

THE COMBONI CHARISM IN ACTION

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

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*A multi-faceted exposure to the spirituality
and activity of the Comboni Missionaries*

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NB. *These articles were originally published in FRIENDS OF THE MISSIONS' NEWSLETTER. In the meantime, MISNA has ceased to exist, Fr. Renato Kizito Sesana has left the Comboni Institute and Fr. Flaviano Amatulli has left the world.*

1. *Traits of Comboni's Spirituality:*

Four classic aspects of missionary spirituality: Ad Gentes, Ad Pauperes, Ad Extra, Ad Vitam.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

“AD GENTES”: to the pagans. This is the first and most essential trait of our Comboni missionary spirituality. In a world profoundly affected by change, this demand still remains valid for the present and for the future.

At the beginning of December 2007, I celebrated the anniversary of my departure for Africa as a missionary, 37 years ago. My destination was Uganda where the Lord was preparing for me a permanence of more than 20 years. I remember the occasion very well. My parents wanted to accompany me to the airport, not a simple thing considering that we had to cover the distance of about 700 km to do that, from Venice to Rome.

When at last we entered together the airport lounge, an incredible view confronted us: the lounge was full of missionaries bound for East Africa: all young, all in their different, colorful uniforms...It was a RAPTIM charter flight, organized only for missionaries. My father was impressed at this cream of youth given out to the missionary ideal of the Church. It was, may be, part of the last wave of that enormous missionary movement, originated at the beginning of the XIX century, that took the Christian faith to the furthest corners of the world. It is within this human ground swell that many missionary congregations came into existence, among them also the Comboni Missionaries.

It is the consequence of the obligation to go to the pagans that follows Jesus' Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28: 19-20). May be, at the time of my departure, under the influence of our missionary enthusiasm, we were under the illusion that we were already finishing the last pagans...How wrong we were!

Since then, the world has undergone terrific changes. The population has exploded; the people of the Third World have started to invade Europe and North America; the

non-Christian religions have known an impressive revival... The world scenario again presents a great challenge for missionaries like the Comboni Missionaries who want to fulfill Jesus’ Great Commission. The Mission starts as it were from scratch.

The call to go to the pagans is now compound with the new awareness that the Spirit of God is already there among them and invites us to a dialogue of life. At the same time, Jesus is the gift of God for all seasons and all peoples have the right to hear his Gospel of love and be brought into the fullness of God’s revelation.

Will this call of crossing cultural and racial boundaries and becoming agents of unity and communion still hold a great human and spiritual charge as the traditional motto that fired my youth: “To cross the seas, to save a soul and then to die”? Recently, a new book about Mother Teresa of Calcutta has caught the imagination of the world media because it reveals the long spiritual anguish of Blessed Mother Teresa whom God allowed to experience inner darkness. The book by the title: “*Come be my light*” is even more remarkable for the extraordinary missionary drive that it reveals. Mother Teresa is fired by the desire of taking Jesus’ light to the holes where the poorest of the poor live their lives and where nobody goes. Since she gave the example, thousand have followed her into the slums and spread Jesus’ light into the lives of millions of non-Christians.

The great masses of the non-Christians challenge the generosity of every believer. It is a new mission that doesn’t have behind the power of politics or great finance. It is often targeted by the violence of fundamentalists and still generates many martyrs. It is often lived in condition of minority and discrimination, but the future belongs to it. It is a mission that relies only on the Holy Spirit and the attraction of the undeniable goodness of the Christian message. We remember with gratitude the exhortation of Saint Daniel Comboni in his deathbed: “Courage for the present, but especially for the future!” Our weakness, as Saint Paul says, is our strength.

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CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE

*By definition missionaries are bridge-builders, bringing together in unity peoples of different origin, into the same family of the Church. This they can do in the measure that they are able to go out of their own world (**Ad Extra**, outwards) and enter into the world of others. The bridge they build is love.*

African drums resounded in Saint Peter's basilica in Rome, on October 5 2003, the day of Saint Daniel Comboni's canonization, crowning a movement that started with the proclamation to the sainthood of the Uganda Martyrs in 1964, during Vatican II, and with the solemn mass of pope Paul VI celebrated over their sacred relics in Namugongo, during the pope's trip to Uganda in 1969. God's universal salvific will takes people out of their limited horizons and makes them emerge towards an ideal of unity and communion.

The History of Salvation started with Abraham being commanded by the Lord to go out of his land and his extended family and allowing God to lead him outside his security, towards the place that God had prepared for him. And then, throughout the Old Testament, we witness the people of Israel always tempted to close themselves in themselves, and God pushing them, time and again, through the circumstances, to be exposed to the different realities of humanity as they appeared outside the boundaries of the Jewish state. The exile first and the *diaspora* (dispersion) afterwards are opportunities that invite the Jewish people to go out of their traditional borders and meet the rest of humanity.

The New Testament is the time when the Gentiles are called to share the inheritance of the Chosen People. Jesus is the mediator sent by God the Father: through his death and resurrection he bridges the gap between God and humanity and knocks down the barriers that separate us. The happening of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit mark the departure of the twelve apostles to the most different directions to fulfill Jesus' great commission.

Very soon the impetus of the apostles drives the Benedictine monks to the farthest corners of Europe and to the tribes of the Barbarians...The great missionary adventure counts its champions in every age: Saint Francis of Assisi who crosses the Mediterranean to visit the Saladin; Saint Francis Xavier who first brings the Gospel to India and Japan and dies prematurely on the threshold of the immense Chinese world...

The last great movement of the Catholic world to go out of its traditional boundaries coincides with the industrial revolution and the thrust of the European peoples to explore and conquer the rest of the world. Saint Daniel Comboni belongs to this period: for him the movement *ad extra* is a call to love the most different masses of humanity of Central Africa whom Comboni was calling *Nigrizia* (*The Black Peoples*).

I have a vivid memory of my Christmas safaris to Kinaaba, a very remote chapel lost in the mountains of the Bakiga in Western Uganda. It used to take me one hour of dangerous driving along winding dirt roads carved on the steep side of the mountains, and then, after leaving the car at a Primary school, take to the steep paths

of the universality of mission has brought to the fore the preferential option for the poor as a characteristic of the whole Church.

Since the parable of the Good Samaritan, the faith in Jesus as the Redeemer of the world, and the commitment to suffering humanity have gone hand in hand throughout the history of Christianity.

The vow of poverty in our missionary perspective becomes our availability to love and to serve, putting our time, talents, qualifications and skills at the service of the less privileged. It is always a challenge to respond to this call to the poor.

Many times we, missionaries, have been tempted to have a paternalistic approach to the poor: seeing their needs and being somehow mediators between the world of affluence and the one of penury; we have invested our energies in providing the poor with goods.

Emergencies have monopolized our efforts in order to come to the rescue in helpless situations. This form of charity is still needed. Happenings, such as the disastrous cyclone in Myanmar or the extensive earthquake in China, show that this type of intervention will never be completely made redundant.

Yet, we may sometimes have given the proverbial fish instead of teaching how to fish. But this has been widely overcome by the commitment to train, to form and to prepare. Immense is the contribution of the missionary Church to the field of education.

I remember my first experience, as a young missionary, among the Bakiga of Western Uganda. The many campaigns to convince our Christians to send their children to school, to build semi-permanent classrooms with poles, grass and mud and, eventually, to band together for the grueling task of making bricks and having their school in permanent state – which was eventually approved by the government!

Education is the door that brings people out of poverty and ignorance. More recently, the idea came that it is necessary not only to work for the poor but to live with the poor and like the poor. This is called “insertion” and the Comboni missionaries have given an example of this in their community of Korogocho, in the slums of Nairobi.

It is almost 20 years now that this initiative has been in existence and the center of community-building dynamics for the inhabitants of the slums: social initiatives, colorful liturgies, opportunity for exposure of missionary students and a constant focus of attention by the media from near and far, raising consciousness of the enormous problems of the slums.

Vicar Apostolic and so it was: his premature grave very soon appeared in the compound of Khartoum Catholic Mission, under the merciless African sun, to witness the love of a lifetime.

The same unending love he wanted from his missionaries. Ad vitam: for life. The religious consecration of the Comboni missionaries puts a seal on what San Daniel Comboni was dreaming for his followers: a commitment that is radical and unconditional, a consecration of the whole life until death.

The origins of the Comboni Missionaries are very closely linked with Africa. “Africa! Africa!” was the cry of Daniel Comboni, when, still an adolescent, he was looking beyond the shores of Lake Garda where his home village of Limone is placed. “Africa or death!” was the motto of Bishop Daniel Comboni in the climax of his missionary career.

And in truth, to missionaries, Africa, at that time, entailed a very likely risk of premature death. The history of the mission to Central Africa is crowded with untimely tombs. To be assigned to the African mission meant to put one’s life in clear and present danger.

This was not what worried Bro. Agge’, the tiny old man with white beard and blue eyes whom I used to converse with, looking down at the city of Kampala from the veranda of the Comboni residence in Uganda, while he was smoking the second of his three cigarettes a day.

It was 1910 when Propaganda Fide entrusted Northern Uganda to the Comboni Missionaries. Among the first who came from the Sudan to start the work in the new mission was Bro. Agge’. He came to Gulu riding a bicycle and, many times, crossing the swamps, he had to carry the bicycle on his shoulders.

He was a builder and, very soon, he was moving with his work gang to the places where a new school or new chapel was planned.... Alone, at night, in the savannah, when the going was good, he used to read the bulky volumes of Pastor, The History of the Popes... When I met him he was over 90, the image of peace.

Fr. Daniel Comboni knew the difficulty of the mission to which he was inviting his followers, coming often from various and heterogeneous groups. He wanted to give them a strong and lively unity. For this purpose, he demanded each one of them to promise dedication to the mission till death.

2. *Comboni Jewels*

Four original missionary initiatives that are the pride of the Comboni Missionaries.

DAR COMBONI

“You cannot understand the Arabic language and literature if you do not go to the desert” stated the Egyptian scholar Wael Farouq. More so Islam in its origin. This is why, at the borders of the largest desert, the Sahara, a Catholic Institute of Studies is training people to face the unknown world of Islam in its historical roots and present day relevance: DAR COMBONI of the Comboni Missionaries, based at Cairo.

Considered the door of Africa, Egypt has always been for the Comboni Missionaries a kind of ante-room to the “Black Pearl”, the Sudan. Here, Saint Daniel Comboni, the founder of the institute, opened the first religious communities in 1867. It was a presence which was meant not only for the purpose of acclimatization but above all for learning Arabic. Even nowadays Dar Comboni, the Institute of Arabic Studies and Islamology, is one of the best centers for learning the Arabic language and culture.

The origin of Dar Comboni is linked to the need the Comboni family felt to train its members assigned to Egypt, Sudan or the Middle East in the Arabic language. The Institute was initially opened in Lebanon but due to the escalation of the civil war, it was transferred to Cairo. In the meantime, several other Institutes asked to join the Comboni Missionaries in the preparation of their members who had the same objectives.

The writer of this article is very proud to acknowledge that the president of Dar Comboni, Fr. John Richard Kyankaaga Ssendawula, doctor in Islamology, is a Ugandan whom he recruited way back in the eighties, together with his colleague at the institute and at present Novice Master in Namugongo, Uganda, Fr. Achilles Kiwanuka Kasozi. They were both eager young men in the schools of Masaka, Uganda, when I was roaming the country along the dangerous routes of the post-Amin period. They are now, in their maturity, the embodiment of Comboni’s dream to save Africa with Africa.

Dar Comboni offers language courses to missionaries and religious of both sexes and priests from all over the world as well as lay people who want to seriously deepen the

THE SOCIAL MINISTRY FACULTY

Love for the development of the African people has inspired a Comboni Missionary to conceive a university program that joins the study of the Church Social Doctrine to the different technical disciplines. The Social Ministry Faculty of Nairobi, Kenya, caters for men and women religious and the many lay church workers engaged in the development of the great continent.

One cannot miss the high water tower that soars above the many modern buildings of the Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA) in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Among the many faculties, special mention deserves the Institute of Social Ministry in Mission (ISMM), which originated in 1994 from the creative passion of a Comboni Missionary, Fr. Francesco Pierli, former father general, and is at present headed by a Comboni brother, Alberto Parise, an architect by profession with a degree from the prestigious faculty of Architecture of Venice University in Italy. The Comboni Sisters are also part of the enterprise through a lecturer, Sr. Lettedenghil Ogbamichael from Eritrea.

The Institute has developed to the point of adding three Master Degrees to the program of lesser qualifications and very soon the Doctorate program will start. In 2004, the Institute celebrated the tenth anniversary of foundation and held a congress for all the alumni who had graduated from the Social Ministry Faculty. On that occasion, it gathered more than one thousand men and women: religious brothers, sisters and lay people who are already engaged in different development projects in several countries of the continent.

Fr. Francesco Pierli, MCCJ, the one who had the idea and the founder of the Social Ministry Faculty, likes to recall the words Saint Daniel Comboni wrote in his *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* in 1864: “The plan which we propose is: the creation of as many Institutes, both for men and women, as are necessary to surround Africa, wisely placed in proper locations...The Society destined to put into operation and monitor the new plan, once the enterprise has progressed conveniently, will be able to establish universities for theology and the different sciences in the most important spots around the African continent”. As we can see, the university commitment is an important component of Comboni’s missionary vision.

The Social Ministry Faculty continues to follow the former alumni in the field with networking and practical initiatives. The most remarkable was the involvement of its graduates in the conflict resolution process in the areas where the tribal tensions had been most fierce with many victims.

Among the great missionaries of that time, Daniel Comboni understood evangelization as a holistic reality. He realized that mission and missionary animation had to mirror every aspect of reality, not only the religious sphere. Comboni accepted traditional instruments like writing letters to his benefactors, but also took advantage of new technologies and opportunities. In keeping with his holistic vision, he founded the *Annali del Buon Pastore*, the first missionary-oriented magazine in Europe, which survives to this day as *Nigrizia*.

Aside from this, Comboni continued to contribute articles to and maintained his relations with many magazines around the world. "I have to write as a correspondent for fifteen German, French, English and American newspapers" he wrote in 1878. Comboni wrote about Africa and the missionary endeavor of the Church there. He also published articles on social ills such as slavery and geographical explorations like the discovery of the Nuba Mountains in Kordofan, the Sudan.

Comboni's special attention to the use of media, which has now become his legacy, has passed to his followers. Wherever they went, the Comboni Missionaries started new publications, mainly for the missionary animation of the local Church, but also for the formation of leaders or as organs of the local Christian communities.

An exemplary story is that of Fr. Tarcisio Agostoni who served as Father General during the very critical decade following Vatican II. As a young missionary to Uganda he foresaw the importance of preparing new leaders for the future of Africa on the eve of the independence of that country in 1962. He founded the magazine *Leadership*, which is still been published today. *Leadership* became extremely popular in East Africa, reaching at one time more than 50,000 copies, a real record for that geographical area. Although this magazine is confined mostly to Uganda today, it still finds its way to many homes and parishes in East Africa.

The Comboni Missionaries still publish international magazines all over Africa. These include *New People* in Kenya, *Worldwide* in South Africa and *Afriquespoir* in the Congo. In Mozambique, the Comboni Missionaries run the magazine *Vida Nova*, a diocesan magazine founded by them during colonial times. During the civil war in the 1980's, *Vida Nova* was the only magazine published and widely read in that country.

Meanwhile, in Latin and Northern America and in Europe, various magazines aim at the missionary animation of the local Churches. In particular, *Nigrizia* in Italy, *Mundo Negro* in Spain and *Além Mar* in Portugal are recognized as the most authoritative sources of information about Africa.

In Asia, the Comboni Missionaries run *World Mission*, which is published in the Philippines and distributed in many Asian countries. On March 15, St. Daniel Comboni's Birthday, a joyful crowd of about 200 people gathered at the Comboni

Ever since the developing countries had a problem: nobody seemed to notice them unless in connection with disasters or some other bad news. This problem is not yet completely solved. Sometimes entire populations silently suffer the many situations of injustice which deprive whole nations of their resources, their rights and their dignity. The developing world is crying out but its voice many times goes unheard.

The news reaching us from developing countries is both poor in quality and quantity. Every time we watch the news on television, we are told a number of selected facts. All too often we will hear news of the Third World and mission lands when there is a disaster to report or when the interests of the Western World are at stake. It is instead quite obvious that the news should be reported from the point of view of the people personally involved.

Aware of the power of the media to enhance the dissemination of information and wanting to redress the balance of objectivity, many missionary institute came together in 1997 to start a news agency. The Comboni Missionaries were asked to take the lead. As a result, MISNA, the Missionary News Agency, was born in Rome. It started with just one computer connected to the internet and the skill and passion of Fr. Giulio Albanese, MCCJ, who became the father of MISNA.

The agency now publishes bulletins in five languages which are updated continuously. MISNA's website is completely free. Each day it releases many news updates, a part from the many in-depth items it releases every month. The agency has revolutionized the flow of information and, in many cases, has brought to light events around the world which otherwise would have remained hidden or which major news agencies could have ignored. MISNA news reports are keenly observed by all those who are interested in international events. Most of the biggest news organizations use its material.

The success of MISNA is largely due to the more than two hundred thousand missionary priests, brothers, sisters and lay people of all nationalities throughout the world. Day by day, events unfold before their very eyes. If you want to know what is happening in most of the world, just ask a missionary. The missionary news agency has brought the world's press and the missionary world together in a way that has encouraged many journalists to devote their efforts to the developing world.

Secondly, the agency has also succeeded in making its own prophetic voice heard. For instance, it drew the attention of the world to the diamond trade as fuelling the bloody conflicts in Sierra Leone and Angola. The United Nations then approved an embargo on diamonds coming from Sierra Leone in an attempt to cut off the supply of armaments to the warring groups. In this new millennium the developing countries look to MISNA to make their voice both heard and heeded throughout the world.

In this period, in collaboration with the theologian Valentino Salvoldi, Fr. Kizito wrote a book calling for an African Synod: “*Africa: the Gospel Belongs to Us*” which was later published also in Italian and Brazilian. Not only one but two African Synods followed some twenty years later, showing the prophetic intuition of the authors of the book.

Renato Sesana was born in Lecco, Italy, in 1943. He studied mechanical engineering and worked in a motorcycle factory for some time before joining the Comboni Missionaries. At his Religious Profession, he assumed the name 'Kizito', after Saint Kizito, the youngest of the Uganda Martyrs. He was ordained priest in 1970 and assigned to *Nigrizia*, the prestigious missionary magazine, of which he became the youngest editor ever, in more than a hundred years' history of the magazine. During this period he began to travel around Africa and wrote his first book.

After his period in Zambia, in February 1988, he was sent by the Superiors to Nairobi, Kenya, to set up *New People*, a Comboni magazine for the English speaking African countries. The first issue of the magazine was published in July 1989, and Father Kizito was its editor up to 1995. It is still one of the most widely spread Catholic magazines in Anglophone Africa.

Once in Nairobi, Fr. Kizito, after several unsuccessful attempts, managed to double his original community *Koinonia*, with a group of young men whose inspiration was the life of the early Christians as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. The Community members were from different professions and backgrounds, and they lived together sharing their dreams, successes and failures. Today, the *Koinonia* Community has about forty members in Nairobi, and ten in Lusaka.

Koinonia Kenya was registered as a corporate body in 1996, after which it established various social enterprises to help improve the local society within which it is based. Its activities and social projects give priority to the marginalized in society, such as street children as well as women and young people from poor backgrounds. Apart from the Nairobi and Lusaka projects, the Community has since spread to the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, where a sister community, *Koinonia* Nuba, was started.

In 1999, the Episcopal Conference of Kenya instructed Fr. Kizito to plan and set up a national Catholic FM radio station. The station began broadcasting in July 2003 with the name of Waumini Radio, and Father Kizito ran it until early 2006. Beyond his missionary and humanitarian work, Father Kizito is an acclaimed writer and journalist. He has written a dozen books and hundreds of articles for magazines and papers around the world.

St. Daniel Comboni wrote that mission work is born and flourishes at the foot of the Cross. This has been true also for Fr. Kizito: his generous and gifted missionary experience had to come in touch with the bitter taste of betrayal. At a certain moment, three of the leaders of his undertakings brought grave accusations against him of

baptism with poverty, Fr. Alex Zanotelli, Comboni missionary, gives an account of the journey that has made of him one of the most representative figures of contemporary Catholic culture. His full human and missionary dimension is expressed in the motto: "Think globally and act locally".

In the local language the name Korogocho means confusion, chaos. Korogocho is one of the many shantytowns surrounding Nairobi, Kenya. The overcrowding in the poor shelters brings promiscuity and with it prostitution, drugs, alcoholism, hunger, violence. In Korogocho, the human degradation is palpable and pervasive.

It is there that in 1987 Fr. Alex chose to live, alone, without protection, cooking for himself, washing his own clothes, sharing the hardships of all. There the liturgies became alive with the problems of survival and the reading of the Bible acquired a different slant, from the point of view of the "damned of the earth". Fr. Alex lived and worked there for fourteen years.

Fr. Alex' experience became a point of reference for the media: journalists, often former colleagues of Fr. Alex, came to see and wrote about that "insertion" experiment. Young missionaries still in their formation came to Korogocho to find inspiration and to be tested by the difficulties of the environment.

Fr. Alex founded many small Christian communities and a workers' cooperative for recycling, which employed many of the inhabitants of the shanties; he urged and helped in the *Udada project*, a community of former prostitutes involved in helping the women who wanted to change their life and at the same time he was working for reforms about land distribution, one of the hot points in Kenyan politics.

Fr. Alex Zanotelli was born in 1938 at Trent ([Italy](#)). As an adolescent he joined the Comboni Missionary Congregation and was sent to the States for theology. He was ordained a priest in 1964. His first assignment was Southern Sudan, which was plagued by civil war and where he stayed for eight years. The local government eventually pressured him to leave because of his open Christian witness and the active solidarity he showed with the Nuba people.

The motherhouse of the Comboni missionaries in Verona is a quiet place of residence for many of the senior priests and brothers coming home from the mission fields, but it also hosts the office of "*Nigrizia*", a magazine providing news about the various missions around the world, that was first published back in 1883. In 1978 Fr. Alex became its editor and worked to make it "the voice of those who have no voice", especially the voice of Africa, radically criticizing the evil of arms trade, the corruption of the cooperation for development and exposing what he regarded as the entanglement between the political class and business.

Valeria Gandini

A LIFE AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING

After more than twenty years of commitment to the African mission, Sr. Valeria Gandini, Comboni sister, by chance came in touch with the world of human trafficking in 1989, while in Italy. A nurse and midwife by profession and with a Diploma in Pastoral Theology, from that moment she has dedicated her life to the redemption of Italy night street walkers, the prostitutes, modern slaves, many of whom from Africa.

In the past twenty five years, Sr. Valeria Gandini, Comboni Sister, in the course of her mission, has come to know and witness many dramatic stories of women forced to sell their bodies on the street. "Coming to talk to a woman who has suffered violence, who is deprived of her freedom - says Sr. Valeria - who is constantly watched by her owners, threatened, bought and sold; when she dares to share with you her feelings, her emotions, it is something indescribable.

Sr. Valeria says: "I remember Lucy, forced to abort eight times, who in washing her hands, always saw blood come out of the tap... And Osagie, whom I met while seriously ill in hospital, on dialysis, who complained that it was the cold of the night spent on the street that penetrated her bones and made her ill...The girl eventually died at 25 years of age. I also met women who ran crazy like Edith who saw always bad men through the window panes, behind doors and used to scream for help".

"One of the most humiliating things for a woman is feeling that she is sold and bought as a commodity" Sr. Valeria continues. Tina, another prostitute, confided to her, crying: 'Sister, they put us naked in a row and we were fingered on the shoulders by men as if we were animals'. "One thing that always surprises me in these unfortunate friends -adds Sister Valeria – is that, despite their situation of suffering and confusion, they always carry within themselves the will to live, the ability to create, protect and grow life in situations which are against life. They are capable of tenderness, attention, patience, gratuity and to give themselves up for the others".

Born during World War II in Verona, the city of Saint Daniel Comboni, the champion in the fight against the slave trade in the Sudan, Sr. Valeria took her vows at 24 and was trained as Nurse and midwife in London. She worked in Ethiopia first and later in Uganda. It is there that I met her. She was then a tall, dignified young woman, soft-spoken and with a beautiful and peaceful countenance, showing a

de Foucauld, his knowledge of the Ewé language and local traditions makes him the most outstanding anthropologist of that area.

Notwithstanding the missionaries, the European colonization, the national independence; notwithstanding the fetishes of today's technological culture like laptops or cellular phones, the immense phallus of Lebga, messenger between men and Vodou gods, guards the compounds of every hut of the villages of the Guinea Gulf and to it every family, every clan offers small sacrifices of blood and alcohol.

In each corner of the regions of the Guinea Gulf, in the evening, during the dry season, the night drums of numberless ceremonies are resounding. In courtyards thick with people, women in trance bite the slain throat of goats. The warm blood drip along their bodies. It is in this environment that Fr. Roberto Pazzi decided to spend his life.

He was born in the Milan area of Northern Italy in 1936. After WWII, from Milan his family moved to the countryside of Como where Roberto met with a Comboni missionary and started to dream about Africa. Eventually he joined and after his priestly ordination, was assigned to Togo, where he arrived in 1965, immediately after the first group of Comboni Missionaries had reached West Africa, in January of the previous year. He was 29 years old.

Contrary to their tradition in East Africa, the Combonis found out that the missionaries were always using interpreters for their apostolate. They refused to accept this situation and especially Fr. Roberto started to study the local language Ewé and the culture and religion of the area with great passion. In 1970 he was assigned officially to that task. The two-years time limit however soon appeared to him as highly insufficient and then the task became for Fr. Roberto a life-time commitment. After a while, he left the Combonis and was incardinated in the local Church.

He chose to live in the countryside of Vigan, a small town at about 45 km from the capital Lomé, not far from the place where Portuguese sailors had planted the Cross for the first time on West African soil, in 1472. Here is Fr. Roberto's hut, which he calls "The Hermitage of the Cross". Here he has lived since, here he has composed his extensive work which was published in five volumes, on the language and traditions of the Ajatado area.

For years Fr. Roberto has formed the new missionaries who arrive in West Africa. Brother Simon Tsoklo, a Togolese Comboni missionary, remarks: " Roberto has made important steps in order to understand my people". Simon is the son of a great

faith and show that to be Catholic is worthwhile, it gives serenity and joy; it is source of pride and ambition.

In 1978, in Mexico City, a young Comboni priest, Fr. Luis Butera, created the “Comboni Center for Evangelization” which published brochures, booklets and cassettes. The activities of the Center awoke a strong desire of evangelization in many youth and adults so that Fr. Luis started to organize a lay movement: “The Servants of the Word”. The name comes from Saint Luke’s Prologue: “...*who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants (ministers) of the Word...*”(Luke 1:2).

The movement quickly grew in numbers: many young men and women took the yearly Apostolic Promise to commit their lives and activity to the spreading of the Bible message. In 1981, the Superiors of the Comboni Congregation, recognizing the special call of Fr. Luis, advised him to continue the promising activity under the responsibility and leadership of a Diocesan Bishop. Fr. Luis accepted and chose the Diocese of Cuautitlàn and Bishop Manuel Semaniego who welcomed him and placed him as Parish Priest at San José El Vidrio. More important development were ahead.

Fr. Luis Butera was born at Marianopoli in Southern Italy in 1932. As a teenager, he entered the diocesan seminary of Caltanissetta. During the years of formation for the priesthood he experienced a strong attraction for missionary life and eventually at the age of 24 he crossed over to the Comboni Missionaries. He was ordained priest in 1960 and soon assigned to Mexico.

There, he was sent for missionary experience to Baja California, where he served the local church in different capacities and then to training in the International Center “For a Better World” in Rome and consequently he travelled extensively, visiting the missions in the Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia. He was now ready for the world of media which seemed to be his vocation. Back to Mexico, he was put in charge of the publication of the magazine ESQUILA MISSIONAL. It is in this context the he initiated the lay movement: “The Servants of the Word”.

Some young men and women who had renewed the Apostolic Promise for more than three years, disclosed their desire to commit themselves to evangelization for life. That is how Fr. Luis felt morally obliged to consider the possibility of starting two Religious Congregations: The “Missionary Servants of the Word” and the “Missionary Sisters Servant of the Word”. The two Congregations became of Pontifical Right in 2008. The two institutes had a rapid and amazing development.

At present, the “Missionaries Servants of the Word” count more than 60 priests and around 150 brothers in different stages of formation. The “Missionary Sisters Servants of the Word” have more than 150 professed religious and around 90 novices and postulants. The institutes have become international: they have communities in

Mexico, Dominican Republic, Chile, Venezuela, Guatemala, El Salvador, Canada, Europe, The Philippines, Kenya and still expanding.

The reluctant Founder, Fr. Luis, is now a very old man: like an Old Testament patriarch, he has witnessed the extraordinary expansion of the little seed of enthusiasm for the Word of God which he sowed during his youth and he doesn't stop being surprised and awed by so abundant a harvest. His heart is overwhelmed by gratitude.

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Fr. Mario Pezzi

I WITNESSED GOD'S MARVELLOUS WORK

Searching for an answer to his inner turmoil, the young Comboni priest, Mario Pezzi, met with the New-Catechumenal Way. He was attracted, became the first presbyter and witnessed the extraordinary development of the movement throughout the world.

In March 2008, nine cardinals and 160 European bishops gathered on the Mount of the Beatitudes, in Palestine, in the center of the New-Catechumenal Way. On that occasion, Cardinal Schönborn said: "During the last forty years Europe has said 'no' to its future three times: in 1968 when it rejected '*Humanae Vitae*'; then, twenty years later, with the legalization of abortion; and today with homosexual marriages." He called the Neo-Catechumenal Way an "answer of the Holy Spirit to this situation."

The *Neo-catechumenal Way*, also known colloquially as *The Way*, is a movement within the Catholic Church dedicated to the Christian formation of adults. Taking its inspiration from the Catechumenate of the early Church by which converts from paganism were prepared for baptism, it provides post-baptismal formation to adults who are already members of the Church.

It originated in Spain in 1964 through the work of two lay persons: Francisco "Kiko" Argüello and Carmen Hernández, with the purpose of evangelizing the slums

of Madrid. In 1968, Argüello and Hernández arrived in Rome and started the first community in the parish of the Canadian Martyrs. Since then, the Way has continued to spread to dioceses and mission countries around the world.

The Neo-Catechumenate is implemented in small, parish-based communities of between 20-50 people. In 2007 there were about 40,000 such communities throughout the World, with an estimated million members. It also runs a hundred seminaries in various locations, and is responsible for hundreds of "families in mission," living in many cities around the World. In June 2008 the Statutes of the Neo-Catechumenal Way received final approval from the Vatican.

On that occasion, Fr. Mario Pezzi, the priest who belongs to the leading team with Kiko and Carmen, said: "I am very happy and grateful to the Lord for this day when the Way is recognized by the ministry of Peter. I also have a story. Before being ordained a priest, I experienced an inner struggle. I was seeing a gap between priests and God's people; their language people did not understand; the liturgy had very little influence in people's lives; there was like a divorce between faith and life. I was looking for answers.

This inner struggle took me to my Spiritual Father who told me: "Don't take any step until God will manifest his will. When he will, there will be clarity and peace". I endured six years of this uncertainty, I was even ordained a priest with the Comboni Missionaries, because I was certain of my vocation. After six months since my ordination, I met with Kiko, Carmen and the New-Catechumenal Way and I found the answers to my questioning".

Mario Pezzi was born in 1942 at Gottolengo, Brescia, Italy. As an adolescent he joined the formation program of the Comboni Missionaries and was ordained a priest in 1969. With the permission of the superiors, in 1970, he joined the New-Catechumenal Way. Later he declared: "While giving my ministry to the Way, I always remained in contact with the Comboni Institute. In 1992, the Chapter decided that I should incardinate myself to a diocese, in order to continue full time the mission with the Way. This is why I now belong to the Diocese of Rome, but my heart has remained with Comboni and will always be".

He continued: "Thirty two years have passed and I have witnessed God's marvelous work in the extraordinary expansion of the Way. Today, I see that the Lord is faithful and the Church is mother". Fr. Mario not only found serenity in the Way, but was called to join Kiko and Carmen as the first presbyter and since then he has belonged to the "International Responsible Team" of the Way and he will be in such position for his whole life.

On March 6, 2015, Pope Francis told the "Families in Mission" of the Way: "I

5. **COMBONI PLACES**

The four most important places in the life of Comboni and his missionary family.

Limone sul Garda

LIMITLESS HORIZONS

Italy's border to the North is constituted by the huge mountain-range of the Alps that divide Italy from Switzerland, Germany and Austria. The water that comes down from the glaciers forms a string of lakes at the foot of the Alps the largest of which is Lake Garda. On the northern shore of the lake lies the little town of Limone where on March 15, 1831, Saint Daniel Comboni was born.

Limone is the Italian word for 'lemon' and this shore of Lake Garda was once renowned for growing lemons and other citrus fruits. Limone's name, however, is no more than a happy coincidence, since it is said to be much older than the lemon groves, and to derive from the Latin word "limen", meaning 'boundary'. The town is still a boundary between Italian regions.

At the time of Comboni, Limone was a village of about five hundred inhabitants. The lemon grove where Comboni's father worked as a tenant and where his family lived has been preserved almost intact and was acquired by the Comboni Missionaries in 1967, when, with the changes brought by Vatican II, the interest for the Founder was revived. The lemon grove is carved amphitheatre-like on the north side of the hill overlooking the lake.

The different terraces used to contain the pots with the lemon plants, exposed to the sun and in winter protected from the cold by screens suspended on columns that still exist and give a unique character to the place. Now, the lemon grove has been changed into a residence and a museum-exhibition. On the western end of the ground terrace, still exists the humble abode of the tenant: the kitchen-living room above the stable, now a rustic chapel, and again above, the bedroom with the extremely simple furniture. It is touching to visit the place where the eight children were born.

On the opposite end, there was the residence of the owner and now it is the place of the Comboni community in charge of the sacred, historical place. Comboni's father,

VERONA: THE MOTHER HOUSE

One hundred and fifty years ago, in 1867, Saint Daniel Comboni gave origin to his missionary family in Verona, the historical city on the river Adige. Today, Verona mother house stands in a buzz of activity, alive and kicking with missionary vitality.

The city of Verona in Northern Italy is inextricably bound to Saint Daniel Comboni's life and mission. To it, as an adolescent, he came to study for the priesthood; in it he was ordained and to the local church of Verona he belonged until he became Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa. In it his missionary institute developed first under the patronage of Cardinal Canossa, Bishop of Verona, and eventually it is in it that the mother house of the Comboni Missionaries is situated.

The beautiful city on the river Adige is renowned for the Arena, the ancient Roman amphitheatre, where operas are performed every year during summer and for Juliet's palace, since Shakespeare set in Verona his play *Romeo and Juliet*. Crowds of young lovers visit Juliet's house every year.

More remarkable is the memory of one of the first bishops who was an African, Saint Zeno, and is remembered by the beautiful church that is dedicated to him. It is wonderful to think that from Verona, almost two thousand years later, the missionary Fr. Daniel Comboni and his followers started out to bring the faith to a different Africa.

In the center of Verona, moving from the river Adige towards the gradually climbing hill, we find, in the locality San Giovanni in Valle, first the place of the Comboni Sisters which was bought by Comboni himself in 1872 with the money offered by the Empress of Austria and then the mother house of the Comboni Fathers and Brothers bought by Mons. Sogaro, Comboni's successor, in 1992, when the members of the institute, in the process of becoming religious, left the residence of the diocesan seminary and moved to their own place.

The property is extensive and it includes spacious grounds. Many times the huge building of the mother house has been renovated. It holds the community that is running the place together with a large number of Italian confreres who are diagnosing their health condition or in transition between assignments.

In the same place, a different community is in charge of mass media, especially the magazine *Nigrizia*, which goes back to Saint Daniel Comboni himself. Important is

KHARTOUM: WHERE HE LEFT HIS HEART

Fr. Daniel Comboni was only 28 when he entered the city of Khartoum on his way to Holy Cross, his first mission. Sick and exhausted, he returned to Europe the following year, but he “left there his heart”. To Khartoum he came back as Bishop and there he died prematurely at only 50. Four years later even his bones were scattered on the African soil as seeds of the future.

In May 1873, Mons. Daniel Comboni entered Khartoum as Head of the Vicariate of Central Africa and delivered his famous homily: “Unfortunate Africa was the first love of my youth...Sixteen years ago I left my heart here, as I was forced by sickness to go back home. Today I come back to you at last and I regain my heart”.

Fr. Daniel Comboni had set foot in Khartoum, with his five companions, in 1858, full of juvenile enthusiasm, only to be disappointed by failure. But his love for Africa was invincible and soon Khartoum became the headquarter of his missionary initiatives.

Khartoum was established in 1821 by Ibrahim Pasha. It is strategically located at the confluence of the White Nile, flowing north from Lake Victoria, and the Blue Nile, flowing west from Ethiopia. By the time of Comboni, it had developed into a regional trade centre and a focal point for the slave trade.

In 1884, only three years after Comboni’s death, the followers of the Mahdi besieged Khartoum. The siege ended with the massacre of all its inhabitants including the heroic governor Gordon Pasha. The Comboni missionaries in the city had been warned by their fellow members of the other mission stations who were captured by the Mahadists and had left the place.

All the same, the tombs of the missionaries, including the one of Comboni, were desecrated by the Dervishes looking for hidden treasures. The remaining bones of the Saint were retrieved by Fr. Joseph Ohrwalder who survived the long captivity and was the first to return to Khartoum, after the defeat of the Mahadists.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Khartoum was the destination for hundreds of thousands of refugees from South Sudan and Darfur, fleeing the violence of the Sudanese Civil War and Darfur conflict, who settled in large slums at the outskirts of the city. It was during this time, when the number of Christians had grown

Rome:

Where Comboni's Successor lives.

At the outskirts of the eternal city, in touch with the universal breath of the Catholic Church, close to the Pope and his ministry of unity, stands the residence of Father General of the Comboni Missionaries. There the missionary impulse originates which animates the whole Comboni family scattered around the world.

In and around the city of Rome, during the fifties and sixties of last century, a great building fervor was manifesting the extraordinary development of the Catholic Church: huge residences of the heads of many religious orders were mushrooming everywhere.

The Comboni Missionaries were caught by the same fever and, in locality Eur, in the direction of Ostia, the harbor of Rome, two tall units rose, joined together by a beautiful chapel dedicated to the Sacred Heart. There, the General of that time, Fr. Gaetano Briani and his council moved their residence in 1965. It was a natural development since the number of the Comboni Missionaries had doubled in a decade: from around 600 in 1947 to more than 1200 in 1957.

The world had emerged from the trauma of World War II which had witnessed the slaughter of more than fifty million people. As if revenging for the narrowing experiences of the war, a wave of optimism and *joy de vivre* had swept over the nations, busy in the work of reconstruction. A baby boom was the consequence and then also the Catholic Church became the beneficiary: seminaries and convents were full and overflowing with young people.

Many things have changed in the fortunes of the Catholic Church since then, the number of religious has dwindled, forcing several congregations to abandon their spacious buildings, but the Generalate of the Comboni Missionaries has never lacked a joyful buzz of life up to now, given the various initiatives it accommodates.

The most important is the residence of Father General and his Council which consists of other three fathers and one brother. At present, Saint Daniel Comboni's successor is an African, Very Reverend Fr. Tesfaye Tadesse Gebresilasie. His council

6. THE COMBONI TREE:

a brief presentation of the Comboni family which can be compared to a tree with four branches: The Fathers & Brothers, the Sisters, The Seculars and the Lays

The Comboni Fathers & Brothers

PEACE WARRIORS

The main branch of the missionary tree planted by Saint Daniel Comboni is made up of those men who call themselves in Latin: MCCJ: Missionarii Comboniani Cordis Jesu, which in English stays for: Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus.

I am writing this short article from the very place which represents the origin of everything: Limone on Lake Garda in Northern Italy, the birthplace of Saint Daniel Comboni. We are twenty “Elders of the Tribe”, going through a Renewal Course meant to keep us still active and efficient in our old age. By the time you read it, God willing, I will be back in Manila.

The group is a sample of the Comboni Missionary Institute: we are of six different nationalities and together we total about 800 years of missionary service across the continents.

It was in 1867 that Mons. Daniel Comboni started his missionary congregation in order to have workers for his harvest in Africa, priests and brothers who would be ready to spend their lives for Comboni’s territory of Central Africa, that he describes as the largest and most difficult in the world.

A hundred and fifty years have passed since that beginning and Comboni’s peaceful army is still consistent of around 1500 men who are working in four different continents: more than 600 in Africa, more than 300 in Latin America, about 500 in

Europe and North America, considering many who are retired because of sickness or extreme old age, plus about 150 young members in formation.

There is also a handful of them, about twenty, in the Asia Delegation, in five communities: two in the Philippines, one in Macau, one in Taipei, Taiwan and one in Vietnam. It is a gift of the Institute to the largest continent with the smallest number of Christians: a symbol of the efforts of Christianity aiming at enlarging its presence in Asia, following the resolution expressed by Saint John Paul II during the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000.

On that occasion, he stated: “The first millennium of Christianity saw the conversion of Europe,; the second that of America and Africa. The third millennium will see the conversion of Asia”.

We are living a time of rapid changes and that affects also the Comboni Institute. The pioneers were from Italy but now the number of Italians is dwindling because of the natural alternation of ages and the present winter of vocation in Italy. The non-Italians are now by far the majority and among them, the African members are already more than 300 and growing fast. They will constitute the majority in the non-distant future.

This is something that Saint Daniel Comboni will certainly be pleased about, looking down from heaven. Viva! Mabuhay! Long live the MCCJ!



The Comboni Sisters

WOMEN OF THE GOSPEL

The Comboni Missionary Sisters are dedicated to teaching, social work, parish pastoral care and are in the frontline in the fight against human trafficking and prostitution in many countries, especially in Africa. They are alive with their Founder’s spirit.

Sometimes In 2012, in Israel, Hillary Clinton, by then US Secretary of State, met with a humble nun from Eritrea and presented her with an award. She was recognized as a “Hero Acting to End Modern Slavery”. That was an unexpected development in the life of Sr. Aziza, but something that showed to the world at large how precious was her untiring activity in favor of the African refugees.

Sr. Azezet Kidane, commonly known as Sister Aziza, was born in Eritrea and is now a British citizen. She worked as a nurse in the Sudan and Ethiopia for twenty years and is a member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters. From 2010, Sr. Aziza began working as a nurse at an open clinic in Tel Aviv. The clinic provided free healthcare to African refugees who had made the journey to Israel via the Sinai Peninsula.

In the course of her work, Sr. Aziza noticed that many of the refugees had suffered from enslavement, human trafficking and torture on their journeys. She discovered that a network of torture camps existed in the Sinai that were used by people smugglers to extort money from the refugees and began recording this in a database.

The reports she compiled were passed on to the Israeli police, the US Department of State, the European Union and the United Nations and were instrumental in bringing to a stop that kind of exploitation.

The story of Sr. Aziza reminds us of the witness of another Comboni sister, Sr. Rachel who risked her life in order to save more than one hundred school girls kidnapped by the Lord Resistance Army in Uganda in 1996 or the untiring efforts of yet another spiritual daughter of Comboni, Sr. Valeria, on behalf of the African women enslaved by prostitution in Italy. Together they represent the Comboni spirit which is still much alive in their group.

Saint Daniel Comboni founded the Institute of the “Mothers of the Africans” in Verona, Italy, in January 1872. The first Comboni sisters came to Africa in 1877. Comboni thought of his nuns as strong-willed missionaries. He told the sisters not to hold their head bent to one side, because in Africa one needs to hold the neck straight.

Contrary to typical views at the time, he regarded them as of equal dignity with the male missionaries in Africa. At present, the Comboni Missionary Sisters number around 1200 members from 36 nationalities and are active in many countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe. For their future they count on about fifty postulants and novices mainly from Africa.



THE HIDDEN STONE

They are only about one hundred and fifty in number. They do not usually move from their homes. But because of their consecration and constant prayer for the Comboni missions, they are a source of strength for the workers in the field. They are the Secular Comboni Missionaries.

Sr. Adele Brambilla, former CMS mother General, when she went to Khartoum for the celebration of the canonization of Saint Daniel Comboni in 2003, she visited the compound of the mission where Comboni was buried and took three bricks from the original old wall which was due to be demolished. She did this in remembrance of the famous words of the Saint who wrote that his missionaries should be like hidden stones buried in the foundations of the huge building of the Church in Africa.

This image applies in a fitting manner to the Secular Comboni Missionaries. They were in the beginning lay women who shared the work of the Comboni Fathers and Sisters in the parishes. Then some of them embraced the missionary passion and desired to consecrate themselves to God for the missions for life.

In 1951, some of them came together to live in community at Carraia, Lucca, Italy, and became the point of reference of many others who were living the same vocation in their families and home places. They were accompanied spiritually by Fr. Egidio Ramponi, MCCJ and others after him. Eventually they assumed the form of a secular institute which was approved by Rome in May 1983.

In the footsteps of Saint Daniel Comboni, they mean to live his spirituality. The common elements of their vocation are the consecration by means of the profession of the evangelical councils, lived out in the world, and the cooperation to the missionary cause.

This is done first of all by prayer and daily sacrifice. They are called to be the “gospel leaven” of the worldly realities in order to transform them from within. In the course of its history, the Institute of the Secular Comboni Missionaries has also sent some of its members to the missions in Africa and Latin America

**THE
COMBONI CHARISM
IN ACTION**

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

