

The Present Orientations and Perspectives of Mission Promotion in the Institute of the Comboni Missionaries

Introduction

The 2015 General Chapter decided to merge the two secretariats of evangelisation and mission promotion (MP), of the offices of Justice and Peace and of the lay Comboni Missionaries into a single Mission Secretariat. I quote the Chapter Acts: “*The Chapter decides the unify the General Secretariats of Evangelisation and Mission promotion and of the JPIC and CML sectors into a single General Secretariat for the Mission*”¹.

The reasons were essentially two, one of a practical/structural order, the other of a theological nature. The aim was to streamline the structure of the General Curia, to rethink the tasks of the various Secretariats, making them more suited to new situations and improving their work as a team. The second motivation of the unification refers to the very nature of mission, conceived as a single reality that emanates from the only *Missio Dei* but, at the same time, as a global, polycentric, multidirectional and egalitarian activity – in other words, it is not confined to specific territories: it is, in fact, global; it does not have a centre and a periphery: it is therefore polycentric and multidirectional, as it exceeds the model of churches that send missionaries and churches that receive them; it is egalitarian in the sense that the mission is a reciprocal exchange of gifts. In this perspective, MP, like evangelisation and JPIC, are dimensions of the same mission.

1. Daniel Comboni

I do not wish to enter into details about the MP work of Comboni who, as we know, has made of this commitment a relevant point. “*I would like to have a hundred tongues and a hundred hearts – he wrote from Shellal to canon Giuseppe Ortalda – to speak for poor Africa which is the least known and most abandoned part of the world*”². I would instead like to mention some of the characteristics of the MP’s work in Comboni as the inspiring principles of our work.

A first characteristic of the MP in Comboni is that of **formation**, that is, quoting his own words, that of “*promoting the greatest interest in the European Catholic world for Africa*”³; a commitment implemented by adopting different instruments: contacts with influential people and various missionary associations in Europe; epistolary correspondence; presentation of the *Postulatum* to the I Vatican Council and the foundation of the Annals of the Good Shepherd. In short, Comboni sought to *form consciences*, to sensitise, to open the Christian communities to Africa and its needs, to involve the whole Church in the ‘Regeneration of Africa’.

The second characteristic is the **proposals of solidarity** to support his initiatives in Africa through the creation of the Good Shepherd’s Work, but also the contacts with numerous contemplative convents to ask for prayers for his work in Africa.

The third element is one of **information and prophetic denunciation**. Let us think, for instance of his denunciation against slavery “*this tremendous moral aberration, this disregard of all humanity*”, he wrote to the Society of Cologne in 1868, ... “*an effect of the infamous greed of the strongest and most powerful to improve their own situation by means of the slave trade*”⁴.

The MP in Comboni is expressed through these three dimensions that are, even in the changed conditions of today, those of the Institute’s MP.

¹ AC '15, n.64

² Writings, 1215

³ W. 1099

⁴ W.1816.

2 The orientations and perspectives of the MP in the Institute

“Comboni considered it an essential aspect of his vocation to arouse the missionary conscience of the whole Church. He divided his time between the work of evangelisation in Africa and the work of animating the Churches in Europe. In the work of mission promotion the Society intends to remain faithful to the Founder’s spirit of initiative and courage”⁵. MP, as this number of the RL reiterates, is an essential part both of the charism as well as of the missionary vocation. What we would like to ask ourselves is what kind of physiognomy we have to give to MP today, in the changed conditions of the world, of the mission and of the Church. In my exposition I would not like to talk about means and methods of the MP in the Institute, but rather to present its fundamental guidelines and essential dimensions.

If, at one time, it was normal to divide a ‘missionary Church’ from ‘a Church as the object of mission’⁶ – a perspective that saw the work of evangelisation in the “missions” (intended from a geographical point of view: Africa, Latin America and Asia) while the task of MP was essentially in Europe and North America – now, in the perspective of a polycentric and global mission and in a world of multidirectional migratory flows, it is no longer the case. “Some Circumscriptions, once exclusively for evangelisation, today boast a significant degree of MP, while others that used to live only for MP today feel the challenge of new demands for evangelisation”⁷. This is what the 2009 Chapter affirms and which makes us understand how the missionary and ecclesial panorama has changed.

Not only. This General Chapter notes that, if the mission is an evangelical proclamation and promotion of the values of the Kingdom, Mission Promotion’s aim is to stimulate the Church and society to defend life in all its dimensions⁸. The task of the MP is therefore that of:

- **making local churches aware** of proclaiming the Gospel beyond their own borders
- **promoting cooperation** among the Churches, stimulating mutual knowledge and
- **sharing the wealth** and the diversity of the universal Church
- **the prophetic announcement and denunciation** against all injustice and oppression
- **the formation of leaders** so that they may become themselves protagonists of transformation⁹.

In short, and I quote the General Chapter of 1997, the task of the MP is one of:

- a. **Information** (which may become prophetic denunciation)
- b. **Formation of missionary awareness of the people of God**
- c. **Proposal of solidarity** (prayer and sacrifice, economic assistance and explicit proposal of the missionary vocation in all its forms).¹⁰

Let us pause for a moment to consider these dimensions of the MP and see some practical implications.

a. Information

Information has a dual purpose: that of **informing** on the life of the Churches and societies, especially on the problems of peace and justice; the RL reiterates it in the section dedicated to MP: “Constant and objective information about the religious and social conditions of other groups of people allows the Christians to recognise, in the light of the Gospel, situations of

⁵ RL n. 72.1

⁶ CA ‘09, n. 180.1

⁷ CA ‘09, n. 180.5

⁸ CA ‘09 n. 180.2

⁹ CA ‘09, n. 183-185.

¹⁰ CA ‘97 n. 102

injustice and exploitation of socio-economic relationships among the different countries and every kind of oppression also from within"¹¹. An information that helps the Christian communities to open up to the world and to make it, paraphrasing the Pope's words, 'an outgoing community' and, at the same time, protecting it from the risk of self-referentiality and self-enclosure.

There is a second purpose of information, that is, the **prophetic denunciation**. To talk about racist drift in Europe and the instrumental use of European politics of migrants; to denounce the interests of large multinationals and collusion with local African governments at the expense of the poorest; to condemn the interests of a few politicians who prolong a war situation with thousands of innocent victims; to contest a Church that colludes with political power and/or that is afflicted by the evils of nepotism and other situations of injustice and oppression, are part of a prophetic information that denounces what is contrary to the values of the Kingdom. I realise that the denunciation against governments and local administrations, especially when it is published by our media – some of which have a national and international audience – can cause tensions with the missionaries who work locally and who blame our means of communication to create difficulties and hinder the missionary work. Then we ask ourselves: to what extent should the prophetic denunciation be openly expressed? To what extent should injustice be denounced, even when facing the risk of creating problems for the missionaries working in that particular area? How far should the prophetic denunciation go and when to use prudence? Who should settle the question, in the final analysis: the persons responsible in the general administration? those responsible in the local administration? I leave the question unanswered because it is not an easy one to resolve.

I add to this of point of *prophetic denunciation*, the work of *lobbying* (that is, the attempt to influence a politician or a public official on an issue) and that of *advocacy* (i.e. the effort to support a cause or an idea, whether it is about the protection of the environment, or minority rights or whatever) which is part and parcel of the prophetic nature of the missionary announcement¹². I recall, for example, our contribution to the VIVAT and AEFJN organisations operating respectively at the United Nations in New York and at the European Parliament in Brussels. I would like to point out that the **World Social Forum** is a great opportunity to publicise information on issues that are important to us – as well as making ourselves and our work known – and to 'network' with other movements working to support the same issues.

b. *Formation*

I would like to move on to the *second dimension* of the MP, which is **the formation of missionary awareness**. This dimension has different and possible expressions.

- It is an incentive to the local church to open up to '*the mission ad gentes*', both '*ad extra*' and '*ad intra*'¹³; this last aspect contains a reference to the local church in order to assume the missionary responsibility of those areas and those 'areopagi' which, within its boundaries, need the light of the Gospel. On the essentially missionary nature of the Church and of the Christian community I quote the words of Pope Francis: "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel."¹⁴.
- The work of formation is also oriented to encourage the Church and society "*to promote life in all its dimensions, in particular that of the marginalised peoples*"¹⁵. We have seen this, for example, with the successful campaign *W Nairobi W*, in 2004, initiated and

¹¹ RL, n. 73.3

¹² CA '09, n. 184.

¹³ CA '97, n. 99

¹⁴ Evangelii Gaudium, n.20.

¹⁵ CA '09, n. 180.2

sponsored by confreres from the Province of Kenya; a campaign that supported the conversion of Kenya's public debt with Italy: the cancelled debt was to support several projects to the improvement of people's lives, projects among which was included the rehabilitation of the Korogocho shantytown.

- Formation of missionary awareness implies the “*formation of community leaders, so that the persons and peoples we serve may be transformed into agents of evangelisation for the spread of the Gospel among all peoples.*”¹⁶. The importance of the missionary formation of the laity is considered “central”, by the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*¹⁷ as it offers them the theoretical and methodological tools to animate political, cultural, economic and social areas of African societies and it has been repeatedly affirmed by the two special Assemblies for Africa and by the Apostolic Exhortations that followed these assemblies. I would like to mention, as a recent example of this formation awareness, *the Missionary Promotion and Formation Centre ‘Laudato Si’* of Kinshasa, started by the Province of the DRC in 2013 and which aims at promoting, training and doing research on issues related to the environment and its protection. An initiative worthy of note but certainly not the only one in the panorama of the formation and education of missionary awareness.

c. *Solidarity*

La *third dimension, solidarity proposals*, is expressed in different ways: prayer, economic help, vocational proposals, but also the exchange of personnel among local churches and the creation of networks of solidarity between churches for the benefit of the needy¹⁸; all this in the logic of “*communicating one's own riches and of receiving and esteeming those that may come from other Churches*”¹⁹, in other words, in the logic of communion and sharing. One of the problems which the circumscriptions in Africa (and not only) are facing, is their economic independence from the offers that come from the Western nations and the ability to sustain their missionary projects. Much is already being done in the search for self-supporting programs. I would like to point out the positive fact that, in some circumscriptions, for example in Kenya, the mission promoters have created a local network of people who support the Comboni projects but who also animate the local Church to support its missionaries who work in other countries. It is certainly the right way to go: the assumption of responsibility of people for the missionary work.

3 Two fundamental elements for effective and credible MP

Comboni, in a 1865 letter to Card. A. Barnabò, stated: “*[...] all the existing works [...] all God's works currently operating separately from each other and producing scarce an incomplete results, would thus be united together and focus on the single purpose of planting the faith firmly in the heart of Africa. They would acquire greater vigour, develop more easily and become most effective in achieving the desired objective*”²⁰. The MP is all the more effective as it is a commitment based on the **collaboration** of all the missionary forces of the local Church²¹ and of the Comboni Family. The collaboration with the Comboni Family is a notion repeated several times – let us remember, for example, the letters of the Comboni Institutes in 2002 and 2017 – but, I suspect, that it is difficult to turn it into concrete attitudes and a common method of MP, especially at the local level. Yet, quoting the 2002 letter entitled “*Collaboration for the Mission*”, “*Contemporary thought and events strongly provoke us to identify today's expression of mission in*

¹⁶ CA '09, n. 185.

¹⁷ *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 75

¹⁸ CA '09 n. 68.1

¹⁹ RL n. 72.3

²⁰ W. 1100

²¹ RL n. 73.4

the capacity for communion and collaboration". [...] *"Men and women of our time expect a collaboration of concrete gestures at all levels; a collaboration which overcomes prejudice and is able to open up new channels of hope"*²². The mission promoter himself, the solitary knight of our many practices of promotion in the past, no longer has any reason to exist; on the contrary, his work can be counterproductive if it does not have the seal of continuity born of an effective collaboration.

The second element I would like to mention is **the community**. The MP is, essentially, a community event, both as planning at the circumscription, zonal and local level as well as in the dimension of the witness of a community that lives the Gospel, a welcoming community, a hospitable community where cultural and character differences are welcomed and valued²³. *"Every community of the Institute"*, says the RL, *"must be a centre of mission promotion and missionary spirituality for the Local Church"*²⁴.

A short conclusion

It seems clear to me that, by now, the boundaries between evangelisation, mission promotion, vocation and Justice and Peace are no longer as clearly separate as, perhaps, they were once, when the mission was framed in a geographical paradigm. Now, whoever does MP, also does evangelisation and is also a vocation promoter. This does not mean that, in a circumscription, some confreres do not have specific tasks of vocation or mission promotion. The complexity of the mission and of local realities requires it, for instance, the promotion of missionary groups in parishes and young people in schools, the management of mission Sundays, contact with benefactors and above all the professionalism required in the media world.

Certainly, however, it is no longer possible to think and 'do mission' in sections, as if each one followed his own specialisation, without taking into account that all the dimensions of the mission are involved in the missionary activity.

²² Collaboration for Mission, Rome 17 March 2002, n.2

²³ CA '15, n. 33.

²⁴ RL n. 75.