

# **COMBONI'S HOLINESS IN HIS FOLLOWERS**

**Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ**

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# COMBONI'S HOLINESS IN HIS FOLLOWERS

Comboni's canonization is a gift for each one of us, Comboni missionaries, and a challenge to understand the inner logic in this happening that God has prepared for us. What strikes me lately is the quality of witness of the sons and daughters of Comboni as it stands out from the profiles of the confreres and con-sisters who reach the end of their lives on earth and whom I have known. What follows is the presentation of one of them, but in the background of the call of for holiness and in connection with the example of Comboni himself.

## 1. *Our Vocation to holiness*

“The call to mission derives, of its nature, from the call to holiness. A missionary is really such only if he commits himself to the way of holiness. The universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission. **The true missionary is the saint**”.

Pope John Paul II continues in one of his most characteristic statement describing **the missionary as a “contemplative in action”**. “He finds answer to the problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia (says the Pope), has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation.

Unless the missionary is a contemplative, he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to say with the Apostles: “That which we have looked upon...concerning the Word of life, ... we proclaim also to you” (1John 1:1-3).

**The missionary is a person of the Beatitudes.** Before sending out the Twelve to evangelize, Jesus in his missionary discourse (Cf. Mt 10), teaches them the paths of mission: poverty, meekness, acceptance of suffering and persecution, the desire for justice and peace, charity – in other words, the Beatitudes, lived out in the apostolic life (cf. Mt 5:1 – 12).

By living the Beatitudes, the missionary experiences and shows concretely that the Kingdom of God has already come, and that he has accepted it” (RM, 90, 91).

**“The characteristic of every authentic missionary life is the inner joy that comes from faith.** In a world, tormented and oppressed by so many problems, a world tempted to pessimism, the one who proclaims the “Good News” must be a person who has found true hope in Christ” (RM, 91).

It seems to me that **Comboni's holiness** that the Pope is holding in front of our eyes to see, to contemplate and to be inspired by, **is also present in his missionary family** and we have the duty to recognize it in many of our confreres and con-sisters stupendous variety and collect for ourselves the example and the lesson that they leave behind.

## ***2. The Pope's strategy***

It is clear for any person who reflects on the features of John Paul's Pontificate that the abundance of beatifications and canonization respond to a clear choice of policy or strategy, **a strategy suggested by the discernment of the circumstances of the present time.**

The sign of holiness is held in front of the consciousness of the Church especially as it is exemplified by the lives and witnesses of so many Saints. This is to apply in the concrete lives of people the principle that the Pope has affirmed in his most characteristic and authoritative teaching, in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and in the programmatic letter: *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001).

And the reasons are twofold: first and foremost it is **the going back to the sources**, but also and perhaps more urgently, **the pressure of the circumstances of our present time**: the reading of the situation of our world, affected by a continuous flow of rapid and radical, profound changes, what has been called "The Runaway World".

The uncertainty about the outcome of this change, and consequently the apparent unmanageability of the changes, prompt one to ask the question: "Where is the present world leading to?" Nobody seems to know for sure, also because of the contradictory character of the signs: great material, technological progress on the one hand and yet, on the other, the human person is becoming the victim of this progress... (Just to mention only one aspect).

## ***3. The situation of the Church and Congregation: there are contradictory signs.***

In the Church itself there is a growing sense of uncertainty, of confusion and dismay: although the last decades from great happening of Vatican Two have witnessed the opening up of the Catholic Church towards the other Christian denominations and towards the world, yet what seems to be the result of this openness is very contradictory: the explosion of the sects and the drifting away of the Christian masses of the West from the practice of religion.

The world seems to be very far from the Christian positions that had been like the seeds of its progress. The pace of change and the uncertainty of the results of the very technological power of humanity are so striking that even thinkers outside the Christian sphere of influence are puzzled and rightly this world has been described as the "Runaway World".

**Even in our congregation the signs are contradictory:** we have never had so many young people in formation and yet the total number is falling; our profile has never been so high in the public opinion in Italy and in Spain and yet the vocations there are reduced to zero.

Although our number is relatively small, our creativity and missionary inventiveness is in full swing (E.g.: the Institute for the study of Islam and the Arabic language and culture, the initiatives for the pastoral care to the Afro-Americans, the network of missionary magazines, MISNA and many other initiatives) and yet the sense of mission does not seem to elicit the readiness to sacrifice that was our characteristic in the past.

We are blessed by an impressive number of martyrs, but maybe we do not aim high in our personal holiness as a whole, but are tempted to accommodation and mediocrity.

Coming to the small pond of our Asia Delegation, we are passing through a moment of difficulty that affects our stance and can compromise our peace of mind and make us doubtful about the outcome of our work and the future existence of the Delegation itself.

In conclusion, **we are also part of the wider picture of the “Runaway World”** and we are therefore also invited to pay attention to the indication of the Pope who repeatedly calls us back to focus on God, on Jesus and on Holiness.

#### ***4. The absolute foundations: God and Jesus***

Undoubtedly, the starting point is always God and Jesus. This is what Pope John Paul II has written in TMI: “Starting afresh from Christ”. “In fact we are certainly not seduced by the naïve expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. **No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which He gives: I am with you!**” (29).

“It is therefore not a matter of inventing a new program. The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, **so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity**, and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem.

This is a program that does not change with the shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This program for all times is our program for the Third Millennium” (29).

“I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness... It is necessary therefore to rediscover the full practical significance of

chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* dedicated to the “Universal call to holiness” (30).

### 5. *Mysterium Lunae*

“A new century, a new millennium are opening in the light of Christ. But not everyone can see this light. Ours is the wonderful and demanding task of becoming its “reflection”. This is the *Mysterium Lunae* that was so much part of the contemplation of the Fathers of the Church, who employed this image to show **the Church’s dependence on Christ, the Sun whose light she reflects**. It was a way of expressing what Christ himself said when he called himself “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14).

This is a daunting task if we consider our human weakness, which so often renders us opaque and full of shadows. But it is a task which we can accomplish, if we turn to the light of Christ and open ourselves to the grace which makes us a new creation” (54).

The exhortation to holiness is a focusing on the absolute reality of God, the only One who is Holy. **Holiness belongs to God. To remind ourselves that His mystery is our point of departure and especially our point of arrival:** this is at the heart of the invitation to contemplation in *Redemptoris Missio*, in the context of the valuing of the example of the great non-Christian religions of the East.

With them we share our faith in God even if conceived very differently. It is in the experience of prayer, in the secret of the mystical realm that the highest form of dialogue takes place as we have understood after the Meeting of Religions that happened in Assisi in October 1986. **“Every genuine prayer is done in the Holy Spirit”**.

The presentation of the Saints obeys to a similar but slightly different scope: the holiness of the most outstanding members of the Church is a reminder that in all the Saints, from the most familiar and, as it were, domestic to the most extraordinary and heroic, we are confronted with the **mystery of Jesus**. They are the mirrors of Jesus who is the only way to the Father and to the holiness of God.

### 6. *The primacy of God in Comboni*

The traits of the holiness of the Founders are evident in the example of many of his followers especially under the category of the **spirituality of presence**. But, first of all, we find it in the affirmation of the Founder himself as we can see in the well known quotation from the 1871 Rule: “Any man, who, in an absolute and final way, breaks off all relations with the world and with those things naturally most dear to him, **must live a life of spirit and of faith**.”





Archbishop Agostino Baroni

# PATIENT VISION

*The holiness of Comboni is the holiness of many of his sons and daughters. At this particular moment, I find it inspiring to dwell on the example of a great Comboni missionary who died fairly recently, and whose life is uniquely related to the Founder's, and speaks in a striking way to the problems of the mission today: Bishop Agostino Baroni.*

Baroni was born in Bologna (Italy) in 1906 and died there in 2001. He joined the Comboni Missionaries at 16, was ordained a priest in 1930 and went to the Sudan in 1932, at 26 years of age, the same age as Comboni when he went first to Africa.

This is not the only similarity with Comboni. Like him, Baroni was appointed Archbishop of Khartoum while he was outside Sudan, and when he arrived in Khartoum for his installation he said, echoing Comboni: "So, I am now at home!".

And he meant it. In 1972 he was granted Sudanese citizenship (the only missionary to be accorded this recognition). Comboni's sixth successor as Archbishop of Khartoum, he was the last European missionary to hold that post. He wanted a Sudanese as his successor at all costs, and in fact gave up his position to the Sudanese Mons. Gabriel Zubeir Wako, who is the Archbishop of Khartoum up to now. This happened in 1981, the first centenary of Comboni's death.

## *Special gifts*

Agostino Baroni had extraordinary gifts of dedication, discernment, openness, and especially holiness in the leadership of a diocese and a Church in such a delicate position in a Moslem country troubled by war. He had to face very difficult decisions, as when all the missionaries (400 of them) were expelled from Southern Sudan in the early 1960s. At the time, he opted for patience and hope for the future, drawing the sharp criticism of those who wanted a prophetic gesture of protest.

Yet time soon vindicated his decision when the largely Christian Southern Sudanese started coming to Khartoum in thousands, eventually reaching about two million. They needed pastoral and humanitarian care, and they found Archbishop Baroni at their service with his missionaries and institutions.

The influx of Southerners into the North also changed the face of the Church in the Sudan, as was shown during the visit of Pope John Paul II in February 1992, when a crowd of one million Sudanese Catholic gathered to honor him and pray with him. The then retired Baroni traveled to Sudan for the occasion. He would return to his country of adoption again in 1996 for the beatification of Comboni: he was 90 by then!

### *Discretion and patience*

The year 1972 was of great importance in the life of the Sudan and for Baroni as a bishop. Nimeiri had taken power in the country and wanted to sign a peace accord with the Southern “rebels”.

He sent Archbishop Baroni secretly to Switzerland to contact the Southern leaders. The peace was signed at Addis Abeba (Ethiopia) on February 22, 1972, and gave the Sudan ten years of tranquility and development. In the same year, the Holy See established diplomatic relations with the Sudan.

The government rewarded Archbishop Baroni with Sudanese citizenship and a Gold Medal for his life-long work in the field of education. Two years later, the Catholic hierarchy was established in Southern Sudan.

Only ten years had passed from the tragedy of the expulsion and the complete reversal of that situation bore witness to Agostino Baroni’s farsightedness and his patient and discrete approach.

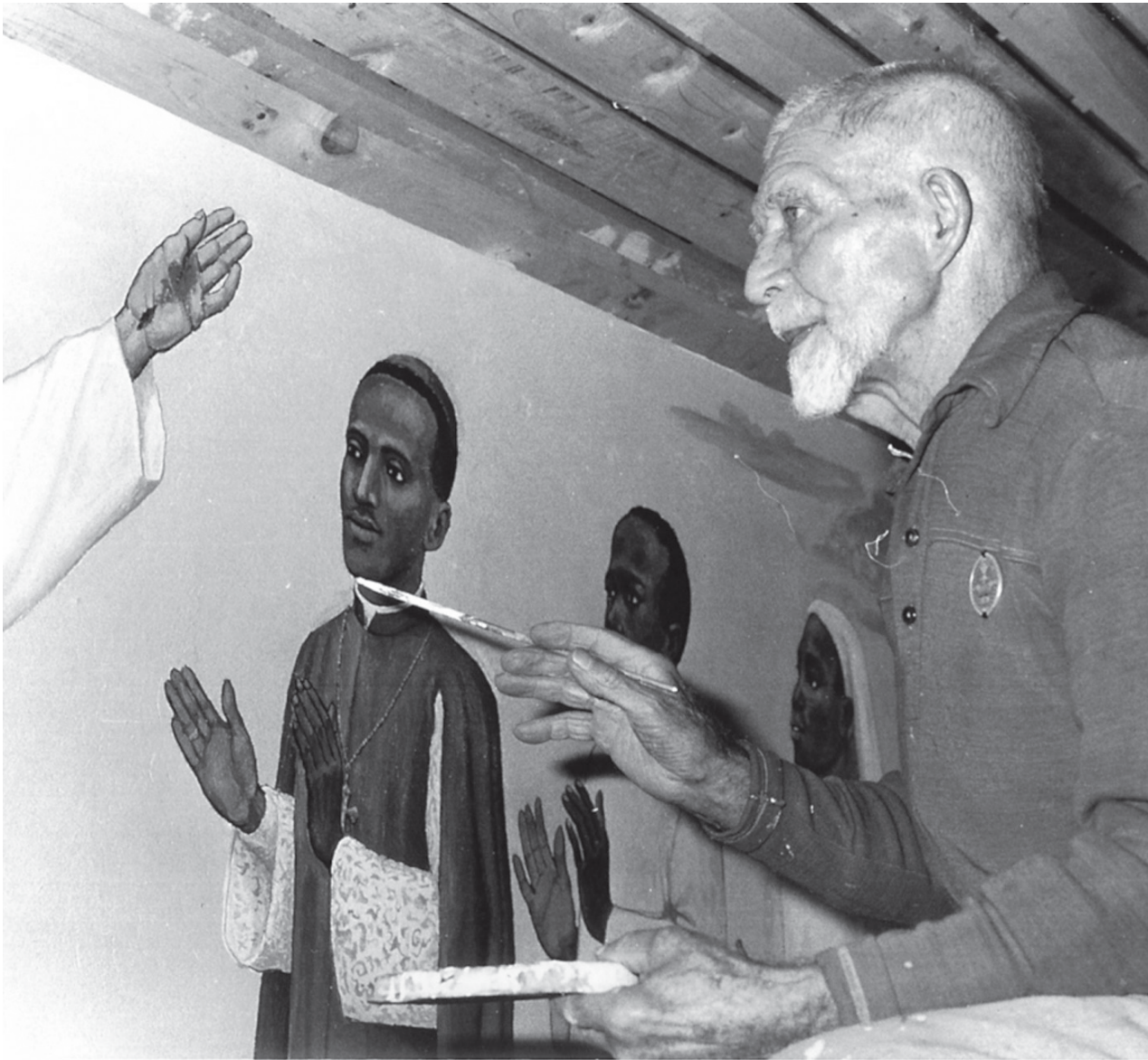
### *Deeply in love*

His secretary, Fr. Agostino Galli, has written: “Deeply in love with the Church and his people, wholly committed to the growth of the Christian community, he spread the Gospel and education in an often hostile environment with the weapons of charity and dialogue”.

Half a century saw him as a discrete but extremely effective actor on the stage of Sudanese history. A man of great vision, he was able to carve out a path for the Church in the difficult days of transition from colonial rule to independence, becoming a secure point of reference for all the pastoral agents.

Time and again he made known and defended, occasionally with strong words, but always in a respectful way, the position of the Church and the rights of the people.

At a time of great social transformation he knew how to adapt the pastoral approach to new situations, leading the Church from a witnessing presence to direct pastoral involvement.



*A Figure in the missionary landscape: Bro. Vittorio Fanti, MCCJ*

## **BLUE EYES**

*When I met him he was already a very old man: permanently bent, with knobby hands and a deformed body. But his face reflected the vision of beauty that he repeatedly embodied in the colorful frescos with which he was decorating so many churches in East Africa.*

*Especially his incredibly blue eyes revealed the ageless quality of his soul. This is the story of Vittorio Fanti, Comboni missionary brother, builder, artist and holy man.*

In 1977, a beautiful round church had been built in Nyamwegabira parish, the last one before Queen Elizabeth National Park, in Uganda, and the work of decorating it with paintings was in process. I happen to pass by and enter the church: perched high on the scaffoldings, Bro. Fanti was working alone. At my greeting, he turned down to me his wrinkled face and looked at me with his beautiful blue eyes. I can never forget that moment!

Vittorio Fanti was born at Pressano, in the mountainous province of Trent, Italy, on October 15 1901. His family's farmhouse was like a mansion: a carved stone portal gave into a large, internal courtyard, used also as night storage place for the many agricultural implements and carts. From there a solid dark marble staircase led into a large hall used for family gatherings during festivities. Balconies and terraces added a touch of aristocratic distinction to the whole building.

The Fanti family had been farming the land for generations. They belonged to that class of farmers successfully applying brains as well as muscles to their work. Their vineyard produced quality wines, the fields wheat enough for the family and the market and the meadows provided fodder for the many milk cows filling the huge stable that used to be, during the long, cold winters, the meeting place for men, women and children.

Vittorio, as a grown up boy, showed his artistic talent painting the walls with frescoes depicting landscapes, reflecting the surrounding alpine environment, and religious compositions. At 27, after military service, Vittorio applied to the Comboni Missionaries to become a missionary brother, he was accepted, did his novitiate and pronounced his First Vows on February 2 1931.

He left immediately for Africa and he was busy for 4 years decorating the cathedral at Khartoum, in the Sudan, as the helper of a Syrian artist. Then he was called to Uganda: Gulu cathedral was waiting for his decorations, but on reaching there, somebody said there was something more urgent that needed the ability of a good brother. Bro. Fanti put away his brushes and pigments in a locker and became an instant mason and carpenter.

It was only after 18 years, in 1953, that he was allowed to work full time as a painter of churches, after a short course in an art school in England. Then the incredible adventure of the next thirty years started: church after church, in Uganda and Kenya, in hundreds

of square meters of frescos, all the colorful saga of the Bible became alive under Bro. Vittorio's creative brush.

He worked in the most diverse places, often away from his community. He had to put up his own makeshift scaffolding, prepare the wall by scraping it, filling the cracks. How many ladders did he climb up and down! All of them, however, were part of the only staircase that would lead him to heaven. Bro. Fanti never signed his paintings, but if one looks carefully he can find somewhere and in each one of them a cat: his signature, his mascot!

An elderly confrere said that Bro. Fanti possessed the heart of a Francis of Assisi and added: "He is both a great artist and a great saint, renowned for his simplicity and sense of humor. Old, literally bent in two, suffering from rheumatic pains, he kept on decorating churches to the very last day for the glory of God".

His last work was the head of a horse, using glued paper mounted on a wire frame: a masterpiece made for the school children. In Uganda horses are practically unknown. Fanti wanted perhaps to finish his artistic career with a work reproducing what he loved so much in youth: the horse. He died peacefully at Aber, in Uganda, on June 19 1989. He had lived in his art the life of Jesus and Mary and was now going in person to check how things had really gone.

I am sure that there he met the persons he so often depicted in his murals; I imagine them going to meet him and telling him : "Come, good and faithful servant. You painted us down there among the Africans and for the Africans, who, thanks to your colors and brushes, can see our faces. Come now to enjoy the prize that is yours by right".



**Sister Lucia Careddu, CMS**

## **FUGITIVE FOR GOD**

*She was 25 when she decided to run away from home to follow her missionary vocation. Assigned to the Sudan, in little more than a decade, Sr. Lucia revealed herself to be “a force of nature” in the field of education. This attracted the enmity of the Muslim authorities who expelled her from the country ahead of the largest expulsion of Christian missionaries in the XX century. After only 2 months, she was starting afresh in Karamoja, Uganda, where she was to spend the next 40 years of her life. She became an institution: her Kangole Girls’ School rescued hundreds of girls from the traditional position of servitude and ignorance. She was a true “woman of the Gospel”.*



My friend Peter Loceng is a stout young man, a teacher by profession with a degree from Birmingham University in England, happily married with children. He belongs to the Karimojon tribe of north-western Uganda and he is completely blind. In the early 1980s, Peter was an adolescent growing up in the savannah of Kotido, North Karamoja, when an accident made him completely blind. His family brought him to the school for the blind that a Comboni sister, Sr. Lucia Careddu, had opened in Kangole, South Karamoja, as an addition to her large Kangole Girls' Primary School.

Blindness became a blessing in disguise for Peter: since he was very good in school and passed his High School Certificate with flying colors, Sr. Lucia took him to the bishop who took a liking at that bulky, blind but smart and cheerful young man. He found some benefactors for him and sent him to study in England. When he came back from Birmingham with his degree, bishop Paul Kalanda asked me to keep him as a teacher in Nadiket Seminary. Sr. Lucia was very proud of him: she was like a mother to him and his success was a single but meaningful reward for her life of utter dedication.

### *An unusual sun stroke*

Lucia was born on November 16, 1923 at Sant'Antonio di Gallura, Sardinia, Italy. The second of eight children, she grew up serene, went to school, joined the lay apostolate of the Catholic Action. Her parents were very loving and ready to sacrifice everything so that their children could pursue their education. They were very proud of Lucia, their clever and vivacious daughter, who was very committed to her education and became soon a school teacher as it was her cherished dream.

One day, Lucia finds a copy of the biography of the great missionary Daniel Comboni and falls in love at first sight with his "Plan for the Regeneration of Africa". "I want to be a missionary for Africa" she thinks, but when she discloses her project to her parents she finds them very much against it. "If you want to be a nun, it's ok to us, but a missionary to Africa, no, never. Why to risk your life in those wild regions?" they exclaim. Lucia, as the good daughter of her parents, shares their stubbornness: she doesn't give up her dream, but decides to run away from home .

"Lucia got a sun stroke" whispered the inhabitants of Sant'Antonio di Gallura when, on May 16, 1948, it was discovered that Lucia has really disappeared from home and sailed to the "continent", as they used to call Italy's main land. It was really a "sun stroke", but it was the "Sun of God's love" that urged her to abandon her home. At Verona, on September 29, 1950, she takes the First Vows and immediately afterwards, boards a ship and, after one month, reaches the coast of Africa. With the means available

at that time, she travels towards the heart of the Black Continent in order to reach her destination, Southern Sudan.

Torit, Palotaka, Omdurman, Kator, Juba, are all places that saw her, in different times, active as a teacher and discovered and appreciated her talents as an organizer and administrator, her big heart as that of a generous mother and her far-sightedness pointing to the future. All this was nourished by long hours of prayer in the morning, when all creatures are still asleep, and at night when the darkness enwraps people and things, with the background company of the distant roaring of the lions, the coarse laughter of the hyena and the swishing of the bats' wings.

Sister Lucia thinks of herself as a normal, ordinary religious sister; she doesn't know that she is observed secretly by the Muslim authorities who badly resent the work of the men and women missionaries, all the more if they are active and successful. It is in this way that, in January 1963, there comes for Sr. Lucia the decree of expulsion ("Out because unwanted"). A little more than one year after, on March 9 1964, it was the general expulsion of all the missionaries from that country. I remember the images on television of the more than two hundred priests, brothers and sisters, disembarking from the plane who brought them, still wearing their soiled white cassocks or habits as they had been grabbed by the police in their isolated missions, disheveled in hairs and beards, disoriented at the glare of the lights in the airport... It was the largest expulsion of Christian missionaries in the whole of the XX century.

### ***Pioneering for women's liberation***

Back in Italy, Sr. Lucia deep down feels that her staying in Italy will be short... As a matter of fact, only two months later, she is already in Uganda. They assigned her to Karamoja, arid area in the North-Eastern part of the country, inhabited by the Karimojon, a tribe of nomadic pastoralists, notorious cattle rustlers, always at war with the neighboring tribes. Sr. Lucia is one of the pioneers who founded Kangole Mission, a settlement not far from Moroto, the head of the Karamoja District.

The continuous movements of the people, forever searching for pastures and water, do not make you think of opening a school and, least of all, a girls' school. One needs courage, spirit of initiative, capacity for dialogue and conviction and...money in order to try such an enterprise. Sr. Lucia is bursting with talents, and, as for the money...our courageous missionary has already spread her contagious enthusiasm to her family members, relatives, parishioners, fellow citizen who are now ready and eager to give a hand. By means of a thick correspondence that steals her precious night hours, she has



already involved so many benefactors who share in her projects and keep sending her financial help.

The experience done in the Sudan has taught Sr. Lucia that if she succeeds in convincing the elders about the usefulness of a project, she can be sure of the result. Therefore she started an intense and respectful dialogue with the elders and got the green light about building the first class room, with the help of the local community and using the material that the people were using in building their huts: timber, mud, cow dung, stones...

Little by little the first girls start arriving... Their number increases year after year until the 800 of the present time. The small hill where Kangole mission is located is little by little covered with buildings: classrooms, dormitories, kitchen and refectory, several offices because the dynamism of Sr. Lucia has shown that the place has possibilities of development even in agriculture.

When I met her, she had already grown old, with her body twisted by arthritis. Only Sr. Lucia's ingenuity and experience of decades of stubborn presence in the place had enabled the school to remain open and well attended against all odds... I remember the long lines of Karimojon women waiting in front of the school with bundles of firewood, pleading Sr. Lucia to accept their firewood instead of cash as school fee.

### *A force of nature*

Beside the girls' school, Sr. Lucia's motherly heart is struck by the realization of the many blind young people present in the area. Something must be done for them also and this is how she started a school for the blind according to the Braille method and added music and typing. Among the blind, some, like Peter Loceng, are distinguished by outstanding academic performance and Sr. Lucia does her best to see that they continue to the university and get degrees.

"Sr. Lucia is a real force of nature" declared the then Mother General of the Comboni Sisters, Sr. Federica Bettari. "Ten sisters like her could well convert the whole nation and in this way make people re-own their human dignity, without depending on anybody else". "This sister is a bomb! When she speaks of her mission, she is so affectionate and irradiates such warmth that none can remain indifferent. We could spend hours listening to her talking, without getting tired" echoed the nurses and fellow patients who have known her during the time she was admitted to Negrar Hospital, at Verona, after she reluctantly had left Karamoja.

Notwithstanding her twisted body, the difficulty she had in breathing and the little mobility, Sr. Lucia kept her enthusiasm and indomitable faith. Leaving Verona for Erba,

where she will depart for heaven, she carried three dreams: to go back to Karamoja, to receive the news that Sr. Giovannina, a young Comboni sister also from Sardinia, who was her dear friend and very gravely sick, has recovered; to witness the opening of a community of Comboni sisters in her island, Sardinia....

But Heaven was calling and the dreams of this world must give way: on January 14 2002, surrounded by her con-sisters and assisted by some family members, Sr. Lucia peacefully passed from this world to the next, to receive the reward of her extraordinary life. Sr. Giovannina had preceded her to heaven three months before. There is still no Comboni sisters' community in Sardinia.

Thinking of her, I am reminded of the generous and gallant words that Comboni wrote about his women missionaries: “ These sisters are the true image of the ancient women of the Gospel, who, with the same facility with which they teach the alphabet to the orphans in Europe, cross deserts on camels, sleep in the open air under a tree, scold immoral men for their vices, claim justice from pagan courts for the oppressed, do not fear hyenas and a lion's roaring, disastrous journeys and even death to win souls for the Church. They respond with miraculous weakness, their own force, to the Heart of Jesus who came to bring fire to the world. They are the shield, strength and guarantee of the ministry of the missionary priest”.



## DOUBLE IMPACT

*He thought that the impact of the bullets that reduced to shreds the right side of his body was the only one that he had to bear, but soon Fr. Fulvio was faced by another, unexpected shock that changed his life, AIDS. This is the extraordinary adventure of a Comboni missionary in Uganda, Africa.*

On September 28, 1983, an accident occurred that changed the life of Fr. Fulvio Cristoforetti, a Comboni missionary in Uganda. For the last three years, since the contested 1980 elections, there had been a fierce guerilla war in Uganda, led by Yoweri

Museveni, the one who would conquer Kampala in 1986, proclaim himself president and continue in the same position up to the present time. He had installed himself, along with his fighters of the NRA (National Resistance Army) in what was called “the Lowero Triangle”, a notorious theater of bloody clashes between the NRA and the regular troops of Uganda’s President Obote. That area happened to be Fr. Fulvio’s parish.

Fr. Fulvio and the other Comboni missionaries were free to go on safari and visit the parish communities, but only at their own risk. Nobody would ever harm them, let alone shoot at them. They were appreciated and loved by everybody. One day, a confrere from the capital brought an off-road vehicle, a Suzuki, to the mission residence. Finally they could face the impassable roads of the far sites of the parish. The military authorities, who gave them permission to travel in the war zone, made very clear to them: “Do exactly what the military tell you at the roadblocks”.

With this warning, the missionaries set off on their way. This is how Fr. Fulvio describes the fateful journey: “My confrere, Fr. William Maffeis, and I passed through three roadblocks without incident. At the fourth one, a young lieutenant told us: “I should detain you here, but since you insist, I advise you to go no further than Magoma because there is a lot of fighting going on.”

At Magoma, the church was well maintained. Fresh flowers on the altar told us people had gathered there recently. We found no one, however, not even the catechist, so we drove on with the intention of visiting the nearest chapel.

### *Targeted by a bazooka*

Suddenly, we heard a loud explosion. I was driving and I didn’t understand what was going on. Almost immediately a second explosion goes off, shattering the glass in the Suzuki. I feel a strong pain in my legs, right arm and buttocks. I am hit by four bullets. I turn to my confrere and I see that he is huddled down between the passenger seat and the dashboard. On that instant, a bullet plows into my scalp, making a furrow along the side of it. If I hadn’t turned my head to look at Fr. William, I’d be dead on the spot.

Despite my excruciating pain, I try to accelerate the car, but the guerillas intensify their attack against us. A rocket launched by a bazooka hits the car and stops us cold. The engine catches fire and a thick, black smoke engulfs us. With my good arm I open the door. I can’t move my legs, but I am able to pull them out, and clinging to the door, I slide them down until my feet touch the ground.

I look at the seat and see that part of me is still there. I touch my bottom and I realize that my buttock has been shot away to the bone. A group of young men approach the car, embracing their guns. “What have I done to you?” one of them, perhaps the chief, exclaims. The others immediately follow his lead. “We are sorry, Father. We didn’t mean to kill you” and they go away as quickly as they had come.

Then Fr. William came to my rescue. Grasping me under my armpits, he pulled me away like a sack of potatoes and eased me on to the grass. I pleaded with him to hear my confession. “I’m dying, and I want to go straight to Paradise.” I told him. I told him that I forgave the youth who shot me and made him promise he would visit my family. After he gave me absolution, Fr. William left quickly to find help. I remained in the company of a cloud of mosquitoes determined to have a feast on my blood. At first, I tried to ward them off, but after awhile I gave up and let them have their way.

In those moments, I felt God’s presence more than ever. I had no fear. I abandoned myself to God, knowing in whose hands I was placing myself. I kept repeating the phrase: “Into your hands, o Lord, I commend my spirit”. Then a group of soldiers, members of the regular army, arrived. God’s hand brought them to me. They looked around and found a board, placed me on it, and carried me away towards the Magoma roadblock. Then, a military truck arrived and in the cabin sat Fr. William.

### *Tragic gift*

They placed me on the naked steel of the truck bed. The lieutenant tells the driver to hit the accelerator, and he floors it. The speed and the impressive potholes only add to my excruciating pain, and I moan continually. A soldier sits on a blanket at the rear of the truck. Our eyes meet, and I can tell he feels bad. He brings the blanket to me, rolls it like a pillow and places it gently under my head. I wish he would place it under my rear where I have nerves exposed, but I don’t have the strength to tell him. I can only smile my thanks to him.

When we reach Kasaala, Fr. William gets the little mission truck and puts two mattresses in the back. “They should help cushion the ride” he says. It is very difficult for me to hear him. We leave for Kampala, and I pray: “Oh God, if I have to die, let it be now, not after another 80 kilometers”. It’s late afternoon when we reach Nsambya Hospital in Kampala. The Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa take me in their care. That day Sr. Miriam Dugan, the surgeon, had been detained in the operating room longer than usual. She was in the kitchen to get a bite to eat when she was urgently called to assist Fr. Fulvio. He had fallen into a coma, had lost a lot of blood, and was the grayish color of a corpse.

Sr. Miriam wanted to start a transfusion but there was no supply of blood in the hospital. She begged Fr. William to look for donors. After one hour, Fr. William had rounded up a few people for donations. The only technology Sister had to screen for HIV was her intuition. “I picked people who looked least likely to transmit the virus. That was my screening mechanism”. But at least one carrier got through anyway, and Fr. Fulvio started his long adventure with AIDS, although this was not evident in the beginning.

### ***Secret of missionary success***

When Fulvio Cristoforetti was seven years old he told people he wanted to be a priest. And he meant it. One of six children in a family materially poor but rich in faith, Fulvio left his childhood home in Alvio, Italy, when he was only twelve to join the diocesan seminary in Trento. By the time he had reached his last year of theology, he knew that God was calling him to be a missionary.

With the support of his spiritual director and the archbishop of Trento, Fulvio entered the Comboni seminary in Gozzano in 1956. “The Lord has called you,” archbishop Ferrari told him “Go, and may God bless you”. In September 1958, Fulvio was ordained a Comboni missionary priest in his home town. His dream was to go to Africa. In 1963, after studying English in the United States, he got his wish when he was assigned to Kasaala, a parish of the archdiocese of Kampala, Uganda.

People welcomed him with open arms, and he immediately started learning the language and immersing himself in the culture. “The secret of a missionary’s success,” he said, “is to sincerely love those whom God places on your path. Love them all like they were your own family.”

Those years were a time of indescribable joy and unforgettable experiences that strengthened Fr. Fulvio’s faith. More times than he could count, he was evangelized by the sacrifices the catechumens made during their preparation for baptism. Year after year, Fr. Fulvio persevered in the pastoral service of the people of Kasaala: his benevolent presence was well known in all the territory where his smiling, optimistic approach brought serenity and good will to all his parishioners.

### ***Twenty years struggle with AIDS***

The doctors who attended Fr. Fulvio through his recuperation predicted that he would be in a wheelchair the rest of his life. Instead, he was able to walk and without a cane. After the ordeal of numerous reconstruction surgeries and long recuperation, Fr. Fulvio

returned to his beloved Kasaala, where he continued his missionary service. In September 1985, he had to leave hurriedly, together with a large group of parishioners, to escape the arrival of Idi Amin's soldiers, who had order to exterminate the population. Traveling on foot, with the dark of the night as cover, he managed, with God's protection, to dodge the soldiers' fury.

In 1990, Fr. Fulvio was moved to Mbuya parish, Kampala, but in 1997 he had to return to Milan for medical treatment for AIDS. He stayed there a year, accepting voluntarily to place himself under experimental anti-AIDS drug therapy. "I signed because I fervently hoped there would be an improvement, maybe even a complete cure for this horrible condition. When God called me home I wanted to be able to say that we defeated AIDS, that the virus was wiped out".

Following treatment, Fr. Fulvio remained HIV positive, but turned away from his own problems to instill courage in other patients suffering from all kinds of illnesses. From 1999 to 2007, Fulvio lived at the Comboni house in Arco, Trent, always taking an active part in the community.

In 2004, Sr. Miriam came to visit Fr. Fulvio. "It was an indescribably emotional experience seeing the person who saved my life some 20 years before," Fulvio said. Sometime during their reunion, Sr. Miriam looked directly into Fr. Fulvio's eyes and pleaded, "Tell me I did right. Tell me that even the infected person was an authentic donor. Thanks to that blood and the infinite power of God, you are still alive 21 years later". Drying her eyes, she said, "And you are still in good shape". Fr. Fulvio hugged her and said, "You did the right thing and I am infinitely grateful"

At the beginning of 2008, the AIDS virus got the better of him in spite of his long, hard battle against it, and he had to return to the Milano clinic. "I am at the end," he said. "I cannot move from my bed. In a sense, I am nailed to it, and this gives me the opportunity to unite myself with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross".

Fr. Fulvio Cristoforetti died, convinced that he was a privileged recipient of God's love, the God who made his unfathomable designs clearly visible in Fr. Fulvio's life. Two days before his death, he confided to a friend: "I am happy to share the life of many Africans who die victims of this disease that has been my constant companion for the last 25 years. I lived for Africa; now I want to die for the Africans". Then he added, "Want to know why? It's a question of love".





Fr. Giuseppe Ambrosoli (1924-1987)

## **THE WARS OF A MAN OF PEACE**

*This is the story of Joseph Ambrosoli, priest and doctor, who passed through the cruelties of wars and the rat race of the industrial world only concerned with alleviating suffering humanity in whom he saw the face of God.*



In January 1986, Museveni's freedom fighters, after five years of guerilla warfare, came out of the bush and captured Kampala, the capital of Uganda, putting an end to one of the most cruel and disastrous regime in the history of that country. Yoweri Museveni became the new head of state and the long period of material and moral reconstruction began. But the leaders of the former regime, centered on the Acholi tribe, did not accept defeat and run on their turn to the bush, starting a prolonged armed resistance, that degenerated into the kidnapping of children and the crimes against humanity of the last years.

Kalongo, a large settlement at the foot of a rocky hill that serves as a landmark in the savanna of the Acholi, was famous for its hospital, the masterpiece of Fr. Joseph Ambrosoli, a Comboni priest and doctor. At the beginning of 1987, it became apparent that the hospital would not survive the insecurity of the area: very soon the Uganda army ordered its evacuation.

Nobody would have imagined that after almost 32 years of missionary life at Kalongo, characterized by the most complete dedication and a great love for the Africans, Fr. Joseph would witness the forced closure of the hospital and the apparent destruction of his long and patient labor. It was the price of the war. At the set day, the long convoy of trucks carrying away the personnel and equipment wound its way through the plains of East Acholi, heading toward the town of Lira.

Fr. Joseph, already suffering from kidney insufficiency, accepted the very bitter chalice with his characteristic faith. He wrote: "We must be convinced that all this is happening for our own good". His remaining worry was to re-settle the large group of student-nurses who were the pride of Kalongo Hospital. Eventually, he managed to find a place for them in Angal missionary hospital, just in time for them to undergo their exams.

As if realizing that his time had come, Fr. Joseph wrote in his journal: "Many people are scared by the passing of the years. For us it is a cause of joy because it makes us think that we are getting closer to the Father's house".

### ***A teenager in World War II***

The seventh of eight children, Joseph was born in Ronago, Como, in northern Italy, on July 25, 1925. His father John Baptist and his mother Palmira cared much for his education, choosing for him the best schools. The encounter with Fr. Silvio Riva, the founder of the "Cenacle", an association in which young people came together to pray, was a determining factor in the preparation of the young Joseph, who became an activist in Catholic Action.

At the end of his secondary education, he enrolled in the faculty of medicine of the University of Milan. Meanwhile World War II broke out and Joseph, following the inclination of his compassionate heart, volunteered to accompany to Switzerland many Jews who were persecuted by the Fascist regime.

At the end however he had to join Mussolini's Fascist Republic, in order to avoid trouble for his family. At that time, Italy was split in two. In the south, the Allies had landed in Sicily and were systematically pushing back the Germans and liberating the national territory. In the North, the dictator Mussolini had escaped from prison and constituted the Fascist Republic, in a last attempt of resistance. Young men were forcibly recruited into his ill-trained army. After some months in the military camp of Heuberg in Germany, Joseph was sent to patrol the mountainous area of the Toscana region. He did not like fighting; he let the partisans fire on him, risking his life, without ever answering back.

Fortunately, the war was at its end and Joseph was very happy to go back to the university. Soon he completed his studies, achieving the doctorate in medicine with top honors. As he was continuing his training in hospital, great changes were happening in Italy and in his family. During the fifties, the Italian economy was undergoing its boom and the Ambrosoli family business, specialized in confectionery, was blossoming: what used to be a family enterprise was becoming an industry.

### ***“I come to look for God”***

This did not affect Joseph's ideals. His medical profession that was offering him an outlet to his compassionate nature was looking for the kind of commitment that could satisfy his deep thirst for God. He decided to become a missionary and in 1951 he joined the Comboni Institute. “I am now preparing to enter the Novitiate”, he wrote to the Vocation Director. “Unfortunately, I cannot help but bringing along the heavy load of my faults. I believe the superiors will have to exercise much patience with me”.

To the Superior General he wrote: “I come to look for God”. The search for God will be his main concern for the rest of his life. At Gozzano, the place of the Novitiate, Joseph realized that the life of a missionary is a hard one. The Novitiate period was a foretaste of it. He did not lose courage, even though he wrote in his journal: “The only one who is not happy about me being here is the Devil, who at times tries to bother me”. And, further on: “To die a martyr is to witness my faith in you, my Lord. To remain here, in this house to serve you, this is a kind of martyrdom”.

On September 9, 1953, he made his first Profession of Vows, and proceeded to the study of theology. He took advantage of free time to go to hospitals to learn the art of surgery.

He distinguished himself for his exquisite charity towards the sick for whom he had a very delicate consideration. With special dispensation, he made his final Profession on September 9, 1955, and with one more dispensation he was ordained a priest on December 17, 1955, at the beginning of his fourth year of theology.

The reason for the hurry: the urgent need of a doctor in Uganda for the hospital which the bishop, Mons. Cesana, was building in Gulu. But also Fr. Malandra wanted to enlarge the hospital in Kalongo. And since the latter was nicknamed in the Acholi language “Aguata Matek” (*hard calabash*), he succeeded in winning and keeping Father Ambrosoli. That was the beginning of the long love affair of Fr. Joseph with Kalongo hospital that lasted 32 years and was coming to an end as he was lying in bed, sick, in Lira.

***“What God Wants is never too much”***

In a few days, his infirmity brought him to his death. Fr. Joseph, who had given professional assistance to so many dying people, died himself without a doctor. The Comboni sisters assisted him up to the end, but doctors could only be consulted via radio.

When he realized that there was nothing left to do, and that the helicopter requested, not by him who did not want it, was not arriving to take him to the nearest mission hospital at Lacor, he asked as a grace to be buried in African land and in the African fashion, wrapped in a simple sheet. He was granted only the first part. He died peacefully. The words that impressed his friends at his deathbed were the ones he had kept repeating in the most critical moments of his life; “What God wants is never too much”. Now he rests in the cemetery of Lira and on his tomb, there are happenings of peacemaking and forgiveness. Two years after his death, the Comboni personnel went back to Kalongo, to re-open the hospital that had been guarded by the Acholi warriors to everybody’s surprise, and another Comboni priest-doctor, Fr. Egidio Tocalli has been there ever since. The powerful spiritual presence of the Servant of God, Fr. Joseph Ambrosoli, hovers over the place as protection and encouragement.

Much has been said, and much more, perhaps, will be said about Father Joseph Ambrosoli. He is in fact one of those missionary figures who have left a mark: the mark of the passage of God. Among the very many witnesses who knew him, there is none who doesn’t emphasize his genuine holiness. Even one who lived close to him for 23 continuous years, the diocesan priest and doctor Don Palmiro Donini, is firmly convinced of the heroic character of some of Fr. Joseph’s virtues like poverty, availability, self-giving, fortitude, charity, purity and obedience.

The secret of such great success in the ways of the spirit rest most assuredly on the grace of God, second on the heart of his mother, a very pious woman, and lastly on his constant efforts to improve.

The Saints are a living exegesis of the Gospel. Fr. Ambrosoli proved it. He is a witness, a walked path, the demonstration that the Beatitudes are possible, so true that he actually lived them. The son of successful industrialists who left everything to serve Christ in the sick brothers and sisters in the wilderness of the Acholi tell our youth not to look themselves in the mirror, making a pattern of themselves, but to mirror themselves on those who probably have walked a longer way or have gone deeper into the Gospel to understand in what manner, how and where God calls them.



Bishop Caesar Mazzolari (1937–2011)

## **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED**

*He was born in Italy but completed his studies in USA. For almost twenty years as a young priest he served the destitute blacks in the States. Having reached Africa, the place of his dreams, he was given the most dangerous area, South Sudan, as the theatre of his efforts. He grew into the paternity of a bishop during more than twenty years of caring and daring. Soft spoken and meek but with an iron will, he knew how to mobilize people both in the Sudan and abroad for the welfare and dignity of the poor. He saw the dream of the independence of his people come true. And then he died. He had accomplished his mission.*

On Saturday July 9 this year, in the Freedom Square of the little town of Rumbek, in Southern Sudan, the local bishop, Mons. Caesar Mazzolari of the Comboni Missionaries, presided over the official opening prayer during the Independence Day celebration, which made South Sudan the newest nation of Africa. Exactly one week later, on July 16, Bishop Caesar died. His death came about unexpectedly as he was celebrating Mass: at the beginning of the consecration he felt unwell. He was rushed to hospital but found to be already dead on arrival. The burial took place at Rumbek on Monday, July 18, earlier than planned, due to the extremely hot weather. Mgr. Caesar had always expressed the desire to be buried in Africa, the land for which he gave so much of himself, for which he suffered much and which he loved with an immense love.

On September 26, the Permanent Council of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) met in Rome. During his opening address, Card. Angelo Bagnasco, its president, said: “In Africa, as it is now well known, the 154th nation, South Sudan, was born, to which all our empathy and friendship goes. Primary protagonist of this independence has been one of our missionaries, Mons. Caesar Mazzolari: his sudden death has contributed to give even more prominence to the work and achievements of this extraordinary servant of the Gospel, who, because of his intelligence and dedication, deserves to be numbered among the greatest missionaries of all times”. This was possibly the highest praise for Bishop Mazzolari in the large resonance that his sudden death had in the media.

### *A brother, a friend and a consoler*

Mgr. Caesar Mazzolari was born at Brescia on February 9, 1937. His home was close to the house of the Comboni Missionaries and Caesar was still young when he first showed his desire to become one of them. After High School, in 1953 Caesar entered the novitiate but the following year he was sent to Monroe, Michigan, in the United States, to complete his formation in view of religious profession and to study English. He was then eighteen years old. He took his first vows at Monroe on September 9, 1955. He then continued with his theological studies at Cincinnati and San Diego, in California. He was ordained priest at San Diego on March 17, 1962.

Fr. Caesar stayed in the United States until 1981 working in different capacities: as spiritual director of the Cincinnati seminary; in pastoral work in Los Angeles, in a parish of Mexicans. Back in the seminary staff in Cincinnati, he worked among the Appalachians (mountain people) around Cincinnati and among the blacks of the city. During those years, Fr. Caesar realised how much poverty and suffering there existed even in the richest country of the world: for many of the poor, marginalised and unemployed he was a brother, a friend and a consoler.

In 1981 he was assigned to Africa and South Sudan, first as curate in the town of Nzara, in the diocese of Tombura-Yambio. His first missionary experience took place, therefore, in the land of the Zande, a fertile area already evangelised by two generations of Comboni Missionaries. Fr. Caesar worked as assistant at the Diocesan Catechetical Centre and as spiritual director at the minor seminary of the same diocese. In 1984, he was elected provincial superior of the Comboni Missionaries and, at the same time, was president of the Association of Religious Superiors up to the end of 1989 and superior general of the indigenous Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

On December 31, 1989, towards the end of his mandate as provincial, Fr. Caesar was appointed Apostolic Administrator of Rumbek. He accepted the post and for ten years followed the tragic vicissitudes of his people, moving his residence first to Arua-Ediofe in Uganda and then to Nairobi in Kenya, due to the war that was raging in South Sudan.

On 6 January, 1999, Fr. Caesar was consecrated bishop of the diocese of Rumbek by Pope John Paul II in Rome. His diocese was bigger than the whole of Luzon, with just two diocesan priests and five missionaries. Political difficulties actually prevented him, for a long period, from taking possession of his see and endangered the lives of his collaborators, both priests and laity. However, at the cathedral of the Holy Family – built, destroyed and rebuilt more than once during the civil war – Bishop Caesar proclaimed the Good news, never once admitting compromise.

### *The voice of the voiceless*

During his numerous trips to Italy, especially to his friends in his home town of Brescia and the surrounding area, he spared no effort in giving ‘a voice to the voiceless’, successfully moving public opinion. South Sudan was the poorest country in Africa where the good of the people took second place to 40 years of civil and tribal warfare whose only aim was to gain power and control over resources such as oil, water and gold to be found there in great quantities. He always asked everyone “not to forget, as the people of Sudan need a just peace that respects human rights.”

The Sudanese people were torn to shreds by tribalism, as well as being worn out by hunger and violence caused by a war which started as far back as 1955, a year before the Sudan became independent from Britain, and which flared up again in 1983. The victims of the war amounted to a million and a half, with five million refugees. “One of my tasks – wrote Mgr. Caesar – will be that of again spiritually and humanly motivate a people whose moral fibre has been completely destroyed.” And again: “That which disturbs me most is the despair felt by the people. For miles and miles the scene is always the same: an endless crowd of women, old people and children trying to flee the

scourge of a war which seems to have no end. In the villages where there have been incursions by government troops, abandoned human bodies and burned out military vehicles are to be seen”.

In 1994, Mgr. Caesar himself was captured and held hostage for 24 hours by a group of guerrillas of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, the armed group fighting for independence against the government of Khartoum. On that occasion he was seriously threatened simply because he wanted to make peace between two guerrilla factions fighting among themselves. In an interview, Mgr. Cesare explained how the fundamental Islamist government of Khartoum had launched a fierce religious persecution against Christians. Those who did not accept the Koran could not find work, a home or medical help and could not go to school.

Whenever Christians built a shelter to gather and pray, the government soldiers would come and burn everything. In this situation, Mgr. Cesare still kept in contact with the people and the priests who lived the lives of fugitives. It was extremely dangerous to travel from one part of the diocese to another. Travelling by light aircraft incurred the risk of being shot down while travel by road ran the danger of mines and military roadblocks. Furthermore, the fleeing people could not cultivate the land, sow or harvest. The villages were burned and the men forced to join the army. Women, the elderly and children wandered like spectres in a scene of horror.

### *A gigantic experience*

“In a country whose population is 85% illiterate, the first challenge is definitely education. Not merely teaching people reading, writing, and arithmetic, but building a personal identity, the shape of a people, a nation looking at the future”. Bishop Caesar explained it recently to a journalist who interviewed him in the course of a journey by jeep. The bishop was at the wheel despite his 74 years and the roads of South Sudan – little more than tracks in the savannah. “One of the problems that the missionaries have to confront every day is the subjection of women in a culture of polygamy. The thing that will put an end to polygamy is education, so that women will understand that they are destined for something better than to be the 20th or 30th wife of the rich old man of the village,” argued Bishop Caesar with conviction.

“Even though modernity is making its timid inroads into an impenetrable society like that of South Sudan, the young are still completely chained to their culture by a sort of system: polygamy, the obligation of vendetta, and other negative situations. People are victims of this vicious circle. They will need tremendously strong Christian convictions to escape from all that,” explains the prelate from Brescia. In addition to the critique of



polygamy – a practice that represents a defeat for the dignity of woman and for the value of love itself – education, understood in a Christian sense, is bringing into the ancient Nigritia another very important human and social value: forgiveness.

"As a Church we have reconciled the Nuer and the Dinka through our diocesan association dedicated to Saint Monica: we have brought about meetings between tribes at one time in conflict with one another. Dinka families have gone to find the Nuer and the Nuer have visited the homes of the Dinka. This has been happening over the last 7-8 years, while the war was still raging. When individuals forget about vendetta, peace comes". What Bishop Mazzolari and others like him have tried to do is to heal the wounds suffered among the people through 20 years of battles and confrontations – in such a way as to overcome the very term 'enemy.'

The Bishop gave an example: "In the area on the border between the North and the South many young people managed to escape from the tented camps where they had been collected as slaves of the *baghar*, the Arab slave traders. So we set up schools in Gordhim and in Marial Lou, two of our missions, where an education has been offered to these lads who were formerly slaves. Our schools have not just been schools but real refuges for these kids. They were places where kids who had come from the North, were (very reluctantly on their part) mixed in with the ones from the South".

"Our centers have been able to bring about a real reconciliation and integration. We have been in a position to offer a future to hundreds of kids who were formerly slaves. One day they will say: 'If it had not been for the Church, we would still be abandoned and ignorant.' I have sent some of the kids who were ex-slaves to university. One girl, Suzanne, even went to Oxford: now she is in charge of public relations for the government of South Sudan. Education here serves as bread for the hungry and water for those who are thirsty".

Bishop Caesar did not hide his enthusiasm also when speaking of his first Christians: "In the first years of mission among the Azande, I was personally responsible for the preparation for baptism. Then, as Bishop, in one single evening I baptized a good 1,200 youngsters in Niam Liel alone. The following morning I confirmed 900. There are moments – when we become instruments of sanctification – when we are sanctified ourselves too. We must not forget how much God works in the hearts of people. And when you become His minister, well, it's wonderful! A gigantic experience!"

### *His spiritual heritage will live forever*

The official burial ceremony took place on Thursday, July 21. The president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit, sent a message in memory of Mgr. Caesar. Part of it reads: “He was a man of deep faith, humble and sincere, who dedicated his life to the service of the Catholic Church in Sudan and who will be remembered for his heroic commitment in the struggle for liberty, justice and human dignity, a man who always worked to reconcile opposing parties”. Only a week earlier, Mgr. Caesar took part in the celebration of the independence of South Sudan. In this context, Fr Giulio Albanese wrote: “I believe he celebrated that event in faith, in the knowledge that, one way or another, good will always triumph over evil”.

Much could be said about Mgr. Caesar’s commitment to education. We may make a brief reference to the moving comment of Maker Mayek Riak, a holder of degrees in both humanistic disciplines and in law, who, in his message of condolence, speaks of the beginnings of the school at Mapuordit, built of reeds and bamboo, with a grass roof, of which he was one of the first pupils. “Today, says this academic, Lakes State may boast of the largest number of educated youth in the whole country: degree holders, economists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc.” He ends by saying: “His spiritual heritage will forever live in me and in those he helped to be what we are.”

Fr. Fernando Colombo, the Comboni priest who is keeping Rumbek diocese at present, writes of the secret strength of Mgr. Caesar: “We all knew of his ability to work ceaselessly, of his cordial welcome and, at the same time, of his poor health which obliged him to take a number of tablets every day as he lived with a bad heart, diabetes, changes in blood pressure, rheumatic pains and asthma. Nevertheless, he was not only the first in church in the morning, but those of us who lived close to him often saw him already at work at his desk at four in the morning. To this we must add his untiring care for the good of the diocese and for peace and development in Sudan. How could such a weak body support such great faith, hope and unceasing charitable work? The answer is to be found in his deep communion of life with Jesus Our Lord, nourished by him with many personal initiatives. Mgr. Caesar showed he had a ‘Presence’ within himself that he kept alive and burning like a flame”.



## **FATHER LELE'S LEGACY**

*Twenty years ago, his violent death marked the struggle of a people for justice and human dignity. Nowadays, his figure is close to be proposed as a model of sacrifice to the universal Church.*

Brazil, the largest country in Latin America, has been in peaceful turmoil in the last weeks because of the general political elections in which, for the second term, Lula Da Silva, the champion of the poor, has again conquered the power, hopefully bringing nearer to fulfillment his promise and dream: to put food on the table of every Brazilian three times a day.

This enormous country, that counts the largest catholic population in the world, has done terrific strides towards industrialization and also social progress. The movement of the people without land has caught the imagination of the world and put the problem of land distribution very high in the government agenda. Twenty years ago things were very much different and progress had to be fought, tooth and nail, inch by inch. This is the story of a hero of this struggle of the landless peasants.

One evening in July 1985, Fr. Ezekiel Ramin, Lele for his friends, a young Comboni missionary to Brazil, was coming back from the *fazenda* Catuva, where he had gone in order to dissuade the farmers to take up arms and exhort them to wait for the legal assignment of the land. It had been an up-hill struggle but he had succeeded and he was heading toward home with a light heart. It was then that he drove straight into an ambush and fell under the blows of assassins sent by the landowners.

Adilio, the layman who was accompanying him, a trade union leader, was wounded but managed to save himself, escaping through the forest. Fr. Ramin collapsed at about 50 meters from the jeep, his shirt and pants full of blood. As it was later assessed, his t-shirt had more than seventy bullet holes. A large wound was gaping on his neck. His arms were stretched out like those of Christ on the cross. He had his wristwatch on and a coco necklace that was the gift of his beloved *Indios* Surui.

### *Always with a smile on his lips*

Fr. Ezekiel was 32 when he fell, his body riddled with the bullets, in the Amazon forest, at the border between the states of Mato Grosso and Rondonia, on July 24, 1985. He was born in the city of Padua, Italy, on February 9, 1953, the son of working class parents, Mario and Amabile, the last but three of his six brothers. Since his student's days he loved joining missionary youth movements like *Mani Tese* and took part in summer camps on behalf of the poor. He developed into a tall, slim, handsome young man, with an unusual eagerness about him.

The decision to join the Comboni missionaries came unexpected and sudden. In 1976 he took the Vows and the following year he left for Chicago, USA, to attend the theology course. He was ordained a priest in his parish of origin in 1980. As a young priest, he

worked with youth missionary groups. In November 1981 he volunteered to help the victims of the terrible earthquake in Irpinia, in Southern Italy, and spent 40 days in the rubble and mud, burying the dead and comforting the survivors.

Don Giorgio Bernardin, the parish priest of St. Joseph's parish in Padua, had met Fr. Ezekiel only as a priest and yet he had developed a close friendship with him. He writes: "Fr. Ezekiel was always coming back to us, his home parish, with joy. He had always a smile on his lips. He was sensitive, earnest, concerned with social problems, especially of the poor and most in need and this brought him to a very clear and precise choice: to be the witness of Christ's love".

At last, in 1984, he left for Brazil for his first missionary assignment. After a brief enculturation course in Brasilia, he arrived at Cacoal, a small town of about 100000 inhabitants in the state of Rondonia and joined the parish staff in the only parish that existed in the area and was run by the Comboni Missionaries.

In his first homily, he expressed openly the pastoral choice of his life: the poor, the *Indios*, the most exploited brothers and sisters in this world. "I intend to walk with you – he said – and to fight together with you. I know well that this choice of mine may cost me my life, I however accept all the consequences of it, even prison, torture and the shedding of my blood". One year after, these words became a prophecy when his martyrdom took place.

### ***His bloody t-shirt is a banner***

Fr. Ezekiel fought for the *campesinos*, for the cause of the marginalized, the *Indios*, the people without land. He promoted a commitment for justice that is not simply charity as alms giving but an attempt to understand the reasons behind and to change the unjust structures. He was trying to convince the *campesinos* not to make their own justice by abusively occupying the land but to follow the lawful ways. It is paradoxical to think that he fell victim of his efforts to get justice according to the rules: legality is the main road, the most difficult and slow but the one that brings deeper and more lasting results.

What is left of his example to the Church, especially to the local Church that saw his sacrifice? His heritage is impressive, his generosity exemplary. He has become a source of inspiration to the people of the area and his bloody t-shirt was used as a standard, a banner.

Isn't there the risk of becoming discouraged looking at the "failure" of his attempt? Death is not necessarily a failure. On the other hand, the choice of mission brings with it risks that every missionary has to assume, as the news show us almost daily. The

treasure of Lele's witness should be more exploited or made use of. This was the intention of the bishop and the people of the Diocese where he died when they decided to open the cause of his beatification. The traditional way of the Church to put its great people to the attention of the masses is beatification. This is what is happening for Fr. Ezekiel Ramin, even if it runs the risk of making him somehow distant from us, giving him a halo that makes him a bit different or distant, whereas in himself he was so close to people, especially to the poor.

### *Making of his life a battle for justice*

Many books have been written about him. Even a film was shot by the Italian television in 1998 by the title: "*The burned-out house*". The historian Ercole Ongaro together with Fabiano Ramin, Lele's brother, have published his writings in a book by the title: "*Ezekiel Ramin: A Witness of Hope*" (*Letters and writings 1971-1985*). In this book, put together with painstaking care and diligence, it is Lele himself who speaks, revealing his innermost thoughts and feelings. The study of his writings has confirmed the reading of his figure, his stature and the treasure of his death that constitute a heritage for everyone.

Since 1971, even before he conceived the idea of being a missionary, the conviction of giving his life for the others is pervasive of his writings. This becomes almost obsessive in his correspondence especially towards the last times of his life. In his writings he sometimes assumes a critical position even towards the Church. He sees that all the theology he studied was not the best preparation for facing the problems of the people... He had to rely mostly on his own gift: the decision of making of his own life a battle for justice. In this sense he was somehow above the average position of the youth of his time.

He was in many ways a normal young man, but he had this gift of total dedication that makes him fascinating, a model especially for the youth. The commitment of the Comboni Missionaries is in the same direction. Lele's figure is present to our young men especially in formation, he is profoundly inspirational. The fact that he died still young, while bringing forward his ideals and his life choices, even his restlessness and intolerance for too rigid positions and rules: these are all elements that make his figure of present day relevance and importance. He is a real brother to us.





*Bro. Bernard Pratt, MCCJ*

## **SINGING THROUGH LIFE**

*From the Deep South of the USA, he proceeded to give his life to God in Uganda, Africa. The gift of music made of his life something beautiful and inspiring for all times.*

In April 1979, the dictatorship of the notorious Idi Amin Dada came to an end in Uganda, East Africa. The Tanzanian army kept pushing back Amin's soldiers until the retreat became a rout and Amin himself, despairing of the outcome, fled the country. The last battle of any importance took place in Lira, a small town in the north of Uganda, the center of the Lango tribe territory. During this time, Bro. Bernard Pratt, an African-American Comboni brother, was confined in Lira Bishop's House, together with one Comboni priest, as if in the eye of the storm.

For 54 days they could not get out of the house because of the insecurity. It was in that period that Fr. Joseph Santi, our first Comboni martyr in Uganda, was shot dead at a road block, some distance away from Lira, and a diocesan priest was slaughtered on the route that from Lira center leads to the mission of Ngeta and his body stayed on the road where he had fallen for days, his friends forbidden to give him a decent burial. Bro. Pratt was my contemporary and had come to Uganda in 1970 as myself. We had met several times in our center in Mbuya, Kampala. He had impressed me with his huge size that contrasted somehow his very kind nature.

Bro. Bernie, as he liked to be called, was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in the deep South of the United States of America, on May 21 1937. He inherited the passion for the Gospel songs, typical of his people. After graduation from high school, Bernie joined the family who had moved to Los Angeles. There he started and led to success his own group of singers: The Click Clacks. But even the success of the Click Clacks did not give Bernie the joy and peace he envisioned.

After consulting with his parish priest, Bernie entered the Comboni Missionaries' Novitiate and consecrated his life to the Lord and to the missionary work of the Church on March 19 1963. His first six years of religious life were spent in the United States. He was busy in construction work, farming and lately in promoting the missionary cause among the youth. He showed himself to be a very dependable person with a stabilizing influence because of his balanced character.

Bro. Bernie was assigned to Africa, Uganda, in 1969, but he actually reached Uganda in 1970. His first assignment was the community of Dokolo. Bro. Bernie always remembered his first day in Dokolo. He had remained alone at the mission house. Suddenly, a woman in labor was brought from a nearby village. Those who assisted her said: "Brother, do something!". Fortunately the mother was strong and in good health and the birth happened without complications. Bro. Bernie remembered that fact as a metaphor: he felt that he was called to assist the birth of the Church in that part of Africa.

The ten years that Bro. Bernie served in Africa were broken by a year of service in the United States as Director of Vocations in Los Angeles. During that time, he organized the Gospel Choir of Holy Cross Parish which he considered his home parish since his family was living there. The Gospel Choir outlasted Bro. Bernie and sung his funeral liturgy when he died.

When Bro. Bernie returned to Lira in 1977, he organized the choir of Lira Cathedral and took up the responsibilities of Director of Development for the diocese. He continued to



give part of his time to teaching Scripture and Religious Studies. In term of influencing persons, his second period in the missions is remarkable. Bro. Bernie supported and counseled numerous young Africans to pursue priesthood or religious life or even good family life. He did it mainly through sincere friendship.

A friend wrote fondly of him: “Bro. Bernie and I would sit for hours making up poems and writing songs. The following one will stay with me forever. *“I gave them my head and they gave me a crown of thorns. I gave them my hands and they pierced them with nails. I gave them my heart and they pierced it with a sword. Finally, I gave them my life and they gave me death. I gave you a vocation. What are you going to give me?”* Bro. Bernie looked at God and said: “I want to serve you my whole life till I die in your arms”.

He died at 47 of a deadly disease, during his leave in the USA, on May 24 1984. One of his friends from Lira, James Odongo, wrote on that occasion: “Well, so long, Brother. If I had known that my last handshake with you would last an eternity, I would have made it a little firmer”.

Life and death of a missionary bishop

# DOM FRANCO'S BICYCLE

*He wanted to be an ordinary Comboni missionary and joyfully give his life to the poor of Northern Brazil and the good Lord called him to be a successor of the Apostles. He embraced the courageous program of fostering life, and the good Lord protected him from the threat of violence. His natural giftedness and scholarly preparation made him a champion of a new missionary mystique. The bicycle on which he died became the symbol of his simple and popular approach to the ideals of liberation theology.*

“Fr. Lorenzo, may I use your vespa while you are away?” I was a young priest at Padua in my first assignment as a teacher in our Comboni Seminary and the one daring to ask me the use of my scooter was Bro. Gianfranco, one of the Prefects in charge of discipline among the young seminarians and a student of theology, preparing for the Priesthood. I looked at his open face, smiling with a hint of mischief in his eyes, and answered: “Certainly, only be careful because it is an old vehicle”.

When I came back, after a week, Bro. Gianfranco was in hospital with a broken collarbone and the vespa had joined the junk-heap. I was reminded of this little episode two years ago when the shocking news of the unexpected and untimely death of our well esteemed Comboni bishop Gianfranco Masserdotti (whom everybody in his diocese

used to call Dom Franco), reached us: he was killed instantly, in an accident, not far from his residence in Balsas, Northern Brazil, on September 17 2006, while peacefully pedaling his bicycle, as it was his habit to do.

Was there an omen, in that first accident, of the mode of his final end? I certainly did not understand it like this then as I never thought, when I went to see my friend Bro. Gianfranco in hospital, that this lively and intelligent companion would be one day one of our most prominent missionary Bishops. The ways of the Lord are infinite!

During his funeral, in front of the overflowing crowd of mourners, Card. Gerardo Majella Agnelo, archbishop of San Salvador da Bahia and president of the Brazilian Episcopal Conference, said: “In a short time, Dom Franco has drawn universal appreciation as master of solidarity, listening and respect and for his passion for the Indigenous peoples to whom he dedicated his life “so that they may have life”, as he wanted written in his coat of arms as bishop.”

“Who was Dom Franco?” added Fr. Teresino Serra, the Superior General of the Comboni Missionaries “Just a missionary... A Comboni missionary who has walked along the road pointed out by Saint Daniel Comboni of remaining with the poorest and most abandoned. A missionary sent by God who has sown goodness in the hearts of people. We are saddened but not in despair. God knows.”

### *A brushing with terrorism*

Dom Franco was born Gianfranco Masserdotti at Brescia, in Northern Italy, from an average working class family, on September 13 1941. Still very young he entered the minor seminary of the Comboni Missionaries. He was a very gifted young man, of an open and cheerful disposition, bearing in his features the mimic articulations of his father’s face which was the embodiment of the common sense, optimism and zest for life of our simple people.

His seminary life was happy and fruitful. Gianfranco was loved by his companions and appreciated by his superiors especially for his humility, sociability and cheerfulness. He took his First Vows at 21 in 1962 and was ordained priest in 1966. Immediately after his priestly ordination, he was sent to study Sociology at Trent, something new in the tradition of the Institute, but very important in order to understand the great, sweeping changes taking place in the world. He was very much influenced by the sociological approach to problems, but he never lost the purpose of the analysis and in the end the pastoral approach always prevailed.

At Trent, during his university student's days, he was very popular and befriended many, among whom some who will soon occupy the attention of the media and embody the worst aspect of the 1968 students' revolution. At that time, the sociology faculty at Trent was the hot bed of communist extremists, most of them children of Catholic families and the cradle of the armed revolutionary movement of the Red Brigades. The founder was considered Renato Curcio, who, eventually dropped out from the studies and moved to Milan where the Red Brigades started their criminal activity of political kidnapping and assassinations.

Renato Curcio was soon arrested, but was freed in a spectacular escape organized by his young bride, Margherita Cagol, whom he had married in Trent with a Catholic marriage only few years before in 1969. Although he was soon recaptured and Margherita was killed in a shoot-out with the police, yet the Red Brigades kept their grip on Italy and their climax and eventually, their downfall, was the assassination of former Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, whose body, riddled with bullets, was left in the boot of a car in the center of Rome in 1978.

Many of the members, revolted by such brutality, repented and revealed their hide out. Very soon the Red Brigades were just a painful memory. Renato e Margherita were friends of Fr. Franco as were many others... How much was he affected by that turmoil? Was it from that experience that he resolutely embraced non-violence? We can only say that he took his degree in the right time, in 1971, and the following year he was on the boat to Brazil for his first missionary assignment and a love story with that enormous country and Church which ended only with his premature death.

### *Fr. Franco's pastoral baptism*

Fr. Franco was assigned to the diocese of Balsas in Northern Brazil and sent to the parish of Pastos Bons, in the countryside. It is there that he had his pastoral baptism. He approached his work among the people with enthusiasm, but at the same time with deep consciousness of the complexity of his relationship with the Brazilian people.

At that time he wrote: "I am aware of the limit of being a foreigner. I feel the ambiguity of my position and this should constantly prepare me to respect and listening. I must make the Christian people perceive that I can only be, mostly, the "auxiliary" animator of a process that must originate from the depth of the Brazilian soul. I am aware that I must daily ask myself about the meaning of my being in Brazil".

He also realized the richness and novelty of the vision of Church born of the Latin-American experience. This he embraced and struggled to implement through his outgoing and generous personality. He wrote: “Starting from the Ecclesial Basic Communities and their commitment, a new “political” holiness was born, based on an understanding of faith, hope and charity with a social slant. Faith must bring the persons to discern God’s call in the situations of social sin. Hope will help them also to see the seeds of life in the concrete realities and to tie the historical liberations to the integral liberation of the Kingdom. Charity becomes organized commitment in the popular movement on behalf of justice and peace”.

From 1979 to 1985 he had to leave Brazil and was one of the four Advisers to Father General: he resided in Rome and traveled to all the countries where the Comboni Missionaries have their missions, in this way widening his experience. Back to his beloved Brazil, he was elected provincial of the Comboni Missionaries of the Northern Brazil. On November 22 1995 was named Auxiliary Bishop of Balsas and ordained on March 2 1996. On April 15 1998 he was installed as the Bishop of Balsas, since his predecessor, bishop Rino Carlesi, had retired.

This was for him the time of blossoming as the pastor of his flock and bringing to fruition the gifts of communication that the Lord had endowed him with and that he had refined in his experience with the simple people of Pastos Bons. In 1999 Dom Franco was chosen as president of the Missionary Council for Indigenous Peoples of the Brazilian Episcopal Conference, a charge which he liked and opened new horizons in his pastoral commitment.

### ***The Passion of Jesus of the Indios***

In the context of the celebration for the “discovery of America”, on April 22 2000, the Indios organized a march that intended to take “the opposite direction of the European invasion”. Dom Franco took part in the initiative. The Indios arrived at the town of Porto Seguro, in the beginning of the Holy Week, to take part in the Conference of Amerindian Peoples and Indio organizations of Brazil.

All together they were around 3000, representing 150 peoples. During the conference, the Indios decided to organize a march of about 20 kilometers, not only to express their protest but also in order to make new alliances and to look for solidarity from all the other sectors of society, committed to the building of a future of greater justice, freedom and respect for all. Unfortunately, after only 4 kilometers of the journey, the

demonstrators were attacked by the military police. Without warning and without being minimally provoked, the policemen hauled themselves against the participants to the march. They threw tear gas and smoke screens and shot rubber bullets, injuring more than 70 people.

Soon the Indio representative, Glido Terena, was on his knees, moving his outstretched arms towards the policemen and begging for peace. "Throw a bomb at me- he was crying- but spare my people". It was Holy Saturday. A tropical rain was coming down in buckets. "I looked at those outstretched arms" says Dom Franco and I couldn't help thinking of Jesus on the cross who accepted his death so that we might have life. And then I felt inside me a certainty: because of the power of the Crucifix and all the others who are crucified daily, this great "unfinished" Brazil will be regenerated in justice and in the respect of all its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural riches.

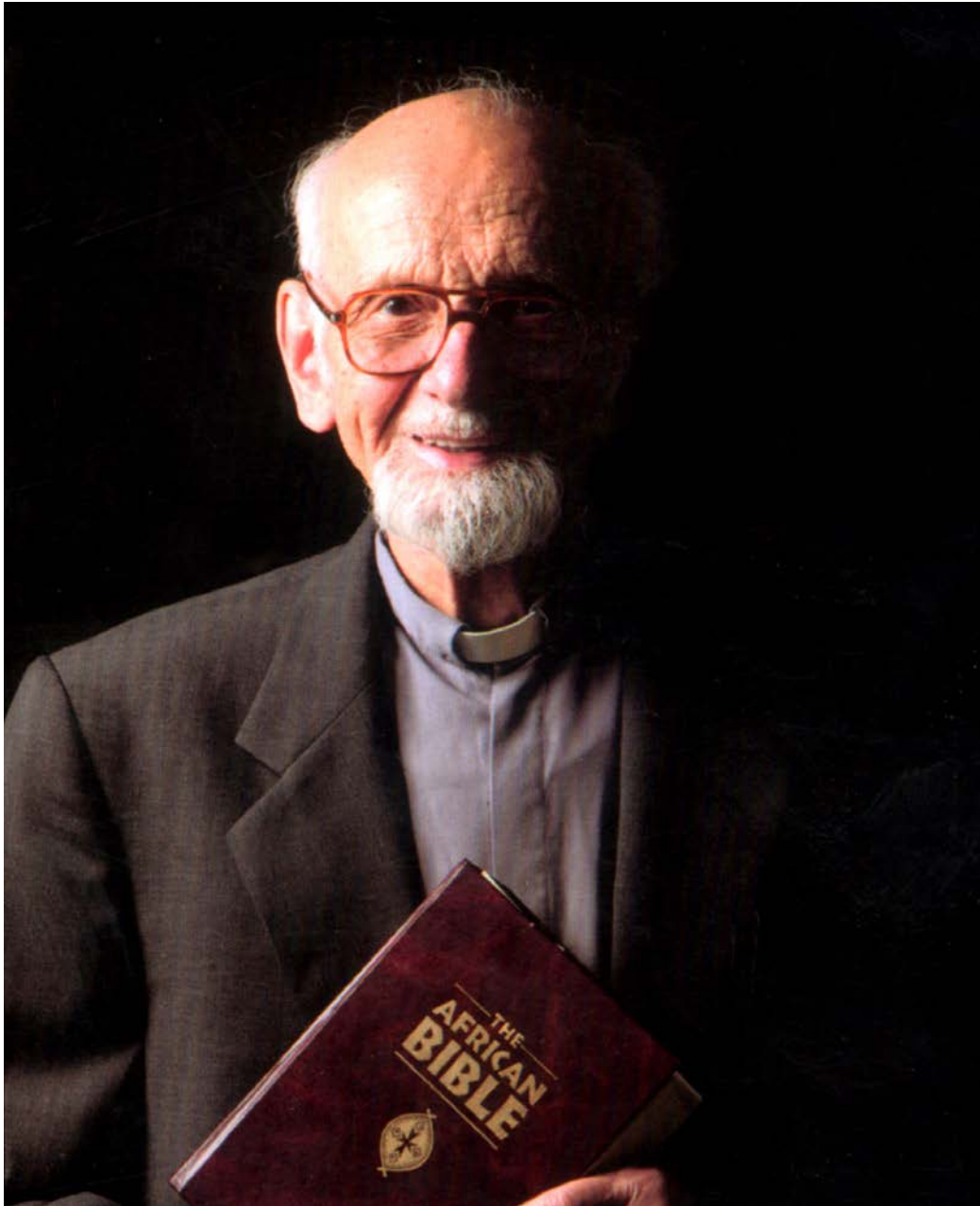
There were many missionaries who had joined the peaceful march of the Indios and were arrested with them. Dom Franco writes: "I went to the colonel who was in charge of the operation in order to ask explanations but I was myself arrested instead. After a while, the colonel, observing the presence of journalists and afraid of possible hostile comments of the press because of the abusive arrest of a bishop, approached me and offered to detach his personal car and driver in order for me to be taken wherever I wanted.

I refused and I told him that I would have accepted only if all the rest were set free...Something which eventually, after other five hours, took place. Obviously, there was no more Indio march. I must confess that I have lived through those hours like a grace of God who allowed us to be more united and in solidarity with countless brothers and sisters who since five centuries are experiencing exclusion and repression".

Dom Franco's sudden death has left a great vacuum. His children of Balsas diocese and all his many friends around the world are consoled by the faith conviction that their great bishop friend will continue to run with his bicycle not only through the street of Balsas, but through the routes of the whole world in order to still be very close to all his friends and spiritual sons and daughters, but especially to be close to the poor who have always trusted his understanding and sincere help and continuously enjoyed his contagious cheerfulness.

A characteristic of Dom Franco was always that of starting from the different persons, accepting them as they are, giving room to each one's individuality, without clipping their wings or jeopardizing their chance for development and growth.

“Our true death – he wrote- happens when we place our hope and the meaning and sense of our life in possessions, power and unbridled pleasure, when we shut our hearts to our brothers and allow ourselves to be carried away by our egoism”.



TARCISIO AGOSTONI

# Lifeblood of Africa

*“Lifeblood of Africa”: This is how the Italian missionary was called at one time by the Ugandans. Tiny in body and with a delicate health, he spent 43 years in Africa. In his dedication to the laity and as*



*Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference, Fr. Tarcisio Agostoni advised, trained, assisted actual and future leaders of Uganda. His contribution to nation-building was essential. His efforts contributed so much to the achievement of the Ugandan Independence not by the barrel of the gun but peacefully. He was General Superior of the Comboni Missionaries during ten crucial post-conciliar years. In the last part of his long life, Fr. Agostoni is remembered for his compassion for the sick, the prisoners, and the abandoned.*

The Kampala Observer of March 30, 2012, revealed that, besides President Museveni's prerogative of mercy, Sharma Kooky was released because an independent report indicated that he did not murder his wife, Renu Joshi. Earlier, in January 2000, a High Court judge convicted and sentenced him to death after finding him guilty of killing Joshi.

It was at that time that Fr. Tarcisio Agostoni decided to carry out fresh investigations into the murder through the Uganda Citizens Rescue (UCR), a non-governmental organization he had founded that advocates abolition of the death penalty in Uganda. Through his NGO, Agostoni saved many from death row, from the hangman's noose. At that time, Fr. Tarcisio was 80 years of age.

"I'm sure, today, Fr. Agostoni's spirit is the happiest in God's heavenly kingdom" exclaimed Godfrey Bamweyana Ssebuwufu, head of UCR, who had lamented Agostoni's death only two months before, on January 15.

### ***The first mission***

Fr. Tarcisio Agostoni was born at Cabiante, a village near Milan, in Northern Italy, on November 23, 1920. He left his place at the age of 13 in order to enter the minor seminary that the Comboni Missionaries had opened at Padua and from which he moved later on to the seminary at Brescia. Since his young age, he had a taste for music which he studied passionately and kept as an interest all throughout his life. In his free moments, he used to find time to play the organ and savor a piece of classic music. His studies of Philosophy and Theology were completed in Rome, in the Pontifical Urbaniana University, the Church's missionary university. He got his doctorate there. He was ordained as a priest a little after the end of World War II, on April 20, 1946.

After spending some time in England, Fr. Tarcisio was assigned to Gulu mission in Uganda in 1951. Gulu mission was the Catholic heart of Northern Uganda. It appeared

as a big medieval monastery engendering life and culture. Around the majestic cathedral, built by a team of young Comboni Brothers, the missionaries had given existence to a large network of social works. The mission had become the hub of promotion for an educational culture and an evangelizing action that was affecting the remotest corners of that region.

Around 30 missionary priests and Brothers were living in the mission center at that time, together with almost a hundred religious sisters, both European and African. It was to this mission that young Fr. Tarcisio was assigned. The young missionary started teaching Philosophy, Music and singing in Gulu Seminary where, at that time, seminarians from Uganda and the Sudan were lodged. But his work was not limited to the formation of the candidates to the priesthood. It was in training the laity that Fr. Tarcisio found his special vocation that will mark his whole life: to form a committed laity, dedicated to education and public life and to forge a new social conscience among the Christians.

### *The awakening of Africa*

After World War II, Africa became awake. Independence movements multiplied in the continent. Some missionaries started perceiving the new turn that the African continent was taking. The young missionary, Fr. Tarcisio Agostoni, was definitely one of them. The history of Uganda as a British protectorate, started with a civil war in 1890 that opposed Protestants, Catholics and Muslims. The war ended with the victory of the first due to the support of the British Imperial East African Company's guns. The Protestant winners destroyed the recently founded Catholic missions and more than 50 thousand Catholics were sold as slaves.

In the middle of the 20th century, Catholics came together in order to affirm their ideals and demanded religious freedom. They started a political party, the Democratic Party of Uganda, first in the central region and then in the North of the country. Fr. Tarcisio got involved in this fight for the social and political rights of the Catholic population and he did it by writing in the local papers *Lobo Mewa*, published in the Acholi language and in *The West Nile Gazette*, published in English.

That was the birth of the movement of teachers and lay men and women, committed to public life. Later, on their behalf, Fr. Tarcisio gave origin to two magazines with the meaningful titles of *Truth and Charity* for the social formation of the clergy and *Leadership* for the formation of the laity involved in social and political life. Fr. Tarcisio would gather, in due course, the main themes in a book of basic guidelines by the title: *Every Citizen's Handbook* that came out in 20 thousand copies, a really

extraordinary number for the Uganda of that time. In it, Fr. Tarcisio expounds the fundamental principles of Christian humanism and democratic political life.

Uganda was lacking in proper cultural identity, a common sense of belonging over and above the tribal identities which were prevailing in the minds of each ethnic group. It was necessary to help form persons capable of taking responsibly into their hands the destiny of a common homeland, beyond the state created by the British colonialism.

### *An era of change*

In October 1962, the same year and month of Uganda's Independence, Pope John XXIII inaugurated the Second Vatican Council which marked an era of change in the Catholic Church. At that time, the Catholic Church in Uganda used to count about half a dozen bishops, who didn't know each other very much and rarely used to meet in Kampala, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Buganda.

Fr. Agostoni saw the need for the bishops to work more united in order to find answers to the problems and challenges facing the Church. To create an Episcopal Conference and a Permanent Secretary to serve it appeared as urgent targets. Thus, Uganda was among the first countries in Africa to give origin to its Episcopal Conference. Fr. Agostoni was put in charge of serving this project and, consequently, he had to leave Gulu in order to establish himself in Kampala.

The Catholic Secretariat was founded in order to serve the aims of the Episcopal Conference and Fr. Agostoni was put in charge of it. He gave it three departments that will accomplish a fundamental role in the following years: Lay Apostolate, Social Services and Mass Media. They did not represent a kind of clerical bureaucracy, but became meeting points for the formation and support of the laity of all the dioceses of the country. The Mass Media Department launched new newspapers at diocesan and national level, edited books and catechisms and promoted other initiatives in the different languages of the country.

In order to coordinate the formation of the laity, he created the Ugandan Social Training Center, where, starting from a basic Christian education, all sectors of social life were reached. These courses were authentic school of Christian life because the teachings of the Christian faith were becoming culture in all areas of personal and social life. Fr. Agostoni's interest in all the realities of life brought him to the need of facing the most painful aspects of the tribal society like the wounds left by the chronic Ugandan wars. In order to respond to the orphans' situation, for example, he introduced a pioneering, unique experience: getting Ugandan families that could adopt the orphans as their

children. In this way, many children found a home in a society where the family sense is great. Fr. Tarcisio didn't want orphanages, but family homes in order to accept the street children and orphans.

### ***The Pope in Uganda***

Fr. Tarcisio took part in the Second Vatican Council as secretary of the Ugandan bishops. In this way, he was able to follow firsthand the Council debates and the still timid African voice. He came back to Rome to take part in the International Lay Apostolate Congress of 1967. Those were the most intense years of his service to the Ugandan Church. He was also the soul of the dialogue and interreligious contacts that he promoted among Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants and Muslims.

In 1968, out of his personal decision, he handed over the reins of the Catholic Secretariat to a Ugandan priest, but went on offering his service and kept himself active in the Kampala diocese of which he became the Chancellor. At that time, he was entrusted with the building of the Uganda Martyrs' Shrine at Namugongo, the place where most of them had been killed. In the same way, he was entrusted with the organization of the pastoral visitation of Pope Paul VI to Uganda, between the end of June and the beginning of July 1969.

It was the first time that a Roman pontiff was visiting the African continent. Fr. Agostoni knew Pope Paul VI from the time of Vatican II but from that circumstance his contacts with the Pope became more frequent. In that same year, he took part in the General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries and came out as General Superior, a task that he carried out for ten years until 1979, taking up residence in Rome.

Once he declared that that was the most difficult period of his life: "They were very difficult years. Not always we knew what to do. At any rate, I tried to keep together the young with the old. It was not easy." Because of his outstanding missionary spirit, Fr. Agostoni made his Institute weather the storm without too many losses.

### ***To build up a people***

Almost straightaway after ending his term as General Superior, without taking time for resting, Fr. Agostoni went back to his first love, Uganda, to the activities within the Ugandan Episcopal Conference, as animator of the Social and Pastoral Services.

Those were tough years for the Ugandan society: after the war to dislodge the notorious dictator Idi Amjnn Dada, it was entering a phase of tribal divisions and chronic guerilla

warfare. During those tragic years, between 1979 and 2004, 15 Comboni missionaries, including one Sister, were murdered in Uganda.

From his position at the service of the Episcopal Conference, Fr. Agostoni gave his contribution to the publication of a series of pastoral letters of great relevance in a time when confusion, injustice and violence were rampant. Those documents, with their clarity of judgment on the situation and their Christian proposals for peace, were the fruit, in great part, of Fr. Agostoni's reflection and animation. During this time, he also established the Justice and Peace Commission the members of which used to travel across the country in order to animate the Christian communities in the difficult task of promoting justice, reconciliation and peace.

Fr. Tarcisio started also to gather together groups of Christians committed to social and political life in order to re-edit and update his previous Every Citizen's Handbook. The key idea was that democracy cannot exist if it lacks its subject: the people. It was, therefore, necessary to take seriously the formation of persons, the education of a conscience based on human rights. Fr. Agostoni decided to prepare a new handbook with the fundamental principles of the Church's Social Doctrine and the contribution of Vatican II to this subject. The new text was a bulky volume of almost 500 pages and he put it to the service of all those who were working in order to promote that new stage of the country. The book reached the neighboring countries and was appreciated in universities and centers of social studies.

Through that book, we can say that Fr. Agostoni exercised his influence on the elaboration of the Constitution that, at present, rules Uganda. From his pen, originated also dozens of texts published in Ugandan daily papers and magazines. His lean face used to appear regularly on Uganda television and his weak voice to be heard on local radios, like the very popular Radio Maria-Uganda, to which he gave his collaboration almost to the end of his life. Thus, he was offering a witness to the Gospel values and the need to join the struggle for human rights to the Christian faith.

### *Against the death penalty*

Starting in the nineties, Fr. Tarcisio went to visit the inmates in Luzira prison, in Kampala, a place dreaded in the whole country because it reminded people of the horrors of the tortures in the time of Idi Amin and the tragedies that followed his dictatorship. One of the most moving aspects of his work during these years was his commitment to the prisoners in the death row. Some would wait years in their cells. Others had lost any hope of having justice done to them. They had been condemned without proofs, out of political reasons, revenge or tribal hatred.

Frequently, in the judgment, the lawyers of the victims used to appear without knowing well the cases or even did not appear at all to defend their clients. Given this situation, Fr. Tarcisio started with doing a delicate, detailed and constant work in order to obtain justice for the cases he was faced with. He would get good lawyers and bring together the opposing parties in order to find the truth and, in this way, promote justice.

It was in this context that he started a campaign in favor of the abolition of the death penalty. He wrote a book on this subject by the title: *May the State Kill?* Naturally, the book had a big impact and provoked reactions and discussions of every type in a country which, unfortunately was accustomed to violence and death perpetrated often by the state. The result was that, after the book came out, the executions were suspended indefinitely.

Agostoni's doctor, in 2005, diagnosed the popular priest with cancer and recommended medical attention in Italy. On January 15, this year, he lost the battle against cancer. In receiving the news of his death, the Archbishop of Gulu, Msgr. John Baptist Odama, President of the Uganda Episcopal Conference, defined Fr. Tarcisio as "one of the great figures who forged the present day Uganda." The Provincial Superior of Comboni Missionaries, Fr Sylvester Hategek'Imana, a Ugandan himself, told the faithful during the funeral mass in Kampala that, in October 2009, Fr. Agostoni sent him a message saying: "Remember, I still belong to Uganda."



Sister CESARINA BORGHESI

## **Letters from the dead**

I don't know if you have ever experienced receiving a letter from a person who is already dead. It happened to me twice and they were letters from dear friends, outstanding Comboni missionary Sisters in Africa: Sister Cesarina and Mother Federica.

They gave me the unusual, beautiful sensation of having a direct line with Heaven. August 14, 1987 – Lusaka, Zambia. A car leaves the Comboni Sisters' residence. At the wheel is Sr. Cesarina Borghesi, a Comboni Sister, 51 years of age, a nurse and midwife. She is going to a conference about Christian family planning. With her in the car are two young African couples.

They are proceeding at moderate speed when a huge truck jumps a Stop signal and hits the car: all five are crushed to death. The news of Sr. Cesarina's tragic end reached me in Uganda. She was a dear friend and a missionary sister always enthusiastic of her vocation.

I had met her in the very difficult place where I still was, Karamoja. She had served there before me and had shared the tragedy of the killing of Sr. Liliana Rivetta in 1981, who was a member of her community. The spot of the lethal ambush had become a holy ground, marked by a big iron cross, a landmark for the travelers through the dangerous wilderness of Karamoja. (The name of the place is Musharaba which means cross in kishwahili.) We had met and exchanged news about our respective families: she was a native of Rallo, a small town of Trent province, in my region, and had visited my old mother during one of her holidays in Italy. She was the most beautiful woman I ever met in life.

Her face was splendid with deeply blue eyes and the blond hair suggested through the veil she was wearing. She looked like film star, reminding me of Ursula Andress. While I was still mourning her untimely death, two weeks after, I received her last letter. She must have posted it the very day she died.

It was a very joyous letter, bursting with enthusiasm and joie de vivre, telling me how happy she was in her new ministry and foreseeing that we would go for vacation at the same time and that, therefore, I could then visit her old mom as she had done to mine. The letter from the dead reminded me of another similar episode I had experienced three years before. In that case, the person in question had been even more remarkable.

Sr. Federica Bettari was Superior General in Rome during the years 1969-1975 and since then she had been known as Mother Federica. Born in a small town of Brescia province in Northern Italy in 1925, third of eight brothers and sisters, she had qualified as a teacher and started the profession while discerning her desire to give her life to God. She was divided between the strong urge of becoming a contemplative and the attraction of missionary life. She was a plain young woman with nothing exceptional apart from the goodness of her nature.



She was tested by the death of her dear father, just before entering the Novitiate of the Comboni Sisters. Before her Religious Vows that she took in April 1947, she suffered the death of her mother. She reached Africa in 1960 and was teacher and head mistress of the Teachers Training Center at Gulu, in Northern Uganda. It was from there that the Sisters chose her as their representative at the Chapter in which she was eventually elected Superior General. It was a special Chapter, the first after Vatican II, meant to implement the Council guidelines for the renewal of the institute.

Mother Federica had, very clear, the two targets she thought critical to the success in the future: a strong missionary drive and a deepening of the spiritual life of the Sisters. Of these essential traits of a true missionary woman, Mother Federica became the model and the embodiment. After her service at the center in Rome, she came back to Uganda only to be entrusted again with the leadership as Provincial Superior.

Her period as Provincial (1976-1983) was marked by the war of the Tanzanian Army against Amin and the above-mentioned murder of the first Comboni Sister martyr, Liliana Rivetta. Mother Federica was always present where problems or dangers arose. As soon as she completed her leadership service, she fell sick with cancer. In September 1983, she was forced to go to Italy for treatment. Missing her powerful and inspiring presence, I decided to write to her, assuring her of my spiritual solidarity.

During the intervals between therapies, while her contemplative instincts were soaring, she took up the pen to write to me. She had just posted her letter when the Lord called her to Himself, on February 18, 1984. The letter reached me when she was already laid to rest. A letter from the dead.

Armido Gasparini

# **A LIFE FOR ETHIOPIA**

*The Comboni missionary bishop Armido Gasparini (1913-2004) tied his existence to that of the peoples of the Horn of Africa. A churchman and a scholar, he passed away at 91, after 52 years spent in Ethiopia. His name still marks the social and cultural life of the groups he encountered. He was an accomplished linguist and his textbooks in Amaharic are considered an important patrimony of that language. As the first bishop of Awasa, during the troubled times of revolution and dictatorship, he was respected by the powerful, but spent his whole life at the service of the poor.*

Bishop Armido Gasparini was a talented person. Of this, very early in his life, was well aware his parish priest of Lizzano in Belvedere (Bologna), in Italy, Fr. Alfonso Montanari. He was the one who introduced the teenager Armido to the superior of the Comboni Seminary at Brescia: “He is an able boy, talented and above all he shows a remarkable inclination to missionary life”.

He was accepted in the Institute and in September 1930 he graduated from High School with flying colors and was admitted to the Novitiate of Venegono. Two years later he took his first Vows. He went on to college in Verona and then to the Urbaniana University in Rome for his theology.

He was very fond of languages and he easily got hold of them. He explained: “It is indispensable to learn them if one wants to approach the people who use them, the individuals and their cultures”. He will manage to master 13 languages (European and Amaharic). He was ordained a priest in April 1938 and in October of the same year he was already in Ethiopia as secretary of the bishop of Gondar, Mons. Pietro Villa.

## ***Mission in war time***

The Italians under the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini had already occupied the Eritrean coast land when they decided to invade Ethiopia with the intention of creating a great colonial empire in the Horn of Africa. Some Italian priests, among whom some Comboni fathers, were attached to the Italian troupes as army chaplains. The missionaries took the opportunity which was offered them and decided to create some mission stations among the natives.

Young Fr. Armido dedicated himself immediately to the learning of the Amaharic language, to getting acquainted with the local cultures and building up contacts with the Coptic-Ethiopian monks. Certainly, Fr. Armido’s facility in learning languages, joined

with his admirable constancy in the study, resulted in him becoming an accomplished polyglot.

They are troublesome years because of the war. At the fall of the Fascist Empire under the attacks of the British army (April-May 1941), all the Comboni Fathers and Brothers are rounded up and taken to Asmara in view of their eventual expulsion. Giovanni C. Marinoni, Vicar Apostolic of Eritrea, however, obtains from the British Administration that five of them may stay in order to pastorally assist the thousands of Italians present in the area. Among the five there is Fr. Armido, who in the meantime is nursing a dream in his mind and heart: a school for Higher Studies in the English language for young Eritrean students in the town of Asmara.

In 1946, the Sacred Oriental Congregation encouraged the building of a Catholic school for the Eritrean youth. Fr. Armido became the promoter and the soul of this foundation. Together with Bro. Laffranchi, he selected a little promontory within the city of Asmara itself and the foundation stone was laid down that very year. Other two Comboni brothers, Sirena and Capuzzo, joined forces in supervising the construction.

### ***An educational dream***

In 1947, the Comboni College was inaugurated. In 1948 it had already 320 pupils. In the first classes, Tigrinya, the language of the country, was taught together with Amaharic and Ge'ez, the liturgical language and Arabic. In the upper classes, the basic study language was English. They were years of great activity. The number of students kept increasing and other buildings were added, including a large hall for the students' performing arts and official gatherings. In 1950, Mons. Pietro Villa blessed the chapel of the Comboni College, dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

In June of the same year, the pilgrimage of the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Fatima throughout Africa came to its conclusion in Asmara. The holy statue made its solemn entrance in Comboni College and Fr. Gasparini as the Superior was asked to read the act of consecration to Mary of all the works of the Comboni Missionaries in Eritrea.

Since 1953, the Comboni College was recognized as the only cultural center in Eritrea able to prepare its most advanced students for the Oxford University General Culture Exams in order to obtain the proper certificate. Comboni College distinguished itself also in the field of sports and performing arts. The soccer team of the college became one of the most renowned of the city and the highest religious and civil personalities of the city used to attend the drama performances and gymnastics' parades of the college.

The Comboni College will soon become a prestige institution in the whole Horn of Africa region. In 1950, on the occasion of the official visit in Eritrea of emperor Hailé Selassié, the students staged a play in Amaharic written by Fr. Armido. It is the story of the developments of the Christian religion in the kingdom of Axum under the leadership of Saint Frumentius: "*The Light bearer*" is the title of the work.

In 1959, Card. Tisserant landed in Asmara in order to preside the inauguration of the great diocesan seminary, the construction and direction of which had been entrusted to the Comboni Missionaries. Once again the team Fr. Armido and the Comboni brothers performed miracles to the fulfillment of the precious church enterprise.

Later on, Fr. Armido became the adviser of the Esarch of Asmara, abba Gebre Jesus Jacob, and facilitated the presence of the Comboni Missionaries in the new seminary of the Esarcate and started the vocation campaign in favor of the Comboni Institute. In the meantime he has gained the knowledge of *Gééz*, the very ancient language, incomprehensible to the majority but still used in the liturgy of the Coptic-Ethiopian Church. He learned it so well that he was able to teach it to the students of the Asmara Capucin Convent and to the first Eritrean Catholic priests. In 1955, he was called to Rome to be the General Procurator of the Comboni Missions.

### ***Difficult times***

In 1973, Fr. Armido was 60 years old. He wrote in a letter: “My life parabola already inclines towards its last phase. Yet I feel still full of energies and-why to deny it?-of talents too”. He will live still 31 years and in a very intense manner. In fact, Rome nominates him Apostolic Administrator of Awasa, in the South of Ethiopia, where he has to start from scratch. He works hard and puts up schools, formation centers, dispensaries and hospitals.

In 1974, the emperor is deposed by a coup-d'état and the revolution, guided by the *Dergue* (Committee of the armed forces), flares up. Eventually the dictator Colonel Menghistu takes the power and the period of “Red Terror” begins which sees the summary executions of tens of thousands of people. Mengistu Haile Mariam is an Ethiopian politician who was the most prominent officer of the *Dergue*, the Communist military junta that governed Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987, and the President of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia from 1987 to 1991.

The “Ethiopian Red Terror” was a period of great political upheaval in Ethiopia that started when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party ignored the invitation by *Dergue* to join the union of socialist parties and instead made an assassination attempt on Mengistu Haile Mariam (the Chairman of *Dergue*) in September 1976. That assassination attempt failed but it was followed by the death of many *Dergue* supporters and ordinary citizens. The “Red Terror” was a fight for power and dominance. The killings from both sides were brutal since it happened when the country was under the threat of a Somalian invasion and war. Internal rebellion was not well tolerated.

Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe in May 1991 after the national government dissolved itself and called for a transitional government. His departure brought to an abrupt end the Ethiopian Civil War . Mengistu Haile Mariam still lives in Harare, Zimbabwe and

remains there despite an Ethiopian court verdict finding him guilty *in absentia* of genocide. Estimates of the number of deaths for which he was responsible range from 500,000 to over 2 million.

In 1979, Fr. Armido Gasparini was consecrated bishop. The situation of the country was disastrous: there was the rebellion of Eritrea and war in Ogaden. The area of Awasa was relatively calm, but for the Church they were times of suffering because the regime made everything extremely difficult. A terrible drought (1982-1984) claimed a million victims and threatened other 5 million people. For the Sidamo and Guji peoples, the bishop was the only point of reference. He took it at heart and several times appealed to Europe and USA for help.

A gentleman in soul and manner, he won over for himself and his collaborators the respect of the tough members of the *Dergue*. In the meantime, Bishop Armido continued his deepening of the cultures and languages. During this time, he published grammar and dictionary of the *Sidamo*, *Gede'o* and *Guji* languages, both in English and in Italian. He paid special attention to the liturgy, which he wanted to be celebrated in the local languages: he himself provided the necessary translations. In 1988, he gave origin to a religious congregation of Ethiopian sisters: the Handmaids of the Church.

### ***A pastor close to his people***

Notwithstanding the huge administrative and organizational task that was demanded by the development of the Awasa Vicariate, Bishop Armido let not pass any opportunity in order to make himself present among his people, without counting efforts and sacrifices. This is evident from this witness given by one of his missionaries: “Mons. Gasparini arrived at our mission of Shafinna towards evening, when we were completing the preparation in order to proceed to Lello, one of the many chapels of the mission station, where we had programmed a great youth reunion.

We had just the time of greeting each other. The bishop would spend the night at the mission, while I would proceed to the long and tiring climbing to the chapel, accompanied by a group of Christian leaders and some youth. There was no time to waste since a storm was gathering. Moreover, I knew that the groups of youth from all the other chapels were coming and would not delay. I was expecting about a thousand youth.

I arrived that it was already dark. The youth of that chapel had worked tirelessly to improve the track so that the bishop would be able to arrive by car up to the threshold of the chapel. His solemn entrance was planned by 9 in the morning and we come out to receive him in procession. The 4-wheel-drive vehicle did not appear and instead Bishop Armido advanced covered in sweat, wearing a simple short-sleeved t-shirt. He had covered the whole route on foot. The previous night rain had changed the track into a slippery mess. How was it possible for an old man almost eighty to face such long and difficult walk? Only love is the answer”.

