of one of his missionaries, he wrote to Bishop di Canossa: "It is a great loss, but we have not lost Jesus, and so we still possess everything. Indeed, the same loss is also a gain, because Fr. Dalbosco prays for us in heaven and helps us in the struggle" (S 1783).

Like Teresa of Lisieux, Comboni saw heaven as the real opportunity to continue to work for the missions: "When we are in heaven (and we most certainly want to get there), we will put Jesus and Mary on the Cross with our constant prayers. And will we pray *so hard* that they will be compelled to work miracles (...) so that the whole of Africa is converted" (S 2459).

Just before he died Comboni said, "I am dying, but my work will not die" (cf. *Positio*, p. 1255). In 1876 he had written: "My work will continue down the ages, illuminating the whole of Africa with the light of the gospel until it reaches the gates of eternity with Christ's glorious church" (S 4380). With these two statements Comboni shows the measure of his faith in the resurrection seen, not in the abstract, but in terms of real events leading to a future with God.

⁸⁹ MERONI P., *Note su Daniele Comboni*, Verona 1928, p. 4.

In our culture, death is only a curse. The last things are forgotten. Death is seen as the end of everything, not the beginning of a new life with God. We need to recover the meaning of the resurrection in order to find the motivation needed for our difficult mission.

The Church, echo of the eternal word

Comboni's faith in the resurrection appears in his faith in the Church as the presence of the Risen Lord in history, and as the presence of the Kingdom of God. Comboni's strong sense of church is rooted in the conviction the Church, "the sacred spouse" of Christ (S 5063), is "the most beautiful creation of divine power and divine love" (S 4775). It is "the echo of the Eternal Word of the Son of God". It makes present in the world "that supernatural charity which embraces the whole universe and which the Divine Saviour came to bring on earth" (S 2791).

We need to remember that Comboni was using the language of his time. It was a time when the papal states were seriously threatened by the unification of Italy. Many Catholics saw this as a threat to the Pope and the Church. Language apart, Comboni's vision is a true understanding of revelation and of the mission of the Church. Faith tells us that humanity is involved in a struggle between good and evil. To ignore this is to dilute the mandate which the Church received from the Risen Christ. It means denying the Church's mission to transform the world.

Comboni places himself alongside the defenders of the Church, declaring himself its obedient servant (cf. S 2269), making himself available to the Pope for whom he would give his life a thousand times (cf. S 962). He wants the authority of the Church to rediscover its early enthusiasm, and he prays for the holy Spouse of Christ and for His Vicar on earth.

In his Report to the Society of Colonge in 1866 there is a page which describes Comboni's concern for the Church and which is a real profession of faith:

"And now a word of love and dedication to the Church and its leader which I send to you from the capital of the Catholic world. Whilst we are certain of the Church's triumph because of the promise that 'the gates of hell will not prevail against it', at the moment the Church is exposed to the greatest of tests. This is a risk to the salvation of thousands of souls who are the victims of the pride and error that dominates the modern world. Pray for the holy Spouse of Christ and for His Vicar on earth.

"You know how the forces of hell attack the Church through secret societies (...) whilst she is victorious over nations and kings (...). Pray to the Almighty that this glorious palladium of justice, of divine order, this victorious vessel of salvation will not be destroyed (...). Pray, pray that our holy Father Pius IX lives to see the triumph of the Church (...) and that he might see the beginning of the work of the regeneration of Africa. Pray to the Good Shepherd who wants to unite all the lost sheep under the shade of the tree of life. And who wants all the unbelievers of every nation to be one flock with one shepherd".⁹⁰

A month before he died Comboni wrote a long and pain-filled letter to Cardinal Simeoni in which he called the Church "my lady and mother". Thus he put the seal on his life which had been completely spent in making the love of the Good Shepherd present in the world. "I promise your eminence *perfect obedience* in everything, even if I must die of a broken heart. Since my childhood until today I have always loved and sought to do the will of God and of my superiors; and I would be happier to be condemned to perpetual imprisonment and to death, while remaining in communion with the Pope and the Church, *my Lady and Mother*, rather than to be a king and to live in glory and honour in the world" (S 7001).

⁹⁰ COMBONI D., *Scritti*, edited by Studium Combonianum, Rome 1983, vol. II, p. 631-633.

Apostle of the Risen Lord

In his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, having spoken about the resurrection and our place in it, Paul then lists the attitudes, the behaviour, and the virtues which are essential for "the children of light" (*Ep* 4-6; *Col* 3).

Comboni writes in a similar way as he thinks of his missionary work. For him the Risen Lord is the great Shepherd of the sheep who continues his work through the Church. He insists on some essential requirements for a missionary: "Whatever work we are involved in let us place all our trust in God and in the Queen of Africa. (...) Patience, faith, courage, fidelity to the hearts of Jesus and Mary will enable us to set up the work and save a great number of souls" (*S* 1785). Let us look at these virtues in detail.

(a) *Confidence in God*. In 1866 in a letter to Fr. Bricolo Comboni uses a revealing phrase, "What I am still certain of is that God has given me immense confidence in Himself" (*S* 1390). A year later he wrote to Bishop Canossa, "In Rome they are making war on me, but I have an unbreakable confidence in God, for whom I have risked my life, and will again" (*S* 1452).

Comboni's confidence in God had a solid foundation: "God never abandons those who have confidence in him" (*S* 4387), because, "the Lord is a gentleman" (*S* 1568), and "the subjects of Jesus Christ are much safer than the subjects of the sovereigns of this world" (*S* 1888).

In a very pleasant letter from Paris to Count Guido of Carpegna in 1865 Comboni said: "As you see, the work is great and demanding. But if God puts his mind to it, it will go well (...). Together, me and you, we are rich; me and St. Francis Xavier, we are saints; me and Napoleon III, we are powerful. Together me and Mr. Lord-God, we are everything!" (*S* 987).

Just a month before he died Comboni wrote to the timid Rector of the seminary in Verona: "Have confidence in God! (...) If we really knew and loved Jesus Christ we would be able to move mountains. Lack of confidence in God is common to almost all good souls (...) who have great confidence with their words, but very little when God tests them and doesn't give them what they want. I have seen this in many religious and priests (...). I never would have believed it, but that's how it is. Have faith in God, in our Lady and in St. Joseph" (*S* 7062-7063).

From his first experience of Africa confidence in God was a basic virtue in Comboni. On 18th. January 1858 he wrote from the Morning Star (the Nile boat): "We have met many unbelievable difficulties (since leaving Khartoum). (...) But do not worry about us. Surrounded by God, our Lady and St. Francis Xavier we are safer than if we were going to the Central Africa surrounded by one hundred thousand of French soldiers" (*S* 207-209).

Even when faced with alarming financial difficulties Comboni did not lose his calm faith in God. He wrote to Canossa in 1867: "Trust in Providence, and be assured that under the mantle of his authority we will find the money that we need. We have an Association approved by Pius IX. We have a tongue for begging. We have a pen for writing. We have courage in the face of rejection (...)" (*S* 1431).

Comboni's confidence in God is expressed through his devotion to St. Joseph, head and provider of the Holy Family. Comboni's writings are full of phrases such as, "St. Joseph never fails" (*S* 6190), because "his bank is stronger than all the Rothschild banks" (*S* 3520). "St. Joseph keeps a lot of money hidden in his beard. He will give it to us when the time is right" (*S* 1513).

(b) *Zeal and apostolic courage*. In July 1857, the evening before leaving for Africa with the Mazza expedition, Comboni wrote to Fr. Peter Grana, the parish priest of Limone: "I have longed for this moment with greater longing than two lovers who sigh for the day of their wedding" (*S* 3). He was not talking of fleeting enthusiasm but of a missionary zeal which would give him the strength to carry on even when others gave up. It would inspire the Plan and the Postulatum to Vatican I, as well as the resolution to die "with Africa on my lips" (*S* 1441). In 1870 he wrote to Propaganda Fide: "I live only to consecrate my life for the good of those souls, and I wish I had a thousand lives to give for them" (*S* 2271).

This extraordinary zeal was linked in Comboni to such great apostolic courage that he almost appears to have crossed the boundaries of fear. In fact it was the fruit of christian fortitude which helped him to carry on with conviction even when faced with great difficulties. In the *Positio* we read that "by gradual steps he did what was necessary to develop the Church in Africa, from his teenage promise to consecrate himself to the missions, to the promise made to Bachit Caenda to take the gospel to his land, to his missionary journeys which are comparable to the those of the great explorers sent from Europe" (*Positio*, p. CXXI-CXXII).

Comboni's courage was born of a christian vision in which history was seen as a series of battles between the Church and the world involving what appear to be unequal forces, but which always end in the victory of the Church. He believed that the apostles suffered persecution and cruel deaths and that, "many good men fell, but divine Providence raised up others whose motto, inspired by the charity of Christ, will always be 'Africa or death.' (cf. S 3077-3078).

"A missionary should always remember that twelve fishermen, from an obscure village in Galilee, (...) went throughout the world, encouraged by faith in the Saviour and certain of victory" (S 4950).

(c) *Patience and constancy*. Early in 1881 Comboni received a request from Fr. Bortolo to be transferred from Khartoum to Cairo or Europe for health reasons. This was not a loss for the missions because Comboni felt that this man 'understood nothing'. However, it was a loss of another kind. Because Fr. Bortolo was so "rigid, unjust, and judgemental" that Comboni had chosen him as his confessor, believing that it "would be of great advantage to my soul and would strengthen my patience, which is most important in an African missionary" (S 6683).

Whilst waiting in Rome for a decision over the difficulty with the Camillians, Comboni wrote to Fr. Bricolo describing the slow Roman bureaucracy. He had written his report and it was being passed from one department to another: "But patience! With patience we win everything" (S 4444). One of the fruits of patience was "that iron constancy which is only given to the catholic missionary" (S 5019). Comboni was convinced that his work would succeed because "after grace, everything depends on our constancy" (S 1655).

Just before his death, Comboni wrote to his father: "The Lord be with you always. I hope that he is always with me because I have always served him, and I serve him now. And I will continue to serve him until I die, in the midst of the greatest crosses and sufferings, and with the sacrifice of my life" (S 6900).

From the Vatican Council in 1870 Comboni wrote to Angelina Frigotto: "Thank God things go well. As I have told everyone in Rome and beyond, I don't want to hear speak of difficulties or impossibilities. (...) I want to go ahead with my work. I want to plant the faith in Africa" (S 2318).

Writing to Mons. de Girardin in 1876 for financial help Comboni affirmed: "It is now twenty-seven years and sixty-two days since I swore to die for Africa. I have faced great difficulties and several times come close to death. (...) The heart of Jesus gave me and my missionaries the gift to persevere so that our war cry will always be Africa or death" (S 4049).

I conclude with an extract from a letter of 1878 to Leopold II, king of Belgium. Comboni asks that he might 'humbly' submit 'some small ideas' based on his "experience of African affairs":

"First of all, the foundation for carrying out a great work (...) is an unbreakable perseverance, never to give up in the face of any obstacle or difficulty, and never to leave or abandon the great work which has been begun" (S 5230-5231).

PRAYER

Father, we thank you
for the boundless confidence and hope
which you gave your servant Daniel Comboni.

We thank you for his belief in heaven
and for his determination
to reach there with many others.
We thank you also
for his experience of the communion of saints,
for his tender devotion to Mary, to Joseph
and other important missionary saints.
We pray
that our lives and our work
be similarly inspired.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE RESURRECTION IN THE COMBONI MISSIONARY TODAY

Readings:

RL 51-53: Prayer, liturgy and eucharist.

RL 62-64: Community, initiation and ministry

Resurrection and mission

The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* states that the announcement of the kingdom of God cannot be separated from the proclamation of the event of Jesus Christ: "In raising Jesus from the dead, God has overcome death and finally inaugurated the kingdom in Him. (...) The resurrection allows universal access to the message of Christ, to his action and to his mission" (*EN* 16).

Following this thought our Rule of Life says: "The missionary is called to follow Christ: remain with Him, and to be sent by Him into the world to share His destiny" (*RL* 21). "He journeys with Him and with the people he evangelises taking up his cross every day, experiencing and witnessing the presence of the risen Lord" (*RL* 21.2).

When we speak of the reason for mission we refer to the words of Christ: "Go into all the world, preaching the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved" (*Mk* 16:15). More than being the foundation of mission, these words are a summary of the work of the Church which is the preaching of the name of Christ to all nations.

The history of salvation is characterised by moments which can be seen as moments of 'passage': the passage from chaos to creation, the passage of the Israelites from slavery to freedom, the passage of Jesus from this world to the Father. Finally, there is the passage of creation from sin and corruption to "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (*Rm* 8:21). Thus, it is the Lord's passover which determines the scope of mission. As I wrote more than twenty years ago, "We need to begin with the centrality of the paschal mystery in explaining the intervention of God in history and how mission is essential to the Church and the people of God".⁹¹

This is what Paul tries to convey to the new converts of Ephesus. Through the apostolic mission they have become part of the triumph and the supremacy of Christ, brought about by the Father when he raised him from the dead (cf. *Ep* 1:19-21). In this regard *Lumen Gentium* says: "Christ, having been lifted up from the earth, is drawing everyone to himself. Rising from the dead, he sent his life-giving

⁹¹ PIERLI F., in *MCCJ Bulletin* 100, p. 25.

Spirit upon his disciples and through this Spirit has established his body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father, he is continually active in the world, leading people to the Church and, through her, joining them more closely to himself and making them partakers of his glorious life by nourishing them with his own body and blood" (*LG* 48).

The resurrection should help us to deepen and live our missionary service as a vision of faith. We are not talking of a human idea but of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. That is, the passage from a world torn apart to a new world which is a place of love and communion (cf. *GS* 37). *Ad Gentes* states that "Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than a manifestation of God's will in history (...). By the preaching of the word and by the celebration of the sacraments, missionary activity brings about the presence of Christ, the Author of salvation. Whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God (...) and whatever good is found in the hearts and minds of people or in their rites and cultures is not lost" (*AG* 9).

The missionary project of "new heaven and new earth" (*2 Pt* 3:13) does not come about without the passage from the old to the new. That is, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ becomes the experience of humanity. This is the aim of mission. Missionary activity reaches its high point at the Easter vigil when the newly baptised share in Christ's resurrection.

At the service of the Easter mystery

"The word of God indicates that missionary work is a service to all the peoples of the world so that they can freely and actively become part of God's plan of salvation. Everyone is offered the 'passage' from their own situation to the fullness of Christ. The Lord has called us to bring about this passover event. We are at the service of the Easter mystery to all nations which will be concluded with the second coming of Christ. We serve non-Christians as they become new people in a new cosmos".⁹²

It is the Trinity which brings about this transformation. We are only helpers, and only to the extent that we accept to live "the mystery of life born from death" (*RL* 35.3) in order to sow the seed of a new world.

If we do not try to deepen and develop the paschal mystery in our individual and community lives, all our work to influence political and social structures will be empty. In other words, in order to be effective evangelisers, we must live in a 'passover' way, in a state of continual conversion, crucifying the flesh so as to walk in the Spirit (cf. *Ga* 5:18-25).

The characteristics of missionary spirituality listed in *Ad Gentes* (24-25) and the Rule of Life are part of this basic paschal orientation. The Rule of Life states that "Throughout the period of formation the dispositions considered basic for missionary spirituality are taken into account and verified: patience and fortitude in adversity, contradictions and disillusionment, spirit of initiative, acceptance of people in diverse situation and cultures and the disposition to live and work in communion with the other missionaries and pastoral agents" (*RL* 90.2).

All the other attitudes that characterise *comboni* spirituality as the incarnation of the Good Shepherd, complement this quotation from the Rule of Life. Some of these attitudes are faith in God, "convinced that our efforts and good deeds are placed in good hands" (Fr. Meroni); zeal for souls, which together with charity and the spirit of sacrifice, is one of the characteristics of the Institute (Fr. Vignato); perseverance and faithfulness to the missionary consecration. Of particular importance is the first part of the Rule of Life which helps us to centre our lives on "the crucified, risen and living Lord" (*RL* 4.1).

⁹² PIERLI F., *ibid.*, p. 26.

Sense of the Church

Comboni, says the Rule of Life, carried out his work for the salvation of Africa "as a missionary sent by the Church". His great love of and fidelity to the Church "were rooted in his missionary charism" (9). Following the Founder, "The missionary maintains an attitude of sincere communion with Pope and Bishops as a condition of faithfulness to the Gospel. Even in particularly difficult situations he seeks respectful and frank dialogue with the competent authorities, ready to accept their decisions" (*RL* 9.1).

Evangelisation is inseparable from the Church because the Church is inseparable from Christ who founded it to continue his saving work. Paul VI described the Church as "a sign of the new presence of Jesus. She prolongs and continues it" (*EN* 15). It is not uncommon to hear bitter criticism of the Church as if it were something other than Christ. We need to distance ourselves from those who try to build the kingdom by following the latest theory and attack the Church. Being sent by the Church, a missionary must live in union with it. John-Paul II points out that "only a profound love of the Church can sustain missionary zeal (...). For every missionary faithfulness to Christ cannot be separated from faithfulness to the Church" (*RM* 89).

Just before the General Chapter of 1985, Fr. Calvia wrote about love of the Church: "Comboni's great love and fidelity to the Church were rooted in his missionary charism (*RL* 9). As heirs to his charism we should have this same love and fidelity. (...) *Without this Comboni would not recognise us as his own.*

"I want to recall the concrete way in which Comboni expressed his love and fidelity for the Church in the form of the 'authority of the Holy See and its representatives', the Pope, the Roman Congregations, nuncios and bishops. Although he was a man of his time, Comboni demonstrated a loyalty that was totally his own, obedient but not passive. It can inspire us to work for good relations with the Holy See and its representatives, above all with the local bishops. We must keep in mind 'sincere communion with Pope and bishop as a condition of faithfulness to the Gospel' (*RL* 9.1). (...) And we must not forget another important lesson from Comboni: that we are in union with them even if they do not agree with us and do not see themselves in communion with us!

"Communion with the Church is a grace for which we must be ready to sacrifice everything, 'even if we could convert the whole world through the grace of God' (*S* 2635)".⁹³

The communion of saints

"In the life of the missionary, Mary, Mother of the Church, has an important place. Her main feasts are prepared and celebrated with special love" (*RL* 51.3). "The feasts of saints who have a particular significance for the local church or for the Institute, such as St. Joseph, St. Francis Xavier, St. Peter Claver, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, are celebrated in a missionary and liturgical context. The commemoration of Daniel Comboni is celebrated in a spirit of praise and thanksgiving to the Father for what he has accomplished in his servant" (*RL* 51.4).

Vatican II, speaking about the eschatological aim of the pilgrim Church and its union with the Church in heaven, says that through the resurrection, "all those who are in Christ, having received his Spirit, form a single Church and are united in him" (*LG* 49). The Council describes this union in order to encourage devotion to the saints:

"In the lives of those who shared in our humanity and yet were transformed into especially successful images of Christ, God vividly manifests his presence and his face. He speaks to us in them, and gives us a sign of his kingdom, to which we are powerfully drawn, surrounded as we are by so many witnesses, and having such an argument for the truth of the gospel" (*LG* 50). The Council points

⁹³ CALVIA S., *circ. lett.* (April 1985), pp. 3-4.

out that we remember the saints so that the unity of the whole Church is strengthened, and by being closer to the saints, we are brought closer to Christ.

To live the mystery of the communion of saints means 'to remember', in the biblical sense, the people and events of the past so as to be better able to understand and face present day events as part of the history of salvation. If we forget our ancestors in the faith we become ignorant of the things of God, of his ways of being and acting with us as he transforms us into Christ. It is in the saints, more than in the stars of heaven, that God shows his greatness and his power. They make the resurrection present among us in a very real way. They demonstrate the wisdom of Christians down the years. Wisdom that we need to make our own.

The mediating presence of the saints alongside Christ has been felt by the Church throughout its history. They reveal the power of God. They are witnesses to the faith, models of virtue, powerful intercessors. All of this is summed up in the Preface for the feasts of all saints:

*(Father, we give You thanks because in the saints)
your glory is revealed,
and their triumph celebrates the gift of your mercy.
In their lives you offer us an example.
Through their intercession you help us.
The communion of grace is a bond of love.*

(a) *Their triumph celebrates your mercy.* The saints are a visible sign of the loving mercy of God. They reveal the presence in history of the Good Shepherd who never abandons his sheep but cares for them so as to bring them to holiness. The saints are God's successes, models of virtue that God raises up in his Church "to vividly show his face and his presence".⁹⁴

(b) *In their lives you offer us an example.* It has been said that the saints are the authentic "followers of the gospel". They are like sparks that reveal the identity of God and man, the way in which man and God relate and the links between the two. "For when we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the city which is to come. At the same time we are shown a most safe path by which, among the vicissitudes of this world and in keeping with the state of life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, holiness" (LG 50).

Here we find a particular aspect of Comboni spirituality. The Rule of Life says that, "The missionaries draw inspiration for their personal life and missionary service from the Founder's witness of life" (RL 1.1).

Fr. Calvia has collected the comments of various confreres on the effect of Comboni in their lives. In his conclusion he writes: "The way in which Comboni has been seen as Founder was desired by the magisterium of the Church which asked all religious to renew their way of life in the light of the charism of the founder. (...) We have to examine our own personal lives in the light of the life of the Founder. (...) He becomes a kind of 'rule of life', the measure of our daily lives. Our vocation comes from the heart of Christ who has linked himself, and his plan of salvation, to the man Comboni. And through Comboni Christ has linked himself to us in a particular way".⁹⁵

⁹⁴ PAUL VI, *apost. lett.* (19.3.1969) *Sanctitatis clarior*, introduction.

⁹⁵ *Nella mia vita Comboni*, Comboni Missionaries, Rome 1980, pp. 92-96.

(c) *Through their intercession you help us.* The saints are not only heroic christians of the past, like monuments that we can admire. They are living people, and in a mysterious way they are part of our history. The Rule of Life invites us to remain in communion with our "deceased confreres who intercede for us with the Father" (42.5). They are with the saints and with the Founder.

In 1937 Fr. Vignato wrote: "Let us open our hearts to a real, felt faith in the powerful intercession of the Servant of God".⁹⁶ Earlier Fr. Meroni had written: "When will Comboni be beatified? It is God's secret. We pray that this great blessing for the Institute come quickly. In the meantime, pray through his intercession especially for the spiritual graces that we need for our sanctification and our ministry. The Servant of God will not be lacking in prayer for us when we ask for that which still concerns him the most".⁹⁷

I end this section with the words of the General Council, in 1981: "At the end of the Comboni's centenary year let us thank the Lord for the great things that he worked in us and in the Church through Comboni (...). For some the centenary celebrations might have been only a recalling or imitating of the Founder, without any sense of union with him. Another step is necessary. Today, through his intercession for us, Comboni is still the most active 'comboni missionary', still part of the work to which he was called by God".⁹⁸

PRAYER

Father, you have said,
"Behold, I make all things new,
and in your Risen Son you have given us
the example to follow.
Help us to know how to use the help
that he left us in the Church and its liturgy.
May his resurrection
touch the whole of creation
which impatiently waits
for the revelation of the Son of God.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁹⁶ VIGNATO A., *circ. lett.* (13.12.1937) in *MCCJ Bulletin* 15, p.455.

⁹⁷ MERONI P., *circ. lett.* (19.3.1928), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 2, p. 18.

⁹⁸ CALVIA S. & council, *circ. lett.* (3.12.1981), in *MCCJ Bulletin* 135, p.3.

CHAPTER VIII

PENTECOST

In this last chapter I want to reflect on the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and in the mission 'ad gentes'.

The Holy Spirit was 'rediscovered' only recently, in the second half of this century. This rediscovery was a great missionary event because it is the Spirit who awakens the missionary call of Christ in the hearts of the faithful (cf. AG 4).

When we speak about mission today we cannot refer to the kingdom without reference to the Holy Spirit who brings the kingdom into being (EN 75). Vatican II presents him as the one who makes holy (LG 4). To ignore him would be to forget the mystical dimension of the kingdom, and replace it with a sociological one. "The mission of the Church, like that of Christ is the work of God or, as Luke says, the work of the Spirit" (RM 24).

*Behold my servant whom I have chosen.
He is my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased.
I will pour out my spirit upon him
and he will announce justice to the nations.
(Mt 12:18)*

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Readings:

Jn 1:29-34: John's witness

Lk 3:21-22: The Baptism of Jesus

Lk 9:28-36: The Transfiguration

The Holy Spirit "remains" over Christ

John the Baptist declared openly to the Jews from Jerusalem that he was not the Messiah, but only the precursor. He tells them that the Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, because, "I have seen the Holy Spirit descend on him like a dove from heaven and remain over him" (Jn 1:32).

Sent by the Father to take away the sin of the world, and bring humanity back to the ways of eternal life, the Messiah can only be the one on whom the Baptist saw the Spirit descend and remain, because, as Jesus himself said, "it is the Spirit who gives life" (Jn 6:63).

The Spirit gives eternal life, the fullness of life which is found in God. It is fullness because it never ends, and because it is concentrated in one point. The "fullness of divinity" (Col 2:9) is in the Good Shepherd because the Holy Spirit is in him. The dove which descends and remains over Jesus reminds us of the dove which left the Ark but returned to it without finding a place to settle. Jesus is the new earth where the Holy Spirit can finally find a resting place. He is the new person open to receiving the Spirit and being guided only by him.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, if a person is not born again by water and the Holy Spirit they cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is Spirit" (*Jn* 3:5-6). Christ is the one who is born of the Spirit and filled with the Spirit. He alone can offer the Samaritan woman "the water of life" (*Jn* 4:10). To his own he offers "rivers" of life, referring to the Spirit which believers will receive from his pierced side when he is glorified.

It is the Holy Spirit who educates the heart of Christ in two ways, vertically towards the Father, and horizontally towards people, so that he becomes the beloved Son and the Good Shepherd.

(a) *Beloved Son*. In the letters to the Romans and the Galatians, Paul teaches that God has sent the spirit into our hearts that cries, "Abba, Father!" (*Rm* 8:15; *Ga* 4:6). Now, if this is true for us, it is first of all true for the man Jesus, who gradually discovered the face of the Father day by day, under the action of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gradually recognised his own union with the Father until he could say, "The Father and I are one" (*Jn* 10:30).

The Father consecrated the Son in "the fullness of the Spirit" (*Ac* 10:37) so that Jesus could experience the Father's nearness and love, and obey him as Father. In fact, despite all his sufferings Jesus was able to say, "I love the Father and I do what my father has commanded me to do" (*Jn* 14:31). Without this close union he could not have become the Good Shepherd. How could he care for them in the way the Father wanted unless he himself had experienced the fullness of divine love?

(b) *The Good Shepherd*. The word 'Son' is clearly spoken by the Father on two occasions, at Jesus' baptism and at his transfiguration. That is, at the beginning of his ministry and at the moment when he prepares to give his life for the sheep. On both occasions the Holy Spirit is present in the form of a dove and a bright cloud. The Spirit helps Jesus to link his love for the Father to his love for others. In this way he becomes the Good Shepherd.

After his baptism Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to overcome the temptations which are preventing him from being fully identified with the mission the Father has given him. He returns from the desert "with the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Lk* 4:14), and preaches in Nazareth, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me". This presence of the Spirit is the guarantee that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Good Shepherd who will lead the sheep back to the fullness of life with the Father.

Likewise after the Transfiguration, Jesus comes down from the mountain empowered by the Holy Spirit and ready to "hand himself over into the hands of men" (*Lk* 9:14). Moses and Elijah, who appear with him, also went up into the mountains at times of particular difficulty. There they renewed the commitment to the work of God. Both were strengthened by the Spirit and were able to retrace their steps and begin again. Jesus is the same. Helped by the Holy Spirit he grows in his understanding of the role of the Good Shepherd to become the lamb of sacrifice.

While he was praying

In his account of the baptism of Jesus, Luke emphasises that the Holy Spirit came down on him "while he was praying" (*Lk* 3:21), and during the transfiguration his face changed "as he prayed" (*Lk* 9:29). The transforming presence of the Spirit is linked to deep prayer. This presence is a grace, the gift of the Father. Openness in prayer is necessary in order to receive it. The prayer of Jesus consisted of placing himself in front of the Father, to be immersed in him, to contemplate his face and receive the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is the *source* of prayer as Paul says: "the Spirit comes to our help in our weakness. We do not even know what to ask, but the Spirit intercedes for us with insistence, with deep sighs" (*Rm* 8:26). The liturgy reminds us of this when it invites us to begin our prayer with the words, "Oh Lord, open my lips, come to my aid". It puts us in contact with the Spirit and recalls our dependence on him.

The Spirit is also the *result* of prayer. This gives us a deeper awareness of the Spirit's transforming effect on us. We leave prayer differently from when we entered. We experience a deeper sense of being a child of God, of being better shepherds.

It is not by chance that the prayer taught by Jesus begins with the word "Abba". Every prayer which is directed by the Spirit will lead us to cry 'Father', with the response 'Son', and all the reactions connected to that word: confidence, joy, hope, strength, obedience, apostolic zeal. It was during this type of prayer that the Spirit gradually transformed Christ into the great shepherd of the sheep.

From the Pierced heart comes the Spirit for mission

In his hymn to the primacy of Christ Paul writes: "It pleased God that all fullness be found in him, and that everything be reconciled through him" (*Col* 1:19). In the Prologue of John's Gospel we find a similar expression: "Of his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (*Jn* 1:16). The spiritual fullness of Christ is not only for him but for us too, from the Father to the Good Shepherd, from the Good Shepherd to the sheep.

We see the mysteries of God as a series of events. God sees it all as one. In Luke the Spirit comes in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost (cf. *Ac* 2:1-13). In John it comes on the same day as the resurrection (*Jn* 20:19-23), or in a more mysterious way, on Calvary when "a soldier pierced his side with a spear and immediately blood and water flowed out" (*Jn* 19:34).

The living water, the Spirit, bursts like a river "from his side" (*Jn* 7:38), from the pierced heart of the Crucified one. This pierced side is like the rock from which Moses drew water in the desert when he struck it with his staff (cf. *Ex* 17:6). It is the sanctuary from which flows the healing river of life (cf. *Ezk* 47:1-12). It is the throne of God from which springs "a river of living water, crystal clear" (*Rv* 22:1).

The Spirit that flows from the side of Christ transforms us as it transformed him. It makes us children of God and places his love within our hearts. From being a non-people, excluded from God's mercy, we become "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people of God called to proclaim his marvellous works" (*1 Pt* 2:9). We think of Peter who after Pentecost, faced the crowd without fear and proclaimed the risen Lord. This produces the first of many conversions. It means that the apostles were filled with the Spirit of the Good Shepherd, who in making them part of his mission, enables them to continue his work which he had made his own in the synagogue at Nazareth (cf. *Lk* 4:16-21).

Before the ascension, after he had "opened their minds to understand the scriptures", Jesus said, "You are witnesses of these things. And I will send you what the Father has promised me. You must wait in the city until you receive power from on high" (*Lc* 24:48). As Jesus had begun his ministry "with the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Lk* 4:14) so did the apostles. They were called to make Christ, the Good Shepherd, present in history. The Spirit was and is the source of all the gifts and ministries in the Church.

PRAYER

Spirit of holiness,
we thank you for your active presence
in the life of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.
As Isaiah prophesied,
you consecrated him with anointing,
and you sent him to proclaim the good news
of freedom and salvation to the poor.

With your power you made him
meek and humble of heart.
On Easter morning you
gave him new life.
We pray,
help us to believe fervently
in your presence in us and in the world.
Make us willing helpers
in your mission of renewing the face of the earth.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN DANIEL COMBONI

Readings:

S 56: The Spirit and the mission of the Church

S 926: The charismatic experience of 1864

S 1583-1586: The Spirit at work in souls

S 4383: Rome has the wisdom of the Spirit

The Spirit of the Good Shepherd

Being a man of his times, Comboni did not refer explicitly to the Holy Spirit but used phrases such as, supernatural grace, divine virtue and superhuman charity. In Comboni the Holy Spirit is that love which flows from the Pierced Heart to bring to the world the presence of the Good Shepherd as the salvific event for Africa.

At times the Holy Spirit is spoken of as if his presence were separate from that of Jesus Christ. In fact in history he mediates the Word which has become flesh so that everyone can receive grace upon grace (cf. *Jn* 1:14.16). If, as we say in the creed, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, it is also true that the Spirit comes from the Father through the Son (cf. *AG* 2). There is "one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ" (*1 Tm* 2:5). This precision helps us to understand the way in which Comboni saw the Holy Spirit as historically present in Jesus Christ and continuing now to make Christ present as the great shepherd of the sheep.

Dynamic presence

Comboni's faith in the active role of the Holy Spirit had its roots in the formation he received in the Mazza Institute. Here I want to quote from a letter sent to Fr. Mazza in April 1859 by "John Beltrami and his missionary colleagues", Fr. Francis Oliboni, Fr. Angelo Melotto, Fr. Daniel Comboni and Br. Isidore Zilli. In this letter there is a passage which reveals the writer's awareness of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit:

"Beloved superior, we are few in number and our lives will be short, but that little that God gives us the grace to do, we will try to carry out for his glory. This will be to prepare the foundations of missionary work here. May it please God to send many other good helpers, *docile, obedient and animated by the true Spirit*, the Spirit which fired the hearts of the Apostles, of St. Francis Xavier and the other champions who worked

and gave their lives for the salvation of souls. Pray for us. Pray constantly for us, invoking God's blessing to keep us strong in faith and love and to make us worthy of this difficult mission".⁹⁹

Comboni was aware of being guided by God through the movements of the Spirit. We have seen this with regard to his vocation, consecration, and work for Africa. Analysing his *charismatic experience* of 1864 from which the *Plan* was born, Lozano writes: "All of this surely characterizes Daniel Comboni as a christian prophet. Inspiration, an action of the Spirit of enlightening the understanding and moving the will, occurs most frequently among prophets. More than a diviner of the future, a prophet is a man (Elijah or Francis of Assisi) or a woman (Teresa of Avila or Frances Cabrini) to whom God reveals his will, calling him or her to act in the present in order to orient history toward the kingdom of God's grace. It was in this sense that Daniel Comboni knew that the hour had come for the evangelisation of Africa, that this evangelisation would have to be carried out by the Africans themselves, and that he felt called by God to advance this cause".¹⁰⁰

With the care and respect that was necessary in his time, Comboni saw the Spirit in individuals and in the hierarchy of the Church.

(a) *In individuals.* Moved by the Holy Spirit, Solomon (cf. *Sg* 1:5) and Daniel (cf. *Dn* 11:43) had foretold the conversion of Africa (*S* 1644; 1978). Mary is the "dwelling of the eternal divine Spirit" who has poured into her "all his gifts and his graces" (*S* 4003). Pius IX chose Bishop Lavigerie as Vicar Apostolic of the Sahara under the "guidance of the Holy Spirit" (*S* 1722). Comboni conceives his Plan and consecrates his vicariate to the Sacred Heart inspired from on high (*S* 4799; 3322). Fr. Ramière renews his consecration directed by the Holy Spirit (*S* 3479). Mother Emilia Julien sends Sr. Emilienne to Khartoum because "the Holy Spirit has inspired her for the good of Africa" (*S* 3721). Mons. Knoblecher was not discouraged in the face of difficulties because he was inspired by the Holy Spirit (*S* 2087).

Comboni saw the Holy Spirit present in the life of Mahbuba, a Denka slave girl who had been captured and resold many times to Moslem owners. Eventually she was bought by a pious christian woman from Cairo and entrusted to the care of the mission. There she died with the names of Jesus and Mary on her lips. Comboni described her as "the first flower that our Institution is happy to have given to the Church and to heaven" (*S* 1582). Comboni felt that the Holy Spirit had guided her life (*S* 1584).

(b) *In the hierarchy of the Church.* As the head of a very difficult mission, Comboni had to act with great prudence in relation to both civil and religious authorities. For Comboni "it is the Holy Spirit" who guides Propaganda Fide (*S* 3682) whose members are "full of wisdom, prudence and charity linked to the light of the Holy Spirit" (*S* 3682).

On the conclusion of the problem with the Camillians, Comboni wrote to Mgr. des Garets, "Rome is eternal. It has the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and in the light of this divine wisdom it renders justice. The goodness of God gave us the Catholic Church. The Holy See has all the wisdom to guide the whole universe in spiritual things. The two Councils of Lyons and Paris have the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus Christ to provide the material help necessary to continue the mission of the Son of God" (*S* 4383).

"Yesterday I received your letter and offering of 9,600 francs. I am very moved by the way in which your Society for the Propagation of the Faith, guided by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, as is the Catholic Church, comes to the help of the foreign missions twice a year, and when the missions are most in need" (*S* 4410).

Comboni's submission to the authority of the Church was based on the profound conviction that "Rome works under the guidance of the Holy Spirit". In 1881 he wrote to Fr. Sembianti with regard to the sisters leaving Sestri (*S* 6961), and concerning Virginia Mansur: "Rome works under the guidance of the Holy

⁹⁹ COMBONI D., *Scritti*, edited by Studium Combonianum, Rome 1985, vol. IX, p. 3419.

¹⁰⁰ LOZANO J.M., p. 12.

Spirit (...). And when Rome has spoken, me, you and the Cardinal must doff our caps and accept with respect the favourable or unfavourable judgement that they give regarding our work" (S 6965-6967).

Source of mission

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II sees the Holy Spirit as the main worker in the Church's mission (cf. *RM* 21). Comboni's faith in the dynamic presence of the Spirit appears most clearly when he refers to the Church's mission. He sees the Spirit as the source of mission. Whilst in the Holy Land in 1857 he went to visit the Upper Room where, "at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles, from here they went to evangelise the world" (S 56). Here Comboni links mission directly to the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of his Plan he points out that he chose Africa (his 'piece' of the world), inspired by "divine virtue", and "that flame of charity which came from the side of the Crucified one to embrace the whole human family" (S 2742).

As Jesus returned to Galilee "with the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Lk* 4:14), so Comboni was led to the distance regions of Africa by the "blood and water" (*Jn* 19:34) which flowed from the pierced heart of the Good Shepherd. For Comboni, the love which sacrifices itself (blood) and the Spirit which gives life (water) are the true sources of the missionary apostolate. Without the "divine fire" (S 3211) of the heart of Jesus the only reason for going to Africa is "the desire for human glory and the greed for gain", like "the enemies of the Catholic name" (S 2306).

Comboni concludes his Plan with a significant reference to the Holy Spirit. Comboni is certain that it "will find an echo of approval, and favourable support and help in the hearts of all the Catholics of the world who are filled with the spirit of superhuman charity which embraces the whole universe, and which the Divine Redeemer came to bring on earth" (S 2790).

Writing to the Council Fathers, he reminds them that the work of the evangelisation of Africa is a duty for those "whom the Holy Spirit has appointed as bishops to direct God's Church" (S 2308). He asks that "some young priests of your dioceses, filled with the spirit of God, join us in our work for Africa" (S 2305).

From Jesus to the Apostles, from the Apostles to the bishops, the Holy Spirit always inspires missionary work.

The prayer of the apostle

Lozano writes that "It is rather surprising to note the markedly central place that prayer occupies in the life of a man of such absorbing activity as Daniel Comboni".¹⁰¹ He chooses a quotation from a letter to Sembianti which expresses "the meaning and value that prayer had in the life of this servant of God". This text "has the value of a testament": "Trust in God! Pray. Pray not just with words but with the fire of faith and charity. This how the work in Africa was planted. This how our religion and all the missions in the world were planted" (S 7062-7063).

Lozano comments on this: "This text is extremely significant. Bishop Comboni is speaking here of a prayer that is born in the depths of the Spirit, under the influence of living faith and charity (fire, he calls them). He means a prayer which is an authentic expression of the human spirit in contact with the Spirit of God (faith and charity)".¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ LOZANO J.M., p. 99.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Comboni always sought this "contact with the Spirit of God" in order to grow as an apostle and place his work on a solid foundation.

(a) *Personal growth in prayer.* In the Rule of 1869 we read that, "Holiness is the daily bread of our missionaries. It is recognised as being necessary to maintain fervour in our vocation when we are in places where it is easy to forget God and our religious duties" (S 1867). Comboni is convinced that it is not possible to be interested in the things of God or have the necessary zeal "without the exercise of the presence of God, and an intimate, childlike relationship with him" (cf. S 2705-2711). It is through prayer that a missionary is filled with the Spirit who initiates the conversation between Father and child. This produces heroic christian missionary work.

In this context we can understand all the norms and elaborate suggestions which Comboni made to encourage prayer. The numerous practices of piety that we find in the Directory of 1869 and the Rule of 1871 need to be seen as helps to missionaries and to students, making space for the action of the Spirit and helping them to renew "the gift of themselves to God" (S 2892).

(b) *Missionary service.* On the 8th. of September 1869, after asking Bishop di Canossa to pray "for his sons in Africa", Comboni adds, "Please ask the clergy of Verona to pray for us when they will be making their retreat. We will do the same for them. The power of prayer is our strength" (S 1969). This last phrase has a particular depth and beauty. It indicates the apostolic meaning which prayer had for Comboni.

In the Rule of 1871 Comboni asked his followers to "keep their eyes always fixed on Jesus Christ", so that they could better understand "the significance of a God who died on the Cross for the salvation of souls," and so that they could be ready "to lose everything, and die for him, and with him" (S 2721-2722). In the Rule Comboni insisted on an annual retreat. He wrote to Cardinal Franchi explaining its importance, "a retreat of eight days should renew the spirit and raise it up to zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls" (S 4161).

He recommends personal prayer to his missionaries as participation in the concerns of "the divine Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep" (S 4949). Comboni knew that conversion is the work of grace and it is necessary to plead for this grace. He involved everyone in this prayer from his parents to enclosed convents. He wrote, "Everywhere they pray for our work. Thus we will be successful" (S 1951).

(c) *Consecration of the Vicariate.* Comboni's consecration of his Vicariate to the Heart of Jesus in September 1873 was part of his apostolate of prayer. In his pastoral letter for this occasion, Comboni described the mystery of the Good Shepherd and his love for people, pointing to the pierced Heart as the source of the grace of salvation.

Comboni had decided to place everything under the seal of the Heart of Jesus which contains all the treasures of grace, and has never ceased to beat with love for the world.

"This adorable heart, made divine by the hypostatic union of the Word with the human nature in Jesus Christ, our saviour, was ever free of sin and rich in every grace. There was never a moment when this heart did not beat with the purest and most merciful love for humankind. (From the stable at Bethlehem until his death on the cross). This divine Heart bore the wound of the enemy's lance, in order to pour forth from that sacred wound the sacraments through which the Church was founded. This Heart has never ceased to love humanity, and continues to live on our altars, a prisoner of love and a victim of propitiation for the whole world.

"We are confident that the consecration of the vicariate, whilst it produces in all of you an increase of faith and love, will open new ways of salvation for our beloved people of Africa, who still sleep in darkness and in the shadow of death" (S 3323-3326).

Comboni saw the consecration of his vicariate as a proclamation of the God of love manifested in the incarnate Son. We must not forget that the good news is not that God exists, but that between God and humankind there is a relationship of love. With this consecration Comboni wanted his missionaries to be renewed in their vocation, rediscovering and deepening the motives of the Good Shepherd. At the same time he was sure that the people would have the opportunity to better understand the christian message and to enter into the kingdom.

"We are deeply convinced, Comboni concluded, that this blessed day of Consecration signals a new era of mercy and peace for our beloved Vicariate. From the side of the pierced Heart torrents of grace will flow on our beloved people of Africa who still live under the curse of Ham" (S 3330).

There is no doubt that Comboni with his phrase "torrents of grace" is referring to the Holy Spirit. The consecration of the vicariate looked for an ever more effective presence of the Holy Spirit who comes from the Heart of the Good Shepherd.

PRAYER

Father,
you have called us to follow your Son
in the Institute of the
Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus.
Give us the Spirit
which helped and guided the Good Shepherd
and our Founder.
Help us to sense his presence
in people, in the world and in history.
With new dedication,
help us to share
in the evangelising mission of the Church.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE COMBONI MISSIONARY TODAY

Readings:

RL 6: Comboni attentive to the Holy Spirit

RL 56; 87: The Holy Spirit, evangelisation and formation

AG 4: The mission of the Spirit

Ratio 62: Guided by the Spirit

Sign of the times

Today we recognise the way in which the role of the Holy Spirit has been rediscovered in the life of the Church. The presence of the Spirit is clearly recognised on the level of faith, of theological reflection, of spirituality and in the new religious movements in the Church. Consecrated religious life is seen as a choice made "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (*PC* 1), and missionary life is described as "a sending in the Spirit" (*RM* 22).

The Holy Spirit is a sign of the post-conciliar times. It was Vatican II which began to listen again to the voice of the Spirit speaking to the Church (cf *Rv* 2:7). In *Lumen Gentium* the Spirit is presented as the "sanctifier" (*LG* 4), and in the decree on missions, as the ambassador of Christ sent by the Father "to complete the work of salvation and to encourage the Church to grow" (*AG* 4). Hence the importance of the Holy Spirit in the missionary documents of the Church and in our Rule of Life.

As Paul VI said, evangelisation will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. It begins, develops, and ends according to the inspiration of the Spirit (cf. *EN* 75). Consequently, following in the footsteps of Comboni, we are called to make the Good Shepherd present among people by living this privileged moment of the Spirit.

Helpers of the Spirit

The Rule of Life says: "The Spirit of the Lord ferments and transforms peoples. He leads them to an encounter with the person of Christ and his message, and to entry into the new people of God. The missionary is called by the Father and sent by the Church. Confident of the Spirit's action, he consecrates his whole existence to cooperating with this action and makes evangelisation the reason of his being" (*RL* 56).

If it is the Holy Spirit who carries out the mission of the Church (cf. *EN* 75; *RM* 21), missionaries help and assist in this work (cf. *LG* 17). *Ad Gentes* leaves no doubt about this. The 'acts of the apostles' began at Pentecost because the Lord Jesus clearly linked the apostolic ministry to the sending of the Holy Spirit, "so that they were to be associated in effecting the work of salvation always and everywhere" (*AG* 4).

On two occasions the Apostles gave witness to their work of assisting the Spirit. Speaking to the Sanhedrin, after proclaiming the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Peter said: "We and the Holy Spirit are witnesses to these events" (*Ac* 5:32). The same expression is used by the Apostles after the Council of Jerusalem: "We and the Holy Spirit have decided, not to impose any other obligation" (*Ac* 15:28).

The Apostles were deeply aware of the Holy Spirit working alongside them. Jesus had promised: "You will receive the Holy Spirit who will come upon you and you will be my witnesses" (*Ac* 1:8). After Pentecost the life of the Apostles can only be read in the light of the Holy Spirit, who prompts, guides and consoles. Like Jesus Christ, the Apostles and Comboni, we too must be aware that the Spirit is present and acts at all levels. Without this we risk relying on our own poor resources rather than the "strength of the Spirit" (*RL* 28). In this regard the Rule of Life says: "The missionary acknowledges that the Spirit acts in each evangeliser and reveals to him Christ's mystery and teaching. At the same time the Spirit acts in the hearer, and predisposes him to be open and receptive to the news of the kingdom being proclaimed" (*RL* 56.2).

The evangeliser is effective only if he interprets and proposes the Word of God "in the light of the Spirit" (*RL* 47.1), because it is only the Paraclete who can teach us and remind us of all that Jesus has said (cf. *Jn* 14:24). It is not enough to be gifted in preaching or liturgy, in order to transform hearts into the hearts of children who are able to dialogue with the Father, and enter into the community of love, the kingdom. From the hearing of the word to the taking it to heart there is an abyss which only the Spirit can cross (*RL* 4.2). Likewise with regard to culture. There cannot be any inculturation of the gospel message without the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*RL* 69).

In short, a missionary is successful to the extent in which in which he an attentive and faithful helper of the Spirit. Only in this way can he become 'spiritual' and give an effective witness.

WITHOUT THE SPIRIT

*God is distant,
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church is merely an organisation,*

*authority is power,
mission is propaganda,
worship is archaic,
moral action is slavery.*

BUT IN THE SPIRIT

*the cosmos is ennobled by the spreading of the Kingdom,
the Risen Christ is present,
the Gospel becomes power for life,
the Church becomes the community of the Trinity,
authority becomes service,
liturgy is memorial and anticipation,
human work becomes God's work.
(Patriarch Athenagoras.)*

Missionary Prayer

To be assured of the guidance of the Spirit in witnessing to the love of the Father experienced in Christ, the Comboni Missionary "feels and lives out his prayer as a manifestation of his missionary commitment" (RL 48), and forms a praying community with his brothers (RL 50).

We have already seen how the Holy Spirit breaks out with power in people and communities of prayer. We need to remember this if we are not to see missionary work just as activity to spread the Word and promote human development. Neither evangelisation nor liberation are possible without the Spirit who enables the word to grow and who gives life.

God does not give his glory to another (Is.42:8). As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Who are Apollos and Paul? Ministers through whom you came to the faith. I planted; Apollos watered. God gave the growth. (...) We are God's helpers, and you are God's field, God's building" (1 Co 3:5-6.9).

This extract from St. Paul, which is part of a long meditation on the role of the Spirit in evangelisation, is very important for missionaries. If our sermons are not based "on the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and his power", we bring a faith "founded on human wisdom". Instead of building with precious stones, we build with straw. Only the Spirit can scrutinise and reveal the depths of God. Only the 'spiritual' man can offer a word of wisdom which can transform and give life (cf. 1 Co 2-3).

All the great missionaries were people of deep prayer. The Apostles themselves felt that it was not their role to be tied up with the practical problems of food distribution. They were "dedicated to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Ac 6:2-3). Together with the Founder, we can recall Fr. Bernard Sartori, who died on Easter morning in 1983 at the foot of the altar. We know that in his last years he rose regularly at four in the morning to contemplate the face of God and to intercede for his people. God, in taking Fr. Sartori in a moment of prayer, has certainly given us a sign that we should not abandon prayer for other activities.

When we open the Bible we realise that the pillars and models of salvation history, Abraham, Moses, David, Elija, Jeremiah, Mary, Christ, Paul, were all strong in prayer and filled with the Holy Spirit. They used prayer as the normal way of entering the revelation of God's mystery, and of finding the interior strength to live it. Without the effort of prayer we remain on the edges of the missionary vocation.

During the Synod of Bishops of 1974, the Superior Generals of the four Italian missionary Institutes wrote their letter on prayer. In it they emphasised how the mission ad gentes can only be

thought of as the active presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who brings the evangeliser "to the fullness of maturity in Christ" (*Ep* 4:13) and makes him a good shepherd. It is the Spirit who makes his preaching and his work of liberation effective. To allow this happen we need to let all our work be perfused by the Holy Spirit through our prayer. When we complain about the lack of missionary spirit in the local church, do we ever think of organising prayer meetings to encourage it? The Rule of Life points out that vocation is a gift of the Spirit (*RL* 88) and "conversion cannot come about without the intervention of the Holy Spirit: only the Spirit opens the human heart to the Word" (*RL* 48.2).

The Introduction to the Liturgy of the Hours, the "source of contemplation which nourishes personal prayer and inspires missionary activity" (*RL* 52), indicates how prayer sanctifies time and makes visible the intercession of Christ. In our busy world, the Liturgy of the Hours and the rest of the liturgy take on the character of a precious missionary service. With this prayer we are able to reach many people whom we would not otherwise reach through lack of energy or because we are rejected or persecuted. Missionary prayer covers an area much greater than that of apostolic work. It has no limits in space and time. Prayer is missionary service with a universal dimension.

Contemplation and apostolate

Contemplation and apostolate are sometimes spoken of as if they were two independent realities. In fact they are integrated and complement each other. In contemplation the apostle opens himself to the Spirit who reveals the mystery of Christ so that he can preach the gospel and awaken faith in the Lord and in the Church. In contemplation the missionary absorbs the attitudes of the Good Shepherd and makes them present in history. If he does not live in an atmosphere of contemplation, a missionary finds himself engaged only in human activity, similar to any other social or political project. Only contemplation makes him an instrument of revelation at the service of people called to a relationship with the Father.

Contemplation helps us to see the stranger as someone loved by God (cf. *Mt* 25:40), to see the 'pagan' as a Cornelius in whom the Spirit is at work (cf. *Ac* 10:22), to see the seed of the Word in the world as well as the presence of Satan, to see events as the signs of the times. In other words, contemplation helps us to see reality with different eyes, and to work in a climate of faith and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Without prayer we lose the mystical dimension of the apostolate and we destroy its capacity to transform.

In its turn the apostolate provides the content and motivation for contemplation. People whom the missionary meets are rich and poor at the same time. Their needs awaken both his gratitude for what he has received and his intercession for them. Their gifts, of a spirit of religion, of hospitality, of sacrifice, help the missionary to deepen his faith and to become more generous. Thus the apostolate becomes a source of prayer and missionary spirituality.

Contemplation and action are mutual. The saying, "the apostolate is prayer, and prayer is the apostolate", is true to the extent that one enters into the other. This does not happen automatically, but through continual effort and discernment in the Holy Spirit.

I conclude with a passage from a letter of Fr. Vianello from 16th. July 1910, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Institute. Here the Holy Spirit appears as the one who molds apostles, the one who helps us to understand and live our missionary consecration.

"Let us stir up our energies and let us pray to the Lord in this moment to give each of us the fullness of the Spirit, that Spirit which formed the apostles and saints. Let us call this Divine Spirit to come upon us and make us truly *poor*, perfectly *chaste*, completely *obedient*. Let us pray to him to give us a *desire for prayer*, and the grace to *pray well*, to give us the *consolation of fraternal charity* and the

strength to make the *sacrifices necessary* to maintain that charity. May he give us real *zeal and energy* for the glory of the Lord, and the salvation of souls".¹⁰³

PRAYER

Father,
we believe that you have sent
on earth the Spirit
from the pierced heart of your Son
to continue his mission.
On the day of Pentecost
he anointed the apostles
and made them his helpers
to bring people to the obedience of faith.
Help us to believe
in the action of the Spirit
in those to whom we are sent,
making them open and receptive
to your word.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹⁰³ VIANELLO F., *circ. lett.* (16.7.1910), in MCCJ Bulletin 1, p. 13.

APPENDIX

OUR PATRON SAINTS Special models and intercessors

Today people have the great need to see 'witnesses' (cf. *EN* 41). People are tired of words and theories. They want visual history. Even theology is becoming more narrative. Role-models are no longer slavishly followed. Instead we try to see how the holiness of Christ was made present in different kinds of people. In the saints we are able to discover how God works in human affairs to bring about the history of salvation. In their difficulties and their response to God we can understand our own relationship with God. Their way of building the kingdom inspires and encourages us.

Modern historical research offer us biographies and studies of great value which enable us to rediscover the lives of the saints whose very existence was an appeal to goodness (Bergson). The Vatican Council reminded us of the need to deepen our knowledge of the saints, "and invoke God with them. For by its very nature every genuine testimony of love which we show to those in heaven tends toward and terminates in Christ, who is the crown of all the saints. Through him it tends toward and terminates in God, who is wonderful in his saints and is magnified in them" (LG 50).

MARY, IMAGE AND MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

Readings:

Jn 19:25-27: Mary at the foot of the cross.

Lk 1:26-56: The Annunciation and Visitation.

S 1638-1644: Consecration of Africa to Our Lady of La Salette.

S 3162-3163: Invocation of Mary on entering the Vicariate.

S 3990-4005: Consecration of the Vicariate to Our Lady.

RL 24; 47.3; 51.3: The example and place of Mary.

Ratio, 63-64: Mary, mother and model of the missionary.

Woman, behold your son (*Jn* 19:26).

The quotation is one of the 'seven words' spoken from the cross. The motherhood of Mary has its origin, we might say, in the Son's heart, about to be opened by the lance. At the foot of the cross Jesus places the Church in the care of his mother. After she has brought Jesus to the final consummation, Mary is called to do for everyone what she had done for him.

Jesus tells us to take her into our homes (cf. *Jn* 19:27). Only if we live close to Mary can she help us to become good shepherds, who like her Son, give their lives for the sheep. Let us not forget the moment at Cana when Mary, interceding for the newly married couple, prompts Christ to involve himself in the situation of the family. For Jesus the intercession of his mother is the Father's sign to begin his public ministry (*Jn* 2:11).

Devotion to Mary is an integral part of the following of Christ. It is one of the deepest feelings of the heart of Jesus which we must share, the attitude of a son towards Mary.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you (*Lk 1:35*)

Mary had a direct and unique experience of the primacy of the Holy Spirit in the mission to bring Christ to the world. She clearly understands that such a mission is beyond her capabilities. Her virginity is the symbol of this, and it is the recognition that human seed cannot bring to birth the first of many brothers who is born not of blood or will of the flesh, or will of man, but is generated by God (cf. *Jn 1:13*).

In this technical age, Mary reminds us that to be what we should be, that is missionaries, we need to work with the Holy Spirit. "If a person is not born of water and the Spirit, they cannot enter the kingdom of God" (*Jn 3:5*).

She set off for the hill-country of Judea (*Lk 1:38*)

Mary is totally at the service of the coming of Christ. As ark of the covenant she carries Jesus to the pregnant Elizabeth. She then presents him to the shepherds, to the Magi, to Simeon and to Anna. At Cana the result of her intervention is that "his disciples believed in him" (*Jn 2:11*).

In Mary the aim of our vocation is clear, to be at the service of the covenant meeting between Christ and the 'nations' as represented by the Magi. All of missionary activity is secondary to this, to make Christ the heart of the world.

She pondered everything in her heart (*Lk 2:51*).

As Paul VI has said, Mary is the virgin who listens and prays (cf. *MC 17*). The Rule of Life says: "The missionary learns to listen to the Word of God like Mary, figure of the Church in prayer. She is the Virgin who listens to and stores up the Word of God, meditating on it in her heart" (*RL 47.3*). Today vast amounts of news and information pass before us. In all this God can be marginalised, and we become incapable of reading the signs of the times. One event cancels out another. If we forget history we are unable to celebrate the memory of the past. This is the sin of which God often complains (cf. *Ps 78*). The Magnificat instead is a masterpiece of the understanding of one's own history in the light of salvation history. It overflows with praise and gratitude and shows how deep was Mary's assimilation of the Word of God.

Mother of Jesus (*Jn 2:1*)

Mary makes feminine the deep love of "the Father of mercy and God of all consolation". Without Mary Jesus would not have been able to have a complete human experience of the tenderness and welcome of the Father who is like "a mother who consoles her son" (*Is 66:13*). Without his experience of maternal love Jesus would have been lacking in emotional experience and this would have influenced the possibility of his becoming the Good Shepherd. Mary is an integral part of the the revelation of Love which is the heart of the Gospel. If we present the Gospel without Mary, if we establish christian communities without her, we pervert the message of the gospel and we found sects, not the community which is part of Christ's Church. Christ without his mother is not the Christ of our faith.

Joseph, with Mary his wife (*Lk 2:5*)

Mary was the wife of Joseph. It is easy to forget this aspect of her human and spiritual experience. Virginity, marital love and motherhood are all combined in Mary. It is all in the service of the coming of Christ. It could be said that Mary and Joseph evangelised as a community.

More attention to this aspect Mary's life can help us to live community life with greater conviction, and to recognise that cooperation between men and women is natural in pastoral work. (cf. *RL* 68; *CA* 1991, 31.6). In an era of great change in the roles of men and women, with inevitable tensions in the Church, Mary and Joseph can help us to learn from the freedom and purity of heart which characterised their positive experience.

I conclude with a quotation from John-Paul II, "On the vigil of the third millenium, the whole Church is called to live the mystery of Christ more deeply, cooperating with gratitude in the work of salvation. It does this with Mary and like Mary, mother and model of the Church. Mary is the model of that maternal love which should animate the hearts of all those who take part in the Church's apostolic mission for the regeneration of humanity" (*RM* 92).

PRAYER

God, Father of mercy,
as your Son died on the cross
he gave his own Mother,
the blessed virgin Mary, as our mother.
Under her love, may your Church
be ever more fertile in the Spirit,
rejoicing in the holiness
of her children.
May she unite all the peoples of the world
in one family.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ST. JOSEPH

Readings:

Mt 1:18-25: Joseph, the father of Jesus

Mt 2:1-23: The infancy narrative

Lk 2:41-50: Jesus among the doctors of law

S 2649; 4170; 5287-5288; 5361-5362

RL 51.4; 162.2: His place in the Institute

Ratio, 65-66: Patron of the Church and protector of Africa

A son who will be called Emmanuel (*Mt* 1:23)

The vocation and mission of Joseph is to help God to become Emmanuel, God-with-us, God who has taken on all the aspects of our history. The image of God becoming human is that of God pitching his tent in the desert along with all the others. "And the Word was made flesh, and he came and lived among us" (*Jn* 1:14). Joseph was part of God's plan of liberation. This plan still continues and the missionary is part of it, like Joseph.

She has conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (*Mt* 1:20).

In an almost traumatic way Joseph learned that the Holy Spirit is the main actor in salvation history. This is part of the Rule of Life (56). But in practice what has changed? How can we accept that the Spirit takes the main role without our consent as happened to Joseph?

Is he not the carpenter's son? (Mt 13:55)

Joseph, Mary and Jesus were manual workers (cf. *RC* 25-27). In the pagan world this was the role of slaves. In our Institute work has always been highly regarded. Encouraged by St. Joseph and our own tradition we need to reflect on the amount and the quality of our work, and on what we do to teach the christian vision of work. We work for the "poorest and most abandoned", and if we forget this we cast a great doubt over the credibility of our work.

Your father and I (Lk 2:48)

The paternity of Joseph can help us to understand our chastity. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, "You may have ten thousand teachers in Christ, but certainly not many fathers, because I generated you in Christ through the gospel" (*1 Co* 4:15). Joseph had a fundamental role in Jesus' human development and in his faith journey. St. Augustine wrote that "Joseph was the true husband of Mary although she was a virgin. He was the true father of Jesus even though he did not generate him. If he had adopted any child he would have had the right to be called father; even more so when it was the son of his own wife". Joseph made the love of God the Father part of the human experience of Jesus as an infant, an adolescent, and as a young man. This is his way of being a father and it is ours too as missionaries.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream (Mt 2:13).

Following his dream, Joseph had an extraordinary experience of God's providence in the flight into Egypt. His confidence in God is an example to us who often live in dangerous missionary situations. However, trust in providence is not enough. As a refugee in Egypt, and then on the return to Nazareth, Joseph had to begin again using his experience and skill as a craftsman. As a worker he did not expect God to do everything! Comboni also understood this. He had great confidence in St. Joseph, but this was never separated from work in the form of missionary animation.

PRAYER

St. Joseph,
in faith and hope
you entrusted yourself
to the Word of God,
and you faithfully guarded his Promise.
As we honour you as our Patron
help us to have an ever more mature faith
so that blessed by God, our missionary work
may bear good fruit.
Amen.

SAINT PETER

Readings:

Mt 16:13-20: Peter's profession of faith.

Jn 21: The appearance of Jesus by the lake.

Ac 10: Peter and the Roman centurion.

S 2650; 3575-3579; 5213-5219: Love and respect for the Pope.

RL 9.1; 12; 33.3; 66: Links with the Pope.

Ratio 67-68: Holy apostles and missionaries.

My father has revealed this to you (Mt 16:17)

Peter professed his faith in Christ: "the Son of the living God", and Jesus exclaimed: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, because it is not flesh and blood that has revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Mt 16:17). This phrase, so often read and repeated, reveals something of Christ which tends to be under-valued and cut off from what follows. If someone had asked Jesus, "Why did you make Peter the head of the Church?" The reply would have been simple and immediate, "because my Father wanted it, having revealed my identity to him."

After his profession of faith Jesus accepted Peter without reserve. He prayed so that his faith would not be diminished and that, at the right time, he would be able to strengthen his brothers. Jesus forgave Peter after his betrayal, and after the resurrection he called Peter to follow him to ends of the earth, even to martyrdom, to his own cross.

If we want to share in the feelings of the Sacred Heart, we must accept Peter (the Pope) as Christ did, knowing that the Father wants this. Comboni succeeded in this, and the Rule of Life (9; 12) reminds us of this to help us to be his worthy successors.

Silver and gold I have not (Ac 3:6)

Peter, who went to the temple to meet God and met him in a beggar, had clearly understood Jesus' teaching at the time of the first mission of the disciples: "Take nothing for the journey, neither staff, nor rucksack, nor bread, nor money, nor extra tunic". Peter says to the cripple, "Silver and gold I have not but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, walk!" (Ac 3:6). Freedom and salvation come only in the name of Jesus.

People often expect the 'silver and gold'. If we have too many possessions despite our good intentions, we become involved in administering them and in looking after them. We distance ourselves from the people and make the mission into a fortress. If we are not careful, possessions take us away from the mission of evangelising and become the cause of envy and jealousy in the people.

Who am I to obstruct God? (Ac 11:17)

In the incident of the conversion of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit helps Peter to free himself from his religious limitations. What had previously seemed essential was now seen by Peter as contrary to the will of God. Mission makes people grow!

In order to be obedient to the Spirit, Peter had to defend himself in front of the christian community of Jerusalem. He is able to convince his opponents and to glorify God saying, "Thus God has also allowed the pagans to be converted so they they might have life!" (Ac 11:18).

In telling the community of Jerusalem what had happened on his missionary journey Peter is doing missionary animation aimed at broadening the community's vision. Mission produces growth in the Church's understanding of itself.

Another will take you where you do not want to go (Jn 21:18)

From Gethsemane Christ was taken where he would rather not go. Peter had to accept the same destiny in order to continue the work of the Good Shepherd. In the life of every missionary there is a moment in which the change from action to passion is inevitable. The place where he would rather not go could be a retirement home, a hospital... or even a place where he is condemned to death. This 'passover' is part of mission which is made real not only in action, but also in prayer and suffering. To be on mission is to repeat a phrase that was dear to Comboni's heart: "We are useless servants. We have done only what was our duty" (Lk 17:10).

PRAYER

Peter, prince of the apostles,
who carried the name of Christ to the world,
and witnessed to him with love and with blood,
protect this Church
for which you suffered.
Preserve it in truth and in peace.
Increase in her children fidelity to the Word,
unity in the faith,
agreement in mutual charity,
constructive obedience to the shepherds,
until we reach the final blessing
at the Lord's coming. Amen, amen.
(Paul VI)

SAINT PAUL

Readings:

Ac 9:1-19, *Ga* 1:11-24: Saul's vocation.

Rm 15:14-22; *Ep* 3. Paul's ministry.

2 *Co* 4: Tribulation & hope.

S 6879-6880: Comboni's vocation.

RL 2: Total dedication.

Ratio 67-68: Holy apostles & missionaries.

Paul, by vocation an apostle (*Rm* 1:1).

Throughout his missionary life Paul was sustained by the certainty of being, by the will of God, an "apostle of Jesus Christ" (2 *Co* 1:1). His title was often contested but he never surrendered it. He recalled it at the beginning of every letter as if to commit himself again and renew his enthusiasm.

There is a great message for of us in this. We remember birthdays and feastdays but pay little attention to remembering the decisive interventions of God in our lives. Perhaps this remembering would be a good antidote against the crises that threaten to overwhelm us. The source of Comboni's missionary strength was "the certainty that his vocation came from God" (*RL* 2). Paul and Comboni had much in common.

To obtain the obedience of faith (*Rm* 1:5)

Paul is the apostle of the gentiles. He has no doubt that he must go to those who have not yet met Christ. This was his understanding of the mystery "that the gentiles are called through Christ Jesus, to share in the same inheritance, to be part of the same body, and to share in the promise of the gospel of which I have been made a servant" (*Ep* 3:6-7). There is an ancient preface which can help us to understand the ministry of Paul:

*It is truly right and fitting,
our duty and the cause of our salvation,*

*to praise you Lord with all our heart
on the glorious triumph of the apostle Paul.
He is a valiant man exulting
as he walks the roads of the whole world
to preach Christ crucified to all peoples.
It is he who says,
'No, I live no longer, but Christ lives in me'.
He ended his life by shedding his blood,
completing in himself what was
lacking in the suffering of Christ.*

They offered their hand as a sign of partnership (Ga 2:9)

Paul founded a christian community among the pagans and worked to bring them together in cooperation, beginning with the church in Jerusalem. He does this at the end of most of his letters by asking for prayers and financial support for Jerusalem. By its very nature mission demands missionary animation which enlivens, unites and develops the churches. The Council of Jerusalem, of which Paul was one of the leaders was a great event of missionary animation which opened the Church to greater catholicity. Comboni too, had the insight to made Vatican I a great missionary event.

He sent for the elders of the Church (Ac 20:17).

With regard to strategy and missionary method, Paul first evangelised the main cities of the Roman Empire so that the gospel would spread from them. Paul congratulates the Thessalonians because, "the Word of God has spread through you to Macedonia and Achaia, and the fame of your faith in God has spread everywhere" (1 Th 1:8). Paul's communities were situated in good missionary centres. Perhaps we can learn from this.

Part of Paul's method was the development of different ministries to give stability to the communities. His emotional meeting with the elders of Ephesus at Mileto highlights this. He can risk prison and death because he leaves the church in good hands. "After today you will see me no more. Watch over the flock which the Holy Spirit has place in your care, to pasture God's church which he has bought with his blood" (Ac 20:25.28).

PRAYER

Great Saint Paul,
while you were still under the burden of the flesh
you were taken up 'into the third heaven'
and heard wonderful things:
TEACH US ABOUT JESUS.
You made yourself a man for all
in order to win everyone for the gospel:
LEAD US TO JESUS.
You described yourself as like 'a woman in labour',
wanting to bring her child into the light of day:
HELP US TO BE BORN AGAIN IN CHRIST. Amen.

ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

Readings:

I Co 9:16-23: It is my duty to preach the gospel.

S 1493: I read the letters of Francis Xavier.

Ratio 67-68: Holy apostles & missionaries.

Set Barnabas and Saul aside for me (*Ac* 13:2)

It was the Holy Spirit who told the community of Antioch that he had selected Barnabas and Saul for his work. Something similar happened in the life of Francis Xavier. Ignatius had thought of keeping Francis in Rome at the service of the whole Society of Jesus. Instead the Holy Spirit made it clear that Xavier was to be used to answer the King of Portugal's request for missionaries to go to India. Francis Xavier is great because he allowed himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Zeal for your house devours me (*Jn* 2:17).

It is not surprising that the Church has made Francis Xavier the patron of the missions. Inflamed with extraordinary zeal, he travelled the whole of India and eventually reached Japan. Our Founder was deeply influenced by Francis Xavier. A painting of him receiving his command to go to India was above the altar in the chapel of the Mazza Institute. Comboni carried Xavier's letters with him as a way of sharing the courage and motives of this man who died aged forty-six at the gates of China. Mission is not a momentary experience, it is for life.

Aspects of missionary spirituality in the letters Francis Xavier

"How pleasant it is to live dying every day by doing the opposite of our desires in order to fulfill those of Jesus Christ" (*from Goa*, 1542).

"Those who come here must have clearly in mind that they were born with the humble duty of dying for their Redeemer and Lord" (*from Cocin*, 1545).

"Placing all my trust in God my Lord I have opted for danger and for death" (*from Amboina*, 1546).

"Only the love of Jesus Christ brings us to Japan" (*from Kagoscima*, 1549).

"The real danger is not to trust in God. For his sake we are going to China, and if God is for us who can be against us?" (*from Sanciam*, 1552).

Points on missionary animation

"Oh, if only more people would rouse themselves and try to discover and follow the will of God rather than their own inclinations, saying, 'here I am Lord! What do you want me to do?'" (*from Cocin*, 1544).

"I beg you, keep me in mind. I am in great need of your help. Let me tell you what I have done so that I never forget you. I have cut your signatures from your letters and I always carry them with me together with the statement of the vows. This consoles me. I won't say anything more because we will soon meet again in the next life where we will enjoy the peace and tranquillity that we have not known in this life" (*to Ignatius and his companions*).

By means of his letters Francis Xavier was a great missionary animator, and not only during his life. In the last four hundred years he has inspired many others.

PRAYER

Oh God, through the preaching of Francis Xavier
you called many people from the east
to the light of the Gospel.
May every Christian community
be filled with his missionary fervour
so that throughout the world
your Church can rejoice
in new members.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.
(from the Missal)

ST. PETER CLAVER

Readings:

Is.58:6-10, The fast acceptable to God.

Ps. 112, The just give generously to the poor.

Mt 25:31-40, The Last Judgement.

RL 28:60, Sharing and solidarity.

Ratio 67-68, Holy Apostles and missionaries.

The Lord covered in sores

I have a picture, given to me by a confrere, which shows Christ as a leper covered in sores. The Father is caring for him in order to bring him to complete healing (the Resurrection). Peter Claver understood his missionary vocation in the light of this truth. In his diary he wrote, "Lord, why are you covered in sores?"

Comboni too, saw his mission as being at the service of the resurrection of Jesus who was still crucified in millions of poor and suffering people. Lozano writes: "Comboni's spirituality reaches its highest point in the identification between Christ and the peoples of Africa. When he saw the peoples of Africa, abandoned, forgotten, oppressed by slavery, through his mystical experience he saw that Christ had also died for them. Black Africa and Christ became the same thing, identified one with the other."

In this context we can understand the meaning of 'reparation' which was seen as an important part of the Spirituality of the Heart of Jesus and which is today understood as the destruction of the consequences of sin leading to full freedom for the human person.

Speaking with the hands

At Cartagena Peter Claver continued the work of his confrere Alphonso de Sandoval who fought against the evil of slavery by appealing to the dignity of the human person. He was not heard, but he did discover that slaves were treated with greater respect once they had been baptised. The dignity which was denied them as human beings was partly recognised in their becoming Christians. Thus, by helping and evangelising the slaves, the missionaries Sandoval and Claver performed not only a great act of mercy but began a process which would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery.

Peter Claver's missionary action is all-embracing. As the slaves disembarked from the ships after a terribly exhausting and brutalising experience, he responded first to their immediate needs regarding health, food and clothing, then to their spiritual needs. Hence his well-known phrase, "We speak with our hands first before attempting to speak with our mouths."

Good, but a bit strange

The numerous religious of Cathagena, who had gradually become part of the social system which exploited slaves, could not hear the cry of the poor. Consequently, Peter Claver, who did see and did hear, as God heard the cry of his people in Egypt, had to suffer a certain isolation. His confreres admired him for his piety and zeal but at the same time tried to render him harmless by suggesting he was a bit simple. In a report to Rome we read, "He is a little strange and imprudent". Fortunately, Rome thought differently and the Superior General of the Jesuits always supported and defended the missionary, allowing him to continue his valuable work.

Even today some of our own confreres "hear the cry of the poor" more than others do. The recent Chapters have encouraged us not to isolate them but to listen to them.

Recreation with Br. Alphonso.

Another interesting aspect of the personality of Peter Claver was his deep friendship with Brother Alphonso Rodrigues, the doorkeeper of the college at Las Palmas where Claver studied philosophy. In those days such a friendship was forbidden by the structures of religious life which keep priests and brothers separate. Peter Claver overcame this difficulty by asking "permission to have recreation with Br. Alphonso". When he left Majorca, Claver summarised what he had learned from Alphonso and always kept it with him.

In our own Institute there have been some wonderful friendships between priests and brothers. St. Peter Claver and St. Alphonso Rodriguez can also help us to be faithful and creative "heirs" in this.

PRAYER

Lord, in St. Peter Claver
you have given us a protector
and a model of great charity
for the spiritual and material
needs of slaves.
Give us generous hearts like his
so that we will not refuse any sacrifice
for the salvation of our neighbour.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE

Readings:

Cant. 5:2-8, The bride.

Eph.3:14-19, To know the love of Christ.

Mt 11:25-30, The gospel revealed to the simple.

S1669, 2624, 3615-3617, 5284-5286, The missionary effectiveness of prayer.

Ratio 67-68, Holy Apostles and missionaries.

St. Margaret Mary is the only woman, other than Our Lady, whom Comboni mentions among the patrons of his Institutes. She has always been a part of our history and it is appropriate to keep her in mind as an example of the role of women in the Church.

Writing on the theme, "Living with the Founder", Lozano says: "A third aspect of Comboni's ecclesiology is the importance he gives to the role of women in the missions. He recognised the great contribution that they could make to the apostolate. Thus he was not afraid of placing African women as teachers in his college in Cairo despite the negative reaction of the Coptic Patriarch. Writing to the Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Comboni spoke of the sisters as "priests and more than priests". They were an essential part of the catholic apostolate. He wrote to Canon Milani saying: "sisters are just as useful as priests", indicating that he did not see them in any way as dependent or secondary. Comboni had quite a non-clerical view of the church and its mission. His ecclesiology is dominated by a desire to evangelise. Every baptised person has a part to play in this. He was not restricted by a sacramental view of ministry" (Lozano, in Aspects of the Comboni Charism, Rome, 1991).

I write for love of you.

I have already noted how easy it is to forget what God does in us so that we are never able to discover his ways of working with us on a personal level. This kind of superficiality has serious consequences for our human and spiritual growth so that we are unable to guide others in the ways of God.

In her autobiography Margaret Mary wrote, "Only for love of you, my God, do I submit in obedience and write this record." To keep a personal or community diary is a burden for many people but it is a good way of remembering what the Lord has done for us. Many saints kept a diary which was helpful to them and to future generations. In our Institute there is the tradition of keeping a diary of the community. In these diaries we see how the Lord has been present in the Institute through the work of our predecessors. Without this record we lose touch with our roots and are not longer able to continue the work that began before us and without us. Our own personal journal helps us to be less fragmented, to live more deeply and more as 'experts in humanity'.

Dismissed for your sake?

The radical and prophetic following of the Gospel always creates a certain tension in the community and in the Church because it challenges attitudes and ways of doing things which we take for granted. At the same time it reveals the absence of creativity and disrupts the daily routine. Margaret Mary was led by the Spirit to rediscover the centrality of the love of Christ by means of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. In this she suffered great loneliness and isolation. The world in which she lived was ailing with Jansenism. When she told her community about Christ's message she was almost expelled from the Order. She wrote, "Lord, what is this? Are you going to be the cause of my dismissal?"

It is interesting to see how Margaret Mary succeeded, with the help of God and her spiritual director, to combine obedience to authority with faithfulness to the Spirit, who gave her no respite even in her extraordinary visions. Knowing this saint helps us to understand both prophecy and the ministry of authority.

A heart filled with love.

During one of her moments of prayer in front of the tabernacle Margaret Mary felt filled with the presence of the Lord. Asking her to abandon herself to him, he showed her his love for humanity. "He seemed to say: 'My divine heart is so filled with love for people, and especially for you, and I am unable to satisfy the flames of such ardent love. I feel the need to show my love to all humankind and to

enrich them with the treasures that I will show you so as to save them from perdition. I have chosen you to carry out this plan so that it can become clear that everything is fulfilled through me.' Then he asked for my heart and I begged him to take it. He took it and placed it in his own heart."

Different things happen in prayer. Margaret Mary's experience reminds us of Comboni's prayer at the tomb of St. Peter when, filled with the flame from the pierced heart, he was able to give himself for Africa.

With hands outstretched for humanity.

Margaret Mary had prayed for the conversion of sinners and the liberation of souls in purgatory. In her journal she wrote, "Lord, I will not leave you alone until you have pardoned them." In these words we see the courage of those who have prayed for God's people, "Then Amalek came to do battle against Israel at Refidim. When Moses lifted up his arms Israel was the stronger, but when he let his arms fall Amalek was stronger. Feeling tired with the weight of his arms held out, Moses sat on a rock whilst Aaron and Hur supported his arms" (Ex.17:8-12).

Comboni believed in the effectiveness of prayer. In 1878 he wrote from Khartoum to Mother Mary Coseghi, a former slave who had become a sister in a convent at Arco, in Italy, "So, you have been called to serve and to become holy in the shrine of a convent. You can still be a true missionary and apostle of Africa, your homeland, if you pray and encourage others to pray fervently for the conversion and redemption of hundreds of millions of your own African people." (S 5285).

It would be good if every Comboni missionary had the prayerful support of at least one monastery or convent. They would be the greatest benefactors.

PRAYER

Pour out on us, O Lord,
the spirit of holiness
which you gave St. Margaret Mary,
so that knowing the love of Christ,
which is beyond all knowledge,
we may enjoy the fullness of your divine life.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ST. TERESA OF THE CHILD JESUS

Readings:

Ps. 131, The Spirit of Childhood

Mt 18:16-4, Who is the greatest?

1Cor.13. Hymn to love.

S1886-1890, More than two hundred convents pray for me.

RL 48, Missionary prayer.

Mother and sister

When Pius XI declared Teresa patron of the missions in 1927, he noted how the heart of the small Carmelite sister was consumed with "the greatest ardour and zeal to spread the faith". Such universal concern for the great missionary intentions of the Church became prayer and suffering for specific people. Teresa felt herself to be like a mother or a sister to them.

In her autobiography Teresa tells the story of Pranzini who had been condemned to death unrepentant. She pleaded with God to save this man from hell. She prayed for his conversion and asked for a sign. Some time afterwards she came across the newspaper in which she read of the sudden conversion of Pranzini who had kissed the crucifix three times before being executed. Teresa felt the joy which heaven experiences when one sinner repents and she exclaimed, "Pranzini, my first child!"

During the last year of her life Teresa became the 'sister' of two missionaries, one a White Father leaving for Africa, the other a member of the Foreign Missions of Paris. This commitment was a deep joy to her. She wrote: "Not since my childhood have I felt such joy. My heart feels renewed. It is as if someone touched part of me which had been forgotten." Teresa was already very ill, but her prayer for her two missionary 'brothers' was even more precious because it was soaked in blood (cf. RM 78).

PRAYER

We thank you, Father,
because you revealed to little Teresa
the mysteries of your kingdom,
and through her humble and hidden life
you gave us the joyful message
of your merciful love.
In her, the fruitfulness of
prayer reveals the mysterious
power of the Spirit,
building your Church
in all nations.
(from the Proper of the Carmelites).

In the heart of the Church

"Because martyrdom was my greatest desire I turned to the letters of St. Paul to find an answer. Thinking about the mystical body of the Church I could not see myself in any of the parts described by Paul, or, really I wanted to see myself in all of them. Charity offered me the pivotal point of my vocation. I realised that the Church has a heart, a heart burning with love. Only love motivates all the parts of the Church, and without this love the apostles would not have preached the gospel, the martyrs would not have shed their blood. So with great joy I cried out, 'Jesus, my love, I have finally found my vocation. My vocation is love. I will be the love in the heart of the Church my mother, and in that case I will be everything.'"

Teresa helps us to understand the complementarity of all the vocations in the Church because, as Paul says, all are inspired by the same Spirit. Comboni always sought to encourage cooperation between different religious institutes even though he was often disappointed. We, as his heirs, must distinguish ourselves by a spirit of willing cooperation with others.

Teresa invites us to clarify the motives of our apostolic work and our commitments within the Institute. It is the love for Christ which is the source of our vocation but it can be poisoned by ambition, envy and fear. The Rule of Life says, "Comboni's unconditional love for the peoples of Africa had its origin and model in the saving love of the Good Shepherd who offered his life on the Cross for humanity" (RL 3).

Small and weak

Teresa wrote: "I am very weak but I am not surprised by that. I am still unable to rise above the small, insignificant things of this world. For example, I am sometimes very worried about something that I have

said or done. So I think for a moment and tell myself, 'Look, I am still only at the beginning!' But I say it with great peace and without sadness." Elsewhere she wrote: "It is really pleasant to feel small and weak!"

Our humility is measured by how we accept our own limitations. The anger that we sometimes feel towards ourselves because we are not as we would like to be, is a great sign of pride. Paul wrote: "I encourage you to behave in a way worthy of the vocation you have received, with humility, patience and meekness" (Eph.4:1).

PRAYER

God, our Father,
you opened the gates of your kingdom
to the small and humble,
help us faithfully to follow the way
of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus.
May we see the glory of
your face and be inflamed with
the fire of that love
which inspired her to offer
herself for the salvation of the world.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ADDITION READINGS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH

Gilli, A., 1979, Daniel Comboni, the Man and his Message. EMI, Bologna.

Lozano, J.M., 1989, The Spirituality of Daniel Comboni, Claret Centre for Resources in Spirituality, Chicago.

Ward, B, 1990, A Heart for Africa, Comboni Missionaries, London.

"Yes, the work of regenerating Africa is God's work. This is the moment of grace, given by Providence to call the peoples of Africa into the peaceful shade of Christ's sheepfold.

For many years already the prophetic voices of Libermann, Olivieri, Mazza have echoed in the Church. These men, with their work for Africa, were the heirs to the apostolic spirit of Peter Claver. And we too, like heirs to these generous athletes of Christ and faithful children of the Church, we too must plant the work of the Good Shepherd of souls in unknown parts of the world and enlighten them with the light of the Catholic faith. The Good Shepherd wants to gather all the lost and unfaithful under the shade of the tree of life. Pray to him so that he makes of all the nations one fold and one shepherd."

(Daniel Comboni, Report to the Cologne Society, 1866)