

**GIVE REASON FOR THE HOPE  
THAT IS IN YOU**

*Letter on spirituality*



**GENERAL COUNCIL MCCJ**

**Rome – 1 January 2011**



## **GIVE REASON FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU**

*“No one can hurt you if you are determined to do only what is right; if you do have to suffer for being good, you will count it a blessing. There is no need to be afraid or to worry about them. Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts; and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason concerning the hope that is in you.”*

(1 Peter 3:13-15)

One year ago, the General Chapter asked us to propose every year, for our personal, provincial and Institute-wide reflection, a theme which would help us to deepen the values of our identity, the spirituality which sustains us and the missionary quality which we are called to live each day as Comboni missionaries.

Throughout this first year following the Chapter, we considered it convenient to give enough time to coming to know and deepen the content of the Chapter Documents, with the desire that they become part of our planning at all levels of the Institute. There have been numerous and beautiful experiences during the first months and others are still in progress.

As we begin the second year of our service, we have decided, in the General Council, to propose to you for the next few months the theme of spirituality in general, bearing in mind that it may become a reflection which inflames us for our growth in every sphere which concerns the quality of our life and our being people consecrated to God to follow him and serve him in the mission.

With this reflection, which we place in your hands and which will be followed by others throughout the year, we wish to present to you a text that will, hopefully, become a journey of research and personal and communitarian examination on the experience of God which we are called to live as people who are both consecrated and missionary.

This is not intended to be a dissertation on spirituality, still less a study on the state of the spiritual life of the Institute. Our aim, instead, is to provoke a reflection which will lead us to discover the importance of spirituality as the guarantee of an authentic missionary life, with the words of the Founder in mind.

*“Any man, who, in an absolute and final way, breaks off relations with the world and with those things naturally most dear to him, must live a life of spirit and of faith. The Missionary who lacks a strong awareness of God and a lively interest in his glory and the good of souls is without the right attitude for his ministry, and will end by finding himself in a kind of emptiness and intolerable isolation.”*

(Writings 2698)

## **Starting Point**

*“The Ratio Missionis discernment process, in which we have been involved over the past few years, has led us to observe that our spirituality is weak, and that gradually we have assumed an individualistic and comfortable way of life, that does not encourage fraternity but challenges the credibility of our missionary witness. Often our faith remains far from life and the reality of the people. At times we reduce our spirituality to a religious ritualism that does not reach the heart of our missionary life. On the other hand,*

*without practical and regular expression, faith will be extinguished.”* (Chapter Acts 2009, n. 17)

This is certainly one of the strongest statements in the analysis made by the Chapter of our experience of spiritual life. It speaks of weakness, contradictory lifestyles, a poor standard of fraternal life, of witness which fails to make us credible and, perhaps most worrying, the fact that the spirituality we experience does not seem to affect our personal life.

It is also true that voices are raised in various parts which look for a change that allows us to go deeper into this essential dimension of our life as persons and, even more so, as missionaries.

The voices are varied. For some it is a question of the desire to go back to the past, a past which is impossible to recreate and which would be unsuitable for the times we live in. These voices say that the true spirituality was that which was lived through a series of pious practices, now remembered with nostalgia.

For others, missionary spirituality is the sap keeping us alive in a world that does not want to hear much talk either of God or of Gospel values.

Others, at times, give the impression that they wish to conceal behind the word “spirituality” a desire to create an exclusively intimate relationship with the Lord in which the multiplication of “our prayers” and living “our relationship with the Lord” are the most important elements, while ignoring other people and the events of our history.

Others, instead, make the word spirituality swing to the opposite extreme in which it is something lived by being with the people, being socially committed, defending hu-

man rights and being in solidarity with all who work for the integrity of creation. Prayer, silence, meditating on the Word of God, the celebration of the sacraments and so forth, become things of the past.

Is it possible and sufficient to reach a synthesis of the questions posed?

One thing is certain. We cannot move forward unless we give ourselves the opportunity to reflect upon our personal and communitarian spiritual life and unless we allow ourselves the necessary room to follow a true spiritual practice that involves a daily encounter with the Lord, his Word and his mystery that concerns our entire life.

### **We wish to grow**

*“Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said, “What are you looking for?” They answered, “Rabbi” (which is to say, Teacher) “where do you live?” He said to them, “Come, and see”. (John 1:38-39)*

It is not important what the original motivation was. We can say with certainty that, in this moment of our history as an Institute, we wish to live our being missionaries grounded in an experience of God which becomes the reason for our consecration. We are aware that the mission, if it is not experienced starting from a deep relationship with the person of Christ, becomes impossible in our time. It was not by chance that Comboni said, speaking of the “Spirit of Sacrifice”, that living with one’s eyes fixed on Jesus is part of the spirituality of the missionary.

*“The spirit of sacrifice. The constant thought of the great purpose of their apostolic vocation must engender in the students of the Institute the spirit of sacrifice.*

*They will develop in themselves this most essential disposition by keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and seeking always to understand more fully the meaning of a God who died on the cross for the salvation of souls.*

*If they contemplate and appreciate a mystery of such great love with a living faith, they will consider themselves blessed to be able to offer themselves to lose everything and to die for him and with him. The detachment from their families and from the world which they have already accomplished is only the first step: they will seek always to make this sacrifice more and more complete, giving up all human affection, accustoming themselves not to bother about their own comfort, their own little concerns, their own opinion and whatever else is theirs. Should even the finest thread remain, it could prevent a generous soul from rising up to God. They will make continuous practice of self-denial, even in small things, and they will often renew the offering of their whole selves to God, the offering of their health and even of their lives. In order to stir the spirit to assume these holy dispositions, in certain circumstances of special fervour they will all together make a formal and explicit dedication of themselves to God, declaring themselves ready, with humility and trust in his grace, even for martyrdom.” (Writings 2720-22)*

However, it must be added that the Chapter noted not only the unease, but has underlined the desire and the will to find ways which will lead us to a spiritual experience that

will become our truth, the wellspring to which we go to find the water we need to quench our thirst for fullness and an authentic spirituality, which is nothing less than the desire for true conversion.

*“This same process has demonstrated a strong desire for change and conversion not just in theory but in the depths of our hearts. We feel like “dry land, arid and without water” (Ps. 63:2), with a great thirst that pushes us to return to the original sources in order to face the challenges of our time.”* (Chapter Acts 2009, n. 18)

### **Questions addressed to each one of us**

Is it really true that we are living a weak spirituality? Is it true that the traditions of spiritual life have been lost in the Institute?

Do we get the impression that the life of prayer, reference to the Word of God, personal meditation, the ability to see all that happens in life with the eyes of faith have disappeared from the parameters we use to understand our life?

Do we all agree that there is no longer that personal, constant and deep relationship with the person of Our Lord that renders our missionary experience possible?

Are we satisfied with the quality of spiritual life which pervades our communities, at the stage where we find ourselves at this moment? Do we agree that at times we confuse spirituality with pious practices carried out as a habit?

Some may immediately reply that the situation is not so serious, that the spiritual health of the Institute is fairly good and that there is no shortage among us Comboni missionaries of figures of men of prayer and great faith; and



this is partly true. What could the point of this reflection be?

As we pass through the provinces and communities, we meet quite a few confreres who have a strong relationship with the Lord and there is no shortage of true men of God who, full of charity and love, carry out a missionary service which is both beautiful and exemplary, as is shown in the simplicity of their lives, the fidelity to their vocation and the ability to live in difficult situations with great peace and joy.

It is true that missionary passion, lived right to the end of one's life, is one of the treasures of our missionary family and we do not lack witnesses to this. Is this not the fruit of a spiritual experience which does not require much explanation or even many words?

The spirituality which we meet with in many parts of our Institute is not a spirituality which seeks publicity. True spirituality is seen in serenity and the ability to live the missionary commitment with humility, as well as the availability of many confreres who offer their lives out of love, without attracting attention or making the headlines, and all this in the knowledge that they will pass into history without leaving great monuments to their memory.

### **Our image and our fruits**

*"You will be able to tell them by their fruits. Can people pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?... I repeat, you will be able to tell them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:16 ff)*

It is said that trees are known by their fruits and we may say with certainty that among the many fruits that are not

lacking in the Institute are prayer and the sense of God which we inherited from our Founder.

If there is one thing for which many of us are grateful to the mission, it must certainly be the fact that we have been helped to become men of prayer. In very many of our missions, it is not unusual to find the missionaries praying, early in the morning, before sunrise. They begin their day by entrusting it to the Lord whom they recognise as the Lord of the mission, guiding, sustaining and encouraging them, but above all making them feel the beauty of being able to share with him the work of building up his Kingdom.

Furthermore, is it not true that it is the presence of the Spirit that makes all things good? And we can assure you that there is much goodness in our family. There is a goodness which expresses itself through the desire to commit itself to justice, a goodness which becomes the voice of many brothers and sisters who have no voice, a goodness which becomes passion for human beings, for their development, their recognition, their right to live with dignity which is theirs as children of God. It is a missionary goodness which becomes a capacity for making common cause, sharing sufferings and also the joys of the people with whom we share our life.

If the passion which urges us to give our lives as a requirement of love for the poorest is a fundamental element when one speaks of spirituality, then we only need to open our eyes to discover in the lives of many Comboni missionaries an authentic icon which speaks of holiness and, perhaps, it is this which explains how, despite so many difficulties, so many obstacles and the poverty itself that we recognise in each of us, the mission goes ahead. It goes ahead because of the power of the Spirit who surprises us and

performs miracles through us, his fragile instruments, and the many contradictions we bear within ourselves.

Is it not possible that the need for a strong spirituality may be due to the unsatisfied desire of our hearts to enter more deeply into the mystery of God who has called us to be his disciples and his witnesses? Is it not an awareness of the great gift we have received in the missionary vocation which makes us always feel unable to respond to such an undertaking relying only upon our human forces? On the other hand, could it not be the result of the realisation that we cannot approach others as missionaries simply with interests or concerns which do not go beyond the level of human promotion but that we must speak to them of God? And how can we bring others to God if our roots in him are not deep enough to allow us to see him as the true centre of our life and mission?

### **So where does this need come from?**

It goes without saying that it is not only today that we feel we ought to review our spirituality, to reclaim the values and the traditions which have been part and parcel of the interior life and ministry of so many confreres. It is as though there were an awareness in the Institute itself which emerges to remind us that we cannot be true Comboni missionaries if we forget that which, for our Founder and for all who came after him, has been fundamental as a necessary stage for living the mission as a journey which the Lord has chosen to allow us to encounter him.

It seems that what we call fundamental is to be found in some aspects of our Comboni spirituality such as the experience of the Heart of Jesus, which is the source of our

being missionaries; the continual presence of the Cross, which is the place where the mission is born as the work of God; the icon of the Good Shepherd, which reminds us that we are disciples called to live the sequela of Him who is the only missionary of the Father.

Then there are the attitudes of the spirituality which ought to express in a concrete way the spirit we bear inside ourselves: a life of deep faith, constant prayer, the ability to interpret reality with the eyes of God, the willingness to respond to the urgent needs of our time according to the mind of God, fraternal life among ourselves and solidarity with the men and women who are suffering, the wisdom to make the Word of God the reference point of our entire being and of our acting as people consecrated and belonging to God.

In short, it seems that the reminder to come to terms with our spirituality derives precisely from the fact that there is a gap between what we affirm and how we usually live. None of us says there is no Comboni missionary spirituality and none of us says that the Rule of Life is not clear on this or denies that we have the structures and means for living an authentic spiritual experience.

### **The gap between saying and doing**

*“Anyone who wishes to save his life will lose it but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it”. (Matthew, 16: 25)*

We observe the easiness with which we abandon personal and community prayer. The Rule of Life speaks of at least one hour per day but there are many among us who believe this is a matter of individual choice. It is said that ours must

be a life of faith but then we find ourselves with individuals who, in the things of everyday life, follow other criteria such as personal convictions, their own ideas or simply those which may give value to personal projects. We say that our life must be brotherly, based on the criteria of love but what great difficulty we find in living the straightforward community life, when all it takes is to behave with good manners to make it beautiful. Again, is it not true that the individualism, the protagonist attitude and the arrogance that insinuate themselves into our lifestyle are the result of the lack of a true spirit which helps others to live without imposing on anyone, as it happens instead where there is a lack of trust or prejudice against others?

From where does the need arise? Doubtless, it comes from the value held by not a few who are not content to live in the Institute as if it were an hotel where one may enjoy guaranteed shelter and food, and who are convinced that they have not left everything to live together with others just for the sake of company, but have made the offering of their whole lives so as to live together with confreres filled with passion for God, the mission and the poorest.

The need also comes from the requirement of placing God at the centre of all and above all. This implies the capacity for abandonment and availability to allow God to write his history in each of us. It implies the acceptance of a surprising reality which is new to us and makes us break with our security, our plans and our certainties. It implies the ability to live always seeking not the fulfilment of our dreams but of his.

The cry we have been hearing for some time is none other than the voice which appeals for space to allow God to do his work without hindrance among us. It is a voice which

speaks of obedience that is not blind submission; which calls to order wherever it seems that everyone thinks he has the right to prepare his own project and his own mission; which urges us towards that humility that consents to accept personal and community limits.

This is surely an appeal which calls to mind the beauty of the love we are called to live in serene and joyful chastity and does not tolerate behaviour which is irresponsible and contrary to the choice of love as self-giving without limit.

It is also an invitation to live in poverty at all levels, renouncing the ambition which poisons the heart and makes us become selfish and deceitful, attached to money, unhappy with everything and never content with what we receive. It is also a poverty which is a challenge that dares us to live in sobriety, austerity and freedom.

The need for a deeper spiritual life is born precisely from the awareness that we are capable of conversion and transformation only if we have the true Spirit of the Lord dwelling in us. The experience of the encounter with the Lord is the only way to find the right road to living the mission as the place where we are called to become new men and credible missionaries. In so far as we become strong in the Spirit we shall be able to question everything to which we are anchored and which prevents us from travelling freely and becoming fascinated by those who approach us.

### **What spirituality do we dream of?**

In this hour of God, which is also ours, it seems that the type of spirituality suitable for us, taking for granted the elements we consider essential for our spirituality, would be one of abandonment, understood as the free giving of

ourselves to God for the mission. We need a spirituality centred around hope which permits us to interpret the present without forgetting that the Lord is always working and that the mission is, above all, his work while we are simply his collaborators.

Ours must be a spirituality which is born on the road we are travelling together with many people whom the Lord has given us as travelling companions, people who bear with them the presence of God and challenge us to recognise him in the faces of those who count for nothing in the world. It cannot be a spirituality which closes itself within our structures, our devotions or habits.

As a missionary spirituality, it obliges us to go towards the encounter with God who awaits us in our brothers and sisters, sending us outside ourselves but always careful not to exhaust or dilute ourselves in the anonymity of a world which is doing everything possible to eliminate God's witnesses.

We dream of a spirituality which enables us to place at the centre of all our desires the person of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who was obedient in all things and did the will of the Father unconditionally. As an Institute, we need a spirituality based upon cordiality, the acceptance of diversity, the recognition of the treasure which others are, both within and beyond our family. We need a spirituality which makes us prophets, and perhaps more, even mystics and witnesses to Him whom we bear in our hearts, to Him with whom we share our existence and from whom we receive life, the strength to carry forward our mission and the joy that makes us happy.

We are all agreed that our spirituality must be missionary but perhaps at this time we would do well to speak of a spirituality of responsibility, fidelity and coherence.

Responsibility which does not make our Rule of Life become a falsity, which continues to speak of Comboni missionaries as men totally consecrated to God, men of faith, of communion...

Fidelity to carry out today what we solemnly declared on the day of our religious profession.

Coherence, even with our limits but committed to live in daily life the values and the requirements of our consecration to God and the mission, accepting to live with a single passion in our hearts.

We hope for a spirituality which helps us to always live with great passion the desire to go out to the poorest and most abandoned but which, at the same time, enables us to let ourselves be evangelised by the Word we proclaim with our poor words and our humble witness.

We are confident that at this time we do not need to invent a new spirituality but to live responsibly the treasure which already forms part of our heritage.

Rome, 1 January, 2011

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