

Daniel Comboni and Comboni Missionaries

Aspects of Spirituality for the 21st Century

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1. Introduction
2. River of Life - Journeying into the Heart of Jesus
3. River of Prayer - Journeying into the heart of Jesus
4. River of Gratitude - Journeying into the Heart of Jesus
5. River of Social Mysticism - Journeying to bring others into the heart of Jesus
6. River of Mission - Journeying to bring others into the Heart of Jesus
7. The Underground River Hidden Power guiding the Journey
8. The Point of Confluence - A Eucharistic community

1. Introduction

SPIRITUALITY to speak “in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:13) For Paul spiritual maturity, living according to the promptings of the God’s Spirit manifests itself in the fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22). Spirituality, like breathing, is the foundation of an intricate interconnectedness of all life.

Spirituality is integrated, all-inclusive, and holistic. Although rooted in the here and now, it is like a living organism ever moving, ever changing. In this constant flow of time we are suspended between past and future in an ever changing yet ever present NOW. It is this tension that moves us forward and at the same time restrains us this NOW is shaped and moulded by our choices and their consequences.

For spirituality to be alive it has to be embedded in the culture of a people and receive its expression and form from it. In a similar way God reveals himself through the wisdom and insight as expressed in the life and faith of a people.

African spirituality is the product of a distinct culture of Africa. It is the spirituality which upholds the dignity of all human beings and in particular a peaceful and harmonious style of life. African life and practice are characterized by the motif of wholeness. „The African world view rejects popular dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, the material and spirits. All life is religious all life is sacred, all life is a piece” (Desmond Tutu).

In African culture and spirituality, religion “permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it” (Mbiti). Religion is not something that one adds to various aspects of life. African societies do not have aspects of life that fall outside of the religious sphere; they do not have aspects that are purely secular.

The whole of creation is sacred. Creation is God’s sacrament because it is a gift from God. It is sacred because it is related to its Creator. God as the Creator of all things indwells creation, even though God is not confined to life and creation.

African culture and spirituality considers as primary the value of good and harmonious human relationships. Personal ambition and pursuit of self-interest are played down and take second place to family or community interests. Without community you cannot be yourself. The community is where we draw the strength needed to effect changes inside of us. What one acknowledges in the formation of the community is the possibility of doing together what is impossible to do alone. A true community begins in the hearts of the people involved. It is not a place of distraction but a place of being.

To be missionaries means that we are people on the move - physically, emotionally, intellectually, and above all, spiritually. It means that we are prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of mission.

A vibrant spirituality includes the readiness to accept sacrifices. Sacrifice is the ability to make life-giving and life-sustaining choices for ourselves, for society and for the whole of creation. This requires healthy boundaries, connectedness without being attached. Establishing and maintaining your time boundaries is a challenge anytime - and when you are under stress it can be even more difficult.

During stressful times time boundaries are extremely useful. They help you to maintain your energy and find the space to breathe and reflect - and thereby be more efficient and effective as you manage whatever is on your plate.

Charism can be seen as a specific way in which we live out our own spirituality in relation to God's call and the needs of the times within society and creation is members of a specific Religious Community.

Comboni Missionary identify consists in the capacity of accepting the initiative of God as Comboni did in Him - and finding the source of this donation of one's very life in the Pierced Heart of Christ, the Good Shepherd, and in the ability to give one's life for the most "needy and abandoned" for love of Christ.

Some Initial Questions to ask ourselves:

Before we set out on this journey let us ask ourselves (based on Teresa of Avila's inner Castle): What do my inner/spiritual living quarters look like? Do I know them do I know what's in them? Do I live there? Are all the rooms well looked after or are they neglected, dusty and full of cobwebs? Are they fitted out with the right and essential furniture? Or are they more like a storeroom cluttered with all kinds of useless things collected over the years and dumped there for possible use later? Are my spiritual living quarters fitted out with spiritual things? Or are they fitted with artillery for possible warfare such as anger and resentment? Or are they fitted out with things for spiritual retirement? Or are they fitted out with things for „unspiritual“ enjoyment?

2. River of Life - journeying into the Heart of Jesus

Our life on earth is a spiritual pilgrimage; it is a journey into the compassionate Heart of Christ. What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us. Deep within the soul is our sacred space to re-member our Divine nature. It is to this sanctuary that our life journey must lead us. The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey (Thomas Merton).

The Transfiguration of Jesus:

Jesus went up Mount Tabor with Peter, James and John to be transfigured. While there, he was engaged in a mystical conversation, with Moses and Elijah both of them prophets of liberation and freedom.

During the time of slavery in Egypt Moses had heard of God's broken heart over the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt. After his initial resistance he becomes God's instrument in leading the children of Israel into the freedom of the Promised Land. His physical journey from a land of slavery to a country of freedom was symbolic of his inner journey from fear and resistance to courage and unconditional trust in Yahweh.

1 King 19 1-14.

In the case of Elijah it was fear of death that brought him to the desert. Elijah went alone into the wilderness and sat down under a broom tree. Strengthened by divine nourishment and after a journey of "forty days and forty nights in the desert, Elijah arrived at Mt Horeb, the Mountain of God where he lived in a cave."

Desert is a place of transition, of total emptying of self - of the past, of the future and its dreams, of present security. It means leaving our comfort zone we have known. Desert is a place of exposure to danger, of vulnerability of devotion. Broom - symbol of cleaning and clearing out. Cave

- symbol or retreat and resistance. To run away from fear, we run into greater fear and trouble because we run without God's guidance. "Go out and stand before me on the mountain." the Lord told Elijah. As he stood there the Lord passed by (in) the sound of a gentle breeze. A voice said, "Why are you here Elijah? Elijah tried to justify his actions. But the Lord told him, „Go back to Damascus.“ Elijah went back and became a prophet of liberation of the people of Israel.

After the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor:

Rather than remaining on the mountain to cultivate a spirituality of personal and private piety, Jesus takes his actions back down to the valley and the streets. Peter, James and John want to stay with the beauty of that mountain top, but Jesus leads them down into the valley of the shadow of death to spread compassion, healing and justice. They return directly to where wounded people live and suffer under unjust and oppressive systems.

Comboni heard the words in his heart as did Moses, Elijah and the Apostles. "Go back!" He went back to Africa ready to give his life for the African people. We too have heard the words at various stages of our lives: „Go back!" What is more powerful in your life at this moment? Is it a comfort zone where you, like the Apostles, say "It is good to be here. Let us stay permanently. We have worked hard enough." Is it a "yes" to follow the example of Comboni?

There are a number of problems we are likely to encounter on our journey and a number of possible responses. We may be hearing the call, but not understand its message. Maybe we ignore the call because it does not fit into our plans. And again we may deny the message out of fear of unknown consequences.

Trying to run away - literally or figuratively - burying ourselves in work, is yet another way of trying to avoid a positive response to God's call.

What Jesus has preached in word and actions Comboni reiterate with his life: living in the Spirit is "about healing hurts, speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten who are at the silent bottom of every pinnacle, every hierarchy and every system in both church and state" (Chittister).

Comboni like Moses and Elijah the Apostles and many travelers before him, was aware that each step he took was an act of prayer. His journey left clear footprints for others to follow. The most profound aspect of Comboni's prophetic vision was in his understanding of martyrdom: he yearned to be so fully united with his Lord that he would willingly sacrifice his life for the Lord and for Africa; like the grain of wheat that would die and produce a harvest for the whole of Central Africa. Is your God-experience a time of regaining spiritual strength that helps you to re-focus on how best to respond to the present needs of the poor?

Roads that have been intensively used by people at prayer radiate the holiness of their encounters with the Sacred. Spiritual roads guide pilgrims to an encounter with the Sacred. Comboni's Spiritual journey is the most precious heritage to the members of the Institute and their missionary activities.

Comboni received the Call. Like Mary he spoke the fiat. His every word became a prayer. He became a voice of God in the world. He became God's prophet. Comboni's purpose was clear: he had a mission and he became Christianity's pilgrim to Africa carrying Christ in his heart. His only allegiance was to Christ and His mission.

The life and mission of the Institute is the sacred path created by Comboni and his followers. Because of his single-mindedness of purpose his footsteps created a path in which others could follow. No obstacles, no territory without clear paths to follow, no footprints lacking direction, no lack of certainty of end results, nothing could deter Comboni from following God's call. God alone was his direction. You are the present pilgrims on this holy road, because you have committed yourselves to walk in Comboni's footsteps. Walking the spiritual path leads us to the desire to merge ourselves with the Risen Jesus, to find refuge and strength in His Sacred Heart.

Like Comboni our journey transforms our lives to the extent that we say "yes" to become co-creators with God in our daily missionary experiences. In this way we are no longer a "separate

self' identified solely by our unique gifts and achievements. Engulfed by the light of Christ streaming from his Sacred Heart we become Christ-bearers. Each person and situation we encounter becomes our teacher with God as our Master Teacher. We have the freedom to accept or reject the learning. Where have I in the past or where do I now encounter the sacred on my life journey?

3. River of Prayer - Journeying into the Heart of Jesus

It is in solitude and prayer that we become united to the source of all Life within us, God our Creator. It is there that we receive our Spiritual Power.

Comboni had a profound sense of God's presence in his life. Comboni nourished his heart and his soul with the spiritual food he received in solitude and prayer, and in the celebration of the Eucharist. Through faithful and constant prayer, God became a comfort in the uncertainties of his daily life, in his anxieties and in his hopes. We, too, have to nourish the hearts in solitude and prayer and the Liturgical Celebrations. These devotions may never be allowed to become a formality through habit.

Extreme hardships, the death of so many of his missionaries and the abandonment of some of his closest collaborators lead Comboni to experience how much it costs to incarnate in his life the figure of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his flock. Comboni found the image of Christ, the Good Shepherd, the source and model for his unconditional love for the people of Africa.

Just being still and quieting the mind long enough to recognize the call and the source of the call enables us to respond positively and without fear to God: "Here I am Lord; I have come to do your will".

The cross and death are the only way to arrive at the fullness of life. The last words of Comboni are already the living experience of the paschal mystery: "I am happy with the cross that, borne willingly for love of God, generates triumph as eternal life." Comboni's heart was pierced by suffering offered up for the poorest people of Africa. Accepting to descend into the abyss of self-emptying he was very much aware that „the more painful the night of his missions the nearer he was to the dawn of his Resurrection“. Cross and Resurrection do not have the same weight. Resurrection has the last word and vanquishes the Cross forever.

The central theme of the missionary message is that Christ is risen, this means that the Church is called to live the Resurrection life here and now. It means that the Church is called to be a sign of contradiction in today's world against the forces of hatred of selfishness as a way of life against indifference flooding contemporary society.

Comboni's spirituality drew its inspiration from the Sacred Heart of Jesus pierced for love of humanity. That was the source of his zeal for the salvation of souls and his strength in bearing trials and crosses for the sake of the Gospel. In his consecration to the missions, he draws close to Christ and His Sacred Heart in which he finds the model of love and total dedication to the most needy. To do so he had to share fully in the mystery of Christ on the Cross. Inspired and strengthened by the compassionate heart of Jesus he never lost his missionary zeal. Charismatic grace received in prayer becomes a powerful force in Daniel Comboni that drives him, that involves his mind, penetrates his heart and his body, and makes him act. It turns him into a tireless traveler along the roads of Europe through the deserts of Africa. It determines his way of writing of inter-personal relationships, of using his times forming friendships, praying, controlling his emotions, how and what he reads, in a word, it permeates his whole being (Fr. Antonio Furioli, MCCJ).

Developing our mystical gifts in prayer and solitude keeps us in deep relationship with God. We find ourselves developing a growing sense of serenity freeing us from anxieties, frustrations and hostilities. We can stay centred in the calm eye of the hurricane while the world spins frantically around us. Unfortunately, however, too often we keep ourselves busy with our work or daily duties and so neglect our total presence to God in prayer. By clearing out the cobwebs of our own negative programs in prayer we are free to enjoy life more. We have much more energy to discover all the beautiful creative gifts God has given us.

The incredible view from the vista of prayer provides a tremendous ability to see the humour in all situations. We learn to laugh at our own reactions. Our heart is really to learn non-violent communication in all situations of life.

4. River of Gratitude - Journeying into the Heart of Jesus

Gratitude - A journey of love, respect, and humility Living the Gospel Value in a Hostile World. Without a disposition of gratitude toward God for our own life and all it contains true gratitude toward others is not possible. Deep down we remain isolated and lonely. Our life is in a constant process of becoming, but without gratitude this growth is stunted.

Just as the water droplet is suspended on the branch each of us is supported by relationships characterized by mutual gratitude. In this creative process of becoming every moment holds infinite potential and for the one who has eyes to see and the heart to believe all is possible. The come and go of life's experiences are like the content of a cup: without spilling, drinking, tipping or sipping there is no room for NOW to refill the cup of Self. A cup filled with bitterness, resentment and anger cannot be filled with gratitude without first emptying its existing content. Gratitude is the place of give and receive it is a space for love.

We need time to "be" and enjoy, time to be still and reflect, time to unfold and become our true Self. For the stiller and calmer we are the more gratitude and respect we show. Times of reflection and prayer enable us to practice the art of inner observations, of seeing one's Self through the inner eye, and freeing oneself from any bondage to Past or Future. Gratitude is a gift of Love, flowing from a sacred heart space, a timely reflection of our heavenly presence on earth.

Fortitude is "constancy under difficulties." It is gratitude in action. Fortitude is our commitment, strength and dedication to co-creating a world that is waking to the power of Love in Gratitude. However, in isolation we are weak. It is in togetherness that all things become possible. Empowered by God and supported by each other our Dreams can become Reality.

Gratitude opens the way to forgiveness allowing our heart and mind to receive wisdom, and experience release while letting go of timely attachments, expectations or perceived notions of how life could - would - should be. To be a saint is to be motivated by gratitude nothing more and nothing less (Ronald Rolheiser). Only one kind of person transforms the world spiritually, someone with a grateful heart (Gutierrez in Rolheiser). True joy (and gratitude) comes from a deep sense of the presence of God in all things (Albert Nolan). The contemplative (missionary) is someone who comes across as a person who is full of hope, gratitude and joy (Albert Nolan).

Ask yourself: Are there any grievances I have yet to resolve? Am I yet to forgive another person or myself? What is the message you want to give to the people whose lives you touch? How and to what extent do you live this message in your own life, in your community, and in your contact with the people outside? What are you doing well? What would be better and how?

5. River of Social Mysticism - Journeying to bring others into the Heart of Jesus

Mysticism of Social Action - Walking on Two Feet of Love

Social Mysticism is an active and involved ministry of love. Mysticism that is not rooted and grounded in love cannot be called Christian. As St Paul said: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal (1Cor. 13:1). "Mystics are ordinary people who walk consciously and knowingly on the two feet of love - love of God and love of neighbour (Rakoczy). Mystics are ordinary people in a continuous process of developing to ordinary self to become holistic individuals. Their life energy flows from an intimate union with God. They participate in the world from the perspective that God is everything and a union with God is the only thing worth striving for.

Social mystics are called by God to lead people back to God and to their own spiritual Self. It is a call, to lead people out of their self-made prison of superiority over creation to their rightful

place as integral and equal members within creation. To be a social mystic, therefore means to be suspended like a bridge between God and humanity. However we are followers of a God who suffers in and through the victims of injustice. In the light of our present reality in the world what does it mean to you to put all your hope and trust in a God who suffers?

Each person has an inner treasure map with a marked path to lead us back to our ultimate destination. This inner map always contains the perfect direction we need to be taking in our lives. To recognize this direction we have to develop our abilities to tap the Divine Source within us for guidance and insight. The path to consciousness of the Divine is unique for each individual, when chosen by the person it leads to wisdom understanding, empathy, and the realization of the oneness of all life, in fact of the whole of creation.

What we build is not first and foremost a physical, material world of riches, power, and prestige. It refers to the psycho-spiritual world of the Self in relation to God, others, and creation. It refers to who we are and the relationships we build. The self we build depends on our willingness to grapple with the pertinent questions of life and to accept the answers we find in our prayerful search. "It is not the struggle that defeats us; it is our failure to struggle that depletes the human spirit. If we want to be spiritual then let us first of all live our lives... let us embrace reality and thus find ourselves immersed in the life-giving will and wisdom of God which surrounds us everywhere" (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*).

Our desire for control is so powerful that we want to know what, where, and when. We don't want anything to shift without first giving us a written notice. Yet, that's all illusion. Life isn't a series of little shifts and jerks. Only process, movement and change are real (Schaefer).

Respect for human dignity is the basis of love and justice in all relationships. The spirit of Jesus urges us on to strive in every way possible for equality and justice. This is easier said than done. Inequality permeates not only the structure of our society and our Church but also the very structure of our thinking.

6. River of Mission – Journeying to bring others into the Heart of Jesus

Life and mission:

We hear the call to be Peacemakers in justice, solidarity and harmony, in our hearts, in our communities, in our localities, in our land, in our world in prayer, contemplation and mission, among people and cultures with the earth and the whole of creation. To be a missionary means to be a preacher sharing the Word of God in life and action. "Ad Gentes" – Going out to the people, continue the work of evangelization. "Ad Pauperes" – Preference given to the poorest and most abandoned in the Faith and Social and Dimension "Ad Extra" – Going beyond personal, family, geographical, cultural, social and religious frontiers. "Ad Vitam" – Making a life-long consecration to God for the Missions.

Comboni consecrated his life to the cause of missionary awareness of the Church with decisiveness and untiring zeal. He saw the greatest need for his ministry in Africa among the poorest and most abandoned people of his time. He was marked by absolute constancy and loyalty to his calling in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles. He was faithful until death. Comboni found strength and courage in the certainty of his own missionary vocation. He knew without doubt that it was God calling him. All his choices and decisions were guided by this conviction that God had a plan for him which he would reveal step by step. Therefore, no human force could either hinder or deviate his steps from his path of life.

Be "emptied of self, ready to be deprived of every human comfort, working only for God, for the most abandoned people in the world and for eternity" (Rule of 1871). He was a man of unshakable faith in God in his own vocation. Three key elements of Comboni's missionary method include the following: To respect the culture and natural religious expression of the people to whom we go to serve. To evangelize as community: Live like a community of apostles, united by prayer and work; and search together for ways to serve our brothers and sisters more effectively. To make charism a life-long unifying force.

7. The Underground River – Hidden Power Guiding the Journey

The Power of Time spent with God. A life that is seriously committed to contemplation will produce fruits that will transform the whole experience of preaching – for the preacher and the listener. The fruits of our contemplation include qualities like inner peace, freedom and fearlessness; a love for people, genuine humility, a Spirit of hopefulness, gratitude and Joy and a profound sense of mystery. The fruits of our Contemplative prayer characterize and shape what I call contemplative preaching (Albert Nolan).

As we gradually come to face the truth about ourselves we discover, among other things, that we are not free. We are chained like slaves to our comforts, our moods and fears our reputation our achievements and successes, our health, our looks, our favourite devotions, our culture, our theological tradition and our names for God. To be a saint is to be motivated by gratitude nothing more and nothing less (Rolheiser). The contemplative preacher is someone who comes across as a person who is full of hope, gratitude and joy (Nolan).

All contemplatives have a deep sense of mystery - the mystery of God, the mystery of life the mystery of faith. Wonder is possibly the most profound form of consciousness. Living in the presence of the truly awesome mystery whom we call God enables us to speak about God more authentically and from the heart. The secret power of words is a gift from the God who calls. The Word is Creative Power emanating from God. The Creative Power is God. Are the words I speak an expression of God's creative Power in me?

The freedom to use our God-given power is coupled with responsibility. Every choice carries consequences. But words are the powerful creative force by which God brought forth „somethingness“ from nothingness. On the cross Christ restored life and reconnected the creative power of the human word to its Creative Powers God. Every thought creates our reality as we perceive it and offers us the choice of how to use our inner power. Do we act on perception or do we look for the facts in a situation and the underlying truth? What is it that drives our personal mission and ministry? If God “said,” so as to create then what you are daily “saying” is creating circumstances and purposeful events in your own life.

God's Word is a Truth greater than social sin, greater than scientific truth and greater than psychological reality. As mystics we are called to cooperate with God in giving birth to the kingdom of God. Do we receive our power to transform the world from this Truth? To reach this level of availability, we have to renounce our limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence. We have to discover an inner centre of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light.

The context in which we are called to preach the liberating truth of the Gospel is complex and difficult to analyze. One aspect however, is certain. The global village of the 21st century is characterized by a mood of despair, a pervasive mood of despondency. Albert Nolan's conclusion: “Nevertheless, what I want to argue is that this shift from hope to hopelessness is not a disaster. It is a magnificent new opportunity for the development of genuine Christian hope.

8. The Point of Confluence - A Eucharistic community

The Eucharist is a prophetic act to be continued in the life of those who celebrate it by being Eucharist, by being the body of Christ (Scott 5). The scope of the Eucharist is essentially global and inclusive, It is always richer and deeper than we can ever imagine or dream. The Eucharistic Community is made up of real people - you, your community. This community is made up of individuals who bring to the group their own personal life story. It is made up of people: Who care deeply, and those who could care more. Who struggle for their own survival and those who fight for the survival of others. Who see God and those who are groping to find him. Who are broken and those who are whole.

This global community is made up of cells of smaller Eucharistic communities bound together and interrelated in and through Christ. The fact that the Eucharist Community is for all people, whether

they are Christians or not, places the Eucharist in the context of the here and now, making it relevant for all humanity. The Eucharist is about eating together about extending the table, making it communal and therefore round - with no top and no bottom and no sides - a table as big as the whole world. The Eucharist community is called to be a table community that listens to the voices of those who seek food in their hunger, justice in their oppression consolation in their plan, and reconciliation in their alienation (Scott 8).

The Host of the Last Supper is a God who wills that all people be saved. "Take it and eat it, this is my body... Drink all of you from this (cup) for this is my blood... which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26 26-29). The God of the Eucharist is a God who tells us to "do this." A God whose heartbeat, pulsating with tenderness for the whole of humanity, is captured forever in the Eucharist (Scott 8).

Because the Eucharist is part of the flow of life it has an impact on the daily life of the Eucharistic community and vice versa. Therefore "the Eucharist should have the dimension that God meant for it, namely the life of the world." Some members of the Eucharistic community are explicitly called and missioned by Christ to make that happen.

Religious are called to be a core community to be leaven of the wider, all embracing Eucharistic community. They are called and missioned to collaborate with Christ in building the global Eucharistic community. Are we ready to hear and respond to this call? What are the consequences of our fiat for us personally? For those we minister to?

The Eucharistic community lives a spirituality of forgiveness.

In the words of Etty Hillesum: "Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears (their) grief honestly and with courage, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But If you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge - from which new sorrows will be born for others - then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply" (in Scott 25).

The Eucharist is a catalyst for forgiveness and reconciliation an alternative to anger and violence, an antidote to the fostering of hate and revenge. This alternative is by no means easy. It cannot ignore injustice or deny that "what is wrong is wrong." It often involves a struggle not to give in to anger. It is about the cross, passion, and pain (Scott 27).

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