

# From reading the 'signs of the times' to giving oneself in the Mission

OGF theme for December 2023

## Introduction

During the assembly of ongoing formation in June 2023 it was requested that we continue implementing the OGF project presented in the February *Familia Comboniana*. These are aspects that help us to deepen and better assume our spirituality, to make our charismatic identity creative, and to live our missionary service in a meaningful way.

We have thus thought of a series of forms (4) from now to June 2024, following the more important moments of the liturgical year and its missionary provocations. We would like to start from the challenges of the mission, to understand how these certainly require adequate methodologies and professionalism, but also and above all deeply rooted motivations and attitudes. If these attitudes and motivations are continuously purified, they generate the choices of our missionary action, on a personal and community level.

This is just a proposal of ours to assist personal research and community dialogue. If you have developed or found other tools in your circumstances and communities, it would be nice to share them. We will then enrich each other and carry out what is asked of us by the last General Chapter and by the *Guide for the implementation of the Chapter* (see Italian ed., pp 18-19).

As regards the methodology: rather than developing a theme, we would like to propose avenues for reflection, indicating texts from the Word of God, Comboni texts, and ecclesial documents, and then propose questions to open up personal reflection and sharing in community.

ADVENT – In the 'signs of the times', the expectations of the peoples and the Hour of God

*Our spirituality involves various characteristics:*

### 1. THE READING OF THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES AND PLACES

- a) In reading the *signs of the times and places*, the missionary discovers and brings out the expectations of the people and peoples with whom

he lives, of the communities and of society. There are profound expectations and perspectives, which concern the identity and life of individuals and peoples: expectations of freedom and dignity, of justice and respect, of brotherhood. There are searches for meaning and the need to be open to something great, almost to mystery.

- b) But it is useless to utter generic words: it is necessary to describe these expectations and searches by contextualising them in time and space, almost with the words of the people themselves.
- c) This attention and reading requires abilities and attitudes:
  - ❖ Intelligence and a critical spirit, the ability to deepen and acquire information so as to go beyond the superficiality of common places
  - ❖ Wise discernment beyond the emotional
  - ❖ Listening, silence, calm
  - ❖ A heart in solidarity which is involved and even allows itself to be wounded by the situations it encounters; our reading is not super biased, falsely objective; It is definitely biased but that does not mean it is not true
- d) I believe it is important to underline the dimension of the search for meaning because it is the search that leads deeper: "The fruitfulness and vitality of the Church depend on the renewal of the relationship with the profound spiritual and existential dimension of faith"... Evangelisation will never be new and useful enough if it does not reach the deepest dimension of human life and culture, the vital space of spirituality... the fertile ground must be something deeper than the rational and emotional part of the human personality, the most internal region... the maternal womb from which to be born again from above" (Tomáš Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity*).

Reading all of number 16 of our *Rule of Life* may be a valid help in deepening all of this.

All the Bible readings of the season of Advent are useful for this research.

## 2. DISCOVERING THE HOUR OF GOD

Knowing how to scrutinise the signs of the times leads us to discover the Hour of God (RV 6), that is, God who intervenes in the history of man. It is discerning the presence and action of God in the events of the person, the community and society, discovering different, subsequent and complementary ways and times:

- a) The time and modality of the promise:
  - ❖ by his promise, God commits himself to his people;
  - ❖ and, at the same time, forms his expectation, purifies and grows the desire;
  - ❖ it is a time for hope, and confident listening at the time of trial.
- b) The time and modality of fulfilment:
  - ❖ “The time is at hand and the Kingdom of God is near” is the first message that Jesus proclaims and which he also entrusts to the mission of the disciples, when they are sent by Him to begin the mission. This fulfilment is made manifest through signs: the blind see, the lame walk, and the poor have the Good News proclaimed to them... (see *Lk 4, 16-22; Lk 7, 18-23*).
  - ❖ St Paul often affirms the value of the present time with respect to the time of waiting and the promise: “The mystery of Christ was not made known beforehand as it is now by means of the apostles and prophets” (*Ef 3, 5-12; Col 1, 27*)
  - ❖ Discovering the Hour of God, and how he acts in the lives of persons and peoples becomes for the missionary a call to become “a collaborator in the work of God”.

Reading no. 6 of our *Rule of Life* can be a valid help to delve deeper into all this.

### 3. THE WITNESS OF COMBONI

- ✓ Comboni admires the beauty of places, but, above all, he allows himself to be wounded in the heart by the situation of the people: the columns and the slave markets and the remains of the caravans; poverty in its social expressions; religious poverty, due to the lack of faith in the Gospel.
- ✓ He sees how the methodology adopted so far is wasteful in terms of means, especially of people, and ineffective. He knows how to listen to all the research that various missionaries are doing regarding which strategy to adopt for the regeneration of Africa.
- ✓ But Comboni also sees the potential, especially of how Africans can become protagonists of their own history.
- ✓ Comboni sees the Hour of God also in the cultural, economic, and colonial interests of explorers, states, etc. There are those who work according to the prism of human interests and those who believe that the Heart of Christ also beats for these populations.

- ✓ In Comboni, a 'heart of solidarity' is forged that can read the signs of the times and see the Hour of God who involves Himself in the history of humanity and makes common cause with the poorest. Keeping his eyes fixed on Jesus Christ and reading the events with the gaze of God, Comboni states that the Sacred Heart of Jesus has shown that the time has come for the regeneration of Africa through the work of the Africans themselves, and that it is urgent to respond to this call from God.
- ✓ This fertile soil gave birth to the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* and to a capacity for self-giving to realise this *Plan* personally through the foundation and training of its institutes and through the animation of ecclesial forces.

In the analytical index of the book of Comboni's *Writings* there is a chapter dedicated to "Today – God's hour". See and choose some excerpts.

#### 4. FOR OURSELVES

*Some questions for personal reflection and sharing in community.*

- ❖ What are the expectations of the people, the communities and the people I am accompanying?
- ❖ How and to what degree do I feel these are also mine?
- ❖ How are they assumed into my life project? Into the community project? Into the apostolic project of my community?

"The Son of God, who became incarnate two thousand years ago for the love of humankind, still carries out his work today: we must have penetrating eyes to see it, and above all a big heart to become its instruments ourselves" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 58).