

A LOOK AT MISSION AND THE CHALLENGES OF FORMATION FOR MISSIONARY LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The present article has been written as part of the celebrations to mark 150 years of the Comboni Institute and is intended to offer some elements for reflections about formation for missionary life in view of the future. The first part is basically a sharing about three missionary experiences that I have had. The second part gives some contributions for reflection and evaluation of formation. The conclusion will suggest the adoption of the ‘integral formation model’ for basic and ongoing formation.

1. MISSION AS THE STARTING POINT: SHARING OF THREE MISSIONARY EXPERIENCES

1.1 Evangelisation among youth and prisoners in urban Brazilian context

Towards the end of my basic formation in the Scholasticate of Elstree (London Province), I forwarded three proposals to the General Administration as to where I would like to be assigned for my first missionary experience. It was in 2003, the same year when Daniel Comboni was canonized. I had the grace and privilege to attend the ceremony of Comboni’s canonization in Rome and also the opportunity to hear the witness of a Comboni missionary who had been working in South Sudan, a region of Africa devastated by civil war. The two events had an impact on me and made me to opt for South Sudan to be the country of my first missionary service as a Comboni priest.

My superiors, however, had a different plan, which I willingly and joyfully accepted: to work in the ‘Province of Brasil Nordeste’, my homeland (2004-2010). I felt my dream to be a missionary in Africa was just postponed while I would try my best to be a

missionary at home. The then Brasil Nordeste Province had made the choice to include Youth Ministry as one of the priorities in the Six Year Plan. A Youth Centre for Peace was opened and I was asked to be one of the coordinators and at the same time to do vocation promotion. One of the remarkable activities of this Youth Centre was the annual youth gathering for peace. Over two hundred fifty young people would meet annually to reflect on youth and peacebuilding, nonviolence, human rights and environment. This included also a number of activities in schools and universities.

Since my ministry was mainly with young people, it was fitting to do vocation promotion. A significant experience in this field, that I can recall, besides the vocational weeks, was the *páscoa vocacional comboniana*, the celebration of Easter in the context of a far-off Christian community with a group of young people, potential candidates for the Comboni formation and mission. The main purpose of this activity was to celebrate Easter with a small Christian community and at the same time to do mission and vocational discernment. Besides this, I also got involved with Prison Ministry, though this service I did on a less regular basis. Basically, our pastoral service to the incarcerated would be the celebration of mass and visits to inmates in five different prisons.

Some relevant aspects of my first six years of missionary and priestly life was, first of all, to be a Christian presence among youth and prisoners in an urban, and sometimes, secular setting, such as schools, universities and prisons. I felt it was challenging to be a Religious and missionary priest called to witness Christ often in a non-parish urban setting. Secondly, it was a missionary service done in the light of Justice and Peace, a Gospel value and an integral part of evangelisation. Thirdly, it was a networked ministry, which required a lot of mobility and collaboration. Finally, it was the expression of my faith and fidelity to Jesus Christ and the values of God's Kingdom according to the Comboni Charism. This first experience of evangelisation and a

positive experience of community life gave me a lot of confidence to move on to the next missionary service.

1.2 First evangelization in a South Sudanese rural context

I got assigned to South Sudan Province in 2010. Africa's longest civil war was over since 2005. I knew I was heading for one of the most difficult missions and this time far away from home. However, this was the mission I wanted to go to some years back. One of my expectations at this point was to live more deeply the Comboni spirit and vocation in the same land and with the same people Comboni loved in his life. I cannot deny I that had some fears and doubts, but deep down I was convinced, felt supported and happy about this assignment.

My first mission assignment in South Sudan was Leer (2010-2014). A call to do evangelisation among the Nuer community on the west bank of the Nile, a mission considered to be of first evangelisation in a rural and isolated context. It was a relatively new mission, with just about 14 years of Comboni presence. On my very first day in this mission, I realised that it was going to be quite different and a far more demanding missionary experience than that I had before in Brazil: it was another country, people, culture, language and in a post-war and male-dominating society. I was not alone and the experience and support of other missionaries were of great help.

The Nuer people are pastoralists and well known for their welcoming and hospitality. This and the welcoming of the Comboni community made me feel at home with them. However, their culture, language, customs and diet are very different of mine. Also, their environment appeared harsh to me and most communities very difficult to access, especially over the rainy season. People lived in very poor conditions. It all seemed shocking and a bit scaring. I did not take long to realise that this was one of the 'missions of frontiers' and a very concrete way of making 'common cause with the poorest and most abandoned'.

Naturally the way of doing mission in this context was quite different from the mission where I was before: mission as Justice and Peace and in urban centres. This important aspect of evangelization was also found in this new missionary experience in Leer, South Sudan. However, the focus here was on first evangelization, a more explicit announcement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the building of the Christian community. The formation of local leaders and administration of the Sacraments, particularly Baptism, were important aspects of this evangelisation. It was a challenge for me to be opened, flexible and adapt to the new context and way of doing mission. In the end I found that it was very enriching.

Among the most relevant aspects of this missionary experience was, firstly, the insertion into a new reality and learning of a local language. Secondly, I was to be the parish priest for the first time and required to collaborate with other missionaries in a mission of first evangelisation. Finally, it was an experience of mission in a war context. This last aspect was a remarkable experience. When the war began in December 2013, tensions and fighting in our mission area forced us to leave the church premises (January 2014) and join war-affected people in the bush who had fled conflicts in other areas. At some point we came under the attack of armed groups. We had to run for our lives, got looted and almost killed. The mission was also looted. We ended up spending eighteen days in the bush. It was a terrifying experience. Local Christians took care of us until we were evacuated. This dramatic ordeal marked the end of my missionary experience in Leer.

1.3 Evangelisation as Justice, Peace and Reconciliation in South Sudanese urban context

According to the Six Year Plan of South Sudan Province, a Justice and Peace Office was to be established. I had been asked to leave the mission in Leer to coordinate this missionary activity in Juba. With the event of the war and the suspension of Leer mission due to insecurity, I was assigned to Juba and appointed the Justice and

Peace coordinator (2014 to date). I found myself once again doing Justice and Peace ministry and in a more urban-like context. This favoured me with the privilege to be part of a provincial Justice and Peace Network. My link with the Nuer community was kept since I was asked to offer pastoral services to ‘Internally Displaced Persons’ (IDPs). In Juba there are over 38.000 war-affected people under the UN protection, mostly from the Nuer ethnic group. These two missionary services have also been remarkable in my missionary experience in Africa.

South Sudan has been at war for over three years. This has had a tremendous negative impact on the population and has also affected evangelisation making mission here even harder and more challenging. At times it can be very stressful to evangelise in such a context. But this cannot prevent missionaries from standing in solidarity with the victims and becoming witnesses of Christ among them. With my confreres, I feel called to be instrument of peace, hope and reconciliation. The core of the Good News proclaimed by Jesus Christ is salvation as a gift of God and it is paramount in our evangelizing efforts. However, besides the Kerygma, other important dimensions of evangelization are not to be excluded. This became clearer in the three missionary experiences I have had in Brazil and South Sudan, which have provided me with unique opportunities to fulfil my Comboni missionary vocation.

2. SOME ELEMENTS FOR REFLECTIONS ABOUT FORMATION FOR MISSIONARY LIFE

Having shared about the three missionaries experiences I have had, I would like to share some elements that I consider to be important when it comes to basic formation for missionary life, as well as ongoing formation.

a) The centrality of God in formative itinerary and missionary life

At the centre of our formative itinerary and missionary life is the person of Jesus Christ. We have to keep our eyes fixed on him, learn from him, become his disciples and make the options he made. It is fundamental that since early basic formation our candidates are helped to grow in this regard. A deep experience of God and profound knowledge of the person of St. Daniel Comboni will help them and us to move on steadily, with serenity and joy in the mission, especially when facing hardships and crises. Looking back at my experiences, I have noticed that there have been times that work and other activities have taken my time of prayers. I have also sadly witnessed that other missionaries often neglected prayers and missed recollection days. A strong spirituality is needed and God has obviously to be at the centre. I am also reminded that mission begins in God, not in me. It is not my mission. I am just an instrument. We all participate in God's mission in the Comboni Charism.

b) Mission as the horizon and ground of the formative phases

I am convinced that it is mostly mission that forms. I remember that towards the end of my Postulancy I was asked to cease doing my apostolate in a parish context and do start doing it with street children. I found it much harder and challenging but also significant for my missionary life. I did the Novitiate in a community of insertion in a periphery and poor area. I found it very relevant. In the Scholasticate I was not happy to limit my apostolate to attend mass in a parish and take Holy Communion to the sick. I decided, in dialogue with my spiritual director, to do Prison Ministry. That was equally significant to my missionary life. I applaud the possibility given to our candidates to do a consistent missionary service in a particular mission. This could be done even, perhaps, after the Novitiate. There is no doubt that other aspects of formation, such as academic studies, are very important too, especially in today's world that demands better qualified persons. But to expose candidates to a significant

missionary experience would help them to deep the values acquired and actually to do mission while under formation.

c) Forming community-oriented persons

Community life is another important aspect for mission. We live in times of growing individualism which is a threat to community life. Individualism can be manifested in different ways. Recently I attended a meeting of Consecrated Life during which I noticed a concentration of people in one particular corner of the house. They were trying to get the Wi-Fi. All had an I-phone in their hands, including myself. Some kept on checking their devices even during the prayer. It is true that nowadays the Bible and prayers books can be downloaded on gadgets. Some people prefer to have a light I-phone in their hands rather than to carry a heavy book for prayer. Amazingly, the use of such devices has been observed even in far-off isolated missions. It is also true that these devices can be distractive and contribute a lot to individualism. It can be very handy. However, in a touch-screen era the habitual good communication and relationship between individuals, that is so important in community life, are jeopardised. In this regard candidates need to be helped to become community-minded people and to strike a balance and make proper use of gadgets and the internet so that they do not find it too hard to be in a mission where this service is just not available. On the other hand, social media, such as Facebook, can be a good tool for mission animation.

d) The ‘Integral Formation Approach’ in basic and ongoing formation

There seems to be a consensus in the Comboni Institute that the ‘integral model of formation’ or ‘integral approach’ in basic and ongoing formation is the most suitable model of formation to help individuals to grow and to dedicate their lives to the mission. I have met so many committed and inspiring missionaries, but have also lived in very conflictive communities. I have known missionaries who are very generous towards people but who find

it hard to share community life and to follow the directives and priorities of the province. I have experienced that mission in a war context is not easy and demands, more than courage, the conviction that God is at the centre and that it requires self-sacrifice. Therefore, in my opinion, when a candidate is helped to properly integrate psychological, theological, spiritual and other aspects, and to assimilate proposed values, he is more likely to answer his call with freedom and generosity, be a community-oriented person and live a life according to the Religious vows. Missionary life becomes a *'here I am'*, a free and joyful answer to God who first loved us, called us and sends us in mission.

CONCLUSION

This article has been an attempt to give some contributions for reflection and evaluation of formation. The starting point was a look at mission from the perspective of three missionary experiences. Then, some elements have been offered as contributions that may be helpful to evaluate, reflect and propose improvements of formation in view of the Comboni mission in the future. As conclusion, I suggest the adoption and maintenance of the *'integral formation model'* for the benefit of an integral human formation and better missionary service.

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