



# MISSION ACROSS THE CONTINENTS

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**Fr. Lorenzo Carraro**  
COMBONI MISSIONARY

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by Fr. Miguel Llamazares, MCCJ

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# FOREWORD



Fifty years of priesthood and of missionary life are the “excuse” behind this book. The real reason is the desire of a Comboni missionary priest to share his life, loaded with meaningful experiences and encounters and, in this way, render tribute to the Lord of the Mission.

Fr. Renzo Carraro, MCCJ, offers, in a simple and passionate way, some of the stories of his life. It is the call to be a missionary that has brightened his life and his sharing testifies that a life for others and for the mission is worth living.

Fr. Lorenzo, as we call him in the Philippines, will soon turn 75. He is no longer the agile and all-around young missionary of his early years in Uganda. Nonetheless, the word “retirement” is not yet in his dictionary, even if he already enjoys some of the benefits of senior citizens. Indeed, he stays vigorous and active, still “full of sap and bearing fruits in his old age,” as *Psalms* 92 would go. Presently, he accompanies various groups in the Philippines giving talks, retreats and spiritual direction. Having rediscovered the taste and talent for writing, he has been, for the last years, a regular collaborator of *World Mission* magazine and other publications.





Throughout the years, Fr. Lorenzo has maintained alive the joy and enthusiasm for some small, yet important, things in his life: a moment with a friend, reading a classic in Theology or in World Literature, or watching an old movie... He values friendship and keeps in contact with people from all the places where he has been assigned (Italy, Uganda, England, Philippines). Most of all, he likes to share about his faith and missionary experience, an experience which has been written with many events in the past, pondered in the silence of prayer, and which gives meaning to his commitment in the present.

This book is Fr. Lorenzo's way to show gratitude to the Lord for the gift of life, for the vocation to priesthood and missionary life, for his family, his friends and the companions in mission, and for his experiences in life. Let it also become a source of inspiration to the ones who long for a joyful and meaningful life.

Fr. Miguel A. Llamazares, MCCJ  
Superior of the Comboni Missionaries in Asia

# PREFACE



Fr. Lorenzo's ordination six months before the start of the Second Vatican Council.

## ONCE A PRIEST, ALWAYS A PRIEST

(Autobiographical outline of 50 years  
in ministerial priesthood)

April 7, 1962. A large number of young men in white vestments sprawl on the floor of the historic Milan Cathedral while the choir sings the Litanies of the Saints. Cardinal John Baptist Montini, Archbishop of Milan, is in the process of ordaining them priests. I am among them, eager, even if a bit naïf, at 24 years of age. We are 38, all Comboni missionaries. The other four members of our batch have already been ordained priests in USA. All together, we are 42. It is a time of abundance.

It is also a time of good omens: I always get a kick in thinking that the year 1962 is not only the year of my priestly ordination but the year of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (October 11) and the year of the independence of Uganda (October 9), the country that would host me as a missionary



Cardinal Montini addresses the 38 newly-ordained Comboni missionaries.

for twenty-three years, my country of adoption. As for Cardinal Montini, the following year, 1963, he became Pope with the name of Paul VI.

I hold in my hands the print with all our portraits: I look at our faces, I think of our different destinies in these fifty years of our life... The print is like a battlefield: ten have left the priesthood, three have left the Comboni Institute and gone back to their dioceses; of the remaining 29, nine have already left this world. One of them, the Sudanese Barnabas Deng, died as a martyr in the Sudan, only three years after his ordination. We, the last twenty, the survivors, are scattered throughout the world, brave and full of scars, but still holding the post. Many of us have totaled 30 or even 40 years and more in the missions...

In the meantime, man has gone to the moon, Communism has collapsed, a global revolution has caused the globalization of communication, wealth and misery, the Southern Sudan has gained its independence (July 9, 2011) and Msgr.

Cesare Mazzolari, who had worked very hard for that goal, the only one of our batch who became a bishop, has already been called by God, dropping dead suddenly during the celebration of the Mass, only one week after the declaration of the nation's independence.

**Journey to priesthood.** I come from a small town called Campagna Lupia, situated between Venice and Padua, in the flatland reclaimed from the swampy areas bordering the Adriatic Sea: it is a fertile plain, crisscrossed by drainage canals, ancient place of settlements that go back to the times of the Romans. My parents married young. My mother was 18 and soon she gave birth to my brother Joseph. But then problems arose and it was only after 14 years that she gave birth to me, the second and the last.



Fr. Lorenzo with his parents on the day he graduated in classic literature, July 1967.

When I was 10 years of age, a missionary came to my parish and spoke to us young people and showed us slides. I was soon caught up by the dream to be a missionary, something that never left me, even while studying for long years in the diocesan seminary of Padua, my diocese. At 22, when I was already in Theology, an elderly Comboni missionary, a real man of God, visited the seminary and I decided to join his missionary institute. I have never regretted my choice.

After my priestly ordination, I was assigned back to Padua where I had come from. It looked ironical, but there was a serious reason: we had several minor seminaries and we needed teachers. So, I was assigned there to teach and to study classic literature at Padua State University. I was eager and idealistic, riding everywhere with a second hand *Vespa*. I then added the study of journalism and, eventually, I was at Lucca, in Tuscany, teaching. It is there that the assignment to Africa, Uganda, reached me. After ten months of intense study of English in the UK, I spent some time with my family and, on December 10, 1970, accompanied to the airport by my parents, I boarded the plane to Uganda.

**My country of adoption.** I remember the trip from Kampala to Kigezi, the place of my destination, with an old pickup truck that used to blast sharp shots every time we faced a small climbing, making the pedestrians at the side of the road jump with fear. Kigezi is a mountainous area bordering with Rwanda, inhabited by the Bakiga, a tribe of stout, muscular farmers, respectful and naturally religious. There I spent six years of my life in pastoral work, walking the hills in all weather, anxious but happy.

The month following my arrival, on January 25, 1971, the notorious bloody dictator Idi Amin Dada took over the country by a military coup. During this time, my father died and I came to Italy during the Holy Year 1975 with four Africans, accompanying them to visit our twin parish in Bologna and then Venice and Lourdes and, eventually, Rome. After one month, I



put them in the plane to go back home, with starry eyes and satiated with gifts while I proceeded, as one of the representatives of Uganda, to the General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries which decided the reunion with the German confrères, healing a rift that had lasted fifty years.

My second period in Uganda saw me in charge of the recruitment and formation of young Ugandans to the Comboni Institute. I moved to Gulu, in the northern part of the country, learned the language of the Acholi and started the Postulancy at Lacor Parish with three young men. There, the war of the Tanzanians against Amin caught me in April, 1979. For the first time in my life, I saw corpses left to rot on the road and met with crowds wild with looting frenzy.

After my sabbatical year in USA (1981-1982), I came back to Uganda as a full-time vocation promoter, I took up residence first at Kambuga Parish, Kigezi and, eventually, at Kampala, the capital, on the hill of Mbuya that hosts our headquarters and, on the very top, the Vatican Embassy. But my real abode was my car, a Peugeot 304 station wagon, the mythical “Lioness,” with which I toured Uganda far and wide.

The going was dangerous and rough, but I was in the prime of my missionary life, with a task that fitted my temperament: I was like a free bird in the bush; I had friends everywhere and I related with natural ease with the thousands of students whom I visited and talked to in the different schools up and down Uganda. The fruits didn't delay in coming and, therefore, success arrived to complete the general sense of satisfaction. But the Bakiga have a proverb which says: *Ebirungi ti bituura* (Good things don't last!), and after ten years of commitment in the field of formation and vocation promotion, I was ready for a change. The change came and almost undid me!

**Flight from Nadiket.** Karamoja is the farthest Eastern corner of Uganda, a semi-desertic area inhabited by the warlike pastoralist tribe of the Karimojong. It is a classic territory of the Comboni missionaries who, for decades, have toiled with sweat



The rector of the Minor Seminary of Nadiket with pupils and his get-away pickup.

and blood to plant the Church there. In January 1987, I arrived there as rector of the diocesan Minor Seminary of Nadiket.

The previous week, I ran my last orientation course in Kampala. Goodbye, free life on the roads of Uganda! I was now cooped up in that God-forsaken corner, burdened with a job that I had never done, responsible for the learning and the livelihood of a hundred adolescents. The transition had been too sudden. I was so much worried that I decided to flee the place just two weeks after my arrival. My escape lasted only two days and I went back.

I suffered the pain of adaptation for two more months and then I was on top of things and enjoying my new position. I spent seven years in that place. With God's help and the cooperation of my loyal staff, the work progressed, the number of seminarians increased, more of them passed to the national major seminaries and are now priests in the dioceses of Moroto and Kotido. In August 1993, I left Karamoja and Uganda, after 23 years of service, and I was destined to our Scholasticate in London as second formator.

**Rotation in England.** The Priory at Elstree was an old residence just outside the perimeter of Greater London, in what is called the Green Belt, rich in vegetation and little fauna. The Combonis had enlarged it and it became the place of one of our communities of scholastics. It was conveniently placed close to the Missionary Institute of London at Mill Hill, the inter-congregational school of theology attended by our students and those of other seven missionary institutes. I liked the place and its closeness to the City of London.



The senior new Master in Pastoral Theology on graduation day at Heythrop.



My mornings were free, when the students were at school; therefore, I took advantage to resume my studies. I took a Master's Degree in Pastoral Theology at Heythrop College, University of London. I could do it only part-time and it took me three years to complete, but thus I rediscovered the passion for reading books and writing papers. Few days after my 60th birthday, I went for my graduation, wearing the gown and the cap called, jokingly, "mortar board." It was fun!

I remember the weekend drives along the luscious English countryside to go for mission appeals all over England as far as Liverpool; the lively evening visits to the pubs with the students; the outings to Hampton Court in the heart of winter or to Canterbury, to the tomb of St. Thomas Becket, or to the Tower of London where Saint Thomas More, "the man for all seasons," was imprisoned before his execution for his loyalty to the Pope, and to the beaches of the English Channel. In January 1998, my dear mother died at the ripe age of 94 and in my presence.

Six years passed quickly and I was ready to put an end to my rotation and go back to Uganda, when the surprise call came to go to Asia. I resisted at first but, in the end, I heeded the call of my spiritual "twin brother," Fr. John Taneburgo who needed a companion in the Novitiate of the Philippines. I spent Christmas 1998 at home after so many years and by March 12 the following year, I arrived in Manila.

**Preaching and writing.** The first six years in the Philippines, I spent in the place of the Novitiate in Calamba, Laguna, in the company of my "twin brother" helping in caring for the meager groups of novices out of whom, anyway, we got the dozen of Filipino confrères who are now with us here and in the missions. The place, presently shut down, was beautiful, overlooking the Laguna de Bay.

There, I struggled with Tagalog, the country's language, diligently preparing to read the Mass every Sunday and soon realizing that when you are above sixty, the memory for words

is reduced to zero. But, I found unexpected demand for preaching retreats: in the Philippines, so many young men and women still come to the call of seminaries and religious congregations and ask for advice, discernment and direction.

The solitary life on the hilltop gave me the opportunity of gathering the fruits of a lifetime of study and reflection on the Word of God and so responding positively to the demands of formation. So many groups climbed the steep, rough driveway to our house and found loving care and generous sharing of life experiences both from Fr. John and myself and in the compound rich in vegetation, peace for their senses and spirits. When, the year after my arrival, the relics of the Little Flower toured the country, I resurrected my journalistic skill and started a collaboration with our magazine *World Mission* that is still going on.

**Bible Study Group.** At Roosevelt, my present place of residence, I continued helping in the formation of the Postulants and Novices with Fr. Victor T. Dias and then with Fr. Rocco Bettoli. Eventually, with the coming of Fr. Victor C. Paruñgao, I left the formation and became free lance in the retreat apostolate and in other ministries. Before my adventure with cancer, which I write about in another place, I had started a Bible Study Group. The initiative gathered a group of ladies, my contemporaries and above, with time, enough knowledge of English and a great love for the written Word of God.

We started in August 2007 and we are still going strong after more than 150 hours. The ladies love the weekly bible meeting that has enriched their lives. But I am the one who has benefitted most from the study of the Bible. From this regular practice, many other teaching initiatives have originated on behalf of other groups. My preaching methods have improved as well and my pastoral perspectives have changed for the better.

Here I am then still alive and kicking. Fifty years have passed since that First Mass that I officiated on April 8, 1962, in front of the crowd of seminarians in Padua Major Seminary,



Some of the ladies of the Bible Study Group during their outing at Subic Bay.

in Latin, and giving my back to the congregation. I still remember that I started my homily with the text of *Isaiah* 61: “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor...” At this point, I broke into tears, the second instance of the trail of tears that have marked my life, tears of joy on this occasion; of anguish on others...

Now, it is a time of gratitude and giving thanks. I thank God, in a very special way, for my missionary vocation that has marked my life since the age of ten and has influenced my adolescence setting me on fire with unconscious but vital enthusiasm. I thank God for my missionary life – full, rich, consistent even if demanding, difficult and dangerous, but always interesting and worth living.

I remember with affection and gratitude the peoples among whom I have carried out my ministry, whom I love and appreciate and from whom I have received more than I have given: the Bakiga, the Acholi, the English and the Filipinos. I thank God, in a very special way, for the inestimable gift of my daily Mass. When I celebrate the Mass, I feel that this is what God has called me to do. After 50 years in priesthood, every



"After 50 years in priesthood, every time I start saying Mass, I feel new."

time I start saying Mass, I feel new; it is never simply a habit, it never bores me: it is always interesting and exciting. It is a reason of life.

*SALAMAT SA DIYOS!*

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;...  
Swift to its close, ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

Manila, April 7, 2012  
50th Anniversary of my Priestly Ordination  
Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

**UGANDA REVISITED**

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In 2007, I was given the chance of going back to Uganda (East Africa) for an extensive visit to my friends and the places where I had worked for 23 years of my life. After three decades, it was like a time travel. Those are the memoirs of this unique trip.

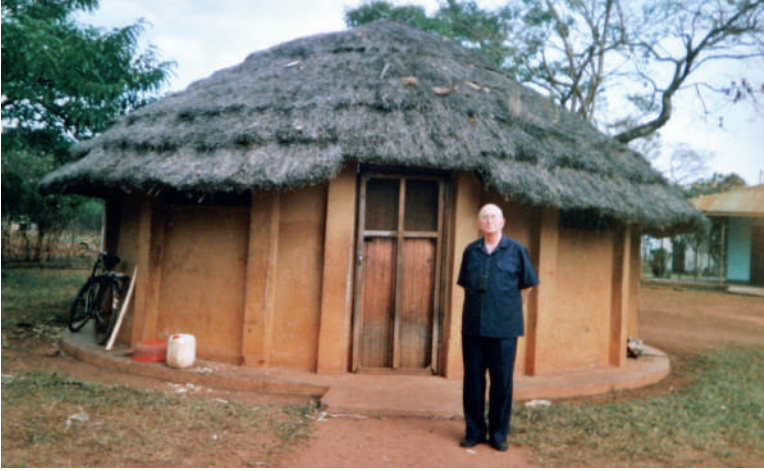
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**Thirty years after**

Eight kilometers from the town of Gulu in Northern Uganda, along the road that goes to the Sudan, there lies Lacor Parish. The tall façade of the church looks directly on the road. It was in front of that very church that I took a photo, with my first three Comboni postulants, 31 years ago. It seemed as if no time had passed. There, it was where I struggled with the Acholi language and welcomed my mother when she came to visit me. She didn't like to travel much. She was happy to cook for us and spent her free time darning the socks of the postulants.

A couple of kilometers from Lacor Parish, in a place called Alokulum Brothers, it is where the Postulancy moved two years afterwards. Alokulum Major Seminary, where our students used to attend their Philosophy classes, is just across a field. So many memories are linked to that place. It was there that, in April 1979, we waited for the arrival of the Tanzanians who were moving silently through the bush and pushing back the soldiers of the notorious dictator Idi Amin. I remember how we were awoken one morning by few powerful explosions and then the Tanzanians were already among us.

The rector of the seminary negotiated with them the peaceful surrender and handing over of our guards, five soldiers of Amin. They emerged with fear in their eyes dressed in T-shirts given by the seminarians, their hands up and their machine guns at their feet. They were marched off with an escort. After less than two hours, they were already dead: when they



Revisiting the Queen of Apostles Chapel in Gulu, 30 years after its construction.

reached the crossroad outside the seminary, the angry populace attacked them with machetes and hoes and finished them off under the indifferent gaze of their Tanzanian escort. That was the beginning of an orgy of looting and killing.

Today, the place is abandoned and occupied by refugees. With a heavy heart, I visited the compound where I had wanted two large Acholi huts to be the chapel and the community room. They were beautiful with their slanting grass roof and gave an African touch to our place. One of them is still standing. But, in the meantime, the Church has grown and the Institute as well: the Comboni Postulancy is now situated in Jinja, in Southern Uganda. It is a vast, new building and yearly hosts an average of 25 students. Almost thirty Comboni missionaries have originated from Uganda and are now at work in different parts of Africa and the world.

*“With a heavy heart, I visited the compound where I had wanted two large Acholi huts to be the chapel and the community room. They were beautiful with their slanting grass roof and gave an African touch to our place. One of them is still standing.”*



Inauguration of the Daniel Comboni Multi-Purpose Training Center in Tanzania.

## Harvest in Tanzania

A happy surprise was waiting for me. Joseph Sekiku, a former postulant of mine, now a successful professional, came to Kampala to fetch me and take me to Tanzania, just over the border with Uganda, to his town of Kayanga. Many years ago, when we met, Joseph was an adolescent, rather short in stature, but clever and resourceful. He was coming from a very poor area in the dangerous Luwero Triangle, a place where the guerilla warfare against the government was in full swing. Very soon, he was also affected. One day, coming back from my vocational safaris, I found him seated at my doorstep, downcast and hungry. The fighting had cut him off from his school and home; he was stranded and desperate. I picked him up, consoled him, found for him a school in Kampala, where he could finish his studies, and a family who took him in as a member with spontaneous generosity. The war ended, but Joseph's father was one of the victims of the last days of fighting. Three years after, Joseph, now a promising postulant due to the Novitiate, decided to leave. "I want to take my mother, Anastazia, back to Tanzania," he said. "I need to know my people." Then, in Tanzania, he met



Isabel and a new life began. After many struggles and several children, Joseph is now an expert in communication technology and a committed promoter of organic farming.

Joseph's Pajero travels fast on the bridge over the river Kagera that, in 1994, was carrying the bodies of the holocaust in Rwanda, and we are already in Tanzania. We branch from the tarmac to the dirt road into the wilderness and, after a couple of hours' journey, we reach the small town of Kayanga. Joseph has prepared some wonderful surprises for me: as we enter the house, a slender, tall adolescent comes to welcome us. Joseph says with a smile: "This is Lorenzo Carraro, Junior, my second son. He is now studying in the seminary at Bukalasa, in Uganda." The young man shows me his passport that he uses to cross the border into Uganda to go to school, and I read my name and surname in it. He looks at me with reverence and affection and I feel very privileged.

I spend two days at Joseph's place: there is a buzz of activities going on, something is in the air. When Sunday, April 15, came, notwithstanding a heavy rain in the morning, a crowd



Fr. Lorenzo Carraro with a seminarian named after him by a former postulant.



of people gathers at the nearby place of Kyanyamisa, where three new buildings are already up in near completion stage, under one big sign: Daniel Comboni Multi-purpose Training Center. Flowers, flags, rolling of drums put everybody in great expectation. The solemn Mass in Kishwahili is presided over by the parish priest. I join with another Ugandan young priest. When the Mass is over, Joseph announces the blessing and official opening of the new institution: The ceremony will be performed by the guest of honor, Fr. Lorenzo Carraro. We go around the buildings, sprinkling holy water everywhere and when we reach the prepared area, I unveil and bless the foundation stone with my name on it. Then, I speak to the jubilant people and we proceed to the planting of some baobab trees to solemnize the occasion. I am sure Saint Daniel Comboni was smiling from heaven.

*“This is Lorenzo Carraro, Junior, my second son. He is now studying in the seminary at Bukalasa, in Uganda.” I am sure Saint Daniel Comboni was smiling from heaven.*

### **Visiting the departed**

Famous tombs are not lacking in Uganda: the most famous are the tombs of the Kabaka, the traditional kings of the Baganda, the leading tribe, in the hill of Kasubi. In all tourists' brochures, the huge round grass hut hosting those tombs is depicted. Then, of course, Namugongo, the execution place of the 22 Ugandan Martyrs which is now a beautiful shrine – a landmark for visitors and yearly destination of the largest pilgrimage of the Catholic faithful. Heroes' tombs are a source of inspiration for peoples and nations, like the Arlington cemetery in USA, where John F. Kennedy is buried together with many other American heroes or the *Libingan ng Mga Bayani* in the Philippines.

When I traveled to Uganda, my purpose was to visit my friends and to see again the places where I had lived and worked. I never thought that the dead would play such an important part in my journey and that I would find myself amidst their tombs, reminiscing and wondering about the mystery of human existence and the challenge of the Gospel of Jesus under the equatorial sky. In the peaceful cemetery of Nsambya, one of the seven hills of the sprawling capital, Kampala, amidst the green grass and under overhanging vegetation, rests the tomb of my novice Joseph Matovu. He was a dapper young man, with a handsome face. Clever in school, he had brilliantly achieved his Diploma in Philosophy and was seconded to our Novitiate in Kenya.

He was enjoying his vacation at home, at his village of Kisubi, near Kampala, when he was struck down by high fever. Admitted to a nearby hospital, he was treated for malaria, but the fever did not subside. His father, Ambrose, who was a skilled worker of the Kisubi Printing Press, decided to have him transferred to Nsambya Hospital, the leading hospital of the Catholic Church in the city. When Joseph arrived there, he was diagnosed with the worst type of hepatitis. He immediately fell into a coma. Days passed and there was no sign of change. The news spread that a Comboni novice, a promising young man, was in a coma and that nothing could be done anymore. People started flocking at Joseph's bedside, to visit, to pray, to shake their heads in wonder. His body was healthy; he was young and obviously didn't want to die. But the liver was destroyed and one cannot live without a liver.

Ten days passed and, in the end, he breathed his last without ever coming to. His father, Ambrose, told me that the family was convinced that Joseph had been poisoned. Somebody resented his success. When he was already in the Minor Seminary and doing well, an anonymous letter had been his downfall. With stubborn determination, he had overcome the drawback and made a new start with the Combonis. His school results had been excellent, he was at home preparing to go abroad, even if only to Kenya, for his Novitiate, his future

was so promising... then, the dark enemy struck again, but this time in a deadly manner. Poisoning is not infrequent in the traditional culture of the Baganda and the symptoms of poisoning look exactly like those of that type of hepatitis...

So, poor Joseph found his final rest in the close-by Nsambya cemetery and the puzzle of his end was never solved. Mysterious Africa! More than 20 years have passed and I am kneeling at Joseph's tomb in the quiet April morning and remembering his promising youth truncated, possibly, by a jealousy that went even beyond the grave. After Joseph Matovu, many other Ugandan young men have picked up his dream and responded to Comboni's challenge and are now missionaries in many countries of Africa and of the world at large.



Tomb of Joseph Matovu, who was a promising novice, in the cemetery of Nsambya.

*“Poisoning is not infrequent in the traditional culture of the Baganda and the symptoms of poisoning look exactly like those of that type of hepatitis. So, poor Joseph found his final rest in the close-by Nsambya cemetery and the puzzle of his end was never solved. Mysterious Africa!”*

## The “prophecy” of the Benz

The couple, Santa and Januarius, were so dear to me because they symbolized a possible future of peace between the different tribes of Uganda. She was an Acholi from Gulu; he was a Munyankole from Mbarara. She belonged to the Nilotic group of peoples, tall, black, warlike. He was from the Bantu group, slender, brown and gentler. The tribal divide was the curse of Uganda, as well as many other countries of Africa, and the reason of all their unrest and instability. Santa wanted to be a nun. Januarius had been in Katigondo Major Seminary but had not continued. They met at Fatima Teachers Training College in Lira. They liked each other, fell in love, and got married. Then, two beautiful baby girls were born. In January 1981, Yoweri Museveni, head of the opposition to the government of Obote (who had been put back into power by the Tanzanians after the defeat of the notorious Idi Amin Dada) decided to run into the bush and start a prolonged armed rebellion. Twenty-six young officers ran into the bush with him. Januarius was



Courtesy visit to Santa, a dear ‘sister’ of Fr. Lorenzo, and her family.

one of them. Santa remained alone with the two daughters, first, in Kampala and, eventually, back to her mother's place at Alokulum, Gulu.

It was not easy for her to survive, also because she obviously had to keep a low profile to avoid harassment and persecution. We helped her. I visited her often. She was like a sister to me. I was telling her: "Courage, do not let yourself down! Your husband will come looking for you, he will be a big person; he will come for you driving a Benz..." The years passed... In January 1986, Museveni's guerrillas came out of the bush and attacked Kampala. I was present in the capital during the battle. A stray bullet entered my bedroom but, fortunately, I was out. Museveni won and proclaimed himself president. In due course, his troops arrived in Gulu and Santa saw her husband, now a colonel, coming for her driving a cross-country Benz. They moved to Kampala and occupied a beautiful house. She became pregnant again and gave birth to a baby boy. When I went to visit them, she said: "Fr. Lawrence, you were really a prophet!" I was happy, a bit heady with success because of the sudden change for the better, the fulfillment of so many prayers and painful expectations. Then the superiors transferred me from Kampala to Karamoja and I lost touch with Santa.

Their prosperity didn't last. Soon, all hell broke loose. Januarius revealed himself to be cruel and a crook. He brought from the bush and gave his wife AIDS. In six months, Santa changed: whereas she was already a matronly woman, she became a skeleton. The baby boy died and Santa left the husband and took refuge at her mother's place. There, she herself soon passed away. Everything had happened so quickly. I was far, in Karamoja. I could not see her before she died. I even failed to reach her tomb. I was really angry with God. I was asking in my prayer: "Why? Why?" That anger stayed with me. In 1993, the year I left Uganda, I was in Jerusalem for a renewal course. In the context of the thirty-day retreat, I faced my anger and brought it to my spiritual director. He listened to me patiently and, after some reflection, he told me: "You are angry because

Santa escaped your control and you were unable to do anything for her. But she never fell out of God's loving hand..."

For almost 20 years, I had desired to reach the tomb of my dear friend and spiritual sister, Santa Lacwec. The tragedy of her end was emphasized for me by the fact that I was away from her when she died. I did not even have the chance to see her tomb and to pray over it. Now, twenty years later, I am deep into the village of Alokulum, between huts and cassava fields, and standing in front of Santa's tomb: a bare earth mound with few half bricks for stabilizing the soil, under the blazing afternoon sun, in her mother's compound. Santa's mother and brother are at my side and, in prayer, we experience the intimacy of a shared memory.

*"I faced my anger and brought it to my spiritual director. After some reflection, he told me: 'You are angry because Santa escaped your control and you were unable to do anything for her. But she never fell out of God's loving hand...'"*

## **The drums of Sr. Mary Benedicta**

Nyamitanga is a lovely, mild, very large hill in the outskirts of Mbarara, in Western Uganda. It hosts the Catholic cathedral and the archbishop's residence and a great number of schools of every kind. In a quiet place, under the shadow of a large banana plantation, there is the monastery of the Poor Clares. It is a building complex in naked bricks, the red color pleasantly contrasting with the all-pervasive green of the vegetation. So many years have passed since that day in 1984 when I rang the bell of the monastery meaning to ask information about a young man (one of the aspirants to the Comboni congregation) who had given the name of the abbess, Mother Francis, as his



Sr. Mary Benedicta in the enclosure of the monastery of the Poor Clares, in 1985.

sponsor. The door was opened and I was met by the tall, slender figure of Sr. Mary Benedicta.

That was how my long and beautiful friendship with this contemplative community started. Here, I always felt really welcome; I enjoyed their food so carefully prepared and their Franciscan hospitality. Especially during my years as vocation promoter, many a times I landed, tired and full of dust, in this monastery, as in an oasis of peace, after moving for hours over broken tarmac and through dangerous roadblocks. It seems a dream that I was able to reach this place again. The same smiles, the same spontaneous joy at finding one another again, the same cordiality and participation were there for me. It was then that the memory of Sr. Mary Benedicta and her untimely death came back to my consciousness with all its potency. She was a very gifted young woman and had brought this giftedness to God's service. She was a beautiful singer and musician

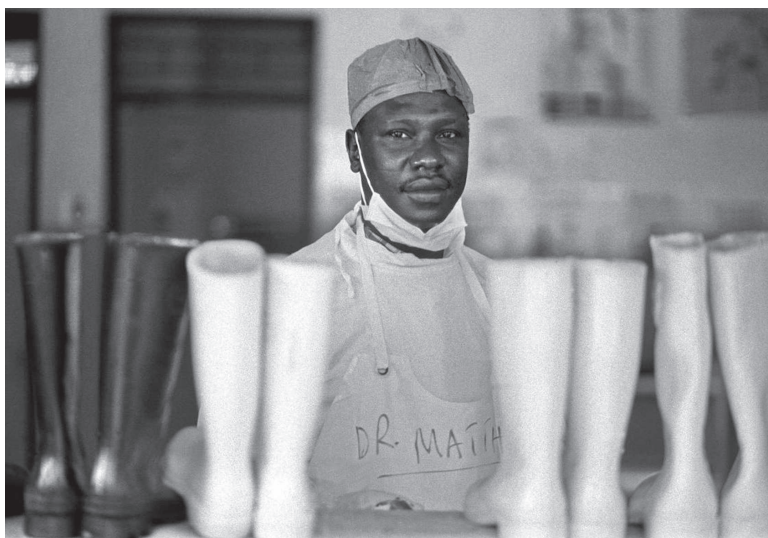


who very much contributed to the development of monastic worship, taking into it the melodies and instruments of the traditional music of the Banyankole, especially the drums. When I came across the *adungu*, a kind of local banjo used by the Alur in northern Uganda and adopted in the liturgy there, I immediately thought of my Poor Clares friends, especially Sr. M. Benedicta. The *adungus* were used in a set of 9 instruments, the largest being so big that the player used to sit on it and pluck the cords from that position. I had a set of *adungus* made and donated them to the monastery. Sr. M. Benedicta and companions were delighted and very soon learned how to play them during the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours.

Sr. M. Benedicta had decided in her heart to dedicate her life and prayers to the sanctification of priests. She had many friends among the local clergy who used to come to the monastery, looking for a place of silence and recollection. She had also her brother, Bonaventure, who was studying for the priesthood.... Then, suddenly, in 1990, the Lord decided to accept her as a sacrifice of sweet fragrance. She fell sick with a mysterious sickness; they took her to Kampala. In Nsambya hospital, they diagnosed the worst type of hepatitis. She fell into a coma and, after a week, she died. Twenty days after her death, her brother, Bonaventure, was ordained a priest. It is with Fr. Bonaventure, now the chancellor of Mbarara diocese, that I kneel at Sr. M. Benedicta's tomb. It was the first to appear in the quiet, green corner of the monastery compound reserved as cemetery. It is still the only tomb here. She was called to be the pioneer of that other world she had sung about in the beauty of the monastery liturgies.

*“Sr. Mary Benedicta was a beautiful singer and musician who very much contributed to the development of monastic worship, taking into it the melodies and instruments of the traditional music of the Banyankole, especially the drums.”*





Dr. Matthew Lokwiya was on the forefront of the battle against the Ebola epidemics.

## The seeds of the future

In Gulu, in Northern Uganda, at Lacor hospital, there is a huge tree. Under its branches, there is the tomb of Dr. Matthew Lokwiya. Dr. Lokwiya was born in 1957 at Kitgum, Acholi District. He was distinguished for his gift of intelligence, which enabled him to come first at the end of his studies in primary school, first in the middle school in Northern Uganda, and first in the whole country at the end of his secondary education. He completed medical school brilliantly at the prestigious Makerere University and came to Lacor Hospital for his post-degree training. Then he went to Liverpool, England, to specialize in tropical pediatrics. There, once more, he was remarkable for his ability. At the end of the course, he was invited to remain as part of the teaching staff. He preferred to return to serve his people in the north of Uganda, among the Acholi ethnic group. He worked uninterruptedly in Lacor Hospital and, eventually, took over the running of it from Dr. Piero Corti, the Italian founder of the institution.



Tomb of Dr. Matthew Lokwiya and his staff, all victims of Ebola at Lacor Hospital.

Dr. Matthew was a simple, open, unassuming and welcoming person. His constant smile and courtesy did not mask his strong character, his moral integrity, strong sense of justice and love of peace. He knew how to be credible and convincing with his staff, since what he demanded of others, he lived himself. In September 2000, he came back to Lacor Hospital after completing a specialization in public health and he was immediately faced with a tremendous challenge. In just a few days, three students from the nursing school and two nurses had died of a mysterious illness. He was the one who suggested it might be Ebola. He left immediately for Kampala to raise the alarm with the health authorities and to involve international organizations. Within a few days, the diagnosis of Ebola was confirmed. Then the almost superhuman struggle of Lacor Hospital staff started. All the suspected cases were gathered in the hospital. The need of isolation and special care in order to avoid contagion made the care of the sick exceptionally dangerous.

Members of the staff began to die one after the other. During the funeral Mass for Sr. Pierina, anesthetist, Dr. Matthew spoke to the staff: “At Lacor Hospital, we have known difficult times: war, looting, destruction and epidemics... and, every

time, we have been able to respond with all our strength. This epidemic is bringing a change in my life as regards the medical profession. Now I understand more deeply that it is a call from God. This service cannot be separated from the willingness to give one's life. I know the risks and I have made my choice. My life has changed and I am not as I was. The example of the members of the staff who have already died has influenced my decision. They were all young people, yet they accepted the tragic reality with serenity. They are martyrs of charity." So the stubborn fidelity continued, the struggle against the Ebola continued, and the deaths among the members of the staff also continued. By the beginning of December, a glimpse of hope appeared... It was then that Dr. Lokwiya himself fell sick. In his anguish, he prayed: "Lord, let me be the last to die of Ebola." God heard his prayer. On December 5, 2000, Dr. Matthew Lokwiya, medical superintendent of Lacor Hospital and head of the team that fought the Ebola virus, passed away peacefully at the age of 43. He was a member of the Anglican Church of Uganda. He left a widow and five children. No other died of Ebola. The epidemic was under control.

I was in the Philippines when all this happened. I heard the news of his death in the BBC. It was my dream to be able to reach the shadow of the huge tree and kneel at his tomb. I am happy that my dream has been fulfilled. Dr. Matthew Lokwiya's tomb bears his portrait and that of the twelve members of the hospital staff who died fighting the Ebola virus, among them two religious sisters. They rest side by side with the tomb of Piero and Lucille Corti, the couple who founded the hospital. The huge tree protects them from the glaring tropical sun and the torrential rain. They are the heroes, the seeds of the future.

*"By the beginning of December, a glimpse of hope appeared. It was then that Dr. Lokwiya himself fell sick. In his anguish, he prayed: 'Lord, let me be the last to die of Ebola.' God heard his prayer."*

## Under the fog's blanket

Kabale is the last town in South-western Uganda, just before the border with Rwanda and Congo. It is situated in a hilly country and surrounded by tall mountains that reach even 3,000 meters above sea level. Yet, it is placed in the middle of huge swamps that populate the surrounding valleys. Very often, early in the morning, Kabale wakes up in a white fog (called *oruho* in Rukiga, the local language). It lingers over the city for some hours until, in mid-morning, it is dissipated by the strength of the sun. The white fog was giving a ghost character to Rushoroza hill and its sturdy cathedral in naked bricks, when I was visiting the premises accompanied by Fr. Fred. Father Fred is the very first boy I helped to go to the seminary. It was May, 1971 and I was in my first *safari* in the farthest corner of the vast parish, near the border with Congo and the impenetrable forest.

After almost two hours by car, we were walking the path towards the chapel when I noticed an adolescent who was holding a book and reading from it every time we stopped for a breather. I approached him and asked: "You like reading, don't you?" "Yes, Father," he answered shyly. And explained: "But, unfortunately, I will not continue to the secondary school because my mother is a widow and we do not have the money!" There and then, I decided to help him and now Fred (that was the adolescent's name) is nearing his Silver Jubilee in priesthood. He is the one who had welcomed me the previous evening and was now showing me around to point out the changes for the better brought about in the last three scores of years. It is thus that we arrived at the cemetery. It is a fairly large one and it contains the tombs almost exclusively of priests and religious. In the traditional culture of the Bakiga, cemeteries do not exist since, usually, dead people are buried in the banana plantation of their homesteads.

I took off my beret and knelt to say a prayer for the dead friends, most of whom I knew. Fr. Fred told me that there had been an extraordinary mortality among the priests: he spoke of



Fr. Lorenzo with Fred Ndyababo, the first adolescent he helped to become a priest.

more than thirty deaths of would-be middle-aged priests. If one takes into account those who are outside the diocese mainly for teaching (Makerere University alone has seven of them at present), we can understand the anguish of the young bishop who finds himself short of personnel. I am kneeling near the tomb of the priest to whom I gave my car when I was moved from Kabale. But the one I remember most is one of my seminarians from Makiro Parish: Fr. Stephen Bihunyira. He was ordained in August 1976 together with his friend Fr. Gaetani Batanyenda. I had moved to Gulu by then, but I did not want to miss their ordination. It was the time of the notorious dictator Idi Amin and there was a petrol crisis in the country. Very determined to go back to Makiro for the occasion, I packed the VW beetle with five jerry cans of petrol and traveled all across Uganda to be present.

And it was worthwhile: the ordination took place in the open, in front of the huge church, in the natural amphitheatre of the hills and with a breathtaking view of the surrounding mountains. The huge congregation clapped and swayed at the drums' beat with charismatic enthusiasm. It was unforgetta-





Fr. Gaetani Batanyenda and the late Fr. Stephen Bihunyira on their ordination day.

ble. Fr. Stephen and Gaetani developed to be leading members of the clergy. Fr. Stephen was made episcopal vicar of Rukungiri. It was there that a mysterious sickness killed him in little more than a week. I pause and mourn my many friends among the clergy. Their tombs are quiet under the velvet blanket of the fog. I remember how much alive and boisterous they were when we used to meet for the clergy meetings or when I visited them in their parishes... The local Church misses their energy, their resourcefulness. I leave the cemetery and go up the hill to the clergy house. Even today, there is a clergy meeting and I have the chance of greeting many friends. We look at each other: time has left its merciless furrows on our faces, our hairs show different shades of gray or heads shine in their absence when hairs are naught. We are the survivors.

*“We look at each other: time has left its merciless furrows on our faces, our hairs show different shades of gray or heads shine in their absence when hairs are naught. We are the survivors.”*

**FROM THE MISSION FIELD**

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Four special happenings in my missionary life  
in Uganda, tragic, happy or sad.

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**Funeral at sunset**

It was Palm Sunday and the bell for lunch had rung in Nadiket Seminary, Karamoja, Uganda. I was in the staff dining room, having the Sunday meal with my clerical staff. Suddenly, the sound of gunfire resounded like sharp cracks, loud and near. I jumped up and ran to the door overlooking the compound and the seminarians' refectory. The seminarians were silently running out of the building, heading for the church: they were looking not only for God's protection but taking shelter inside the strongest walls. The gunfire continued and grew more threatening. Inside the dining room, we lay down or squatted with our heads well below the windowsills in order to avoid the danger of strayed bullets. All of us knew instinctively that a raid had started and we were in the middle of it.

Nadiket Seminary is situated about five kilometers from Moroto town, in a semi-desert territory, only fit for animal husbandry, that is the domain of the fierce Karimojong tribe and their herds of cows. From the seminary, the eye ranges over the dry plains where the villages of the Loputuk (a section of the Karimojong) are so small and close to the ground that they are almost indistinguishable from the undulations of the soil and the nearby hills that are the place of a rival tribal group, the Tepeth. The shooting was the sign that the Tepeth, after long and careful spying, had struck and were now running back to their hills, pushing in front of them the cows of the Loputukians that they had surrounded. Very soon the alarm was

raised for the warriors to leave their places under the shelter of the scarce trees (where they had been drinking, tattooing and plaiting their hair), grab their weapons and run in hot pursuit. Later, the gunfire grew sporadic according to the different vicissitudes of the battle.

Around three in the afternoon, everything was over. At that point, our cook ran to me to tell me that a group of women, coming down from the side of the mountain siding the seminary fence, had come up against the corpse of a young shepherd who had been killed. They had hurriedly continued their descent, eager to take the news to the village. I spoke to those around me and we went immediately to the spot. Just outside the fence of the seminary, the body of an adolescent lay down full length on the ground, face upwards, shot neatly through



Seminarians from Nadiket, Moroto, in Karamoja, a semi-desert territory.



the head by a single bullet. His brain matter was oozing out of the bullet holes on both sides of his head. He was slim and well formed, naked, wearing only a pair of sandals made of an old motorcar tire.

We looked with pity at that wasted young life, said a prayer and went back. Later we heard the cry of the women who had come up from the village, accompanying the mother, mourning... Then there was silence. Nobody came for the body. The Karimojong don't bury their dead, but pull their bodies into the wilderness to be prey to the vultures and hyenas, especially the bodies of those who die in battle. When the time came for the evening rosary, I called them to me, all one hundred of them, and addressed them in this way: "My dear boys, I know that in your tradition you do not bury those who fall in battle, but we are Christians and for us the human body is sacred. Let us, therefore, walk, saying our rosary, to the place where the poor young man lies and let the older boys bring shovels and picks. Let us bury him, thus saving him from the wild animals."

The murmuring procession of the seminarians sneaked slowly out of the gate and along the fence to the place where the body of Lomer (this was his name) was. We made a circle around him and prayed for him and for peace in that troubled land. Then a shallow grave was dug and Lomer was put to rest inside it and covered with a low heap of stones. Somebody improvised a cross with two sticks and fixed it on the ground at the head of the tomb, and at the feet we put his sandals. The sun was setting over the savannah of Karamoja, painting the sky an intense red. Rest in peace, dear Lomer, and may you be the last victim of such senseless violence.

*"In your tradition, you do not bury those who fall in battle, but we are Christians and for us the human body is sacred. Let us, therefore, walk to the place where the poor young man lies and let the older boys bring shovels and picks. Let us bury him, thus saving him from the wild animals."*

## I went to pieces!

In December 1987, I was almost completing my first year in Karamoja as rector of the Diocesan Minor Seminary, when the invitation to preach their annual retreat came from the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu. I had been so close to them that I was not able to refuse. So, it was that I took the long journey from Moroto to Gulu during the Christmas holidays of my students.

At that time, Gulu was in a very special situation given the uprising against the government of Museveni who had taken power the year before, overturning the previous regime supported mainly by the Acholi tribe. Gulu is the capital of the Acholi region and, therefore, was, at that time, the hub of the uprising. The National Resistance Army (NRA) was holding the small city with a concentration of about twenty thousand soldiers, but the surrounding area was under the domination of the rebels.

I had the feeling of this situation when I arrived at Kamdini, about 45 kms from Gulu town, and I was stopped at the military roadblock. "From here to Gulu," a young officer told me, "cars can proceed only in convoy with military escort." I parked the car at the roadside and looked around. The place was in disrepair and groups of soldiers and civilians were lying around, talking, roasting maize cobs at improvised fires, giving a sense of confusion and disorder. Then, suddenly, the convoy formed itself, with the soldiers' trucks at the head and tail, and advanced at sustained speed towards Gulu. The tarmac was gutted with potholes and the elephant grass at the side of the road had grown so tall that one had the impression of driving through a vegetable tunnel. A sinister silence made one's hair stand on end.

As God wanted, we reached the town. I went to the Fathers' house where I had booked my residence and walked over to the compound of the Sisters' mother house to start my preaching. Back to my residence, in the evening, the Superior told me: "There is no power in the city. We will operate the



Fr. Vincenzo Pellegrini (left), nicknamed 'Acholi Elder,' with Fr. Gaudencio Langol.

generator but only until supper time. Then, you have to be happy with the kerosene lamp." Two days passed uneventfully. In the evening of the second day, while I was going through my notes at lamplight, suddenly a portentous blow shook the windows of my room and made me jump. While I was wondering about the nature of the disturbance, another blow paralyzed me, while a strong voice shouted: "Open your door, or we will kill you!" I opened the door of the room and stood on the threshold only to be blinded by the glare of a powerful torch. A pistol shot cracked and a bullet brushed my hair on top of my head and chipped the cement of the wall behind me. "Down, lie down!" the menacing voice shouted and I sprawled on the ground with my arms spread out while a machine gun was pointed at my head.

"We are the rebels and are coming from the bush. We have no fear because we are as good as dead," they kept shouting at me while they grabbed my money, wristwatch and camera... Then, after commanding me not to move, they proceeded to do the same to the other inhabitants of the Mission, going from

room to room in the little cloister. Then there was silence in the darkness of the night... When we thought we were safe to move, we gathered in the refectory and consoled ourselves over a cup of coffee. I was amazed at my cool headedness. Two nights later, they came back: many more, same procedure, only I had nothing left that could satisfy them! And this time, I was shattered, I went to pieces!

The good Sisters found a place to sleep for me at their convent and I managed to finish the retreat. On Christmas Eve, I drove to Kampala, with the convoy and through the roadblock, and then, free, free along the uneven road to the capital. I had missed the chance to become a martyr... But sometime later, I heard that the ordeal we had undergone had claimed its victim: poor old Fr. Vincenzo Pellegrini, nicknamed 'Acholi Machon' (Acholi Elder) by the Acholi, who had spent more than 40 years in the area and was an expert in the Acholi language and customs. He died on the day of Epiphany. His weak heart, though helped by the pacemaker, had given way and the 'Acholi Elder' was now in the peace of God.

*“Suddenly a portentous blow shook the windows of my room and made me jump. A strong voice shouted: ‘Open your door, or we will kill you!’ I opened it. A pistol shot cracked and a bullet brushed my hair on top of my head and chipped the cement of the wall behind me.”*

### **God's lifeline continues**

Night was falling on the compound of Obongi Mission, an isolated outpost on the bank of the River Nile, in Western Uganda. It was September 11, 1979, the year of the defeat of the notorious dictator Idi Amin Dada by the Tanzanian army. Already the frontline had past and the war was over. Amin had fled to South Arabia taking one of the two planes of Uganda Airlines.



Notorious dictator Idi Amin Dada was defeated and fled to South Arabia in 1979.

The scene was peaceful, nobody was around. The young parish priest, Fr. Silvio Serri, Comboni missionary, was sitting under the veranda of the Fathers' house, reading his breviary. Suddenly, from the nearby Zoka forest, a deserter of Amin's army emerged. He was disheveled, in rags, with fierce, bloodshot eyes, and brandishing a machine gun. "Give me the keys of your car!" he whispered to the priest, threatening him with the weapon. The Land Rover of the Mission was parked in front of the garage. The soldier grabbed the car keys from the priest's hand and run to the car. Having checked the fuel level in the tank, he went back to the priest and commandeered him to fill the tank with fuel from the jerry can that was kept in the garage. Here was Fr. Silvio pouring gasoline into the Land Rover's tank, using the jerry can, while held at gun point... In the dusk, the silence was overwhelming. Suddenly, some people came in view, turning the corner of the church building. They



Comboni missionary, Fr. Silvio Serri, was killed by a deserter of Amin's army.

saw the scene, and screamed. The soldier panicked, shot Fr. Silvio through the heart, jumped on the Land Rover and disappeared on the horizon in a cloud of red dust. The news of Fr. Silvio's death spread like a bush fire. He was well-known in all the surrounding areas and well-loved because of his kindness and dedication.

In the small town of Arua, the capital of West Nile District, a young man called Philip was in his last year of college. The



news of Fr. Silvio's killing shocked Philip: he was from Moyo, the neighboring parish to Obongi and he knew the priest personally; we can say that he was his friend. Philip started thinking... Few weeks later, I saw a young man coming to me at Alokulum, where I was with the Comboni postulants as their formator. I was also the vocation promoter. The young man approached me, introduced himself and said: "Father, my name is Philip. I am a Madi by tribe and come from Moyo parish. I was a friend of Fr. Silvio... His death has touched me deeply." And he continued, to my great astonishment: "Fr. Lorenzo, I want to take his place."

Philip was true to his word. He entered our formation program and was soon with me in the Comboni Postulancy. He completed his Novitiate in Kenya and took his vows in 1985. I traveled to Kenya for the occasion and I was present at his religious profession. The Superiors sent him to Rome for his Theology and he came back to Moyo to be ordained a priest on August 13, 1989, before proceeding to Togo, West Africa, where he spent the first years of his missionary life. He is now serving in his own territory, in the very town of Arua where the news of Fr. Silvio's sacrifice reached him and transformed him, making him pick up God's lifeline interrupted by the killing of Fr. Silvio.

The story of Fr. Philip Zema Waigo, MCCJ, reminds me of the conclusion of the film: *The Fugitive* by John Ford taken from the famous novel by Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*. We are in Mexico, during the persecution unleashed by Calles. The last priest has just been executed by a firing squad. Suddenly, from the dark background, the figure emerges of a young man who comes forward towards the light and exclaims: "I am a Catholic priest." God's lifeline continues.

*"Philip said: 'I was a friend of Fr. Silvio. His death has touched me deeply.' And he continued, to my great astonishment: 'Fr. Lorenzo, I want to take his place.' Philip was true to his word."*



## A mother's safari

My father was afraid of flying; that is why my parents could no longer follow me when I started to be assigned outside Italy. Since I changed from the diocesan seminary to the Combonis, they had appeared every time in my new communities to visit me as if to check how I was treated. My mother had never ceased to cry because of my decision to be a missionary. My father died of colon cancer in 1974, during my first period in Uganda. I was lucky enough to reach home the very day he was operated upon. We spent two days together, then he passed away. I went back to Uganda. When I was finishing my next vacation period and I was conversing with a certain young woman, Graziella, who had a cousin in Uganda and had visited him there, my mother suddenly butted in: “*Signorina*, next time you go to Uganda, I will go with you!”

So it was that sometime in February 1977, I traveled to Nairobi to welcome my mother and Graziella. Because of the notorious tyrant Idi Amin Dada, Uganda was cut off from the international community: no more planes were landing at Entebbe. In Kampala, we were met by Fr. Minisini, Graziella's cousin, who drove us to Lacor Parish, just outside the town of Gulu, where I was living with my first Ugandan postulants. My mother was a dignified, rather short woman, still beautiful at the age of 73, always dressed in black because of her condition as a widow. The Acholi people loved her immediately and she became very popular. The African Sisters fussed over her. My mother didn't like to travel to many places; she was satisfied in experiencing the life of her missionary son. She preferred to stay at home to cook or to darn the postulants' socks. This notwithstanding, we did visit the nearby park. While in it, a lion, with an impressive mane, crossed our path and while my mom was resting in the lounge of Chobe Lodge, two huge elephants passed by on their way to the rubbish dump.

Two weeks before her departure, I decided to take her to Kigezi, among the Bakiga people who live on the mountains of South-Western Uganda, where I had spent the first six years of



Mama Angelina, already a widow, visited her son in 1977 and enjoyed the wildlife.

my missionary life. We traveled 800 km to reach Kabale, the capital of Kigezi and then we took to the hills towards Kinkizi. I drove carefully along the steep murram roads on the side of the mountains. At last, Makiro parish appeared in view with its large church on top of the hill, surrounded by trees. There we spent a very happy week. On Saturday morning, we drove down to the neighboring parish of Nyamwegabira where Graziella had promised to cook pizza for us on Sunday evening. That pizza was not to be. As soon as we arrived at Nyamwegabira, Graziella said to my mother: "Let us go to greet Cita!" Cita was a chimpanzee that people had captured from the nearby Impenetrable Forest and given to the priest. It was little then, very gracious and the children loved it especially since the Father used to dress it with pants and breaches and a funny cap. It was now big, naked and tied to a tree with a chain. Graziella shook hand with it.

When my mother's turn came, the beast violently grabbed her hand and stuck its long and dirty teeth on it, drawing blood. My mother was in a cold sweat and on the verge of fainting, while the host priest pushed back the chimpanzee with shouts

and blows. The incident forced me to change route: we had to pass by a missionary hospital where Mama Angelina was given a tetanus injection and to anticipate our return to Kampala. The morning she and Graziella left for Italy, all hell broke loose in Uganda. Amin denounced an attempted coup and executed two ministers and the Anglican Archbishop of Gulu, Janani Lowum. Military road blocks sprung up all over Uganda. My mother's safari was fortunately over! Her hand healed perfectly and she never cried again about her son being a missionary. Amin was ousted two years later and died in exile in South Arabia. The statue of Archbishop Lowum stands on the west front of Westminster Abbey, in London, together with those of Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero and other modern martyrs.

*“The morning my mother left for Italy, all hell broke loose in Uganda. Her safari was fortunately over! She never cried again about her son being a missionary.”*



Mama Angelina with the Bishop of Gulu, Msgr. Kihangire, during her Ugandan trip.

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In my missionary life, I was never alone, but always in team with other missionaries. I want to remember and honor some exemplary figures of missionary brothers and sisters whose life touched mine.

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### **Women of the Gospel**

I met in Uganda two true women of the Gospel, the Comboni Sisters Lucia Careddu and Rosa Lucia Vinco, who have fulfilled in their lives their name of “Mothers of the Africans.” They deserve Comboni’s definition of being “the shield, strength and guarantee of the missionaries.”

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

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

Sr. Lucia was very proud of him. She had grown old by then, with her body twisted by arthritis. She was an institu-

tion: her Kangole Girls School had rescued hundreds of girls from the traditional position of servitude and ignorance with the power of education. Only Sr. Lucia's ingenuity and experience of decades of stubborn presence in the place had enabled the school to remain open and well-attended against all odds... I remember the long lines of Karimojong women waiting in front of the school with bundles of firewood, pleading Sr. Lucia to accept their firewood instead of cash as school fee. She has now gone to receive the reward of her missionary service in heaven. The last time I saw Peter was in 1997, in London. He came to visit me in Elstree Scholasticate, accompanied by his wife and one of his children. He had come to Great Britain to take part in the marriage feast of one university mate. It was a happy surprise to see him in London. He was so proud of our friendship that he insisted that we must take a photo and I should not forget to send him copy in Karamoja.

It was during my stay in Karamoja, as the rector of the seminary, that sometimes I was confronted with different health problems of my seminarians. If the fever was too strong and their condition could not be helped with our ordinary means and knowledge, I used to drive the few kilometers to Moroto town and take them to be seen by Sr. Rosa Lucia Vinco. Her kindness and dedication, as well as her skill, fruit of many years of service to the poor and the sick, were well-known. She had spent the years of her maturity in Morulem Leprosy Center and was known as "the Mother of the Lepers." The Uganda government had recognized the dedication and exceptional experience of Sr. Rosa Lucia by nominating her "Leprosy Superintendent" for Karamoja. She was always welcoming and her only touch was enough to put the sick young men at ease... What always struck me about her was the joy and satisfaction that she used to show when there was any event in which the Africans were promoted like the ordination of a local priest or the graduation of the student nurses in the Catholic hospital. Sr. Rosa Lucia was always there, her best uniform on, a large smile splitting her face as if she was getting fat... You could feel that was what she had come for: to "Save the Africans by means



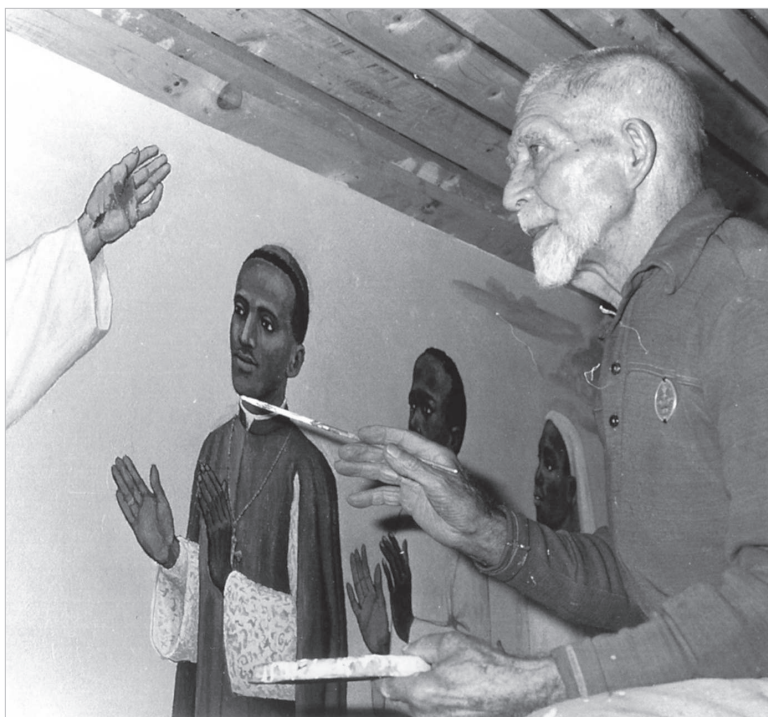
Sr. Lucia Careddu teaching at Kangole Girls Primary School, in South Karamoja.

of the Africans themselves.” She is now resting, together with other retired missionary Sisters, at Verona, Italy.

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

*“The Comboni Sisters Lucia Careddu and Rosa Lucia Vinco fulfilled in their lives their name of ‘Mothers of the Africans.’ They deserve Comboni’s definition of being ‘the shield, strength and guarantee of the missionaries.’”*





Bro. Vittorio Fanti left his artistic touch in many churches in East Africa.

## Artist and saint

When I met Vittorio Fanti, Comboni missionary brother, builder, artist and holy man, he was already a very old man: permanently bent, with knobby hands and a deformed body. But his face reflected the vision of beauty that he repeatedly embodied in the colorful frescoes with which he was decorating so many churches in East Africa. Especially his incredibly blue eyes revealed the ageless quality of his soul. In 1977, a beautiful round church had been built in Nyamwegabira Parish, the last one before Queen Elizabeth National Park, in Uganda, and the work of decorating it with paintings was in process. I happen to pass by and enter the church: perched high on the scaffoldings, Bro. Fanti was working alone. At my greeting, he turned down to

me his wrinkled face and looked at me with his beautiful blue eyes. I can never forget that moment!

Vittorio Fanti was born at Pressano, in the mountainous province of Trent, Italy, on October 15, 1901. His family's farmhouse was like a mansion: a carved stone portal led into a large, internal courtyard, used also as night storage place for the many agricultural implements and carts. From there, a solid dark marble staircase led into a large hall used for family gatherings during festivities. Balconies and terraces added a touch of aristocratic distinction to the whole building. The Fanti family had been farming the land for generations. They belonged to that class of farmers successfully applying brains as well as muscles to their work. Their vineyard produced quality wines, the fields' wheat enough for the family and the market and the meadows provided fodder for the many milk cows filling the huge stable that used to be, during the long, cold winters, the meeting place for men, women and children.

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

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

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

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

An elderly confrère said that Bro. Fanti possessed the heart of Francis of Assisi and added: "He is both a great artist and a great saint, renowned for his simplicity and sense of humor. Old, literally bent in two, suffering from rheumatic pains, he kept on decorating churches to the very last day for the glory of God." His last work was the head of a horse, using glued paper mounted on a wire frame: a masterpiece made for the school children. In Uganda, horses are practically unknown. Fanti wanted perhaps to finish his artistic career with a work reproducing what he loved so much in youth: the horse. He died peacefully at Aber, in Uganda, on June 19, 1989.

He had lived in his art the life of Jesus and Mary and was now going in person to check how things had really gone. I am sure that there he met the persons he so often depicted in his murals; I imagine them going to meet him and telling him: "Come, good and faithful servant. You painted us down there among the Africans and for the Africans who, thanks to your colors and brushes, can see our faces. Come now to enjoy the prize that is yours by right."

*"How many ladders did Bro. Fanti climb up and down! All of them, however, were part of the only staircase that would lead him to heaven. He never signed his paintings, but if one looks carefully, he/she can find somewhere and in each one of them a cat: his signature, his mascot!"*

## Singing through life

In April 1979, the dictatorship of the notorious Idi Amin Dada came to an end. The Tanzanian army kept pushing back Amin's soldiers until the retreat became a rout and Amin himself, despairing of the outcome, fled the country. The last battle of any importance took place in Lira, a small town in the north of Uganda, the center of the Lango tribe territory. During this time, Bro. Bernard Pratt, an African-American Comboni brother, was confined in Lira Bishop's House, together with one Comboni priest, as if in the eye of the storm. For 54 days, they could not get out of the house because of the insecurity. It was in that period that Fr. Joseph Santi, our first Comboni martyr in Uganda, was shot dead at a roadblock, some distance away from Lira, and a diocesan priest was slaughtered on the route that from Lira center leads to the Mission of Ngeta and his body stayed on the road where he had fallen for days, his



Afro-American Comboni Bro. Bernard Pratt was a large man with a very kind nature.

friends forbidden to give him a decent burial. Bro. Pratt was my contemporary and had come to Uganda in 1970 as myself. We had met several times in our center in Mbuya, Kampala. He had impressed me with his huge size that contrasted somehow with his very kind nature.

Bro. Bernie, as he liked to be called, was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in the Deep South of the United States of America, on May 21, 1937. He inherited the passion for the Gospel songs, typical of his people. After graduation from high school, Bernie joined the family who had moved to Los Angeles. There, he started and led to success his own group of singers: The Click Clacks. But even the success of the Click Clacks did not give Bernie the joy and peace he envisioned. After consulting with his parish priest, Bernie entered the Comboni Missionaries' Novitiate and consecrated his life to the Lord and to the missionary work of the Church on March 19, 1963. His first six years of religious life were spent in the United States. He was busy in construction work, farming and, lately, in promoting the missionary cause among the youth. He showed himself to be a very dependable person with a stabilizing influence because of his balanced character.

Bro. Bernie was assigned to Africa, Uganda, in 1969, but he actually reached Uganda in 1970. His first assignment was the community of Dokolo. Bro. Bernie always remembered his first day in Dokolo. He had remained alone at the Mission House. Suddenly, a woman in labor was brought from a nearby village. Those who assisted her said: "Brother, do something!"

Fortunately, the mother was strong and in good health and the birth happened without complications. Bro. Bernie remembered that fact as a metaphor: he felt that he was called to assist the birth of the Church in that part of Africa. The ten years that Bro. Bernie served in Africa were broken by a year of service in the United States as Director of Vocations in Los Angeles. During that time, he organized the Gospel Choir of Holy Cross Parish which he considered his home parish since his family was living there. The Gospel Choir outlasted Bro. Bernie and sung his funeral liturgy when he died.

When Bro. Bernie returned to Lira in 1977, he organized the choir of Lira Cathedral and took up the responsibilities of Director of Development for the diocese. He continued to give part of his time to teaching Scripture and Religious Studies. In term of influencing persons, his second period in the missions is remarkable. Bro. Bernie supported and counseled numerous young Africans to pursue priesthood or religious life or even good family life. He did it mainly through sincere friendship.

A friend wrote fondly of him: “Bro. Bernie and I would sit for hours making up poems and writing songs. The following one will stay with me forever. ‘I gave them my head and they gave me a crown of thorns. I gave them my hands and they pierced them with nails. I gave them my heart and they pierced it with a sword. Finally, I gave them my life and they gave me death. I gave you a vocation. What are you going to give me?’ Bro. Bernie looked at God and said: ‘I want to serve you my whole life till I die in your arms.’” He died at 47, during his leave in the USA, on May 24, 1984. One of his friends from Lira, James Odongo, wrote on that occasion: “Well, so long, Brother. If I had known that my last handshake with you would last an eternity, I would have made it a little firmer.”

*“Bro. Bernie, born in the Deep South of the USA, inherited the passion for the Gospel songs, typical of his people. After graduation, he started and led to success his own group of singers. But even their success did not give him the joy and peace he envisioned. And he became a Comboni missionary.”*

## Letters from the dead

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



erica. They gave me the unusual, beautiful sensation of having a direct line with Heaven.

August 14, 1987 – Lusaka, Zambia. A car leaves the Comboni Sisters' residence. At the wheel is Sr. Cesarina Borghesi, a Comboni Sister, 51 years of age, a nurse and midwife. She is going to a conference about Christian family planning. With her in the car are two young African couples. They are proceeding at moderate speed when a huge truck jumps a Stop signal and hits the car: all five are crushed to death. The news of Sr. Cesarina's tragic end reached me in Uganda. She was a dear friend and a missionary sister always enthusiastic of her vocation.

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

She was the most beautiful woman I ever met in life. Her face was splendid with deeply blue eyes and the blond hair suggested through the veil she was wearing. She looked like a film star, reminding me of Ursula Andress. While I was still mourning her untimely death, two weeks after, I received her last letter. She must have posted it the very day she died. It was a very joyous letter, bursting with enthusiasm and *joie de vivre*, telling me how happy she was in her new ministry and foreseeing that we would go for vacation at the same time and that, therefore, I could then visit her old mom as she had done to mine.

The letter from the dead reminded me of another similar episode I had experienced three years before. In that case, the person in question had been even more remarkable. Sr. Fed-

erica Bettari was Superior General in Rome during the years 1969-1975 and since then she had been known as Mother Federica. Born in a small town of Brescia province in Northern Italy in 1925, third of eight brothers and sisters, she had qualified as a teacher and started the profession while discerning her desire to give her life to God. She was divided between the strong urge of becoming a contemplative and the attraction of missionary life.

She was a plain young woman with nothing exceptional apart from the goodness of her nature. She was tested by the



Sr. Cesarina Borghesi, who looked like a film star, was killed in a road accident.

death of her dear father, just before entering the Novitiate of the Comboni Sisters. Before her Religious Vows that she took in April 1947, she suffered the death of her mother. She reached Africa in 1960 and was teacher and head mistress of the Teachers Training Center at Gulu, in Northern Uganda. It was from there that the Sisters chose her as their representative at the Chapter in which she was eventually elected Superior General.

It was a special Chapter, the first after Vatican II, meant to implement the Council guidelines for the renewal of the institute. Mother Federica had, very clear, the two targets she thought critical to the success in the future: a strong missionary drive and a deepening of the spiritual life of the Sisters. Of these essential traits of a true missionary woman, Mother Federica became the model and the embodiment.

After her service at the center in Rome, she came back to Uganda only to be entrusted again with the leadership as Provincial Superior. Her period as Provincial (1976-1983) was marked by the war of the Tanzanian Army against Amin and the above-mentioned murder of the first Comboni Sister martyr, Liliana Rivetta. Mother Federica was always present where problems or dangers arose. As soon as she completed her leadership service, she fell sick with cancer.

In September 1983, she was forced to go to Italy for treatment. Missing her powerful and inspiring presence, I decided to write to her, assuring her of my spiritual solidarity. During the intervals between therapies, while her contemplative instincts were soaring, she took up the pen to write to me. She had just posted her letter when the Lord called her to Himself, on February 18, 1984. The letter reached me when she was already laid to rest. A letter from the dead.

*“I received two letters from the dead. They were letters from dear friends, outstanding Comboni missionary Sisters in Africa: Sister Cesarina and Mother Federica. They gave me the unusual, beautiful sensation of having a direct line with Heaven.”*

**MISSION'S LITTLE FLOWERS**

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The serious commitment to preach the Gospel did not make me insensitive to the small everyday realities, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes infuriating: food, animals, vehicles, journeys, etc. Something to uplift the spirit and keep a healthy sense of humor.

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**The “miraculous” flashlight**

Missionary life is usually adventurous and often dangerous. Extra work for the guardian angels! Sometimes, it is the Saints who help, especially Saint Joseph, who is specialized in it as you are going to read in these few memories from my long missionary life.

One day, some years ago, in Morulem Parish, Karamoja, Uganda, my friend, Fr. Gabriele, a Comboni missionary, was going out for a short journey with his powerful motorcycle. Fr. Gabriele was very fond of motorcycles and the huge machine he was riding was a gift from his friends in Italy who knew his passion for the two-wheelers. He was progressing steadily along the winding path of the savannah when he hit a slippery patch, probably some cow dung, the rear wheel slid out of control and he fell sideways with the motorcycle on top of him.

The crash was followed by an ominous silence. Nobody was around in that isolated spot, far from any human settlement. Utterly unable to shift the terrible weight of the machine, Fr. Gabriele cried out in prayer to God to help him. A shadow loomed out of the blue and two powerful hands grabbed the motorcycle and stood it on its stand. The Father laboriously picked himself up, inspecting his bruises... When, at last, he gave his attention to his benefactor, intending to thank him, he found nobody. The savannah stretched itself boundlessly in all directions... No tree obscured the view... There was absolutely nobody. Fr. Gabriele is convinced to this day that he was helped by an angel.



Since Comboni, St. Joseph has been affectionately pestered by his missionaries.

Since the time of Comboni, Saint Joseph has been affectionately pestered by all the Comboni missionaries for two main reasons: protection from dangers and for financial assistance. This is what Comboni wrote, after a bad fall from a camel: “I have, by no means, spared my dear bursar, Saint Joseph, to whose care I had commended myself for a safe journey from Kordofan to Khartoum. Since this dear Saint let me have such a terrible fall from the camel, I well and truly fined him to the tune of one thousand gold franks a day for every day I would have to keep my arm in a sling” (March 10, 1874).

I myself often relied on Saint Joseph for protection and to get out of emergency situations. The following examples are only two of numberless others... On July 20, 1997, coming back from a priestly ordination in Spain, I was flying from Valencia to Barcelona, where I had my connecting flight to Venice. The plane was late. We had not landed yet and it was already time for the Venice plane to take off. I was already imagining missing that plane with all the inconvenience that goes with it. “Dear Saint Joseph,” I cried, “Don’t let me miss the plane!” As God wanted, we landed, I ran to the departure gate of my flight (It was deserted!) only to be addressed by the hostess at

the counter: “Are you Mr. Carraro? Yes? Please, get in quickly, we are taking off.” That time, thanks to Saint Joseph, I made it!

But more remarkable, I consider the episode of the flashlight. It went like this. When, in 2007, I had the chance of going back to Uganda, I packed my small flashlight of a rather rare brand, Palfinder. I had a wonderful month: I went to so many places and saw so many friends! One of the places was Gulu, North Uganda, where I was guest of the archbishop. One night, there was a brownout and I used the flashlight to lift the mosquito net and sneak into bed. It was so hot and I was so tired that I fell immediately asleep and forgot to switch off the flashlight. In the morning, I packed it with the rest of my things without realizing that it had become useless. The following week, I was taken by a former postulant of mine over the border, into Tanzania, to a small town in the middle of nowhere called Kayanga.

When darkness came, I looked for my flashlight and I was shocked. “Saint Joseph, what shall I do?” I prayed. Of course, it was no big deal and I could have solved the impasse in more than one way, but, there and then, an extraordinary thing happened. I was showing the spent flashlight to my host, when a young European woman entered the room and extended a packet to my friend, saying: “Thank you, Joseph, for your kind help! This is a little present for you from me and my friends.” Joseph opened the packet: it was a new flashlight of exactly the same brand as mine, only different in color, mine was blue; this was pink. Joseph passed it on to me with a smile. It is still on my desk, now.

*“The crash was followed by an ominous silence. Nobody was around in that isolated spot, far from any human settlement. A shadow loomed out of the blue and two powerful hands grabbed the motorcycle and stood it on its stand. When, at last, Fr. Gabriele gave his attention to his benefactor, intending to thank him, he found nobody. He is convinced to this day that he was helped by an angel.”*



## Brother pig & sister cow

Animals enter our life's journey in different ways. In my missionary life, I have vivid memories of my relationship with different animals, both domestic or living in the wild. Here are some stories of lions, rats, pigs, dogs and how I skinned a deer in London.

I was presented with a whole roasted pig (*lechon baboy*) for my 73rd birthday. That reminded me of the several goats I had received as present in Uganda on different occasions. Unfortunately, I remember also quite a few goats that had fallen victim under the wheels of my car, not to mention several dogs and many chickens. The day I killed a cow by accident, I will never forget. I was driving back from Kampala to Karamoja in my Land Rover 110, a journey of more than 500 km. I had reached the vicinity of Mbale when a cow, grazing at the roadside, suddenly came out of the grass and I couldn't avoid hitting it. The impact with the rigid bumper of the heavy vehicle was terrible, and, with the sharp sound of a rifle shot, the poor animal went down for good. I did not stop, well aware of the danger of being lynched by the angry villagers.

More happy memories I treasure of my encounter with the big game in the wild. I had just arrived in Uganda when, on December 26, 1970, the group of the Comboni missionaries in Kigezi (a dozen of us) decided to spend the night in Queen Elizabeth Park. We arrived at sunset in this modern Eden, a very good time for viewing the animals... We toured around the tracks: it was wonderful. Hundreds of antelopes and gazelles were grazing peacefully in the great expanse of the savannah, herds of buffalos, zebras, giraffes not to mention several elephants. The climax was our encounter with a pride of lions: fourteen of them, some also resting on low branches of trees.

Unfortunately, the long years of my stay in Uganda saw the dwindling of the game population in the wilderness, especially in Karamoja, once rich in every kind of animals and famous for its elephants, now emptied by the indiscriminate use of the gun by the Karimojong themselves. Few ostriches have remained



The Comboni community of Calamba, Laguna, with their house pet, Ringo.

and these ones can come across when travelling in that vast unpopulated area, together with the herds of cows and their guardians, the Karimojong shepherds, naked under the sun, but with machine guns. No animal can escape the trigger-happy natives and their crave for meat. They will not touch their cows and especially the bulls that are so much part of their culture that they confer special names to the elders. I got my tribal name myself: PALOMAGALIKWAN (the owner of the white bull with downturned horns). That is how they described my hairless head and my accommodating temperament.

But let us go back to domestic animals and pets... Consolata was a girl whom I had helped to join the convent but, in the course of time, she had met with a well-mannered young man

and got married. Sometime later, I arrived in the parish where Consolata was living. She and her husband were delighted to see me and invited me to spend the night at their home, a grass hut. With great joy, we had supper together and then, after so much conversation, they surrendered their only bed to me. I stretched on it with difficulty because it was far from soft, and I spent most of the night awake, in the darkness. When at last, out of exhaustion, I started dozing off, suddenly a rat fell on my face and scuttled away. It was a kind of home rat with a fluffy tail that they call *omushushu*. As you can imagine, I kissed goodbye to sleep after that, but I stood up fresh and smiling to my kind hosts in the morning.

The most lively memory of a house friend is linked to a dog, a small, elegant animal of Chinese origin that we had in our Novitiate house in Calamba (Laguna), Ringo by name. It was so close to us that we considered it almost a member of the community. It was always in the frontline when we used to take a group photo. It used to howl like a wolf when the whistle of the passing train was heard.

The strangest episode happened in London. Our Scholasticate at Elstree was situated along the so called “Green Belt” and close to some woods. One day, during my early morning walk, I came across a deer that had just been hit by a passing car and was dead. It was still warm. I rushed back to the house and returned with two students. We picked up the deer, took it to the house, skinned it and asked Anna, our cook, to stew the soft meat. She obeyed but refused to taste it. It was delicious.

*“The Karimojong will not touch their cows and especially the bulls that are so much part of their culture that they confer special names to the elders. I got my tribal name myself: PALOMAGALIKWAN (the owner of the white bull with downturned horns). That is how they described my hairless head and my accommodating temperament.”*

## Locusts and wild honey

Sharing food is certainly the greatest sign of equality and friendship: an experience that is common to all missionaries. For me, it has also been colorful, interesting and often funny: these shared memories mean to give some of the color and fun to you also. In Kigezi, Western Uganda, among the Bakiga, the falling of the locusts (*ensenene*) is a happening eagerly expected and greatly enjoyed by everybody but especially by the school children. For the occasion, a holiday is declared and one can see groups of excited school children go around with baskets and any other kind of container collecting the locusts. These are roasted or fried with peanut butter and accompanied by steamed bananas or millet bread. I found them too much on the greasy side.

A similar happening surrounds the swarming of the flying ants (*ngweng*) in the Acholi area in the North of Uganda. Everywhere in the flat savannah, the anthills are a common feature and a scourge, but when the dry season ends, at the



The community of Daniel Comboni Seminary preparing to feast on a roasted pig.

first rain, they become a blessing because the flying ants come out in millions by night and, attracted by any type of light, they soon lose their wings and crawl on the ground and can be collected by anybody. It is a feast: crowds of people run around with pots and pans to fill them with the little animals. The craving for proteins is such that some people do not even wait for the ants to lose their wings but catch them as they fly and put handful of them straight in their mouth! Generally, they are roasted or fried. I remember one day, just after the passing of the frontline during the fall of Amin, that a Sister friend of mine invited me to go to visit her parents who had been cut off by the war. We traveled together to Kaladima, a village not far from Gulu. As we arrived at the hut, the mother was preparing a meal with the flying ants that had swarmed the previous evening. We sat on the ground, around a delicious dish of *ngweng*, with millet bread and we washed it down with *duma*, a drink extracted from the honey of wild bees. I was very hungry and I feasted on the unusual fare with relish to the great surprise of the Sister's father, a dignified retired catechist who did not expect the young foreign priest to be so appreciative of the local food.

In every safari to the villages for Mass or preaching, we made a point in sharing food with the people. How many times I have witnessed a scene which is vividly described by Sant Daniel Comboni himself in his letters: how he visited the Nuba mountains of the Sudan and the indigenous people welcomed him and his party with cordiality. But what caught his imagination was the fate of the rooster that the villagers chased noisily around the place, executed, plucked, cooked and presented to the guests: an unfortunate fowl whose meat resisted bravely every attack.

The inhabitants of Southern Uganda love their staple food as much as Filipinos love rice. I mean their steamed bananas they call *matoke*. It is a type called plantain in English: they are big and green. The indigenous peel them and place them in a pot with two fingers of water, covering them with their leaves, and put them on the fire. They cook easily by the steam

and when they are cooked, they mash them with a pestle so that the result is a steaming golden mass that they serve on banana leaves. You catch some of it with your right hand, roll it in a lump, stick the thumb on the lump to make a hole for the sauce that goes with it: whether beans or ground nuts or meat or chicken and you put it in your mouth. Delicious!

The Bantu of Southern Uganda, especially the Baganda, go to great lengths in order to have their *matoke* when they have a feast or a celebration, even if they are abroad. I remember that I was in Rome and I had befriended a novice of the Little Sisters of Blessed Charles de Foucauld who have their mother house at the Tre Fontane, close to the Comboni Generalate. She was a Ugandan called Bernadette and belonged to the Bakiga, the tribe I spent my youth with. When the time for her profession came, as we were coming back from the ceremony at Saint Peter Basilica, a couple of Ugandan friends of Sr. Bernadette were carrying a bunch of green bananas that they had collected from the airport, just arrived fresh from Kampala by cargo plane, ready to be cooked and served for the occasion!

Incredible how every single tribe has its alcoholic drinks, mostly fermented from sorghum, maize, cassava, and especially another type of banana for the very purpose called *embiri*. Huge pots of banana wine are always available during civil or religious celebrations. The official name among the Baganda is *mwenge*, but it is popularly called *tonto*, from the verb *okuton-tomera* which means: knocking against one another. The name befits the staggering walk of those who take too much of it.

*“As we arrived at the hut, the mother was preparing a meal with the flying ants that had swarmed the previous evening. We sat on the ground, around a delicious dish of ngweng, with millet bread and we washed it down with duma, a drink extracted from the honey of wild bees. I was very hungry and I feasted on the unusual fare with relish.”*





As a full-time vocation promoter, Fr. Lorenzo traveled all over Uganda.

## Remembering the “Lioness”

Jesus said to the Apostles: “Go to the whole world and preach the Gospel...” It is because of this that the means of transport become so close to the itinerant missionary. They become part of his vicissitudes, adventures, joys and pains. I can’t help feeling some attachment or even affection for them, like my brave “Lioness.” They are certainly part of my memories.

I got my driving license for cars immediately after my ordination but, for five years, my cherished means of transport was a simple *Vespa*. The shape of the scooter gave me a comfortable position even with my black *sotana* and when I was going for long journeys, I could easily put my little suitcase between my legs. I remember my journeys through the Alps, to Brixen, where I could attend the summer courses of Padua

University and visit our German confrères. At summer, the weather is good and you can attempt long journeys even with a simple *Vespa*: I covered the Dolomites mountains for hundreds of kilometers, I reached Innsbruck in Austria: breathtaking views, picnics under the trees, the wind on my face... Marvelous! But the motorcycle can be dangerous. I remember the times I fell, especially during winter when a thin ice film is on the tarmac and you don't see it... Unfortunately, the two second-hand *Vespas* that I used during those years ended miserably on the junk heap the day I lent them to two confrères... The first one was a scholastic who broke his collarbone. He later on became a bishop.

I had my first major car accident in Uganda on the day we went to meet the notorious dictator Idi Amin Dada. The Catholic population of Kigezi had a great expectation of justice from Amin against the engrained discriminations of the previous Protestant rulers. That is why we went in thousands to meet Amin for the first time on May 21, 1971. I even had the chance to shake hands with him. But going home in my old Peugeot 302, with head catechist and parish Sisters as my passengers, my car was hit by a bus that went out of control because of brake failure. By God's mercy, none of us was injured.

Eight years later, it was the fall of Amin and his army was in disarray, retreating in front of the advancing Tanzanians. I was in charge of the Comboni Postulancy in Gulu. I had a second hand 800 Fiat automobile which I hid in the bush to save it from the predatory deserters. When the frontline passed and I went to look for my vehicle, I found that the termites had started building an anthill in it! Few days later, I had to venture on the first long trip, to Kampala. A Comboni Sister told me: "Father, can you give a lift to an American journalist, our guest, who came to do a reportage about Amin and wants to go back to Kampala?" I agreed since I was alone and that was the beginning of an adventurous and memorable journey. The road to the capital was interrupted by innumerable road-blocks. The first day took us only to Aber Mission, a barely one third of the journey. The journalist was a lady, my contempo-

rary and her name was Barbara. She spent the night with the Sisters. Early in the morning, we set off for Kampala and, after one hour driving we reached the bridge over the Nile rapids at Karuma. We were approaching the roadblock on the bridge, when Barbara uttered a cry: "My bag! I have forgotten my bag at the Sisters'. I have my passport, my plane return ticket and my money in it..." She was upset and embarrassed. What could we do but to go back all the way to Aber? As God wanted, we had to spend the second night in the Mission of Kasaala. We reached Kampala the third day. All the long hours spent together, the friendly conversation, the common tastes and interests were the beginning of a friendship that continues to the present day.

The best years of my African experience came when I was full-time vocation promoter and are linked to another Peugeot, a 304 station-wagon I used to call "The Lioness." It is with it that I traveled all over Uganda, visiting schools, seminaries and parishes and speaking of the missionary vocation. Many times, I crossed the Equator with it. I was like a free bird in the bush: I used to pack all my apparatus in the car: a small Honda generator, projector, loudspeaker, tape-recorder, etc... I could arrive in those faraway senior secondary schools, arrange with the headmaster and have the students in the evening, in the open. There, I used to line up my apparatus and have a roaring session with them. With my Peugeot 304, I faced every type of adventure: I even dared to cross the desert between Karamoja and the Pokot. Many other cars I have driven since, but none has replaced in my memory and affection my "Lioness."

*"The best years of my African experience came when I was full time vocation promoter and are linked to another Peugeot, a 304 station-wagon I used to call 'The Lioness.' It was with it that I travelled all over Uganda, visiting schools, seminaries and parishes and speaking of the missionary vocation. Many times, I crossed the Equator with it. I was like a free bird in the bush."*

**JESUS AND THE WOMEN**

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I look at Jesus in the Gospel and at His exemplary relationship with the women in order to understand and appreciate the role different kind of women have played in my life.

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**My four mothers**

The Gospels show that Jesus had a special relationship of appreciation, respect and affection with the women of His time. He listened to them, consoled them, performed miracles for them, allowed them to touch Him, to follow Him and to provide for His needs and those of His apostles. But no woman was important to Him as His Blessed Mother. Likewise, a special link ties the missionary to his mother: he loves her yet his profession obliges him to leave her. My mother, Angelina, resented my choice to be a missionary because it entailed for me to live far away from her. Eventually, her visit to me in Africa contributed to her peace of mind and made her proud to have a missionary son. In the meantime, God gave me other three adopted mothers.

Elizabeth was an Irish woman married to a Welsh convert, with seven children. They lived in a small place in Wales called Newtown. That is where, in 1969, I was assigned to learn English, in the parish priest's residence, under the tutorship of Fr. Beddoes himself. He was a scholarly convert, stern and a bit odd in his lifestyle. The place was cold, the food scarce and the teaching rough. But in the evening, with my Comboni companions, we used to visit Elizabeth's family, sitting around the gas fire, trying to speak English and drinking countless cups of tea. The atmosphere was cordial and we became friends. I kept the link with gentle Elizabeth from Uganda by correspondence. The years passed. The children grew and made their own fami-

lies, some in the States, some in Canada. Peter, the firstborn, was a pilot of the Royal Air Force (RAF) assigned to Cyprus. There Elizabeth retired with her husband. They grew old gracefully in the temperate climate of that beautiful island. Then the husband died and Elizabeth was a widow. In all those years, her letters never failed to reach me.

And then, in 1995, while I was in London, Elizabeth wrote to me: “Dear Fr. Lorenzo, I am coming to Great Britain for the Golden Jubilee of our Catholic Parish in Newtown which will take place on Pentecost Day. Since you are in England, why don’t you come yourself to the feast and we meet again physically.” I accepted the invitation, studied the map and drove to Newtown. I arrived half an hour before the Mass, greeted the young parish priest and introduced myself to the bishop who was present for the occasion. The problem was: how could I rec-



Fr. Lorenzo with Mrs. Elizabeth Conlin, one of his four mothers, and her family.

ognize Elizabeth after all the years that had passed? Ten minutes to the Mass, I asked the sacristan: “Sir, do you know Mrs. Elizabeth Conlin? Is she present in the church?” He said: “Yes, she is there with her whole family. Let me show her to you.” We peeped inside the church and he pointed her out to me. I went to her and said in a loud voice: “Elizabeth, I am Fr. Lorenzo.” This is how we recognized each other after 26 years. I spent a beautiful day with her and the family.

In January 1998, when my mother died, she wrote to me from Cyprus: “Allow me to be your mother. I always wanted one of my seven children to be a priest....” And so it was that for almost ten more years, Elizabeth called me “dear son” and followed my life vicissitudes with her love and prayers. Then, her son Peter wrote to me that she had passed away. She was my last mother to die.

Before her, Lucy had died in Denver, Colorado. I had met her and her husband in 1982, during my sabbatical year and they had adopted me into the family. She was a descendant of Mexicans and native Americans and mother of five. I remained in touch with them for a long time. I remember how, every now and then, I was lifting the receiver from my office in London and calling her on the phone. I knew that she was always there because she was in a wheelchair and could not move. Her voice was so peaceful... How sad when her daughter, Mary, wrote to me that she had died. My fourth mother was Rafaela, an elderly elementary teacher from Buenos Aires, Argentina. We met during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1989. I remember that it was while visiting Ain Karim, Saint John the Baptist’s place, that she proposed to adopt me as son. Her eldest son was the pilot of the President of Argentina, but she had wanted very much to have a son priest. She was full of zeal... A cancer took her away soon after.

*“I was fortunate enough to have four mothers.  
Now, I am really an orphan and waiting  
to join them in God’s own good time.”*



## My soul sisters

Jesus did not have any blood sister, but when He stopped and rested in Bethany, He was happy to enjoy the attentions of Martha and Mary, real soul sisters to Him. The same often happens to priests and missionaries. The most classic example is that of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and her missionary brother, Maurice. Here are the stories of two of my soul sisters: Mariangela and Clare.

It is a fairly common experience for missionaries to have spiritual sisters among the contemplative nuns and also others. It is in the Christian tradition and the examples throughout the history of spirituality are innumerable. It is a beautiful experience which enriches the life of the missionary and it is a source of great support and spiritual progress... I had and have this experience in my missionary life. I want to share a detail of my friendship with Sr. Mariangela which reminds me of something I read in the life of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and touches my heart even now, after many years. Saint Thérèse kept a correspondence with her brother missionary, Maurice Bellière, prayed for him and especially offered all her sufferings for him. One day, one of the convent Sisters came upon her as she was trying, with difficulty, to walk in the cloister, her life now threatened by TB. The sister told her to go and rest, to which came the reply: "I am walking for a missionary."

When I was in Lucca, Italy, as a young priest, in 1968, I befriended a Sister of the Daughters of Saint Zita, Mariangela by name. She was a teacher of Biology and Chemistry in college and involved with the Diocesan Mission Office. Clever and full of enthusiasm, she wanted to go, as a missionary, to Rwanda, where her Order was opening some communities. But, unfortunately, Sr. Mariangela had lost a leg in a car accident and was wearing an artificial limb... For many years, when I was in Uganda, she wrote to me and sometimes, when the prosthesis was giving her pain, especially in climbing steps, she wrote that she was saying to Jesus quietly: "This is for my brother, Padre Renzo." May God give her the reward; she died in 1994.



Sr. Clare and her family at Kabahezi, on the hills of Rukungiri, in Western Uganda.

Sr. Clare is the daughter of a catechist of my former parish of Makiro, Mr. Pius Kataratambi, now retired and living in Kabahezi, on the hills of Rukungiri, facing Kinkisi, in Western Uganda. That is the area of my first missionary experience among the Bakiga people. It was when I had the chance of visiting Uganda extensively that I met again my soul sister, Sr. Clare. She took my visit seriously: she meant to take me to her parents and have a family reunion for the occasion. This is how I recorded the visit in my Ugandan journal: “It takes a long time to reach Kabahezi through the winding track over the hills, up and down. At a certain time, we get stuck in the mud, but we are already in sight of the place of our destination. Sr. Clare’s father, *omwami* Kataratambi, is rushing on foot, with the help of a long staff, to meet us on the road, followed by his wife Flora. We embrace with great affection and the hands press hard on the back, eagerly assessing our mutual strength, according to the greeting custom of the Bakiga.”

The night gathers over the hills. The place is abuzz with activity: bathing, cooking, starting a small generator for light, even going back to the road where a friend, coming to the reunion from Kampala, got himself stuck. The wonderful supper and tumultuous sharing goes deep into the night. At last, silence and sleep reward the tired bodies. In the morning, we

lift our eyes anxiously at the sky; it looks overcast and threatening... If the rain falls, who will help us out of this place?

We gather for an early Mass in the family residence, followed by breakfast... The clouds are heavy over us, but, by the grace of God, no rain is falling. At around 11 a.m., the convoy of two vehicles comes laboriously out of the hills to the tarmac. The journey back to Kampala takes the whole day. I wonder how I used to do it driving alone, without giving it a second thought! Then, I realize that I am no longer 30!

We reach the capital late in the evening and the traffic is still hectic and the nightlife in full swing. Reaching the Comboni residence in Mbuya, I find my bed again, at last, with a sigh of relief. Now, the distance separates me from my *munyanyazi* Clare and her family; most probably, I will never have the chance to see her physically again in this world. Now, only the electronic link of the e-mail remains, rarely, when she has the signal and can open it. Fortunately, prayer is the strongest link and its signal never fails.

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### **Thicker than blood**

God’s love in people can be thicker than blood, especially if it is directed to Jesus in His Blessed Humanity, the most beautiful and fascinating person. Of this type is the extraordinary love of Mary Magdalene for Jesus. A missionary, like Jesus, can be the object of such a love, as you are going to assess from the following episodes that happened in my life.



Sr. Domitilla (*right*) with another Missionary of Charity Sister, in Moroto.



Fr. Lorenzo enjoying his Thursdays' breakfast, assisted by his friend, Sr. Domitilla.

Mary Magdalene loved Jesus with unique intensity: He had given her back freedom, integrity and dignity. She could not resign to the fact that Jesus' body was not in the tomb. She was untiring in her search and wished to complete the works of piety towards the dead body of Jesus that had been somehow interrupted on Friday night because of the Passover: she wanted to wash Jesus' body, to anoint it with embalming perfumes, wrap it tidily and put it to rest. Jesus repaid her devotion by making her the first witness of the Resurrection and granted her a quality leap in her love for Him as her Risen Lord.

When my father died, my mother, Angelina, was alone in the house. My brother Joseph and I did not like that, but we felt powerless. My brother was married a hundred kilometers away; I was in Africa. Then, my parish priest suggested to a young couple, Joseph and Celine, recently married with a baby girl of a few months and who were looking for a house: "Why don't you take over the house of late Mr. Carraro and keep Fr. Lorenzo's mother, as well?" Then, he communicated the idea to us. It looked a crazy proposal, given the way people usually treat their old folks in Europe. Instead, they accepted with enthusi-

asm. Celine was a distant relative of mine, Joseph had come from Sicily to take up the position of postman in my village. The thing worked out beautifully. My mother found a new family and became the grandmother of the children who were born. It was especially Celine who revealed an extraordinary love. For fifteen years, she gave a long and happy old age to my mother. And when my mother eventually died at 94, she and the three children followed the coffin in tears. Now, it is to me that Celine directs her extraordinary capacity of love, welcoming me when I go there, to her family, to the house where I was born, for my periodic vacations. And there is nothing warmer and more lively than my weekly chats with Celine via Skype. Her sisterly love really keeps me sane and in touch with my roots.

There is another woman who occupies a similar place in my heart. It was in 1989 that my bishop in Karamoja called me and said: "I have requested Mother Teresa to open a community of Sisters in our area. We really need them. Thank God, she has agreed, but on one condition: that there is a priest who takes care of them as their chaplain. Would you like to be the one?" I answered: "Certainly, Bishop. It will be my privilege and joy." So it was that, in May 1990, a group of Missionaries of Charity took their residence in the little town of Moroto and started caring, in different ways, for the very many poor of the place. They were five, all young: four from India and one from Africa. Very soon, they became a cherished feature in the streets of Moroto, moving always on foot, two of them together, with their canvas bags and their easy smile.

Every Thursday, I used to go to them, give them talks, hear their confessions and share their Eucharistic adoration. It is then that I came under the influence of their spirituality. How I remember those holy hours in the small, bare chapel, with the naked crucifix and the words "I thirst!" on the wall, the many tiny lamps around the simple monstrance and those young women kneeling on the floor in their white and blue *sari*, in the overwhelming silence of the savannah. I often used to go there also in the morning for Mass and to take breakfast alone at their lobby, assisted by Sr. Domitilla, their Superior. That



is how we became friends. She was a tiny woman, with tiny but strong hands, accustomed to manual work, and a sunny disposition. She was from Kerala, one of six siblings: five girls, all nuns of different Orders, and one boy who got married. She chose the Missionaries of Charity because they required their members to cut their hair and almost never allowed their members to go back home on leave. She professed at twenty and was immediately assigned to Africa. When we met, she had already been a Sister for fifteen years, worked in Tanzania and started a community in Rwanda, before being assigned to Karamoja.

She was like a power station. In her tiny body, she had the energy of ten people. She took me as her spiritual brother with complete trust. Twenty-two years have passed; life and our different vocations have thrown us apart. She is now back in Tanzania, in the far away Tabora region. We may never meet again in this world, but I know that all her prayers and sufferings are and will always be for her brother priest and his mission.

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## **My spiritual granddaughters**

Jesus died too young to have spiritual grandsons and granddaughters. He even discouraged us to call anybody “Father,” because there is only one Father, God, and we are all brothers and sisters. Yet, the experience of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood is itself a gift from God and a natural fruit also of celibate love. And when the years become exceedingly many, it is very sweet to be called “lolo” (grandfather).



Fr. Lorenzo feels like a spiritual grandfather to many religious women he helps.

In the Bible, it is written: “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of light” (*James 1:17*). Saint Paul also writes: “Every paternity in heaven and on earth comes from God the Father” and he prays that “we may comprehend with the saints the breadth, and the length, the height and the depth of the love of Christ” (*Ephesians 3:17-18*). It is within those parameters that we must put the experience of spiritual paternity. Those who call me “Father” do not mean to diminish God’s absolute paternity, but only to honor the participation of this paternity in my ministerial priesthood. I must say that I have experienced my spiritual paternity, especially with the many young men whom I have helped form to the priesthood and missionary life. Quite a few

of them, whom I recruited during the prime of my missionary life in Uganda, are now accomplished members of the clergy and hold position of responsibility in their diocese or in the Comboni Institute. When we meet, it is always a feast in reminiscing the locusts' years we shared together...

But now that I am a free-lance operator and an old man, I am enjoying being a spiritual grandfather to the many young women whom I teach in the Novitiates of the Missionaries of Charity and the Missionary Servants of the Blessed Sacrament and the many others to whom I give retreats and recollections. They come from the Philippines and from all over the Far East, including Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guiney, East Timor... They look at me with the spontaneity and respect of their home cultures; they make me feel at home. It is very beautiful to share with them the knowledge and expe-



Fr. Lorenzo is happy to contribute to the future of the Church in Asia.

rience of a lifetime, dealing in Salvation History, Church History, the Psalms, etc... They are virgin terrains: they look at the world with the freshness of their naivety and inexperience, but also with the eagerness of their youth and their love for Jesus and the Church. They are really my spiritual granddaughters. Recently, I have initiated an unusual experience which is still going on: to teach a group of Chinese young Sisters from mainland China itself who have come to the Philippines to improve their formation. I was asked to be one of the lecturers.

The unusual thing is that they do not know English and I do not know Chinese. One of them, however, was in Rome for three years and knows enough Italian to be able to translate my words and, in this way, we have already completed a week dedicated to "Vocation in the Bible: Dynamics and Characters." It was a wonderful experience, thanks to the intelligence of my interpreter who showed an exceptional capacity of understanding my concepts and Italian expressions. The fact that I made extensive use of the Bible certainly helped. But their eagerness and vivacity were a determining factor of the success. I am looking forward to some more sessions with them.

So, I am happy to contribute to the future of the Church in Asia, by sharing my knowledge and experience with these young women who will spread the message of the Gospel to many remote areas of the Far East and work for the perseverance of Christian communities that, many times, find themselves in minority situations, sometimes even under persecution. They reflect in their traits and behavior the virtues of their peoples who have endured hardship and discrimination, poverty and isolation and have prevailed, thanks to their simple faith and natural honesty. They really need to be introduced to the complexity of our modern life and helped to appreciate and keep their natural gifts and, at the same time, open up to the wider horizons of the universal Church and the challenges of the present-day society. They remind me of the poem written by the famous Jesuit poet, Gerald M. Hopkins: *God's Grandeur*, where he speaks of the world worn out by the passing of the human generations, "all is seared with trade; bleared,



Friars Minor Conventuals after a retreat with Fr. Lorenzo in September 2010.

smear'd with toil; and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell." And for all this, "nature is never spent; there lives the dearest freshness deep down things...." My granddaughters are the bearers of this freshness: with their youth, faith and enthusiasm, they go towards the future. Looking at them, I don't mind my going towards the sunset.

*"My spiritual granddaughters come from the Philippines and from all over the Far East, including Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, East Timor. They look at me with the spontaneity and respect of their home cultures; they make me feel at home. It is very beautiful to share with them the knowledge and experience of a lifetime."*

**THE MISSION OF WRITING**

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When I was a young priest, I studied Journalism and started writing, but then, when I was assigned to Africa, I stopped writing for thirty years. This is the story of how I rediscover my writing skill when assigned to the Philippines and how I was faithful to it even during my struggle with cancer.

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**Santa Teresita's "miracle"**

This year, I will be 75. I was ordained priest in 1962, which is the year of Vatican II and of the independence of Uganda. As a young priest, my superiors decided to send me back to Padua where I had come from when I joined the Combonis, to take up Classic Literature at the historic Padua University, in order to teach in our minor seminaries. One day, one of the two confrères who were my companions in studies, told me: "What will be the use of a degree in Classic Literature for the missions? Why don't you enroll in the Journalism School newly-opened by the Sacred Heart University of Milan? That will prepare you for writing in our many missionary magazines that we have all over the world."

I was captured by the proposal and while still writing my thesis for Literature, I enrolled and started attending lessons in Bergamo, where the Journalism School was located. I remember the long trips by train, the enthusiasm of the first batch of students at the beautiful lectures of Mario Apollonio and Fr. Nazareno Taddei, S.J., and the other experts in the fields of communications like G. Bettetini and G. Bianchi. As God wanted, I concluded successfully my degree in Literature and left Padua to go to teach in our Liceo Comboniano in Lucca, Tuscany. The pursuit of my post-graduate Diploma in Journalism became more adventurous since I had to combine my teaching and again traveling to Bergamo to complete the courses, un-





St. Thérèse of Lisieux 'made' Fr. Lorenzo's journalistic talents come alive.

dergo my exams and write another thesis. I took as my topic: "The adaptation of the Catholic Church in Africa at the time of Vatican II and the independence of the African countries": I researched this topic in the French-speaking African press. I really enjoyed myself in reading and writing about "adattamento/adaptation" never suspecting the inadequacy of the term that was very soon substituted with *inculturazione/inculturation*.

To make my journalistic training more concrete, I started writing. I wrote 20 articles that were published by different Catholic papers and I submitted them, for consideration, to the Council of Journalists of my region, the Veneto. The articles were approved and I was granted the Journalist Card and my name was written in the Album of the Profession. The card reached me in Uganda. By the time I finished the exams and discussed the thesis, momentous developments had taken place in Italy. It was the year 1969 and the Comboni Institute was experiencing the tidal wave of the students' revolution that

had started the year before in France. The unrest reached our candidates in the Novitiates and even in the minor seminaries. All our formation houses were closed. For the Liceo, the Superiors decided to send our students to the public schools. That very year was also the year of our first special chapter after Vatican II and it can be considered as a kind of re-foundation of the institute. The formation curriculum was then totally revised and given the shape that has lasted up to the present time.

As for us, young professors, members of the staff, we found ourselves free to pursue our dream to go to the missions. I was assigned to Uganda, where I arrived on December 10, 1970. I was immediately taken up by the learning of new languages and the missionary work. Twenty-three years passed among military coups, wars and revolutions and I forgot completely my original resolution to write and overlooked the training I had had... My companions did not spare their sarcasm about the journalist who did not write. I accepted their criticism but somehow, I did not break the spell... Other years came, other commitments, especially in the field of formation, first in London and then, in 1999, in the Philippines. It was here that the then editor of *World Mission*, Fr. David Glenday, asked me the text of the talk about “Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus in the Heart of Mission” I had given to the confrères and made it into an article that appeared in the magazine in January 2000 at the time when the relics of Saint Thérèse were coming to the Philippines. That was the beginning of my collaboration with *World Mission* and it is nice to know that it was the Little Flower, the Saint of the Third Millennium, who brought me out of my journalistic paralysis and released my writing energies. May God bless her who points us towards the future.

*“It is nice to know that it was the Little Flower, the Saint of the Third Millennium, who brought me out of my journalistic paralysis and released my writing energies. May God bless her who points us towards the future.”*

## Writing as therapy

On February 18, 2008, while I was putting on the chasuble to celebrate Mass, I threw an eye on the long mirror in front of me and I noticed a growth in my neck, just below the right ear. I was in the sacristy of the Sacro Costato Sisters in Scout Magbanwa Street, in Quezon City, Metro Manila. After Mass, I had another more careful look... Yes, something unusual was growing in my neck! I touched it and it was not painful. In short, this was the beginning of my adventure with cancer. I went to Saint Luke's Hospital and I was diagnosed first with lymphoma, then, after excision biopsy and many laboratory tests, with neuro-endocrine small cell lung cancer. I was told that I had to undergo chemotherapy. I then started the six cycles that kept me busy for five months, every time being hospitalized for three days and then recovering slowly from the side effect in about ten days.



The mission of writing for *World Mission*, while fighting cancer, was therapeutic.

I was always accompanied to the hospital by Fr. Victor T. Dias, my superior, who showed for me an extraordinary kindness and concern. The two of us, in and out of Saint Luke's, became very popular: people knew that we were priests and they seemed to have a special pleasure in meeting us and greeting us. An even greater kindness and generosity I experienced with the doctors who treated me. It was a special time: I could not go out for apostolate; some days, I had to eat my meals in my room; I even celebrated Mass with a mask. My mouth had a metallic taste; I suffered a nasty numbness in my extremities; I was so weak that you could have knocked me down with a feather or, to quote P. J. Wodehouse, with a toothpick!

In those circumstances, what occupied my interests and kept my sanity was the task of writing my monthly contribution to *World Mission* magazine. Day by day, little by little, with grim determination, I searched the web for material, copied, pasted, wrote and polished, in this way keeping my nose above the water and not allowing the sense of frustration and discouragement to have the upper hand. Now that more than three years have passed since I concluded the therapy and after the successful result of all my checkups, I wholeheartedly thank God and am back to my normal life with a new taste for my good health, for my beloved priestly and missionary activity and even for my daily walk along Roosevelt Avenue, Quezon City, inhaling the polluted air full of exhaust fumes with relish and cheerfulness.

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Fr. Lorenzo in Kambuga Parish, Kigezi, his second pastoral assignment, in 1982.

## Bridge-builders

By definition, missionaries are bridge-builders, bringing together in unity peoples of different origin, into the same family of the Church. This they can do in the measure that they are able to go out of their own world (*Ad extra*, outwards) and enter into the world of others. The bridge they build is love. African drums resounded in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, on October 5, 2003, the day of Saint Daniel Comboni's canonization, crowning a movement that started with the proclamation to the sainthood of the Uganda Martyrs in 1964, during Vatican II, and with the solemn Mass of Pope Paul VI celebrated over their sacred relics in Namugongo, during the Pope's trip to Uganda in 1969. God's universal salvific will takes people out of their limited horizons and makes them emerge towards an ideal of unity and communion.

The History of Salvation started with Abraham being commanded by the Lord to go out of his land and his extended family and allowing God to lead him outside his security, towards the place that God had prepared for him. And then, through-

out the Old Testament, we witness the people of Israel always tempted to close themselves in themselves, and God pushing them, time and again, through the circumstances, to be exposed to the different realities of humanity as they appeared outside the boundaries of the Jewish state. The exile first and the *diaspora* (dispersion) afterwards are opportunities that invite the Jewish people to go out of their traditional borders and meet the rest of humanity.

The New Testament is the time when the Gentiles are called to share the inheritance of the Chosen People. Jesus is the Mediator sent by God the Father: through His death and resurrection, He bridges the gap between God and humanity and knocks down the barriers that separate us. The happening of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit mark the departure of the twelve apostles for 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 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).

As a Comboni missionary in Africa, 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 the 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!

At the beginning of December 2007, I celebrated the anniversary of my departure for Africa. My destination was Uganda where the Lord was preparing for me a permanence of more than 20 years. I remember the occasion very well. My parents wanted to accompany me to the airport, not a simple thing considering that we had to cover the distance of about 700 km to do that, from Venice to Rome. When, at last, we entered together the airport lounge, an incredible view confronted us: the lounge was full of missionaries bound for East Africa: all young, all in their different, colorful uniforms... It was a RAP-TIM 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, maybe, part of the last wave of that enormous missionary movement, originated at the beginning of the 19th century that took the Christian faith to the farthest corners of the world. It is within this human ground swell that many missionary congregations came into existence, among them, the Comboni Missionaries.



A visit to Kigezi with Karimojong seminarians with the tea estates as background.

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*). Maybe, 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, thousands 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.

*"Mother Teresa was 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, thousands have followed her into the slums and spread Jesus' light into the lives of millions of non-Christians."*

## 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 our way to make Jesus’ love present to them. It is our mission. Saint Daniel Comboni, during his lifetime, wrote many times that he was 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.



Fr. Lorenzo with Jesuit Father Matungulo Otene (*left*) in Kinshasa, in 1984.

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.



Morning assembly and parade at Nadiket Diocesan Minor Seminary in Karamoja.

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.

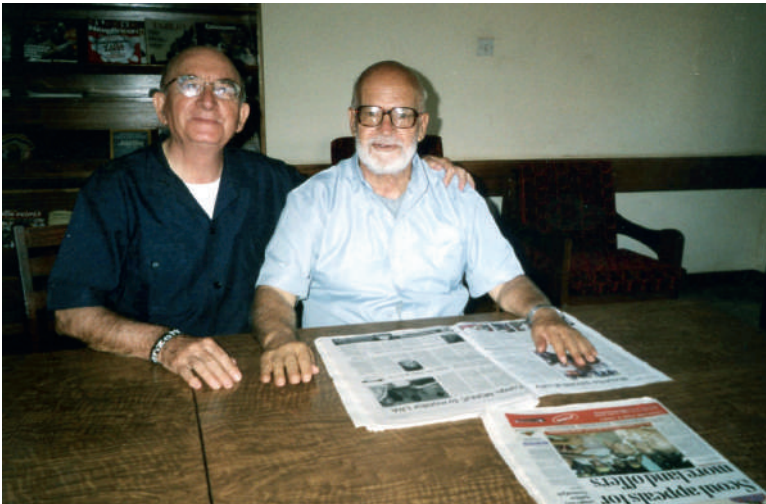
*“It is the faithfulness to the call of the poor, in Africa, in Latin America and in other countries of the South of the world, that makes us feel alive and gives taste to our lives, makes us more humane and essential, stops us from going to seed and become mere Church functionaries.”*

## **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,



Fr. Paolino Tomaino, in spite of his old age, exudes missionary enthusiasm.

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.

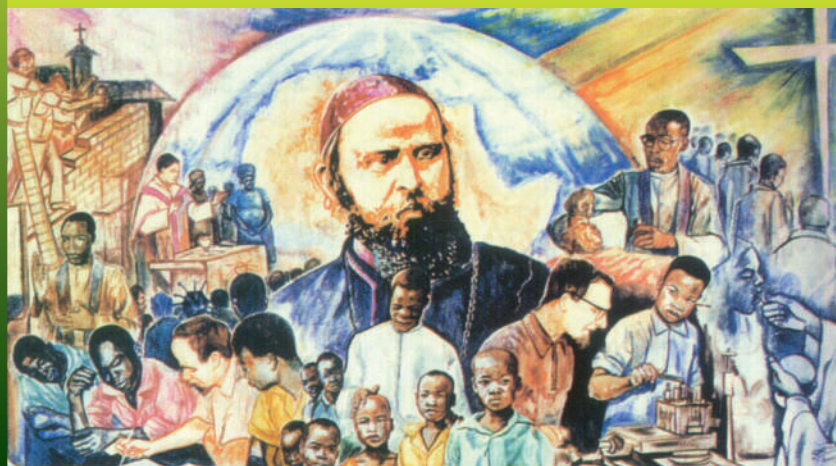
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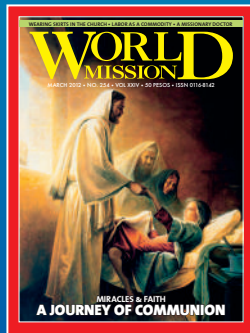
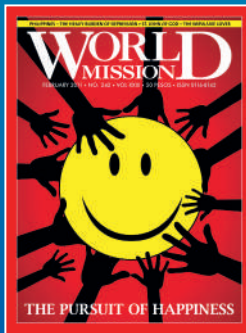
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## PRAYER FOR THE MISSIONS AND VOCATIONS

O Father,  
You want all peoples to be saved:  
awaken in every believer  
a strong missionary desire  
to witness and announce Christ  
to all those who do not know Him.  
Through the intercession  
of Saint Daniel Comboni,  
strengthen all missionaries in their work  
of evangelization and raise up  
new vocations for the missions.  
O Blessed Virgin Mary,  
Queen of the Apostles, you presented  
the incarnate Word to all peoples.  
Guide all men and women  
to the One who is the Light  
that enlightens every person,  
and transform us into His generous co-workers.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.  
Here I am Lord... SEND ME!

