

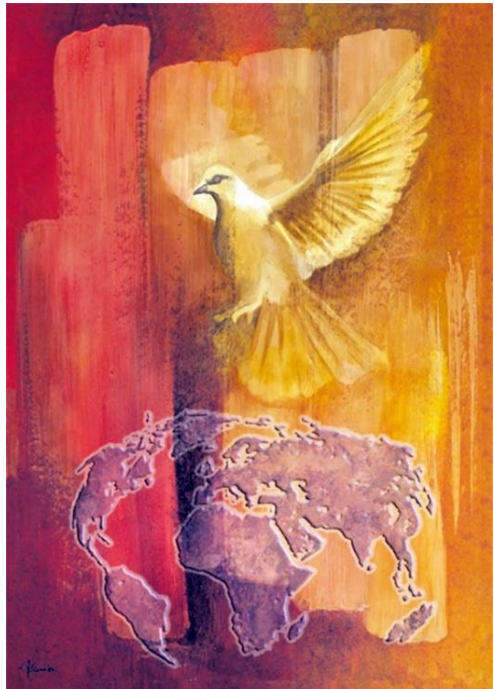
The mission lived in the Holy Spirit who animates it

Our faith in God who loves and desires to claim us for himself requires a continuous reorientation. We ought to acknowledge that a recurrent pattern – “orientation – disorientation – reorientation” – is noticeable in our spiritual life. God creates an order, which gives us *orientation*, but our inclination to sin creates a disorder (*disorientation*) that points us to our need of a reordering (*reorientation*) by God himself. This may bring about a necessary suffering, which many are not willing to undergo.

This suffering stems from the fact that every moment of reorientation demands the abandonment of old patterns of life and the acquisition of new ones. And it is not easy to let go of the things we have allowed to define us: our work, our achievements, our vices, and our sins. Unfortunately, many times the definition we have acquired is that of a ‘smaller’ (let us call it ‘false’) self, while our true identity is rooted in who we are in the eyes of God, who, through the gift of our missionary family, continues to ‘redefine’ us.

The African philosophical concept of *ubuntu* reminds us that our sense of self is shaped by the relationships we have with other people: “I am because we are.”

Our missionary identity is rooted in the mission that God entrusted to our father and founder St. Daniel Comboni. He left us a legacy of participating in this noble mission, namely to first gaze at the Crucified and contemplate the depth of God’s love for the world



(see *Writings* 2721). We can live this mission only by and in the power of the Holy Spirit who is the gift of the Father and the Son. In these pages, I would like to retrace the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' mission, particularly in his Passion-Death-Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost. It is this same Spirit that animates our mission today.

Driven by the Holy Spirit

It is important to remember that it was the Holy Spirit who animated the mission of Jesus Christ, the Father's true missionary. His very incarnation was by the Holy Spirit. This shows us how close God wants to be to us.

Whereas the evangelists Mathew and Luke use the verb '*to lead*' as they portray Jesus' movement to the desert before starting his public ministry, Mark uses the verb '*to drive*': "And at once the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. He stayed in the desert for forty days, put to the test by Satan. He was with wild beasts, and angels waited on him." (*Mk* 1:12-13).

It is good to remember that the passage preceding Jesus' going into the desert concerns his baptism in the Jordan. It is there that Jesus is called by the voice from heaven: "My Son, the Beloved" (*Mk* 1:11). This is his true identity, and fully aware of this, he overcomes all temptations of the evil one, who tries to convince him to use power for purposes contrary to his divine mission. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at the Jordan and his abiding with him in the desert, where he drove him, brings us back to the Spirit that hovered over the primordial chaos to give birth to the beauty of creation (see *Gen* 1:2). Jesus is now presented as the New Adam who restores the original paradise. Jesus is now presented as the New Adam who restores the original paradise. His mission is, therefore, to restore above all the right relationship between God and man, and between man and the rest of creation.

As missionary disciples, we are invited to follow the Lord also into our wilderness (i.e. the dry areas of our lives) and face the wild beasts that threaten life in us and in others. Let us not forget that there are also angels at our service (*Mk* 1:12).

The forty days of Lent helped us to face our own disordered desires which many times guide our actions and determine our decisions. We have made the experience that descending with Jesus into our wilderness transforms our life-less deserts into living spaces, and enlarges our hearts to accommodate others in community life. This journey prepared us to celebrate the victory of Christ at Easter. Pope Francis describes the Lenten journey as a path of descent: “Lent, then, immerses us in a bath of purification and of self-spoilation: it helps us to remove all the cosmetics that we use in order to appear presentable, better than we really are” (Pope Francis, *Homily on Ash Wednesday 2024*).

This does not only help us to deepen our missionary spirituality which is a life of interiority but also helps us to reclaim our true missionary identity which is beyond all our performance on the missionary stage.

The Sacrifice of the Cross

The Lenten journey indeed prepared us to be participants in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. True discipleship requires us to have a love so strong that we can stand under the Cross. When all the trappings of the world are stripped away, all that remains is Christ on the Cross. It is here that he accomplishes his salvific mission. In the Gospel of John, his last words are: “It is fulfilled” (*Jn 19:30*). In the Cross we see God’s ‘*at-one-ment*’ with human brokenness.¹ And does this not awaken in us the conviction of our Founder, St Daniel Comboni, that our missionary identity should consist in ‘making common cause with the people’? In Jesus crucified we are taken into the depths of God. It is there that we come to understand most deeply the love God has for us and the absolute lengths to which God goes to give us life, even in our moments of darkness and defeat.

What we see in the passion of Jesus is a love that picks up all the scattered and shattered pieces of our life and heals them with

¹ The author of this article accepts that the English word ‘*atonement*’ (meaning ‘expiation’ or ‘propitiation’) is derived from *at one* + the suffix *-ment*. *At one* suggests ‘union’, ‘unity’, ‘in harmony’, and therefore ‘reconciliation’. The idea is that through *at-one-ment* (‘union’) the rupture of the human relationship with God is resolved. Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection help us to overcome this rupture.

tenderness. What we see in the cross is a love that loses nothing that can be saved, whether that be our defeats, our brokenness, or our shame.

“Do this in memory of me”

Who we are (our true identity) and what we do (missionary work) are both rooted in the mystery we celebrate daily in the Holy Eucharist. Whenever we encounter Christ in His Sacrifice (Eucharist), we are invited to come out of our comfort zones and be ready to do as he did. In his *Being claimed by the Eucharist we celebrate* (2022), Scott P. Detisch, a priest of the Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania, invites us to appreciate the four verbs that are in the words of the Eucharistic institution: *taking, blessing, breaking and giving*.

These four verbs redefine the identity of those who participate in the Eucharist and, even more, of those who are called to be witnesses of Christ (consecrated persons). “Jesus *took* the bread, *blessed* it, *broke* it and *gave* it”. The bread is Christ Himself in His self-offering for others. Our life, conformed to that of Christ is, thus, a life for others. He *takes* us from many (he chooses us). He *blesses* us so that we may be a blessing for those entrusted to us. He *breaks* us so that we may be shared by others. What needs continuous breaking is our *ego*, which normally looks for self-preservation and continuously claims importance.



Here I invite you, brother priest, to pay special attention to the moment in which you break the host that has been transformed by the

Holy Spirit (even if with your own words) into the Body of Christ. Say a prayer like this: “Lord, you allow me to break your body; I, too, allow you to break my *ego*.” Finally, he gives us out (he sends us) so that we may be consumed by a self-offering love in mission. Our life as missionaries is ‘Eucharistic’. The Spirit, constantly working in us, transforms us into bread for the life of the world. We, therefore, make memory of Christ through our self-giving; if this does not happen, the Eucharist has little or no effect in us.

The Spirit raised him to life

Jesus had to rise from the dead. Given the God whose love brought all things into being and whose greatest desire is that we might have the fullness of life, Jesus had to rise from the dead. Given the God whose unexcelled love is stronger than evil, darkness, and death – and anything else that threatens human dignity – Jesus had to rise from the dead. The resurrection of the crucified Christ is the logical consequence of a God whose love for us is so strong that it defies even death. In Easter we see God’s everlasting and invincible victory over everything that tries to destroy the love, joy, communion, growth, and peace that God wanted for us and the whole of creation from the beginning.

The heart of the Easter message is that death may be ‘very real’, but love is stronger. To be Easter missionaries is to live each day, with joy and gratitude, from and according to this wonderful news, faithfully witnessing it in our attitudes, words, and actions to every person we meet. This can be through our readiness to promote peace and denounce injustices, to care for creation, our solidarity and closeness to the poorest and most abandoned.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, crucified and risen, is the radical motive and foundation of mission. The historical fact of Christ’s resurrection constitutes the central core of the Christian message. Our mission is to carry the message of life, which is Christ himself: the Living One risen after his passion and death. This is the essential proclamation both for those who are not yet Christians and for those who have come to know Christ, but have lost Christian values, so that faith is awakened and purified in them.

We know that there are Christians who focus almost exclusively on the suffering Christ in his passion and hardly make the leap of faith into the reality of the resurrection. It seems to them easier and more consoling to identify with the dead Christ, especially when experiencing situations of suffering, depression, poverty, humiliation, and mourning. The Spirit of the Risen Lord urges us to tell them: "Let the Lord heal your wounds!" We ought to remember that the transformation and healing we have experienced ourselves prompts us to be channels of transformation and healing for others. Only a transformed missionary can transform the world. Broken people, on the other hand, will continue to break others.

Empowered by the Spirit of the Risen Lord

In order to make them participants in his new life of the resurrection, Jesus comes to his fear-filled disciples and wishes them peace. In this encounter of the disciples with the risen Lord we notice something resembling a 'creation'. While the death of Jesus, the Master, caused the dispersion of his friends, his resurrection reunites them. They are already together, yes, but hidden behind closed doors, as if imprisoned in a tomb, paralysed by fear.

Jesus comes, stands among them, breathes on them and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (*Jn 20:22*). This is the power that dispels fear and recreates. The Spirit is given for the forgiveness of sins. The Spirit intends to heal the wounds of separation and division. The cracks in our relationship with God and with others are radically ('from the root') healed, so that community life is made possible again.

We receive the Holy Spirit in order to gather the family of God together. In and through the Holy Spirit we can contribute to the realisation of God's dream for the world. At the end of it all, we realise that we are all brothers and sisters (see *Fratelli tutti*).

The experience the disciples have on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 1-2*) shows us the action of the Holy Spirit that animates every missionary enterprise. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who acts in and through the apostles: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (*Acts 2:4*). Those who, on Good Friday, were filled with disappointment

and fear, are now filled with the Holy Spirit that enables them to speak in different languages. The message that is proclaimed has universal relevance. The Spirit enables mutual understanding. Everyone else can understand them because they hear them proclaim the wonders of God. This brings forth a clear contrast with what caused the original dissension at the Tower of Babel (*Gen 11*). Desiring to make themselves a name, their language got confused so that they could not understand each other.

The Holy Spirit enables mutual understanding because people proclaim God's action rather than human accomplishments. If we go around trumpeting our achievements, we shall trigger the envy and judgement of others. Instead, if we are witnesses to what God is doing in our midst, we shall be able to invite others to let God work in and through them. It is worth noting that the effect of the Spirit's action is first felt within the community of the apostles when they were moved to hold everything in common so that none of their members lacked the essentials for life (*Acts 2:42-47*). If we want our proclamation to be credible, we must be able to invite others to come and see how we live.

Spirit-filled evangelisation and discernment

Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) invites us to be Spirit-filled evangelisers who see the constant need of being animated by the Spirit of the Risen Lord. We can only evangelise if we know the source out of which we draw life, so as to be life-giving in our work of evangelisation. Otherwise, our announcement risks being irrelevant because it does not touch hearts. The best way to let ourselves be filled with the Spirit of the Lord is our personal prayer moments in which each one of us seeks to meet the Lord who speaks to our hearts and fills us with new life. Another way is communal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, during which we place ourselves together in the presence of the Lord and allow him to form us to be sent out into the world. We must remember that the heart of the Lord speaks to our heart, so that we can go and speak a life-changing message to the heart of the world. "Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world." (*EG*, 276).

As instruments of this irresistible power, we can face all the storms of death and darkness in the world with the hope that, where the Gospel is planted, hearts can be transformed. Even if we are filled with the Holy Spirit in our mission, we ought to be aware of our weaknesses. There will be many setbacks and obstacles (the greatest of which can be our 'ego') in our missionary work, but our awareness of the Spirit's presence keeps us moving even against the currents and spirits of our time. Our *Rule of Life* reminds us that we are consecrated to be collaborators with the action of the Holy Spirit (*RL* 56). The Holy Spirit is the true protagonist of evangelisation; we are only participants in his action. Following our charismatic identity as Comboni Missionaries, let us allow the Holy Spirit to move us to *golgothas* scattered around the world, to bring the good news of Easter victory to the 'losers' of society.

The Holy Spirit we have received helps us in our discernment, namely, to distinguish between what we can do and what we can only surrender to the Lord of the mission in prayer. And when we feel we cannot pray, the Spirit prays on our behalf.

Questions for reflection and sharing

- What drives and moves you in your missionary engagement?
- Does Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice become the sacrifice of our lives, teaching us to stand on the side of Jesus and his Gospel in all the choices the mission requires of us, and throwing ourselves into the unconditional service of our brothers and sisters? [In Luke's Gospel, those who sit at the Lord's table are those "who have stood by me in my trials" (*Lk* 22:28)].
- What wounds still need to be healed in individual and community life?
- What obstacles remain to the full realisation of the Total Common Fund in our communities?

Fr. Anthony Kimbowa Kibira, mccj