THE COMBONI CHARISM IN ACTION

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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 then 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.

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 ad 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 them selves, 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

together with the youth who were waiting for me and had come to carry my things: the camp-bed, the field-altar, the pressure-lamp, etc...

It was an exhausting journey on foot as we followed the route opened by the natives. Their geometry knew only the straight line. Their paths were literally backbreaking... We could go on like this for about three hours, reaching a watershed and looking down on a valley, and then another watershed and another valley...At last, I would look down with relief on the beautiful, large valley of Kinaaba, with the mud and grass chapel in the middle of it.

It is there that I spent my best Christmas nights, presiding the solemn Mass in the open, at the light of the pressure-lamp tied on a tall pole, with the singing and the drumming, and, after the Mass, the wild dancing of the people, rejoicing for the birth of Jesus. It was then that I experienced more deeply this "going out" of my missionary life. Surrounded by a crowd of black people, I was asking myself: "What are you doing here, you only *mujungu* (white man) among all these black?" And yet I experienced such unity, such unanimity, such joy in the mutual acceptance and appreciation, because of Jesus!

The option for the poor

"The poor will always be with you," says Jesus (Mt 26:11). One of the fundamental traits of our Comboni spirituality is that we should always be with the poor: ad pauperes. They are the companions of our destiny: sharing their life and problems is ourway to make Jesus' love present to them. It is our mission.

Saint Daniel Comboni, during his lifetime, wrote many times that hewas called to serve the black Africans whom he considered the poorest and most abandoned of all. By instinct, we can say that missionaries go to the poor of the world. And since missionaries are considered the spearhead of the Church, the growing consciousness

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.

And, yet, its position and external circumstances illustrate the different approach that the love and commitment to the poor can assume. The Korogocho community is within the area of Kariobangi Parish that is entrusted to the Comboni missionaries.

The parish team is totally involved in the work with the slum dwellers with various initiatives of a more traditional character but vital – like the kindergarten with several hundred toddlers or the parish secondary school, without mentioning all the other pastoral and social initiatives.

Within the parish and in the heart of the slums, there is also the very large Huruma community of the Missionaries of Charity. To reach their gate, one has to tread on layers of rubbish but, when you enter the large compound, one meets cleanliness, order and peaceful activity. Hundreds of boys and girls go there every morning to learn to read and write. Several hundreds of handicapped find there loving care and score of young women in white and blue saris swarm out to the hovels of the slum dwellers, bringing goods, medicines, health instruction and human and spiritual support.

The ways of approaching the poor are various and need not exclude each other. The importance of the presence of Kariobangi Parish was well illustrated during the electoral and racial unrest in Kenya that led to setting the slums on fire which rendered many poor people helpless and homeless.

It is the faithfulness to the call of the poor, in Africa, in Latin America and in other countries of the South of the world, that makes us feel alive and gives taste to our lives, makes us more humane and essential, stops us from going to seed and become mere Church functionaries. The call "to the poor" is a mission agenda that moves us to action always afresh and pushes us to go beyond sterile complaints, uncertainties and nostalgia and takes us to face new and challenging horizons, with the courage of Christ's Spirit.

A lifelong commitment

"I am yours forever." This is what Daniel Comboni solemnly declared to the people of his vicariate on the day of his arrival as

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.

This is what he writes in the 1871 draft of the Rule: "The missionary to Africa will have to understand that he is a stone hidden under the earth, which will perhaps never come to light, but which will become part of the foundations of the vast, new building that only those who come after him will see completed: the African Church."

The mystique of the hidden stone, with its biblical overtones, has inspired hundreds of Comboni missionaries who have dedicated their whole life, in Africa or elsewhere, to the peoples they were sent to. In my visit to Uganda, I was lucky enough to meet with a long-standing friend, a Comboni priest with whom I worked among the Bakiga people, in the mountain of Kigezi, many years ago, Fr. Paolino Tomaino.

Fr. Paolino, like Bro. Agge', is a living example of this characteristic of Comboni spirituality: Ad vitam, for life. He was assigned to the populations of Western Uganda in 1965, soon after his priestly ordination. In the course of the 43 years, he has climbed mountains, started schools, dispensaries, farms... Hundreds of young Ugandans, who have reached university standard through his schools, revere him and consider him as a father.

He went to Italy to undergo an open-heart surgery and because of a mistake of the anesthetist, he was in a coma for a month. Catholics in Uganda were running mad with worry and going through novena after novena for him. In the end, he recovered and he is back in Uganda where I found him, with his sharp eyes full of fire as always.

Fr. Paolino reminds me of Comboni and his extraordinary statement addressed to the people of Khartoum: "I have returned among you never again to cease being yours and all consecrated for your greater good. Come day, come night, come sun, come rain, I shall always be equally ready to serve your spiritual needs: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the young and the old will always have equal access to my heart.

Your good will be mine and your sorrows will also be mine. I make common cause with each one of you, and the happiest day in my life will be the one on which I will be able to give my life for you." These words are a precious heritage and make every Comboni missionary understand that his vocation is an expression of that new family that Jesus has started and is bound together by an unbreakable tie that is thicker than blood: charity.

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

study of Arabic. Courses last one or two years, with a compulsory attendance of 5 to 6 hours a day. Besides much grammar, other subjects like translation, conversation, written composition, newspapers' reading, Islamic studies and reading of the Christian Arabic texts are proposed.

In light of Vatican II, the center fosters relations through dialogue with Muslims, giving at the same time a background preparation for Church personnel and committed lay people who will be working among Christian communities living in an Islamic environment. These aims are achieved by an intensive course in the Arabic language so as to have a good mastering of the contemporary Standard Arabic and an introduction to Islamic culture to foster mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims and Inter-religious Dialogue.

There is now an organic union between Dar Comboni and the PISAI, Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, placed at Rome and run by the Missionaries of Africa, the White Fathers. This union consists in the exchange of lecturers, but especially because the students start their first year with the study of the Arabic language in Egypt, with the Comboni missionaries, and complete the second year in Rome at the PISAI. The rector of PISAI, Fr. Miguel Angel Ayuso, is himself a Comboni father.

In August 2008, sixteen Italian university students belonging to "Comunione e Liberazione", fascinated by the perspective of the encounter of different civilizations, religions and cultures, after a full year of private study, travelled to Egypt for an intense course of the Arabic language at the prestigious Dar Comboni Institute at Cairo, and a full immersion in the Arabic world in order to approach a way of thinking and living that immigration and globalization had made increasingly close to their lives.

In November of the same year, they were received by Cardinal Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, who encouraged them, telling them that the basic motivation of every knowledge is love, that true dialogue between people of different faith can occur only if they are steeped and routed in their own faith. He also told them that such trips encourage the local Christians, often a discriminated and persecuted minority. We Comboni Missionaries are proud of Dar Comboni. It is a laboratory of ideas at the service of the Universal Church. As the prophetic vision of Vatican II foresaw, it is vital to look for understanding and dialogue in view of a greater harmony between Christians and Muslims who are called by the circumstances, in many countries, to live more and more side by side.

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.

In October 2009, the Second Special Synod for Africa took place in Rome. The motto was: "Africa, stand up and walk!", taken from the episode of the cure of the paralytic in the Gospel of John (5:8). In the final message the Synod Fathers wrote: "Africa is considered the cradle of humanity. As a continent, Africa has a long history of great empires and illustrious civilizations. But the future of this continent has still to be written. Many efforts have been made in order to free Africa from cultural alienation and political submission. Now Africa has to face the challenge of giving to her children a worthy standard of living. The Synod praises those programs that clearly join economic emancipation to good governance".

Now, at Nairobi, this dream finds an original way of fulfillment in the Social Ministry Faculty of the Catholic University of East Africa. It is vital that the scientific competence and the ethical values of the Church Social Doctrine become object of higher study and research for a way of implementation in present day Africa which is in the process of assuming a social, cultural and religious configuration that may allow her to share on equal footing with the other continents.

The two African Synods have open up new perspectives, objectives and strategies. The Comboni Family with all its components: priests, brothers and sisters and lay associates, has shown to have the enthusiasm, energies and motivations to pick up the challenge.

WORLD MISSION & COMPANY

It was Saint Daniel Comboni himself who started making use of the press for the cause of the Missions. His legacy has remained with the Comboni Missionaries and it is at the origin of the network of about thirty missionary magazines, both for adults and youth, with more than 500000 copies printed monthly, all over the world.

The XIX century saw the revival of the missionary work of the Church. The European Church took the lead and, taking advantage of new explorations and interests, sent missionaries to Asia and Africa, then considered the last frontier to be conquered. It was also the time when missionary animation was considered as an important tool to make the Church aware of the need of evangelization.

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

Mission Center in Sucat, Paranaque, for the celebration of the 25 years of existence of *World Mission*.

A copy of the first issue which came out in March 1989 was brought to the altar during the solemn commemorative mass, together with the most significant of the many awards received, the trophy of the entrance in the Hall of Fame. A statue of Comboni was unveiled and blessed to mark the link between the *World Mission* Silver Jubilee and the unceasing presence of the Founder's charism in the commitment of the magazine.

Realizing the potential of the internet and digital media, the Comboni Missionaries have begun migrating all their magazines to the web. Initially, they created a website to simply mirror the content of their publications. But this did not seem enough. That is why in 2008, the Comboni Missionaries decided to produce a new magazine, only this time it was not on paper! *Southworld.net* thus became the congregation's first magazine that is published entirely on the net.

MISNA: Missionary News Agency

All media products are heavily conditioned by the news bulletins of the big news agencies that monopolize the news world. Especially the area of the developing nations needed an instrument of firsthand, impartial information. To satisfy this urgent need MISNA (Missionary News Agency) was born.

On December 13, 2013, MISNA was awarded the special prize of the UCSI (Catholic Union of the Italian Press), given to those journalists and agencies who put their professionalism at the service of Humanity. This was the motivation: "Instead of superficial reporting, the MISNA people have been able to bring to light hidden but not sensational experiences of solidarity, welcoming the defense of human dignity, carried out in the silence of the geographical and spiritual outskirts".

"Directed by Comboni Father Carmine Curci, MISNA is an international press agency on line which, since 1997, has provided a voice for the South of the World, reporting facts, eyewitness accounts of happenings and conflicts: the fringes forgotten by the great mass media. Its editorial work doesn't limit itself to reporting but contributes to building up dialogue and bridges understanding among peoples".

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 enfold 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.

MISNA's strength remains in its network of thousands of missionaries around the globe who continue to serve as its eyewitnesses, people who offer a new slant to the news, who propose a different interpretation of facts, and who recognize their importance for the local population. In doing so, the missionary Church has given a voice to the people of the South, a legacy that MISNA and the Comboni Missionaries can be proud of.

3. Comboni Prophets

Four living members of the Comboni Family with a special, prophetic mission.

Renato Kizito Sesanna

THE PEN AS A WEAPON

With the large mane of hair and the abundant beard surrounding his face, Fr. Renato Kizito Sesana can easily be taken for a prophet. His countenance is usually relaxed and humane, notwithstanding the many enterprises he has started and is keeping afloat. A multi-awarded journalist and author of books, his main weapon is the pen.

Fr. Kizito, as he is usually known, started his missionary work in Zambia, Africa, in 1977. First he served in a rural parish for three years then he moved to the capital, Lusaka. Assigned to a poor slum area called Bauleni, Fr. Kizito started to gather young people and live together with them. The objective was to invest in young people who wanted to commit themselves to live out the Gospel values personally. This was the origin of the community which he called "*Koinonia*", a biblical word which means "Fellowship".

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

which he was subsequently completely cleared. Undaunted, he continues to look after the works he created, while taking some rest in Italy.

Rachele Fassera

BEFORE MALALA

Last year the world was shocked by the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria as it had been in 2012 for the attempt to the life of young Pakistani Malala, now a Nobel Prize awardee. Yet there was a precedent: in 1996, the surprised world media followed the heroism of a Comboni sister, Rachel Fassera, who, risking her life, rescued more than 100 schoolgirls kidnapped by the notorious LRA rebel movement in Uganda, East Africa.

In August 1996, I interrupted my sedentary formation job in London and went to Africa to preach retreats. The last was in Lira, Uganda, and coming back to Kampala in order to take the return plane, with great joy I met my dear friend Sr. Rachel, for many years active in school there. We embraced and prayed over each other for our different apostolates. It was September 11 and I was far from thinking that in one month time she would be involved in a terrible episode of violence and be the protagonist of an extraordinary feat of courage.

Following the rise to power in January 1986 of President Yoweri Museveni, the north of Uganda was wracked by conflict as the Acholi tribe rebelled to his rule. The resistance to Museveni dragged on causing victims and misery. Ten years later it was continued by the movement of Joseph Kony, the Lord's Resistance Army. The rebels began to target civilians, mutilating those they thought to be government sympathizers, burning villages and abducting children to make them child-soldiers and sex slaves.

It was October 9, 1996, Uganda Independence Day, and, at Sr. Rachel's Senior Secondary School at Aboke, in Lira District, the girls were sleeping peacefully when, at 2:30 am, the night watchman at the college knocked on Sr. Rachel's door stating: "Sister, the rebels are here." Sr. Rachel immediately informed the headmistress Sr. Alba and Sr. Matilde, the third of the team.

The darkness was pervasive. No call came from the girls. The sisters took refuge in the stockroom, hoping that the iron bars installed on the windows of the dormitories might be strong enough to discourage the rebels. The following morning the bitter surprise: 139 girls were missing, kidnapped, aged between 13 and 16.

Immediately Sr. Rachel set out in hot pursuit, accompanied by John Bosco, one of the teachers. After long hours of tracking through brush and swamps, the two made contact with the rebels. Sr. Rachel, accompanied at gun point to the leader, pleaded with him to release the girls. The man looked superstitiously afraid of the courageous white woman of God and accepted to release 109 girls. The other 30, the taller and more shapely, he kept for the officers.

Sr. Rachel knelt at his feet crying and offering her life in exchange, but to no avail. Eventually, among the heart-rending cries of the girls left behind, the long column moved back to the school. The episode became famous not only in Uganda but in the whole world and Sr. Rachel's bravery was told in books, even in a movie by the title "Girl Soldier" with Uma Thurman impersonating Sr. Rachel.

In the meantime, in order to obtain the release of the remaining girls, Sr. Rachel, together with Ms. Atyam of the Concerned Parents Association, met with many important people among them Hillary Clinton, Kofi Annan, the Pope, members of the European Parliament, even Nelson Mandela. In June 1997, Sr. Rachel went to meet the LRA commanders in Juba, Sudan, but without success.

The Lord's Resistance Army continues to operate in Uganda, as well as Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, attacking civilians and abducting youth. The leaders of the LRA were indicted in 2005 for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court. Of the remaining girls, five were killed in harrowing circumstances, others succeeded to escape. In 2009, Catherine Ajok, the last of the abducted Aboke girls, returned home. Sr. Rachel Fassera, my heroic friend, after a resting assignment in Italy, is now bestowing the gift of her kindness to school children in Dubai.

Alex Zanotelli

AT THE SCHOOL OF THE POOR

From the experience at "Nigrizia" to that of being "a pilgrim of peace" on the streets of Italy, through the immersion in Korogocho (Kenya), which was his

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.

At that time Fr. Alex faced continuous attacks and in the end he was practically fired but time soon showed that he was right and what he was denouncing as a solitary 'voice in the desert' became soon common place, raising in such a way his reputation as a prophet, a reputation that has never failed, especially after the adventure of Korogocho. His cultural heritage has passed on to the following editors of the magazine, and still keeps "*Nigrizia*" alive.

From 2001, Fr. Alex is in Italy and lives in the community of Naples, in a very poor area, but he mostly travels around the country, supporting with his teaching and example all the Christian movements that resist actively against the prevailing power of what Fr. Alex calls "the empire" which contrasts God's beautiful dream for humanity:

"We Christian are the heirs of a dream: that dream of God which emerges from the experience of the Jewish people and becomes flesh and blood in Jesus Christ. God's dream is an economy of sharing and equality, but we are living in global empire of finance, based on violence and discrimination. By 2016, the 1% of the world population will own the 99% of the world wealth, contributing to the globalization of misery. It is vital to understand the link between faith and life and how to behave so as not to betray God's dream".

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

touch of sadness due to the sickness which forced her to go back to Italy for treatment.

It was during her convalescence in Verona that she started going to the office of Caritas and offer her services. Since then she has never left the mission to the street walkers of Italy. She has been interviewed, she has gone on television, she has become an expert. Now, well passed the retiring age, she continues her crusade in Palermo, Sicily.

Last year, in April, there was an international conference at the Vatican entitled "Combating Human Trafficking". The aim of the forum was to build on the work of women religious who, like Sr. Valeria, have been involved in this fight for a number of years. The actress Mira Sorvino, U.N. goodwill ambassador to combat human trafficking, explained that this scourge ranks with drug and arms sale among the top three money-making international crimes: more than twenty million people are enslaved in the world, reaping billions of dollars annually for their exploiters.

On that occasion, Pope Francis said: "Human trafficking is a wound in the body of contemporary humanity; it is a wound in the flesh of Christ. It is a crime against humanity." The Holy See has asked that this February 8 be celebrated, in the whole world, as the first "International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking". It is the feast day of Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese slave, who once freed became a Canossian nun and a Saint.

4. Extra Muros

(This feature introduces Comboni Missionaries called by Providence to an outstanding mission outside their Institute)

Roberto Pazzi

IN THE HEART OF AFRICA

For more than forty years Fr. Roberto Pazzi has lived in a grass hut, within a Togolese village in West Africa, in total immersion in the life and culture of the people. Considered a present-day Charles

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

Vodou priest; his house hosts a "traditional" convent; his personal history is run through by the great ceremonies that honor the fetishes which keep safe the family and the clan.

The Vodou has endured almost unscathed by two centuries of Christian evangelization. It is impossible for a foreigner to fully understand the traditional religion of the West African people of Togo and Ghana, a religion that the slaves took with them to the New World and is now prevalent in Haiti. The experienced missionary says: "The Vodou is a secretive, selective religion. Only the priests know its meanings, cults, rituals. The priests will reveal them only to their successors, heirs or most faithful followers".

"But the Vodou is also slavery, a tie of fear, a chain which sometimes binds in a suffocating way. This is why those who convert to Christianity search also for liberation: for this they surrender the fetishes to the Christian priest saying: 'Please, burn them, destroy them!'. They want to free themselves from a weight, a danger".

Fr. Roberto, now almost 80, still continues undaunted, in prayer and study, his life of hermit-missionary, buried in the immense African continent.

Fr. Luis Butera

SO ABUNDANT A HARVEST

To counteract the influence of the sects and the worldly mentality, a young Comboni missionary in Mexico started a lay movement who soon developed into two Missionary Religious Institutes who have attracted many youth to the amazement of their Founder.

In the years after Vatican II, Catholics in Mexico felt the need to react to the pervasive anti-Catholic atmosphere of their country. In the present world, and not only in Mexico, there often exists a manifest anti-Catholic attitude so that whoever wants to openly witness his Catholic faith will always be criticized, discriminated, even persecuted.

Because of this trend, which dominates the media to the point of appearing as a powerful brain-washing mechanism, convinced Catholics must unite to witness their

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 Caltanisetta. 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 an 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 sewed during his youth and he doesn't stop been surprised and owed by so abundant a harvest. His heart is overwhelmed by gratitude.

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

confirm your call, I support your mission and I bless your charism. You will go in Christ's name to the whole world to bring his Gospel: Christ precedes you, Christ accompanies you, Christ will bring to fulfillment the salvation of which you are bearers!"

Fr. Flaviano Amatulli

LIKE AN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET

With his fluent white beard, the former Comboni missionary has become the most famous Catholic apologist of Mexico and of Latin America as a whole. With more than 90 books and pamphlets published and especially with the lay movement "Apostles of the Word" and more recently with his male and female religious institutes, Fr. Flaviano has effectively contrasted the mushrooming protestant sects, teaching the Catholic masses to love and be proud of their ancient faith.

In the years after Vatican II, the spirit of ecumenism and the generous look that the Council had thrown on the separated brethren of the Protestant Reformation brought a lowering of defenses and kind of irenic attitude on the part of the Catholic Church which favored the aggressiveness of the protestant sects.

Eventually, Catholics in Mexico felt the need to react to the pervasive anti-Catholic atmosphere of their country. In the present world, and not only in Mexico, there often exists a manifest anti-Catholic attitude so that whoever wants to openly witness his Catholic faith will always be criticized, discriminated, even persecuted.

Because of this trend, which dominates the media to the point of appearing as a powerful brain-washing mechanism, convinced Catholics felt the need of uniting to witness their faith and show that to be Catholic is worthwhile, it gives serenity and

joy; it is source of pride and ambition.

To satisfy this need aimed the mission and activity of a Comboni missionary who was so caught up by this new call to the point of leaving the Comboni Institute, putting himself at the service of the Mexican church and eventually becoming himself a founder of religious initiatives to that purpose.

Fr. Flaviano Amatulli Valente is an Italian Catholic priest who has resided in Mexico for almost half a century. He is the founder of the movement "Apostles of the Word" the aim of which is to equip with apologetics and catechization the less provided and poorer sectors of the Latin-American Catholic flock in order to counteract the rapid pace of expansion of the protestant sects. Fr. Flaviano has become one of the best known apologists of the Catholic tradition in Latin America.

He was born at Conversano, Bari, in Southern Italy in 1938. As a diocesan seminarian, he decided to join the Comboni Missionaries because of his great desire to be a missionary. He was ordained priest in 1965. He added the study of Social Communications to Theology and was assigned to Mexico as editor of the missionary magazine *Esquila Misional*.

He then left the job on the magazine in order to have a first-hand pastoral experience with the Chinantecos tribal people in the highlands of Oaxaca. He came back to *Esquila Misional* and it was at that time that he developed his biblical apostolate who made him eventually leave the Comboni Institute in order to dedicate himself completely to his new call.

In 1978 in founded the movement "Apostles of the Word". It was a movement of lay volunteers and with those who after some years of service, asked for a more stable commitment, Fr. Flaviano founded the "Fradernidad Apostolica Misionera" consisting in a religious congregation of sisters and a society of apostolic life for priests and brothers.

He is author of about 90 publications between books and booklets which deal with popular religiosity, anthropology and Bible. He has especially developed the discipline of apologetics or defense of the faith which has a very ancient tradition in the Catholic Church since the II century with Saint Justin, philosopher and martyr.

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, Luigi, worked as a gardener in the lemon grove. His mother, Domenica, was a simple housewife. Daniel was the fourth child. A part from the eldest who lived until he was twenty-one, Daniel was the only child to survive. From the lemon grove, the bell tower of the parish church of Limone where Daniel was baptized is visible, at the lake shore.

Daniel did well in the small village school where he remained until he was eleven years old. From there, his father, following the suggestion of the parish priest and recognizing the academic gifts of the boy Daniel, arranged for him to go to Verona to continue his education by attending the diocesan seminary as a day-pupil. Shortly after the beginning of the following academic year, it seemed he would have to return to Limone because his family could not afford accommodation for him.

Fortunately, a priest from Verona, Don Nicholas Mazza, had set up a school for gifted children whose families could not pay for their education. Here Comboni was accepted as a student in February 1843. He will never go back to reside at the village of his birth, only to visit his parents and later, his relatives. From that moment on, he put his roots in Verona. Mama Domenica died soon, in 1957, while Comboni was on his journey to Central Africa, but papa Luigi out-lived his own son.

Limone is now a popular tourist resort. It is a beautiful place to stay which in summer is crowded by German tourists. Parts of the 2008 James Bond movie *Quantum of Solace* were filmed around Limone. Scenes include a car chase along the lakeside road, the famous twisting and turning Via Gardesana.

As he travelled across the arid desert during his eight missionary journeys in Africa, Bishop Daniel Comboni must have often thought with nostalgia of the water of lake Garda, the expanse of which had given his adolescence the experience of unlimited horizons.

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 being 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

the vast library of *Nigrizia*, specialized in the African continent. The most popular feature of the mother house is the African Museum which gathers artifacts collected by hundreds of missionaries in the one and half century of the life of the institute. The Museum is frequented by numerous visitors, in particular by thousands of school children.

The leadership of the Comboni institute left the mother house and moved to Rome, to the Generalate, in 1965. Also the sick and aged confreres who require special care have moved out very recently, to a new center, equipped with the latest provisions required by law. The new place is situated in Castel d'Azzano, in the outskirts of Verona, and can be rightly considered an extension of the mother house.

It is shaped like a cloister and in the central courtyard a huge olive tree has been lowered by a gigantic crane and planted. It comes from the olive groves of Central Italy, Abruzzo, and it was hauled to the place in a big truck. Now with its green leaves and succulent olives, it consoles the eyes and the palate of the old campaigners who wait there for their last summon: "But I am like a growing olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the goodness of God forever and ever" (*Psalm* 52:10).

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

considerably, that pope John Paul II paid his controversial visit to the Sudan.

He arrived in the Sudanese capital in February 1993, to lend his support to the Christians who were caught up in the fighting between the north and the south of the Sudan. The Pontiff had been warned that the hands of the Sudanese president, General Omar Bashir were "dripping with the blood of Sudanese Christians."

Undeterred, the 72-year-old pontiff landed in Khartoum, was received by Cardinal Gabriel Zubeir, Comboni's sixth successor, and then was escorted through the streets of the capital, to a rapturous welcome. After meeting priests and nuns at the cathedral, the Pope had a private meeting with Bashir, whom many accused of war crimes.

The Pope was firm when he told Bashir that, as leader of the Sudan, he had a "universal obligation to understand and respect the variety and richness of other peoples, societies, cultures and religions." The occasion was a triumph for the Christians who saw the Pope surrounded by a crowd of almost one million people.

Nowadays, Khartoum is a metropolis with an estimated overall population of over five million people. The Comboni Missionaries are still present, especially with the Comboni College, as valid collaborators of the local Church. Card. Zubeir stated this in the letter of gratitude he wrote them on the occasion of his retirement, in November 2016.

Rome:

Where Comboni's Successor lives.

At the outskirt 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

represents the internationality of the Comboni family: the vicar is a Portuguese, the other two fathers a Mexican and an Italian-American respectively and the brother is a Spaniard.

They occupy the fourth floor, high up, away from the noise. There they have their chapel, offices and meeting room where they sit for interminable sessions called "Consultations", examining all the issues of the institute, especially the welfare and the distribution of the personnel. The corridor displays the portraits of all Father Generals and a fresco of a colorful African landscape.

Attached to the General Council are the general secretaries, the archivist, the procurator, the postulator: they keep the machinery of the institute ticking: they preside over the records of the personnel, the specialized library and the offices of the magazines: "Archivio Comboniano" which publishes the studies connected with the Founder and the history of the institute and "MCCJ Bulletin", its official voice.

The second unit hosts the lively community of the priests and brothers who are continuing their studies in the pontifical universities. The large kitchen prepares the meals of all the three dozen inhabitants of the Generalate. There are two refectories: one for the elders which welcomes in its official atmosphere the important guests. The other, larger and more noisy, belongs to the fathers and brothers student and their occasional friends.

The buildings are situated on a hill overlooking the last station of the metro, the commuter train linking the place with the center of Rome and the distant horizon of the sea shore around Ostia and the mouth of the Tiber, the river of Rome. There Saint Augustine had his most intimate conversation with Monica, his mother, and there he buried her, before setting off for his trip back to Africa.

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 Nothern 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 Secular Comboni Institute

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

What is remarkable in their constitutions is the invitation to persons with handicaps and disabilities but with a liking for the missionary ideal to join, making possible for them what Saint Paul writes: to complete in their bodies the passion of Christ, for the sake of Christ's body, the missionary Church.

We read in their Directory: "As Daniel Comboni used to consider an essential aspect of his vocation to awaken the missionary conscience of the whole Church, in the same way the Secular Comboni Missionaries, drawing inspiration from his example of initiative and courage, dedicate themselves in a special way to missionary animation".

At present, they are about a hundred in Italy and about 50 in Portugal, Spain, Columbia and Costa Rica.

The Lay Comboni Missionaries

CLOSE TO THE ROOTS

The last to appear and be recognized are the Comboni Lay Missionaries. They are the expression of that vast background of lay faithful who are attracted by the missionary spirit which they see alive and active the sons and daughters of Saint Daniel Comboni.

Everything started with a shy attempt around 1975. Then it grew and developed in different forms and in various countries. Today the phenomenon of the CLM (Comboni Lay Missionaries) is a moving reality which is slowly finding its place and its specific features in the Comboni family.

Lay people have always been present beside the Fathers and Sisters in the missions, especially doctors and their families. I remember in Uganda the wonderful couple of doctors, Pietro and Lucille Corti who brought the Lacor dispensary in Gulu to become a hospital of national relevance, through more than thirty years of dedication

in the midst of wars and revolutions. And many others like them.

But here we speak of lay persons, single or with a family, who are particularly attracted by the charism of Saint Daniel Comboni and want to share it alongside the celibate consecrated ones. It is actually what Comboni himself had devised: for his Central Africa Vicariate, the Saint used to call and welcome also lay men and women. He used to ask them, like the priests and sisters, to dedicate themselves totally and without reservation to the African mission.

A hundred years later, Vatican II re-launches the same idea with greater clarity and authority, fully recognizing the vocation and missionary responsibility of the laity in the evangelization of the world.

The Comboni Lay Missionaries therefore start a journey of discernment and specific formation that will prepare them for departure. In the missions, a definite commitment is assigned to them by means of a contract with the church which requests their service.

The link with the communities of the Fathers or Sisters varies according to the circumstances of the place and people. Time and experience will contribute to put in evidence the essential traits of a common Comboni identity over and above the more general passion for mission.

So far we have the experience of the German CLMs who live inserted in a religious community and the other more common of those who are members of a community of other lay persons and collaborate closely with the Fathers and the Sisters or with agents of the local church, forming in this way an "apostolic community".

Without counting the many CLMs who work in their own country in Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Congo, Uganda, etc., there are about one hundred and fifty of them who have left their own country to work in the missions in Africa and Latin America. Long live the CLM!

THE COMBONI CHARISM IN ACTION

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ