

Vittorio Moretto

If I Lived A Thousand Lives

**St Daniel Comboni's
journey to holiness**

Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus

*Africa –
If I lived a thousand lives,
They would always be for you;
If I had a hundred hearts,
They would all just want your joy.
One thing alone
can never be:
Not to think of you,
And not to love you,
My Africa.*

(Words from a song about St Daniel Comboni)

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

PART ONE: WHAT IS HOLINESS?

HOLINESS OUT OF FASHION?

HOLINESS NOW

THE CANONISATION: A CHALLENGE

PART TWO:

LIKE A CHAMPION REJOICING TO RUN HIS COURSE

- 1 – Called to mission
- 2 – Discerning towards decision
- 3 – Baptism in mission (Comboni aged 26-28)
- 4 – Towards the plan for the regeneration of Africa (Comboni aged 29-33), and times of tension with Father Nicholas Mazza (Comboni aged 34)
- 5 – The Founder (Comboni aged 36-41)
- 6 – Responsible for the mission as Provicar (Comboni aged 41-46)
- 7 – The conflict with Carcereri and the Camillians (Comboni aged 44-46)
- 7 – Drought and famine – death of the missionaries – panic in Africa (Comboni aged 46-48 years)
- 9 – Calumnies and Loneliness (Comboni aged 49-50)
- 10 – Dies Natalis, October 10, 1881, in Africa

PART THREE:

JESUS AND AFRICA

JESUS

AFRICA

FOR LIFE

A DOUBLE INHERITANCE

PART FOUR: GOD’S WORK IN COMBONI

THE JOURNEY OF PURIFICATION

- 1 - Leaving his parents
- 2 - Losing his first companions
- 3 - Letting go of his early convictions
- 4 – Separation from his founder, Father Mazza, and his Institute
- 5 – The purification of his understanding of his call
- 6 – Losing his first coworkers, the Camillians and the Sisters of St Joseph
7. - The last purification: “useful” to Africa no more Dies natalis – born into heaven

READY TO LEARN

READY TO BE DIFFERENT

FREE TO TRUST

GOD’S WORK BROUGHT TO FULFILMENT

NOT BORN A SAINT, BUT BECOMING ONE

HUMAN NATURE AND GOD’S GRACE

PART FIVE:

THE CHALLENGE OF COMBONI’S HOLINESS

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

THE COMBONI INSTITUTES

Jesus Christ: the pierced heart of the good shepherd

Africa

THE MEMBERS OF THE COMBONI INSTITUTES

OTHER GROUPS

Consecrated missionaries

Lay Christians

People of no specific faith

INTRODUCTION

It is my hope that those who read this book will come to feel they have met a very fascinating person indeed - Daniel Comboni, one of the greatest missionaries in the Church's history. The story of who he was and what he accomplished is bound up forever with the story of Africa and of her peoples.

Comboni lived in the nineteenth century, at a time and in a place and culture very different from our own. As a consequence, certain things to be found in the reading of this book will probably be not at all familiar or readily understood. To help with this, some basic information may be offered at the outset about some of the points that might most benefit from clarification.

- Daniel Comboni was born in a small village in northern Italy by the name of Limone sul Garda, on March 15, 1831. He died aged 50 at Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan.
- The place where he grew and matured as a human being, a Christian and a missionary was the city of Verona (of Romeo and Juliet fame), situated about fifty kilometres from his home village. In Verona, Comboni first studied at, and then became a member of, an Institute which will be referred to here as “the Mazza Institute”, after its saintly founder, Fr Nicholas Mazza. It was under the auspices of this Institute that Comboni made his first journey to Africa, and he remained a member for around twenty-four years: from the age of eleven, that is, when he entered as a young student, until the age of thirty-five, when he left to found his own Institutes for the African mission. He was thirty-six years old when he founded his Institute for men (the heirs of which are today's Comboni Missionaries), and forty-one when he founded his Institute for women (today's Comboni Missionary Sisters). These Institutes will almost always be referred to as “his Institutes” or “Comboni's Institutes”.

- Mention will frequently be made of the diocese of Verona and its bishop. Comboni not only did all his training for the priesthood in Verona, but his African enterprise began and developed with the moral and official support of the bishop of Verona, referred to here as “Monsignor de Canossa” (de Canossa was the bishop’s surname), and “His Eminence” (in the later years of his life Bishop de Canossa was made a cardinal).
- In hierarchical terms, the superior authority for the diocese of Verona and for Comboni’s mission in Africa was the Holy See, that is, the Pope with his closest aides and the corresponding Vatican departments. Comboni was directly answerable to a department of the Holy See known today as “the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples”. At Comboni’s time, though, this was called “Propaganda Fide” and, as also today, was headed by a cardinal directly answerable to the Pope. Comboni was in close touch with this department, and especially with its cardinals – successively Barnabó, Franchi and Simeoni -, known as “Prefects”. These names and terms will make frequent appearances throughout this book.
- Mention will also be made of the “Camillians”, a religious Institute founded in the 16th century by St Camillus de Lelis, with the main but not exclusive aim of caring for the sick. It was thanks to the cooperation of some members of this Institute that Comboni was able to start his Institutes and his missionary enterprise in Africa. This cooperation lasted for ten years.
- Another Institute, of French origin and which worked with Comboni for twelve years, was the “Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition”. Comboni had a high regard for this Institute, because its Sisters had long experience in the Arab world and language through their work in the Middle East. When the

Sisters and the Camillians withdrew from Africa, Comboni was able to continue his work thanks to the two Institutes which he himself had founded.

- Another unfamiliar word – but much loved by Daniel Comboni – which will crop up from time to time is “Nigrizia”. This is the translation into the neo-Latin languages of the word “Sudan”, which in its turn translates literally into: “land of the black peoples”. When Comboni speaks of Nigrizia, he is variously referring – and this book will follow his usage in this – to the whole of “Africa”, the “African continent”, and “the Vicariate of Central Africa”. “Vicariate” in its turn is an ecclesiastical term indicating an area where the Church community has not yet attained such a level of organization as to justify the establishment of a full diocese. “Central Africa”, another term both much loved and frequently used by Comboni, referred at his time to all that part of Africa which was as yet very little known to the rest of the world, and included territories known today as the Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Chad, the Central African Republic, Rwanda, Burundi and parts of modern Cameroon and Nigeria. In terms of the area where Comboni was able to work during his lifetime, the “Vicariate of Central Africa” corresponds to present-day Sudan.
- Two further things remain to be mentioned. Firstly, the aim here has been to let Comboni speak for himself as much as possible by making generous use of his “Writings”.¹ Given that he lived at a time and in a context significantly different from our own, the various introductions and comments are intended to situate his words in such a way that their sense is easily accessible, while still fully respecting their meaning, style and “passion”. Only slight editorial alterations have at

¹ Daniel Comboni, *Writings*, Comboni Missionaries, Sunningdale, United Kingdom, 2005.

times been introduced with the sole purpose of rendering Comboni's meaning clearer, and quotations from his writings are presented in indented italics so that his words may, as it were, stand out more clearly on the page.

Secondly, an explanatory word may be helpful about the reason for some occasional repetitions, especially in the second and fourth parts. The matter is simple: it seems correct and respectful to attend to Comboni's human and spiritual experience starting out from the real situations in which he found himself. This made it necessary always to recall, even if only briefly, the context of his words, thus dispensing the reader from an extra effort of memory, and above all letting Comboni's experience speak in a more lively way. This can be a help to all, including those who already know Comboni well.

PART ONE

WHAT IS HOLINESS?

Khartoum, capital city of the Sudan. The comparative coolness of the evening is always a welcome respite after the burning noontime heat. On this particular evening, though, in a room in one of the city's hospitals a thirty-two-year-old woman is fighting for her life. The fifth caesarean section she is due to undergo threatens to have fatal consequences. At 7.30 on the morning of November 11, 1997, the woman - Lubna - is taken to the operating theatre. "Once the surgeon has removed the baby from the mother's womb, he realizes that Lubna is haemorrhaging: he does what he can to staunch the flow of blood, and hopes for a favourable outcome. But by 12 noon on the same day the haemorrhage has become so serious as to require the transfusion of two units of blood, and then a return to the operating theatre for the removal of the uterus, and subsequent admission to the intensive care unit; Lubna's blood pressure has dropped so low as no longer to be measurable, and no pulse can be found. In the afternoon the clinical situation worsens even further: the wound is bleeding copiously, and the blood refuses to coagulate. At 7 in the morning of November 12 the situation has become desperate. Lubna is returned to the operating room for a third operation, but this takes place with the patient in a state of collapse and, to top everything, the complication of a pulmonary oedema sets in. Yet on the following day, November 13, the woman is fully conscious and her vital signs are normal. On November 18 she is discharged from hospital"².

² Report taken from PIERSANDRO VANZAN SJ, San Daniele Comboni, il patrono della Nigrizia, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, quaderno 3689, 2003, IV 139-152 (our translation into English).

What had taken place? An idea had come to the mind and heart of one of the Comboni Missionary Sisters³ who was caring for Lubna: why not ask God for help through the intercession of Blessed Daniel Comboni?

Lubna, her husband, and all the family were Moslems. All the same, Sister Blanca showed Lubna's husband a picture of Comboni, and asked him: "Would you agree for us to call on Allah-God through the intercession of this man of God? Have you heard of Comboni?" Lubna's husband said yes, that Comboni was known to everyone as the founder of the hospital. And so the Sister gathered all the members of her community and some of the Catholic nurses, and placed Comboni's picture under Lubna's pillow. Then all assembled called on God to have mercy on Lubna; to heal her, if it was his will, through the intercession of Daniel Comboni who had given his life for the people of the Sudan. The little group went on praying for a short while longer in the hospital's Catholic chapel. Some hours later, Lubna was no longer in a critical condition and had improved visibly. The following day she was once again in perfect health.

Just five years later in Rome, in 2002, the commission of doctors charged with examining the case expressed the unanimous opinion that the healing had no natural explanation. Pope John Paul II, recognizing the supernatural nature of what had happened, decided to proclaim Blessed Daniel Comboni a saint. His canonisation took place on October 5, 2003.

HOLINESS OUT OF FASHION?

There was a time when it was common enough to hear speak of holiness, and of the Christian's duty to aim at becoming holy. In seminaries, convents, houses of formation, in associations and groups of lay faithful, in parish churches, there was no lack of occasions when the members of the Church would be encouraged to walk this path.

³ Sister Blanca Benatelli, who had been working in the Sudan for almost forty years.

Today, instead, it sometimes seems that holiness has gone out of fashion. This may in part be due to the wide publicity given to the unworthy behaviour of some priests and religious; yet holiness has also been given a bad press by a kind of hagiography which has presented the saints as people who were born holy and went through life without fault or failure. Presented in this way, they come across as entirely out of the ordinary, offering a well-nigh unattainable ideal for “ordinary” Christians who live in the midst of today’s world.

There is no doubt, of course, that the Church’s history has been enriched by saints who were indeed truly extraordinary. Men like Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio come immediately to mind, as do geniuses like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and great women like Monica, Teresa of Jesus and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Yet the great majority of the saints were “normal” people. In this sense, the hagiographers at times achieve the opposite effect from that intended, and succeed only in discouraging Christians from following the saints’ example, presented as entirely beyond the reach of most people.

Again, in the mind of many Catholics, especially those particularly committed in the social field on behalf of the emarginated, or in political commitment to change society’s unjust structures, to speak of the saints often seems a synonym for a disincarnate spirituality, with no practical relation to the struggle for a life worthy of human beings. We also find ourselves living in a culture of disenchantment, with the collapse of the great ideologies, and we can ourselves become disenchanted and too “realistic” to commit ourselves to great ideals and purposes, widely perceived as unattainable. We accommodate ourselves to the little that can be done here and now, and make our peace with our very modest aspirations.

For these, and other reasons, holiness may really appear to have gone out of fashion.

HOLINESS NOW

All this is a challenge for us to rediscover the meaning of holiness today. In this task, we could do worse than make a start with Pope John Paul II's words, in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* ("At the Beginning of the New Millennium"), to the effect that holiness is "the basic sense of belonging to him who is in essence the Holy One, the "thrice Holy" (cf. *Is* 6:3). To profess the Church as holy means to point to her as *the Bride of Christ*, for whom he gave himself precisely in order to make her holy (cf. *Eph* 5:25-26)"⁴. Segundo Galilea fills this approach out when he says that holiness is "the eternal destiny of each one of us, the idea God has of us"⁵. This is a wonderful definition: God has a beautiful idea of each one of us, and he wants to bring that idea to fulfilment.

If all this is so, then maybe we have to work at overcoming some prejudices. As John Paul II says: "This ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few "uncommon heroes" of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual". And he goes on to insist: "The paths to holiness are personal and call for a genuine "training in holiness", adapted to people's needs"⁶.

In calling the Church to commit herself to her pastoral priorities at the beginning of the new millennium⁷, John Paul II characteristically issued a counter-cultural challenge: "stressing holiness remains more than ever an urgent pastoral task."⁸, even though, he allows, "it might seem almost impractical to recall this elementary truth as the foundation of the pastoral planning in which we are involved at the

⁴ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 30.

⁵ SEGUNDO GALILEA, *El Pozo de Jacob*, Ed. Paulinas, Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C., Colombia, 1992, 17.

⁶ NMI 31.

⁷ NMI 29.

⁸ NMI 30.

start of the new millennium.”⁹. Yet he nevertheless insists: “In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity.”¹⁰.

THE CANONISATION: A CHALLENGE

To celebrate the fact that Comboni has been proclaimed a “Saint” certainly brings great joy. Yet such emotions, real though possibly passing, are not enough. We need to ask: what are the consequences of this event for our lives?

A few months before his death, when Comboni was writing from Africa to the Rector of his missionary seminary in Verona, he encouraged him to keep going in spite of his difficulties or limitations, encouraging him to “*train missionaries and sisters for us who are truly holy, without false piety, because in Africa one needs direct but bold and generous souls who know how to suffer and die for Christ and for the Africans*”¹¹.

We will not reap the benefits of the canonisation if we do not accept its main challenge which is to “be holy”. Feelings pass. Some have indeed already passed. But the challenge remains.

The reflections found in the present work are offered as a modest contribution to meeting such a challenge. The focus here will be on Comboni’s personal holiness. Against the background of his missionary work in Africa and in Europe, special attention will be given to the way God moulded Comboni into holiness, and how Comboni let the Spirit work in him.

⁹ NMI 31.

¹⁰ NMI 31

¹¹ Writings 6486.

The flow of the present work is as follows: first, to recall some of the most significant moments in Comboni's life, especially as he recorded them in his own words; second, to seek to identify what was the essence, the centre, of this man and missionary; third, to examine the ways in which God set about purifying and refining him, so as to make it clear that Daniel Comboni was not born a saint, but gradually became one. To approach Comboni in this way is intended to motivate and encourage those who feel called to live as his heirs today, and to help those committed to mission today to recognise God's ongoing work in them.

PART TWO

LIKE A CHAMPION REJOICING TO RUN HIS COURSE

At first sight it might seem almost disrespectful to try and reduce to the space of only a few pages the extraordinarily rich and eventful life of a man who gave himself completely to the service of Africa. Yet this effort cannot be avoided if we are somehow to grasp the main chapters of Daniel Comboni's story in such a way as to help us understand and appreciate this fascinating missionary. Here, in an attempt at a personal synthesis, I have sought only to indicate the principal milestones in Comboni's journey, hoping thus to avoid the risk of a confusing labyrinth of dates, places, persons and events.

1 – CALLED TO MISSION

Just a few days before Comboni's death, when he was already exhausted by illness and sadness of heart, he wrote to the Rector of his mission seminary in Verona with the straightforwardness of a child: *"No passion ever took root in my heart except my passion for Africa"*. In the same letter he insisted that this was his *"deep, long-standing and extraordinary vocation"*.¹²

But how long-standing in fact was this deep and extraordinary vocation of his? He himself tells us in a letter he wrote to his parish priest in Limone while still a young priest of twenty-six:

*If I abandon the idea of consecrating myself to the foreign Missions, I will be a martyr for the rest of my life to the idea that germinated in my mind at least 14 years ago, and always grew, as I discovered the loftiness of the apostolate.*¹³

¹² Writings 6983.

¹³ Writings 6.

Comboni had been ten years old when he entered the Institute founded in Verona by Father Nicholas Mazza to educate young men from poor families who gave proof of “excellent intelligence, good behaviour and solid common sense”.

What had favoured the emergence of his vocation? Part of the explanation had undoubtedly been the interest in mission that characterised the Mazza Institute of the time, an interest nourished by the ready availability of missionary reading as well as Mazza’s own enthusiasm, which had gained him the nickname of “Father Congo”. This initial interest was further fuelled by Comboni’s reading of the book on the Japanese martyrs by St Alphonsus Mary de Liguori, the founder of the Redemptorists. Comboni must have read this with special attention, given that later he was to envision his whole missionary life in terms of martyrdom. Again, when Comboni was only fifteen, Father Angelo Vinco, a Mazza priest who had travelled to Central Africa, would send news of his mission in letters which were read with great interest by the whole community.

All this led to the fact that, by the time Comboni was seventeen, he had reached a final and irrevocable decision: he would consecrate his whole life to the evangelization of Africa. Almost thirty years later, in the Report he presented to Cardinal Franchi, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Comboni, now forty-five and at a difficult time in his missionary life due to a painful dispute with the Camillians, recalled this very act of total commitment:

It was in January 1849 that, as a 17 year-old student in philosophy, at the feet of my venerable Superior Fr Mazza, I vowed to consecrate my whole life to the apostolate of Central Africa. And, by the grace of God, I have never broken my vow whatever the circumstances, never trying to do anything else but to equip myself for this most holy enterprise. Indeed, in 1857, during the first period of the Mission, I was sent with other priests to Khartoum and the Stations of the White Nile where, among other trials, I was several times at death’s door.

Some years later, once the dispute with the Camillians had been resolved in his favour, Comboni returned to the memory of this youthful decision¹⁴, writing of it to the Society of Cologne, which provided him with regular financial assistance for his missionary work. In this report, he added another very significant detail: his act of dedication to God was also the fruit of meeting and making friends with a young African who was living in Verona at the time, in the house of some benefactors of the Mazza Institute. Comboni wrote:

In Verona in 1849 I had already met an excellent young African called Bakhit Caenda, who belonged to the family of the Conti Miniscalchi. He was born in Caco, in the tribe of Jebel Nuba, was well known throughout Italy and especially appreciated at Propaganda. Bonds of friendship and an identical interest for his homeland brought me close to this fervently Catholic African. Like myself, deeply Catholic Verona admired with amazement this Nuban whose faith was steadfast, whose piety outstanding, and who combined a very strong character with these excellent qualities. Through him I formed a high conception of the Nuba and said to the excellent Bakhit at least a hundred times: "I will have no peace until I have established the Cross of Christ in your homeland".¹⁵

¹⁴ "In January 1849, a 17-year old student, I promised at the feet of my most reverend Superior Fr Nicola Mazza to dedicate my life to the apostolate of Central Africa; and with the grace of God it has never happened that I have been unfaithful to my promise. I then began to prepare myself for this holy undertaking. Then in 1857, when the third period of the mission had already begun, under the leadership of the courageous Fr Giovanni Beltrame, I was sent by Fr Nicola Mazza with a few other priests to Khartoum and to the stations on the White Nile where I had to spend a difficult time of testing and was several times smitten by violent equatorial fevers that nearly carried me to the grave" (Writings 4797). This Report, "HISTORICAL ACCOUNT and STATE OF THE VICARIATE OF CENTRAL AFRICA" is dated 1877, but without day and month.

¹⁵ Writings 4840.

So we can conclude that Daniel Comboni's vocation first emerged, and then matured, thanks to a combination of favourable circumstances: Father Mazza's own influence; the missionary interest alive in the Mazza Institute, with access to missionary reading matter, and the opportunity to carry out research on missionary subjects; the Institute's work in gathering and educating African children who had been freed from slavery; the close friendship with one of these young Africans; and the fact that missionaries sent to Africa by the Institute shared their experience with the students.

2 – DISCERNING TOWARDS DECISION

When Comboni took his solemn oath committing himself to the regeneration of Africa, he was a young man full of the enthusiasm and fire typical of his age. Eight years were then to pass during which he matured not only physically, but from the human and spiritual points of view as well. In due course, he was ordained a priest and lived as a committed member of the Mazza Institute. And the much-desired moment was arriving: to set out for Africa. At the age of twenty-six, Comboni longed for this, as he himself recognized in a letter to his parish priest:

*I had been yearning for this moment for a very long time and with more passion than two ardent lovers longing for the moment of their wedding.*¹⁶

But now Comboni had to face up to the circumstances of his family. He was the only surviving child and could not evade his duty towards his parents. On the one hand, the idea of leaving them on their own troubled him deeply; on the other, they were going through a difficult time from the financial point of view, having contracted debts to pay for medical care for Daniel's brother, Virginio, who eventually died. Comboni went through times of great interior struggle and doubt, as is reflected in what he wrote to his parish priest:

¹⁶ Writings 3.

It is certain that this uncertainty, and much more so the thought of leaving my parents even momentarily, in the throes of the present family circumstances that you know, and especially thinking of my mother, disconcerts me greatly.

If I can free myself from the two above-mentioned difficulties, I have decided to go. But the thought of the unhappiness of my parents, the isolation in which they will find themselves, that is what disturbs me. Neither life nor the difficulties of the Mission nor anything frightens me, but matters regarding my two elderly parents make me tremble greatly. That is the reason why, in such uncertainty and consternation of spirit, I have decided to go on retreat so as to implore help from Heaven.

So I can tell you nothing that is certain or determined: all that is certain is that I am one minute anxious, one minute hopeful, one minute I have pleasant ideas and the next I have disconsolate ones. If I consult the one who has always directed my conscience, I am urged to decide for departure; if I look to my family, I am terrified; if I think of the world and resolve to persevere, I must expect to be damned by those who know of my family circumstances and have worldly thoughts; if I search my heart, it tells me to sacrifice everything and fly to the Missions, and spurn what others might say. Imagine the storm my spirit is in, the struggle, the conflict which troubles me.¹⁷

How does Comboni go about solving this dilemma? Firstly, by taking some practical steps to resolve his parents' financial problems, and secondly, by giving himself over to prayer and seeking the help of experienced counsellors. Once again in a letter addressed to his parish priest, Comboni shared what was happening in his life:

I have at last finished my spiritual exercises; and after seeking the advice of God and of men, I saw that the idea of the Missions is my true vocation: indeed the successor of

¹⁷ Writings 5, 6 and 8.

the great Servant of God Fr Bertoni, Fr Marani, told me that, having got the picture of my life and the past and present circumstances, he assures me that my vocation for the African Missions is one of the most clear and obvious; and therefore, despite my parents' circumstances, which on this occasion I candidly put before him, he said: "go, I give you my blessing, and trust in Providence, for the Lord, who inspired you with this magnanimous plan, will know how to console and protect your parents." So I have therefore absolutely decided to leave this coming September.¹⁸

It may be said that Comboni faced this first and decisive difficulty for his missionary vocation by accepting that discernment inherently involves struggle, and that he found the resources necessary to engage in this struggle through times of introspection and prayer, and by taking some significant practical steps.

The most decisive of such steps was to seek the advice of his spiritual director, Father Marani. This at any rate was the way Comboni saw things when, just a few months before his death, after twenty-four years of missionary work, and immersed in a sea of tribulations including a shameful calumny, his thoughts went back to this crucial moment, twice in the same letter to the Rector of his seminary in Verona:

Ah, hold on, my dear friend. It is true that you are a child in virtue. But remember a maxim inculcated in me by Fr Marani, who was rougher than you. He had awkward manners and at times showed that he did not have much charity (and in this you are not at all like him). I had recourse to Fr Marani as a seminarian, I made my general confession with him, and he gave me the definitive advice on my Vocation (on that morning, 9th August 1857, Fr Benciolini was outside, waiting to hear from me of Fr Marani's decision). He said to me: "I knew you as a seminarian, I have advised you as a seminarian

¹⁸ Writings 13.

and a priest in all your affairs, I have in my mind as in a mirror your affairs, your principal fault, all you have done to overcome it, etc., etc. I began in 1820 to discern vocations and I have done so for many years; and I had none less than Fr Gasparo as my teacher. Well, be comforted and do not be afraid (I was trembling like a leaf because I feared he might tell me that I had no vocation for Africa, a fear that on the morning of the 9th I had confided to Fr Benciolini who had answered, "You will do what the Lord wills, go and see Fr Marani and do as he says"). "I have been examining the vocations of Missionaries and priests and friars, etc. for many years, your vocation to the mission and to Africa is one of the clearest I have ever seen: Fr Vinco, the Jesuit Zara and Fr Ambrosi have all been here and hundreds of others; your vocation seems to me one of the clearest and soundest I have ever seen; and I am old, I have grey hair and sixty-seven, almost sixty-eight, years behind me. Go, in God's name and rejoice". I knelt, he blessed me and I thanked him, crying with consolation, and ran to tell it all to Fr Benciolini (who was laughing)...

Finding myself so abandoned and distressed, a hundred times I had the strongest temptation (even suggested to me by pious and respectable men, but men without courage and trust in God) to give up everything, hand over the work to Propaganda and offer myself as a humble servant, at the disposal of the Holy See, or of the Cardinal Prefect, or of some Bishop. Well, what helped me not to fail in my vocation (even when I was accused before the highest authority with, so to say, twenty capital sins, when in fact there are only seven) and even when I had debts of 70,000 francs, the Institutes at Verona were in confusion, there were many deaths in Central Africa with no prospect of light, but everything was dark and I had a fever at Khartoum – what sustained my courage to hold firm at my post until death or some decision from the Holy See was the conviction of the certainty of my vocation. It was

always toties quoties because Fr Marani told me on 9th August 1857, after a serious examination, “your vocation to the African mission is one of the clearest I have ever seen”.¹⁹

Reading Daniel Comboni’s words here one is reminded of a young Jewish woman in a small town in northern Galilee when she received the good news that she was going to be the Mother of the Redeemer. Her heart, troubled by the message, debated between two words that came from God. The first was written in her very being, and impelled her to a sense of unworthiness in the presence of the God on whom she entirely depended, in the deeply personal, intimate and authentic conviction that she was not called to be a mother and for this reason felt she should remain a virgin. The second word had been brought her now by the angel: You will be the Mother of the Saviour. What to do when faced with two clear words from God? The divine messenger, the angel Gabriel, reassured her: God does the impossible. If both words are from God, but seem incompatible to us, it is God who must show himself to be God, fulfilling those two words... in his own way. This is what happened to Our Lady: God gave her both virginity and motherhood.

In Comboni, two words of God appear clearly: the fourth commandment, “Honour your father and mother”, and the other: “Go to Africa as a missionary”. For Comboni, Father Marani was the divine messenger: “God wants you in Africa, go, he is with you... and with your parents!” Mary believed and became the Mother of God; Comboni believed and, fulfilling his filial duties, he became the missionary for Africa now known to so many.

Let the world prattle away; let it say that two poor parents are unhappy because they are childless, but in heaven things are taken differently, up there it is written in very different characters. The doctrine of Jesus Christ, the Gospel, is indeed opposed to the world’s chatter.²⁰

¹⁹ Writings 6879, 6886.

²⁰ Writings 221, letter to his father of March 5, 1858, written during Comboni’s first missionary journey to Central Africa.

3 – BAPTISM IN MISSION (COMBONI AGED 26-28)

At last, the day of Comboni's departure for Africa dawned. Father Mazza was sending six missionaries to Africa - five priests and one brother. With his blessing they sailed from Trieste for Alexandria in Egypt. Once there, they were offered the opportunity of a pilgrimage, all expenses paid, to the Holy Land. With three of his companions, Comboni took up the offer. In the long letters written at the time, he tells of the deep emotions evoked in him by being in the land where Jesus had lived and walked. As he explained to his parents, he was especially touched by his visit to the church of the Holy Sepulchre:

When just two paces away from this place I stood over the spot where the Cross was planted, and the Superior of the Franciscans of the Holy Sepulchre told me that this is the very hole in which the Cross was inserted, I burst into floods of tears, and for a moment I stood aside: then, after the others had kissed it, I too approached, and I kissed it, that blessed hole; and these thoughts awakened in me: This then is Calvary? Ah here is the Mount of Myrrh, here the altar of the Cross, where the great sacrifice was consumed. I am on the top of Golgotha in the very place where the Only Son of God was crucified: the ransom of humanity was accomplished right here; here death was conquered; hell was vanquished here; here is where I was redeemed.²¹

The pilgrimage completed, and greatly inspired by what they had experienced, the missionaries returned to Cairo, and from there began their journey into Central Africa. They reached Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan, after seventy-eight days, first sailing up the Nile, and then by camel-caravan across the scorching desert. From Khartoum they set out towards the South, eventually reaching Holy Cross Catholic, where they found people in mourning over the recent

²¹ Writings 42-43.

death of the superior. It had not been long since Comboni himself had recovered from a fever which afflicted him for a whole week. At Holy Cross they gradually adapted themselves to the situation, began to study and write down the local languages, quickly and efficiently gathering almost two thousand words, which would become five thousand a few years later. But illness troubled the missionaries. A few months later, Father Oliboni, the leader of the expedition, died. Three days after this sad event, Comboni recorded the missionary's holy death in a letter to his own parents:

He had already been to confession and received communion that same morning. Before receiving Extreme Unction, however, he called us all to his little angareb (a sort of bed) and with the eloquence that came naturally to him, and the strength and vehemence God's spirit gave him as he was about to die, he gave us a talk; a recommendation to remain determined and strong in the great undertaking, to carry out the Superior's great plan, to love the Superior by not failing in his plans for the glory of God, not to spare any toil for the redemption of souls for heaven.

Goodbye! He said, we shall not see each other on earth any more, but I shall be united with you in spirit, I shall pray to God for you, for our Mission and we shall be indivisible brothers in the spirit; Goodbye! Then he intrepidly said the responses to the prayers of the Church, and received the holy oil.²²

Significantly, the day after Father Oliboni's death Comboni shared with his friend Dr Battuzzi his own response to the event:

But the Lord be blessed a thousand times. Far from losing courage on this account, we shall spare no toil or efforts to co-operate in the conversion of Africa and to carry out our Superior's great plan.²³

²² Writings 400-401.

²³ Writings 390.

And two days later he expressed the same sentiments in a letter to his parents:

*Do not doubt, dear father, that I have become a Missionary to labour for the glory of God and to spend my life for the good of souls. Even if I saw all my fellow missionaries fall, unless prudence or other reasons advised me to the contrary, I would hold fast and make every effort to carry out the great plan of our Superior.*²⁴

Where anyone would have been able to find more than enough reasons for discouragement and retreat, Comboni focused on and underlined the difficulty of the enterprise only so as to become even more fully committed to the mission. This first experience of Africa made a very deep impression on him and transformed him deeply.

Comboni was a great observer of things and persons. He had written with feeling of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In a way just as deeply felt, he wrote about how new and strange Central Africa seemed to him. Especially in his letters to his parents, he took the time to describe all the fascination of the natural beauty he discovered day after day in his journey towards the heart of Africa:

The low banks of the broad and stately river are invaded with vigorous vegetation that has never been touched or altered by human hand. On one side an immense and impenetrable undergrowth, never yet explored, formed by gigantic mimosas and green nébaks – trees of an extraordinary girth, height and age, since man has never interfered with them – growing densely together, form a boundless and variegated enchanted forest. It affords the safest hiding place for immense herds of gazelles, antelopes, tigers, lions, panthers, hyenas, giraffes, rhinos, and other jungle beasts accustomed to the infinite grasslands teeming with snakes of every kind and size. On the other side more undergrowth, dense with mimosas and

²⁴ Writings 407.

tamarinds and ambaries, etc. appears, covered in verbena and a sort of thick and supple grass. This forms as it were, natural huts, where one would certainly be protected from the heaviest downpour.

How great and powerful is the Lord! Our boat advances, one could say, on the backs of the hippopotamuses. These are about four times the size of an ox and numerous, for there are hundreds of them and they could sink us in an instant. But God ensures that these very fierce animals flee before us. The dugouts and little boats of naked Africans armed with shields and spears could attack us in a country isolated from all; instead, as soon as they catch sight of us fearlessly advancing, they rush away, concealing themselves beneath the branches of those gigantic trees growing on the river banks and extending beyond them because of their enormous size.²⁵

With the same wealth of detail, he recorded his observations of the different peoples, such as the Shilluk, Dinkas, Nuer, Baggara, and Kich, whom he encountered along the way. He noted their different customs, their varied ways of reacting, relating, and understanding life. Comboni would continue to focus on this aspect of his missionary experience in the visits he would make to the villages in his work of evangelisation. This interest in the culture of the peoples to whom he announced the Gospel would continue till his last exploration of the Nuba Mountains, just a few months before his death. Comboni's ethnological interest, however, was always linked to his outlook as a man of faith, as we find clearly expressed in one of the letters written during his first African journey:

But the light of the Gospel will shine before their eyes, penetrating their minds and hearts, and with divine grace they will change their thoughts, their counsel and their customs.²⁶

²⁵ Writings 243, 246.

²⁶ Writings 279.

Yet Comboni's attitude to Africa and her peoples would undergo a deep transformation, as is witnessed by a brief but significantly prophetic postscript in one of his letters to his parents at this time:

*So far you have seen your son as a mere traveller, henceforth you will see him as a missionary.*²⁷

Comboni's early encounter with the difficulties of mission - the fevers, the death of his fellow missionaries, his own poor health which debilitated him and obliged him to return to Italy only two years after his departure – decisively transformed the journey from a romantic adventure into an act of faith. It was upon this transformation that his being a missionary was founded, and to which he would explicitly refer in explaining his “new” plan for Africa. In all the editions of his Plan for the evangelisation of Africa, this original and fundamental experience was always an key point of reference.

In the first edition of the Plan (1864), he recalled:

*For some time we too studied those distant peoples at first hand and, in so far as it was possible, given the virulent diseases that often nearly killed us, we researched their nature, customs and social conditions.*²⁸

And in the last edition, seven years later, he wrote:

*We, too, were a member of those apostolic expeditions and we were, by God's mercy, among the very few to survive, of the hundred and more who threw themselves into that daunting undertaking.*²⁹

“Henceforth you will see him as a missionary”: these few words were to mark all the rest of his life.

²⁷ Writings 414.

²⁸ Writings 804.

²⁹ Writings 2746.

4 – TOWARDS THE PLAN FOR THE REGENERATION OF AFRICA (COMBONI AGED 29-33), AND TIMES OF TENSION WITH FATHER NICHOLAS MAZZA (COMBONI AGED 34)

Although Comboni had returned to Italy in a poor state of health, he recovered quickly and was given charge of the education of the young Africans at the Mazza Institute in Verona. From there, he travelled via Egypt to Aden to collect a group of African children who had been “freed” by the British after they had intercepted a slave-ship. The matter became something of an adventure in which Comboni gave proof of an ability and astuteness beyond his years. He was able to extricate himself from the difficult situation created when he found himself suspected of complicity in the slave trade, and then at last to bring the young Africans with him to Europe.

Comboni hoped that in due course the young Africans educated in Verona would become involved in the mission to their own people, and he set about providing for their education and upkeep with his characteristic energy and drive. He made direct contact with an association of German Catholics in Cologne, which aimed at aiding young Africans who had been taken into slavery and then freed, and which had already been supporting Mazza’s work in this field. A little after this, he contacted Propaganda Fide in Rome with the request that a mission in Africa be entrusted to the Mazza Institute.

To these two developments must be added an unexpected turn of events which was to leave its mark on Comboni for the rest of his life: he conceived the idea which led him to write his Plan for the evangelization of Africa.

I believe this plan is the work of God, because the thought of it burst upon me on 15th September while I was doing the triduum to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque; and on 18th September, the day this Servant of God was beatified, Cardinal Barnabó finished reading my Plan. I worked on it for nearly 60 continuous hours.³⁰

³⁰ Writings 926.

The main innovation of the Plan can be summed up in the phrase: “to save Africa with Africa”. Comboni writes:

*On this important subject we said to ourselves: “Would the conquest of the tribes of unhappy Africa not be better effected by siting our centre of operations in a place where Africans can live without changing and Europeans can live without succumbing?” Our thought has become set on this great idea; and the regeneration of Africa by Africa seems to us the only programme to be followed in bringing about so dazzling a conquest.*³¹

Comboni went on to present the Plan to the prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Barnabó, and to the Pope himself. The discussions he had with them led him to travel to Turin, Lyons, Paris, Cologne, Madrid and London. All this activity was misinterpreted by some members of the Mazza Institute, to such an extent that the Bishop of Verona and Cardinal Barnabó came at least in part to give credence to the criticisms levelled at Comboni.

One can understand this uneasiness on the part of some of the members of the Mazza Institute, if one bears in mind the apparent failure of the earlier missionary expedition and the financial difficulties the Institute was facing. Further, it seemed as if Comboni was acting on his own initiative, and as if he was the main protagonist in the matter. Father Mazza himself, already weakened by old age and financial worries, was at times so distraught as to express the desire that Comboni should leave the Institute of his own volition. When Comboni himself got wind of this while away from Verona, he reacted in an extremely vehement and pained manner. As he wrote to his friend Father Francis Bricolo, rector of the Mazza Institute for men:

Although the good old man is being a tyrant rather than a father with me at the moment, the reason I am so dejected is

³¹ Writings 2753.

because the said good old man is suffering on my account, and so is suffering for nothing, for no reason. I feel more than ever what a grace it is to be a Catholic, and the faith is the only thing which gives me the strength to suffer for love of Christ. Without the faith, a heart not strengthened by Christ would certainly give way. I will answer your dear letter in detail later. I am really depressed. It is about time the Superior stopped, or this will be the result. There are times when I need encouragement, more than to be scolded. The Superior ought to have told me something about this when I was in Verona. I can see they wait for me to be out of the way before influencing him against me. But whether near or far, I am always the same and I feel things with the same strength wherever I am in the world. The Superior will never be able to reproach me for things which would deserve my being expelled from the Institute.

I say nothing of my relations with the Superior; I only say that in all these matters philosophy is required, the philosophy of the Gospel. Before heaven and earth I declare that nothing of which I am accused is true. I have never received anything from Giovanelli that I did not give to the Superior... I did this in all conscience and I will always act in this way as long as I go on accepting money. I have always acted scrupulously and with great care in this matter. If the Superior is otherwise convinced, then may God's will be done; I will pray for him to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. There is nothing else I can do. I am very, very fond of him, but I am just a little annoyed by the way he has proceeded, because it might damage my work.

I assure you, dear Rector, that I am scandalised by certain saints. But God is good. The Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary are my great comfort and the pivot of my philosophy.

Well, God himself who is the witness of my actions, my feelings, my heart's desires, this dearly beloved Jesus will

either defend me or give me the strength to carry the burden of my affliction.

Perhaps the Lord wants me to suffer in my African affairs, so that I may put up a better fight against the difficulties that will appear in the implementation of my projects; and should none of this be wanted by the Lord, the affliction and humiliation will always be embraced by me with God's grace, because I will take it as a discount on my faults, and because Jesus suffered, Mary suffered, St Paul suffered, St Francis Xavier suffered and the converted sinners suffered. May everything God wants be done, I will always bless the Lord and exclaim with St Augustine: hic ure, hic seca... etc. (you know, I do not remember)...³²

The disagreement, which others were fomenting when the “father” Mazza and his “son” Comboni were apart, was resolved the moment the latter returned to Verona from his long journey of mission promotion across Europe. Comboni presented himself to the “holy old man” asking him with straightforward confidence if “he wanted to put into writing” a declaration stating that “the priest Daniel Comboni, after being part of the Institute for twenty-three years, no longer belonged to it”. After a short pause, Father Mazza embraced and kissed him, exclaiming: “You are my son!”. This was the last meeting between “father” and “son”: Mazza would die a little more than a month later, while Comboni was in Rome.

It was 1865. A year later, the Mazza Institute in its entirety would withdraw officially and definitively from its commitment to the African mission. Comboni was alone.

5 – THE FOUNDER (COMBONI AGED 36-41)

In the full vigour of his youth and missionary zeal, Comboni now found himself abandoned by all in the work for Africa. At about this same time, the Institute of Blessed Luigi de Casoria (Naples,

³² Writings 965, 974, 975, 990, 994.

Italy) also withdrew its cooperation. Yet, in spite of remaining alone, Comboni went on thinking intensely about Africa and travelled across Europe (Paris, London, Cologne) to seek support.

It was at this very moment that Cardinal Barnabó invited him to found a missionary Institute for Africa. Comboni accepted the challenge and sought the protection of the Bishop of Verona for this new initiative: on June 1st 1867 the Association of the Good Shepherd was born, a kind of central committee with responsibility for the promotion, formation, organization and financing of the mission in Africa.

This Association thus became the foundation stone of Comboni's Institute for men, with the support of four members of the Order of St Camillus who placed themselves at his disposal³³. It should be recalled that as a consequence of Italy's Third War of Independence, the whole region of Verona towards Venice had been annexed by the new Italian State, which was pressing to apply also in these new territories the anticlerical laws aimed at suppressing the religious Orders. Foreseeing this, this group of Camillians with an interest in the missionary vocation decided to throw in their lot with Comboni's new Institute.

Gathering the four Camillians, three Sisters from a French Congregation (the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition), and sixteen young African women educated in various Italian Institutes, Comboni left a few months later for Cairo, where he opened two Institutes: one for men and the other for women, in line with the insistence of his Plan on an adequate period of acclimatization for both African and European personnel. The

³³ At the outset this cooperation seemed destined to fail, because of difficulties between the Camillians and the Bishop of Verona. It was the wisdom and the patience of Comboni that made it possible for these problems to be resolved, with all parties showing some readiness for compromise so that some good would be done for Africa. The birth and initial growth of Comboni's Institute for men was made possible by the availability of the Camillians .

following year, in mid-1868, he returned to Europe for a new round of mission promotion and fund-raising. He wrote:

*You will be surprised to see that I am suddenly in France. It is normal. Someone as burdened as I am has to seek a way out. This is why, with the consent of Mgr Ciurcia, I decided to go where I can find money. I will go immediately to Cologne, but first of all I want to seize this favourable opportunity to visit and unburden myself to my venerable and dearest M. Girard in Grenoble and discuss the interests of the most unfortunate and abandoned race.*³⁴

He travelled first to France, where he visited the shrine of La Salette to consecrate Africa to the Virgin Mary. A month later, he set out for Germany and then returned to Paris, staying there for more than three months. At the beginning of 1869, he returned to Italy paying a brief visit to his native village, Limone, and then went on to Vienna. “*Although business is thin, I have nevertheless not come to Austria in vain*”³⁵, he wrote. From Austria he returned to Venice and Verona. In mid-February he was already in Marseilles, from where he embarked

*for Cairo with a Priest who is a member of our small Seminary in Verona, and with another 4 individuals (two good African schoolmistresses, a catechist and a teacher of crafts).*³⁶

Once in Cairo he opened a third house to serve as a school run by African women teachers.

The final months of 1869, as well as the first half of 1870, were marked by the significant event of the First Vatican Council. Alluding to this, Comboni wrote to the Bishop of Verona in September 1869:

³⁴ Writings 1632.

³⁵ Writings 1850.

³⁶ Writings 1856.

*We have many matters to conclude at the time of the Council. We are preparing ourselves for it with prayers and crosses which are two extremely precious things.*³⁷

From Cairo he also wrote to the Pope to promote the cause of “unhappy Africa”; he assured the Pontiff of the support for the Council of his missionaries, co-operators and African students through their prayers and sacrifices, as well as a small monetary donation, the expression of the first fruits of the Africa God desired to save. Then Comboni had the idea of taking advantage of the Council to speak up for Africa and awake in the Church interest and involvement in the Africa mission. Through contact with the Catholic bishops of Cairo and Verona, he attained the most he could have hoped for: to go to the Council as the theologian assistant of the Bishop of Verona. Comboni’s joy and euphoria is understandable:

*Tell Fr Carcereri of the Hospital that he was right to write to his brother that the Ecumenical Council cannot be held without Fr Comboni. In fact, the other day the Bishop wrote to me, and yesterday His Eminence the Cardinal announced to me that I should go to that top-level meeting in order to clarify matters concerning the mission.*³⁸

With the help of Father Carcereri, Comboni drew up his *Postulatum pro Nigris*, a solemn petition for the evangelization of Africa which was signed by seventy of the bishops³⁹ at the Council. Through Comboni, Africa made its presence felt and insisted that the Council

as it turns its attention to the entire world, filled with pity for the needs of all, deign to direct at least one look of compassion to Central Africa.... nevertheless these regions of Central Africa are still neglected, almost completely

³⁷ Writings 1967.

³⁸ Writings 2024.

³⁹ Writings 2310, 2311, 2314

*abandoned to their wretched state, without a Pastor, without Apostles, without Church and without Faith.... May Central Africa also have a share in the solemn joy of the imminent triumph of the Church. May the peoples of Africa, once conquered for Christ, shine out like a dark pearl in the heavenly bejewelled diadem of the Victorious and Immaculate Mother of God*⁴⁰.

When in September of the same year Rome fell to the Italian troops, thus putting an end to the centuries-old Papal States and causing the suspension of the Council, Comboni threw himself heart and soul into the consolidation of his Institutes in Verona, thus responding to the wishes of the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide. Fruits of Comboni's work at this time were the purchase of a house for his seminary in Verona, the appointment of a rector for the same⁴¹, the research for and writing of the "Rules" for his Institutes, and finally, the foundation of the Institute of the Pious Mothers of Africa (known today as the Comboni Missionary Sisters) in Montorio, Verona. Through these various practical initiatives Comboni completed his foundation. The Rules, together with the Postulatum and Plan, constitute the foundational texts to which reference must be made if one wants to understand both the spirit and the substance of Comboni's work for Africa.

6 – RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MISSION AS PROVICAR (COMBONI AGED 41-46)

Thanks to all this work by Comboni to start and consolidate organizations and institutions for the evangelization of Central Africa (the male and female Institutes in Verona, with their respective "Rules", the colleges in Cairo for African boys and girls, and the Postulatum at Vatican I), in February 1872 the Bishop of

⁴⁰ Writings 2310, 2311, 2314.

⁴¹ Writings 2337.

Verona was able to present an official request petitioning the Holy See to entrust the Vicariate of Central Africa to Comboni and his Institutes. Comboni himself backed the petition up with a report on his foundations and a large map of Africa. In May, the Holy See officially entrusted the mission to Comboni's Institutes, and appointed him "Provicar Apostolic"⁴².

Greatly encouraged by this development, Comboni organized a group of missionaries which set sail from Trieste for Cairo on September 20, 1872. Once the missionaries had reached Cairo, however, various factors prevented them from continuing the journey towards the Vicariate at once, including the fears of the Sisters of St Joseph about the difficulties that might await them. Comboni had to be very patient and write a series of letters of encouragement to their Superior General.

At last, in January 1873, he was able to set out from Cairo for Khartoum with an expedition of twenty-eight persons. The journey was to last ninety-eight days because of the adverse natural conditions of the route. They finally reached Khartoum on May 4, and the new Provicar was received with full honours by the authorities and the general population. In a solemn Mass celebrated the following Sunday, Daniel Comboni pronounced the homily which was to become a particularly eloquent expression of his love for the people entrusted to him:

I am truly happy, dearest friends, to be back with you again after so many sad events and so many sighs of affliction. The first love of my youth was for unhappy Africa and, leaving behind all that was dearest to me in the world, I came, sixteen years ago, to these lands to offer my work for the relief of their age-old sufferings. Subsequently, I was called back home since for health reasons the swamps of the White Nile in the vicinity of the Holy Cross and

⁴² It was May 26, 1872. This appointment was confirmed by Pope Pius IX on June 11, 1872.

Gondokoro had reduced apostolic action to impotence. I departed through obedience: but I left my heart in your midst and, when I recovered, as God willed, my concerns and activities were always focused on you.

Today, at last taking back my heart by returning among you, I open it up in your presence with the sublime and religious sentiment of the spiritual paternity with which God willed me to be vested a year ago now by the supreme Head of the Catholic Church, our Lord Pope Pius IX. Yes, I am now your Father, and you are my children and as such, for the first time I embrace you and press you to my heart. I am most grateful for all the enthusiastic welcomes you have shown me; they demonstrate your filial love and have persuaded me that you will always want to be my joy and my crown, just as you are my lot and my legacy.

Rest assured that my soul responds to this with unlimited love forever and for each one of you. I have returned among you never again to cease being yours and all consecrated for your greater good in eternity. Come day come night, come sun come rain, I shall always be equally ready to serve your spiritual needs: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the young and the old, the masters and the servants will always have equal access to my heart. Your good will be mine and your sorrows will also be mine.

I make common cause with each one of you, and the happiest day in my life will be the one on which I will be able to give my life for you⁴³.

A month later he was already on his way to El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan, where the Camillians he had assigned there some time earlier were already at work. Here he was able to experience personally the hard climate as well as the shocking slave trade, for which El Obeid served as a centre.

⁴³ Writings 3156-3159.

On the journey from the White Nile to El Obeid, I encountered thousands of slaves of both sexes and of all ages. Some were tied around the neck, by the tens or the dozens, to a rope, the end of which was attached to a Jallaba. Others, eight or ten of them, both boys and girls, were tied by the neck to a beam they had to carry on their backs, others had metal chains clasped to their feet, others had their hands tied behind their backs, yet others had a yoke or board tied to their necks, all were naked and being driven by the spears of the guards, and the majority were 10 to 20 year-old girls completely naked. You may well understand the sublime nature of my Mission. But enough⁴⁴.

We can thus understand why, as early as August, he issued a pastoral letter on the slave trade, offering some guidelines to the missionaries on the freeing of slaves, “*who are our most beloved children and precious heirs*”⁴⁵.

While in El Obeid, Comboni received a visit from the great chief of Jebel Nuba, Goyur Kakum, and as a consequence called Father Carcereri from Khartoum to lead an exploration into that region. The expedition took place in October 1873, and pointed to Delen as a suitable site for a new mission station. In the meantime, on September 14, feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Comboni solemnly consecrated his Vicariate to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in communion with the “*members of the Apostleship of Prayer and the Messenger du S. Coeur*”⁴⁶.

In November, on his way back to Khartoum, Comboni fell from his camel and suffered serious injuries, including a broken left arm. Needless to say, there was no doctor available, so his companions bandaged him up as best they could. Three months later the bones had set, but out of place. Comboni provides us with a lively account of what ensued.

⁴⁴ Writings 3340, letter to his friend Father Bricolo, August 2, 1873.

⁴⁵ Writings 3349.

⁴⁶ Writings 3411, letter to Cardinal Barnabó, September 15, 1874.

I must confess frankly that I have failed in my duty and in the imperious demands of my heart by remaining silent for so long. I have literally imitated the procrastinating sinners. As soon as I was appointed Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa and had hastened back to Verona, I had decided to pass through Brescia and deliver my greetings to Limone. But the urgent need to rush to Vienna and Cairo with a strong expedition prevented me, despite my intentions, from coming to spend a day in Brescia as I had wanted. But from Cairo, from Khartoum and from Kordofan I yearned to inform Your Excellency and your Most Reverend and venerable Secretary of the excellent progress being made in this arduous African enterprise. But I did not do it, although our little Annali del Buon Pastore in Verona, which should have been sent to you at my request as soon as it was published, must have given you a vague idea of my holy Work and perhaps of the Catholic Missions.

In any case, as I beg forgiveness for such a long silence, I can assure you that I have not stopped praying for a single day in my unworthiness, or having prayers said here in the heart of Africa for Your Most Reverend Excellency and the Very Reverend Fr Carminati, and for the whole of my beloved native Diocese of Brescia, of which I preserve a most vivid and indelible memory. Now I shall just give you a very quick account of the successful development of this Work of the Sacred Heart, because my arm which was fractured prevents me from doing so at length. On 16th November, I left El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan, with My Vicar General, to return to my main residence in Khartoum. On the morning of the 25th, after a hard 9 day camel journey, my camel, already mad and frightened, started running faster than a horse, and threw me to the ground where I lay half dead and spitting blood. I did not even have time to commend myself to the Sacred Heart. When I came to, I realised that my left arm was broken.

I had the tent pitched in the desert, and after soaking [my arm] for 42 hours continuously in water and date vinegar, I had to remount the camel for 5 days so as to avoid dying there in the desert. At the camel's every step I had renewed spasms of pain in my broken and bruised left arm. God alone knows how I suffered. Finally reaching the White Nile at Omdurman, the Grand Pasha of Khartoum sent me his steamer which brought me to the mission. But there is not a doctor in the whole of Central Africa who knows the elementary principles of medicine and surgery.

Our doctor is the Crucified Jesus. The Pasha sent me his cat-skinner, who tied up my arm and put it in a sling. I remained in great pain for 82 days with the arm slung to my neck; but the arm stayed badly mended and crooked, without the strength to move a leaf. I celebrated Mass on 2nd February; but with the greatest difficulty and forced to hold the host between my index and middle finger, because I could not bring my thumb and fingers together. After many pleas from my Arab Mother Superior, I agreed to let myself be seen by a so-called Arab doctor. He came on the eve of the feast of Saints Faustinus and Jovita. He was a Hercules and with a face like Judas Iscariot. After examining the arm, he assured me that I could be healed in 24 hours should I let myself be operated on. I accepted.

The next day, he came with eight splints of date palm, a handful of goat hair, a piece of tiger tail and rubber: he was accompanied by two other Muslim cat-butchers: he grabbed my arm and, with the help of the other two, literally twisted it, and then with his muscular thumb, working with all his strength, pushed my protruding bone half an inch back into place, tearing the flesh and nerves and everything: then with a handkerchief he soaked the rubber, the goat hair and the tiger tail and bound my arm; then he strapped the splints around it in such a way that it seemed to stop my circulation, and left me

there half dead on my angareb (a sort of bed we sleep on). How Jesus Christ must have suffered when they bound him and nailed him to the Cross! But the fact is that after a week of such continuous stricture I found that the arm was almost healed, the bone back in its place and now as I write, I am able to work as before: For all this I owe thanks first to the Lord, then to St Joseph and finally to the Turkish cat-butcher, who treated me in his manner with little delicacy and gentleness, but with great success.

Towards the end of December 1873, Father Carcereri left Khartoum for Europe. In the meantime, four new Sisters arrived, three of whom Comboni would later take to El Obeid to a house purpose-built for them⁴⁷: they thus became the first European women ever to reach Kordofan.

In Khartoum, Comboni then had a house built to accommodate the Sisters and their missionary activities. He spent the remaining months of 1874 in the city, except for a few days in November when he traveled towards the border with Egypt to found the station of Berber, which he entrusted to the care of the Camillians. In December of the same year, he laid before the Holy See his idea of founding a mission in the region of the Great Lakes, “which constitute the sources of the Nile”⁴⁸.

On March 31, 1875, he sent Fathers Luigi Bonomi and Gennaro Martini to found the new mission of Delen among the Nuba. Comboni himself reached El Obeid on July 7, accompanied by a group of missionaries, one of whom was Father Franceschini, a Camillian who wasted no time in stirring up trouble among the mission personnel and managed to set two of the Sisters against Comboni. On September 22, Comboni and his missionaries entered Delen, but they soon had to withdraw again by order of the authorities, officially because of the war being waged by the

⁴⁷ In February-March 1874.

⁴⁸ Writings 3689, letter to Cardinal Franchi, December 19, 1874.

Egyptian government against the Baggara (the principal slave traders). The real reason for the order, however, was to remove inconvenient witnesses from the area.

In the meantime, all the missionaries fell ill and had a very difficult journey back, first to El Obeid, arriving there on November 9, and then to Khartoum, where on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1875, Comboni solemnly consecrated the Vicariate to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. At the end of December, he left Khartoum for Europe, calling at Berber, where he had a long meeting with Father Carcereri; he then proceeded to Cairo, where he stayed for some months to attend to some outstanding matters regarding the building going on there. He finally reached Verona in March, 1876.

Four years earlier Comboni had arrived in Africa buoyed up with great enthusiasm and to a universally enthusiastic welcome, but now his return to Europe was to bring him face to face with a terrible trial. If he had been received in Africa with a joy reminiscent of the hosannas which greeted Jesus at his final entry into Jerusalem, now the days of his Holy Week awaited him.

7 – THE CONFLICT WITH CARCERERI AND THE CAMILLIANS (COMBONI AGED 44-46)

We have already seen how Comboni was able to re-start the mission in Central Africa thanks to the help of a group of Camillians. It was with them that he began his work in Verona, in Egypt and in the Sudan. He had appointed one of them, Father Stanislaus Carcereri, as his deputy, and another, Father Franceschini, as superior of the mission of El Obeid. Before this, he had asked Carcereri to undertake an exploratory journey among the Nuba on his behalf. The mutual respect and trust between Comboni and his deputy was such that, when Carcereri passed through Rome in mid-1874, he lent his support to the idea of making Comboni a bishop. The relationship began to get deteriorate, however, as a consequence of a series of misunderstandings in that same year.

It all started with some disagreements between the two men about the pastoral plan Carcereri presented to friends and benefactors of the mission when he travelled to Vienna, also in 1874. According to him, Africa had no need of large, permanent buildings of the kind Comboni favoured, and the number of missionaries in each mission community could be very small, and not four or even five missionaries, as Comboni wished. Then, in an interview in Rome with the Prefect of Propaganda, Carcereri suggested closing the college for young women in Cairo, and sending the Sisters to work in the nearby hospital, though the Cardinal Prefect reminded him that this was not in fact Comboni's wish. Thus was born mistrust and friction, which naturally also affected the Sisters. Subsequently, Carcereri wrote a number of somewhat offensive letters against Comboni to various people.

In the meantime, as already mentioned, Comboni had opened a mission in Berber, as requested by the Camillians (November 1874)⁴⁹. After Carcereri presented his resignation as Comboni's vicar, he in fact withdrew to Berber, sensing that he no longer enjoyed Comboni's confidence. At the end of 1875, Comboni set out again for Europe. He passed through Berber, where he met Carcereri, receiving from him the surprising news that he wanted to leave the mission altogether, and that he had already written in these terms to his superior general. The truth was, instead, that though he had indeed written to his superior general, it had been with the purpose of levelling accusations against Comboni, and petitioning for these to be presented to Propaganda Fide, so that Comboni would be recalled from the African mission.

Comboni did not at first realize what was afoot. On the contrary, in fact, he himself wrote a letter to the superior general of the Camillians, asking him not to accept Carcereri's resignation, and expressing renewed confidence in him by appointing him instead

⁴⁹ In 1871, sending the Camillians to explore Kordofan, Comboni had promised them the opening of a Camillian house in the Sudan, cf. Writings 2617.

“Superior, parish priest and explorer of the new mission in Jebel Nuba”⁵⁰.

*Most Reverend Father General, ...with these two lines ...I warmly entreat you to write soon to this son of yours and mine, who has so much merit, to console him and inform him that you consider his step and request as never having happened. To tell you the truth, it would be too painful to lose my first-born, with whom I have shared so many joys and so many difficulties for the redemption of Africa*⁵¹.

Since Carcereri was well aware that the greater part of the accusations he was making against Comboni came from Father Franceschini, he sought to obtain a character reference for Franceschini from the Pro-vicar. Comboni signed it, but specified that it only covered the period of time when he himself had lived with Father Franceschini⁵²; this, naturally enough, was not to Carcereri's liking.

Feeling more relaxed and thinking he had made peace with Carcereri, Comboni continued his journey to Europe, by way of Suakin, Suez and Cairo, where he spent some time with the members of the mission. In March 1876, and once he had received the necessary permission from the authorities in Rome, he embarked for Trieste. From there, he travelled to Verona to visit his Institutes and the Bishop, and then went down to Rome, where he met Cardinal Franchi, the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, gaining a positive impression of their meeting.

*I find the whole of Rome is on my side. The Cardinal Prefect received me with immense kindness. He has ordered me to draft a Report on the history of the Vicariate from 1872 to today*⁵³.

⁵⁰ Writings 4020.

⁵¹ Writings 4014.

⁵² Cf. Writings 4018.

⁵³ Writings 4074.

The Cardinal mentioned nothing about the accusations which only a few days earlier he had received in writing from Father Franceschini, to the effect that: “the Vicariate has been going to ruin since 1873, and the cause of its ruin is the Pro-vicar himself. Comboni has not been respecting the terms of his agreement with the Camillians and the Sisters of St Joseph; he is a bad administrator who wastes enormous amounts of money; he is superficial in deciding what action to take, inept in directing the mission stations; he treated people badly and his private conduct is bad”⁵⁴. Comboni, unawares, drew up his own Report in the space of a few days and handed it over to the Cardinal (April 15, 1876).

He then travelled to Verona, Germany and Austria, while the Prefect of Propaganda was sending Comboni’s Report to the superior general of the Camillians to seek his opinion. The superior general replied by saying that he noted that the Report’s central section made no mention whatever of the main issue at stake, namely, the relations between the missionaries; he further added the accusations which his confreres were making against Comboni. Fortunately, in May, the Bishop of Verona and the Cologne Association also wrote to the Cardinal, supporting the idea of Comboni’s being made a bishop.

While Comboni was in Vienna, he received a telegram from the Prefect of Propaganda asking him to come to Rome immediately. Once there, he was asked to fill out his previous Report with details regarding the relations between the missionaries. Comboni at once wrote a Supplement, which dealt exclusively with the mission personnel (June 29, 1876). To this, a little later, Comboni added some “Short Notes of justification re the accusations brought against me by Fr Giuseppe Franceschini” (July 20, 1876). In these two documents Comboni gave an exhaustive explanation about the various issues which had poisoned the relationships between the

⁵⁴ JUAN MANUEL LOZANO, *Daniel Comboni, Misionero y Profeta*, Ed. Misioneros Combonianos, Mexico City, 229.

missionaries: the campaign of calumnies conducted by, and the mistakes made by, Father Carcereri, specifically in dealing with the superior general of the Sisters of St Joseph; Carcereri's unnecessary expenditure; the obstinacy with which he insisted on the need to divide the Vicariate; and finally Father Franceschini's conduct. Regarding the latter, he concluded thus:

*Of all the accusations made against me by Fr Franceschini, in conscience I do not feel guilty even of the slightest venial sin. I am only sorry for him, who will lose his soul if before he dies he does not retract before the authorities to whom he untruthfully made so many accusations. For my part, I forgive him with all my heart*⁵⁵.

Regarding the accusation that "all my Missionaries are opposed to me", Comboni clarified that "my Missionaries are not against me. Indeed, apart from Fr Roller, they all support me against those who seek to persecute me"⁵⁶. Once he had submitted the Supplement and the Notes, he left Rome for Verona to spend a few happy days with his missionary Sisters. On October 15 he received the religious profession of the first two of them (Maria Bollezzoli and Teresa Grigolini).

At the end of October or beginning of November, he returned to Rome because Propaganda Fide was examining the proposal of dividing the Vicariate of Central so as to entrust the eastern part to the Camillians and the western part to Comboni, who strenuously opposed such a division. On November 27, Propaganda Fide put an end to the conflict between Comboni and the Camillians by determining that the Vicariate in its entirety would continue to be entrusted to Comboni and that the Camillians were to leave the mission.

⁵⁵ Writings 4329.

⁵⁶ Writings 4306-4307.

The sentence was a colossal triumph for me and total and eternal perdition for my enemies — as long as they live, that is. They were brigands who had been covered with favours by me and, when they saw my Work grow and the eleven Institutes I founded in seven years, to take possession of them they tried to ruin me through slander and intrigue, making use of Muslims, idolaters, heretics, bad Catholics, the Turkish government, persons devoted to Bismarck, freemasons and liberals; they tried to overwhelm me. But I was able to resist and I triumphed over everything. But Satan was not happy. He incited my enemies to have recourse to the Holy See and the supreme authority of the Church annihilated them. God be praised! God does not abandon those who trust in Him. God and papal Rome always protect innocence and justice⁵⁷.

Further long months were to pass, however, before the whole matter was finally laid to rest with Comboni's appointment as Bishop on July 2, 1877. When ten days later he received the official letter of appointment, he wrote euphorically to his friend, Canon Johannes Mitterutzner:

Summus Pontifex Pius IX...me elegit Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa⁵⁸.

He was ordained the first Bishop of Central Africa on August 12, 1877, in the chapel of Propaganda Fide in Rome.

I have finally arrived at my goal after three years of troubles, suffering and mortal anguish which my enemies, as God's love arranged, procured for me. I forgive them with all my heart; my triumph is complete⁵⁹.

The promotion to the honour of the Episcopal dignity of a poor son of a rag-and-bone man of Limone, born in the

⁵⁷ Writings 4387, letter to Mme. De Villeneuve, December 31, 1876.

⁵⁸ Writings 4655.

⁵⁹ Writings 4665, letter to Mme. Anne de Villeneuve.

*caves and who lived in the shadow of S. Carlo and for many years ate the proverbial polenta and squaquaciò of Upper Tacuso, is something to be wondered at; it is the realisation of St Paul's words that God chose the weak of this world to confound the powerful, the base, etc. and so forth*⁶⁰.

Comboni had left Khartoum and his Vicariate of Central Africa in December 1875: he would return there in April 1878, an absence of two years and four months, which naturally had a slowing effect on the mission's progress⁶¹.

7 – DROUGHT AND FAMINE – DEATH OF THE MISSIONARIES – PANIC IN AFRICA (COMBONI AGED 46-48 YEARS)

His enthusiasm rekindled, Comboni was ordained a bishop in August 1877. On the afternoon of the day of his episcopal ordination, he was received in audience by the Holy Father together with the Bishop of Verona, Luigi de Canossa, the Rector of the Verona mission seminary, Father Sembianti, his secretary, Father Rossi, the superior of his Sisters, Maria Bollezzoli, and Sister Teresa Grigolini. Then, the following day, he traveled by train to celebrate his ordination, first in Verona and then in his home village of Limone. They were happy times of legitimate satisfaction.

Then in October Bishop Comboni travelled to France: in Lyons he met with the directors of the Propagation of the Faith, and in Paris, among others, with Marshal Maurice MacMahon (who would later be elected President of France). In Belgium he was received by King Leopold. A few days later, he reached the Netherlands and met Father Arnold Janssen, the founder of several missionary Institutes.

⁶⁰ Writings 4680, letter to a Canon of Verona.

⁶¹ Comboni had written to Rome from 1875 to inform the authorities that he had to return temporarily to Europe. His absence from Khartoum lasted two years and almost four months. He was away from Cairo for one year and nine months (from March 1876 to December 1877).

Comboni had already been in correspondence with Janssen, but now the two great founders met personally for the first time. And more than a century later they would meet again - on October 5, 2003, in St Peter's Square in Rome, when Pope John Paul II, surrounded by a multitude from all five continents, was to proclaim them saints.

Comboni travelled from Holland to Germany (Cologne and Munich), and from there back to Verona, where he began to prepare for his return to Africa. On this occasion he was to be accompanied by three priests, four Brothers and, worthy of special note, the first four of his own Sisters to leave for Africa.⁶² In December of the same year he took the train to Rome, where he was received by an ailing Pope. From there he traveled on to Naples and from there, taking advantage of the free tickets promised him by Marshal MacMahon in Paris, he embarked for Alexandria in Egypt. In Cairo he had the satisfaction of seeing the newly completed buildings of his colleges, and he was also able to take his missionaries to visit the Pyramids, and arrange for an audience for them with the Khedive:

But the most benevolent welcome I received was from His Highness the Khedive of Egypt, who was kind enough to converse with me for an hour and a half, during which time he asked me numerous questions about Central Africa, about many of the Governors and about Gordon Pasha, telling me clearly that my opinion and advice would be precious to him, coming as they do (his own words), from your venerable mouth, full of truth and wisdom⁶³.

During the same period, Comboni called on the various European consuls, and was invited by the Egyptian authorities to a reception in honour of the explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley, who had not long returned from the Great Lakes of Central Africa, a journey which naturally interested Comboni greatly⁶⁴.

⁶² Cf. Juan Manuel Lozano, op. cit., 238.

⁶³ Writings 5028.

⁶⁴ Cf. Juan Manuel Lozano, op. cit., 234-235.

And what a welcome I received from His Highness the hereditary Prince and from the Minister of War, Stone Pasha, who invited me to the solemn banquet given in honour of the distinguished Mr Stanley, one of the greatest travellers in Central Africa who was the first to discover the course of the immense River Congo and who, from the sources of the Nile, through Tanganyika and along the Congo emerged at the Atlantic Ocean. Such an enterprise, apart from benefiting my Vicariate, will also be most useful to the Holy Ghost Fathers and to the Order of the Sacred Heart of Mary who, from their Prefecture in the Congo will be able to penetrate further into the interior for the greater good of souls.

The illustrious Stanley (who is an American Anglican) gave me appropriate instructions to reach the sources of the Nile and establish a Catholic mission there. He gave me an introduction to King M'tesa, whom he says is a perfect gentleman, most powerful and fond of Christians. For the sake of brevity, I shall just mention an anecdote the illustrious traveler told me⁶⁵.

At the beginning of 1878, Comboni and his missionaries were able to leave Cairo for Khartoum in a dahabia⁶⁶, which soon, however, sustained damage. All the cargo had to be unloaded, and another boat found. Once the cargo was aboard the new vessel, the group were able to resume their voyage. In due course they reached Shellal in southern Egypt, where the cataracts obliged them to leave the boat, and make their way up along one side of the river until they could continue their journey on the Nile.

At Shellal sad news reached them: Pope Pius IX and the Superior General of the Sisters of St Joseph (who were working in Comboni's Vicariate) had died, as had Sister Grigolini's father, Lorenzo:

⁶⁵ Writings 5030, 5031.

⁶⁶ A sailing boat typical of the Nile.

In any case, these days we are celebrating the Masses for our dear Signor Lorenzo, who is all ours because, among the other reasons, he gave us one of his worthy daughters to guide to heaven. But... mark my words, Signora Stella, we do not go to heaven alone; behind us we bring a procession of souls saved from the mouth of hell; so many that when we missionaries and Sisters pass away, St Peter will have to fling open both of heaven's doors. That is what we hope for, after the Lord has granted us the grace of undergoing and suffering much for him⁶⁷.

At Shellal, too, Comboni met Sir Charles Gordon, the governor general of the Sudan on his way to Cairo, who told Comboni that it would not be possible for him to cross the desert to Khartoum, because of a lack of camels caused by the major drought in the Sudan. He advised Comboni to return to Cairo and take the route by Suez and Red Sea. Comboni decided against following this advice, however, and gradually managed to find about fifty camels (although he would really have needed around 150): choosing the most essential items, he began his journey across the desert. The rest of the supplies were transported by another route under the supervision of three Brothers.

I found that poverty increased as we proceeded. Reaching Korosko on the edge of the great desert I feared I should have to turn back or make a halt because of the lack of camels. I was told they had nearly all died of hunger, and it was only through the powerful recommendations of H.E. Gordon Pasha, Governor of the Sudan, whom I fortunately met in Aswan, and because of my long-standing friendship with the Sheikh or great chief of the desert, that I was able to obtain 50 camels, that is, a third of the number I would need to cross the desert, paying an exceptional price for them. And what camels! They were all emaciated, ulcerated and tired; they could only be loaded with half the usual

⁶⁷ Writings 5079.

*weight, and nonetheless many collapsed and died on the journey, adding to the number of white skeletons and bones scattered along the way*⁶⁸.

Two and a half months after leaving Cairo, the expedition led by Comboni finally reached Khartoum in mid-April 1878, where he was received with full honors by the highest civil and religious authorities.

I am extremely busy organising things and getting them started for a prosperous future, despite the serious difficulties we have experienced exceptionally this year, due to the general famine and drought and due to the exceptional heat, with a temperature that reaches 40 degrees in the shade of a house and 55 to 60 degrees in the desert sun. We have been under enormous stress and suffered greatly; but we are pleased about this, for, by growing at the foot of Calvary, our Work is certain to bear copious fruits.

*When I arrived in Khartoum I was solemnly received both by Christians of all rites and by Muslims. It was a real triumph of the faith of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. I sent some staff to reinforce the Missions of Kordofan and of Jebel Nuba; I solemnly administered Baptism and Confirmation to many adults and I pontificated on Easter Day. It was the first time that Central Africa saw its Bishop, the Vicar Apostolic*⁶⁹.

⁶⁸ Writings 5149. "Since I was extremely loath to follow his advice, I begged him with insistence to move heaven and earth to have me provided with at least the camels I needed to transport the staff to Berber and Khartoum, and he was so good as to send many telegraphic dispatches, ordering the great desert chiefs (Sheikh Caliph) and the Mudirs of Sudan to give me 80 camels. When I reached Korosko I found a large number of merchants who had been waiting there for camels for between four and six months. But thank God, in four days, out of a few hundred ulcerated and exhausted camels, 50 were chosen and in 11 days I crossed the desert of Atmur as far as Berber. I sent the rest of my caravan via Dongola, that is, with 190 camels, and I am expecting it here in Khartoum towards the end of May" (Writings 5159).

⁶⁹ Writings 5084, 5164.

If we set aside for a moment the exhausting journey from Cairo to Khartoum and the bad news received during it, we can say that, after the pain of the conflict with the Camillians, Comboni had been given almost a whole year (May 1877-April 1878) of renewed enthusiasm: there had been his episcopal ordination and the celebrations that ensued, and then his return to Africa with a new group of missionaries, and his triumphal reception in Cairo and Khartoum. But some of the most painful times of his life were awaiting him now in Africa.

But the external poetry of a brilliant reception, a good number of conversions made and prepared and the splendour of the pontifical Masses, soon became the prose of the grim shortage and terrible famine which hold sway over a large part of my Vicariate, and I found a good number of debts, the result of these terrible scourges⁷⁰.

In the first place, only a few days after reaching Khartoum, he discovered from reading a magazine that the Holy See had granted two Missions to the White Fathers in the Great Lakes region, comprising territory which actually belonged to his Vicariate. Needless to say, he was very hurt by the fact that he had not been previously consulted about this. He wrote to Rome about the matter in a serene and considered manner, which nevertheless did not conceal how wounded he felt:

Since these two new Missions, known as the Missions of Tanganyika and of the Nyanza Lakes, belong to my Vicariate...I would therefore like your Most Reverend Eminence to kindly let me have a copy of the two Briefs or Decrees for the canonical establishment of the two future Vicariates, or two large Missions, to which the above-mentioned article of the Missions Catholiques refers, for my records⁷¹.

⁷⁰ Writings 5165.

⁷¹ Writings 5090. In parenthesis, Comboni notes “as can be seen in the Brief of 3rd April 1846, in which Gregory XVI established the so-called Mountains of

He expressed his skepticism that the White Fathers were prepared for this difficult undertaking, but he was happy all the same at the thought that they would collaborate in the evangelization of Africa:

I do not think this is the case with Mgr Lavigerie's new institution, although it has a great number of priests and members; I do not believe their number is matched by their practical experience of travelling in Africa, maturity of concepts, local prudence and extraordinary self-denial in the inevitable privations they will encounter...

Since the conversion of Africa has always been the most ardent desire of my whole life, I am deeply comforted to see the zeal of the above-mentioned Algerian missionaries for the Africans' salvation. However, in such a vague way, ignorant of the most essential prerequisites for a probable success and with means less reliable than those I possess, I do not consider it appropriate for the time being; it should be absolutely avoided. Furthermore, my missionaries and I are not at all keen on it, for the good of those peoples

On the other hand, I declare with heartfelt sincerity that I am ready for anything the Holy See wants of me and therefore to cede not only the Equator but Khartoum and Kordofan or whatever pleases the Holy See, as my one master and arbiter in all things⁷².

To add to this disappointing news about his Vicariate, Comboni soon began to realize what terrible effects the drought was having on his people. There had been no rains since the previous year, and as a result the price of everything had shot up.

There is a terrible famine here: the price of food has quadrupled; and durra (a kind of maize) which is the principal nourishment of the country and of the poor, from the seven

the Moon as the southern boundary of Central Africa, which in the opinion of modern Geographers are supposedly situated far south of Tanganyika".

⁷² Writings 5094, 5096, 5097.

francs an ardeb (sack made of date leaves) it used to cost, is now bought for no less than 60 francs an ardeb.

In Kordofan my Missionaries and my Sisters are forced to buy water, to drink, to cook and to wash, at one and a half francs and two francs a borma (about 4 litres); as a result, water in this land costs more than ordinary wine in Europe. The villages are abandoned in their hundreds by starving and desperate people, and the local government is in the worst financial trouble for not having been able to collect the ordinary taxes. The cause of such wretchedness and of such a terrible shortage of everything vital to life is the lack of rains last year. No one can remember a period of such scarcity⁷³.

People were dying of hunger. On May 12, 1878, Comboni launched a special “appeal to Catholic charity for the frightful famine in Central Africa”:

Famine! This terrible scourge which has been devastating some parts of the world is making itself keenly felt and producing its disastrous effects in Central Africa... I am sending this Appeal to Fr Bortolo, drawn up by Fr Antonio and approved and signed by me. We sent a facsimile to France, Germany, Austria, England, etc. Just to inform you of how much we are doing. For the rest, trust in God, in the Virgin, in St. Joseph, and pray and get others to pray⁷⁴.

Writing to his friend Canon Joseph Ortalda in Turin, Comboni expressed the way his faith led him to view the scourge that had fallen upon his Vicariate:

You can imagine, Canon, the state of my heart, the extraordinary expenses, the debts that we are forced to make in order to give brackish drinking water to the Missionaries and Sisters; and we are lucky when we succeed in slaking our

⁷³ Writings 5147, 5150.

⁷⁴ Writings 5148, 5157.

thirst with this dirty water. But do not think that my soul is discouraged at such wretchedness. No, Africa or death! We will fight until our last breath; this is my war cry. The universal devastation of the largest, most densely populated and laborious mission in the world which is Central Africa, is a sure sign of victory; because the Cross is the seal of the stability of God's works which must all be born at the foot of Calvary and it will be blessed by God and converted. Oh! How beloved are our crosses when they touch where it hurts, for they are omens of true happiness. We are in the season of the Passion; the day of resurrection and life will dawn⁷⁵.

When some time later the rains came, they were so torrential and sustained that they caused severe flooding, sweeping away the people's humble homes and leading to outbreaks of typhus and smallpox. Comboni told of how in some parts of his Vicariate half or more of the population had died.

As I mentioned briefly in my last letter, n. 8 of October last, a tremendous and absolutely lethal epidemic, the consequence of the terrible famine and the very heavy rains that followed the great drought of almost 20 months, has devastated Central Africa. In one territory of the Vicariate (from Khartoum to the east, west and south), two or three times the size of the whole of France, more than half the population has died; in the city of Khartoum which has doctors and medicine, more than a third of the population

⁷⁵ Writings 5181. "What can be done? *The One who put the stones in cherries will work it out: because he's level-headed and has an upright heart and conscience. It is his work, so he will think it out: I am his servant. [lines in italics are in the Verona dialect]* I have also called to order my bursar, St Joseph, and let him know, with the threat that otherwise I would turn to his wife, that within a year, from 12th May, I want my Finances to be balanced; not the balance of Lanza, Sella, Minghetti or Semits Doda, current Italian Minister of Finance, but the real balance: otherwise I shall go to his wife. Enough. (Writings 5224)

died; and in some localities and villages I visited, not only has all the population died, but in addition, all the livestock and even the dogs, which are the only providential defence and security of these lands⁷⁶.

To this accumulation of disasters were added others of an even more personal nature - the death of many of Bishop Comboni's missionaries. From the spring of 1877 (when Comboni was in Rome dealing with the conflict with the Camillians) to January 1879 fourteen missionaries died.

This time I have taken longer than usual to write because I have greatly suffered, struggled and worked. I felt deep anguish at the sudden loss of a young and robust missionary, Fr Policarpo from the Tyrol, from a rapid, mortal attack of typhoid fever. After a few days of merely feeling unwell, he was suddenly overcome by a sudden attack of typhoid and died in less than half an hour, barely allowing me the time to give him the sacraments. Sixteen days before, the same fate had befallen my butler or manservant whom I had brought with me from Rome to make him an excellent catechist: he was young and healthy, about 16. Lastly, the Superior of the Sisters of St Joseph in Kordofan, Sr Arsenia Le Floch, also died. She had been pious, good, judicious and full of love and zeal for souls. Her death greatly discouraged nearly all the Sisters of this Congregation who are in the Vicariate, and I was and remain most afflicted by it,

The tremendous epidemic also ravaged our mission in a frightful way. For six years, since I was put in charge of the Vicariate, no missionary priest had died in Central Africa, thanks to the appropriate system of my Plan. After the tremendous drought, the rains and the epidemic, three of my priests have died, including the right arm of the holy Work of Central Africa, the devout and excellent Fr Antonio

⁷⁶ Writings 5524.

Squaranti, formerly Superior of my Institutes in Verona. I had brought him to the Vicariate last year to be the General Administrator of its property, intending to make him my Vicar General later, had his health permitted.

I sent him on a visit to Berber, above all to remove him from the threat of the epidemic as soon as I realised after the rains that it was imminent and since it was his first year in Central Africa; but after he had been 40 days in Berber, when he heard that all the priests in Khartoum had succumbed to the fever, that many mission members had died and that I was the only one of the priests still standing and was having to act as Bishop, parish Priest, Superior, Nurse, etc. , etc., he decided to come to my aid and left Berber by boat. He reached Khartoum a fortnight later, more dead than alive, because he had fallen victim of the fever and the epidemic during the last 4 days of the journey. Our treatment for a good 12 days was no use: burning with love and fully resigned, he flew to eternal repose, leaving me in deep sorrow. In addition to the three Priests and two Sisters who died, I have also lost more than half the lay brothers of great piety and eminent virtue who, full of merits, were stricken by the epidemic and flew to heaven⁷⁷.

And there was still more to come: during the same period (March 1877-July 1879) a further fifteen missionaries, understandably overcome by fear and panic, left the mission and returned to Europe.

Yes, the heavens may fall; but as long as the Heart of Jesus helps me with his grace, I shall stand firm and unshakeable in my place, and I shall die on the battlefield. To increase my anguish, even a good missionary, Fr Stefano Vanni from Puglia, asked and obtained my permission to return home on the pretext of the recurrence of a former illness, (but basically he said to a companion that he could carry 12 loads of troubles, but not 13); and he was fluent in Arabic.

⁷⁷ Writings 5357, 5527, 5528.

I have also suffered a great deal because my representative during my absence from the Vicariate, Canon Pasquale Fiore who, due to the famine, and also of course because of not being an expert administrator, having accumulated 46,472 francs of debt without letting me know, asked, insisted and obtained my permission to return to Trani because of his mother, just at the time when I most needed his assistance.

I write to you from the main Mission in Khartoum, where I am now the only priest, having to be Bishop, parish priest, Superior, curate, doctor, nurse and sexton. I am here with only two lay brothers from my Verona Institute, that is, the chief gardener and the storekeeper, who have indeed had their fevers but are well. Only one of the Sisters is up and about; all the others and nearly all the girls are in bed with the fever which has been raging for a month⁷⁸.

There was also the news that the Sisters of St Joseph of the Visitation, far from increasing their investment in the African mission, decided at the beginning of 1879 to withdraw their remaining personnel. In this regard Comboni wrote to Cardinal Simeoni at Propaganda:

On 13th January I received your esteemed letter N.1, in which you let me know that the Superior General of the Sisters of St Joseph, after a decision by her council, has decided not to send any more Sisters to my Vicariate, and instead, to recall those who are still there.

Although I am very upset by this decision, I am nonetheless far from feeling discouraged or humiliated, for I am certain that the sweetest Heart of Jesus which beats for unhappy Africa will provide help otherwise. The Apostolate of Central Africa is very difficult and demanding and requires great sacrifices: but it is possible, and God will help us⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ Writings 5282, 5358, 5405.

⁷⁹ Writings 5669-5670.

It can come as no surprise that at this time Daniel Comboni's own health began to succumb. From around the autumn of 1878, he was subject to frequent bouts of fevers, loss of appetite, and insomnia. Gordon's personal physician counseled him to return to Europe to regain his strength.

My health, undermined by the extraordinary efforts and anxieties for which I am taken to task by Gordon Pasha's good English doctor: to recover, I need rest and the help of the thermal waters in Europe, or at least those of Helouan in Cairo. I have virtually not slept at all for five months, I have persistent trouble in eating and I am stricken with constant bouts of fever⁸⁰.

After writing to the Prefect of Propaganda to obtain the necessary permission to travel to Europe⁸¹, he left Khartoum for Cairo, where he awaited the Cardinal's reply. Once it had arrived, he left for Europe, arriving in Verona in May 1879.

By June, though, he was already in Rome, and by July in Naples to oversee the departure of a group of missionaries (three men and five women); in August he was back in Rome, this time conceding himself the time to take the thermal waters on medical advice.

Against this background we can readily understand how it was that during this period of his life Comboni spoke even more frequently of the cross:

Smitten with fever I stopped in Verona, where the fever left me only after four days.

The cause of it all are the enormous efforts and worries, the interior and exterior suffering of the whole year. I spent 14 months without ever being able to sleep a single hour in 24. I suffered everything: in a word, I assure you, Madame, that

⁸⁰ Writings 5678.

⁸¹ Letter of March 3, 1879, to Cardinal Simeoni.

Job just sailed through joys and delights in comparison with me. He had more patience than I do, but I have suffered more than him.

But however depleted I am by efforts, disappointments and so many losses and troubles, I feel as brave as a lion and have even more trust and hope in God since it was God who first visited Central Africa, in Propaganda's opinion the most difficult and demanding Mission in the world. God's Work must proceed on the royal road of the Cross and we must thank God. You, who are a woman of faith, will understand this language⁸².

9 – CALUMNIES AND LONELINESS (COMBONI AGED 49-50)

In September 1879, the Prefect of Propaganda took advantage of Comboni's being in Italy to ask his help in mapping the boundaries for the new mission territories in Central Africa. While in Rome, he also met Mgr. Lavigerie, founder of the White Fathers. In November of the same year he sent another group of missionaries to Africa (five Brothers, two priests and seven Sisters).

He went on to spend almost the whole of 1880 in Rome, working for Propaganda Fide on the four new Vicariates which would greatly reduce the size of his own. This work for the Holy See did not, however, prevent him from travelling all over Italy (Turin, Piacenza, Sestri Levante, and Verona) and Austria. While in Vienna in August 1880, he received a letter from the Prefect of Propaganda inviting him to return to Africa. The matter was somewhat curious. It had not been Comboni's own preference to extend his stay in Europe; this had been at the explicit request of Propaganda itself. So why this unexpected invitation?

⁸² Writings 5760, 5761, 5762, letter to Mme. Anna de Villeneuve.

The fact was that the Vatican authorities had received complaints, firstly from the Bishop of Verona, who was uncomfortable in dealing with Comboni's Institutes in his diocese while their founder stayed on in Europe. Other complaints had also come in from Father Rolleri, who was never done talking ill of Comboni, and yet others from Father Losi who complained that he had been left with no money in Delen. Regarding Father Rolleri, Comboni replied thus:

*Well, after Rolleri had received this declaration, made as it were on his deathbed by the slanderous priest (he then really did die four months later), shouldn't Rolleri have come to me to retract his slander of an innocent priest? But he did no such thing; and he let the slander spread in conscience... a favourite expression of his. In short, I have suffered martyrdom: but I am glad of it because this was the Lord's will, and I forgive everyone*⁸³.

Comboni's blunt response to Father Losi's complaint follows a little later:

*Fr Losi is mad to say that money was never sent: he is mad. Fr Giulianelli in Cairo paid a bill of exchange from the Kordofan for 109 pounds Sterling which is not much. But I shall go and see for myself. It is wretched to have to deal with mad saints without a head on their shoulders. I think they kept him on a shoe-string*⁸⁴.

At the end of November 1880, and in the company of two Brothers and three Sisters, Comboni embarked in Naples for Egypt. This was to be his last journey to Africa, and it would be a journey without return. In Cairo he was received by the young Khedive, who promised him his support with the Governor of the Sudan. He was now met with a series of disappointments, the first of these being a retreat a young Jesuit priest preached to his

⁸³ Writings 6100, letter to Cardinal Simeoni of August 27, 1880.

⁸⁴ Writings 6168, letter to Father Sembianti, December 10, 1880.

missionaries in such a way that he practically invited them to leave their founder and join the Society of Jesus. Comboni was also disappointed to find that his Sisters in Cairo still had learnt no Arabic; a similar discovery awaited him when he arrived in Khartoum towards the end of January 1881⁸⁵.

Once in Khartoum, he was eager to visit the missions in Kordofan, but a number of setbacks, among which the illness of two of his missionaries, prevented him from doing so. On March 15, 1881, he celebrated his fiftieth birthday amidst the good wishes of the authorities and the mission personnel.

Today I am 50 years old! My God! One gets old very quickly and achieves nothing. It is true that I am here faced with the most challenging and difficult Vicariate in the world, and that it is making good progress and has reached a point, through God's grace, that eight years ago I would not have thought possible, because of the enormous obstacles I had foreseen. It is true, too, that by God's help and through his will I have been able to make my contribution to the progress of this work. But after all, it is a grace if I was able to avoid being a hindrance to this work, and I can only exclaim with the Apostle: servus inutilis sum. And the little I was able to do was only through the support of Your Most Reverend Eminence. Therefore let us repeat: servi inutiles sumus.

Here I am smothered in visits from Europeans, Turks, etc., who know it is my birthday, and this evening our table will be graced by the Hoccomdar with his whole court of Pashas, Beys and Mudirs, etc., that is, Rauf Pasha, Governor General of the Sudan who governs a territory (all under my jurisdiction) five times the size of the whole of France⁸⁶.

⁸⁵ Journey by way of Suez, Red Sea, Suakin, Berber, Khartoum.

⁸⁶ Writings 6561, 6563, letter to Cardinal Simeoni, March 15, 1881.

It was only at the end of March that he was able to leave Khartoum for El Obeid; once there, he had the satisfaction of celebrating Mass in a new church, “the largest and finest in the Vicariate”, built by the Neapolitan priest Marzano, “without debt, with contributions from the Moslem mudir and the Eastern-rite Christians and the results of a raffle organized by said Neapolitan”⁸⁷.

Comboni visited Malbes, an agricultural settlement situated at two days’ journey from El Obeid, a project conceived by him along the lines of the Jesuit “reductions” in Latin America. Then, when the camels he had requested from the governor eventually arrived, with one hundred soldiers to keep the marauding Baggara at a safe distance, he set off in the company of a small group of missionaries to visit the mission at Delen; from there he organized an exploratory journey into the territory of the Nuba, with the aim of eventually founding a mission there too. By June he was back in El Obeid, and at the end of the same month he started back to Khartoum, intent on presenting Rauf Pasha, governor general of Sudan, with a plan for the abolition of the slave trade in the Nuba region. The journey proved long and difficult because of unexpected torrential downpours; as a result, Comboni was ill when he reached Khartoum on August 9, 1881.

*Although I am ill, because among all the other efforts I had to spend a whole night in a wood on my way here from the Kordofan, under a very heavy downpour that fell unexpectedly and as well as ruining us, ruined all our provision of bread and all the vestments contained in a strong box, I am nonetheless getting out of bed for a moment to give you the news of my arrival in my principal residence at Khartoum*⁸⁸.

⁸⁷ Juan Manuel Lozano, op. cit., 285.

⁸⁸ Writings 6927, letter to Cardinal Simeoni, August 12, 1881.

September brought a series of deaths among his missionaries up till October 9 (a day before his own death), when Father Fraccaro also succumbed; Comboni had designated him his vicar general. Needless to say, Daniel Comboni was deeply saddened by the loss of so many missionaries.

*Jesus afflicts us and gives us the Cross. These days the catafalque three times without moving it from its place for the Requiem Office and Mass. The day before yesterday for Fr Mattia Moron, yesterday for Fr Antonio Dobale, today for Sister Maria Colpo. May Jesus be ever blessed. If it is built on the Cross our work has a solid foundation*⁸⁹.

Throughout the whole of this last year of his life, Comboni also suffered greatly because of a calumny being spread against him alleging improper moral conduct on his part. He was being accused of nursing an emotional attachment to a young Lebanese woman, Virginia Mansur, who as a Sister of St Joseph of the Apparition had worked with him for long years in Africa, and who had subsequently entered his Sisters' Congregation in Verona, in the hope of continuing her mission in Africa.

To have a better understanding of the seriousness of this calumny against Comboni, we can turn to a long letter he wrote Cardinal Simeoni, the Prefect of Propaganda, on September 3, 1881 (little more than a month before his death):

Now who is this Virginia? I will only give you a brief outline here, but will later explain and prove everything to be quite true. She is an orphan who was born and lives to suffer on earth, but will then have great joy in heaven. After seeing her father and eldest brother slaughtered like sheep in the tremendous 1860 massacre of Christians in Syria, and after seeing the family houses and villas burn, she was taken to Saida and received at the age of 6 by the Superior of the

⁸⁹ Writings 7155.

Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, Sister Emilienne Naubonnet, who died as my Provincial Superior in Khartoum in 1877 and told me what I am now telling you. At 15, at the hands of the Greek schismatic Bishop and her schismatic relatives assisted by a French freemason, she was taken back to her family at Beirut, where they wanted to force her to marry a young schismatic who hung around for six months. But, standing as firm as a pillar, though confined to the house and absolutely forbidden to go to church or to confession and Communion because they wanted to make her schismatic, she endured this martyrdom for six whole months, until one night, seeing that no one was watching her, she fled and walked all night and the following day, feet dripping with blood, until she met a Maronite and was taken to Saida. From there, she was smuggled to France by the Mother Superior herself. After completing the novitiate in Marseilles, she was sent to Khartoum on the orders of the Superior who told me that Virginia (in religion Sister Anna) Mansur does the work of three Sisters.

During the six years she remained in my Vicariate she behaved extremely well, worked harder than all the others and was much loved and respected by the four Superiors who died there in six years, but much hated and persecuted by two other Sisters who were not Superiors, and unjustly so, as I shall prove. When eight or ten girls she had instructed and prepared for the Holy Laver were solemnly baptised in Khartoum, while all the others celebrated, she wept and said: "Here I am converting Africans, while I leave my mother and my brothers and sisters who are schismatic to perish for eternity". Several times she asked my Provincial, Mother Emilienne (who had smuggled her to France to become a nun in 1870) to allow her to go home to Beirut for a few months to convert her family. But that good and holy Mother answered rightly that the Most Reverend Mother General would never allow her to return even for a

short time to her family because, since Virginia had been stolen away to France by the Sisters of St Joseph and the family had never had any news of her, this would jeopardise the relations of the Congregation of St Joseph with the schismatics in Syria. This was a thorn in Virginia's heart, and it was the beginning and the principal reason why she started to think of leaving the Congregation that she so loved, which she actually did,

It was in July 1879 that Virginia left St Joseph and went to Syria, to the sorrow of many of her companions. She therefore stayed in the religious communities of the St Joseph houses, and doing very well, from 1860 to more than half-way through 1879. So she stayed nearly 20 years.

Two months after she went to Beirut, she wrote to tell me that three members of her family were ready to become Catholic, but that it was necessary to get them away from their home which was more than two hours away from the nearest Catholic church, and that she too, after 20 years in a religious community, was in purgatory in her own house, especially since it took two hours to go to Mass. So she asked me:

- 1. If I would accept her as one of my Sisters, prepared to do anything, and especially to die for Africa even right away (and for six years she had given splendid proof of this).*
- 2. If I would help her find a place in some house where her brother, her sister and her cousin Alessandro could prepare for their abjuration.*

To her 1st request, as the founder, master and head of my Institutes, and knowing the person and my Work's need for Arabic speakers, I answered in the affirmative as to receiving her, but reserved the right to decide whether to send her to the Novitiate in Verona, under the Mother General, or in Africa, under my Mother Principal Teresa Grigolini. In the meantime I also told her to do her utmost to convert her own mother.

*Regarding her 2nd request, as I had been accustomed to doing with my holy Superior, Fr Nicola Mazza, who was overjoyed when I brought unbelievers and Protestants to the Institute to be converted, I answered that I would accept all three of her relatives in my Institutes, either in Verona or in Cairo*⁹⁰.

It was these decisions which apparently infuriated Comboni's co-workers in Verona to the point that they forcibly repatriated Virginia's brother without first informing either her or Comboni himself. Comboni rightly suspected that they would go on to do the same thing with Virginia, hence what he wrote in his letter to the Cardinal:

Now I ask you a favour, O Most Eminent Father: I have a well-founded fear that those in Verona might immediately send Virginia away to Syria among the schismatics, placing her soul in peril, as they did two months ago with her brother Giorgio. Without advance notice to Virginia or her brother, they took Giorgio to Trieste and put him on a ship bound for Syria.

Therefore, since Your Eminence has been so good and prudent as to order Fr Sembianti to tell Virginia that for the time being she must not go to Africa, please now send Sembianti a note telling him "to order Virginia to stay in the Institute as a Postulant, and to do so until further orders from Your Eminence".

*But in the meantime, doesn't Virginia have the right to be afflicted at seeing her brother taken from her without a last farewell, sent to Syria among the schismatics, with the risk of losing his faith due to his poor treatment in Verona; a brother for whom she wept in Africa for so many years and made so many sacrifices, even leaving her Congregation to convert Giorgio and her family?*⁹¹

⁹⁰ Writings 7005, 7006, 7009-7013.

⁹¹ Writings 7024.

Comboni ended his letter to the Cardinal with complete frankness and transparency:

That is the truth. So I implore Your Eminence to write to Verona as I said. In Sestri too, Fr Sembianti withdrew the Sisters and the Institute and left in the night at 1 o'clock, without saying goodbye, without informing the head of the house. I do not pass a bad judgement on this, but these systems of prudence generally do not please me⁹².

What hurt Comboni most about the calumny was the fact that his father had been informed of the allegation being made against him. He came to know this in June 1881 (less than four months before his death), while in El Obeid on his return from his exploration of the Nuba mountains.

The other day I received the mail and this brought me the very greatest anxiety and pain, far surpassing all the afflictions God has sent me since 1878. In fact, I had to take to my bed for a full three days and who knows when I will be able to breathe easy again. The Missionaries think that the trouble is backache, because I am in fact rather tired after the explorations I have been making on horseback. But the true cause, known only to God and to me, is a deep and fearful affliction, which surpasses all the humiliations and afflictions I have been subjected to, and all the injustices and hurt I have had to suffer, and all my justifiable afflictions for Virginia when her brother left without her knowledge, etc., etc. All this is nothing.

The cause is the colossal imprudence of the Mother Superior of Verona (to whom I will never drop a hint so as not to upset her) who foolishly got it into her head (and I already imagine what she was aiming at) to write a letter to my father (which I will send you, dear Father, from El Obeid), in which she

⁹² Writings 7025.

describes to my father the motherly ways with which she treats Virginia, that she does everything for her (Virginia always said and wrote to me very well of the Superior etc.,) and asks him advice as to what she should do, etc.; moreover the Superior advised Virginia to ask my father his advice as to what she should do etc.; and that silly Virginia wrote in this sense to my father.

My God! 'Dear Heaven!', Sister Victoria says – and she is right. But my very heart is petrified. However, Africa will be converted, long live Noah, and Jesus will help me to carry the cross. Then God will bless Virginia, who for her patient sufferings for Africa and for the cause of justice will be set by God on the path to fulfilling her true vocation as a nun and a missionary etc. and I, through the duty of conscience, will help her and support her until death. But we are ready for crosses. My greatest worry of all is my father, who was always a comfort to me, and will perhaps end his holy life with a broken heart and fear for his son, which is a sort of madness because of the position and situation in which I am wholly consecrated to the glory of God and to die for Christ. In brief, please pray for me, who am the most afflicted of men and disheartened with the world, and also pray for my father. Long live Jesus⁹³.

Added to all this was the fact that the bishop of Verona informed Propaganda about Comboni's alleged attachment to Virginia, thus leading to the long letters Comboni wrote in his own defence. It was a time when he expressed himself with considerable frankness.

Not at all. No passion ever took root in my heart except my passion for Africa. If [there were] a spark of passion (something which is diametrically opposed to my character and my deep, long-standing and extraordinary vocation) it

⁹³ Writings 6790, 6791, 6796.

would not be for Virginia, a Sister who goes to confession; I would not have brought her to Verona, I would not have entrusted her to the very Sisters I founded to make them holy etc. Well, everything is possible in the small minds of peasants who get too big for their boots. I will be sending this letter of Virginia's to His Eminence Cardinal Simeoni as soon as he writes to me about Virginia.

I care nothing about the gossip that may already be spreading in Verona to damage and discredit my dignity and my character, or whether they believe what is said (untruthfully) about my having a passion for a woman, etc. as certain vile peasants believe, etc., etc.: cupio anathema esse pro fratribus; amo pro nihilo reputari, etc. The only thing that matters (and this has been the one true passion of my whole life, and will be until I die, and is no embarrassment to me) is that Africa be converted and that God grant to me and preserve those auxiliary instruments that he has given and will give me⁹⁴.

Comboni's last two, handwritten, letters date to just six days before his death. In one, he struggled to save for the African mission his principal co-worker in Cairo, who was being recalled to Rome:

I strongly protest against such a decision, and you, by the will of God and the Sacred Congregation are a missionary of Central Africa, in whose service you have a most important office for the greatest glory of God and which you carry out magnificently⁹⁵.

In the other letter, he gave his last "order", which concerned Virginia:

⁹⁴ Writings 6983, 6987. Cf. 6993, 7194.

⁹⁵ Writings 7241.

In order not to stand in the way of the respectable wishes of Fr Vignola who wants Virginia out of the Institute immediately, I order you to give Virginia 500 francs, and to send her immediately to Roveredo to Fr Bertanza and his sister, Teresina; so that Virginia will be peaceful until she goes to whatever other destination God will deign to assign her. I do not want her to go to her family in Beirut just now, as I already declared many days ago to my most venerable Superior, the Most Eminent Cardinal Simeoni⁹⁶.

10 – DIES NATALIS, OCTOBER 10, 1881, IN AFRICA

“At ten in the morning on October 10, 1881, in Khartoum, Sudan, Daniel Comboni, feeling unwell, expressed the desire of receiving the Sacraments; after having made his confession, he received Holy Communion with the greatest fervour.

“He had spent the previous night talking of home, of his childhood in Limone sul Garda, and of his father Luigi; but his last words were those of a founder who felt he was dying, and who wanted to leave his followers his last recommendations, hurriedly, before darkness clouded his mind: ‘Have courage, have courage at this difficult hour, and even more so in the future. Do not desist, never give up. Face any tempest that comes without fear. Do not be afraid. I die, but this Work will not die’.

“At midday he became delirious. Towards five in the afternoon, though, he seemed to improve. He took hold of Father Hans Dichtl’s hand, squeezed it weakly in his own, and with all the voice that remained to him said: ‘Swear to me you will be faithful to the missionary vocation’. Then he seemed to be able to speak no longer, though he remained conscious. Father Arthur Bouchard leant over him and said: ‘Monsignor, the supreme moment has come’. Daniel Comboni followed the prayers of the Anointing of

⁹⁶ Writings 7244.

the Sick and of the Commendation of his soul with fervor, and then managed to say three times: 'My Jesus, have mercy on me'. His face lit up so brightly that he seemed transformed: he was seeing heaven. Then his breathing became heavy and slow, and a little later he died in Father Bouchard's arms, 'sweetly, like a child going to sleep in its mother's embrace'.

"It was ten in the evening of October 10, 1881. Daniel Comboni was 50 years, 6 months and 25 days old. The missionaries present at the passing of this just man swore before his mortal remains: 'Africa or Death'""⁹⁷.

It can be a help in understanding the sense of deep sorrow and emptiness which Comboni's death occasioned if we listen to the accounts of his passing left us by three of those who were close to him at the end of his life: the Canadian Father Arthur Bouchard, the Tyrolese Father Hans Dichtl, and the Italian seminarian Francesco Pimazzoni. From what they wrote we can appreciate the regard in which they held him, and the awareness they had of having lived and worked with a very holy man.

Writing the day after Comboni's death, Father Dichtl expressed himself thus: "My good God! Yesterday around ten in the evening (I can't even recall the exact time), the great Bishop Comboni, while blessing his mission, passed on to the next life. He had kept repeating: 'Don't you see how sweet the cross is?' It fell to me to whisper in his ear some last words of love, and to dry his last tears. And he died in my arms. I am so grateful to God for having granted me, such an inexperienced missionary, this great grace before reaching my twenty-fourth birthday. Ever since Sunday (October 9) I hadn't left him for a moment. He wanted me by him, and could not settle without me, and he let me care for him with the gentleness of a child. I thank the Lord with all my heart, and am so happy to have been able to serve my beloved Father at

⁹⁷ Text taken from the opening celebration for the period of preparation for the canonisation of Blessed Daniel Comboni, March 15, 2003.

the end in this way, and to have enjoyed his last and complete trust. Yesterday afternoon he asked me to promise yet again that I would be faithful to the mission. This I did. I swore that I wanted to die in the Vicariate”.

A few months later, Father Dichtl was writing again (July 28, 1882): “If I were to die in this land, I assure you I would die happy, because I love the mission more than my mother and father; and I would pray for the young that they might feel attracted to this Work of ours, so as to dedicate themselves to it with their whole heart and life, in the certainty of finding the Lord’s mercy, as I have found it, deeply happy in my vocation”⁹⁸.

For his part, on October 15, 1881, Father Bouchard wrote to the director of the Holy Childhood Association: “You will have heard, Sir, of the great loss that we have experienced in the passing of our holy and beloved Bishop, Mgr. Comboni, the apostle of Africa, who, on October 10 last went to heaven to receive the reward of twenty-five years of apostolate in Africa. As you know, he was taken from us in the space of twelve hours by a pernicious fever. It fell to me to receive the holy bishop’s last breath. When I saw that he was nearing the end, I said to him: ‘Monsignor, the supreme moment has come; for twenty-five years now you have been sacrificing your life. Renew your sacrifice; in a few moments you will go to receive the crown promised to those who have left everything for God’. The apostle of Africa had already ceased to speak, but he was fully conscious. His great and noble face lit up with a look of heavenly joy, and he pointed lovingly towards heaven, like an exile nearing the homeland so long desired and now soon to be seen.

“His death has plunged us into the deepest grief, but the certainty that our Father is now in heaven sustains us. Those of us missionaries who were present at the death of this just man now

⁹⁸ Cf. Letter of Father Hans Dichtl to Mitterutzner, in L. Bano, *Missionari nell’Istituto alla morte di Comboni*, Rome, 1982.

repeat his war-cry: 'Africa or death!' Following the example of our Father, we will work courageously in this part of the vineyard which has been entrusted to us. Doubtless, the obstacles are numerous; but it was by the cross that God redeemed the world. The work of the regeneration of Africa will be long and difficult, but what matters is that the beautiful day of mercy will arrive: I am very certain of this"⁹⁹.

The Italian seminarian Francesco Pimazzoni described Daniel Comboni's passing thus: "The two Fathers present administered the Anointing of the Sick to him, and he followed with his heart and with signs of the most lively faith; they also read – inasmuch as their grief allowed – the prayers for the commendation of his soul, until at ten in the evening of October 10 he flew to heaven, surrendering his fine spirit to the Creator. What a great bishop! Dear Father and Founder, if by the decree of the Almighty your body was mortal, immortal and worthy of admiration instead will be your works; and immortal you will live on in the hearts of the many to whom you did good; indelibly you are written in the hearts and minds of your children, whom, orphaned and abandoned, you have left in Verona and in the glorious field of your labours in Africa.

"Yes! You will live immortal in the hearts of us all, who not only knew you but worked and lived with you. Now that you are dead, we continue to venerate your venerable remains, beseeching God to hasten your entry into the celestial Sion, where with the choir of the Apostles we also await to see you crowned with glory. Oh good Father, who loved us so much, now more powerful because you are with God, do not forget us, and commend your Work, your Africa, to our sweet Redeemer! Now more than ever, ask that your Work may grow and spread quickly; make your missionaries feel your powerful voice in their hearts, so that reinvigorated by its sound, they may commit themselves tirelessly to fulfilling their vocation"¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Positio*, 968.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Positio* 964-965, slightly adapted.

In the words of these three missionaries, we can form some idea of how the spirit that had been granted to this holy man had passed to his coworkers and followers, just like the spirit of Elijah passed to Elisha as the Scripture tells¹⁰¹. Aged seventeen, Comboni had sworn Africa his eternal love. Nine years later, already in Africa before the body of the recently deceased Father Oliboni, he had sworn this fidelity yet again. Now, having accomplished his mission as an apostle of Africa and founder of missionary Institutes, before he died he asked his sons to renew their missionary oath: “Swear to me that you will be faithful to your missionary vocation”. And this they do: *“His death has plunged us into the deepest grief, but the certainty that our Father is now in heaven sustains us. Those of us missionaries who were present at the death of this just man now repeat his war-cry: ‘Africa or death!’”*

We have been telling St Daniel Comboni’s life-story by highlighting some of its most significant moments. Others, though, could just as appropriately have been cited: three of these merit at least a brief mention here:

- 1) The enormous amount of work Comboni did in the field of what today we might call “human development”: we can recall how his various missionary houses in Africa were engaged in the education of both boys and girls, as well as the agricultural project at Malbes, and, above all, his wide-ranging campaign against the slave trade, which alone would justify a separate study.
- 2) Then there was his indefatigable commitment to missionary awareness work throughout Europe, a continent which he crisscrossed several times. Here, he brought his message of shared missionary responsibility to all classes of society, from the humblest to the most influential persons and groups in the religious, cultural, economic and political fields. Part of his work here involved

¹⁰¹ 2Kings 2, 9-15.

maintaining contact with all manner of persons and organizations by way of numerous letters and long reports, which must have cost him considerable time and the sacrifice of much sleep. Comboni thought of this aspect of his work as being intimately connected to what he was trying to do in Africa: in line with his Plan, he wanted the whole of Europe to play its part in the “regeneration of Africa”.

3) Finally, we need to mention the effort Comboni made to formulate an intellectual and operative synthesis of the evangelization of Africa in what are sometimes called his “foundational” writings: the Plan, the Postulatum and the Rules. These three documents would merit a special study, because from them flowed the strength of Comboni and of his coworkers in committing themselves for life to the service of Africa. The Plan focuses especially on missionary activity, the Postulatum on the need to work for mission awareness in the whole Church, and the Rules offer guidelines on how to prepare the missionaries of the future.

While thus willingly conceding that there would have been much more to tell of St Daniel Comboni’s life and mission, we can all the same feel that we have succeeded in highlighting what was essential to his life and holiness: a life and holiness lived out in a big way, with enthusiasm and generous dedication.

It was all this that led us to choose a verse from Psalm 18 as the title of this chapter. This Psalm proclaims the glory of God in nature and especially in the sun: “In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming from his pavilion, *like a champion rejoicing to run his course*” (Ps 18:4-5). Scripture scholars say that the sun here is a figure of Jesus himself. “The rising sun will come to us from heaven,” proclaims Zachariah in the Benedictus¹⁰². It seems to us that it was the light and warmth of this sun that became present in a very special way in the trusting, generous and enthusiastic person of St Daniel Comboni.

¹⁰² Luke 1, 78.

PART THREE

JESUS AND AFRICA

As has become very apparent, Daniel Comboni's life was full of activity, event, challenge and emotion. In the midst of all this, however, two fundamental elements emerge clearly, constantly and uninterruptedly – Jesus, and Africa. Jesus and Africa are at the root of the person Comboni was, and gaining a deeper understanding of this allows us to celebrate his holiness with greater assurance.

JESUS

An attentive reading of Comboni's writings shows how he lived all the aspects of his personal life (human, Christian, missionary) in constant reference to the person of Jesus, or to use the words of the liturgy, he lived everything “through Christ, with him and in him”.

This becomes apparent in the various expressions to which he was especially attached, some of a more biblical kind, and others more connected to the theology and devotional practice of his time. On countless occasions, he insisted on speaking of the Cross of the Lord, his Pierced Heart, the Crucified One, Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Heart of Jesus and other similar expressions linked to confidence in God, and to faith in Him and his Divine Providence.

It is clear that for Comboni, both intellectually and experientially, Jesus and God were at the centre. Aged thirty-seven, in a letter to Marie Deleuil Martiny, Comboni, who at the time was travelling in Europe to promote his mission, enclosed the translation of a letter written to Cardinal Barnabó in which he wrote:

Do you know the strength my spirit derives from this Guard of Honour¹⁰³ in which I venerate the Heart of Jesus? It gives me the strength to bear my cross joyfully, as if I had made a fortune for the Mission; and with the Cross, my dearest Bride and teacher of prudence and wisdom, with the Blessed Virgin, my dear Mother, and with Jesus my All, O Eminence, I fear neither the persecutions of Egypt nor the fury of Africa, nor the massive clouds of Verona, nor the devil of hell, because I am the happiest of men and in the most desirable state¹⁰⁴.

Ten years later, from Khartoum, he wrote:

An attempt was made by the good Franciscan Fathers, who always have sublime and holy members; then they had to leave. Now why has the smallest and most insignificant of Institutes, microscopic like mine which I founded in Verona, been able to consolidate the Apostolate of Central Africa and pitch its tents more successfully than my predecessors? Because, in agreement with Pius IX, I solemnly consecrated the Vicariate to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and to St Joseph, and because in all the Shrines in the world which I have visited, and in almost all of the most fervent monasteries and Institutes of Europe, prayers – ardent prayers – are said for the conversion of Africa, and because in the apostolate of Central Africa I was the first to involve the omnipotent ministry of the woman of the Gospel and of the Sister of charity, who is the shield, strength and guarantee of the Missionary's ministry.

However prayer comes first, because Jesus Christ is a gentleman, who keeps his word and proclaimed the petite et

¹⁰³ The Guard of Honor was a form of the devotion to the Heart of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, in which the members committed themselves to spend a particular time before the Eucharist.

¹⁰⁴ Writings 1734, letter written from Paris, October 15, 1868.

*accipietis, the pulsate et aperietur*¹⁰⁵: and this is worth more than all the treaties of sovereigns and the powerful of the earth¹⁰⁶.

Eight months before his death he wrote from Khartoum to the Prefect of Propaganda:

*I fear nobody in the world besides myself, whom I examine every day and commend most fervently to the Heart of Jesus, to Mary and to St Joseph*¹⁰⁷.

And only forty-one days before his death, all but overwhelmed by a torrent of accusations and calumnies, he wrote as follows to the Rector of his missionary seminary in Verona:

*There is nothing firm and stable in the world but Christ and his Cross*¹⁰⁸.

AFRICA

Naturally enough, during the years of his adolescence, Daniel Comboni had not yet defined what exactly would be the place and aim of his life's mission. When he came to read St Alphonsus Mary de Liguori's book about the Japanese martyrs, he was enthused by the prospect of giving his whole life for mission, yet still was not sure where this should happen. By the time he was seventeen, though, he had made a final decision - for Africa and its peoples. As we have seen, he was helped in reaching what was to be an irrevocable decision by various factors: the lively missionary atmosphere at the Mazza Institute; listening to Fr Angelo Vinco speaking of his experience of Africa; and his friendship with Bakit, a young Nuban from the Sudan.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Mt 7,7.

¹⁰⁶ Writings 5284-5285, letter of July 24, 1878.

¹⁰⁷ Writings 6437, letter of February 8, 1881.

¹⁰⁸ Writings 6989, letter of August 30, 1881.

From then until the day he died, through Christ, and with Him and in Him, Africa was the only love and passion of Comboni's life, and the focus of all his attention and activity. The peoples of Africa, he would say, are "the most needy and abandoned in the world", both because they have not yet received the gift of the Christian faith and entered the Church, as well as because of the very unfavorable social and economic conditions in which they find themselves. Differently from the peoples of other continents, no one in the Church was concerned about them, and in Europe Africa was only thought of in terms of potential and real exploitation.

When one looks at Comboni's life as a whole, this unity of passion, concern and dedication becomes very evident. To quote, for example, his words to two of his greatest friends, written during the time of his difficulties with his founder Fr. Nicola Mazza:

If the Pope, Propaganda and all the Bishops in the world were against me, I would lie low for a year and then present a new plan: but I would never, never stop thinking of Africa. I am discouraged neither by the cum quibus nor by the holy self-esteem of the Congregations to which the 21 African Missions have been entrusted¹⁰⁹.

Be firmly convinced that Comboni cannot live but for Africa and for whatever has a connection with Africa: I trust in your protection, brotherliness and friendship. God's works have to encounter difficulties. That is how they bear the beloved imprint of Providence, despite all the obstacles¹¹⁰.

Eight years later, as he arrived back in Khartoum with overall responsibility for the African mission, he expressed himself thus in the homily during the solemn Mass at which he inaugurated his ministry:

¹⁰⁹ Writings 1071, letter to his friend Father Bricolo, April 23, 1865.

¹¹⁰ Writings 1185, letter to his friend Canon Mitterutzner, September 18, 1865.

Rest assured that my soul responds to this with unlimited love forever and for each one of you. I have returned among you never again to cease being yours and all consecrated for your greater good in eternity... Your good will be mine and your sorrows will also be mine. I make common cause with each one of you, and the happiest day in my life will be the one on which I will be able to give my life for you¹¹¹.

A further five years later, at a time of crushing financial difficulties and epidemic, he was to write from the same place:

I write to you from the main Mission in Khartoum, where I am now the only priest, having to be Bishop, parish priest, Superior, curate, doctor, nurse and sexton. I am here with only two lay brothers from my Verona Institute... Only one of the Sisters is up and about; all the others and nearly all the girls are in bed with the fever which has been raging for a month¹¹².

Little more than a month before his death, he wrote to the Rector of his seminary in Verona:

No passion ever took root in my heart except my passion for Africa... I care nothing about the gossip that may already be spreading in Verona to damage and discredit my dignity... The only thing that matters (and this has been the one true passion of my whole life, and will be until I die, and is no embarrassment to me) is that Africa be converted and that God grant to me and preserve those auxiliary instruments that he has given and will give me¹¹³.

Given all this, one can readily understand how just a week later he could simply and straightforwardly say that “*all my affairs... solely concern the redemption of Africa*”¹¹⁴.

¹¹¹ Writings 3158-3159, May 11, 1873.

¹¹² Writings 5405, letter to Cardinal Simeoni, October 24, 1878.

¹¹³ Writings 6983 and 6987, letter of August 30, 1881.

¹¹⁴ Writings 6993, letter to Cardinal Simeoni, September 3, 1881.

FOR LIFE

These two loves (of Jesus and of Africa), then, completely filled Comboni's life. To them, Comboni committed himself without measure, and to his last breath. His was a fidelity to the end, not something temporary, but a life-long commitment that involved his whole person.

At the age of forty-one, just as the Pope was about to give him responsibility for the evangelization of Central Africa, in the final edition of his Plan he found words to express the way in which he had been given the grace of drawing together the two loves of his life. Although he wrote in the third person, it was clearly of himself that he was talking:

In order not to stand in the way of the respectable wishes of Fr Vignola who wants Virginia out of the Institute immediately, I order you to give Virginia 500 francs, and to send her immediately to Roveredo to Fr Bertanza and his sister, Teresina; so that Virginia will be peaceful until she goes to whatever other destination God will deign to assign her. I do not want her to go to her family in Beirut just now, as I already declared many days ago to my most venerable Superior, the Most Eminent Cardinal Simeoni¹¹⁵.

The Catholic, who is used to judging things in a supernatural light, looked upon Africa not through the pitiable lens of human interest, but in the pure light of faith; there he saw an infinite multitude of brothers who belonged to the same family as himself with one common Father in heaven. They were bent low and groaning beneath the yoke of Satan, and they were placed on the threshold of a most terrible precipice. Then he was carried away under the impetus of that love set alight by the divine flame on Calvary hill, when it came forth from the side of the Crucified One to embrace the whole human family; he felt his heart beat faster, and a divine power seemed to

¹¹⁵ Writings 7244.

*drive him towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers of his, upon whom it seemed that the fearful curse of Canaan still bore down*¹¹⁶.

From Khartoum, seven years later, he wrote to Father Ramière:

*How glad I am to spend half an hour with you, to commend and entrust to the Sacred Heart the most precious interests of my trying and difficult Mission, to which I have vowed my whole soul, my body, my blood and my life!*¹¹⁷

The whole thrust of Comboni's life can thus be summarized in three Latin expressions: *ad Christum*, *ad Africam*, *ad Vitam*, for Christ, for Africa and for Life. At the time of his canonisation, it was said: "In his contemplative gaze, Comboni focuses on the love of the Father which flows from the Heart of the Son and reaches out in the abundance of the Spirit to those who are marginalized. God and his people in trouble, the open Heart of the Saviour and people who are oppressed and abandoned, the Crucified Good Shepherd with a pierced heart and the "Africa" or "Africas" of those who are ignored, enslaved, hungry and cut adrift, are now inseparable. It is impossible to think of one without the other; it is impossible to believe in the love of God and forget the brother or sister in trouble"¹¹⁸.

A DOUBLE INHERITANCE

Daniel Comboni left the ideals in which believed and for which he struggled to his sons and daughters as their inheritance; they are the same values which we identify today by the name of "Comboni missionary charism". They can be summarised as follows:

¹¹⁶ Writings 2742.

¹¹⁷ Writings 5256.

¹¹⁸ Letter of the three General Councils of the Comboni Institutes on the occasion of the canonisation of the Founder Daniel Comboni, *Daniel Comboni, Witness of Holiness and Master of Mission*, Rome, September 1, 2003, no. 26, p. 14.

- a) *a passion for union with Christ, who gave himself out of love and to the end on the Cross for our salvation;*
- b) *a passion for union with the poorest and most abandoned, out of love, in readiness for martyrdom and daily commitment.*

The passionate love for Jesus and for Africa cannot thus be separated, and together become a grace here and now for the Church in her work of evangelisation. For the sons and daughters of St Daniel Comboni, this double love becomes a basic point upon which to build their identity and find the fulfillment of their personal, community and apostolic aspirations.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this central aspect of Comboni's life is by reading part of the Rules he drew up for his missionary Institute. In chapter ten, he described the kind of missionary he was seeking, and – Comboni scholars say – he also described himself. Comboni's very special spirituality shines out through these words: "It is enough to read and meditate; no more is needed"¹¹⁹.

Any man, who, in an absolute and final way, breaks off relations with the world and with those things naturally most dear to him, must live a life of spirit and of faith. The Missionary who lacks a strong awareness of God and a lively interest in his glory and the good of souls is without the right attitude for his ministry, and will end by finding himself in a kind of emptiness and intolerable isolation.

His work will not always be graced by that devout attention, that atmosphere of approval and almost of applause, which is often accorded to the priest who works in the midst of intelligent souls and sensitive hearts.

Such human comfort may indeed sustain a zeal that is little founded on God and on love. But the Missionary to Africa

¹¹⁹ PIETRO CHIOCCHETTA, *Daniele Comboni: carte per l'evangelizzazione dell'Africa*, EMI, Bologna, Italy, 1978, 195.

cannot and must not hope always to find such comfort for himself. He works among savages who are brutalised by the horrors of the most inhuman slavery, and who are reduced to the condition of beasts by the wretched condition into which they have been thrust by misfortune and the boundless cruelty of their enemies and oppressors. These unhappy Africans have become accustomed to seeing their children snatched violently from their bosom to be condemned to a deplorable servitude and they have no hope of ever seeing them again; often they see their dearest relatives and even their own parents mercilessly slaughtered before their very eyes. And since the wicked perpetrators of such horrible crimes are not generally of their own race but are foreigners, so these unfortunate savages, accustomed to being betrayed by everyone and mistreated in the cruellest of ways, sometimes regard the Missionary with distrust and horror because he is a foreigner. In this way the Africans may appear to him as barbarous, stupid, ungrateful and brutal. Consequently he must, rather than expecting to receive an encouraging response of affection, resign himself to hostile resistance, saddening inconstancy and dark betrayal. This is why he must often see the hope of results receding into a remote and distant future. On occasion he will have to be happy in sowing a seed with infinite labour and in the midst of a thousand privations and dangers, a seed that will produce fruit only for his successors in the mission. He will have to think of himself as just one unnoticed worker in a long line of missionaries, all of whom can only hope for results, not from their own personal work, but from the gathering together and continuation of efforts mysteriously guided and used by Providence.

In a word, the Missionary to Africa will often have to reflect that he works in an undertaking certainly of the highest merit, but one that is, nonetheless, hard and difficult. He will

have to understand that he is a stone hid under the earth, which will perhaps never come to light, but which will become part of the foundations of a vast, new building that only those who come after him will see rising from the ground, over the ruins of fetishism, a building which will grow to gather within it the more than one hundred million unfortunate descendants of Ham, who have been languishing for more than forty centuries under the rule of Satan.

*Completely emptied of self and deprived of every human comfort, the Missionary to Africa works only for his God, for the most abandoned people in the world and for eternity. He is moved by the pure vision of his God, and so, in all these circumstances, he knows how to sustain and nourish his heart abundantly, whether he gathers the fruit of his work either sooner or later, through his own work or by the hand of another. Further still, his spirit does not seek from God the reason for the Mission he has received, but rather acts on God's word and that of his Representatives, as a docile instrument of his adorable will. In every circumstance he repeats with deep conviction and lively joy: *servi inutiles sumus; quod debuimus facere fecimus*, Lk. 17.*

On the contrary, woe to anyone who might be drawn to enter on this way of life by other motivations than those just described; woe to anyone who might begin because of a passing burst of enthusiasm or the attraction of exotic travel or the desire to distinguish himself in an unusual career! Besides certainly succumbing in times of darkness and discouragement, besides not being able to persevere in a life of continual hardships and privations, he would also experience in a particularly dangerous manner the onrush of the tendencies of fallen nature and he could become a victim of seduction and of the most ignoble passions.

One should not, however, exaggerate or make facile generalisations about the quantity and the power of the

dangerous occasions which surround the priest in his home country and the Missionary in Central Africa.

It is fair to say that the prestige and flattery in the midst of which our priests in Europe live and the worldly atmosphere in which they must sometimes work may slowly corrupt them no less than the unprotected encounter with more blatant and formal dangers. One needs also to take account of the fact that, if the Missionary in Africa, alone in distant and savage regions, lacks much assistance and support, he is, nevertheless, for the same reason, bound to live a more austere way of life and obliged to think thoughts of a higher order. When the Missionary in Africa has a heart burning with the pure love of God, when he keeps his eyes fixed on the contemplation of the great goodness and sublimeness of the work for which he spends himself, then all the privations, the continuous hardships, the greatest trials become a paradise on earth for his heart; then the cruellest of martyrdoms and death itself become the dearest and most eagerly desired reward for his sacrifices.

So the fears must not be exaggerated, even though one must note that the greatest safeguard for the Missionary in Africa is, in many cases, his conscience and his faith. For all these reasons and for many others which must often be the subject of meditation by the students of the Institute who aspire to the African apostolate, it is important and necessary that they should have solid dispositions of genuine zeal, of pure love and the fear of God and that they should maintain a firm control over their passions. To this end, while there should always be in the Institute a spirit of simplicity, cheerfulness and a lively atmosphere, there must also be a strong fervour for the things of the spirit, the study of the interior life and a lively desire for perfection.

Over and above the annual retreat, the monthly day of retreat, sacramental Confession at least once a week, over

and above an hour of mental prayer every morning, the examinations of conscience, spiritual reading, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the other daily prayers, the students must also become very familiar with the assiduous exercise of the presence of God so that it becomes all but second nature to them. They must also learn how to communicate with God in an intimate and childlike way by means of frequent and devout aspirations and this should become part of what they consider in their particular examination of conscience.

The practices of exterior mortification are also most useful in supporting piety and the spiritual life, even though one must proceed with great care and have the full agreement of one's confessor and spiritual director. According to the strength of each person, the latter will allow one or other abstinence or corporal penance, especially on Fridays and on the Vigils of the major feasts of the Church and of the Institute. However, no common practice in this matter is established in the Institute.

What matters is that all these prayers and mortifications should not through habit become simply a formality. To avoid this, it is necessary often to reflect on the importance of a prayer that is meaningful and practical and of a life lived in spirit and truth, and this reflection should be done by each individual in private and also by everyone together, especially in spiritual conferences. In order to discern whether piety is genuine or superficial, it should be measured by the development of interior mortification, especially with regard to the two fundamental virtues of the interior and exterior life, humility and obedience.

By faithfully co-operating with God's grace, the candidates are to make every effort to empty their hearts of all pride and presumption, of all ambitious desires and pretences, so that there may instead take root there the holy disposition that makes us acknowledge that all we have comes from

God and allows us to submit to him our intellect, will, energy, and in him and through him submit everything to those who stand in his place. Specifically the respect owed to the voice of God should be paid to:

- 1. The voice of the spiritual director, to whom one will disclose everything about one's interior life and entire conduct.*
- 2. The voice of the Bishop and of the Rector, of whom the students will seek to follow not only the orders, but also the desires and wishes.*
- 3. The voice of the Rule and the signals of the Community, to which they will be attentive with the most scrupulous exactness and perfection.*

If the candidates nourish this spirit of genuine piety, of humility and of obedience so as to die spiritually to themselves in the most intimate areas of self-love, divine grace will help them to overcome and control all the other passions and to acquire all the other virtues.

It would be indeed enough to follow these general norms of perfection. However, as a further help in this journey of the spirit it might be useful to pay some attention to the following detailed treatment of some of the virtues more specifically required by the apostolic ministry in Africa.

- 1. Chastity. The interior of the College is closed to women. Visits from one's female relatives and from other women who have to be admitted out of true need or the duties of one's office or out of charity are to be received in the common room with all the caution of modesty and priestly propriety.*

This caution is to be practised also in the spiritual ministry, not only to remove any danger but also not to give cause for suspicion or gossip, even if this will sometimes mean omitting to do some good deed.

In this regard the students will be so conscientious that, should the time come when they are in the midst of unavoidable dangers, they will have built up such a habit of modesty, of ready raising up of the heart to God and of effortless prudence as to enable them to seek the salvation of others, without any risk of injury or harm to their own soul.

2. Charity. This should principally be practised within the College by means of a sincerely felt demonstration of priestly and Christian kindness, to the exclusion of particular friendships, rivalries, jealousies, quarrels and arguments as well as of excessive familiarity, which detract from one's own dignity and the respect due to others. Everyone should make a point of asking forgiveness quickly and with humility from anyone he realises he has in some way upset. Additionally everyone should ask one of the others to point out his faults so that charity may triumph no less in bearing one another's defects than in timely fraternal correction.

As to persons outside the Institute, while the necessary atmosphere of recollection should be preserved by a prudent reserve, and thus unnecessary visits to very busy places should be avoided and even more so to private houses, nevertheless the members of the Institute should be trained in good manners, genuine friendliness and Christian cordiality. Above all, every member will strive to be an example in his behaviour and in his dress (which is that normally worn by good clergymen, always unaltered, and tidy both in the College and outside, and at all times of the day even in Summer); he will also strive to be exemplary in what he says, by avoiding all affectation and using the wisdom of the Gospel so as to bring his conversation, when possible, to some conclusion that is likely to be edifying and useful for souls.

In the interests of the salvation of souls, the students will give life to their charity by exercising the spiritual ministry. They will be delighted to assume and to carry out with

constant patience, care and love the very precious tasks of confessor, especially of the poor, of teaching catechism to the uninstructed and children, of teaching Christian doctrine and of preaching in church, though only at the invitation and with the approval of the Rector. In caring for the good of souls in all the various opportunities provided by these circumstances, they will strive to make their work resound with that apostolic fervour of which they must begin to show some sign.

If they cannot in fact do much about this in practice, they will at least seek by prayer to do whatever the goodness of God allows. In all that they do, their minds and hearts will turn towards the wretched souls of the entire world and especially of Central Africa, who lie buried in the darkness of infidelity and error, and they will offer up for them whatever good they do, praying for their conversion in the Holy Mass, in their ejaculations and in all their prayers. Calling on the merits and the intercession of the Immaculate Blessed Virgin and of all the Patron Saints, they will say special prayers for the peoples of Central Africa and will do suitable acts of mortification and penance for the conversion of the infidels.

3. The spirit of sacrifice. The constant thought of the great purpose of their apostolic vocation must engender in the students of the Institute the spirit of sacrifice.

They will develop in themselves this most essential disposition by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and seeking always to understand more fully the meaning of a God who died on the cross for the salvation of souls.

If they contemplate and appreciate a mystery of such great love with a living faith, they will consider themselves blessed to be able to offer themselves to lose everything and to die for him and with him. The detachment from their

families and from the world which they have already accomplished is only the first step: they will seek always to make this sacrifice more and more complete, giving up all human affection, accustoming themselves not to bother about their own comfort, their own little concerns, their own opinion and whatever else is theirs. Should even the finest thread remain, it could prevent a generous soul from rising up to God. They will make continuous practice of self-denial, even in small things, and they will often renew the offering of their whole selves to God, the offering of their health and even of their lives. In order to stir the spirit to assume these holy dispositions, in certain circumstances of special fervour they will all together make a formal and explicit dedication of themselves to God, declaring themselves ready, with humility and trust in his grace, even for martyrdom¹²⁰.

¹²⁰ Rules of 1871, Writings 2698-2722.

PART FOUR

GOD'S WORK IN COMBONI

Any study of Daniel Comboni's life provides evidence of both the richness of his personality and the greatness of his holiness, as well as of his human limitations and failings. Alongside the many gifts he received from God and his many acts of total commitment to Jesus Christ and Africa, there was no lack of mistakes and human weaknesses. Grateful for the first, Comboni also recognised the latter and worked on them with honesty. For example, writing to Marie Deleuil Martiny, in 1868, when he was thirty-seven years old, he said:

*I have an objection to make here, which is that I am convinced I am a great sinner. I am not ashamed to confess my nothingness to you, good Sister, because I also have a powerful remedy. Since Jesus came to save sinners, he also came to save me*¹²¹.

Ten months before his death, he confessed:

*Let them say what they like in Verona, the Pope and the most powerful and best missionaries of the Orient are convinced that it was the steadfast firmness of that sinful old bodger Comboni (that founded and achieved the African mission)*¹²².

Three months later, on his fiftieth birthday, he wrote to the bishop of Verona:

It is true, too, that by God's help and through his will I have been able to make my contribution to the progress of this

¹²¹ Writings 1735.

¹²² Writings 6171.

*work. But after all, it is a grace if I was able to avoid being a hindrance to this work, and I can only exclaim with the Apostle: servus inutilis sum*¹²³.

And a month later to Father Sembianti:

*Poor Jesus! How little he is loved by those who should love him! And I am one of them*¹²⁴.

Comboni's deep humility is evident here. And "humility – they say - is truth", the ability lucidly to recognize one's own weak, negative and sinful points. Yet, when we consider Comboni's experience over all, we still remain impressed by the extraordinary oneness he attained in his person. His whole being, the different aspects of his personality, from the physical to the spiritual, from the psychological to the emotional, the moral and the intellectual, all were taken up and placed at the service of his great loves, Christ and Africa: here he found his deepest identity and the wholeness of his being and doing. Times, places, people, and events - he gathered them all up into his person, ever more centered and focused on his love for Jesus and for the African mission.

One aspect of this whole process was his willingness to admit his mistakes. He also found it in him to forgive those who offended him. He accepted being crucified with Christ through the events that befell him, through the people he related with, and through his colleagues and coworkers in the mission. He took the risk of living difficulties, trials, crosses and calumnies in the spirit of the beatitudes, so allowing the strength of the Jesus' Resurrection to work in him.

We can recall, by way of example, just three passages from letters he wrote to the rector of his seminary in Verona during the final months of his life. Ten months before his death:

Blessed be Jesus and his most Sacred Heart, to whom I have almost always prayed in the morning after Mass, using the dear and beautiful prayer of the Gratiarum actionis:

¹²³ Writings 6561.

¹²⁴ Writings 6656.

*“Ignosco, et dimitto ex toto corde omnibus inimicis meis (of which I am unworthy), omnibus me calumniantibus, omnibus mihi detrahentibus (even if they are holy men...) omnibus quocumque modo mihi nocentibus, vel volentibus mala”*¹²⁵.

Forty-four days before his death:

*I do not complain of this at all, because Christus humiliavit semetipsum usque ad mortem*¹²⁶, etc., and thus I am happy to lick the ground and receive any humiliation for the love of God and of Africa¹²⁷.

And three days later:

*I care nothing about the gossip that may already be spreading in Verona to damage and discredit my dignity and my character, or whether they believe what is said (untruthfully) about my having a passion for a woman, etc. as certain vile peasants believe, etc., etc.: cupio anathema esse pro fratribus; amo pro nihilo reputari*¹²⁸, etc. The only thing that matters (and this has been the one true passion of my whole life, and will be until I die, and is no embarrassment to me) is that Africa be converted and that God grant to me and preserve those auxiliary instruments that he has given and will give me¹²⁹.

THE JOURNEY OF PURIFICATION

Comboni became a saint by letting God work on him and in him, and God worked through events and people. Progressively, stage by stage, Comboni was deprived of the kind of material and human support on which he might naturally have thought to rely, believing such support to be indispensable for his personal journey, and for the

¹²⁵ Writings 6465.

¹²⁶ Phil 2,8.

¹²⁷ Writings 6964.

¹²⁸ Rm 9, 3 and THOMAS À KEMPIS, *De imitatione Christi*, chap. 3.

¹²⁹ Writings 6987.

accomplishment of the mission he knew had been entrusted to him by God. Comboni's "merit" in all this, his contribution to God's work in him, was to let God work, even if at times this was only with gritted teeth and kicking against the goad. Yet, in the end, he made his act of surrender, trusting if not always understanding God, but believing that this was the way God behaved. Comboni would verbalise all this in terms of his experience of the Cross, insisting on its value, fruitfulness and necessity.

Against this background, we now turn to examine the main ways in which God moulded and transformed Comboni through this work of separation, detachment, and purification.

1 - LEAVING HIS PARENTS

The separation from his parents was the first purification God carried out in Comboni. As we have already seen, with the early death of all his siblings, he had become an only child, and so it was doubly difficult for him to leave his parents:

But what can I do now to achieve this? For the time being I have no means, and neither do I wish to procure some in a base or risky manner. So I do not know what the result will be. It is certain that I do not want to leave for the African Mission without having done all this. But Fr Melotto is in the same situation. Not knowing what is going to happen. It is certain that this uncertainty, and much more so the thought of leaving my parents even momentarily, in the throes of the present family circumstances that you know, and especially thinking of my mother, disconcerts me greatly¹³⁰.

To the suggestion of waiting for his parents to pass away before going to the missions, his response is lucid and straightforward:

Neither can I contemplate that once my parents die, I might then think of the missions; for would I not then have to be

¹³⁰ Writings 5.

*wishing them dead? Such an idea is neither Christian nor priestly, it is a vandal's and a cannibal's; and I have always wanted and always will want to die first, before they do*¹³¹.

Comboni's mother in fact passed away while he was in Africa for the first time. On his return from this first missionary journey, he would not see her face nor receive her embrace. When he received the news of his mother's death, he wrote to his father:

*Ah! Is my mother then no longer alive?...Has inexorable death then cut the thread of my good mother's days?... Are you then quite alone now, you who once saw all around you the happy company of seven children, cherished and loved by the one whom God chose to be your inseparable companion for life?... Yes, by the mercy of God it is so indeed. Blessed forever be the God who wished it so. Blessed be the provident hand which has deigned to visit us in this world of exile and of tears*¹³².

His father's loneliness weighed on him, and he entrusted him to the care of good friends, especially his cousin Teresa:

*But may the Lord be ever blessed! He has wished it so: I humbly adore his divine decrees. It has pleased him to call my poor mother, whom I remember with such love and who bore much suffering and sacrifice on my account. It has also pleased God to leave my father in sorrowful solitude, and though he is resigned to the divine will his great sensitivity carries and drags him into a deep melancholy*¹³³.

As often as he could, Comboni returned to Limone to be with his father, and to offer him the encouragement of his company. The celebration of his first Mass as a bishop in the parish church of Limone, and two years later the consecration by him of the church

¹³¹ Writings 7.

¹³² Writings 416.

¹³³ Writings 443.

itself, were meaningful moments for both of them. Their last meeting, though, had a special sadness about it: soon after, St Daniel would return to Africa for the last time, to die there a few months later.

But Comboni's last months were marked by the pain of finding his father involved in the calumny of which he was a victim. In a letter to him, his father wrote:

*The devil so tempted her until he succeeded in undermining the reputation of the poor Bishop of Central Africa. I understand that I must die with a wound in my heart, God bless you*¹³⁴.

This wound in his father's heart was a dagger-blow to Comboni's own. He responded thus:

*This is my extreme and enormous suffering. Let them inveigh against me, let them denounce me to the Pope. The mission will be damaged if I am absent from Africa for a few years to justify myself before the infallible Vicar of Christ, who is a father to all, and as God's true representative only does what is right and just. But to upset and distress a holy old man who not only gave me material life but also spiritual life, this is too much, and Giacomo will have to account for it before the eternal judge, who never forgives those who touch the apples of his eye, a priest, a Bishop, a Christian Virgin, whatever their shortcomings may be. May the divine will be done. Everything is disposed by God, who always hears the groans of the afflicted and protects the innocent; and my father dying with a wound in his heart, based on slander, suspicion and lies, or rather on the air perfumed by Giacomo and by Grief, will acquire a new crown in heaven where I hope we will shortly be together*¹³⁵.

¹³⁴ Writings 6937.

¹³⁵ Writings 6938.

And Comboni would die with this wound still open.

As the day of Comboni's death drew closer, the word of Jesus was being fulfilled in him in the most radical way: "If anyone comes to me and does not leave his father and mother... he cannot be my disciple"¹³⁶.

For his father's seventy-eighth birthday, Comboni wrote what would be his last letter to him, manifesting some of the broken-heartedness he was experiencing. Only faith now sustained the relationship between son and father:

*I celebrated Mass in my room this morning at about 3 o'clock (since I could get hardly any sleep at all). In the morning I haven't the breath to say Mass nor even to hear it, so I say Mass some time after midnight, when I can breathe better, in my rooms. I said this Mass for you, for the 78th year since you came into this world to trick this earth and to be a puzzle to others. I prayed that God might make you holy, and give you many spiritual graces to assure the eternal salvation of your soul. I did not pray for a longer life for you, because that is altogether too worldly, although it would be the greatest of joys for me if you were to live to a hundred, provided that it brought you more grace and merit. Apart from that, what use is this miserable world?*¹³⁷

2 - LOSING HIS FIRST COMPANIONS

Comboni set out for Africa the first time at twenty-seven years of age, and as a member of an expedition of five priests and a layman from the Mazza Institute. The leader of the team was Father Oliboni, who died only six months after they had reached their mission. A few months later, two of the others also died: Father Melotto and the layman Isidore. Comboni himself returned to Italy with his health so badly affected that he felt he too had come near to death:

¹³⁶ Lk 14, 26.

¹³⁷ Writings 7034.

I do not want to conceal from you how since the very beginning of last December and for the whole journey to Khartoum I have been so battered by fevers and sickness of the stomach that the prognosis as to the outcome of my health cannot be anything but gloomy. I am now extremely weak, riddled with aches and pains and prey to the most terrible breathlessness and all the symptoms that announce that life is coming to its end. May the Lord be eternally praised! Yesterday I was bled: the blood was as rotten as lye but I must confess that it gave me some relief; so we must not lose hope¹³⁸.

Thus it was that right from his very first experience of Africa Comboni had to learn to deal with the grief of losing the finest of his companions in mission. He effectively remained alone, with the firm intention of going ahead, but with his health badly compromised. In a report he wrote for the Holy See in 1872, just before he was given responsibility for re-starting the African mission, he noted:

The Mazza Institute sent seven missionaries, of whom I was one, to Central Africa on the two expeditions of 1853 and 1857. Five of these died, one went back home for good, and the last, the poorest of the lot, is still being a servus inutilis in the field of the mission¹³⁹.

The dimensions of this purification are striking: of the seven first missionaries sent to Africa, five had died, one withdrew permanently from the mission, and only the last, and the least significant of all, that is Comboni, remained. It was as simple as that.

3 - LETTING GO OF HIS EARLY CONVICTIONS

In St Peter's Basilica in Rome on September 15th 1864, an idea came to Comboni which led to a decisive change in the way he approached and worked for Africa:

¹³⁸ Writings 456, letter to Fr Francis Bricolo.

¹³⁹ Writings 2854.

Would the conquest of the tribes of unhappy Africa not be better effected by siting our centre of operations in a place where Africans can live without changing and Europeans can live without succumbing?”¹⁴⁰

This new idea and approach was the fruit of various inputs and suggestions he had been receiving over time and from various quarters. Until then, he had been convinced that it was a good thing to bring young Africans to Europe so as to prepare them to become agents of mission and development among their own people. The first sign of the gradual change in Comboni’s outlook came with a chance meeting in Cairo three years earlier with Fr Kirchner, who was on his way back to Europe, while Comboni was headed to meet a group of “freed” African slaves as already mentioned above. Of Kirchner, he wrote:

To my great surprise, he is not too favourable to the plan of educating young African boys and girls in Europe.¹⁴¹

The phrase “*to my great surprise*” should be carefully noted since from it we learn that at the time Comboni was still convinced that educating Africans in Europe was the best way forward. The words indicate that now something new and different was beginning to take shape in Comboni’s mind. Later there came a series of long meetings with the Society of Cologne (a great benefactor of Fr Mazza’s work), at which he was challenged about his preferred method. Bishop Canossa, too, was himself insisting with him that bringing African children was not an approach likely to succeed. And, just a week before having the idea for the Plan, we find him recording that “*nearly all my young African boys have died*”.¹⁴² He was referring to the young people in Verona, but the same had happened with those staying with Fr Ludovico in Naples, as Comboni had to recognize years later:

¹⁴⁰ Writings 2753.

¹⁴¹ Writings 552.

¹⁴² Writings 799.

*“Four-fifths of the African boys and girls in Naples either died or abandoned the Institute”.*¹⁴³

In a letter written in September 1864 (the same month he wrote the Plan) to Fr Godofredo Noeker of the Society of Cologne he recognized that:

*... We are depressed due to these misfortunes which have removed all our hope of being able to educate my Africans in Europe for the benefit of the Central African Mission... The undeniable reality, on the one hand that Africans cannot live in Europe, as we have sadly experienced in Naples, in Rome and recently in Verona, and on the other the fact that European missionaries cannot survive the climate of Central Africa, makes me search incessantly for the remedy and presses me to put into practice the ideas that came to me last year during my stay in Cologne.*¹⁴⁴

We understand why, barely two months later in November 1864, Comboni was writing to the same Fr Noeker:

As soon as I arrived in Rome and spoke of the new plan I had conceived in Cologne and developed in my mind on the journey between Cologne and Mainz, the Cardinal ordered me to put these ideas down in writing and in my plan to unite and make use of all those who are working for Africa...

*You can understand what a splendid future is prepared for your Society of Cologne, for in a certain way it gave birth to the idea of the new project, since it was after discussions with the Presidential Committee that I had the thought of the Plan.*¹⁴⁵

It was through Comboni's openness and readiness to listen to people and events that he received the inspiration which impelled him to change direction and leave behind his earlier strong

¹⁴³ Writings 2865.

¹⁴⁴ Writings 852 and 909.

¹⁴⁵ Writings 942 and 945.

convictions. Comboni will present his Plan to his superior as the fruit of divine illumination. It was like a gift from above, the culmination of a long, progressive process of attentiveness to what people and events were telling him.

I believe this plan is the work of God, because the thought of it burst upon me on 15th September while I was doing the triduum to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque; and on 18th September, the day this Servant of God was beatified, Cardinal Barnabò finished reading my Plan... My beloved Superior, I have no merit. When I came to Rome I would not have even dreamed of the Plan. It is Providence that has guided my mind and my heart.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion: at first Comboni (like Mazza, Olivieri, Verri, de Casoria and others) was convinced that African young people should be brought to Europe to educate them and then send them to Africa, but now he was persuaded that this was not the best way to proceed. This change of direction was the fruit of events and of meetings with persons which made him reflect about his methods. In the end, like an inspiration from above, he received the light necessary to make the change and leave behind his previous convictions.

4 – SEPARATION FROM HIS FOUNDER, FATHER MAZZA, AND HIS INSTITUTE

Comboni's deep affection for his benefactor, founder and superior, Father Mazza, is well-known. Also well-known are the difficulties and misunderstandings which arose between them, and which reached the point of Comboni's being considered excluded from Mazza's Institute. He wrote to his friend, Fr Francis Bricolo:

I confess that I cannot understand all this: the serenity of my conscience, and the fact that God works in man the designs of his mercy, these two things give me the strength

¹⁴⁶ Writings 926 and 931.

to bless Providence with all my heart for what is happening. Although I cannot see through the darkness of the future, I still carry on calmly and confidently without bothering about what the world might think about all this. With all my soul I thank the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, who have raised me up to the honour and blessing of being allowed to drink from the bitter chalice, firm in the hope that this will help towards my salvation. I wish a thousand blessings on the people who have helped to make me bear this tribulation and shall always pray for them. I venerate and respect that holy old man who has been so good to me for 23 years, and I will love him until death, although he has mercilessly cast me into perdition, and I would indeed be lost if God in his mercy had not helped me: pater meus... dereliquit... Dominus autem assumpsit me. Full of trust, I throw myself into the arms of God's Providence and I am ready for anything, always fearless and full of trust no matter what may happen. Yet I will stand firm in not declaring myself out of the Institute as long as it isn't clear to me and as long as it isn't certain that this is the will of God.¹⁴⁷

Comboni rebelled and resisted. He expressed similar sentiments to Fr Francis a few weeks after Fr Mazza's death:

When I reached Verona from Paris, I was dumbfounded to hear that such an important man as the Rector of the Institute, whose unlimited self-denial consecrated through enormous and inestimable sacrifices and who was literally identified with the Institute itself, had left. I still cannot swallow this. I felt frozen, not knowing whom I could confide in. Only Fr Francesco had a heart to which I could unburden my thoughts, sure of being understood.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Writings 1049.

¹⁴⁸ Writings 1162.

We know that the dramatic divergence between Comboni and Mazza was resolved with a moving embrace between father and son¹⁴⁹. After that, Comboni was never to see Fr Mazza again in this world: he died a little over a month later. Yet *“in that reconciliation was being decided the survival of what was the apex of Mazza’s spiritual experience: the missionary nature of his work in the Church”*.¹⁵⁰ The fate of Mazza’s mission would be finally decided a year later when the Mazza Institute, in the person of the founder’s successor, withdrew from involvement in the African mission. Comboni would remain alone, deprived of his first and until then only institutional support, and in a very uneasy position with respect to the members of the Mazza Institute, to which he still officially belonged. He recognized this when he wrote to his friend Fr Bricolo:

*My relations with the Institute are very peaceful: Fr Tomba’s last letter above all, though brief, showed his affection. It seems to me, generally speaking, that they do not trust me and are none too sure of my intentions. We have not understood one another too well. On the other hand, I am so far from the Institute; I do not waste my time explaining things concerning the mission to them, after they answered Cardinal Barnabò that the Institute is unable to take on a Mission; and therefore, not being unanimously agreed on the report on Africa, we do not deal with one another with complete openness.*¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ “I went to the old man (Fr Mazza) and told him that I was not even asking him why he wanted to distance me from the Institute; I only asked him whether, in that case, if that was what he wished, he would kindly put it in writing as follows: “I, Fr Nicola Mazza, declare that the priest Fr Daniel Comboni, a member of my Institute for 23 years, no longer belongs to it”. After a few instants, the old man threw himself into my arms, kissing me and saying: “You are my son” (Writings 1162-1163).

¹⁵⁰ *Summarium*, extract from the *Positio*, 19.

¹⁵¹ Writings 1392.

This painful separation left Comboni wounded and perplexed. He would need time to recover. As he remarked, “that is a mouthful I cannot swallow”.¹⁵²

5 – THE PURIFICATION OF HIS UNDERSTANDING OF HIS CALL

Comboni never lost sight of the Plan for the regeneration of Africa, which he considered an inspiration from God. In the years following its writing (1866-1872), he did everything he could to put it into effect. A few days after first conceiving the Plan, he had written:

*The Holy Father, to whom I have presented my plan, is very pleased with it and blesses it. As he said, he wants all the forces involved to wage a general battle in order to tackle head-on the Christianisation of Africa “viribus unitis”. It seems to me that the plan I submitted to Barnabò is well designed for this purpose. Naturally, once I have heard the opinions and deliberations of the individual societies and formed a precise idea of the conditions in Africa and particularly of the situation in the different mission points, I will adjust my plan accordingly. When the first steps will eventually be taken with the help and advice of many experts, God will then undoubtedly show us the right way for the regeneration of Africa.*¹⁵³

One can see here both Comboni’s deep belief in the validity of the Plan, as well as his readiness to accept the advice of, and engage with, the many persons interested in Africa. This led him, even if not always entirely convinced, to adapt himself to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide’s invitation to aim at doing something more limited in scope, but also more practical, safe and viable: the establishment of the Comboni Institutes in Verona and Cairo. This meant that he

¹⁵² Writings 918.

¹⁵³ Writings 911, letter to Fr Noecker, Cologne, September 1864.

had to give up his original idea of promoting a consortium of Church organizations focused on the mission to Africa. Comboni's readiness to adapt was to take practical shape in June 1867, as he himself communicated to the Prefect of Propaganda:

*I have the pleasure to announce to Your Most Reverend Eminence that the distinguished Mgr Canossa has opened a Seminary in Verona for our dear African missions, which in better times will be called the Institute of the Good Shepherd for the Regeneration of Africa; he also opened a female Institute to train good women missionaries, and they are given an education exclusively suited and most appropriate for the specific needs of the African apostolate. Taking another female Institute for Africa, it is necessary to pay the maintenance of 12 sisters of which only two or three will be used, because the others, for lack of proper training, are superfluous and most of the time useless.*¹⁵⁴

But these foundations did not develop with all the solidity required by the Holy See, which continued to insist on greater practical commitment. Three years later (in April 1870) Comboni himself recognized this, and indirectly offering an apology, he wrote once again to the Prefect of Propaganda:

*What has been done so far was accomplished in spite of serious obstacles and difficulties, despite the wretched times we are living in and while the prudent reserve of Propaganda was still in effect, which in its wisdom judged it appropriate not to lend us directly its moral and formal support, the Work being only at an experimental stage.*¹⁵⁵

A few months later, he returned to the same matter in a letter to the Bishop in Cairo:

In the long and frequent conversations I had with His Eminence the Cardinal Prefect, I was warmly recommended

¹⁵⁴ Writings 1416.

¹⁵⁵ Writings 2215.

to give a good impetus to the College for African Missions in Verona. This recommendation was instantly repeated to Mgr Canossa by His Eminence and rightly so, because otherwise, in Africa, without the support of an Institute in Europe, all would be built on sand. Our wittiest of Cardinals made my ears ring with these expressions several times: "Either bring me a certificate that guarantees you will live for 35 years, or put the College in Verona on a firm footing: in either of these two cases I will give you a mission in Central Africa: otherwise, if you don't set up the College properly for me and an accident occurs that carries you off to the other world, there's the fear that your Work will perish with you".

Now since I have not found a Saint who assures me I will survive from one day to the next, it is necessary to establish the College properly. Although I am deeply convinced of the servus inutilis sum, since I am only good at making messes, I nonetheless find His Eminence's principle quite sound. Therefore after returning to Verona on 12th August with Monsignor Bishop, we purchased a large House adjacent to the Seminary of Verona, which for a thousand reasons suits our purpose extremely well. And at this moment there are only 13,600 francs more needed to pay for it. With the help of the most esteemed Rector of the Seminary, we shall be able to find an excellent Priest from Verona to be Head of the College; he will take up his post next March, to devote himself totally to the education of the African candidates.¹⁵⁶

Six months later, in June 1871, he returned yet again to the subject, accepting that the Holy See's requirements and suggestions were both wise and just, and that he consequently needed to put even more resolution and energy into consolidating his Institutes:

I therefore had to stay on in Verona where I shall remain a while longer, to give it the best possible guidance and to

¹⁵⁶ Writings 2336-2337.

consolidate this College, above all in accordance with the wishes of Cardinal Barnabò, who in his facetious way said to me more than once: "My dear Comboni, one or the other: either you put it in writing that you will live another 35 years, or you firmly establish this College of Verona for me, so that it provides good missionaries for Africa. In either case you have hopes of initiating great missionary activity in Central Africa. But if you fail to put the College in Verona on firm foundations, or if some accident should befall you that carries you off to the next world, your beautiful work might perhaps go up in smoke!" Since up to the present I have not found anyone who can assure me that I shall live another 35 years or even another day, it is necessary that I busy myself with the Verona College. Although in full sincerity I exclaimed with St Paul: Servus inutilis sum, and although I know very well I can do little or nothing, I nevertheless acknowledge that the Cardinal, who is the Head of Propaganda, is perfectly right about this. A great Servant of God, Venerable Benaglio Corte of Bergamo who died in 1836 in the odour of sanctity and whose cause for beatification is to be introduced, said: "The great works of God are not achieved by learned men or saints, but by those who have received inspiration from God".¹⁵⁷

Three months later he was in a position to inform the Holy See as follows:

Faithful to the instructions Your Eminence has frequently deigned to give us, the Bishop of Verona and myself have set about more energetically consolidating the foundation of the COLLEGE FOR THE MISSIONS OF AFRICA in Verona.¹⁵⁸

Thus it was that Comboni succeeded in putting into effect the spirit, method and aim of his Plan for the evangelisation of Africa in a way quite different from what he had anticipated, setting aside opinions he had expressed previously, as when he had written:

¹⁵⁷ Writings 2568.

¹⁵⁸ Writings 2609, letter to Cardinal Barnabó, August 15 1871.

From these facts and hopes it does not appear to me that I should conclude that my Institute lacks sound foundations... In this context, the Most Eminent Cardinal's other proposition does not appear altogether exact to me either, namely that through lack of adequate regulations there had been the improprieties that were generally referred to him... It was therefore not a lack of regular organisation: it was one of those evil arts with which God allows the devil to test his Works so that they may be strengthened and hell may be vanquished. Judas among the Apostles, Br Elia alongside the Seraphic Patriarch, apostasies in the heart of the Church and the Religious Orders, etc.: can these be said to have happened through lack of regular organisation?¹⁵⁹

By the second half of 1871 Comboni had clearly traveled quite some distance from the position he had held two years earlier. This change in direction on his part had required of him no little freedom of spirit.¹⁶⁰

6 – LOSING HIS FIRST COWORKERS, THE CAMILLIANS AND THE SISTERS OF ST JOSEPH

Comboni was able to begin fulfilling his dream for the mission in Africa thanks to the cooperation of some Camillian priests and the Sisters of St Joseph. It was the Camillians who made it possible for him to found his Institute for men both in Verona and Cairo.

¹⁵⁹ Writings 1942-1944.

¹⁶⁰ In 1869 the Prefect of Propaganda had gone so far as to suggest that Comboni was “a madman fit to be tied”. Not surprisingly, Comboni was not a little hurt by such an appreciation, as: “...This rumour spread through Rome, went round Italy and France and may even have reached Germany and cooled or restrained some people, and was a powerful influence in making me refrain from certain steps which, during my last trip to Europe, would certainly have earned one hundred thousand francs” (Writings 1941, letter to Mgr. Luigi Ciurcia).

This very fruitful cooperation would last for around ten years, but would eventually end because of the dispute which arose in particular with his principal coworker, Fr Stanislao Carcereri, of whom Comboni had written some years before:

*Fr Stanislao is a great man, capable of great things, a man capable of heading a diocese and more, especially if he is at my side, because he has a great influence on me and has given me proof that I (most unworthy) have an influence on him.*¹⁶¹

In the end the dispute was resolved by Rome, after almost two years which kept Comboni on tenterhooks, uncertain, uncomfortable, and practically paralyzed, as far as his work in Europe and Africa was concerned. The Holy See invited the Camillian superiors to withdraw their personnel from the African mission, and asked Comboni to accept the help of a new administrator. For Comboni, the happy ending was provided by his promotion from the rank of Pro-vicar to that of Vicar Apostolic and his ordination as a bishop. “This was the recognition by the Church’s supreme authority that the grave accusations made against Comboni by the Camillians lacked substance and consequently of [Comboni’s] rectitude and reliability as a missionary”.¹⁶² Comboni emerged victorious from a trial which had caused him “the pains of death” and which deprived him of his first coworkers:

A furious storm which caused me mortal pain flattened my spirit so much that I was on the point of death. This furious tempest which tortured me for two years was the cause of my silence.

Yet this colossus...waged war against me, declared I was guilty, etc, and for not having wished to listen to me incited in foveam quam fecit pro me, and behaved like the mountain shepherds who go for wool and come home shorn. I must

¹⁶¹ Writings 3391.

¹⁶² *Summarium*, extract from the *Positio*, 42.

thank God often, because I escaped from a great danger which was supposed to knock me down.

*I have suffered the anguish and pains of death: but now I thank God for having suffered propter iustitiam. Oh! How good is that God who showed almost greater wisdom in inventing the Cross than he showed in creating the world. Ave, dulcissime, have a very happy year.*¹⁶³

To his friend Fr Bricolo he wrote:

I must say that it was a true miracle of God; and my Work this time too acquired the character of a work of God.

*God bless them for ever. But I have suffered the anguish of death for two and a half years, and thought I would succumb.*¹⁶⁴

In the context of this painful dispute two apparently contradictory aspects of Comboni's personality emerge. In the first place there is his integrity and honesty, upon which he himself insisted:

*It was not I who treated them badly, but they me, in trying to oust me from the Mission. For if they were in any way offended by me, it was on account of their behaviour, and my actions were all just, neither as many nor as grave as they should have been, nor yet as many or as grave as they say or believe them to have been.*¹⁶⁵

Comboni also demonstrated a deeply Christian spirit in bearing the suffering with patience for what seemed an interminable two years, as he awaited a resolution and, above all, in offering those responsible his forgiveness; on various occasions he says, "May God bless them (the Camillians)".

¹⁶³ Writings 4385, 4421, 4426.

¹⁶⁴ Writings 4442, 4445.

¹⁶⁵ Writings 4368, letter to Cardinal Franchi, November 18 1876.

I can assure you that being forced to stay in Rome, far from Central Africa, for 16 months has been a far greater trial to me than the scorching heat, enormous efforts, fevers, hyenas and lions of Central Africa.

*I have finally arrived at my goal after three years of troubles, suffering and mortal anguish which my enemies, as God's love arranged, procured for me. I forgive them with all my heart; my triumph is complete.*¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, in this context Comboni also manifests the more human side of his passionate temperament. The pain he had suffered was so great that when victory came he was taken by a kind of euphoria, and led to use somewhat exaggerated expressions about the positive outcome, while at the same time giving vent to such heavily negative appreciations of his enemies that we are left somewhat surprised. This aspect of Comboni's character will emerge even more in the final trial of his life, and will provide the great opportunity for him to give himself over to God's purifying and sanctifying work.

To complete this painful passage it is necessary to remember that only two years later, in 1879, for completely different reasons, the Religious of St Joseph also withdrew from the African mission, after having cooperated fruitfully for twelve years. Comboni tried everything to keep them, but in vain. And thus he was deprived of his first and valid coworkers. His enterprise would continue thanks to the Institutes founded in Verona, accepting the desire and order of the Holy See, and against his own first inspiration.

7. THE LAST PURIFICATION: "USEFUL" TO AFRICA NO MORE

One cannot but be impressed by the series of crosses which fell upon Comboni in the final years of his life.

Once appointed and ordained Bishop of Central Africa, he returned there in April 1878 and was immediately able to get a firsthand

¹⁶⁶ Writings 4650 and 4665; see also 4600.

picture of the consequences of a terrible drought which, with its attendant famine and illness, eventually wiped out half of the population in some parts of Comboni's Vicariate. To this must be added the premature death of many of his co-workers. As we have already noted, in the space of less than two years fourteen missionaries died, and during the same period as many as fifteen left Africa to return to Europe.

In spite of all this, though, Comboni pressed ahead. He travelled to Italy to find a Rector for his seminary in Verona, to push for the final edition of the Rules of his Institute, to buy a house in Sestri, near Genoa, so as to have a place where his missionaries could recuperate, and to seek financial support for his sorely tried mission. When he returned to Africa eleven months before his death, for what would be the last time, he found himself obliged to face a last and terrible time of testing: his superiors' lack of confidence in him, which leads him to question his "usefulness" to Africa. The two trials he was to pass through now would leave him mortally wounded.

In the first place, the Holy See – without previously informing him – took steps to deprive him of the southern part of his Vicariate, the part on which he had most set his heart, which was home to peoples who had not yet been converted to Islam, and which consequently held out especially high hopes for missionary work. In this regard it should be recalled that, already two years earlier, the Holy See had granted the Great Lakes area (in today's terms, Uganda, Kenya and the eastern part of the Congo) to the missionaries of Monsignor Lavigerie. Comboni responded to this decision with surprise and pain, especially because he only learnt of it in the French missionary journal *Les Missions Catholiques*, despite the fact that these areas "belong to my Vicariate". Comboni requested the official documents: once he had received them, he accepted, even though not without pain, this decision of the Holy See.

Now, two years later, he came to know that the Holy See intended also to deprive him of the southern part of present-day Sudan, and to assign it too to Lavigerie's men. This matter cast a shadow

over the last year of Comboni's life. Five months before his death, writing "with a judgment which is never absolute but entirely subordinate", he nevertheless pointed out to the Cardinal of Propaganda that such a decision would be to

the great detriment of my Vicariate, by depriving me of the main area of my Institute's work... This zone has been the main objective of the Work and of the establishments I have carried forward with such great labour and expense, and I will say even more with the help of the grace of God which helped me.

And just six weeks before his death, he was again writing to the same Cardinal, telling him that the matter of the South Sudan

has been a great heartache for me, and I shall not be rid of it until I die or until the Sacred Congregation takes other more appropriate and necessary decisions.

Comboni had always considered the southern part of the Sudan to be the natural destination of all his work, given that the northern part of the country was completely Moslem. Without South Sudan his work would be stillborn. His dismay may be all the better understood if it is remembered that Comboni had spent more than a year in Rome at the request of the Holy See precisely to work with the ecclesiastical authorities on defining the boundaries of new Vicariates in Central Africa. And now, without his foreknowledge, he received the news of their intention of depriving him of the area which held out greatest promise for his missionary work.

The second trial Comboni had to face at this time – even more serious and painful than the first -, was the calumny against him of alleged passion for the missionary Sister Virginia of the Institute of St Joseph of the Apparition. Given that her Institute had decided to withdraw from Africa, Sister Virginia had asked permission to leave it and become a postulant with the Comboni Sisters so as to be able to go on working in Africa. At this point there developed a whirlwind of suspicions, accusations and calumnies, regarding the alleged attraction Comboni felt for her. The last six months of

Comboni's life were marked by this calumny. He defended himself with energy, the subject filling almost all his letters during these last months of his life. He faced the issue head-on at every opportunity and in the strongest of terms. Comboni felt that he had been mortally wounded, and in his letters he expresses all the dismay he feels. Never before had he expressed himself in such an uncompromising way (except perhaps on some occasions in the disputes with Father Mazza and later with the Camillians). At a first superficial reading, he appears embittered, wounded, aggressive in his own defence. But if we read him calmly, remembering what Comboni had been in his younger years and the dimensions of this trial, he comes across to us now as a man confronting all the details of the calumnious accusation with serene clarity, analyzing them one by one and responding to them with remarkable precision and acuity. Through everything he writes shines out what has gradually become one of his defining characteristics: to seek, save and defend what is vital to the individual person, in justice and charity, separating this out from what is only secondary, superficial, and formal.

The main focus of Comboni's letters now is the defence of his innocence, or more precisely, the defence of Sister Virginia. Having taken upon himself responsibility for a whole continent, Comboni now feels himself obliged to take responsibility for one single individual. He continues to think and write of Africa, spending himself for her peoples, faithful to his long-standing and demanding vocation. But now he is ready to give up even Africa, so as to go on struggling to defend this single person. Three months before his death Comboni writes to his Rector in Verona:

Although I am certain that I will soon succumb to so many crosses, which in conscience I feel I do not deserve, still may my Jesus be ever blessed, the true vindicator of innocence and protector of the afflicted. Africa will be converted; and if I am not to have consolation on earth, I will have it in heaven. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are always with us, and if we are abandoned by men, God will not fail us, and will see to it that

*Africa is saved, as well as poor Virginia, who is a soul redeemed by the Blood of Jesus Christ.*¹⁶⁷

To the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda he writes, sixteen days before his death:

Those people in Verona are always scandalised that I show so much interest in Virginia. But I would do the same thing for any other Sister, even the humblest, if she were victimised and persecuted unjustly like Virginia, because that is my duty in justice and charity...

*Virginia is ruined as far as they are concerned. But I will never abide by such injustice and cruelty, even if it cost my life! The Heart of Jesus will help that unhappy and innocent victim, who does not deserve these tortures!*¹⁶⁸

To the same Cardinal a few days later:

*But it comforts me to think that this is a question of justice and charity towards a soul consecrated to God, whom they are trying without reason to deviate from her true vocation, at the risk of her eternal perdition. The sublime spectacle, well known to Your Eminence, given to the world by the illustrious zeal and charity of the late great Pius IX, when he had the courage to indignantly defy the most powerful Emperor Napoleon III, refusing in Rome to hand over to a Jewish father his poor eleven year-old shoemaker son who had become Catholic, whom I myself accompanied from the Catechumens' Hospice (whose President was then Mgr Jacobini, now Cardinal Secretary of State) to the papal audience, will, I am sure, bring courage to Your Eminence's great charity in protecting the vocation of a Christian virgin who, in my humble opinion, is worthy of this in every way.*¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Writings 6815.

¹⁶⁸ Writings 7117, 7120.

¹⁶⁹ Writings 7174.

It is interesting to note how the whole of Comboni's correspondence ends with two relatively brief letters, written the same day, six days before his death. One deals exclusively with Africa,¹⁷⁰ and the other with Virginia. The last written word left to us by Comboni, in the postscript of his last extant letter, is "Virginia"¹⁷¹: "*Please give the enclosed to Virginia*".

With these last and hardest trials, God was freeing Daniel Comboni even from his way of being, or of considering himself, "useful" to Africa, something of which he had had a presentiment clearly expressed in a letter to the Cardinal of Propaganda Fide a little more than a year before his death, in response to a clear manifestation of distrust in his actions as vicar apostolic.¹⁷² It was August 27, 1880:

I received your venerable letter of the 3rd of this month about two weeks ago at Ischl, where I went to pay my respects to the Emperor of Austria, the Protector of the Mission. I well understood the full import and meaning of the letter, and I have seriously considered whether, given my weakness and indeed nothingness, I can still be really of use to the African apostolate, doubtless the most trying and difficult in the world, or whether I am more likely to do it harm; the more so because now I have really become more sensitive to the blows of adversity and far less able to carry crosses, because of so many difficulties, privations, illnesses, fevers; because of so much heartbreak, struggle and opposition, all borne for many

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Writings 7239-7242, letter written to Father Giulianelli in Cairo, October 4, 1881. As a young man Comboni had written: "I am therefore trying every way. If I do not succeed in anything, God will be satisfied with my good intentions. It is true, I spare no efforts, nor journeys, nor my life to succeed in the enterprise. I will die with Africa on my lips" (Writings 1441).

¹⁷¹ Letter to Fr Joseph Sembianti, rector of his seminary in Verona, from Khartoum, October 4, 1881.

¹⁷² Cf. Zugliani, *Beato Daniel Comboni*, Misioneros Combonianos, Mexico, 200, 122-123.

*years, but particularly during the recent and terrible period of the famine and plague.*¹⁷³

Confirmation of Comboni's understanding of the situation comes in a series of statements he wrote during the last three months of his life, where it is plain that Comboni foresaw the possibility of his being withdrawn from the mission by the Holy See:

*Finding myself so abandoned and distressed, a hundred times I had the strongest temptation... to give up everything...; what sustained my courage to hold firm at my post until death or some decision from the Holy See was the conviction of the certainty of my vocation.*¹⁷⁴

I can tell you, my dear Father, that in these matters both you and His Eminence (both of whom I love and will love until I die), paid no heed to my opinion and judgement: and I still see no sound reason I might have given you for this, for so despising my views.

*However, I am not offended, because those who work with such constancy, as I always have, for God and for his glory, must always be ready (and I am and have been for decades) for all the trials and crosses, and for the dear and indispensable pro nihilo reputari.*¹⁷⁵

*I answer you both that if you wronged me (I repeat, I am convinced that you acted to a holy end and in conscience), it was by giving no weight to my assertions and to my judgement regarding Virginia, but rather by believing peasants and others who are less competent than me.*¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Writings 6084, letter to Cardinal Simeoni, August 27, 1880. In this and the following five quotations, the key phrases are left in normal type.

¹⁷⁴ Writings 6886, letter of July 16, 1881, less than three months before his death.

¹⁷⁵ Writings 6931-6932, letter to Fr Sembianti, August 3, 1881, two months before his death.

¹⁷⁶ Writings 6964, letter to Fr Sembianti, August 27, 1881, 43 days before his death.

*I blush at writing these things, but I feel deeply offended at seeing Cardinal di Canossa acting inside my Institute without listening to a word from me who, besides giving it the Rule, maintain it entirely with thousands of scudi a year through great sacrifices and the sweat of my brow. But I offer it all up to the Lord, because everything is disposed by God for the good of the Work and for our perfection.*¹⁷⁷

History would show that, only shortly after his death, Daniel Comboni was to all appearances left without Africa and without Virginia. Without Africa: because not even a year after his death there broke out in Sudan an anti-Western revolution so violent that it erased every trace of Comboni's work, spelling unspeakable tragedy for fifteen missionary men and women who became entrapped in the events as they unfolded. This trial lasted eighteen years and is known as the Mahdi revolution. And without Virginia: because once Comboni died, all trace of her is lost. It is known that she left the Comboni Missionary Sisters, and went to Egypt for a while, but then silence.

In this darkest desolation, left with nothing, Comboni remained only with what was truly essential: his absolute confidence in the God who knows how to bring good out of evil and life out of death, as he expressed it in the last paragraph of his last letter, six days before his death:

Let everything that God wishes come about. God never abandons the one who trusts in him. He is the protector of innocence and vindicator of righteousness. I am happy in the cross, which, when borne willingly out of love for God, gives birth to victory and eternal life. Yours most affectionately, Bishop Daniel.

*(Postscript) Please give the enclosed to Virginia.*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Writings 7194, letter to Cardinal Simeoni, September 1881, a month before his death.

¹⁷⁸ Writings 7246.

DIES NATALIS — BORN INTO HEAVEN

We have no further written word from Daniel Comboni during the last six days of his life. There is instead the report prepared by the missionaries who were at his side during those days and in his passing from this life to the next. They recorded that “Fr Arthur Bouchard, bending down over the dying bishop, said to him: ‘Monsignor, the time has come’. Fervently, Comboni followed the prayers of the Anointing of the Sick and of the commendation of his soul to God, and then managed to say three times, ‘My Jesus, mercy’. At this, his face lit up so as to seem transformed. He was seeing heaven. His breathing became difficult and slow. Comboni died in Fr Bouchard’s arms, ‘sweetly, like a child falling asleep in his mother’s arms’. It was ten in the evening of the tenth day of October, 1881. Daniel Comboni was fifty years, six months and twenty-five days old. The missionaries who were present at the moment of the death of this just man made this solemn promise before his mortal remains: Africa or death”.

His last words were “My Jesus, mercy”, the simplest of prayers, still commonly used today in Daniel Comboni’s native northern Italy. With these few, simple words he attained the very beginning and end of the Gospel, its deepest essence. Salvation and holiness happen when a person hands over the truth of their lives to the free and loving compassion of God. “Lord, have mercy on me, for I am a sinner,” said the publican. “And I tell you that he went home justified”. Some might say: “Is that all? What is so special about that?” Yes, that is really all. This is truly special, this intimate, deep, conscious and loving “self-abandonment” to God’s unconditional and freely-given love, “like a child falling asleep in his mother’s arms”. Comboni’s “docibilitas”, his readiness to be led, exercised throughout his life, reached its climax at the hour of his death. As we have been able to see, so much had already been taken from him in various ways throughout his human journey. Now he was completely free of all dross and every attachment, and finally ready to entrust himself for ever to the great Artificer and Artist of his life.

READY TO LEARN

We can gain a deeper appreciation of what took place in Comboni if we think of the work of great sculptors such as, for example, Michelangelo Buonarroti. Of him Alexandra Grömling has written: “Michelangelo would go in person to the workshop where the marble, his favourite material, was kept, and there he would look for the ‘right’ piece for his purposes. He would then start working on it from the front. He would first chisel out the main contours, and then move on to sculpt the extremities. Little by little he would work deeper into the marble cutting out the deepest incisions. According to Michelangelo, the artist’s task was to allow the figure already existing within the marble finally to emerge. He considered that the sculptor found the strength to carry out this task in the ‘ability to stay put’”.¹⁷⁹

Even before starting work on an enormous block of white Carrara marble, Michelangelo could already “see” there the Pietá, the Moses, or the David he was to fashion. Gradually removing piece after piece of the stone, at first larger pieces and then smaller and smaller, in the end he was practically caressing his subject into life. Indeed it is said that, standing before his completed Moses, he let out a cry of both satisfaction and rage: “Why don’t you speak?” This masterpiece only lacked the gift of speech.

All this can give us some idea of what God did in Daniel Comboni, gradually leading him into a deeper freedom through the circumstances of his life in mission as Comboni held fast to his “long-standing vocation”. Comboni’s “merit” in this was to let God shape him, especially through the inevitable crosses. Comboni’s free and personal availability to the hand of the Potter can be well expressed in the Latin term “docibilitas”. This is not

¹⁷⁹ Alexandra Grömling, *Miguel Ángel Buonarroti, Vida y Obra*, Könnemann, 1999, p. 56. “Even the greatest artist could not picture an image which the marble did not hold within it, and only the hand of man, moved voluntarily by its creativity, can enter as far as that”, wrote Michelangelo (ibid., p. 57).

merely “docility”, but rather the readiness to let oneself be taught, the readiness to learn. In Daniel Comboni, this “teachability” allowed God to draw out of him the missionary masterpiece he intended. “The true missionary is the saint”.¹⁸⁰ God knew how to make a missionary and a saint out of Comboni, and Comboni, by God’s grace, knew how to learn from his difficulties and failures, and let himself be shaped into a free person: he knew that in every renunciation and pain there moved a loving and mysterious hand sustaining and caressing him, in the conviction that to hold fast to the God of his life and of his vocation mattered more than anything else.

READY TO BE DIFFERENT

The Bible is full of statements about God’s holiness and about our duty to be holy. Perhaps the best known text is in Leviticus: “Be holy, because I am holy”.¹⁸¹ Bible scholars explain that the term “holy” could be translated into English as “different”. God is “holy”, that is “different” from us, from the way we are, from the ways we judge, think, and respond, from our religious categories and concepts. When in Isaiah God is proclaimed three times holy,¹⁸² he is being acknowledged as “totally different”, entirely other. When God manifests his holiness, his difference, to human beings, it seems as if the awe and terror thus inspired can only be healed in death. “Woe to me!” Isaiah cries. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty”.¹⁸³ And Peter, awestruck by the manifestation of Jesus’ power, exclaims: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 90.

¹⁸¹ Lev 11,44.

¹⁸² Is 6,3.

¹⁸³ Is 6, 5.

¹⁸⁴ Lk 5, 8.

To accept the invitation to “be holy, because I am holy” means accepting to set out from our reasonable, “religious” human reality, to journey towards the Totally Other, who is the Lord. Because of this, every adventure of a human being with God is born of a personal call, by which we are invited to set out and journey with him wherever he leads. Often it also involves a material journey: Abraham leaves Ur of the Chaldees for the land of Canaan; the people of Israel leave Egypt, venture into the desert and finally make their way into the Promised Land; the prophets leave behind their quiet life so as to pass on the message entrusted to them.

But the journey is always more than geographical; it always involves the very persons of those called, inviting them to be transformed, to become “different” in the way they understand themselves, in the way they think, act and judge. The Abraham who was ready to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, the son of his trust in God’s promise, is a very “different” Abraham from the man who decades before had left his home, sustained by the wonderful promise of a new and beautiful land and countless descendants. Abraham’s “pure faith” appears at the end of a long journey, during which all human certainties are taken from him one by one. Only thus did Abraham attain the one true certainty: “God will provide”.

Like Abraham our father in the faith, Comboni only gradually attained this deep experience of God. How very “different” is the Comboni who first left for Africa, longing for mission with “more passion than two ardent lovers longing for the moment of their wedding”, from the Comboni who, at the end of his life and still faithful to his long-standing vocation, but now freed from everything, even from his own usefulness to Africa, abandoned himself into the hands of God: “There is nothing more certain than Christ and his Cross”. It had been a long road: to reach the Totally Other and become different like Him. Indeed, “the missionary spirituality of the Church is a journey towards holiness”.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ RM 90.

FREE TO TRUST

The description offered here of Daniel Comboni's gradual journey into freedom might perhaps tempt one to imagine that everything was easy for him, as God accomplished this transformation through the various circumstances of Comboni's life. But this was far from the case; God worked Comboni's salvation through Comboni's complete self-abandonment, where Comboni spared himself in nothing, standing faithful till death, fleeing before no person or event, but rather facing everything and bearing the consequences. God acted through events, yes, and Comboni let himself be moulded by them, regarding and accepting them as something to be gone through out of love for God and for Africa.

I like illustrating this point by recalling Jesus Christ himself, especially in his passion, death and resurrection. If we read the Gospels with care, we become aware that there is a kind of double reading or level. On the one hand, it is affirmed that Jesus handed himself over to the Father and to men, on the other it is said that it is men who hand Jesus over (Judas hands him over to the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin to Pilate, and Pilate to his death). The two ways of looking at things, both very present in the Gospels, seek to show, among other things, the complex interplay of freedoms, of persons and of God, and how it is that in the person of Jesus there came to be the perfect and complete realization of the two freedoms and of the two commandments of the Law: love for God and neighbour, not as if they were two separate realities, but rather as intrinsically connected.

GOD'S WORK BROUGHT TO FULFILMENT

We have identified the main moments of purification in Comboni's life, where one can especially appreciate his great willingness to learn and let himself be moulded by God. Perhaps other times of similar purification could also have been identified; but there is no doubt that those mentioned are very evident, and there are precisely

seven of them. Is this number a mere coincidence? In Holy Scripture, the number seven has a clear meaning, expressing the idea of something complete and full, a perfect whole. Seven signifies totality, the whole desired and worked by God. Indeed, through the seven purifications in Comboni's life, God attained a perfect whole, a desired completion.

If holiness is the achievement in a human being of the idea God has of them, we can understand how God regards a holy person with a sense of repose and satisfaction in the work he has brought beautifully to fulfilment. This beautiful work of art is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's dynamic presence, as he acts primarily through the sacraments, impelling the person to an active love of neighbour, inspiring and strengthening them in the practice of the theological and cardinal virtues.

In considering the possible canonisation of one of its members, the Church looks for them to have lived these virtues in an "heroic" manner. In fact, the virtues are good practical habits; they indicate a habitual, constant, ready - and hence heroic — openness to God's plan. They provide a paradigm within which can readily be seen the reality of the Holy Spirit's work in the sacraments and the works of mercy. They also show how a person who lives in this way experiences the dynamic and effective victory over the forces of evil and sin. In his human journey, courageously committing himself to the evangelisation of Africa, learning with docility from the circumstances, dealing with real people, and under the inspiration, impulse and action of God, Comboni succeeded in defeating the forces of evil and succeeded in being "different", that is, "holy".

NOT BORN A SAINT, BUT BECOMING ONE

Given the "largeness" of Comboni's personality and of God's work in him, we might run the risk of regarding him in a one-sided way, only seeing what is marvellous and good and neglecting to notice other aspects of his temperament. This can make it seem that holiness came easy to him. But if we take a closer look, we soon see

that it was not thus: Comboni was not exempt from weaknesses, mistakes and failings. Earlier in this chapter, we have seen that he knew how to recognise his own human reality with humility. Now here mention can be made, even if only briefly, of some of the things that make him a human being like us, with his own negative points that accompanied him throughout his life, and which characterised his personal journey towards redemption and holiness.

In my view, Comboni's most obvious failings were connected with his personality and character. By temperament, Comboni was very active and full of initiatives. As Lozano has remarked: "Daniel Comboni is one of those rare people who in fifty years of life do things that others would need a hundred years to achieve"¹⁸⁶.

Comboni had a passionate, spontaneous, rich, and forthright character, capable of easily entering into relationship with people: on the one hand, this was a great help to him, but on the other it meant that he was unlikely to get on well with everybody. Indeed, in dealing with many people he evinced failings that can also be described as "moral". He himself was aware of many of these failings. He always and wholeheartedly forgave those who had sought to frustrate, accuse or wound him. In this regard, it should not be forgotten that it was his normal practice to go to confession once a week, except in some rare instances which he was the first to acknowledge¹⁸⁷.

Yet on various occasions he expressed very negative judgements about different people, at times using offensive words. The undeniable fact remains that the judgments he reserved for his missionaries were more severe than those of his accusers against him. We can briefly recall some of these cases.

In the period of painful tension with Father Mazza and his Institute, Comboni at times lacked sensitivity towards people and their

¹⁸⁶ JUAN MANUEL LOZANO, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

¹⁸⁷ Writings 4318-4325.

understandable human reactions. While still working as “Father Mazza’s son”, he acted and decided independently, as if he were already responsible for the Plan for the African mission. He even went so far as to say that Father Mazza was dealing with him not so much as father than “as a tyrant”¹⁸⁸. In the conflict with the Camillians he did not mince his words, going so far as to call Father Carcereri a “great freemason”. He seemed almost to relish the humiliation of the Camillian superior general, who exercised considerable influence in the Vatican. He ran into various problems with the bishop of Verona and went so far as to say of him: “He has never given a single cent to Africa, or anything to anybody, because he left his rich inheritance to his noble family when he became a Jesuit”¹⁸⁹.

He spoke his mind about religious Congregations in very uncompromising terms. Regarding the presence of the Franciscans in Egypt, he spoke of “the very serious obstacle that predominates and is in direct opposition to the increase of the apostolic ministry in Egypt. And what is this obstacle? It is the Franciscan monopoly, which keeps the Catholic apostolate in Egypt enchained, and substantially prevents its development”¹⁹⁰. He protested against the “cursed selfishness of friars and religious!”¹⁹¹, as well as against the activities of the Jesuits in Cairo when one of them gave the spiritual exercises to his missionaries. Some years earlier, at the conclusion of the controversy with the Camillians, he was to exclaim: “Away with all the Camillians”, and “Friars never more!”¹⁹².

On the other hand, he himself did not seem prone to shun the limelight. He would boast about his friendship with the viceroy of Egypt, of how he rode the horse of the governor of Kordofan, of how he had a battalion of soldiers under his command. “I came here by

¹⁸⁸ Writings 965.

¹⁸⁹ Writings 7193, to Cardinal Simeoni, September 1881.

¹⁹⁰ Writings 6764-6765.

¹⁹¹ Writings 6989, August 30, 1881.

¹⁹² Writings 4378 and 4381.

steamer and dromedary at full speed in 5 days, and I am as strong as a lion... I have been given full powers by the Turkish government to bring to heel the chief thieves of human flesh, woe betide anyone who dares to oppose me”¹⁹³ - and this, a mere six months before his death.

In many ways, Daniel Comboni reminds one of St Paul, in the sense that like the Apostle he too clearly had a very strong personality, and could often find himself in conflict with others. Like Paul, Comboni did not only express his feelings with considerable spontaneity, but also tended to exaggerate. It came easy to him to use superlatives, both of the positive and negative variety. He could often pass from exorbitant praise of someone to damning criticism. He certainly exaggerated at times in the way he described some of his trials and difficulties. This was just the kind of temperament he had to live and struggle with.

Comboni knew his own value, but he also knew that he should not always be praising himself. While still remaining the man he was, and hence still with some exaggeration, he sought to correct his feelings and expressions, glorying rather in his difficulties, in the saving power of the cross, in the love of Jesus, in trust in God and not in himself. It is interesting to note the various occasions when expressions of self-praise are mixed with declarations of being a mere servant, or the times when he manifests his desire to be considered a mere nothing in the context of the triumph of God’s grace in his work and the necessity of the cross. By staying in touch with who he was as a human being as well as with the supremacy of God’s action in his life through painful trials, Comboni accepted the journey through which God was purifying him from every human attachment.

By way of illustration of all this, we can cite two of the many possible passages from the letters Comboni wrote during the last year of his life: “How would I have managed... to found and to

¹⁹³ Writings 6602-6603, letter to his father, April 6, 1881.

achieve the African Mission which was made possible for the Holy See only under my governance? Let them say what they like in Verona, the Pope and the most powerful and best missionaries of the Orient are convinced that it was the steadfast firmness of that sinful old bodger Comboni”¹⁹⁴. “It is true, too, that by God’s help and through his will I have been able to make my contribution to the progress of this work. But after all, it is a grace if I was able to avoid being a hindrance to this work, and I can only exclaim with the Apostle: *servus inutilis sum*”¹⁹⁵.

Given that Comboni had such a rich and passionate personality, one can readily understand how deeply attached he could become to life and even to things, so there is no surprise in finding that even in the last month of his life he could have expressed himself as follows about the gift of a ring from Pope Pius IX: “Oh! I dream night and day of possessing the Pope’s ring with Mgr Ricci’s signature left to me by Brown. Oh, beloved ring! It was worn by that holy Pontiff, Pius IX! Use all your prudence and skill to wrench it from the greedy hands of the son, who was thought to be a saint, who was made a cavaliere by Pius IX because he was wounded at Castel Fidardo. Oh, beloved ring! I dream of what I must do with it. Use it myself, no, because I am too profane; sell it to princes who eat too much for two thousand marengi, no, that would be a profanation of the ring. We shall see. Pray and have prayers said for it to be retrieved.”¹⁹⁶.

Some psychologists specializing in the study of the felt needs of the human being affirm that such needs are to be found in every person, but in differing degrees of intensity. The Jesuit psychologist of vocation, Father Luigi Rulla took up the list of needs previously elaborated by Murray and studied it in connection with the priesthood and religious life. He made a distinction between what he

¹⁹⁴ Writings 6171.

¹⁹⁵ Writings 6561, letter written on his fiftieth birthday, March 15, 1881.

¹⁹⁶ Writings 7205, letter to Father Sembianti, September 1881.

called “dissonant needs” (those, that is, in contradiction with the values of the consecrated life), and “neutral needs” (psychological energies that can be used either positively or negatively in the consecrated life according to whether or not they are channelled in ways that are in harmony with the values of the Gospel or against them).

Applying Rulla’s two lists to Comboni, one can, in my view, identify only one “dissonant need” that is, exhibitionism - the tendency to want to draw attention to oneself, to occupy the centre of attention, to be noticed, to fascinate and attract. Comboni had these tendencies, but the purifications to which God subjected him throughout his life, and which were accepted by him with deep surrender, obliged him to move from a selfish stance, proper to exhibitionism, to a progressively theocentric – with God at the center of his life.

Given Comboni’s rich personality, “neutral needs” were present in him in abundance: for example, the need for many friends, to be with those who suffer, to be a pioneer, to overcome great difficulties, to be a leader, to be an organizer, to be active and enterprising. The holiness of Comboni consisted in the fact that, with the help of God’s grace, he was able to channel all these energies into the service of the African mission through the vocation received from God. “Neutral needs” are energies which potentially constitute a person’s greatness. According to the use a person makes of them, they can either become a great saint or a great villain. Comboni’s journey of purification and conversion led him to unify the diverse energies of his personality around the vocation and mission received from God.

In considering how Daniel Comboni became a saint within his concrete human reality, it is opportune also to take account of the fact that his life and action were situated at a particular historical period and within a particular cultural framework. Naturally enough, the oral and written traditions of the Institutes he founded tend to underline the prophetic power of Comboni’s life and mission – and

in this they do not err: Comboni was indeed a prophet. He bore witness to a God who loves Africa and died for her, to the fundamental human dignity of the Africans, and to the fact that Africans were called to evangelize their own brothers and sisters. Comboni spoke with prophetic voice when he insisted that Africa was called to take up her rightful place in the Church as the “black pearl”. He was a forward-thinker in understanding and valuing the importance of consecrated women in the evangelization of Africa, especially in the Muslim context. Comboni was in fact the first missionary to bring consecrated women to the African interior.

Comboni bore witness to God’s ability to unify the energies of a person in the service of that absolute which is God himself and the evangelization of Africa. While giving himself completely to the Africans, in a context which was “outside” the Church and which exposed him to many vicissitudes and temptations, Comboni remained anchored in all his humanity in God. His prophetic message consisted in affirming the intimate, unbreakable link between God and Africa. In this sense, Comboni was a prophet because he was a saint, because in his very person he pointed to the presence of God at work evangelizing Africa.

In other fields, however, Comboni showed a lack of foresight with regard to ongoing developments, erring at times in his evaluation of facts and persons. For the Italian and European that he was, Comboni espoused very conservative political positions. He did not support the changes underway in Italy in favour of the country’s unification which, among other things, put an end to the temporal power of the Popes. In this regard Comboni disconcerts us not only by his silence but by his outright opposition. This lack of “prophetic spirit” becomes even clearer when we remember that this very problem was a matter of lively debate both in Church circles in Verona and in his own Mazza Institute. Comboni’s position on the question can also probably in part be explained by the very traditional and conservative nature of his theological training and outlook.

In his missionary activity in Africa, he unwittingly favoured the colonial ambitions of Egypt (and Europe). He did not foresee the Mahdist revolution, which broke out just a year after his death, as a reaction to the interference of Egypt and Europe in the territories of Sudan, and which would turn out to be a terrible tragedy for his missionary sons and daughters.

With reference to questions of more modern relevance, Comboni cannot be said to have favoured inter-religious dialogue in the formal and structural sense of the term, although as a person he was very open to people of whatever cultural or ideological hue. Vis-à-vis the Moslem world, he adopted a traditional, if not at times hostile, posture.

Nor can he be called a great pioneer of inculturation. Other missionaries gave much clearer proof of perspicacity in this respect: it is enough to think of St Justin De Jacobis, the apostle of Ethiopia. With regard to lay people, although Comboni valued their work in the African mission, at times he expressed his opinion about some of them in somewhat negative terms. And, understandably enough, he did not foresee the spirit and value of non-violence, as would appear later with, for example, Mohatma Gandhi.

We have to recognize that the history of the Church is full of saints who were in some respects the forerunners of new movements and exigencies of society, but in others remained somewhat behind the flow of history. With simplicity and respect, we can say that Comboni, too, followed this rule. Yet the holiness of a person does not consist in whether or not they have innovative ideas, or in their being progressive or conservative in one or other civil or Church context. Holiness resides in the personal response given to God, in such fashion that a person's whole humanity, naturally limited in one way or another, is lived in generous self-giving to the God who died on the cross and rose again at Easter. Holiness has to do with placing God at the centre of your life and letting him lead you to live here and now the spirit and reality of the beatitudes. If this is holiness, then Comboni was undoubtedly holy.

HUMAN NATURE AND GOD'S GRACE

Space has been given to these human aspects of Comboni's person and experience because through them we can understand more clearly what is special about the Christian faith. Here we have a God who takes flesh so as to assume our human nature, and from within that very nature, not in spite of our human limitations but through them, opens up for us the way to the "Different". Christian holiness is always given to human beings who, while influenced by evil, are saved by grace, that is, by the kind concern and action of God, to whom we respond with grateful love. At one and the same time, the incarnation of God shows us a God who is "different" from our normal, natural human understanding, as well as a human being who is "different" - made free from within and made able to offer a "divine" response from out of his or her "human" reality.

To have reflected on some of Comboni's weaknesses and failings, - besides bringing him closer to us as a flesh-and-blood human being - , also helps us become aware of where our own journey of holiness begins. Saints are not persons placed on a pedestal to receive our admiration or prayers, but rather people who throw light on our true humanity and show us where God's path passes through our lives. Our own faults and failings are not obstacles for God's work in us, and God does not act in us in spite of them; on the contrary, they are the "theological place" where salvation is given, that is, they are our best teachers on the journey of purification and holiness.

This way of looking at things helps us understand the paradox of the Christian faith, and appreciate the way God's plan comes to fulfilment against all human expectation. Where we may be tempted to see only weakness, failure, ignominy or injustice, faith sees - and we know how convinced Comboni was of this - the realization and living out of a love which is by its very nature given freely, that is, in situations of fragility, injustice and ignominy.

Very apt here are the words of one of Comboni's greatest students, Gianpaolo Romanato: "Comboni's letters during the last two months

of his life tell of a man who already regards life with a sense of detachment. He is hard, dry, imperious, and rough as never before. He is in anguish because of the death of his best missionaries. He feels his own strength deserting him, while the necessities of his mission increase. The disproportion between the resources of the mission and the immensity of the Vicariate obsesses him. Yet he is embittered even more by the pettiness he encounters in certain Church quarters, where instead of support he meets opposition; instead of people rallying to his defence, they dishonor him with false, stupid and injurious accusations. He is obliged to offer absurd and humiliating explanations, wasting the last energies he could have used for Africa which is dying of hunger and thirst, and which still awaits the redemption of Christ". He continues: "Comboni's last letters, combative and in some places stylistically confused, are the most human, the truest, in his vast correspondence. At the end, this great missionary, whom nothing could hold back, who had moved half the world, for whom obstacles had always been just an incitement to even greater effort, is left quite alone, in the grip of ingratitude, anguish, and anxiety. Before him there is Africa in all her mystery, around him a few dying missionaries, behind him an indifferent, slow, and ungrateful Church".

Thus Romanato the historian feelingly reconstructs what was in fact the real situation. Yet this very same reality, with its humanly-speaking lamentable burden of negativity and evil, can be seen as the "theological place" where God's saving and sanctifying work made itself present. The human responsibility and limitations of the various characters in the drama remain in their entirety, but the person, in our case Comboni, has inner supernatural light enough to be able to live this very situation as the "necessary" path towards becoming like the Different One, and so being in some way useful to the evangelization of Africa. It is important to recall this basic aspect of the Christian faith, because it can help all of us Christians recognize in our lives that path which leads to salvation, to holiness and to apostolic and missionary effectiveness.

PART FIVE

THE CHALLENGE OF COMBONI'S HOLINESS

Comboni's times were different from ours, and our historical and cultural situation is quite different from his. So at this point we are inevitably called to move from the Comboni of history to ourselves, and to reflect on the challenge his holiness constitutes for us. At the time of his canonisation, the Italian Comboni magazine *Nigrizia* published a special issue entitled "Comboni among us". It is well worth trying to develop the idea encapsulated in that phrase, with special emphasis on Comboni's holiness, given that here we are dealing with his "canonisation", that is, the official recognition of this holiness.

The focus here will thus be the meaning Comboni's holiness has for us who live in times very different from his own. Considering the matter from different points of view, we can ask: What does Comboni's holiness have to say to the whole people of God? And to the members of the family he founded? And generally to people living in our contemporary situation?

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Comboni's canonisation has – as they say – raised him to the altars. He now belongs to the great multitude of persons who throughout the history of Christianity have enriched the life of the Church, and reflected one or other facet of God's glory. Yet every saint is unique; every saint lived the Gospel in a very personal way, saying something fundamental but different about the life of God. Given the infinite splendour of God, we can say that he needs many different men and women to make himself present and known. When, for example, we think of St Francis of Assisi, we realise that his is a different showing of God's holiness from, say, St John Bosco or

Mother Teresa of Calcutta (this last beatified, as it happens, in the same month of October 2003 when Comboni himself was canonised).

In general, as we have had many occasions to see, Comboni gives the impression of being a person gifted with rich and outgoing personality, a man completely committed to the African mission which was his life's only passion, exploding with initiatives, extremely active in serving this one and only ideal. He found it easy to make friends with all kinds of people of every level and social class; he was also a man prone to find himself involved in lively conflicts, not inclined to retreat in the face of difficulties, ready to bear all things, with the sole aim of bringing to fruition the missionary intuition he had received as a grace. Against such a rich and complex background, how might we define Comboni's particular holiness?

Two insights may be helpful. First, the lay historian Gianpaolo Romanato, who says this: "Comboni was neither ascetic nor mystic; he was a complex, energetic man, who came to know God without fleeing the world and without the classical mortifications, a man who understood love in terms of active, virile service to real human beings in their sufferings. Comboni chose to go to Africa because in the Africans of his time he recognised the maximum expression of need, of poverty, of dereliction – he saw our common humanity at its most abandoned".

Romanato's perceptive observations are complemented by the words of the superiors of the Comboni Institutes: just ahead of the canonisation, they thus described the concrete, daily experience of Comboni and his first companions in mission, speaking of "the taste of death, of burning desert sand, of dark and putrid water from goatskins, of human skeletons strewn along the caravan routes, of the slave traffic, of sudden fevers, of exhaustion, of journeys with no return, of violent and fatal attacks of black water fever and so on"¹⁹⁷. Their words are reminiscent of some of Comboni's own:

¹⁹⁷ Letter of the three Comboni Institutes, Daniel Comboni, *Witness of Holiness and Teacher of Mission*, Rome, September 1, 203, no. 20.

“Both the majestic houses of the mission in Khartoum became hospitals; not only did I have to attend to the duties of my ministry as Bishop, but I also had to act as superior, parish priest, chaplain, administrator, doctor, surgeon and nurse, outside and inside the mission, and sometimes even undertaker”¹⁹⁸. Here we are at the heart of Comboni’s holiness, lived out in fidelity to his missionary vocation - a love expressing itself in active and energetic service, ready to accept all the consequences in terms of the physical and spiritual cost, in what could only be described as sub-human situations.

If canonisation removes a saint from his “privacy”, from his natural family and his original Christian community, to make him “the property” of the whole “Catholic”, universal Church, it is clear that the significance and influence of Comboni’s holiness overflows the bounds of his own Comboni family alone, and becomes accessible to and imitable by every Christian. When we think of the particular nature of Comboni’s holiness, we realise that he is the natural patron of all those in the Church who are actively committed, or wish to commit themselves, to the work of evangelisation and human promotion in a real and persevering way. From him such persons can ask the strength they will need for their mission; they can learn how to resist and persist in the inevitable times of trial and discouragement; and they can find the courage to begin afresh in faithfulness each day, continuing their struggle for the love of God and their underprivileged brothers and sisters. We can rightly say that all those committed in an active apostolate within the Church or at her frontiers, and for whom the fundamental motivation is their Christian faith, can find in Daniel Comboni a saint to whom they can spontaneously turn because of the similarity of their vocation and situation to his own.

In an even wider way, Comboni can become a point of reference for all those Christians who experience difficulties and trials in living out their faith, and who because of the Gospel meet with opposition

¹⁹⁸ Writings 5633. Cf also nn. 5663, 5704, 5873.

in their daily lives, in the workplace, in the Church, in the parish, or in the family. Comboni stood faithful to his commitment to evangelisation in the face of frequent hostility, and he never gave in: he can now obtain this same grace for others. Even a contemplative nun, for example, can find in him an effective intercessor in times of darkness, of difficulties in community, of rejection, or of loneliness. Comboni may or may not be a saint to obtain the grace of physical healing, but he certainly is one who can obtain the grace to carry the cross, to bear difficulties, and to persevere with fidelity in living and spreading the faith.

He is also a natural patron and intercessor for all who might be experiencing serious difficulties in their relationships with others because of cultural and religious differences, and who find themselves unable to accept the others as their brothers and sisters, persons for whom Christ also died. In this connection, we would do well to reflect on the miracle obtained through Comboni's intercession (and which "earned" him his canonisation!). As we have seen at the outset, the beneficiary of the miracle was a Sudanese Moslem woman, and the person who took the initiative of praying for her through Comboni's intercession was a foreign missionary sister. Perhaps in fact the chief miracle, even more striking than the physical healing, was the spirit of fraternity and solidarity Comboni was able to inspire in this missionary, leading her to consider herself a true sister to the Moslem woman and her family, feeling compassion for the woman's five Moslem children, who would have been orphaned if their mother had died. For historical, cultural and religious reasons, we can at times feel uneasy with brothers and sisters from other cultures, and find it difficult to offer them heartfelt welcome and acceptance. St Daniel Comboni can prove a powerful intercessor for us to receive this grace, which is central to the Christian faith.

But before and above all, Comboni is the patron saint of Africa. Pope John Paul II concluded his homily at the canonisation by calling him "this outstanding evangelizer and protector of the

African continent”. If ever there was a saint who showed concern for Africa in its entirety, who dedicated himself totally to the continent’s human and Christian development, who loved Africa with a faithful love, that saint was Daniel Comboni. His vocation and his person are one with Africa. Africans know that in him they have a holy “ancestor”, a member of the “council of the elders” in the Kingdom of God, who still continues to be concerned and intercede for his children, as he clearly showed by the miracle of healing for Lubna, the Moslem woman in Khartoum.

Yet there is more: the solemn proclamation of Comboni’s holiness to the whole Church is a strong call for us contemporary Catholics to be ever more committed on behalf of Africa, which even today continues in many ways to be the most neglected and exploited of the continents. And this call is addressed especially to those of us who happen to live in America and Europe: it is clear that St Daniel Comboni invites and encourages us so that, like him, we be deeply concerned for the evangelisation of those peoples who in their majority have not yet received the Gospel message, and who are to be found in Africa and Asia. Comboni is the saint who challenges us to think about the peoples of the world who have not yet heard the Gospel, and who urges us, as individuals and local Churches, to commit ourselves with greater energy to the perennially urgent task of evangelisation.

THE COMBONI INSTITUTES

Though it is evident that the significance of Comboni’s canonisation goes well beyond the Institutes he founded, there is here a very direct challenge also for them. Yet, precisely because Comboni’s times are not our own, and the historical and cultural context in which we live is completely different from his, a process of substantial renewal is called for. As Comboni Superior General, Fr Teresino Serra, has remarked: “Such renewal does not mean trying to overtake the Founder, nor does it mean following

him in a literal or fundamentalist way. It means, rather, doing what he would do today, in dynamic fidelity to the Spirit”.

The Comboni Institutes cannot be understood apart from Comboni. We have seen how much it cost him to found them, both in terms of his own spiritual journey and of the output of energy and effort: these Institutes are made in his image and likeness. So if we want to grasp what renewal might mean for them, we have to start from what was “essential” for Comboni’s life and work. As we already remarked in Part Three, “Daniel Comboni left the ideals in which he believed and for which he struggled to his sons and daughters as an inheritance; they are the same values which we identify today by the name of ‘Comboni missionary charism’”. For Comboni, Christ crucified and Africa were the two inseparable passions of his life. They reflect the colour and intense commitment typical of Daniel Comboni and of all those whom “God...has given and will give me”¹⁹⁹. The members of the Comboni Institutes recognise that in these two passions they find Comboni’s heart, the essence of his charism and of the heritage he left them.

JESUS CHRIST: THE PIERCED HEART OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

In Christ, in his pierced heart, in the Crucified One, in the Good Shepherd, in God, in his Providence, in all these Comboni and his missionaries place their whole trust. Without this total and explicit commitment to Christ, it is not possible to understand either Comboni or his missionaries: this is already a fact of history.

In our own times, the members of the Comboni Institutes live in local Churches in pluralist situations, where the faith is expressed in very different theological categories and pastoral practice. In such a context, there can be the risk of losing the sense of the faith as the foundational element of the missionary vocation, and especially the explicit reference to the person of Christ and its community expressions, such as the Eucharist and prayer. This

¹⁹⁹ Writings 6987.

process of diversification can become even greater when there is uncritical adoption of various emerging theologies or theories.

Yet the fact remains: in his time, Comboni lived out and gave expression to the experience of a total commitment to Christ, and he called his followers to make this same experience their own. So the question now is: in our changing historical situation, is it anachronistic to choose to live out this Christological option? In the continuing search for, and practice of, this unconditional commitment to Christ at the personal and community level, the holiness of Comboni challenges the Institutes he founded to be cenacles of apostles at the service of mission. Today this essential aspect of the charism is not always entirely clear in the Comboni Institutes.

AFRICA

For Comboni it was evident that his mission was to Africa, but this is not quite so obvious for his followers today. One sign of this is the difficulty the Comboni Institutes have in reaching some agreement on the matter. If, for example, we consider the last three General Chapters of the Comboni Missionaries (1991, 1997 and 2003), we can see that in all three great emphasis was placed on the theme of mission, but when the debate turned to the choice of fields of mission, there was such a variety of opinions that the discussion had practically to be abandoned, confining itself to confirming, or little more, what was in fact already being done.

It can come as no surprise, then, if the most acute difficulties emerged in the most recent Chapter of 2003, the first in the Institute's history to focus on a theme prepared in advance - the theme of mission. So much has changed in the world and the Church that the reference to the historical Comboni becomes very complicated and subjective. While for Comboni the "poorest and most abandoned" were to be identified simply with the peoples of Africa, today such an identification cannot so easily be taken for granted; or better said, the option for one or other field of mission

tends to be made starting from a situation of cultural and theological diversity and/or from one's own personal experience in one or other of the four continents where the Comboni Missionaries work now.

Needless to say, such a situation has its consequences: an evident fragmentation and dispersion in the Institutes, a lack of the experience of shared spousal love directed towards a common goal, a lack of the sense of being involved until death with specific situations and peoples – consecrated “totally and until death to work for the regeneration of Africa”, as Comboni would say²⁰⁰. He wanted his Institutes to have “a well defined and clearly formulated aim”.²⁰¹ That the Comboni Institutes are passing through a period of uncertainty in this regard is also recognised by persons outside the Church and the Institutes. Two weeks before the opening of the Comboni Missionaries' 2003 Chapter, and a month and a half before Comboni's canonisation, Sandro Magister wrote a piece entitled: “Missionaries of Christ - or just anti-globalisation? The great debate. In October the Pope will make Comboni a saint, but his heirs are very divided”²⁰². As plain as that: “His heirs are very divided”.

Accepting the challenge of Comboni's holiness must mean then to seek as a priority to define what is “Africa” for the Comboni Institutes today. If we affirm that Comboni, fired by an explicit and intense relationship with Christ, had a single passion for Africa, then a renewal in fidelity to him cannot happen unless a consensus of motivations and praxis is found around this double value: Christ and Africa. It is not enough to have a spirituality or methodology in harmony with Comboni's. This could be sufficient for friends and sympathizers of the Comboni family, but not for the members of the Comboni Institutes themselves. Without a spousal love for Christ and an “Africa” chosen, known, loved and shared they will not enter into their Comboni heritage. This challenge is thus crucial.

²⁰⁰ Writings 2654.

²⁰¹ Writings 2469.

²⁰² SANDRO MAGISTER, *Missionari di Cristo o dei no global? La grande disputa*, L'Espresso, n. 34, August 21, 2003.

THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE COMBONI INSTITUTES

If this is the challenge Comboni as a saint offers his Institutes as organisations, we can now consider how he challenges the Institutes' individual members. Here again, we need to recall that we live in a world in a deep process of change. The changes underway are not merely superficial, but happen within people themselves: it is persons who have changed and are changing. In the western world (Europe and America) and in the religious field, the most apparent change is the passage from a situation of Christendom, sociologically characterised by Christian values, to one of secularism, where not only is there no reference to such values, but where indeed they are relativised, questioned and opposed. The deepest change, however, is in the socio-cultural field, where we have passed from a context which favoured reflection and conceptualization, to one where what predominates is "video-dependency", "video-information" and "video-formation". As a consequence of this, it can be said that people have undergone a "structural" change.

At Comboni's time (and in some degree up till the last part of the twentieth century) it could be said that "in the beginning was the word", in the sense that humankind exercised itself in thought, reflection, ideas and the capacity to express them. Today, instead, other criteria hold sway; today "in the beginning is the image": what we see and hear imprisons us in the visible, moves our feelings and emotions, and prevents us from reflecting, thinking and conceptualising. Ours are times when what is not seen and demonstrated does not exist. The whole of reality is transformed by the television and its technological derivatives into a spectacle, and because of this our view of everything is altered.

Children of two or three years old who, before even starting to speak, read or write, watch two, three or more hours of television a day, will grow physically into adulthood, but may run the risk that at thirty years of age they will only be able to respond to

stimuli of a video-dependent type. They will act and react led by their emotions, and not by values upon which they have reflected and which they have assimilated in a conscious way. They will have become people belonging to another kind of humanity, structured differently from their grandparents. The great challenge facing them will be to become aware of their video-dependency and to find how to move from belonging to the species “home videns” to that of “homo sapiens”,²⁰³.

Closely connected with all this, there is the fact that, for the first time in the history of humankind, we live in a context where the whole economic system is geared to consumption: we produce to consume and we consume to produce, in a vicious circle. The whole aim of our present economic system is to produce in order to sell more so that people buy and consume more. Completely useless and superfluous things come to be considered necessary, but what matters is that the economic wheel continue to turn; if it should stop, the crisis would be total. It is striking how often public debate hinges on questions like “how to reactivate the economy” and “how to promote consumption”.

The consequences of all this are alienating for people. In a way closely connected to the video-dependency of which we have been speaking, people unconsciously begin to think they exist and are worth something in the measure that they buy and consume. They no longer consider whether it would be good to buy or not buy this or that thing, but rather automatically try to earn more money so as to buy and consume. This lifestyle has already become a “habit”, connatural to the structure of the person. The very debate on family planning, with all the possible instruments of birth control, including the morning-after pill or even abortion, is ruled by the logic of those things which are “necessary” for life,

²⁰³ I have taken the central part of this reflection and some of the terminology from GIOVANNI SARTORI, *Homo videns, la sociedad teledirigida*, Taurus, Mexico, 1997, pp. 27-65.

but which in another cultural context would seem completely absurd. Javier Sicilia rightly affirms that the conventions of industrialism “encourage us to believe that we are free, when in fact we have been reduced to beings who can be manipulated and programmed to function within the bounds imposed by the economic chain of production, thus depriving us of our rightful condition as persons open to the mystery of gift”²⁰⁴.

Bearing in mind that video-dependency and consumerism are the context in which people live today, it becomes evident that we are called to do some extra work on ourselves, so as to come to a deeper self-knowledge, an awareness of our fears and defence mechanisms, of the distortions present in our perception and interpretation of reality, of the factors that disturb our positive relationships with others, and of our unrealistic expectations of the future. While it may be neither possible nor viable for people to deal with all these factors while still young, it is nevertheless desirable that they should succeed in identifying them at that stage, so as to be aware of how these things can falsify their relationship with themselves, with God and with his Word. Youth is the time for our basic cultural and human formation, and also for this inner “unblocking”, so that we can move ahead in the later phases of life. In fact, what we do not know about ourselves tends to condition us at all levels (love, decisions, perceptions, joys, efforts, and fears). If we do not know ourselves enough as far as our video-dependency and consumerism are concerned, it is as if we are “blocked” inside, enmeshed by these things in an inexplicable way. So the demanding journey from being “homo videns” to “homo sapiens” has to be further completed by the passage from “homo sapiens” to “homo liber”, an indispensable condition for persons to be able truly to commit themselves in a serious way.

²⁰⁴ JAVIER SICILIA, *Un nuovo fetiche*, in *Proceso*, Mexico, 1424, February 15, 2004, p. 60.

To these fundamental aspects of the present situation must be added one further factor which can perhaps be expressed as follows: today the younger generations are not receiving an integrated and complete Christian formation. This is at least in some measure due to the socio-cultural context of which we spoke earlier, as well as to the related fact that parishes and religious associations find it difficult to discover the best way to offer young people an adequate knowledge of the Christian truths and of the person of Jesus Christ and his Gospel message. The result of all this is that young people may often have a very superficial relationship with the faith and with the Saviour Jesus Christ. All of which accentuates the difficulties of those young people who may feel called to commit themselves to a mission as demanding and difficult as that proposed by St Daniel Comboni. In this regard, Pope John Paul II's words to a group of French bishops about the difficulties encountered by young men today in becoming priests seem particularly apt: "Their knowledge of Christ, attained in the midst of multiple religious proposals, is frequently superficial and relative, when instead the desire to be a priest is essentially nourished in intimacy with the Lord, in truly personal dialogue with him, which expresses itself above all in the desire to remain with him".

If we want to respond to the challenge of Daniel Comboni's holiness for us today, it would seem absolutely necessary to face these four challenges: first, to effect a significant interior and exterior rupture with video-dependency and, second, with consumerism; third, to face up to who we are and to set to work on ourselves; fourth, to undertake a serious and deep journey of knowledge of and love for the person of Jesus Christ.

When we respond to these four challenges, we can consider committing ourselves to God and his mission in the way Comboni did. He was undoubtedly a man of other times: the age and context in which he lived helped him grow in strength of will, in solidity of character, in inner unity, in communion between his being and his deeds. On the contrary, all of us today, but

especially young people, need a formative journey which starts from our real situation, and helps us to re-appropriate all this here and now, a complex of initiatives which at one and the same time nourish us intellectually and emotionally, and encourage us to exercise our freedom in fidelity to the word we have given and the commitments we have made, while at the same time finding the reasons to accept a certain break with the “modus vivendi” encouraged by the context in which we live.

Will it be possible to respond in this way? The real answer to this question will be given by those who come after us. For our part, we can express the modest opinion that if an energetic response can really be given to these challenges, then the Comboni charism can continue to live on in this new historical context, even though probably in a smaller number of people. This little “remnant”, however, will be able to offer its specific service to humankind in the Church, and will be the reference point around which the spirituality and missionary commitment of the ecclesial communities and friends bound to the Comboni Institutes will be assured and nourished. Without the survival of the “central nucleus” of Comboni’s charism in his Institutes, his inheritance would undoubtedly quickly dissolve.

To conclude this particular reflection on a note of hope, we cite the words of a missionary working in the Sudan, written on Comboni’s birthday in March 2005: “Among the huge trees here in Khartoum, I have discovered one which is 174 years old, and which was planted on March 15, 1831, the very day our God rolled up his sleeves and said: ‘That’s enough! It’s time we did something serious for Central Africa!’ There are people who say this tree is dying, but I can assure you it’s very much alive. Indeed, who could kill such a tree? It’s true that beneath it there is a small mountain of dead leaves. Once they were part of the tree, and now they have fallen lifeless, but the tree itself is very much alive and continues to put forth new leaves. There are people who think they know who the Comboni Missionaries are, and insist on addressing their questions to the dead leaves. But why?

They have the strong, living tree, with its roots reaching into the Nile! And who can dry up the Nile? The one who planted this tree said: ‘It will not return to me until it has carried out what I commanded it to do’”.

OTHER GROUPS

PERSONS CONSECRATED TO MISSION

Like Comboni, men and women who today give their whole lives to mission will sooner or later become familiar with the way of purification.

For them, too, this may begin with their own human family, from whom for one or other reason they will grow distant geographically as well as psychologically and spiritually. But, in the normal run of things, their purification may also come through their superiors or co-workers, in the form of misunderstandings, accusations or calumnies. In this way, mission will turn out to be very different from what was at first imagined, and it may appear that the Congregation they have chosen to belong to seems to turn against them, with the biggest disappointments coming from those from whom they expected support and understanding. Similar things may happen in their relationships with Church workers or groups. Comboni’s holy life teaches that the greatest sorrow in mission does not come from those outside the Church, but from those within it.

Missionaries can at times reach the point of feeling that they are no longer of any use to the mission, that their energies are spent, and that the great dream with which they first set out has only led to an acute sense of human and spiritual emptiness. Especially as the years pass, they can feel set aside, ignored and neglected. In reality, though, all this is the way God works to detach them from themselves, so that they may enter more fully into his own life. Needless to say, every such detachment is painful, and an experience of the Cross. As Comboni wrote a few weeks before

his death, “There is nothing firm and stable in (the world) but Christ and his Cross”²⁰⁵. And in his very last letter: “I am happy in the cross, which, when borne willingly out of love for God, gives birth to victory and eternal life”²⁰⁶. The challenge, then, for missionaries is to remain faithful to their vocation at any cost, surrendering themselves to God’s work of purification in them, so as to live in their own flesh the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection.

LAY CHRISTIANS

Needless to say, though, God is at work, too, for the purification of all the baptised. One can think, for example, of Christian parents as they watch the normal process of their children’s growth and gradual distancing from them. They sometimes have to live through the pain of seeing their children adopt religious and moral stands different from those they have been taught in the family. Their sons or daughters may choose not to be married in church, or not to be married at all, or even if they marry, they may separate or divorce soon after. They may fall into bad company and the use of drugs. They may seem to forget or neglect the parents who have brought them up with love and sacrifice. Some may simply be “nice people”, but all the same find no meaning in God, or Jesus Christ, or the Church’s sacramental life, or Christian values.

Faced with this kind of situation, certainly not universal but frequent enough, parents may easily feel they have failed in what mattered most to them, and for which they had given their lives. At the same time, they may find themselves having to face personal problems of employment or of poor health, and so forth. In such a situation, they are faced with the choice between two

²⁰⁵ Writings 6989.

²⁰⁶ Writings 7246.

alternatives: either to let themselves be taken by a sense of bitterness and pessimism, or to work towards focussing their lives once again on what is truly essential, surrendering themselves into God's hands, in the trust that God will know how to bring new life out of this "death", for themselves but also for their families and those with whom in one way or another they interact.

For persons living through such situations, St Daniel Comboni's example and experience can be a source of no little encouragement: as he would say, "Courage for the present, but above all for the future". He can lead people to re-discover again and again that the ultimate meaning of life is in God, and is God. The challenge for all Christians is to keep going, placing their trust in the values for which they have always lived, living a deep sense of God's presence, persisting in doing good in the midst of failures and loss, offering heartfelt forgiveness to those who have offended them, loving every single person in the strength that comes from faith in Jesus Christ. The challenge is to want to be moulded by God to become like him, as he continues to love the world, so as to be witnesses of his being and action, pouring out good things precisely where he receives rejection, indifference and evil.

PEOPLE OF NO SPECIFIC FAITH

As a missionary, Daniel Comboni went out of himself to go towards those who in one way or another were "far away", and so we may imagine that his holy life may even today have something to say to people who do not believe in God, or Jesus, or eternal life. We can think, for example, of those many honest, hard-working people, who try to live their lives by the values of tolerance, justice, solidarity, care for others, and commitment to their families. They, too, in one way or another may have to pass through a process of purification very similar to that just outlined for missionaries and lay Christians.

It is a beautiful thing that, in such circumstances, many discover within them a mysterious strength which allows them to accept this purification with serenity. Despite everything, they hold on to a thread of hope for their lives and, even if they do not attain faith in God, they find the strength to accept the limitations and fragility of human existence, and to surrender themselves to the mystery they perceive within them. We would like to think that such persons, at the moment of their death, come to the surprising discovery that the mystery they have lived and accepted has the face and heart of the Risen Christ, to whom, even without realising it, they have been growing close.