The dramatic and unknown story of Teresa Grigolini

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For the second time, the monthly supplement of L’Osservatore Romano, “*women-world-churches”* devotes considerable space to the Comboni Missionaries. The number 15 (August-September 2013) of the journal dedicates almost its entire second page to the "dramatic and unknown story of Teresa Grigolini, heroic Comboni Sister," who was one of the first religious sisters to follow Daniel Comboni in Africa in 1875. The interesting article, by the scholar Lucetta Scaraffia, has a positive approach and expresses sympathy for “the sacrifice of this missionary (which) caused not only the end of her religious vocation but also of all her human hope.” Dramatic situations such as Grigolini’s have been happening many times in the history of the mission, especially in situations of war and violence.

**“Nothing worse than this could happen in this world”**

The dramatic and unknown story of Teresa Grigolini, a heroic Comboni Sister whose process of beatification will finally be initiated.

Since the beginning, sexual violence has been one of the ways to torture Christian women who refuse to give up their religion. Actually, Christianity is the only religion which proposes to women chastity as a spiritual way. One of the most revolutionary novelties of ancient Christianity, in fact, was exactly the opportunity given to women to choose chastity, making them equal to monks and hermits and superior to lay people burdened with family affairs. But this equality would end at the time of martyrdom. In fact, towards the end of the 3rd century the pagans, struck by the increasing numbers of Christian virgins, started to inflict on them punishments that took the form of sexual violence or of forced prostitution in brothels. It was a type of martyrdom specifically reserved for women consecrated to the Lord, a martyrdom unknown to men and which is remembered in the first Christian martyrologies – be it sufficient to remember the case of St. Agnes, but which by itself was not enough to determine her holiness: Agnes is venerated as a martyr because, after having been exposed naked in a brothel, she was killed. After the first centuries, with the end of persecutions, the violence against consecrated women became rarer in Christian lands, only to come back at the beginning of our age, when revolutions and invasions caused sisters to be ejected from their cloistered monasteries. In particular it has reappeared – and unfortunately even today it is a very real risk – in the life of missionary sisters who live in areas of inter-religious or ethnic wars.

Not much is said, because they are situations that are difficult to define and to resolve, especially when a child is the result of violence, an event which compels the sister who has been violated to abandon her religious vocation.

Over these episodes there still hang embarrassment and shame that, up to a few decades ago, did not allow our societies to see these violated women as victims: there always seemed to be over them the shadow of guilt, of connivance with the attacker. While in society feminism has fought to debunk this prejudice – which often stopped many women from reporting the violence received – in our Catholic world this opinion is only now beginning to disappear, as it is shown in the process of beatification which the Comboni Sisters are preparing on behalf of a heroic missionary forced into marriage more than 100 years ago, Teresa Grigolini.

Teresa, a young woman who shared the dream of Daniel Comboni to “regenerate Africa,” was one of the first religious women who followed him to the Sudan in 1875, living in inhospitable places due to the climate and the extreme poverty, with great passion and expertise such as to be considered by the founder “the model of a true missionary of Central Africa, the first and best accomplished members of the congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia.”*

Other letters of Comboni missionaries who worked with her confirm this positive judgment: “She – writes Fr. Orwalder of the mission of El Obeid – is the soul of them all: when she is missing, everything is missing. She brings joy, courage and woe to us if the Lord were to take her to himself.”

Teresa did not die of a disease but, just like many courageous young women who followed her, faced a worse fate when the mission was overtaken by the victorious troops of El Mahdi. She was destined to spend ten years as a prisoner, tortured by deprivations and threats of violence, but above all by the pain of feeling abandoned by the clergy and by her congregation, who were unable to send her help or to start diplomatic attempts to obtain her release.

In the memories of her imprisonment, which she wrote a few years before her death – a very dramatic text because of its style, dry and devoid of frills – Teresa wrote: “I say that nothing can happen worse than this in the world.” After those years, during which time she always resisted the pressing requests to apostatize and declared repeatedly that she would prefer death, together with other sisters, she was forced by the Mahdi to marry.

Fake marriages were arranged with some Greeks, who were also prisoners but, after seven years without any children, it became necessary, for the salvation of all, that at least one marriage be consummated and produce a child as proof. Fr. Orwalder decided that Teresa had to make the sacrifice – all the sisters had been dispensed from their vows at the arrival of the Mahdi – a choice which was later strongly contested, upon their return to Italy, both by the Holy See and by the Grigolini family. Why demand such a great trial from a perfect missionary? We only know that Teresa, even though full of despair, found the strength to obey: “I confess even my misery, as I thought that the Lord had wronged me – she wrote in her memoirs – For an entire year I cried over my misfortune, but even more on the day we were set free. Everyone, except myself, found freedom; the sisters went back to their convents, and all the others returned to their families and their countries. As for myself, I could not find neither my convent nor my family; and my slavery will last until death.”

In fact, we are dealing with a sacrifice which implies not only the end of her religious vocation, but also the end of all hope: when the British arrived and freed the survivors, Teresa remained chained to her new condition. It was a concrete chain, but it was also dictated by affection: the children born from that marriage created strong ties to her new state in life.

Furthermore, she knew full well that her choice would not be easily understood by those who in Italy lived so far removed from the cruel African world. The end of all hope was for her a terrible moment: “Here I am, alone among these barbarians and so far from the entire world, without hope, even remotely, of ever coming out from this infernal bedlam.” But even then she placed her “confidence in God who, if I asked for forgiveness, would forgive me.” Even after losing hope in human beings, she was always able to hope in and to accept the inscrutable will of God, who made her leave the religious life she had chosen for the love of Him: this is the greatest sacrifice which Teresa had to make within her heart.

She fulfilled her duties to the end: witness being her return to her wedded home even when – having returned to Italy and having been accepted by her family with her children – she could have stayed there. Instead she decided to embrace her fate to the very end, returning to live with her husband in Ondurman and then in El Obeid. He was a violent man whom she assisted until his death after a prolonged illness and after having brought him back to his faith. Only then, finally free from her cross, she returned to Italy to live almost hidden in the home of a brother who was a priest, since her congregation refused to accept her.

While it is true that renunciation of self, of desires and will are all part of a journey to holiness, which has as its objective to substitute God’s will to one’s own, the case of Teresa in its gravity stands out probably as a unique and undiscovered example of a particular way to martyrdom. Her deep honesty before God, which always led her to choose the most difficult but just way, helped her also to face those, within her family and the congregation, who tended to see her choice of marriage as a fault. In her memoirs, which she wrote in her defense and without falling into the pathetic, Teresa owns up to her responsibilities and shows how the strength of her relation with God gave her that interior peace and assurance that the outside world was denying her.

Her condition, even though in less dramatic fashion, has been shared by many other missionary women for whom sexual violence took on particularly harsh dimensions when the birth of a child meant the renunciation of a life chosen and embraced with conviction, namely the religious life.

For them, the abandonment to the will of God has meant even having to give up their gift of themselves to him. These are hidden and precious lives that show how the violence on a woman’s body may take many forms, some of them almost hidden.

By Lucetta Scaraffia