



**THE COMBONI FAMILY  
COMMISSION ON MINISTERIALITY**

**WE  
ARE  
MISSION:  
WITNESSES TO  
SOCIAL MINISTRY  
WITHIN THE COMBONI FAMILY**

Edited by  
**FERNANDO ZOLLI and DANIELE MOSCHETTI**



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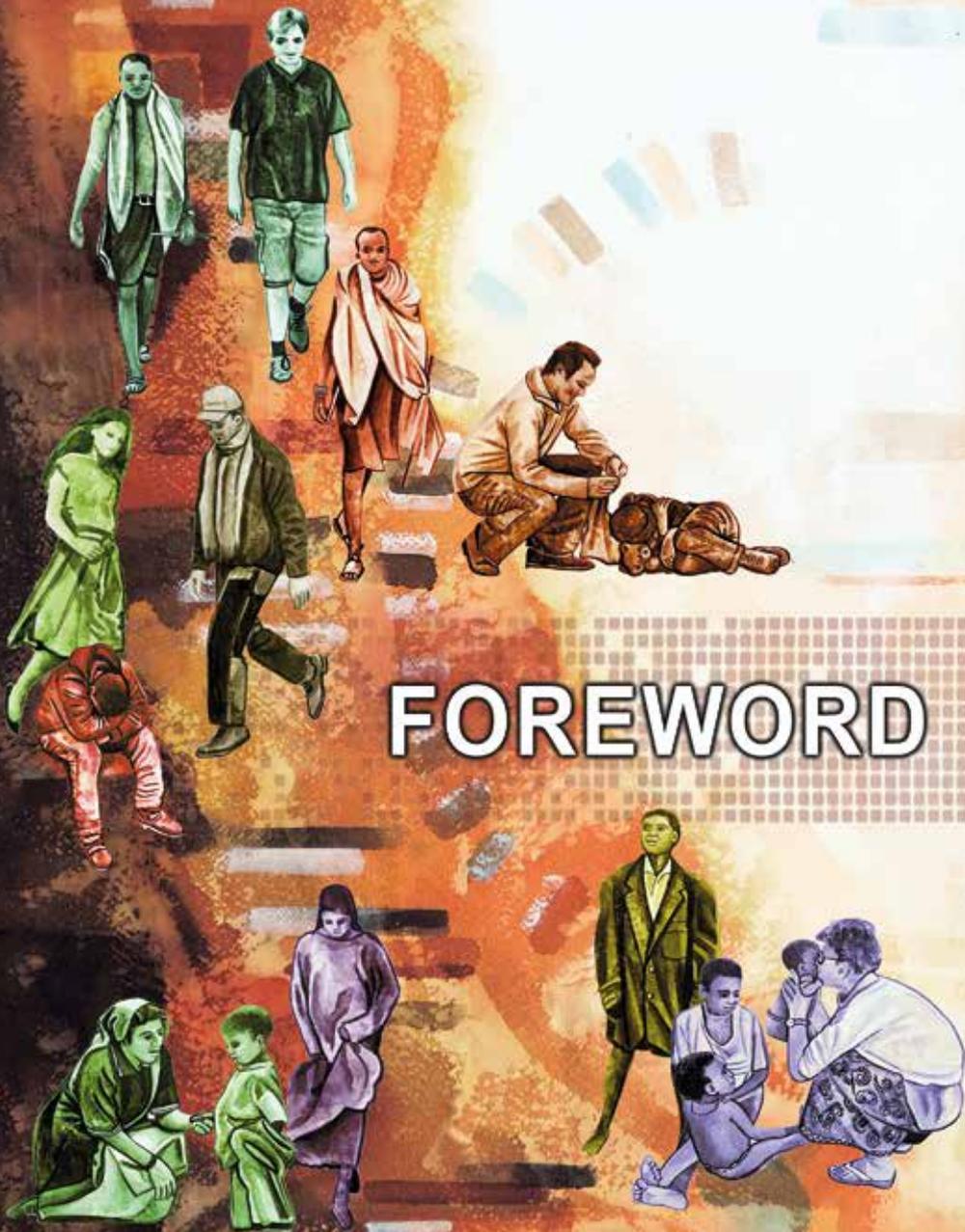
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# FOREWORD



# Why a second volume?

Sister Luigina Coccia and Father Tesfaye Tadesse  
And their General Councils CMS - MCCJ

*«Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person. A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills. For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body so also is Christ.» 1 Corinthians 12*

Dearest Brothers and Sisters, you will surely remember the first volume *Be the change you wish to see in the world*; the ideas animating and guiding us were presented to you at that time, mainly as far as it concerns Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. Those paths were in their turn possible thanks to the encounters between the World Social Forums (WSF) and the Forums organised by the Comboni Family concomitantly with WSFs.

Our commitment in the field of social ministeriality is huge in terms of space and time. We are heirs to a **rich ministerial experience** who was born and raised over these 150 years of History and Life due to many missionaries brothers and sisters' dedication. They have interpreted the uniqueness of our Charism with apostolic enthusiasm and creativeness.

Our wish is to share the broad range of the concrete ministerial experiences this second volume presents. First, to appreciate what we are already doing thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit and also to our communal and individual answers. Secondly, to value the different works carried out by the Comboni missionaries which are complementary and mutually enriching by revealing us the fullness of the Charism with ever-increasing dynamism.

We are convinced that sharing this plurality of experiences will work as charismatic attraction to young people attending our community, toward the option of an answer to God on their part as Comboni missionary brothers and sisters.

We welcome the gift of this second volume with renewed faith in the light of hope that enlivens us. Even if our Institutes and their Comboni Mission go far beyond this specific experiences, the encounter with them is important especially **to younger generations' formation journey by taking care of their academic level.**

These experiences of missionary presence in the field of social pastoral care are varied as well as diverse with regard to the geographical context of action. **Saint Daniel Comboni's Charism** pervades them, as they always are an answer by the Gospel to concrete situations of impoverishment and marginalisation.

They further help us **deepen the spirituality** which sustains our social ministeriality. While leafing through the pages of this book, you will find a great **ministerial variety**. It is therefore noteworthy that many times a single project is fuelled by many particular services: this means to respond holistically/integrally to human beings' complex reality and to the environment where they live. We invite and encourage you to welcome **the gift of the Holy Spirit** who wants us in our turn to welcome the newness which is inherent into the folds of the social complexity, and then to open ourselves to the beauty of the upright life according to the teachings of the Gospel.

We rejoice with the profound desire to **transform reality** which motivates the efforts of those who have experienced these paths firsthand. It is wonderful to understand that we are contributing significantly to making people the real protagonists of their own history. This is an extremely important dimension, we might say constitutive, to the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*. This book helps us to evaluate how various ministries are having impact on the social transformation of reality, and how our ministerial presence is meeting an actual necessity given by the signs of the times where we live.

The **collaborative dimension** of these experiences is a further element underlining the richness of this volume. Behind them, it is really important to highlight the effort of a team operating at various levels of commitment and sharing gifts. As Comboni Family and inter-congregational experience, we rejoice and validate such paths that bear witness to the importance and the emergency of being and living our mission in communion with each others.

Ministerial cooperation is the core foundation of the dream we were born from: ecclesial experience has to be built together, and we must be able to create **alliances** with other participants sharing our vision now more than ever. As General Directions of the SMC and the MCCJ and Central Committee of the CLM, we have received the proposal to set up the Comboni Family Commission **to develop criteria and common guidelines on ministerial collaboration** according to the Comboni Charism in order to help each other along this path. We are very grateful to the members of this commission for the work they carry on, and we sincerely wish them all the best. We are sure of their commitment - both as Comboni Family and individuals - in helping us giving life and supporting different ways of cooperating toward an aware social ministeriality which should be focused on adequate growth - both human and spiritual - and on social transformation as a whole.

The Synod for the Amazon, which has just ended in these days, has provided us with a document. Four kinds of conversions are required, and they are pastoral, cultural, ecological and synodal conversion; only in this way, a new world is possible. We surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit's living action while we are entrusting to Him the fruits of this great ecclesial event, and the journey this second volume has embarked on. Enjoy the reading and do not forget to spread the good news you will find in this book!



# Presentation

**Members of the Social Ministry Commission: Father Daniele Moschetti, Sister Maria Teresa Ratti, Mister Marco Piccione, Sister H el ene Isra el Soloumta Kamkol, Father Fernando Zolli**

**Partners: Father Domenico Guarino, Father Joseph Mumbere Musanga, Father Fernando Gonz alez Galarza, Brother Alberto Parise, Father Arlindo Pinto**

Words and facts, ideas and actions are dynamics of a process that helps to grow, to face and to transform situations and contexts that challenge our everyday life. Thinking and acting are the two poles of human experience that, by interconnecting, illuminate and complete each other, thus giving answers and starting solutions to the historical evolution of events and of life experience itself; this symbiosis also helps to seize opportunities and to manage the critical aspects of each historical process.

The Comboni charismatic experience was born and grew in this way; it started from the concrete experience and contact with the reality of Africa, followed the ancient path that others had walked before (Writings n. 2746), took up the socio-cultural, religious, anthropological and environmental challenges, and proposed a new system, which found its completion and clarity in the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa with Africa itself.

Comboni's Plan, as we well know, was a gift of divine inspiration, but in the same way it was the result of meetings, debates, revisions; there was no lack of misunderstandings, criticism and positions that caused suffering, divisions, rejections and exclusions. From the first trip to Africa, undertaken by Comboni when he was only twenty-six years old (1857), as a member of the expedition organised by Don Mazza's Institute, until the publication of the Plan (1864), seven years of research, discernment, revisions, prayers and inspirations passed, until it offered us an instrument that is still valid today in many of its features and which, along with the *Postulatum pro Nigris*, presented by Comboni to the Fathers of the First Vatican Council, constitute fundamental paradigms of reference for the evangelizing work of the Comboni Family in favour of

all the existential peripheries which, everywhere in the world, ask to be introduced to the beautiful cause of the values of the Kingdom.

Theory and practice must proceed together and be articulated in the dynamics of daily life, as Benedict XVI reminds us: “*Deeds without knowledge are blind and knowledge without love is sterile*” (*Caritas in Veritate*, n. 30). A combination that is a guarantee of effectiveness for the proclamation of the Gospel in every part of the world and in every circumstance. **Albert Einstein had had the same perception by starting from a different perspective: “*Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind.*”**

In this epochal change - an expression of Pope Francis - there is a need to understand how the Church and how the Gospel, which the Church bears witness to, can change reality, can have the capacity to influence the social, political, economic and cultural life of peoples and the ecosystem of the territories. The Gospel as the living Word, not as a dead word. This is the great objective that the book is proposing: **to present the orthopraxis of the social ministries of the Comboni Family**, from Vatican Council II to the present day.

This book, in fact, follows the publication of the first volume, entitled: “***Be the change you wish to see in the world***” (2018), where the biblical-theological, pastoral, sociological and charismatic parameters that have motivated and nourished the commitment of Comboni’s daughters and sons in recent decades have been highlighted.

One would not understand the content of this second volume, without having examined in depth the reasons and motivations presented in the first volume, which motivated the members of the Comboni family to commit themselves to social ministry. In this second volume, therefore, is presented the immersion of the Comboni family mission in the reality of life in various cultural and social contexts and exalted the originality and vitality of the Comboni charism in ministerial service with varied approaches, methods, dynamics and means, thanks to its intrinsic dynamism.

Men and women, consecrated and lay people who share the same charism, have interpreted it with creativity and adapted it to the various circumstances and cultural contexts, to make it effective and meaningful for the expectations of billions of people who are considered “**waste**” by the tech-

nical-financial system and, as Comboni wrote at the beginning of his Plan, each one was «...*transported by the impetus of that love set alight by the divine flame on Calvary hill, when it came forth from the side of the Crucified One to embrace the whole human family, he felt his heart beat faster, and a divine power seemed to drive him towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers of his, upon whom it seemed that the fearful curse of Canaan still bore down*» (Writing no. 2742).

In the book that we present to you, through the account of the commitments, chosen from among many, you will be surprised by the sensitivity and generosity of the women, whom Comboni wanted to be *Pious Mothers*, and thus capable of bearing upon themselves the destiny of the peoples entrusted to their care; by the passionate and loving zeal of the consecrated and lay men; the compassion of all of them for the poorest and most abandoned; by the holy indignation for the abuses and injustices against the helpless and defenceless; the sharing of the conditions of life of the excluded; the fidelity to the word given even in the case of persecution; the sober lifestyle respectful of the common good; the promotion of reconciliation in conflicts and the building of fraternity; by the acceptance of and respect for cultural and religious differences; the capacity to support new ways of life no longer separated but together; the care and promotion of life in abundance; the education and alternative systems of teaching; the awakening of consciences through the means of social communication; the defence of fundamental rights and the values of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; the formation of consciences; the acceptance and sharing of goods; the care of the common home against the plundering of predators by trade....

All these realities, far from being self-exaltation, help to discover those “*hidden stones*” (Writings n. 2701) that support the Church building and motivate everyone to get more and more involved in the realization of the plan of regeneration: plan of universal fraternity with all the living beings.

## **Time for a change**

For years we have been repeating that times have changed; we often engage in analysis of situations, we get help from all sorts of experts; we understand that this is no longer the time to preserve or even less to

change; but the answers we give are still timid in the face of the challenge of the present hour. Now is the time for change! Pope Francis also repeated it to us in the Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: «... it is necessary to move from a pastoral care of simple preservation to a pastoral care that is **decidedly missionary**» (n. 15). And who better than us, missionaries and missionaries, understands this appeal? The first book, and especially this second volume, help us to discover the new that is already taking place in the evangelizing work of the Combonian Family; at the same time, they urge us to make this journey our own:

### **a) Remembering**

Social ministry leads the disciple, man or woman, to live by incarnating themselves in the reality that welcomes them; it keeps its gaze stretched out towards the new that is to come and commits oneself to making it visible in the present; but he/she is aware that this gift does not belong to him/her, because it is free; for this reason, he/she is not detached from that common thread, achieved over time through gestures, initiatives, works of men and women who, in fidelity to that gift, have kept hope alive and have made the poor happy.

To remember, therefore, means letting oneself be guided and enlightened by the same spirit that has inspired those who have gone before us and those who live close to us, letting all protagonism and self-referentiality fall, knowing that in every human work, in every ministry of social transformation it is He, the Master, who must grow and the disciple must diminish. This is the *sine qua non* condition for our own personal-communitarian-ecclesial transformation.

### **b) Evaluate the evangelizing practice**

With the contemplative and sapiential gaze and with the same optimism of Comboni, who saw a bright future for Africa, to assess the extent to which our action has contributed to social transformation; lifted the people out of poverty and helped to eliminate the causes of the unjust global system that condemns and excludes more and more millions of poor people, increasingly impoverished. Verify the effectiveness of the methods, the means, the privileged alliances in our choices and, without complacency, ask ourselves to what extent our practice is an alternative to this neoliberal system.

### c) Living the gratitude of the gift

Gratitude is one of the characteristics of the disciple, which makes his heart free and joyful, aware of the great gift he has received; he does not allow himself to be dominated by the anxiety of the results and he is not discouraged in the face of failures, opposition and trials of the path he has undertaken. Comboni, together with his men and women companions of the first hour, could face any difficulty because he was sustained by the deep inner peace that flowed from the bliss of having become part of a gift of grace far greater than they were. Their testimony must sustain us within the complexity of our daily life.

### d) Making the underlying mysticism visible in practice

Social ministry is the fruit of an unconditional love for the realization of the values of the Kingdom, of justice, peace and the universal fraternity/sorority. The commitment to make them visible and concrete in daily life opens the mind and heart to grasp, like sentinels in the dawn, the premonitory signs of the times and places; it touches the innermost part and opens unthinkable perspectives; it allows itself to be pierced by the poverty and abandonment of the people, because they are **“like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6, 30-44)**; it disposes itself to assume a lifestyle that is incarnate, sober, supportive and welcoming. It creates communion and promotes the collaboration and participation of every person, without distinction of creed, race (a term that we must erase from our vocabulary: there are no races), culture and gender; it escapes from all protagonism and promotes collective action, in order to create a solid basis for the alternative to all that is obscure and rejects the providential plan of God, Who wants everyone to be saved and have life in abundance (Jn 10, 10).

To the appeal of Comboni, who was calling the whole Church and all the people of good will not to let **“the HOUR of Africa”** pass in vain, Pope Francis, in the present historical moment, helps us with the love of a pastor, to broaden our horizons and to grasp that it is also **the HOUR of the Church**, no longer in a defensive attitude and entrenched on itself, but outward-looking towards every existential periphery (*Evangelii Gaudium*). It is also the **HOUR of the common house** (*Laudato Si'*), where everything is interconnected. Integral ecology is proposed as a paradigm for socio-environmental change, conscious that it is re-

alised to the extent that everything that exists in the common house is valued, respected and included in the realisation of the divine plan. In this way, the conditions are set for the alternative to the system of financialisation of the market economy, in favour of a civil economy, solidarity and communion. It also defines a new educational pact with all people of good will for the assimilation and transmission of the values of justice, peace and care of the common home. We live as persons converted according to the parameters of this ecological spirituality.

### **e) Regenerate ourselves in order to regenerate**

The word regeneration, which Comboni made his own by taking it from the political situation of his time, is the charismatic keyword of the Comboni men and women in the praxis of Social Ministry. A constant regeneration that embraces the whole of life, from basic formation to ongoing formation. Every age in one's existence is the propitious moment to regenerate itself; not only during the time of growth, expansion of interests and active commitments, but also during the time of rest and inactivity, sickness and old age. A regenerated person will in turn be an instrument and agent of regeneration, personal, community and social. This is why the method of the *"Tabula rasa"* as a presupposition of evangelisation is the negation of the social ministry; destroying, annihilating, standardising and homologating in order to reconstruct the future starting from one's own schemes, from one's own cosmos vision, from one's own interests means regressing and preventing the force of the Spirit from stirring the waters of immobility and of the stereotype *"we have always done so"*.

In Social Ministry one never starts from zero, because in regeneration it is necessary to grasp the potential, the values, the opportunities that people already offer and only through communion, the exchange of knowledge, skills and concrete ways, a new humanity and a new world are built. All of us, in fact, in the Social Ministry, become subjects of transformation. There are no more teachers and students, but we are all disciples of the only Master of life.

### **An ambitious project**

Since 2007, the Comboni Family has taken part in the World Social Forum, an event that is organised every two years and sees the forces of

popular movements and agents of transformation from the grassroots for a new possible world. This participation has proved to be fundamental to increase collaboration with all the other members of the Comboni Family, consecrated and lay, to broaden the horizons of the commitment to social ministry, to articulate with other ecclesial and lay forces and to build a new world and give hope to the poor, the young, the women and the workers.

In the first World Social Forums, the Comboni Family was spectator and observer; as the experience grew, it became a protagonist within this world event, in the sense that some significant experiences, lived in the various continents, in collaboration with other forces present on the territory, were presented. They addressed human trafficking; inter-religious dialogue at the service of peace; land grabbing; the need to become aware of climate change and the threat to the common home; the plundering of common goods; the situation of the forgotten wars, especially in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo; the Mozambican project 'No Savana' for the occupation of immense areas of land in favour of a multinational agri-food project, in order to export but to the detriment of small local producers and owners...

In Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, where the last World Social Forum was held in March 2018, the 53 participants of the Comboni Family came up with the suggestion to propose a Forum on Social Ministries at the level of all the Comboni Institutes. This proposal, elaborated and presented to the leaders of our Comboni Institutes, men and women, Seculars and Laity, received the consent and mandate to organise the next participation in the World Social Forum, probably in Mexico in 2021, the preparation and realization of a Forum on Social Ministries for the Comboni Family in 2020, the charting of the social ministries and the publication of this second volume.

The project is undoubtedly ambitious and demanding in terms of involving people, means and timing. But it is worthy for the good and the future of the Comboni's work. The General Councils have appointed a Commission with the tasks listed above and with these objectives to be achieved:

- *Elaborate common criteria, modalities and principles in already existing experiences of collaboration framing them in an institutional perspective.*

- *Evaluate how the various ministries have an impact of social transformation on the reality and how our ministerial presence responds to a real need of the signs of the times.*

The book that we are publishing and the cards of the mapping will be the basic tools for the Forum of Social Ministeriality, but they will also help to better articulate our commitment in the various continents, through an exchange of ideas, methods and means, which, while respecting the conditions and originality of each continent, may be articulated starting from common priorities and objectives, for example, on the same line with which Pope Francis pointed out to the social movements, gathered in Rome on 6 October 2017, the three Ts: *Techo, Trabajo, Tierra* (Roof, Work and Land).

### **But also, a limited project**

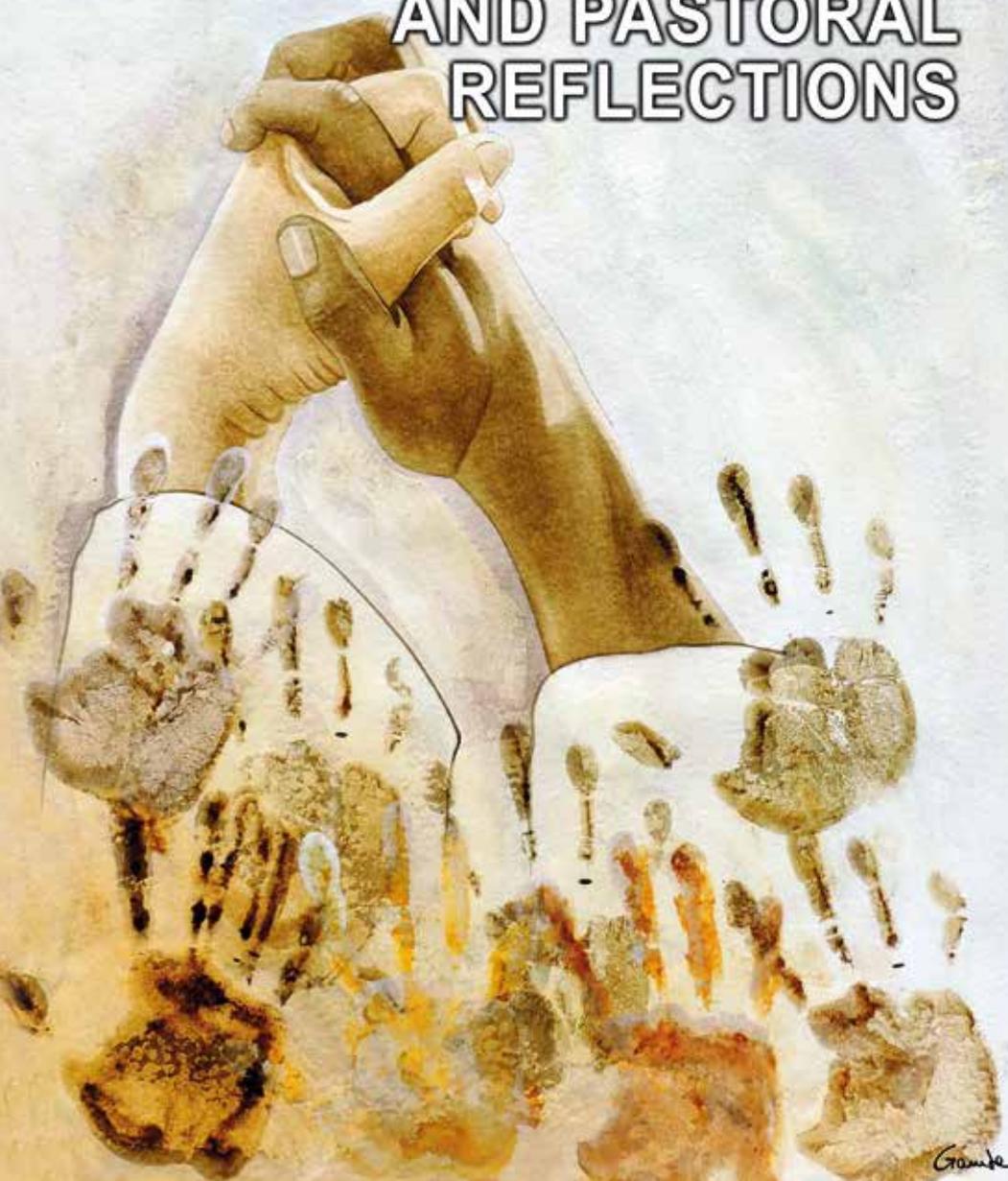
Especially for two reasons.

First of all because the great richness of Comboni's work cannot be enclosed in a few words; the words, at times, are inadequate to express years of commitment, of struggles, of hopes, of results, of failures, of individual and community growth.

Secondly, it is necessary to bear in mind that every vision is partial and expresses a part of some points of view.

The desire, however, of this second volume, is to motivate, to arouse, to let each and every member of the Comboni Family enter into the dynamic and vital process of the mission, that same spirit that moved our Founder and so many missionaries, men and women, who preceded us and who transmitted to us this immense love that came forth from the pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd who, yesterday as today, beats in unison with the hearts of the people who welcome us. With a 'synodal' spirit we continue our journey, happy to share our lives so that humanity and all creation may forever be ***"brought together under Christ"*** (Eph 1:10).

THEOLOGICAL,  
BIBLICAL  
AND PASTORAL  
REFLECTIONS





# Social ministry: learning from Africa

**Francesco Pierli**  
**Comboni Missionary**

**Kenya**

## **Foreword**

This article is a sharing of 25 years of experience of Social Ministry through the *Institute for Social Transformation* (formerly Institute of Social Ministry in Mission) at Tangaza University College in Nairobi (Kenya). An experience born in the decade of transition between the second and third millennium of the Christian era, as an actualization of Comboni's vision elaborated in the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa through Africa of 1864 and to enter the new millennium with new operational stimuli and a methodology of transformation*. The word *ministeriality* is crucial because it indicates that it is a transformation that is never a mere social event, but the implementation of a *mystery - Christo-cosmic* (St. Paul), where the social aspect is the Incarnation, for the coming of a new order that Jesus called *the Kingdom of God*. There is therefore a charismatic aspect *from above*, Spirit and Word, and one *from below*, consisting of professionalism, culture and processes of government of a people.

This is the fundamental characteristic of every ministry, that is, the interweaving of the human and transcendent dimensions. Thus, in practice, we see the intervention of the community in the choice of candidates (competence, human maturity, experience of leading a community); then there is *the invocation* of the Holy Spirit to anoint (strengthening from above) the candidate for the ministry, and to confer a mandate on the part of the Christian community; finally, *the mission* on behalf of the community, to which the envoys must then render an account (see Acts 6 and 13). Whoever is invested with responsibility for a ministry always acts on behalf of the community.

*Evangelization* to build the Kingdom of God in the world according

to Jesus' mission has two fundamental aspects: *a religious one and a social one*. The religious one is the revision and transformation of the religious experiences of the various human groups on the model of the evangelization of Jesus; the social one is based on interpersonal relationships and the environment. The 1971 Synod of Bishops on *Justice in the World* affirmed this:

“Action for justice and the transformation of the world clearly appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, that is, of the mission of the Church, for the redemption and liberation of the human race from all sorts of oppressive situations” (GM 6).

Pope Francis in the *Evangelii Gaudium* specifies:

*“I would now like to share my concerns about the social dimension of evangelization, precisely because if this dimension is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization”* (EG 176).

## **1. A process, not an episode**

First of all, the word “ministry” means action and commitment to implement something that must lead to a concrete transformation for the improvement of society. It is not an isolated action, an episode, like giving alms to a poor person, or accompanying a blind person across the street. *Ministry* implies continuous action, according to a global plan, with broad objectives, with a clear methodology and pursued by people invested with a mandate, supported by a spirituality and mysticism inspired by Christ, by the prophetic tradition and by other great models of social transformers, not necessarily Christians, such as Gandhi. *Ministry*, therefore, implies transformative action. Pope Francis would speak of transforming *processes*, with defined objectives to be pursued, with ceaseless action, by competent people. *Social ministry* implies that the human group to be accompanied is not necessarily only the Church as such, but society, that is, the human community organised in many groups. When we speak of “society”, we mean humanity not as a mass, but as a group articulated in community, according to the criteria that the group itself has chosen as an aggregating point. For example, the Church as a community of faith is part of society; a sports association

is part of society, a school is part of society. *Social ministry*, therefore, implies an activity aimed at a group, or several groups, among the many that make up society; a group within society that, by improving itself, also promotes a positive transformation of society as such.

## **2. For the Kingdom of God**

We often limit ministry to the ecclesial sphere. This is very restrictive! Ministeriality has the purpose of the Kingdom of God *to be proclaimed*, although it is already present, through positive values and processes already in place, and *to be instilled* because it is absent due to the many social evils. Ministeriality implies an action oriented to the transformation of society, according to various types of modalities, according to the specificity of the social problem to which a given social ministry seeks to respond. There must therefore be a clear reference to the society that needs to be transformed. If there is a community of faith, which we call “church” in the case of the Christian faith (but there are also many other communities based on other confessions), it is seen as part of the society, bound by faith as an aggregating criterion of its members. The church is not an end in itself, its goal is to transform society and the environment to which the faith group belongs.

## **3. A radical transformation: from dependency to protagonism**

So, what is the primary objective of Social Ministry? It is *not to make people feel better*, nor to raise the level, the standard of living, or to solve a given social problem. That is not its main objective. Social ministry inspire, help, animate a group *to become a protagonist* in the resolution of their problems. Comboni would say that it is *to regenerate Africa with Africa*. Social ministry, therefore, for example in the context of a slum, aims to encourage residents to take charge of their own lives and to invent initiatives to transform the slum into a human environment. The focus is not on what others have to do to transform the shantytown, but on the spirit of initiative, creativity and organisation of the people living within it.

We can say that the ultimate goal is the protagonism of the people, that is to bring the group to be subject, protagonist, creative, organised, for

its own transformation. It is not about helping some individual; the objective is to ensure that a given human group goes through a necessary transformation to go from an *object* of compassion, attention and help from others to the *subject* of its own future. Without of course excluding the contribution of collaboration and interaction.

We can think of the people of Israel in Egypt. Moses was a social minister? Yes, because for forty years he urged the people in the midst of great difficulties and moments of discouragement to move from a condition of dependence and slavery, like that of Egypt, to found with their own forces a federation of 12 independent tribes in Palestine. The “desert” of 40 years, a symbolic number, was the time needed to transform a passive, dependent and enslaved people into an active, creative, organised nation; a people in which decisions and actions started from within: they were not imposed from the outside nor controlled by the state police, so that orders would be executed. During the Exodus, Moses discovered many times that the people were unable to self-manage. The Jews longed for Egypt, a nation that assured them their daily bread and a clear, albeit despotic, government. Something similar also happened in Eastern Europe after the fall of the communist regimes, when, through free elections, the choice fell for several years on parties and leaders not far removed, in some way, from previous regimes.

#### **4. Protagonism of peoples in Africa, linked to the end of the bipolar era in 1989**

The aspect of people’s “protagonism” is fundamental, especially in the African context; unfortunately, Africa has a long and heavy colonial history that has led its population to dependence and subjection to domination. As Paulo Freire explained, oppression is dehumanising and deprives people of the ability to achieve a different history of creativity, innovation, the ability to take alternative paths: the oppressed tend to internalise the image of the oppressor and replicate his patterns.

In essence, the possibility of true subjectivity found the conditions to emerge, at least from the political point of view, for the first time in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and, later, in 1991 with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent end of the Russian - American bipolar system. Until then, the Cold War was fought

by proxy, especially in Africa, where political regimes were supported either by Washington or Moscow. By means of coups d'état, instead of regular democratic elections, heads of state and certain systems of government were imposed or deposed. It was therefore still a matter of dependency, even though political independence had been recognised in the 1960s. When did the peoples of Africa become "subject" of choice, and when did the vote take on value for the choice of the Head of State and the parliamentarians? Practically after 1989, when, with the fall of the bipolar system, the global environment became favourable to the *subjectivity* of the African peoples. The African peoples took advantage of the process of globalisation of the markets - which followed the interests of neo-liberalism, that moves better in open societies - to obtain a more democratic system: there are elections, pluralism of parties, greater freedom of expression, entrepreneurial freedom and economic sustainability to make it possible; all necessary conditions for the protagonism of the people to be real.

Local self-determination was inherent in many aspects of African peoples' lives because of the system of government of the various ethnic groups. With the imposition of the structure of Nations, the "ethnic" system was put aside and replaced with the national one, which was little felt, because it was a new fact in the African continent. On the other hand, by now, the need for an identity and a national organisation had become indispensable. Africa today is made up of 54 States which, as such, must govern themselves internally, always seeking greater unity on a continental level and to interact at international level.

In Africa, the Constitutions written at the end of the colonial regime in the 1960s, suffered from a strongly centralised vision in the hands of the President; the division between legislative, executive and judicial power themselves was rather uncertain. It was after 1989 that a path of true transformation became possible. In almost all nations, the Constitutions were rewritten: at the centre of them today is the People, the true subject of power and government. In the nineties, therefore, the priority of social education and civic education was imposed in order to overcome the clientelary and corrupt systems and to build egalitarian, supportive, participatory systems with integrity. Education aimed at making the people capable of being active and critical subjects, and of making choices beyond the interests of their own family and clan, with a vision and repercussion on a national, continental and global level.

## 5. Subjectivity in Local Churches

This effort to make every human sphere capable of self-determination in the logic of the values of the Kingdom has also applied to the Church, so much so that, in 1994, John Paul II called an “African” synod. The result was the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. The aim was to help the Church of Africa to be herself, to know how to manage herself, in the context of the Catholic Church but with her specificity and uniqueness. This continental synod became a point of reference for the other continents. It was intended, on the one hand, to affirm the unity of the Church; on the other, to encourage the uniqueness in living the faith in all continents, also ensuring “the Incarnation” and providing appropriate responses to culture, reality and local social situations. In 2009 it was the turn of the second African Synod: a serious reflection was carried out so that the Church in Africa would become an agent of transformation in the service of reconciliation and peace.

Building one’s own path is therefore also a need at the ecclesial level, using the theological and juridical categories of *synodality* and *collegiality* that had characterised the Church of the first millennium. These latter characteristics were recovered by the Second Vatican Council in the process of overcoming the clericalism that had characterised the second millennium of the Church’s history. The theology of the local Church is a strong instrument of service to the authenticity of the ecclesial journey and Pope Francis, with the use of local synods, such as the Synod for the Amazzonia, promotes the local “subjectivity” of the local Churches throughout the world. He also appreciates its contribution to the universal Church, it is enough to see the numerous quotations of the local churches in its documents such as *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si’* and the *Gaudete et Exultate*.

The theology of the local Church, without which there is no subjectivity of the individual Churches, is reasonably clear. The Orthodox Churches have a long tradition of subjectivity of the local Churches. In the Latin Church, especially in the second millennium, there has been a strong centralisation of the Pope and the Vatican as the governing body, in Rome. The peak will be reached with the First Vatican Council, with the so-called affirmation of the Pope’s infallibility.

With Vatican II, this process was identified as negative and there was a

re-orientation on the theology of the local Church, hence the declaration that episcopal ordination is a true sacrament. By now, the future lies in the “subjectivity” of the local Churches; the universal Church is the communion of the local Churches and hence the explosion of ministries in the Church precisely with the rediscovery of the local Churches, equipped with respective ministries, in response to the local situation.

## 6. 1994, the turning point: African Renaissance

1994 is considered an epochal watershed, for several reasons:

- it is the year of *the end of Apartheid* in South Africa, with the election of the first South African President, Nelson Mandela. Apartheid was the last sign of the system of colonial oppression in Africa;
- it is the year of the *African Renaissance*, also linked to South Africa. It was in fact Thabo Mbeki, Mandela’s successor, who expressly spoke of Africa’s growth starting from its own identity and self-determination;
- the *African Synod* is celebrated, whose objective was precisely the subjectivity of the local Church in Africa, with great expectations and hopes.
- it is also the year, sadly, of the genocide in Rwanda, a terrible *divorce or separation between personal-community faith and social life*. To pass from ethnic identity to national identity seemed impossible; the two ethnic groups could not cohabit in the same Nation. The massacre was a clear sign of this. The Catholic faith accepted by both ethnic groups failed to make political cohabitation possible. A faith, therefore, whose social impact on society was absolutely below the religious impact.

In the context of the African Synod, the idea of founding an *Institute of Social Ministry* in Nairobi was born, which since September 2019 is called the *Institute for Social Transformation*. An Institute of social ministry, not linked as such to the Church or to the religious life of the people, but rather linked to social life, enlightened by the social doctrine of the Church, in an attempt to bring the faith outside the Church,

in politics, culture, the family, the economy, in line with Chapter 6 of the post-synodal document *Ecclesia in Africa*. It was born precisely in this context, to help the people to be the subject of their own history: on the political, cultural, religious, economic and social levels. On the whole, the word that identifies well the purpose of the social ministry is political, administrative, cultural, entrepreneurial and even religious subjectivity. There is no doubt that Africa, as a continent, is today a “subject”. One cannot speak of today’s world without speaking of Africa, of the influence it can have, of the enormous potential that its young masses contain. Africa possesses resources, starting with human resources: it is the continent with the highest density of young people; it possesses mineral resources of all sorts, it has an immense extension, a diversified environment and a very important cultural and spiritual heritage. However, colonial heritage and neo-colonialism are obstacles to overcome in order to realise their full potential.

## **7. Methodology of social ministry: the pastoral cycle**

Considering the above, the methodology of the *Pastoral Cycle* has been suggested by the communities themselves, after having evolved from an object of care to a subject of transformation. In addition, it draws on the experiences that were already developing in the world at that time: in Latin America with liberation theology, in South Africa, with the resistance to Apartheid, and in Kenya, with the *Training for Transformation* program. As a methodology, the pastoral cycle consists of four phases:

*Insertion*: first of all, the transformation takes place from within, then within the group or community there must be a social transformer. No one can accompany the transformation of a community unless he or she enters into it, unless he or she is known and knows, unless he or she learns the language, unless he or she acquires confidence. Moses, in order to transform the Jewish people, was forced to leave the security of Midian where he lived with his family, to return to Egypt, to immerse himself again in the world of slavery.

*Socio-cultural analysis*: understanding in an analytical way through social, economic, political, religious sciences; scientifically, with a systemic interpretation of reality, grasping the overall picture, the remote causes, the structures and dynamics involved, the trends and factors at

stake. If one fails to understand the reasons and dynamics of a given situation, one cannot change it, either due to discouragement or to a lack of adequate vision and the ability to find transformative solutions.

*Theological reflection:* on the understanding of reality, one grafts a discernment on the response to be given to the situation, in the light of the Word and the signs of the Spirit, which is already present in history. Moreover, in Africa, religion is a great component of people's lives, and we must analyse whether it is in favour of transformation or an excuse for stagnation. If it favours slavery and dependence, or if it favours the spirit of initiative, hope, the future. Both religion in the strict sense and the influence of cultures play an important role in the processes of social transformation. It is worth remembering that the social teaching of the Church is an integral part of the Christian message. Unfortunately, many missionaries, when they speak of the proclamation, do not include it, and this is a great omission that makes Christian communities much less transformative in the face of inter-ethnic slaughter, injustice and poverty. Faith itself has not been, as we have seen, a factor of unity and reconciliation. Ethnic differences have not been interpreted in the light of the social teaching of the Church but have continued to represent an obstacle to social and civil education and the building of Nations.

*The action:* professionally planned, supported, evaluated and celebrated, by celebrating its fruits. In this journey, what counts is, above all, to initiate processes of transformation rather than obtaining immediate results ("time is greater than space", EG 222); to unite, reconcile, build communion, overcoming divisions and inevitable conflicts ("unity prevails over conflict", EG 226); always starting from reality, accepting to live in the midst of contradictions, far from the ideal, believing that the Kingdom is like that field sown with the good seed in which, however, at night, someone has also sown the weeds, but it is precisely in these situations that the Kingdom manifests itself ("reality is more important than ideas", EG 231); "the whole is greater than the parts" (EG 234), therefore the image of a communion in diversity, in pluralism, in which each part is equal in dignity and everything is in relationship.

The *Pastoral Circle* is an excellent attempt to base social pastoral action on collaboration between the human and social sciences, spirituality and theology - especially the social teaching of the Church - and the disciplines of managing processes of change.

## 8. The global urgency of social ministry today

“We are not living in an era of change, but in a change of epoch”: with these words, in 2015, Pope Francis grasped the substance of the time in which we are living. It is a change of paradigm, involving new social systems and a new mentality, new cultural horizons with which we relate to reality. Change is now a characteristic of all areas of life and society today. Although new possibilities and potential for the promotion of life are emerging, today the prevailing economic system is leading the world in the direction of social exclusion and environmental devastation, with climate changes having a devastating impact on the planet. The Oxfam 2019 report shows how the gap between the rich and the impoverished continues to widen exponentially: the wealth of the world’s 26 richest people reached \$1.4 trillion in 2018, which is the same amount of wealth possessed by the world’s 3.8 billion poorest people. The report also explains that, in many countries, acceptable education and basic health care have become a luxury that only the rich can afford. Every day, ten thousand people die because they cannot afford the care necessary to survive. Unemployment and underemployment are widespread globally and people, in many cases, are even beyond the threshold of exploitation and oppression: these people are excluded, they become “waste”, among the indifference of those who are privileged. The other emergency, correlated to this socio-economic emergency, is that represented by climate change, with serious environmental, social, economic and political consequences. In short, the dominant economic system - evidently colonial in its dynamics - is unsustainable. The social transformation expected by humanity and creation, then, is that which goes in the direction of sustainability, socio-economic justice, respect and care for the life, integral ecology, non-violence and peace of the community. The path towards such a change requires the participation and contribution of all citizens, local communities, grassroots movements and the creativity of social entrepreneurs capable of creating new sustainable socio-economic models with a positive environmental impact on the climate.

In particular, in the face of today’s human and environmental problems, the joint contribution of religions is needed. In the face of violence and the great social and environmental crises, social ministry is called to help human and Christian communities to face them without fear and without a spirit of defence of privileges, of the standard of living al-

ready achieved at the expense of the majority of humanity, forced to live in marginalisation and constant impoverishment. Social ministry is also called to overcome divisions and competition among religions, against all violence. The Charter of Abu Dhabi, signed in the Middle East by the Great Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis, is a great event that adds to the 1986 Assisi initiative for Peace and which develops it further.

In response to the cry of the impoverished and of the Earth, today Christian communities are called to develop social ministries with creativity. Their strength and originality in the social sphere lies precisely in their commitment, fruit of the common and synodal journey of faith, in listening to the Spirit. In a world now plural in terms of cultures, cosmos-visions and religions, we are called to dialogue, to discover the seeds of the Word, the presence of the Spirit in wisdom, to get to know indigenous peoples and to develop a reciprocal maieutic. Ministeriality emerges in keeping in tension the scientific-professional dimension of the commitment to social transformation with that of ethics, of values, of the sense of the common good and of the common house, of a vision of a sustainable, equitable and fraternal world.

Celebrations are privileged moments in which these dimensions are encountered: the liturgical dimension that anticipates the final transformation by celebrating it, making it present even if not yet fully present, is an example of this. It is a profoundly transformative moment, above all of the heart, perspective, attitudes and basic choices, not only on a personal level, but also on a community level: a particularly fertile area of regeneration, of conversion, an essential requirement for any transformation; a moment of grace mediated by the Word and the sacraments. At certain times of the liturgical year, such as Lent for example, there is the possibility of helping Christian communities to make a particular journey of conversion, as the recent Synod for Amazonia has also called for on several levels: pastoral, cultural, ecological and synodal levels. In an increasingly conflictual and violent world, it is also particularly necessary to rediscover and develop the social dimension of the sacraments, such as that of reconciliation. Also, with regard to this aspect, a dialogue with the living traditions of peace and reconciliation of indigenous peoples opens interesting avenues for research in the line of interculturality and inculturation for social transformation.

In all this, the prophetic gift of Christian communities emerges: to unveil the false claims of oppressive systems for salvation and to promote an alternative vision of the world, of the ultimate, truer and deeper reality, motivating and involving ourselves in its realization. Obviously, this journey is not to be realised in isolation, as a single force, but as salt of the world and yeast in the mass, in collaboration and dialogue with the most diverse forces and social situations. In this path, which requires time, perseverance and total dedication, the importance of narratives, inclusive language, collaborative and intercultural perspective stands out: Christian communities can make use of various tools that are functional to the care of all this, such as calendars that celebrate events, witnesses, processes and milestones on the path of transformation. In this way, the various international days that recall certain problematic issues or anniversaries of historical anniversaries become spaces in which shared visions of a different possible future can be built, in dialogue with different perspectives and traditions, to awaken consciences and to promote concrete initiatives at a cross-cultural level.

In particular, there are four areas that are emerging as epochal priorities: integral ecology, the commitment to education for a new fraternal humanism, the promotion of the civil economy and the accompaniment of popular movements.

### **a. Integral ecology**

This theme has been reworked several times by Pope Francis and has found ample space in the encyclical *Laudato si'* and in the *Synod for Amazonia*. It is a theme that imposes itself on a planetary scale because of the cry of the excluded and the Earth. It requires a different perception of reality, in order to grasp that everything is interconnected, to think in terms of ecosystems and to relate to complexity without excluding or suppressing any aspect or person. Thus, there is no separate social crisis and environmental crisis, but a single socio-environmental crisis, which requires “an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting” (LS 139).

### **b. Education to a new fraternal humanism**

In the social tradition of the Church, *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI,

2009) stands out for having noted an epochal change, that is, for having highlighted that the social question - that of work and class relationships, which had evoked the birth of the modern social magisterium of the Church with *Rerum novarum* - has become the anthropological question, seen in the loss of ethical and humanistic values that characterises the theory and practice of today's political economy, which reduces the vision of the human being to the dimension of consumption, the *homo economicus* who always tries to obtain the maximum advantage for himself and his utilitarian objectives.

The Magisterium of Francis takes up and develops this orientation in the *Evangelii Gaudium* and arrives at the need for a global educational pact that will lead to global solidarity, to a new humanism, involving all those who, for various reasons and at all levels of discipline and research, work in the field of education, especially the young. At a time of extreme fragmentation, of extreme opposition - says the Pope - there is a need to unite efforts, to create an educational alliance to form mature people, capable of living in society and for society. Planned actions are also needed to respond to the various socio-environmental problems: to do this, research, study and analysis of social situations are indispensable. A social transformation cannot be foreseen without a thorough knowledge of the unjust systems that are the causes of the problems. A fundamental component of social ministry is scientific and systematic research, especially research on particularly serious and complex problems. The commitment, both educational and research at the university level, is indispensable for this journey towards a new fraternal humanism.

### **c. Civil economy**

The communist system has fallen but, now, everything is driven by the capitalist system which is absolutely unjust for the inequality on the human level and for the destruction of the environment. The initiative taken by Pope Francis to try to create a new model of development is substantial and fundamental. The Pope summoned economic scientists and economic operators to Assisi ("The Economy of Francis", 26-28 March 2020). The two forces he summoned, thinkers and operators under the age of 35, were desired precisely because it is hoped, through the new generations, to be able to replace the current economic model

with another model of greater solidarity and justice. We are looking for a system of civil economy, of *oikonomy*, that is the **“care of the house” understood in a broad and deep sense**. It is that *oikonomy* capable of sobriety, of sharing, of respect, of harmonious development: **we want an economy that places the person at the centre of its actions**, that is inclusive, that deals with poverty, that respects creation, that is sustainable.

#### **d. Popular movements**

The popular movements are born precisely to restore dignity and voice to all those people to whom no one would ever listen. Among them are landless farmers, small landowners, tenants, daily and seasonal workers, homeless people, rural communities, people occupying abandoned houses, domestic workers, second-hand goods dealers, workers recovering abandoned or destroyed businesses or factories. Explains Pope Francis:

“The Popular Movements, at this moment, are a concrete and tangible testimony, because they show that it is possible to contrast the culture of waste that considers men and women, the children and the elderly as excessive and often harmful to the production process, and generate new forms of work centred on solidarity and the community dimension, in a handicraft and popular economy”.

Fundamental is the process of accompaniment and dialogue that many local Churches have created through these movements, some of which are also very far from faith. It is also much from their subjectivity, from their protagonism that a new world will emerge. They are at the heart of the existential peripheries to which the outgoing Church is called.

#### **Conclusion**

Social ministry requires the protagonism, initiative and creativity of the Christian communities, who stand alongside and accompany the excluded, the marginalised and the oppressed along the path of social and environmental transformation. As Paul VI says in the *Octogesima adveniens* (1971):

“Faced with such different situations, it is difficult for us to pronounce a single word and propose a solution of universal value. This is neither our ambition nor our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to objectively analyse the situation of their country, to clarify it in the light of the unchanging words of the Gospel, to draw principles of reflection, criteria of judgment and directives of action in the social teaching of the Church, as it has been elaborated in the course of history, and particularly in this industrial era, starting from the historical date of Leo XIII’s message «on the condition of workers», whose anniversary we have the honour and joy to celebrate today. It is up to the Christian communities to identify, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit - in communion with the responsible bishops, and in dialogue with other Christian brothers and sisters and with all men of good will - the choices and commitments that should be made to bring about the social, political and economic transformations that appear urgent and necessary in many cases” (OA 4).

These are the great challenges of the local churches. It is not enough to apply the general principles issued by Rome, but it is up to the grassroots, in a spirit of synodality, subsidiarity and solidarity, to discern paths and transformative solutions. What is needed is a collaborative social ministry, which makes use of different and complementary competencies, where the contribution of Catholic universities, capable of scientific and not preconceived analysis, must not be lacking in order to produce the new thinking needed today. A thought built in the full participation of all, capable of accepting plural perspectives, of dialoguing with knowledge and with the points of view of excluded peoples, with rigor, in order to open up to the truth of inclusive cosmos-visions, in harmony with Creation, which promote life in a perspective of global interconnection.

What we as Comboni Family did in Nairobi, was to implement at the African continent level the Comboni Plan for the regeneration of Africa in a holistic and collaborative manner. It is necessary to bring this model to all the continents linked to some already existing universities. To bring to all the continents this “Institute for Social Transformation”, without which the Church is missing an important arm. The Church has two oars: a religious one and a social one; a pity that, in practice, through the seminaries, we prepare only the religious arm. We must also

prepare the social arm. And if we Combonians had in all the continents an academic centre of social transformation for research and for the proposal of alternative models, we would make a very urgent and very important missionary contribution. I hope that from Nairobi we go to the rest of the world, and that what we do in Nairobi will not be seen as the initiative of one or the other, rather as an essential component for the implementation of the Comboni Plan. We do not regenerate Africa through Africans without a serious commitment to social transformation. Europe is not regenerated through Europeans, America through Americans, Asia through Asians, without a strong commitment to make local people the protagonists of transformation. Certainly, in Comboni's charism, is enclosed the keystone also for our own regeneration, as individuals and as communities. This is a strong call to make us more and more capable of collaboration among ourselves. In a global world, where the majority of people are passive and constantly indoctrinated, we must react with a great and meaningful missionary activity, which will transform the remote-controlled ones into people with a scientifically and Christianly critical mind, with a brotherly heart, in order to give birth to a new, different world, where walls and prejudices are broken down and mutual acceptance taken as the first step towards the fullness of the Kingdom.

Our magazines and our centres, such as Nigrizia and Combonifem in Italy, but also all our other publications in every place where we are present, mission promotion and libraries, are to be points of reference to help understand the great events of today, such as migration. And in every community, there should be a social commitment, otherwise it cannot be called a missionary presence for us, the Comboni Family.

### **Dedicated to:**

*Ezechiele Ramin*, Comboni missionary, martyr of the social apostolate in Brazil, Amazonia.

*Gino Filippini*, Lay missionary consumed by environmental degradation in the dump site of Korogocho - Dandora in Nairobi, Kenya.

*Marta Citterio*, Comboni sister, tirelessly promoted the subjectivity of people and groups everywhere she worked, always enthusiastic to collaborate in order to regenerate.

## **Recommended Readings:**

1. Justice in the World: 1971 Synod of Bishops.
2. New heavens and new earth. Handbook for promoters of justice, peace and integrity of creation. (EMI, 1999).
3. Letter of the Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Hans-Peter Kolvenbach, on the Social Apostolate (2000).
4. Moretti, F. - Pierli, F. (2002). Religious life and Social Ministry. Paulines Nairobi.
5. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004). Libreria Edizione Vaticana.

# A glance at the social missionary dimension in Matthew's Gospel

**Father John Ikundu**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **Chad**

Among the Gospels, Matthew has been called the missionary evangelist par excellence. He plays explicitly or implicitly with the names Jesus and Emmanuel in order to alert the reader on the nature and the scope of the mission. All along the Gospel, Matthew deftly unveils a theological divine strategy present in the Old Testament where God reveals and makes himself known through his saving act. Mission becomes for the first evangelist, the arena of God's manifestation. For Matthew, each missionary endeavour is a revelation of the person of God; a revelation of this God who saves (the meaning of the name Jesus) by being in the midst of his people (the meaning of the name Emmanuel). It is, therefore, in proclaiming the kingdom of God, in teaching and in answering to the needs of the people that the real meaning of the names Jesus and Emmanuel is manifested and revealed. Mission becomes therefore a privileged *Locus Theologicus*, a place for a personal encounter and experience of God. Actually, this is a theme that characterises the missionary discourse in Mt 10. Jesus tells His disciples that, *whoever receives you receives me and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me*, (Mt 10:40). This awesome fact gives ultimate significance to everything that we do in our role as missionaries. The sent one, i.e. the missionary becomes a real tangible presence of the ultimate sender. In the mission, the missionary conveys the presence of God to the beneficiaries of the message proclaimed. Hoping not to sound moralistic we could emphatically underline here that it is the quality of our presence, our proximity to the people that is at the centre this beautiful verse of Matthew. God transforms, touches and transmits life to His people through our missionary presence among them. Our quality human presence as missionaries among the people becomes the presence of God Himself, a continuous process of divine incarnation into the concrete lives of the people!

The numerous recurrences of the name Jesus in Matthew serve as a subtle reminder to the readers that God is at work. Actually, from a missiological approach of the first evangelist, the intriguing Matthean change of the quotation taken from prophet Isaiah from a singular *you will call him Emmanuel* (Is 7:14) to the plural *they will call him Emmanuel* (Mt 1:23) is not at all surprising. Once we understand that the evangelist is fundamentally missiological, then the whole Gospel becomes a journey along which the evangelist invites all the nations (Mt 28:19) to an experience and encounter with God's salvific presence which leads to the transformation of the Isaian singular, *you*, into a Matthean plural, *they*. This can rightly be read as a subtle reminder that the goal of the mission is to create a community of believers, *they*, who, as a family of believers, acknowledge together this divine presence. Hence, mission is not only a place where salvation, a privileged arena for discovering and seeing God at work, a place par excellence for the verification of the Biblical leitmotiv of the presence of God among His people, as Emmanuel, but it is also the ideal place for building true fraternity, an ideal place for creating the long desired and dreamt global village where all the *matthean they* lives as brothers and sisters!<sup>1</sup> Mission aims at a creation of a big messianic community made up of all the nations (Mt 28,19). This notion of universal brotherhood in Matthew is found expressed in other terms in his gospel- *the Good News of the Kingdom will be proclaimed in all the inhabited world* (Mt 24,14), *all nations will be gathered before Him* (Mt 25,32). Is this not one of the aspects the Matthean beatitudes are calling for, *breaking down of all the walls of injustices, violence, hate?* In short, of getting rid of the vicious circle of social instability!

In what follows, here below, we shall look at the first public visit of Jesus in Matthew and we shall try to show that the core message of Matthew is the manifestation of the unfolding of Emmanuel, *God is with Us*, as we have already stated above. Journeying with Jesus all along the first Gospel following His missiological itinerary one perceives quite well a strong social missionary commitment of *Emmanuel*. The first evangelist presents Jesus as a Messiah actively involved in the salvation of His people. This dimension of His mission appears to be a reminiscent of the continuous creative ability and activity of God Himself; an illustration of God's work for the benefit of a helpless humanity.<sup>2</sup>

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1 This has been well developed all along the year of *interculturality* in the Institute.

2 Cfr. IKUNDU John, *The healing of a leper: A search for a Missionary awareness*, Rome (2006) p. 7.

The first active and public outreach of Jesus is in a town totally unknown in the Old Testament: Capernaum, which is about 35 km north-west of Nazareth. He goes to live in this town in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali (cfr. Mt 4:13). I dare say that Matthew could not have seen Jesus start in a more pertinent *locus missionis*. Just the mere meaning of Capernaum and the historical background of Zebulun and Naphtali are enough hints to sum up the holistic missionary approach that the evangelist wishes to offer, i.e. the Social and Spiritual dimensions. I conceive both aspects present in this apparent simple but theologically heavily loaded geographical focus. I will briefly point at the social dimension.

Etymologically, Capernaum could mean *The Village<sup>3</sup> of Nahum*. The village would therefore owe its name from prophet Nahum who seemingly resided in the neighbourhood. To the forces of evil, oppression, dominion and slavery, the prophet announces an imminent defeat and destruction. His message raises hope to the already long fallen northern kingdom of Israel. To a people who had started doubting of the Lord's supremacy as the Master of history, Nahum rises and promises downfall of the enemy through the direct intervention of the Lord Himself. Nahum compares the powers of the days to a lion that tears apart its young ones (cfr. Nah 2:12-13). The prophet announces a new era of freedom where the people will no longer be humiliated under the yoke of slavery.<sup>4</sup> It is the restoration of the human dignity through the hand of the Lord (cfr. Nah 1:9-14). The prophet invites the people to see the Lord intervening through a messenger - *see upon the mountain there advances the bearer of GOOD NEWS, announcing PEACE* (cfr. Nah 2:1). Nahum therefore carries his prophetic ministry at a period of tyrannical cruelty and wickedness when the people of Judea badly needed a word of comfort and consolation. Actually, this is the meaning of the name Nahum, *consolation* or *comfort*. Therefore, more than being the village of prophet Nahum, it would be more fitting to etymologically interpret Capernaum as *the village of consolation*.

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3 *Caphar* is from the root *to cover* denoting a village. Cfr. FAUSSET BIBLE DICTIONARY, "caphar", in BibleWorks6.

4 This is well taken up again by the church centuries later. Referring to the social changes taking place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Leo XIII says that "*the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself*" (Rerum Novarum, N° 3).

This will precisely be the mission of the Matthean Messiah, to bring divine consolation to the people through the spiritual and physical liberation from the forces of evil through His WORDS and ACTS.<sup>5</sup> The same message of hope, comfort and consolation announced by Nahum in the olden days is once again renewed by Jesus who is the divine hope, comfort and consolation in person.<sup>6</sup> And it is exactly at Capernaum that this missionary enterprise is launched.

Prophet Nahum practiced at a period in history when the people were under foreign political domination and oppression. Chronologically, Matthew is seven centuries later but the political scenario of his people is still determined and managed by foreigners, the Romans. Although the evangelist never portrays explicitly Jesus as a socio-political liberator, the placement and evocation of the first missionary outreach of Jesus in Capernaum implicitly wishes to depict Him as not being indifferent to the socio-political reality of the people.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, Matthew himself under the name of LEVI will later on offer his own life experience of encounter with the person of the Messiah as a way forward for true and lasting socio-political liberation. This courageous response of Matthew is wonderfully described in the words of Pope Francis: *An authentic faith (...) always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.*<sup>8</sup>

It is not therefore surprising that the Gospel will place this encounter by Matthew and Jesus precisely in Capernaum where Matthew served as a custom's officer collecting taxes for the powers of the day, the Romans! It is exactly here in Capernaum, that the Lord will call him (cfr. Mt. 9:9). Again the words of Pope Francis describe well what the Matthean

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5 In Isaiah, consolation announced will be seen in a direct divine intervention to bring to an end the period of political slavery in Babylon (Cfr. Is 40,1-11).

6 "God Himself seems to incline rather to those who suffer misfortune; for Jesus Christ calls the poor "blessed." He lovingly invites those in labor and grief to come to Him for solace; (21) and He displays the tenderest charity toward the lowly and the oppressed" (Rerum Novarum, N° 24).

7 Apparently, the words of Leo XIII seem to echo exactly this social dimension of the mission of the historical Jesus today embodied in the church... *This most serious question demands the attention and the efforts of others besides ourselves... But We affirm without hesitation that all the striving of men will be vain if they leave out the Church... The Church, intervenes directly on behalf of the poor; by setting on foot and maintaining many associations which she knows to be efficient for the relief of poverty. Herein, again, she has always succeeded so well as to have even extorted the praise of her enemies* (Rerum Novarum, N° 16 and 29).

8 *Evangelii Gaudium*, N° 183.

Messiah is inaugurating in Capernaum: ... *openness to the transcendent can bring about a new political and economic mindset which would help to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society.*<sup>9</sup>

Yes, people expected a political Messiah, who would free them from the Romans and restore back the glorious kingdom of David. Matthew could not be clearer in answering to these expectations; the socio-political liberation of the people and the nation as a whole is possible only through individual liberation from being at the service of forces of evil, of the oppressors through a religious personal respect of the rights, liberty of the people and a personal commitment for social values for a more fraternal society. This is possible only through a personal encounter with the person of Jesus. *The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.*<sup>10</sup> It is our faith in the person of Jesus that lays the foundation of every Christian commitment for the integral development of society's most neglected brothers and sisters.<sup>11</sup>

Matthew's personal experience speaks out loud and clear. This is exactly what makes Matthew a great missionary. His personal witness of life precedes his missionary proclamation. And again centuries later, the Church would still emphatically reiterate this by underlining that the society listens more to witnesses than to teachers...<sup>12</sup>

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9 Evangelii Gaudium, N° 205.

10 Evangelii Gaudium, N° 3.

11 Cfr. Evangelii Gaudium, N° 186-201.

12 Cfr. Evangelii Nuntiandi, N° 21, 26 and 41; Redemptoris Missio, N° 42.

# Everyone is mission

**Fr. Alex Zanotelli**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **Italy**

I have always felt the dimension of justice, peace, and integrity of creation as an integral part of my way of being a missionary. Since the beginning of my missionary service, Vatican II has permeated all of my theological studies, mainly through the wonderful *Gaudium et Spes*. Similarly, I was influenced by the “Fathers of the Church in Latin-America” who were able to interpret the Council within their contexts: Bishops like H. Camara, Pedro Casaldaliga, Evaristo Arns from Brazil, Proano from Ecuador, and Samuel Ruiz from Mexico translated the Latin America Council into the great Assembly of Medellín thus paving the way for the liberation theology which conditioned me a lot; likewise, I was inspired by some outstanding South African ecclesial figures: the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley, and Reverend Beyers Naudé animated resistance against the System of Apartheid, and opened ways to its contextual theology (the black theology) so well expressed by the Dominican Albert Nolan thus influencing my formative journey. Maybe, only a few people were able to translate all that theological richness as the great liberation theologian Jon Sobrino did: “According to Jesus, the fundamental task of every human being is to *humanise* reality starting from truth and primordial compassion in the face of the victims’ tribulations. He makes this real also starting with obedience - a word that sounds shocking and which is not particularly liked, especially in the Western world - to the authority of those who are suffering. *To humanise* is to heal, to feed, to hunt demons, to welcome and to comfort weak people, to denounce and to tell the truth, to generate communities and to celebrate around a new Eucharistic table, to proclaim a new heaven and a new land. To merge into another world is possible, if well explained. Obviously, it also deals with changing economic, political, and cultural structures radically, and structures in favour of arms as well. *To humanise* is to be opened in order for God’s mystery to reveal His Face”. This view is possible if we come back to the ‘Historical Jesus’, and to His fundamental choices which were also the reasons for his execution as a rebel against the es-

established order of Rome. This ongoing research on the Historical Jesus has profoundly influenced my life. It was right the following of the poor Jesus of Nazareth to guide my steps in my missionary life since my first missionary experience in El-Obeid, Sudan, from 1965 to 1973. We were in the midst of a civil war between the North and the South of the country, and Karthoum's Army slaughtered civilians. The silence of the Sudanese Church on what was happening in the South sounded absurd to us young missionaries (namely, A. Modenesi, Ramanzini, Ferraboschi, Spadavecchia). We drafted together a document on the themes of justice and peace that also denounced those terrible events in the South; we sent it first to the Archbishop of Khartoum Msgr. Baroni and to the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio Calabresi in order for them to send it to the Synod of Bishops (1971). There was no way we could convey our message: the reaction was of total refusal, even if we had the total support of our Bishop in El-Obeid, Msgr. Cazzaniga. We decided therefore to deliver it to the Synod through Fr. Bresciani who put it in his turn on every synodal father's seat. The Archbishop of Khartoum got angry; he took the floor in the Synod, and severely attacked our document. Back in Khartoum, the Archbishop Baroni and the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio Calabresi put our Bishop under pressure in order for me and for Fr. Modenesi to be expelled from Sudan. Our Bishop answered: "These missionaries are very committed, and deserve the right to speak their mind". I knew then I would have to pay for my commitment to justice and peace even within the Church, not to mention Sudan's dictatorial government that followed with great attention my denunciations but above all my closeness to the Nuba people, who is people inhabiting the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan state in Sudan, not far from El-Obeid, and maybe is the people who has suffered more in Africa. Sudanese authorities looked with mistrust at that black people in the midst of Arab peoples, as the government feared their alliance with South-Africa against Khartoum's Arab government. For this reason, the government took my passport away, and I was declared unwanted in Sudan. Later, the rebel leader of the Nuba confirmed that the government had kicked me out of Sudan due to my closeness to this martyr-people, the Nuba.

As soon as I got back to Italy, I was asked to run *Nigritia* magazine. I reluctantly accepted even knowing that it was not an easy task. However, this was a big grace for me because it finally helped me to understand the African reality from the historical, economic, political and cultural point of view. It was also the time for further research on the

‘Historical Jesus’, and this radicalised my commitment to justice and peace against a Western world sucking blood from the impoverished people of the South of the world. I could no longer accept a Western Church that was so functional to the economic-financial System. As a consequence, for the first time *Nigritia* confronted with the Holy See in the person of Cardinal Ratzinger, who asked for a ‘public’ recantation of the mistakes in the Reconciliation dossier written by the African theologian Father Hebga. The Holy Office held a grudge against Africa’s inculturation theology, or ‘the black theology’, that *Nigritia* was trying to make known to Italy. We were rescued by our Superior General, Fr. Calvia, who told me: “*Rome is eternal, let’s wait!*”, and so the matter ended. This enabled us to push the Italian government towards a foreign policy of cooperation with African countries. On January 1985, a very harsh attack was raised against a new Italian law - with a fund of 1.900 billion Italian Lira- in *Nigritia*’s editorial to the struggle against hunger in Africa: it was titled “*The Italian face of the African hunger*”. I argued that it was not the hunger of African people to motivate our politicians, rather the hunger of politicians to take possession of that money! The article reported the names of Italy’s mighty politicians of that time: Prime Minister Craxi, Minister of Foreign Affairs Andreotti and others. I raised a hell at national level. For the first time, I felt it was like to challenge the dominant political power in the name of that God who Jesus revealed us. In moments of prayer, and in the dead of night I asked myself: “*Alex, are you sure to tell the truth? Is it possible for you to see things that 50 million Italian do not see?*” I felt defeated everywhere I went. There was also a lapidary statement from the Holy See Press Office: “*Nigritia’s editorial has been written with an excessive dose of irresponsibility*”. Luckily, our general father, Fr. Calvia, summoned the whole General Direction, the Provincial Father, and *Nigritia*’s editorial staff in Rome to reflect together on how to act as a Comboni congregation. We gathered in the eternal city on a cold winter day in January 1985, and Fr. Calvia asked us all to express our opinion on the editorial. Fr. Calvia himself concluded by saying that, despite doubts about several points, we all agreed with the article; so he instructed that editorial staff to immediately issue a press release in the defence of *Nigritia*’s editorial on behalf of the Comboni Missionaries. It was an extremely important historical decision to take: for the first time, we were attacking the Italian government in the name of the impoverished people of Africa, and we were even distancing ourselves from the Holy See Press Office’s stance.

Vatican's stance on the problem of hunger in Africa made me immediately think about the connection between hunger and weapons. I noticed it in the Italian government's behaviour, which was ready to allocate 1.900 billion Italian Lira while it was offering arms for a value of 5.000 billion Italian Lira at least to African countries. What was the link between hunger and weapons? Thus began my commitment to unmask the Italian market of weapons; slowly, I started denouncing all the crimes about this trade of death and dialoguing with a group of priest and lay men and women committed to the problem of weapon and peace. *Blessed are the Builders of Peace* was born this way: it was a document inviting all Christian communities to start a pastoral cycle for peace, and also to practice fiscal objection against firearms (therefore refusing to pay taxes consistent with the rate that the government was spending on weapons). Triveneto bishops told us that they would sign the paper. We presented it on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December in 1985, in Venice; only Beppe Giuletti (current chairman of the FNSI - art.21) and another journalist working at ANSA were present. The Archbishop of Trieste was there. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January in 1986 *Il Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale's* editorials sharply attacked Triveneto's red priest who, according to them, were attacking state security. They were followed by a very sharp attack from the ex-Ministry of Defence Spadolini on the *Espresso's* pages. The Vatican's reaction was harsh and fell on the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Ce, who claimed he had never signed that document. The Archbishop of Trieste paid the piper. Triveneto bishops- who had already drafted their pastoral letter in response to *Blessed are the Builders of Peace* - retreated in silence. It was then I realised how much it hurts to be betrayed by your own Church! It was the Ministry of the Defence triumph who, during a press conference, affirmed that "the statements by the Director of *Nigritia* are an incitement to international terrorist delinquency". *L'Arena*, Verona's Daily Newspaper, titled: "*Terrorist Zanotelli*".

Governing parties began to put pressure on the Holy See to get rid of me. And the Vatican yielded! Cardinal Tomko summoned our General Father, Fr. Pierli, and asked him to send me back to Africa. Father Pierli had always upheld the positions of *Nigritia*, but he couldn't stand up to the Vatican pressure. It was a painful moment for me. I decided to participate in a conference press in Rome to denounce the true reasons behind my removal. I was convened by Cardinal Tomko in the Propaganda Fide. It was the most terrible encounter in my life: ecclesiastical power is as deadly as political power. "Remember - Tomko said to me - that before me there's only the Pope, and then God!". I was given my

first canonical warning before the *suspension a divinis*. I walked out of this profoundly saddened. Anyway, I went to Africa because I had long wanted to go and live in a slum with people. You have to go through this experience to really feel the sufferings of the impoverished people, and consequently to talk seriously about them and their problems. I had never experienced or felt something like that before that moment. I chose Nairobi as a city where to operate, and I arrived there in 1988. It took me 2 years to settle in slums. I tried to live in a slum in Soweto, but Nairobi's cardinal had ordered me to leave under the threat of *suspension a divinis*. I went to live in Korogocho on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January in 1990, with the blessing by the Comboni brothers. I celebrated with the few Christians who were present along with the priest of Kariobangi, and during the homily I asked them "Today, on the day of Jesus' Baptism, I have come to live with you to receive your Baptism". I felt like a petty bourgeois who needed to receive Baptism by poor people, and the impoverished people of Korogocho baptised me for real. They overturned my worldview. They obliged me to read reality starting from the last ones, from impoverished people. I understood then that we live in an absurd world: today, in Africa alone, 200 million people still live in slums! Poor people obliged me to read the Bible with the oppressed people's eyes; little by little, I discovered a God who is fully Other, totally Free, the One who listens to the cry of the impoverished people and questions every System who oppresses and kills: "I praise and I bless you, Father - exclaimed Jesus - for what you have hidden from the mighty ones and you have revealed to the poor ones". God reveals Himself on the impoverished people's face.

For twelve years, I have walked and lived with the last of the Earth. (I speak in the first person, but this journey was made possible only thanks to a remarkable community composed by priests, sisters, lay men and women. I would like to recall three of them who are no longer with us: Fr. Gianni Nobili, the outstanding lay man Gino Filippini, and Sister Marta Citterio). We were a mission that gave priority to justice, peace, and integrity of creation proclaiming the Good News. We did give back *dignity* to people who are despised by everyone. This is what impoverished people are asking for: to be respected. And mainly the last ones in Korogocho: *scavengers* (the ones who pick up waste) in the dump, street children sniffing glue and kicked by everyone, thieves that, if and when discovered are burnt alive, young girls who went to sell their bodies in the city and people with AIDS.

What an incredible struggle over the years to eliminate Korogocho's dump and its toxic smoke! Nevertheless, it still exists and indeed have extended up to the Church of St. John's. The commitment against 'mob justice' that sentences any poor person who is caught stealing to be burnt alive; we celebrated the Eucharist on the place of execution as an act of protest. We realised some centres where street children could feel welcomed and helped. We founded some cooperatives to allow scavengers who spent their nights in the city to live a more dignified life. We celebrated the Eucharist in those shacks where men and women with AIDS lived, since AIDS in Korogocho is a taboo, and a curse. All this would have been just a palliative without a serious commitment to eradicate this cruel reality. In Korogocho, in fact, a hundred people are obliged to live on a surface of just 1 km in length and 1 km in width. It was necessary that the land on which the slums was built (it is a state ownership!) passed into the community's hands in order to improve: the so-called *land community trust*. I recall that, during the first demonstration I organised to this purpose, the head of the police came in the slum and asked me: "Why did you do that without my permission?". I answered: "My lawyers told me I didn't need it". The policeman brutally said: "Know that your lawyers won't save you from the bullet of my policemen."

Korogocho's people could not carry on alone with the struggle for land: we had to raise awareness, and consequently organise all the enormous slums in Nairobi (70% of the population lives in slums!). Along with Kituo cha Sheria and Pamoja Trust's lawyers, we got down to work to mobilise the several slums. The commitment lasted for long. At a certain point, the government was about to give in and to entrust the lands to Korogocho's community; when we got to the point however, the community split into those who owned some huts and people without property. We witnessed human selfishness even among poor people! These will be the great popular struggles in big African cities and their giant slums.

In 2002, I handed Korogocho over to Fr. Daniele Moschetti. The night before I left Korogocho, I was invited for a moment of prayer organised by the supervisors of some small Christian communities and priests of the several Pentecostal Churches. At the end of the prayer, one of them told me: "Father Alex, come in our midst and get on your knees". Another one added: "Lay your hands on him". One of those shepherds started a long charismatic prayer. At the end, he prayed this way: "Dad,

give your Holy Spirit to Father Alex!”. People pushed me with strength towards the ground to give it to me. “ Send him your Spirit so he can come back to *his white tribe* and *convert them*”. I was sent back to Italy, Europe, to convert my “white tribe”.

Once I was there, I asked the Provincial Council to go South (Italy’s most depressed area) and live in the city of Naples, which is the most complicated and troubled town at the social level in the country. I chose one of the toughest neighbourhoods in Naples: Rione Sanità, a blighted part of the old town. It is always fundamental to settle in the outskirts in order to understand how to behave towards the “discarded”: this is Pope Francis’ urgent call. It is all the more vital to live in a sober and simple way. Now, we are in the main Church of Santa Maria della Sanità; we live in the bell tower in three small rooms connected by a winding staircase. It is an inter-congregational presence: I live with Father Arcadio Sicher, Franciscan Father, and the lay consecrated woman, Felicetta Parisi (paediatrician). Our missionary presence operates on two fronts: on the one hand, we work internally in the neighbourhood of “Sanità” and in the outskirts of Naples with serious commitment; on the other hand, we work at the European and national level against a socio-economic System which oppresses and kills. We have to face *O’ sistema* (the Camorra) which is always present in the neighbourhood through protection money, usury, gambling and drug trafficking. It is an octopus penetrating everything. Young people with no work do the dirty work. Those kids grow up in broken families, degraded environments, and they soon evade school. School evasion in Caracciolo, for instance, which is the only Secondary School in the district, is 50%;74% of students failed the first biennium (compulsory school) in 2017 (we were denied access to the latest figures!). They are the kids who, gun at hand, control territory for drug trafficking.

First and foremost, our commitment is aimed at healing the area. We make it through the “Rione Sanità Network” aggregating citizens, associations, and local realities. As a network, we have also promoted microcredit in the Rione to fight usury, and we have founded the Gamblers Anonymous to combat gambling, for example. However, the main work is to motivate people to stand up for their rights and to ‘raise their heads’. We made it through a big popular manifestation against the Camorra (the first one in the Rione Sanità) when a 17 year-old boy - whose name was Genny Cesarano - was killed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September

in 2018 in Piazza Sanità (in front of our house). We also tried to rescue St. Gennaro's Hospital (the only one in the district) inviting people to take to the streets and to block them to protest. Not many responded to that appeal, and the hospital was closed. A few of us kept on fighting: we wanted that facility to be at least a serious polyclinic at the neighbourhood's service.

In Naples and surroundings, we are committed to homeless, migrants and Romany people. As a Committee, we have succeeded in forcing Naples' municipality to open a small part of the enormous *Albergo dei Poveri* for homeless. Now, shower and other services are working. It means to give dignity to these people. The commitment against racism towards migrants by means of manifestations and marches is all the more important. We are going to start soon a close fight against slavery and exploitation of migrants in the agricultural sector in collaboration with the regional CGIL. The plague of illegal hiring is frightening. As a Committee, we fought against all the evictions executed against Romany people, who are the last in the social stratification. We have fought a ten-year struggle for the Romany people in Giuliano (Naples) who were continuously expelled by the same Municipality. I have never seen such a Via Crucis.

In the city of Naples, we carried on a tight battle against water privatisation along with the Committee for Public Management of Water; water privatisation had been voted both in the Municipality and in the Province, and we did not accept it. In the end, thanks to actions of contrast and strong commitment, we succeeded: all the Municipalities voted in favour of public water. The Popular Initiative Law started from this first struggle: 400.000 signatures were gathered in order to force the Italian government to make water public again. However, a decree by the Berlusconi government decided to privatise it. We promoted therefore a Referendum against that decree with the support of the Italian Water Movements Forum. On the 12<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> of June 2011, 26 million Italians said Yes to public water. It was a stunning and fundamental victory: water is a greater good in this moment of global warming, and it is the first victim of this natural event. The lack of water already exists now, and it is going to get even worse in the future. The consequence is that millions of poor people will die of thirst because they won't have money to buy it. No! Water is a fundamental human right, as Pope Francis states in the *Laudato Si'*. Unfortunately, we haven't already forced the

Parliament to enact a law for public water after long years struggles. It is ready, but we can't force parties to vote it.

We launched another important initiative at the national level as a small missionary community in Naples, and it was hunger strikes against the *Security Decree* of the former Ministry of Internal Affairs, Salvini. Along with other ecclesial realities, we proposed a ten-days fasting in July 2018 in front of the Italian Parliament to say *No* to the First Security Decree; we also suggested to continue with it on the first Wednesdays of each month until July of 2019. Many people in Italy fasted with us, and mainly communities of Poor Clares Sisters. On the contrary, a few missionaries adhered to it, yet Salvini's policies for closing ports and his war against NGOs that saved lives at sea were terrible to African migrants. Salvini, by the Security Decree, even declared that to rescue human lives at sea is a crime. We could not remain silent. We rebelled with the "*Fasting of Justice in Solidarity with Migrants*". We also fasted for a long time in Riace, Calabria, with young people working in the fields when the Mayor Domenico Lucano called for a strike-hunger against the cut off of funding by the government and the Prefecture. When the former Ministry of Internal Affairs Salvini declared war to Domenico Lucano, we strongly fought in the defence of his model of welcoming. We were (and we are still) very close to Domenico when he was investigated and put under house arrest, banished from Riace and recently processed. Salvini's purpose was to demolish the whole experience of Riace. Along with other friends in Riace, we have decided to establish the Foundation '*It was the wind*' to allow that extraordinary experience to go on. (Domenico wanted for me and for the Doctor Felicetta Parisi to be a part of it). And now, with the return of Domenico in Riace (after an eleven-months exile!!) the village is reborn. Riace is one of the focal point in Italy of the resistance against racism and far-right policies.

Even more radically, our missionary presence in Europe must be the radical protest against this economic-financial system which is militarised, and weighs so much on the eco-system that the Planet barely endures our presence. Our System murders for hunger, for war (*This economy kills*, says Pope Francis) and kills the Planet. Our missionary presence in Europe must be a radical protest against this system of death through our lifestyle and preaching. This is the reason why it is even more important to put at the centre of our presence in the Western World justice, peace, and integrity of creation. Today, the mission is global.

# The general chapter and ministeriality

**Brother Alberto Parise**  
**Comboni Missionary**  
**Italy - Mission Secretariat Curia**

There are times in history that mark epochal movements or transitions from one socio-cultural system to another, with a high degree of discontinuity. The period in which Comboni lived was certainly one of these historical moments. It was the time of the industrial revolution, the result of the great leap that science and theology were making in science as well as in the fields of finance and politics.

The Church found itself on the defensive, faced with the so-called “modernism” that it was perceived as a threat. It was a Church under siege, politically and culturally; and in its resistance, it ran the risk of self-referentiality. And yet, precisely at that difficult time, it experienced a great rebirth: among the contradictions and social evils that emerged with the new industrial capitalist economic system, there also emerged a force for social apostolate, through the work of the laity and of a large number of new religious institutes. The colonial movement - a response to the politico-economic logic and to the ideology of competing nation states - on the other hand, was accompanied by a deep cultural interest in exploration, exotic things and the spirit of adventure. However, there was also the rebirth of a new missionary movement towards distant lands and peoples. The Church was entering a new epoch with deep spiritual renewal - as it is attested to by the spirituality of the Sacred Heart that characterised those times - bringing about a new missionary model.

The XVIII General Chapter was celebrated in an analogous epoch for the Church. The discernment of the Chapter was harmonised with the interpretation of that turn of events which Pope Francis had written in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG): his was a theological reading of the new epoch that opens, in pastoral practice, to a new missionary impetus. New in the sense that it abandoned the paradigm we were used to: a mission based on a geographical model in which the protagonists were “special units” of missionaries who were real pioneers, whose role was to found local Churches. The reality of globalisation and the dramatic socio-environmental crisis of our time - a consequence of a prevailing unsustainable

model of development that has brought us close to the point of no return - require a renewed approach to evangelisation. After all, we just have to look at our Comboni situation to realise that, in practice, the model of the past has been discarded. For example, the system of 'sending' provinces (in the northern hemisphere) and provinces (in the southern hemisphere) that 'receive' missionaries, no longer corresponds to what is really happening, as it's the case with the idea that the countries of the south are for "evangelisation" and those of the north for "mission promotion". We can now see the urgent need for mission promotion, for example, in Africa and - as also stated by the Chapter - of the mission in Europe.

*Evangelii Gaudium* therefore proposes a new paradigm of mission. No longer simply geographical, but existential. The Church is called to overcome its own referentiality and to go out to all the human peripheries where people suffer exclusion and live with all the hardship of economic inequality, social injustice and impoverishment. All these situations are no longer a dysfunctional aspect of the economic system, but a requirement for the system itself to prosper and continue. The mission becomes a paradigm of all pastoral action and the local Church is its subject. So, what is the role of the missionary institutes? It is that of animating the local Churches to live out their mandate of being missionary, Churches that go out to the existential peripheries. It is a matter of proceeding in communion within realities characterised by diversity and pluralism, creating together a common perspective that values the differences and "conquers" them, without destroying them, creating unity on a higher level. These journeys are characterised by closeness to the poorest, by service and the ability to proclaim the Gospel with the essentials of the *kerygma* both by word and by a way of life. Pope Francis is re-launching the vision of the Church of the Second Vatican Council, as "the sacrament, or the sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race". In our new world formed by a digital revolution and the globalisation of the markets of financial capitalism, the Church is called to gather a 'people' who are able to go beyond the confines of belonging and walk towards the Kingdom of God. Then the Christian testimony to the Risen Lord will be productive and the Church, too, will grow by attraction and not because of proselytising.

Today, the epoch of digital revolution is a time of great missionary opportunities, just as the time of the industrial revolution was for Combo-

ni. Since we are speaking of a new paradigm, the challenge lies in thinking, structuring and training ourselves accordingly. The first step is to recognise the grace of the Comboni charism which is very relevant and made to measure for the new paradigm of mission. In the first place we have the central idea of “regenerating Africa with Africa”, a concise image that recounts a most complex and articulated story: there is the idea of generating a ‘people’ capable of building up an alternative society, in harmony with the action of the Spirit. The proclamation of the Gospel helps to bring to completion those “seeds of the Word” already present in the cultures and spirituality of the people. Comboni also stressed the importance of this work being “catholic”, that is to say, universal: far removed from self-reference, he saw himself as an integral part of a much greater and broader missionary movement with a variety of gifts and charisms. He saw his role as that of an animator who made an untiring effort to move the conscience of the Pastors of the Church concerning their missionary responsibility so that Africa’s hour might not pass in vain” (RL9). In the view of EG, the mission of the Church and all its ministers within it are directed towards building up the Kingdom of God, striving to create room in our world where all people, especially the underprivileged and the excluded, may experience the salvation of the Risen Christ.

The ministers, therefore, assume a role of crucial importance as a place of encounter between humanity and Word and Spirit in history. It is a fecund encounter, as Comboni well understood. This is why, in his Plan, he envisaged a series of small theological and scientific universities along the coasts of Africa, to train ministers in various fields who would then spread out into the interior, to bring about the growth of communities imbued with the spirit of the Gospel, capable of social transformation, as the models of Malbes and Gezira show us.

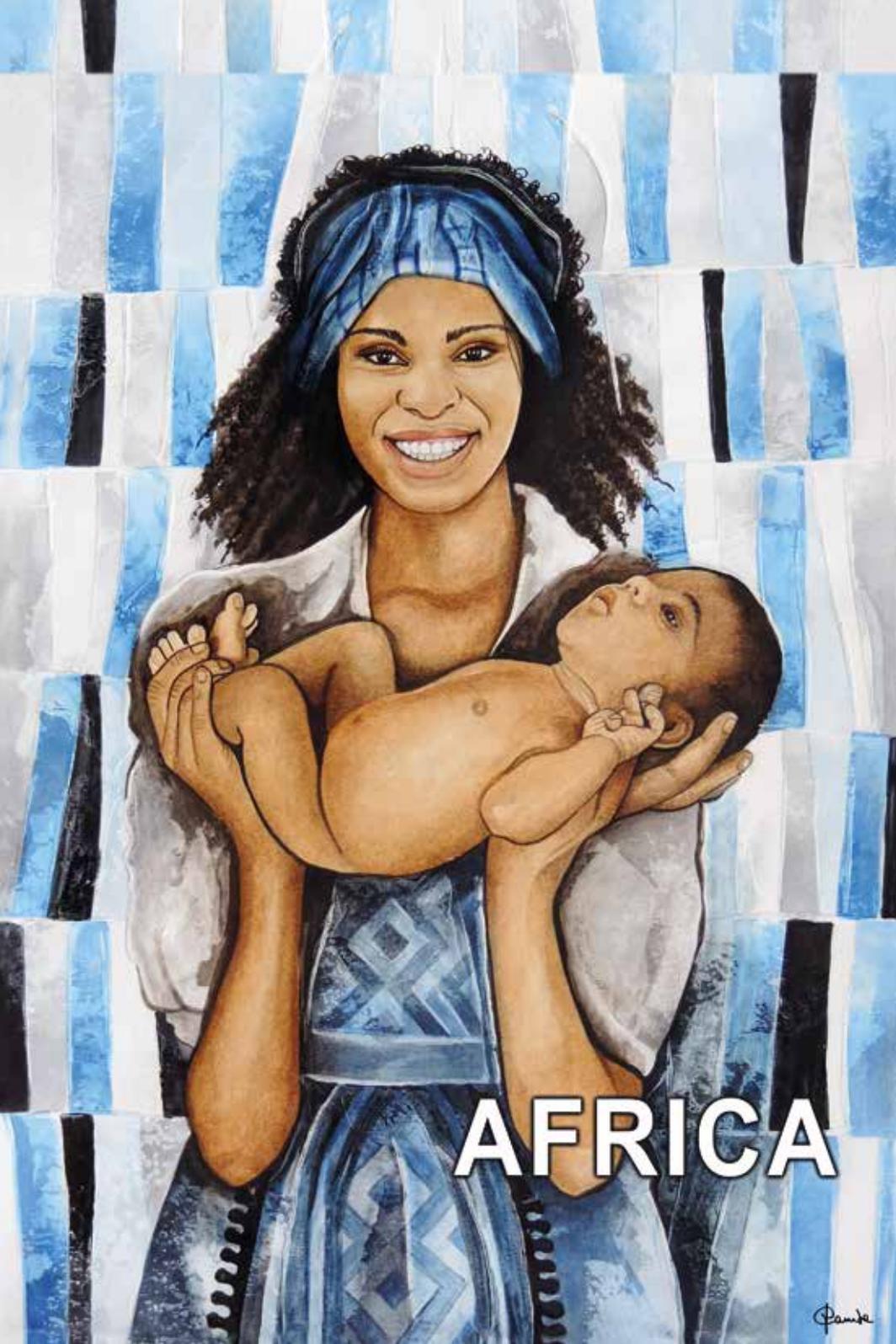
In the spirit of the Chapter, the requalification along ministerial lines of our missionary service requires, as Comboni realized, a new “structure” of the mission that sustains and fosters it:

- a ministerial requalification of our commitment, with a development plan that is shared and made in communion, for specific pastoral priorities, in accordance with the continental urgencies. During the Chapter, it emerged that, on the one hand, we are present in these “frontiers” of mission while, on the other hand, we often lack a con-

- textual approach to the human groups we accompany;
- collaborative ministry in journeys of communion. We are still subject to practices and ways of operating that are too individualistic and fragmented;
  - re-thinking our structures while seeking greater simplicity, more sharing and the ability to welcome others, so as to be closer to the people, more human and happier;
  - all this with the reorganisation of the circumscriptions. Amalgamation does not find its justification only in the shortage of personnel, but rather, it has a value in relation to the passage from a geographical to a ministerial model which renders it necessary to be connected, to work as a network and to share resources and pathways;
  - the reorganisation of formation to develop the necessary expertise in the various specific pastoral fields.

In brief, as the Chapter Acts state, “the growing awareness of a new paradigm of mission spurs us on to reflect and re-organise our activities along ministerial lines.” (CA 2015, No. 12). As invited by Pope Francis (EG 33), the Chapter has indicated the path of pastoral conversion, abandoning the criteria: “as we have always done” and setting in motion a series of action-reflections to reconsider the goals, structures, the manner and method of evangelization (CA 2015, No. 44.2-3).





**AFRICA**

*Pamela*



# Comboni College: the ministry of education within an inter-religious context

**Father Jorge Carlos Naranjo Alcaide**  
**Comboni Missionary**

**Sudan**

## **Introduction**

Since his work did not only consist in training apostles of faith, Daniel Comboni had founded a centre for education right in the land where he had started a mission. It was furthermore necessary to prepare “apostles for civilisation” (Comboni, 1870, E226). The early Comboni missionaries who returned to Sudan following the *Mahdya* continued with the same missionary method. In a country where the education system was basically reduced to Quranic schools’ networks - where you could only study the Quran, the Fiqh (i.e. the Islamic Jurisprudence), the Arabic language and the Basics of Arithmetic (Seri-Hersch, 2017, p.3) - this seemed the most appropriate approach.

## **Comboni College Khartoum (CCK) foundation**

School and mission seemed to be inseparable in Sudan until 1924 when Msgr. Paolo Tranquillo Silvestri was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Khartoum. The Bishop closed two Catholic all-boys schools - the only ones then existing in Sudan - and rented the building where the unique all-girls school was located in 1925.

The Vicariate was experiencing economic problems, and the bishop preferred to concentrate his limited financial and human resources on what is now South Sudan. On the other hand, Msgr. Tranquillo - who was well aware of the impossibility of converting the Muslim majority in the North - decided to reduce to the bare minimum our presence in

the area in order to facilitate the logistical access towards the missions of the South (Villa, 1932).

The community was led at that time by Fr. Paolo Meroni who had a broader concept of mission and a different perception on the importance of our presence in the North. The confreres reacted in the General Chapter of 1925 with the decision of founding a school in Khartoum; the institute would have been named after his founder since it was decided to introduce the cause of his canonisation.

Other Churches and national communities had founded primary schools over the four years of absence of Catholic all-boys schools from Sudan. It seemed, therefore, especially necessary to establish a secondary school where students from several primary schools could merge. Since secondary or high-schools were called “colleges” in the English system, the school founded in 1929 was called “Comboni College Khartoum” (CCK), and it would have had technical and business orientation in order to respond to the country’s need at that time.

The colonial government granted permission to found the school on two conditions. The first one was related to the teaching staff’s academic title. The lack of Comboni missionaries qualified staff caused the community to invite the Canadian Teaching Brothers to create a teaching staff, while the Comboni missionaries - who were the school’s owners - would have been responsible for the administration.

The second condition appeared in a second version of the authorisation: South Sudanese students were banned from enrolment in the new school. Moreover, the Gordon Memorial College proposed a *curriculum* which had been conceived to meet the colonial administration’s requirements. This was the one and only secondary school in the country and belonged to the government (Vantini, 2005).

The latter condition had to do with the English authority concern, according to whom, the opening of Missionary schools could have hurt the local’s feelings- since the *mahdya* was still an open wound - and fuelled “dangerous” independence leanings, especially since the revolution of 1924 in neighbouring North, where the new Egyptian government behaved in a very hostile way towards English people.

## Quality and leaders-formation for the independent Sudan

Sudanese press became the channel through which people's desire to access to a better quality educational offer was expressed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1930). Amongst local leaders, Moḥamed Aḥmad Maḥjūb wrote an article on the local newspaper *Al-Fajr* demanding to colonial government the goals' reform for formation. Further, he insisted on the need to reform Gordon Memorial College's educational contents so as to adapt them to British system standards. A few months later, a second piece by the same author bore an unequivocal title: "Give us education and leave us alone" (Aḥmad Maḥjūb, 1935, pp.1065-1066).

Along the lines of the above-mentioned article, the second British Under-Secretary of State, Sir Lancelot Oliphant, accused the British authorities in Sudan to neglect "the education of the natives and to concentrate solely on efficient government" (Foreign Office 407/219, quoted by Warburg, 2003, p.97) on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October in 1936.

Sayed Abdel Rahman El-Mahdi - the posthumous child of Muḥammad Aḥmad Al-Mahd, the one who had destroyed the missionary work carried out by Daniel Comboni - visited the Comboni College on the occasion of the prize-giving to champions of the different sports tournaments in April 1938. The religious and political leader was so impressed by the quality of the institution that he donated 50 Sudanese pounds for scholarships and enrolled three members of his own family in the school in 1940 (Vantini, 2005, pp. 514-515).

At that time, the Comboni College represented a clear example of international education community made up of 150 Egyptian students, 48 Syrians, 32 Greeks, 26 Italians, 16 Armenians, 13 Palestinians, 2 Indians, one Ethiopian, a Polish, one Yugoslavian and 48 Sudanese. The latter, finally, have already had access to the CCK. With regard to religion "208 were Christians, 104 were Muslims, 31 Jews and 2 Hindus" (Vantini, 2005, p.515).

In 1933 the Comboni College became a centre for Oxford High School examination which enabled its students to pursue their education at any College in the world. This also involved a huge investment by the community in the formation of the Comboni Missionaries who were intended to teach in the school. A quality indicator of the teaching is given

by the fact that in 1950 the 92.5% of the students who sat for Oxford Exam were able to pass it. Besides, the CCK became London Institute of Chartered Accountants' Examination Centre in 1949.

Sudan achieved independence in 1956, and Sadiq Al-Madhi - who was one among CCK's graduated students - was elected as Prime Minister in 1966.

### ***Sudanisation and equity***

Sudanese government ordered the expulsion of foreign missionary groups in the South in 1964; the intentions of those who also wanted to expel the missionary groups in the North were stopped thanks to the reaction of some graduates from CCK who then formed part of the government (Vantini, 2005, p.522).

However, another event had strong impact on the institution: the 1964's disorders. On the uprising, Southern Sudanese and Sudanese fought against each other in the capital. Most of the CCK's foreign lay teaching staff left the country and this also had great effects on the teaching quality.

Since then, the process of *sudanisation* of the teaching staff quickened, and the concept of equity achieved greater emphasis especially when the second civil war (1983-2005) obliged thousands of Southern Sudanese to move to the North.

### **The creation of a post-secondary section**

Even if timetables, teaching staff and place had already been decided, post-secondary program's creation was prevented by the riots of 1964.

Later on - in 1999 - some fathers of students belonging to the primary section asked Fr. Giuseppe (Beppino) Puttinato - the Comboni missionary brother who ran the school - that their sons could pursue their academic studies even in the Comboni College.

The Ministry of Higher-Education and Scientific Research of Sudan

approved the Comboni College of Science and Technology (CCST) on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April in 2001 thanks to the contribution of those fathers. They all were Muslim Sudanese citizens passionate by the Charisma of Comboni.

The CCST became the one and only Christian higher education institution throughout the country. Its several university curricula currently admit 54% of Sudanese students and 46% of foreign pupils mainly coming from refugee families of South Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

### **An evolution marked by dialogue with society**

CCK's foundation represented the community's reaction towards the abandonment of an active missionary presence in Sudan, the land on which his founding father had walked. It dealt with giving a pastoral-educational care to the Christian minority, and to obtain a launching pad for dialogue with an Islamic majority society.

The lack of schools and their quality, made the CCK a reference point in which generations of Muslim and Christian leaders were educated together.

The institution emphasised the equity point by means of founding new schools in the country, and the attempt to create a Sudanese *curriculum* as opposed to the international one. High-school filled its classrooms with South Sudanese students, and the post-secondary section facilitated access to higher education for students coming from displaced and refugees families from South Sudan and Eritrea.

Nevertheless, post-secondary section keeps on maintaining contact with prominent personalities of the South Sudanese society who seek for it because of its Spanish and Italian language courses.

The institution's features evolution has gone hand in hand with the mission concept's evolution. Its open-minded approach was demonstrated by the reaction to a point of view which was restricted to the Non-Christians' conversion. However, as time goes by, a new approach has spread, and it conceives the mission as dialogue at the service of the building of the Kingdom of God in cooperation with Muslim friends.

For instance, this approach finds concrete expression by means of the service that post-secondary section carries out through its activities in the field of palliative care. Muslims and Christians are formed to approach to the Father's mercy anyone who is suffering from a chronic or a terminal disease. Another example of this approach is represented by the business incubator created by the CCK through which we promote an entrepreneurship respecting the environment, meeting the social needs, and encouraging the economic integration for those most in need.

Comboni College historical evolution has also affected the way of developing the ministry for those missionaries who worked there. The early Comboni Missionaries ran a secondary school composed by a majority of foreign and Christian students and they entrusted education to the Canadian Brothers (1929-1935). After they left, the community had to prepare well-qualified missionaries for this ministry. Some of them, never worked in a parish but they spent the rest of their missionary lives enlightened by the icon of Jesus as a Teacher.

In recent years our presence has decreased, and the teaching- as much as the administration - are carried on in collaboration with the local staff. Here are included some Muslims and Christians who had studied at the primary and secondary school of the CCK, and who graduated at the CSST. They are the ones who continue along the path of the mission and who provide new insights on the institution.

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# Solidarity with South Sudan

**Sister Espérance Bamiriyo**  
**Comboni Missionary Sister**

## **South Sudan**

**« (...) and you will be my witnesses (...) to the end of the earth.»**  
**Acts 1:6-8**

*Solidarity with South Sudan* is the reaction by those consecrated men and women who participated in the Synod “*Thirst for God, thirst for humanity*”. Their commitment symbolises a concrete answer to South Sudan’s people thirst following long years of the multi-faceted civil war that this site of the world has been experiencing. Such an initiative is a reply to South Sudanese Bishops’ invitation to international religious congregations. The invocation has been addressed to both religious men and women so that they may join the Church of South Sudan in order to meet the population’s humanitarian needs after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Naivasha, 2005. Following the guidelines given by the Catholic Church, religious men and women should collaborate in fulfilling the so-called **5 R**:

- Reconciliation
- Rehabilitation
- Reconstruction
- Repatriation
- Re-education

Although it was created in 2006, *Solidarity with South Sudan* was actually born in 2008. It was then that Sr. Cathy Arana - an American sister belonging to the *School Sisters of Notre Dame* Congregation - and Sr. Espérance Bamiriyo - from the *Comboni Missionary Sisters* - were officially invited to South Sudan for starting a missionary presence of sisters which should have lived together a shared ministry.

At present, there is a large number of religious men and women who live and work together on human promotion, education and evangelisation in South Sudanese Catholic Church. We live together in inter-congregational mixed communities. St. Daniel Comboni, our founding Father, used to say: “This work is Catholic.”

*Solidarity with South Sudan* groups, consecrated men and women coming from all over the world: the United States, Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

The Comboni Missionary Sister (CMS) has been entrusted with the training of healthcare workers given their experience in Sudan since the beginning of the plan. I am personally responsible for male nurses and female obstetricians training at higher education level in the Institute. The training lasts three years, and only boys and girls who completed secondary schools focusing on humanistic studies are admitted.

The Institute has trained 191 health workers since 2010: a really appreciated and valuable staff who works all over the country. All the staff members come from far corners of the nation, and most of them go back to their birthplace to work in health facilities after having completed the training. Everyone else works with NGOs like WHO, World Vision, Doctors Without Borders and many others. The skilled work they carry out helps to reduce death rate among inhabitants, especially in far corners facing a huge lack of healthcare workforce. People show appreciation and gratitude to the work carried out by our Institute’ graduates.

Currently, there are 126 undergraduate students coming from the Nuba Mountains and all over South Sudan: 50 of them are attending the obstetrics course while the others - who are 76 – are attending the nursing course. I am very glad to offer a small contribution for the greater glory of God. The work is catholic, and together we are witnesses.

Far from being an institute which only provides a high quality vocational education and training, we further promote South Sudanese’ people cohesiveness which is often threatened by tribalism. We actively take part in JPIC promotion through seminaries, workshops, meetings and so on, since our students come from far and near. This is a slow process, nevertheless enabling us to harvest the fruit of empathy and mutual support. Our presence and consecrated people’s community life coming

from anywhere and belonging to different congregations are precious and meaningful demonstrations.

*Solidarity with South Sudan* is an initiative in response to a request from the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference; we can therefore foresee continuity for the future. It is our concern to ensure continuity in health-care education, as we are involved in preparing other religious who will come after us. We take the neighbouring countries' opportunities into account, and we identify some capable individuals; then, we send them somewhere else to carry out high-quality studies so that one day they return to South Sudan as teachers of the Institute where we work.

Three Comboni Missionary Sisters in collaboration with two Comboni Missionary Brothers have actively helped in health workers education since the beginning of the project, while some other sisters deals with the teacher training. Would you like to experience missionary life through *Solidarity with South Sudan*?

Welcome!

# Mother earth centre

**Sister James Thoompunkal Anns**  
**Comboni Sister**

## **Zambia**

*Mother Earth Centre* unassumingly rises along the Mongu-Lusaka road as one approaches the town of Mongu in Western Province. This discrete centre, in actual fact, represents the commitment and quiet determination of the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Zambia in upholding and furthering the stewardship of creating in partnership with farmers of this rural area. The centre, in fact, promotes community involvement in sustainable farming and eco-friendly attitudes and actions in a holistic approach towards climate change mitigation.

*Mother Earth* centre was born after years of service by the Comboni Missionary Sisters in the rural community of Kaande, on the outskirts of Mongu, administrative centre of Western Province of Zambia, a landlocked country in the central southern region of the African continent.

Western Province is among the least developed of the provinces of Zambia. It is characterised for the most part by sandy soils. More than 80% of its population is considered to live below the poverty line. The main resource is subsistence agriculture - mostly carried out by women - supplemented by fishing, as well as the cultivation of cereals and livestock-rearing, albeit with relatively low levels of productivity. When seasonal rains are plentiful, the district has a reasonable level of food self-sufficiency. However, the situation varies hugely between different agro-economic zones, with some areas even facing extreme poverty.

In the area of Luena and Nalikwanda, where *Mother Earth Centre* is located, there is a total population of approximately 86,000. Most people here have traditionally eked out a living by selling vegetables, fish, rice and cassava. Others sell handicrafts and, in recent times, many have turned to the production and sale of charcoal for additional income.

## **How the centre took shape**

Over the years a committed group of women and youths of St. Agatha Parish (Mongu), together with the Sisters, participated in different workshops and gatherings organised by different entities. They learned, reflected, prayed, organised and conducted a series of faith formation programmes, and developmental initiatives ranging from training for sustainable agriculture, groups savings programmes, prevention of HIV/AIDS, literacy classes for adults and training programmes for prayer leaders and catechisers. From 2006 to 2011, a small group of young farmers, together with Sr. Eulalia Capdevila, participated in a training programme on Sustainable Agriculture. The programme was organised by the Sisters in collaboration with officers from the Ministry of Agriculture and various local and non-governmental institutions.

With agriculture presenting peculiar challenges in this semi-arid region, the farmers, together with the Sisters, saw the urgent need to identify sustainable alternative sources of livelihood. For, although the widespread practice of charcoal production seemed to be an 'easy' way of supplementing household incomes, it was clear to them that this was only further aggravating deforestation in Western Province.

As the group put into practice their newly-learned skills in their own farms, some through pig-rearing, others through the planting of rice, still others planted moringa trees in their gardens. The idea of producing and selling moringa leaf powder as an alternative to the business of charcoal production, and as a sustainable means to improve farmers' livelihoods emerged as the young farmers continued their meetings and evaluations with Sr. Eulalia. After considerable discussion and careful research, they agreed that venturing into moringa cultivation and processing would significantly improve the incomes of rural households while also contrasting the rapid trend towards deforestation in their area.

Right from its inception in 2006 the project has adopted an approach of ecological sustainability, both in farming methods as well as in techniques used for the processing of moringa leaf powder.

## Why moringa?

The plant of moringa (*moringa oleifera*) is native to the hills of the Himalayas and is commonly found in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the Philippines; it is also widely cultivated in Central and South America. The tree is easily grown in the arid plains of tropical and sub-tropical African countries. In Zambia it has become popular among farmers, who grow the tree around their villages. Research shows that the plant has many properties and contains a broad spectrum of nutrients.

In 2011 the population of the area of Kaande and their *indunas* (local traditional leaders), having observed the benefits brought by the training programme in sustainable agriculture and the cultivation of moringa, requested to extend these benefits to the wider population through the creation of a permanent training centre and a pilot plantation of moringa, as a sort of development hub for the whole area. To this end, the *Yuka Kuta* (the traditional court of the chief of the area, Chief Mwenekandala) allocated 4 hectares of traditional land to the Sisters. Since then, different formation programmes, visits to farmers, a moringa plantation and related projects have been developed in the area, giving rise to the centre that is today known as *Mother Earth Centre*, or just simply, *Mother Earth*. In January 2019, a factory for the processing of moringa leaf powder was officially inaugurated at the centre.

## At the service of the local community

The centre has taken shape over the years in a concerted attempt by the Sisters to journey with the local rural community towards greater resilience by proactively engaging the specific challenges facing them. At the same time, it is continuing to evolve into a project of much broader scope.

In fact, the centre is gradually developing into an ‘agricultural, social and spiritual centre’. The aim is to keep developing, showcasing and propagating a variety of sustainable agricultural practices suitable to the sandy soils of Mongu. This is being done by staff tending the moringa demo plot and the moringa processing factory. The centre is also qualifying and re-qualifying local personnel in the area of organic and sustainable agriculture, environmental protection, health promotion

and disease prevention. All this goes hand-in-hand with establishing a moringa leaf powder production unit for its commercialization on accessible markets, both local and international. This would eventually enable participating farmers to have a steady source of income. The centre continues to provide short courses to farmers on alternative organic farming, sustainable organic agriculture, moringa plantation, processing, production and manufacturing.

*Mother Earth* centre also offers a forum for farmers and governmental and non-governmental entities involved directly or indirectly in climate change mitigation.

The socio-developmental focus of the centre sees it working with women of rural communities in the prevention of malnourishment and diseases. Sisters are also sharing and helping to recover local knowledge of natural medicine. In addition, the centre channels support for the education of youth and women giving special attention to girls, through Christian formation, literacy programmes and counselling.

The Sisters are also actively involved in pastoral outreach to the rural Christian communities. The centre itself offers a welcoming and conducive space for groups to reflect on and deepen a spirituality of ‘integral ecology’ through prayer and meditation. It offers programmes of faith formation in coordination with the local Catholic Church.

## **Impact ...**

In a landscape where the struggle for survival is, at best, served by random and piecemeal approaches to development, it is the environment itself that often loses out. Tree-felling continues to be a menace, making it clear that much still needs to be done to preserve the natural environment and the livelihoods and habitats of all those who depend upon it. Today, *Mother Earth Centre* stands out as a veritable green island in Kaande, combining the cultivation of native trees, moringa and nursery trees, even as surrounding land continues to be cleared for the rapidly expanding town of Mongu.

The centre hosts a thriving demo-plot on organic farming and moringa plantation. It also manages a chicken run for manure and as an

income-generating activity. Vermicomposting and organic compost demonstration also feature as methods for soil regeneration.

Since 2015, around 3,000 women have been trained to improve levels of nutrition in their families and in the wider community. In addition, more than 250 farmers have been trained in eco-sustainable farming methods, while 100 moringa growers have been trained in moringa farming and processing techniques. The latter have been trained and mentored by the Sisters in principles of participatory decision-making and transparency in view of starting their own moringa growers' association. This association was finally created in 2018 as a direct stakeholder in the production, processing and ongoing assessment of the internal system of the centre's moringa powder enterprise.

Sisters and staff regularly visit participating farmers. In these occasions they are able to appreciate the impact the farmers and course attendees have on the wider community as well, as women and farmers who have undergone the various trainings contribute in their turn to the life of their communities by sharing the acquired skills.

## **Sustainability**

The sustainability of the project depends on moringa leaf powder production and sales and on local production of organic vegetables, poultry and many other initiatives connected with sustainable and organic farming at *Mother Earth Centre*.

The staff of *Mother Earth* is made up of local lay people who are constantly trained and upgraded in different areas of skills. *Mother Earth* moringa leaf powder has been registered under ZABS (Zambia Bureau of Standards) and is already being sold on the local market.

## **Collaboration**

The project has been generously supported by many organisations and people of goodwill. These include: CEI (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana), Guardavanti, CELIM (Centro Laici Italiani per le Missioni), VMM (Volunteer Mission Movement), GRIMM (Gruppo Impegno Missio-

nario-cantieri di solidarietà), Caritas Italy, Caritas Mongu, Religious Congregations including the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Comboni Missionaries, as well as Zambian governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture and a host of funding agencies, private donors and the families of several Comboni Sisters.

## **Embracing an integral ecology**

The transition to an *integral ecology* is the need of the hour, a planetary SOS! Like much of the church, it seems that we too, as a missionary institute, have barely had our ears to the ground as regards the global ecological crisis. Even *Mother Earth Centre* may be just a ‘drop in the ocean’.

Nonetheless, it has been long, and patiently, in the making, benefitting from the goodwill and financial contributions of many donors - generous individuals as well as organisations - who, like the Sisters, believe that this is the way forward, *one community at a time*.

As a congregation, are we Comboni Sisters ready, as bearers of a charism that was born in a specific time and place, to let it speak to - and heed - ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’?  
*Perhaps we still think we have a choice...*

# The experience of the inter-congregational community at the Italian Hospital Umberto I

**Sister Pina De Angelis and Sisters  
Comboni Missionary Sisters**

**Egypt**

## **1. Historical backgrounds on the Italian Hospital**

The Italian Hospital Umberto I in Cairo was built in 1903 by the Società Italiana di Beneficenza (Italian Society of Charity).

«The Pious Mothers of the Nigritia were entrusted with the hospital's internal service; in the months before the opening of the first pavilions they sent some sisters who were a shining example of self-denial and faith<sup>13</sup>». At the beginning, the Devout Mothers of Africa were 4, then the sisters number gradually rose to 44 until it plunged to 10 due to their old age and diseases.

Mother General, Sr. Adele Brambilla, believed in the importance of being present, as sisters, inside the work; however, the congregation was short of staff. Thus, she tried to contact various religious congregations in Europe and the Middle East, but no one was willing to accept the responsibility of the mission in the hospital.

Unwillingly, she was compelled to write a letter to notify competent authorities of the Comboni Missionary Sisters' withdrawal from the Hospital in 2006.

## **2. Why an inter-congregational community? Historical genesis**

The birth of a community composed by different congregations has been determined by a tangible situation of emergency. H. B. Antonios Nagib, Patriarch emeritus of Alexandria of the Copts, reacted to the

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13 C. CERQUA, The Hospital Umberto I in Cairo,  
[http://xoomer.virgilio.it/nuovopapiro/dopo\\_egitto\\_file/cerqua\\_sarnelli/lospedale\\_umberto\\_i\\_del\\_cairo.htm](http://xoomer.virgilio.it/nuovopapiro/dopo_egitto_file/cerqua_sarnelli/lospedale_umberto_i_del_cairo.htm)

Mother General's letter and asked her to postpone the date until one year in the hope of finding a solution. He wrote in his turn a letter to the Provincial Mother Superior expressing his firm belief of the importance of the Christian presence in the healthcare sector, where the individuals are very sensitive, where values are conveyed both to Christians and Muslims and dialogue of life is highly effective<sup>14</sup>.

Mr. Piero Donato, President of the Italian Society of Charity also wrote a letter to Provincial and General Mother expressing his sorrow for the Sisters' withdrawal and asking them to let them stay as their selfless dedication to patients was irreplaceable<sup>15</sup>.

The idea of an inter-congregational community was born as a consequence of the encounters and exchange of ideas with the Patriarch who, enthusiastic about the initiative, wrote a letter to all female religious congregations at the beginning of 2007; he called for Christians to be present in the Italian Hospital and also asked to put a sister at disposal for this task.

Four congregations responded to the call. The Patriarch convened a meeting of the Provincial Superiors to define the aim of the religious presence within the hospital, and to develop a vision and a plan.

The purpose of the project is a human-spiritual mission aimed at patients, as well as guidance and support to medical personnel intended to foster a spirit of cooperation in order to humanise nursing service regarding the dignity of the individual.

Besides ward service, the community needs time for communal prayer to bear a consistent witness of the work.

The Hospital made an agreement with the Italian Society of Charity - represented by the President and the Patriarch - to establish rights and obligations of the contracting parties to lend reliability to the project on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2009.

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14 Cf. S. B. Antonios Nagib's letter, the Coptic Catholic Patriarch emeritus of Alexandria and President of the Assembly of the Catholic Hierarchy of Egypt, to Sr. Teresa Irene Yago Abril, Provincial Superior of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (the 25<sup>th</sup> of June in 2006).

15 Cf. Letter by the President of the Italian Society of Charity to Mother General (the 15<sup>th</sup> of June in 2016).

The signing of the contract by the Patriarch was meaningful as the community officially worked on behalf of the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt, and not on a single congregation's behalf.

H. B. Antonios Nagib decided to organise a week of preparation for this new form of service that represented an unprecedented adventure to sisters who had to join the new community.

A team of experts tried to direct this new venture: situations were meant to be grouped so as to survive, e.g. banks. This approach was new to Egypt and to the ecclesiastical-religious context too.

Dealing with a whole new experience, we were exposed to different reactions:

- Some people supported us
- Some people looked at us skeptically or with negativity
- Some people were afraid that we could lose our identity
- Some others were afraid of misunderstandings and of a short-term failure.

The experience began among fears for different languages, doubts and widespread skepticism even among priests and female religious congregations. But we did not get discouraged.

Since the beginning, we have been aware of our great responsibility to a God who wants to open new ways; we were aware of our own responsibility towards our congregations and towards the ecclesiastical authority who supported our project and had faith in its success given that it might become a model for other fields (for example, pastoral and educational fields), bearing witness to the Kingdom of God.

The same Apostles were few and different from each other; however, the Lord and the mission brought them together.

The same Comboni worked with all the forces present on site; they were brought together by the passion for the mission and this allowed them

to overcome obstacles together; keeping as reference the importance of **cooperation**.

We are brought together by the Lord and the hospital too; we are integrated with the patients, their relatives, medical and paramedical staff, and the service staff.

### **3. The structure of the community**

We had to invent our community life and style to live it because we had never had such an experience.

For example, we cannot speak the same language both in prayer and in daily life. Some sisters only speak Arabic or some other French, but they are not in the position to speak Italian; some sisters can't read Arabic and the use of this language is limited to the working context.

By mutual agreement, we have decided to pray some days in Arabic, and some days in Italian; we celebrate the Eucharist some days by the Coptic rite, and some days by the Latin rite in Italian.

We help each other in the housework removing the expression: "It is up to me, it is not up to me".

We have set the community on the value of **welcoming**, between us and with people. Everyone who enters our home, whether they are believers or not, can experience peace and a warm **welcoming**.

We have drawn up an internal statute in collaboration with the Patriarch who has always followed our path with interest. He has expressed in a letter his thanksgiving to God for His grace, and to each one of us for the success of this project which is in its turn a work of God; he also had showed gratitude for our cooperation, solidarity and mutual love: without these values, the experience might not last<sup>16</sup>.

We have underlined the inter-congregational community's significance and purpose in our statute: the mission of communal life meant as fra-

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16 Cf. Letter by H. B. Antonios Nagib written on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July in 2008.

ternal life in the diversity, as unity in the multiplicity which is based on maturity, humility and simplicity of the members.

The community bears witness to the evangelical message, and it is an expression of dialogue between churches and religions; it also seeks to satisfy up-to-date requests, so as to respond to community aging and decline in vocations, and to meet the challenges of contemporary society.

Sisters belonging to the community represent their congregation of origin through the modesty they have demonstrated in the workplace and inside the community.

The community daily prays Lauds, Holy Mass, and Vesper; any sister chooses her time for personal prayer according to the rules of her congregation.

Finally, the coordinator is elected by the community. She runs the life of the whole group, and maintains a close relationship with the President of the SIB, the Patriarch, the Hospital Board and Superiors Mothers of the different Congregations.

The hospital provides sisters with food, cleaning products, medical and transports costs, as well as a monthly *pocket money* for each of them. A fixed share is provided to the sister in charge of the economy for some little extra expenses in the community<sup>17</sup>.

#### **4. Results and failures**

Accomplishments are tangible by anyone who attends the mission. People often ask us: “*How can you live together and why are you always helpful to everyone?*”

The success of the plan lies on the people who are part of it. As indicated in the statute, sisters shall have a clear identity, sense of belonging and a certain experience. In the beginning, a congregation sent a sister soon after her first Vows: she tried to resist for five years, but in the end she was torn about the requirements of her community of origin and

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17 See Statute of the community (the 19<sup>th</sup> of May in 2014).

the needs of the inter-congregational community so much so that she had to leave the hospital's community. We have faced challenges due to the handing over of the hospital boards: we were able to overcome them through solidarity and union among us. The various directors were not aware of the role played by the sisters inside the hospital, so they immediately entered into conflict with them. Later, they perceived and recognised the value of our presence, and relations began to change positively.

The coordinator plays a crucial role in leading the sisters for the mission ahead of them; furthermore, she helps other sisters not to linger on little things as the achievement is far greater: we are the Church in Egypt.

## **5. The future**

We are worried about the future as sisters are aging; in case no other sisters will be sent to the mission (both by the same congregations participating in the project or by other congregations) the experience may be short-lived and come to an end.

There are many congregations in Egypt, but according to an Egyptian priest «every congregation minds its own interests», thus avoiding to open themselves to new ways and trying to overcome the fear of losing members. Admittedly, we have to lose something, but what we receive from this experience is far superior.

## **6. What have we learnt from this experience?**

From this experience that has been going on for 12 years, we have learnt (and we still continue to learn):

- to abandon a narrow-minded approach within the congregations, and to break new grounds;
- to be flexible, and to deal with different social categories in respect of the dignity of the individual;
- to *re-dimension* our limited vision which is often considered as absolute;
- do not withdraw before little misunderstandings which are part and parcel of life, but look ahead, at the value of mission;
- take the responsibility to grow up on a human and spiritual level.

Success depends on our own commitment, on the faith in the project we are carrying in our heart, on communication, on sharing the joys and the sorrows and also on the coordinator's role. The project was born from an emergency; however, it was and it is a real challenge.

# Hospital and health system in South Sudan

**Brother Doctor Rosario Iannetti**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **South Sudan**

**Mary Immaculate Hospital** was established in February 2002 in **Mapuordit**, a remote village in the savannah in the **Diocese of Rumbek**. About 5.000 people live there and the majority of them escaped in April 1992 from the city of Yirol, 65 km East of Mapuordit, when Khartoum army recaptured the town from SPLA rebel soldiers (Sudan People's Liberation Army) and slaughtered the civilians who couldn't escape in time.

Diocesan Father Raphael Riel of Diocese of Rumbek (DOR) guided the people who were fleeing from Yirol, and chose Mapuordit to found a village for the refugees and for the new mission as it was hidden by the savannah and far from the main road connecting Yirol to Rumbek which was combed by the Sudanese Armed Forces' army trucks.

The **New Sudan Group of Comboni Missionaries** was operating in liberated zones under the direct responsibility of the General Curia of the Comboni Missionaries, whose community in Yirol had been evacuated shortly before the attack of the Sudanese Armed Forces. They decided to help Fr. Riel to start the new mission. Fr. Pellerino and Fr. Barton were sent to Mapuordit in March 1993 to establish respectively the parish and the primary school. Later, in 1998 a secondary school was founded.

**Australian Sisters OLSH** (*Our Lady of Sacred Heart*) arrived in Mapuordit in 1995, and founded a small dispensary made up of three huts. Local people affected by the war and periodically threatened by famine were in desperate need of healthcare. There were no hospitals in the area and surgical patients had to be referred to the ICRC's Lopiding hospital in northern Kenya over 1.000 kilometres away, after the dispensary had radioed the Red Cross Radio for help. Mothers who needed caesarean section often did not arrive in Kenya in time to be saved.

The **Comboni Father Cesare Mazzolari**, Bishop of the Diocese of Rumbek (DOR), developed the idea of founding a small field hospital along with the dispensary in 2001. The aid station was equipped with a surgical tent from the University of Trnava (Slovakia) that also sent one rotating surgeon and two rotating nurses every 3 months. Nevertheless, a permanent doctor was missing on the spot; it was necessary to coordinate the activities of the Slovakian medical staff with the activities of the paramedical local staff in need of education as it was low skilled. Further, a Medical Director was needed in the new hospital.

The Bishop asked his congregation for help and the Superior of the Delegation of South Sudan, Fr. Ezio Bettini, asked me to make myself available to the diocese to cooperate in the establishment of a **rural diocesan hospital** in Mapuordit. Although he made it clear to the Bishop that my assignment was *ad personam* and that the congregation was not taking over the running of the hospital, he called to the mission a young brother electrician, Alberto Lamana. He would have helped for the technical development and the hospital maintenance. Since its inception in 2002, the hospital has seen a **strong involvement by the Comboni Missionary Brothers in its founding and managing. The Comboni Missionaries presence has always been a constant in the history of the hospital and still continues to be a constant now** due to the presence of a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 4 brothers alongside.

**The option to educate informally local young people who had attended the mission's secondary school** made possible the development of the hospital in relatively short time, despite the isolation caused by the civil war, the limited financial resources and the lack of local qualified personnel. Some female registered nurses from Uganda and a laboratory technician woman from Italy were employed as instructors. Registered nurses came from **St. Kizito Matany Hospital** in Uganda that was run by the Comboni Missionary Sisters so they were motivated to convey the Christian values - and not just skills - of the service to our sick neighbour to South Sudanese people. Obviously, the long-term purpose was to set up a **formal registered nursing school** inside the hospital; however, due to the war and to the lack of funds this dream came true only in 2009. In its first ten years of existence, the hospital mainly worked thanks to **local auxiliaries nurses** who were educated by means of theoretical courses and practice under the supervision of some Ugandan and Australian registered nurses and **Comboni Missionary Brothers nurses**.

Since 2005, right after the peace agreement and the formation of the South Sudanese autonomous government, **the hospital's facilities have increased rapidly** thanks to the contribution of state-owned (the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation) and ecclesial (mainly from Slovakia, Austria, Italy and Germany) donors eager to contribute to the country's reconstruction after the war. As a consequence, in 2016 the hospital was mostly built with permanent materials and had about 100 beds and 5 wards (surgical, medical, maternity, paediatrics and surgical septic), one operating room, one laboratory and a triage. However, completion of all remaining facilities with permanent materials (pharmacy, surgical unit, antenatal care, radiology and isolation) and the finishing of water, medical, and electrical services slowly continued until 2017. The **direct catchment area** was of 90.000 people who were resident within a 40-km radius; some patients even came from up to 200 km away to undergo surgery (around 1.000 surgical operations a year were performed on average until 2013).

Since 2005, **the Comboni Province of South Sudan had slowly but progressively entered the hospital management** and opened a specific account for it. It also had started a direct fundraising besides providing 3 brothers who worked full time in the hospital.

Meanwhile, the Diocesan Commission on Health of the DOR that was still legally responsible for the hospital management was changing into an NGO in 2006 (AAA: Arkangelo Ali Association) and it was limiting the field of activity to TB (Tuberculosis) and leprosy even outside the diocese.

There were tensions with the hospital management team as the former field hospital had reached the dimension of a regional hospital; the Lakes State's Ministry of Health (MOH) offered all kind of health services in exchange for the payment of wages of 50 workers and the provision of some medicines by the same ministry.

After the approval by the Provincial Assembly in January 2009, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February in 2009 Superior Provincial of South Sudan, Fr. Perina, and Bishop Mazzolari signed a **MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) where the Comboni Province of South Sudan assumed the management of the hospital** for 5 years while the AAA continued to support the activities related to TB and Leprosy programs. The MOU was renewed in 2015 by new Provincial Fr. Daniele Moschetti and Diocesan Coordinator Fr. Mathiang: it is expiring on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June in 2020. Since the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2016, the management of the hospital was handed

over to Br. Dr. Paolo Rizzetto while I was transferred to Wau at the end of November 2016. Now, I am running the St. Daniel Comboni Catholic Hospital and I am working closely together with the Comboni Missionary Sisters who founded this hospital in 2011.

About the **results achieved**, undoubtedly Mary Immaculate Hospital has been an extraordinary *pre-evangelising tool* for Dinka and Jur Peoples of the Eastern Lakes State and of the Amadi State. These tribes -who are still followers of traditional and illiterate religions - greatly appreciate the service rendered by the hospital which is often the first opportunity to them to meet Christian faith. The Mass is celebrated regularly on Sundays in the hospital under a canopy working as a waiting room. Many patients and their relatives watch from a distance and they are intrigued by this odd and new ceremony they have seen before. Unfortunately, we have no chaplain assigned to the hospital in order to look after sick people consistently, and mainly the few Catholics. However, a priest from the Comboni community is always at disposal in case a sick patient or his/her relatives ask for the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.

The hospital is also a *place of meeting and dialogue between tribes and clans*; here they interact with one other both as workers and patients. Unluckily, coexistence is not easy; the hospital was the centre of repeated **tribal warfare** in 2004, 2006 and 2011. This caused the permanent expulsion of workers belonging to clans which are different from the prevailing one in Mapuordit (Dinka-Atout), and mainly of Dinka-Agar, Dinka-Jang and Jur workers. In the last 5 years, Dinka-Agar patients can no longer come to the hospital to be cured, although they live just 20km away from Mapuordit. All the area is in a situation of permanent insecurity due to the abundance of weapons among young civilians from the outbreak of a new Civil War in December 2013. The hospital vehicle was struck by bullets twice, in 2015 and in 2016; Fr. Placide Majambo was injured first, and then the driver.

The hospital has always been **a place for the education and training** of dozens of young paramedics and doctors that are now working in many hospitals and dispensaries all over South Sudan.

**Sustainability and continuity of the work** are the major challenges now. The financial support from the Ministry of Health has rapidly de-

creased in 2016 due to hyper-inflation. Before that moment, the aid given has always been strong (mainly from 2007 to 2015, as a consequence of a MOU between DOR and Lakes State's MOH signed in 2010). Unfortunately, hyper-inflation practically zeroed the real value of the wages paid by the government to half of the staff. The hospital was therefore forced to pay 95% of the real value of government wages (increased by a compensation for inflation). Since April 2019, the government also zeroed the provision of medicines. The DOR is facing hardship - also because of the absence of Bishop since 2011 - in taking again the full management of the hospital as the Comboni Missionary Brother wish on expiry of the second five-year MOU on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June in 2020.

## **What we have learnt from this experience?**

According to me, that the classical Comboni method is still valid in the XX century;

1. *To Save Africa with Africa*: Ugandan nurses educated professionally and mainly Christianly in a Comboni Ugandan hospital had a crucial role to the development of the hospital. Given their cultural and ethnical proximity to South Sudanese, they revealed themselves to be more efficient than European or Australian female nurses.
2. *Cooperation of the local dioceses with different religious congregations, international ecclesial benefactors, NGOs, Italian and Slovakian State Cooperation, UN agency (WHO and WFP) and the South Sudanese Ministry of Health*: the inception and development of the hospital was based on a strong and continuous collaboration among multiple and different religious, secular and state entities. The hospital is one of the few diocesan institutions in South Sudan to receive considerable and direct funds both from the South Sudanese Ministry of Health and the Italian and Slovakian International Cooperation.

# Africa through the lenses of social transformation

**Brother Jonas Dzinekou Yawovi**  
**Comboni Missionary**  
**Director of the Institute for Social Transformation**

**Kenya**

## **The era of social transformation for Africa**

The African continent has been perceived differently at different times. Often negative terminologies have been used to describe the continent. Regardless of the different social challenges in Africa, there is the undeniable fact that there are interesting positive evolutions occurring. We see a vibrant and innovative youthful population determined to resolve the continent's major social problems, more so, communities are awakening to the reality that can own their own development. These positive evolutions are clear signs of the important social transformation happening on the continent. These are clear indications that Africa has great prospects and this is where there are more opportunities for creating a better society. Africans and the Western world must change the lenses they have been using to see the continent. On one hand the Africans have to start looking at the continent with the eyes of opportunities and on the other hand, Western world should stop looking at the continent as a land to loot but rather build a win-win partnership.

## **Spiritual for social transformation**

Agents of social transformation deal with complex societal realities. Consequently, there is no guarantee that their efforts will yield fruits in a short time. Often, they have to go through frustrations and great difficulties to bring about change. Human goodwill is not enough to go through the struggle for social transformation. They need inner energy and strength that transcend their own human limitations. Hence there is the need to connect with the Supreme Being. Spirit-

uality is a crucial aspect of the life of agents of social transformation.

The fundamental dimension of the training at Institute for Social Transformation (IST) is to provide to the agents of social transformation a solid spiritual and biblical foundation for the ministry. Spirituality provides the agents of change a deeper motivation to engage and make the world a better place.

## **Social transformation process**

Social transformation is not an event but rather a continuous process of continuous transformation of the society. The process of social transformation starts when people's old mindset, consciousness, and change in beliefs enable them to engage and do things that improve their lives and their community. When communities that have been passive and dependent on external handouts suddenly realise their potentials for their own development and start to address the problems they face, then social transformation is set in motion. Slowly when we see tangible positive changes in the lives of people and the community, then social transformation is taking place.

The process of social transformation always starts with individual transformation. The individuals are the agents of social transformation and the initiator of the process. Hence their own transformation is part of the process. Once they get to embrace their own inward transformation, they are ready to engage outwardly to the transformation of the society.

## **The trigger of social transformation**

The process of social transformation is triggered by various factors. We have learned with certainty that one key trigger of social transformation is education. Education can change people mindset, unlock their potential and open new perspectives of life for them. Education that is geared towards transformation provides people with the skills to read their life in a different script and be able to make a decision that put them on the path of systemic change.

IST has been in existence for the last 25 years and has essentially focused on human development for social transformation. Founded by Fr

Francesco Pierli as Institute of Social Ministry in Mission at Tangaza University College in Nairobi, in a quarter century it has grown both academically and as a reality that significantly contributes to the social transformation of Africa. This is done through the training that the institute is unlocking people and communities' potential to embrace and engage for social transformation. Over the years we have developed unique content and pedagogy that work.

## **Level of social transformation**

Social transformation happens at different levels of the society. The first level is personal transformation. This is when individuals become more aware of the power, they have to transform their life and impact the society. When this personal transformation occurs, they make personal decision to become agent of change. Secondly, at the micro-level, there are situations or events that awaken communities of their potential. This is when a community or group becomes aware of their potential to transform their current situation. The social transformation process is at time initiated by communities or groups people. The third is at the macro-level and this is where there is a systemic change in the society. There are times where the action of agents of social transformation provoke a change that shakes the existing system that perpetuate the oppression of people. A good example is the change brought about Mohamed Yunus through his Grameen Bank. Systemic change produces positive change at the global level.

## **Comboni Missionaries on path of social transformation**

St. Daniel Comboni in his work of evangelization envisaged the positive transformation of the continent which he captured in his plan for the regeneration of Africa. This great dream of the regeneration of Africa is what in modern terminology we call social transformation. The dream of social transformation is embodied in the work that the Institute for Social Transformation does. The spirituality of Comboni and his dream for the regeneration of Africa remain a source of inspiration and gives meaning to the ministry we carry out in higher education. Education that transforms is central to the plan of Comboni. This transformative educational approach is adopted by IST across its programmes.

## Social enterprise development

One key approach to social transformation is a social enterprise that provides sustainable solutions to the most challenges and social problems for the continent. Africa is experiencing the rapid growth of social enterprises. There is a realisation that social enterprise development is a major contributor to the transformation of the continent. The social enterprise model has demonstrated its efficacy in creating socio-economic impacts. Social entrepreneurs are not only solving problems at the local level but also address the problems at the macro-level hence creating systemic change. This is certainly an alternative model to the pure capitalism model that has been for many years the dominant model in Africa.

We are observing an interesting dynamic in the social enterprise ecosystem in Kenya. First the high interest it is receiving from impact investors, accelerators, incubators foundations, and education institutions. The ecosystem players are growing, which is a positive development. However, this is still far from the idea.

One major challenge that needs to be addressed is a policy framework that will create an enabling environment. Since 2017, IST started an initiative called the Annual African conference on social entrepreneurship (AACOSE) that brings together the major ecosystem players in social entrepreneurship to discuss the way of advancing the social enterprise development on the continent. Through this conference, an initiative was to spearhead the development of the policy for social enterprise. Once the policy is in place it will be a game-changer for the growing social enterprise.

The social enterprise's development is also faced with the challenges of financing and solid social business model. At various stages of life circles, the social enterprise needs a different kind of financial support. Although there is a growing number of alternatives, this is still far from the demand. Consequently, many start-ups are still struggling with the finance aspect.

The IST has been a key player in the training of social entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurship is one of the major programme of the institute. Over the last ten years, the accumulated experience has helped the IST to build content and pedagogy that enable social entrepreneurs to create

a solid business model and implement it. It is through its programme that IST has become a reference point in training of social entrepreneurs.

## **Innovation for social transformation**

In Africa, there are already various interesting innovations that are spearheading the process of social transformation. Moving forward, we need to create an enabling environment for more social innovation for transformation and support to scale the solutions that have already proven to contribute to impacting lives and communities effectively. It is through social innovation that many social enterprises can be created. We need to put more emphasis on building sustainable social business models, and sustainable development models. To succeed in this, the starting point is the development of human capital on which the continent can rely on her social transformation.

## **Achievements and Challenges**

The landmark of the IST for the last 25 years is its practical approach to teaching and learning. The programmes have remained focused on the training of the agents of social transformation. The direct engagement with the communities is counted as a success story of the work IST does. The Institute has developed new innovative programmes over the years, in the field of sustainable human development, justice and peace, and through partnerships with marginalised communities and the public sector.

Higher education is expensive, distant from the underprivileged people which results in the exclusion of many people. The institute has been able to deconstruct this old approach by bringing higher education closer to people living in the informal settlement in Nairobi and making it affordable for them. Using a pedagogy of service-learning that blends classroom and community engagement, the IST is successfully transforming the lives of the learners and impacting communities in the informal settlements of Nairobi.

Building partnerships is part of the strength of the IST. We have devel-

oped an array of partners from local government, civil society organisation, non-governmental organisation, academic institutions, and the private sector. They contribute in one way or another to the attainment of our mission.

The limitations of IST are investing in the development of competences for evidence-based research to support its work and that of other organisations. The institute is also trying to build a strong network of alumni. This network is essential to connect the training that the institute offers to the practice in the field and vice versa. Finally, providing scholarships to the financially disadvantaged remains a major challenge that the institute is grappling with. This a crucial step to take in order to provide more opportunities to agents of social transformation who do not have the capacity to afford the high cost of university education.

# Catholic Radio Network (crn) the gospel of peace and reconciliation through the airwaves

**Sister Mary Carmen Galicia**

**Sister Elena Balatti**

**Sister Paola Moggi**

**Sister Cecilia Sierra**

**Comboni Sisters**

**Father José Vieira**

**Brother Alberto Lamana**

**Comboni Missionaries**

## **South Sudan**

For more than 50 years, the people of Southern Sudan had experienced violence, devastation, and displacement. By 2005, about four million had been forcibly displaced from their homes some took refuge in major cities in the north and others in neighbouring countries. With almost no infrastructure, extreme food insecurity, continuous bombings, and the absence of most social services, Southern Sudan became a humanitarian concern. Ongoing instability and rampant violence fuelled by continuous ethnic tensions and social crisis claimed the lives of over 2.5 million people over that period. The Catholic Radio Network was born as a concrete response of the Comboni Family to accompany South Sudanese in their journey from war to peace, freedom, and dignity in view of the 2011 Referendum on self-determination.

## **Broadening the tents**

January 9, 2005, marked a turning point in the history of Sudan. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, signed between the Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army created a framework for democracy and freedom and envisioned possibilities for peaceful co-existence. The signing of the Peace Accords generated an explosion of joy and hope; it was an opportunity to embark on the political transfor-

mation the country needed for a comprehensive peace, democracy, and unity in Sudan. There were high expectations on the arduous task of building a new, free and prosperous nation. The unprecedented media freedom was the window of opportunity for the Catholic Radio Network, CRN, to emerge.

The history of the Comboni Institutes is deeply rooted in the history of the Sudan. In 1992, the Khartoum regime ruling in Juba expelled foreign Comboni missionaries from the southern capital. It was only after the CPA, during the Interim Period, that foreign missionaries returned to Juba. The canonisation of Daniel Comboni in 2003, rekindled the Comboni Family's passion and renewed their commitment to Comboni's cause. "*Save Africa with Africa*", the motto of Comboni's plan, was the backbone of the CRN origin, expansion and legacy.

Traditionally, the Comboni presence in Sudan has been anchored on three pillars: education, health and pastoral. New times called for new strategies, and thus, feasibility studies, involving consultation of local communities and church leadership, led to the creation of a network of local FM radio stations. The Comboni family took the firm resolution to dare new paths, to broaden their tents and venture into an ambitious project. The prevailing illiteracy rate in Southern Sudan and the lack of infrastructure led to the choice of FM radio broadcasting. The low price of receivers and the distribution of radios powered by solar energy were other factors that contributed to the rapid growth of the audience. The CRN emerged and gave fruits in one of the most difficult, daring and complex socio-political and religious contexts.

## **In the periphery**

On Christmas Eve 2006, Bakhita Radio, the radio of Juba diocese, went on air broadcasting the Vigil Mass live from the Cathedral. The first radio station of the CRN started in two containers and only three years later a permanent building was constructed. Soon the other radios began broadcasting in Nuba Mountains, Torit, Malakal, Yei, Rumbek, Tonj, Wau and Yambio. The goal of the project was to establish radio stations in major cities to reach about 50% of the population of Southern Sudan. The network had a coordinating body in Juba that included two Comboni Sisters and two Comboni Missionaries. Coming from

Mexico and Italy, Spain and Portugal, respectively, their task was the overall coordination of the project, the financial administration, and the news desk. Later on, a Polish Comboni Lay Missionary added to the team to work in audio production. The network, programs, expertise, equipment, and facilities were built progressively. Continuous training of personnel, shared programs, and collaborative efforts among stations were key factors that contributed to the success of the project.

The Radio Network aimed at reaching out to the people of South Sudan with a means of communication and information to build peace through reconciliation and healing. Programs focused on civic education, integral human development and respect for human rights. There was also particular attention to marginalised groups. Soon the radios became a significant and vital forum for information and entertainment in the main cities of southern Sudan. The radios broadcast in English and Sudanese Arabic mainly, with significant space for local languages; as a result, each radio was a platform for expressing views as citizens and as Christians in their own and diverse languages. Some stations had also a Radio Listening Group for the ongoing evaluation of the programs, building closer ties with the people and responding to the needs and expectations of the audiences. After decades of war, people could finally have first-hand information and the opportunity of expressing themselves in radio forums. Through Catholic Radio stations, southern Sudanese become instruments of transformation, sentinels, and beacons of peace and hope in a country in the making.

## **Embracing vulnerability**

The Radio Network fully shared the pains and struggles of South Sudan on the road to peace. From the beginning, the stations were vulnerable to the social and economic conditions: diesel shortages, huge inflation, rampant insecurity, power shortages, etc. The resilience, strength, skills, and media capacity achieved by the staff were remarkable. The personnel and trainees strived daily to develop their potential amid upheavals and insecurity.

From the very beginning, the interim government started to feel uncomfortable with the content of the radios, accusing them of being too political and stepping out of their religious command. Government offi-

cials at all levels were uneasy with phone-in programs that gave people the opportunity to voice their grievances and opinions. Together with the personnel of the radios, mainly Sudanese, the Comboni personnel stood strong in the face of confrontation, political pressure and harassment from police and other government forces. With clear and sound broadcasting programs, the Catholic radios became a forum for thinkers and intellectuals to dialogue with audiences in view of the first general elections and the referendum.

At its birth in 2011, South Sudan experienced a remarkable political, economic and social transformation and people had a prospect for peace and prosperity. Their hopes and expectations, however, were soon watered down as new outbreaks of violence re-started in 2013 and continue to date. Since December 2006, the CRN has operated amidst security concerns, humanitarian crises, corruption, impunity, and ethnic conflicts. Despite these challenges, and the political situation that has worsened in the last years, eight radio stations run by local personnel, continue broadcasting words of peace. The radio station of Malakal, heavily damaged during clashes in April 2015, is planning to reopen soon.

## **Building alliances**

Collaboration is at the heart of the CRN. A project of this nature could not materialise without a common effort, diverse capacities, an emerging plan, and a shared vision. The Comboni team in Juba created an articulated network with the management and committees of the diocesan radios. Training of local personnel, fundraising, and planning for the establishment of the stations was crucial. International funding agencies eventually become partners, not only of the diocesan stations but of the Radio Network. Close collaboration with local partners and international organisations was fundamental to attain a community-based stand that would lead to a sense of local ownership, visibility of the project and sustainability.

The strength of the network lies in sharing resources among radios from the centre to the stations and vice versa. Programs elaborated by the CRN production studios were distributed to the diocesan stations and translated into local languages, while others were produced directly by the radios and shared throughout the network. One of the key structures

of the CRN was the News Desk. Created in 2006, the news department issues two radio bulletins, morning and evening, and broadcasting by all the stations. The News Desk gathers news from Juba and from other locations.

## **Celebrating Life**

South Sudan was ushered into independence on July 9th, 2011 as a wounded country. In fidelity to the Charism, the Comboni family laid the foundation stone of a great building and then stepped back to allow others to continue the work. The CRN brought fresh air into the radio waves by empowering the South Sudanese to express themselves. It has contributed to the development of an informed and more conscious community on current news, education, literacy, health, women's promotion, civic education, ethnic enrichment, peace building, and religious formation. The CRN has given a prominent contribution to enhancing public opinion and critical thinking. The CRN was also an active part of different local bodies, such as the Union of Journalists, Juba Forum and other civil society organisations.

From its conception to the present day, the CRN has been characterised by great commitment, endurance, and resilience but also by fragilities and misunderstandings. Nonetheless, setting up nine stations in just six years has been a miracle of collaboration and resilience. In 2013, the CRN was the second national broadcaster after Miraya, the UN radio, but was more rooted in the local communities and had a greater impact and effectiveness to reach out and promote the involvement and participation of people.

The Radio Network continues to be a fundamental actor in the journey of South Sudan towards nation-building and reconciliation. The road ahead is unclear, yet perseverance rooted in the values of the Gospel will bear its fruits. There is only one certainty: God has been present, journeying through joy and pain in this project born at the foot of the cross.

# Afriquespoir centre, a ministry in the mission of the Church

**Father Jean Claude Kobo**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **The Democratic Republic of the Congo**

*“Baptised and sent: the Church of Christ on mission in the world”*, this was Pope Francis’ message for World Mission Day and Extraordinary Missionary Month (October 2019). This message reminds us of the missionary commitment and the role of every Christian in particular and of the Church in general. *“I am a mission, always; you are a mission, always; every baptised man and woman is a mission”* says the Pope. Paul the Apostle was right to say in his time *“Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”* (1 Corinthians 9:16). *“The mission to evangelise humanity remains urgent and necessary. Mission is a duty, to which we must respond”* (Benedict XVI, Saturday 17 May 2008). As far as God’s love is concerned, no one is useless or insignificant- added Pope Francis- each of us is a mission to the world, for each of us is the fruit of God’s love.

## **The mission, one and multiple**

In the Gospel of Luke 4:16-20, Jesus explains the programme of actions that one must follow in order to understand His salvific mission for humanity, as well as the mission of the Church for centuries to come, that is: to preach the Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s Favour. This is the mission of the Church and of every Christian for it is varied and diverse: it is carried out through many services or charisms, which are a gift from the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Nevertheless, we must remember that Christ is the source of all these ministries, exactly as Saint Paul suggests. He is the One who *“gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:11-12). To modernise the Apostle of the Gentiles’ sayings in our times, we might

say that He is the One who is calling us: to be bishops, priests, religious men and women, theologians, catechists, doctors, journalists, teachers, social activists, human rights defenders, and so on. Everyone aims at building up the body of Christ for the sake of Christian community. These charisms or gifts structure the mission and the pastoral of the Church. They underlie the inception of religious orders, congregations, institutions, different kinds of spiritualities and Christian commitment within the Church of God. Somebody means to preach, somebody intends to teach, and somebody pays particular attention to poor people. This diversity of gift is precious to the Church and to any order, congregation or ecclesial institution as well. There are fields of action for every religious institute; it is thus possible for every religious institute to organise pastoral commitment in full collaboration with other institutes without neglecting any field. There are three priority areas to the Comboni Missionaries, and they are: evangelisation, training and missionary animation. However, they are not the only ones to have exclusive right to them; hence, the perseverance on collaboration with the other forces developing in the different fields of intervention.

## **Missionary animation and media**

Media are an integral part of the evangelisation for Comboni missionaries: they are neither an addendum nor an exception in the Comboni charism; missionary animation is a mainstay in the missionary vision of the Founder Saint Daniel Comboni. In the chapter about missionary animation, the Rule of Life of the Institute states that “*the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, by vocation and after the example of their Founder, are called to stimulate the missionary conscience of the people of God so that they recognise their missionary responsibility and commit themselves to proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world*”(RoL72). Paragraph 1 also adds: “*Comboni considered it an essential aspect of his vocation to arouse the missionary conscience of the whole Church*” (RoL 72.1). Comboni then illustrates some tools to be used by the Institute which are still functional to contemporary mission, as explained below in the Rule of Life n.78: “*In missionary promotion the missionary makes use of the means of social communication which experience and particular situations present as apt to attain their purpose*” (RoL78), “*especially by distributing mission literature*” (RoL 75.1). The Founder was one of the early protagonists of the Missionary An-

nals and bimonthly magazines founded in 1872 by the Good Shepherd Association which was ancestor of the *Nigrizia* magazine (founded in January 1883), the first Comboni missionary magazine. Magazines have marked and still mark the Comboni missionary presence in the world. We mention *Mundo Negro* for Spain, *Além Mar* for Portugal and others; magazines did the same for the mission's sake even in America and Asia.

## **Africa**

Africa had reasons to be *first* in the Comboni Missionary Institute's foundation. Mass media centres in Europe were first of all means of support to evangelise and to learn about the African condition; in fact, *Nigrizia* was used to spread "*news about Africa's problems and the black world*" ([www.nigrizia.it](http://www.nigrizia.it)). The Comboni missionaries had to wait until the 1980s to think about building some structures to missionary animation in the continent of Africa: it is the case of *New People* in Kenya, *Leadership* in Uganda and *World Wide* in South Sudan. Wasn't it the time for the Church in Africa to talk about herself maturely? Wasn't it the time to give herself to Universal Church since the Universal Church had given much to Her? The *Meeting place of give and take* which is of great importance to Léopold Sédar Senghor is a human imperative.

## **Afriquespoir, one-of-a-kind work**

Three meetings of missionaries were held respectively in Nairobi, Kinshasa and Lomé in 1981, 1984, and 1987. At that time, the Comboni missionaries expressed their desire to open a media centre in Africa. This dream was fulfilled in Rome during the Comboni Missionaries' General Chapter in 1985 (Acts 1985, 118) when they invited the General Direction to create two centres in Anglophone and Francophone Africa. They had to wait until 1996 in order for activities to start in Kinshasa following a long journey of discernment. The beginning was original. *Afriquespoir* would have been an institution, both for the province and for all districts under the supervision of the two branches of the Comboni Family: the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus and the Comboni Missionaries Sisters. A team composed by members of both entities embarked on this experience participating in the publication of the first issue in April 1998, namely: Fr. Eliseo Tacchella, Fr.

Neno Contran, and Sr. Betty Imperial. The financial contribution for the proper functioning of the centre came from all those districts that previously participated in the project's inception. A sign of great cooperation within the Comboni Family which was maybe unique.

## **Cooperation**

Afriquespoir centre collaborates with many actors, and it couldn't be otherwise. First and foremost, the Comboni missionary brothers and sisters are the pillars of the cooperation, as they support it in their fields of life and missionary actions through different initiatives both communally and individually. We also have to recognise the role of the Comboni lay missionaries. They play a key role mainly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as regards *Afriquespoir* magazine's distribution and the Centre's publications. Further, our local Churches across Africa have carried out a great work. In Kinshasa, for example, the late Cardinal Bishop Frederic Etsou was the first to encourage the initiative by the Comboni missionary to publish a missionary magazine and of the Congolese Church. As a matter of fact, Catholic press ended up being orphan following Christian periodicals and magazines suppression by Mobutu's regime. It was therefore necessary to renew this precious commitment to the evangelisation in Africa. Many dioceses, parishes, catechetical centres and schools give great credit to the work carried out by the Comboni missionaries thanks to media. We must also admit that *Afriquespoir* magazine and other publications from the centre are really appreciated by many people, even by people who don't belong to Christian or Catholic world. Moreover, the work carried out by the staff is of high quality. Since its foundation, Fr. Neno Contran assumed the direction of the Centre up to 2010. He oriented the magazine's editorial policy and wrote most of the books used by the Centre. His entourage was solid, and it was composed by Missionaries Brothers and Sisters: Fr. Eliseo Tacchella, Sr. Betty Imperial, Fr. Louis Kouevi, Sr. Josephine Calle, Fr. Tonino Falaguasta, Fr. Kike Bayo Mata, Sr. Dina Ramos, Fr. Jean Claude Kobo, Fr. Célestin Ngoré. Despite the fact that Fr. Neno Contran keeps on serving in the *Afriquespoir* Centre, he handed direction over to Fr. Kike Bayo in 2010 who in his turn handed it over to Fr. Jean Claude Kobo in 2017. Many other forces participate in the magazine writing: they are diocesan priests, religious men and women, and lay people.

## **The mission of Afriquespoir**

Inter-provincial meetings held in the years that followed the building and the strengthening of the Centre never stopped recalling the mission in these terms: “Afriquespoir Centre is an initiative inspired by the Comboni charism looking to awake and to raise awareness for mission in the Church. It is a work of missionary animation that must be ecclesiastical and liberating. It is a Comboni communal activity that must be opened to the promotion of vocations” (Lomé 2002). This gives to our missionary animation “*a force transforming the world according to the values of the Kingdom, and through people who listen to the Spirit of Jesus and to the challenges of contemporary world* (Comboni Family - Missionary animation, Rome 2005, p. 21). The goals of the Centre are: to raise local Churches’ awareness of the universal mission in order to transform them into missionary Churches; to make Comboni and His animating Charism known; to reawaken consciousness and Christians’ commitment in favour of justice, peace, integrity of creation and human rights advocacy; to raise awareness of situations in the countries where we are present; pastoral agents training; bearing witness to the love of Christ through our presence, and the aid to the Comboni Family in making them aware of the mission they carry out. The centre seeks to achieve its purposes through the distribution of the periodical, the broadcasting of audio-visuals programmes with local media, the preparation and sending of the material for missionary animation, communication and missionary animation training, partnership with various missionary agencies in the field, animation of groups (parishes, CEVB, group of young people, Comboni missionaries relatives, cenacles of prayers for mission and much more), publication and distribution of books, mainly within parishes.

## **Editorial policy**

Afriquespoir magazine is an opportunity to the countries that the periodical is serving. In fact, Catholic press is not widespread in Franco-phone Africa. We affirm that no doubt it is one-of-a-kind work both in terms of contents and quality across all African Comboni Districts. It tries to achieve the above-mentioned purposes. Our magazine aims at providing adequate information and formation, since today the nature of information - mainly relating to quarterly publications - is often ev-

anescent. Thus, we investigate current topics; the magazine is highly appreciated for its articles and large contributions to academic research. The topics covered in *Afriquespoir* are now used in schools, parishes and other meeting places in order to form and to train groups and young people.

In the opening pages of each publication, we talk about an African country in detail. We analyse the social-economic, political, religious, and cultural issues of the selected country. It is a way to make these countries known, and also the reality lived by their inhabitants. Columns dedicated to environment, society, justice, and peace address many issues, challenges and problems which are directly associated with environment, land grabbing, pollution, democracy, common good, immigration, refugees, witchcraft, mine exploitation and human trafficking, slavery, arms trade, conflicts and wars, terrorism, situations martyring the African peoples' lives and generating poverty, misery, and death. All these topics stimulates the prophetic role and the awakening of consciousness. This is the role that is expected to be played by the Church, if we really want to be true disciples of Jesus Christ.

However, *Afriquespoir* is "*a Church of the continent opened to the world*". It is a window on (and opened to) the world. She is a mouthpiece for African Churches to Churches in the world and vice versa. It is a meeting and exchange place between churches. It echoes in the Churches' life, in their happy or unfortunate events thus ensuring the communion with the Universal Church. It is a forum studying and investigating in a simplified way some realities of the Church that would otherwise be misunderstood by Christians or more in general by people: ecumenism, faith, prayer, world days, institutions, celebrations and so on.

*Afriquespoir* therefore complies with the recommendations in the Rule of Life wishing that our missionary animation through media promote "*a constant and objective information about the religious and social conditions of other peoples allows Christians to recognise, in the light of the Gospel, situations of injustice and exploitation in the socio-economic relationships among the different countries, and every kind of oppression also from within*" (RL 73.3).

# Significant ministerial activities: School of Carapira

**Brother Giovanni Luigi Quaranta**  
**Industrial Technical Institute**

## **Mozambique**

The Comboni Missionaries started the mission of Carapira in 1947. The social context of that time portrays the historical period of Mozambique within the complexity of being a Portuguese colony, and of all its implications.

Carapira is a rural village in northern Mozambique in Nampula Province, and more precisely in Monapo District.

The mission became a reference point to the former Diocese of Nampula due to the presence of a missionary staff which was skilled and trained, and also to the presence of some mechanical workshops. The mission of Carapira became a point of reference also to the Diocese of Nacala in 1991. Means of transports maintenance was the focus of the work.

To prepare young Mozambicans for the work required by the mission was a pressing urgency at the time of its foundation; further, it was useful to train young people to satisfy the demand for staff from new-born-companies.

The project to establish a vocational school to train local qualified staff in the field of mechanics was born in 1962 with the arrival of Br. Giovanni Grazian.

The first training course was held in 1964, and it had approximately 25 pupils. The Comboni Province of the Mozambique in collaboration with other non-governmental organisations later submitted projects for the construction of buildings that would have been used as classrooms, dormitories, kitchens, workshops and warehouses.

The mission of Carapira granted 35-acres land to the project. Giovanni Grazian and other brothers (namely Vian Giovanni, Mario Metelli, Andrea Morganti and Giovanni Tomas) were entrusted with the direction of the construction works.

Educational programs including the teaching of technical subject and of general knowledge were drawn up in the following years.

The Ministry of Education approved the educational project as “School of Arts and Crafts” in 1971.

The independence from Portugal took place in 1975; school was then nationalised, and consequently the property and the management were taken by the State. Giovanni Grazian was ordered to come back to Europe by his superiors at that very moment: he was meant to serve at the Comboni Institute until 1986. Simultaneously with his return to Africa, the Government raised the educational level of the School: the Institute was named “Industrial School of Carapira”.

The Ministry of Education applied for and obtained the school management in 1994 by the signing of a contract between the Ministry of Education and the Comboni missionaries.

The direction of the school was entrusted to the Comboni brothers from then on; we mention in chronological order: Br. Giovanni Grazian, Br. João Paulo da Rocha Martins, Br. Raul Ceja Ceja, Br. Manfred Bellingner and Br. Giovanni Luigi Quaranta.

The Department of Technical and Vocational Education of the Ministry of Science and Technology promoted the School of Carapira to Secondary School following the positive evaluation on its facilities in 2015. As a consequence, the School was recognised as “Industrial Technical Institute of Carapira.”

The motto which has always animated this Institution is: *“Make of school your family, and once it is a family, that may be family forever.”*

The main goal is to train qualified young people, and responsible and honest citizens as well. They should contribute to the development of the Country. The specific targets of the ITIC are: to make school a big family, to make school a community where students’ personal skills are enhanced; to improve the quality of technical and vocational training; to raise awareness on the practice of ethical and human values.

Particular attention is given to young coming from the surrounding area in order to ensure them the possibility of a vocational training based on sound knowledge to contribute to the fight against poverty. School gives value to the potential within each boy regardless of their social origin or religious affiliation. The school is currently attended by 50% of young Christians and the remainder 50% by young Muslims. The Comboni community is involved in the training and accompaniment of Christian students through moments of encounter, catechesis, involvement in the pastoral program of the parish, and the Eucharistic celebrations.

Another feature that defines this school is the intent to diversify the curriculum to respond to the needs of the surrounding area and of the

public at large by means of contacts with local businesses and associations. To achieve this, it is necessary to promote the possibility to create and to run micro projects, small companies or cooperatives that would ensure a greater economic independence.

The school also gives particular attention to the training of skilled labour, thus facilitating integration into the labour market. This is a consequence of the importance given by Mozambique to technical education as an essential element for the improvement of the local community's living conditions.

It was created a sector of production in order to ensure the self-sustainability of the school since the very beginning of the project. Carpentry, turnery, welding, automechanical services and repair shops were born this way.

Agricultural production was started to offer a better diet and nutrition to pupils thanks to a small dam with a basin of water that was created with the aim of ensuring the irrigation of crops.

There has been an involvement by the Comboni family through the presence of missionary sisters and Comboni lay missionaries committed in educational and extracurricular activities in more recent years. The school also welcomes those young volunteers who are interested in doing work experience and offering service in different fields of the project.

The school has always been - and still it is - recognised as centre of excellence in professional training, both technical and human. The students who complete the secondary course have a good chance of finding a job into the local labour market, and in new companies which have been recently started in the industrial zone of Nacala-a-Velha.

The Institute offers the opportunity to attend its courses also to the girls who are interested in technical training. This is a relevant data in the field of women promotion and formation.

On the one hand, the biggest challenge is due to the lack of the Comboni staff (brothers, laymen and women, sisters) to give continuity to the project; on the other hand, we have to deal with the waning influence of the State in the school management.

The challenge in this Comboni province is to adapt the Industrial Technical Institute of Carapira to the needs of the new educational system reform. This requires greater training for the teaching staff, and the requalification of the workshops as they date back to 1980s.

It is equally important to deal with the financial aspect in function of a further requalification of the existing environment.

It is necessary to adequate and to maintain the facilities so that they respond to the current training requirements by means of new ideas and investments in the teaching staff after 55 years of activity, that is since 1964. Efforts to develop cooperation projects are, in this sense, multiplying; the proposals are mainly addressed to private institutions, companies, NGOs, friends, and donors in general.

Experience has taught us to invest in technical, vocational and human training as they still are priorities to our missionary presence in this region.

The challenge is to involve more and more people in order to form a native staff in the didactic and economic management. The school board is now composed by 25 Mozambican teachers.

This exactly fulfil the Comboni charism to regenerate Africa with Africans by making them the protagonists of their own present and future.



# Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing

**Sister Henriette Mfutu Beya Ndongo**  
**Comboni Missionary Sister**

**The Democratic Republic of the Congo**

## **Local context and challenges which motivated the mission**

The inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of the Congo live in poverty, in total insecurity, and they are facing regrettable social phenomena such as homelessness, offenders, and children living on the street as a result of the civil war they have endured for many decades. This conflict has also caused populations who lived inland near Kinshasa - the capital city - to migrate.

A further problem is represented by women prisoners; they are held in appalling conditions and many of them do not receive any assistance.

To cope with this emergency, the Comboni Missionary Sisters have founded the *Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* in the municipality of Mont-Ngafula, in the Mitendi district. *Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* opened its door on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May in 2018 to offer these women the possibility of living a dignified life.

The house is at the service of all women who find themselves in situation of vulnerability, and also of women getting out of prison so that their social reintegration turns out to be decent and fruitful. The *Social Housing* aims at reducing some of the difficulties to women who have to improve their life conditions through the learning of a trade, and subsequently the starting of income-generating activities.

## **Reasons**

This ministry finds its source of inspiration in the implementation of Saint Daniel Comboni's Plan "To save Africa with Africa". As clearly stated in our Rule of Life, n. 55.1 « *Inserted into people's life and reality*

*through initiatives on human promotion and Christian formation, we contribute to the integral development of the man oppressed by ignorance, and hunger... we spare no efforts in order for him to be conscious of his own dignity and to improve his condition.»*

## **Features and methods**

*Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* provides its service to female ex-convicts and marginalised women. Sisters recruit non-working women in conditions of marginality; they often come from suburbs where they live in extremely poor conditions, abandoned to their sad fate. This category represents the majority of the population living in our social housing.

We keep an eye on inmates who soon afterwards will re-join society in Makala's central prison. We seek to come into contact with women who are eager to embark on a journey of growth through human and crafts training.

During the first stage of their training, women beneficiaries are hosted in the social housing for up to one year. During the second step, they return to their living environment following social reintegration carrying out income-generating activities depending on the training they have received.

## **Activities**

- **Prison:** we come into contact with inmates so as to know them and to selectively accompany some of them, as well as seeking to resolve conflict with their families; once they get out of jail, we favour their welcoming in *Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing*.
- **Visits to families:** take place before and after the recruiting in order to obtain accurate information on the women we are going to host.
- **Vocational training:** is carried out at “Arts and Crafts Learning Centre Cams/GSM” in the municipality of Mont-Ngafula, a few kilometres from *Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing*. It includes cutting and sewing courses, beauty and cosmetic courses, and hair-dressing courses; our young girls have enrolled in the project for

a mini accelerated course of six months. The program includes a theoretical and practical training followed by a final exam; in case of success, a training certificate will be issued.

At the end of this study program, women will be able to carry on successfully the activities they have been trained to.

- **Literacy classes and French courses:** are held three times a week on even days from 15:30 to 16:30 to improve their level of knowledge.
- **Prayer:** it is for us a core activity to convey moral and Christian value, since it is the driving force of the soul and the source from which all efforts and inspiration spring allowing this way the realisation of the work.
- **Education to life sessions:** take place once a week, and they focus on practical matters such as sanitation, taking care of the house and living according to the rules of good manners.
- **Manual labour, cleaning and cooking:** manual labour is focused on embroidery, bags manufacturing, gardening, processing of products, and learning about culinary recipes.
- **Leisure and sport activities:** leisure sessions consist in alternate activities such as conversation, watching films, games, readings, and celebrations on the occasion of their birthdays. To this, we add sport activities to achieve physical and moral well-being.

## **Community involvement by the Comboni Family and people's leadership**

*Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* is an initiative by the Comboni Missionary Sister (CMS). The congregation has made three sisters available to increase the efficiency of the activities carried out within the house, and they are: *Sr. Maria Giovanna Valbusa*, *Sr. Rania Adly Mousa*, and *Sr. Henriette Mfutu Beya Ndongu*. Our work full-time and we live within the same social housing. We also avail ourselves of the collaboration of some coaches, supervisors, teachers and educators for

the different fields of activities. Furthermore, our young girls contribute in the service to the social housing through small work according to their needs and their abilities.

## **Results**

At the end of the training course, women social inclusion takes place based on their field of expertise, in their family or somewhere else when they do not have a family. The social housing provides accommodation to women who do not have a roof over their heads, materials which are useful to the activity, and necessary funding for starting the project in order to help them embarking on a path allowing them to generate income and to be self-sufficient.

We have welcomed a total of 21 people whose ages range from 18 to 40, as well as two children aged 2. Results are satisfying. Women beneficiaries have achieved independence that makes them self-sufficient and responsible for themselves, besides having acquired the knowledge needed to start income-generating activities. This also allows a better future thanks to the opening of some sewing shops, beauty and hairdressing salons and small businesses. Our women have actualised these projects in less than a year, thanks to their efforts and by the grace of God.

Our greatest accomplishment is to see and to live a real transformation that occurs when women leave the social housing. They are confident and willing to rise again to live a decent life on completion of the path we have paced together.

Life in *Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* has also been marked by utmost joy when three of our women autonomously decided to receive the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation.

This experience has further been characterised by difficulties relating to the fact that most of the women beneficiaries were composed by those who did not have the chance to attend school due to the lack of funds. Such a condition has made integration difficult, mainly in the beginning and on a vocational training level. However, this has been overcome due to the proposal of literacy classes and French courses, to allow an updating to women who had abandoned school a long time ago. In ad-

dition, recruitment of women getting out of jail is tough. Life together was hard to digest to them, we might say that it was *a sea to drink*. Nevertheless, over the years, social life harmonised little by little. Some unpleasantness have faded away and good habits have been developed thanks to continuous training.

## **What we have learnt**

This experience was to us a school of life. We have realised that poverty is not just the lack of financial means, but it is also ignorance and lack of training. Shortly, it is a state of mind. Ignorance makes one a prisoner. Similarly, not just walls are prisons, but much more. A closed mind will live in prison forever.

From this little experience we infer that a way to help our sisters in need is to give them the opportunity to be free by means of education. This will enable them to fly with their own wings so that they can be a source of inspiration for many others young women.

To live in communion is a revealing act of so many truths one cannot imagine. The experience has been enriching us, Comboni Missionary Sisters, to the point that the passage in this social housing has represented an inspirational source towards a radical change in our way of being Christian, religious and missionary women.

We have learnt a lot from our young women: their sense of gratitude, their trust in God, the struggle for a better life, and also generosity.

It helps us to see God at work in the life of these women, who sometimes ask nothing more than to be taken by the hand to start their journey.

## **Future perspectives and mission continuity**

*Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* has just ended its first year of trial, of listening and action, an action that has enabled us to experience the concrete situation lived by our young women. Planned activities have been carried out, and the results achieved have been positive.

Following a careful analysis, our vision for the future is to widen fields of activities and training. For the moment, *Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing* works due to the help of some people of good will that we wholeheartedly thank. Hopefully we can find the financing needed to ensure continuity to the mission at the service of our sisters in need.

# Child trafficking for exploitation in begging in the region of karamoja, Uganda we cannot remain silent

**Sister Fernanda Cristinelli**  
**Comboni Missionary Sister**  
**Women Desk coordinator**

## **Uganda**

Criticism arises against what is defined as universal in terms of standards, value, rules, and even rights in daily exchanges of life and academic studies developed in multicultural and religious meetings within post-modern societies. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 is considered a milestone in the humanisation of global world: it affirms a conception of childhood in which children have not only the right to be protected, but they are also considered legal persons. The Convention has been ratified by all countries in the World with the exception of the United States which have limited themselves to sign it; this has caused the promulgation of national laws aimed at promoting and defending those rights.

Despite the Convention's formal approval by all African countries, many critical voices were raised against the universal standards of the UN Convention issued that actually is based on the conception of childhood interpreted by a Western point of view; therefore deemphasising the influence of broader social and cultural circumstances. The recognition of this variation, particularly in relation to African social-cultural realities, led to the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (ACRWC) ratification by the African Union in 1990. Obviously, the *African Charter* does not go against principles of the UN Convention from which it springs, but it emphasises respect and African traditional values involvement in the affirmation of children's rights. On the one side, the Charter intends to safeguard African traditional values; on the other side, it bans the use of standards and practices which are considered as negative elements for the children's sake, even though those customs and traditions are an integral part of the social and cultural

pattern of many African communities. The concept of individual rights in collective societies is in fact subject to compliance with supremacy of the collective rights - that is towards community and obedience to authority - on the individual. Blended family and community's needs and requirements weigh on all stages of a child's growth: the predominance of the community's sake in collective societies demands indeed for children to be subject to the interest of the group.

The UN Convention binds the States Parties to recognise the right of the child in the article 32 "*to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development*". The African Charter upholds the same principle (Art. 15/1). The articles do not seem to grasp the nature of child labour and apprenticeship within the African reality of blended families. A widespread form of labour is, unfortunately, the practice of socialising children aged 6 years and over to make them contribute to family duties; male children, for example, drive herds while female children collect wood and water from wells or they care for newborns. Pastoral societies are in fact based on child labour and apprenticeship. The concept of a child which is totally dependent, nourished, dressed, and educated until the age of majority - that is recognised between 16 and 18 years old by international conventions and national laws - is not widespread, and consequently little practiced in traditional realities, where a period of long childhood is still a *luxury*; unluckily, a condition of protracted childhood cannot be sustained in a subsistence society whose life expectancy is about 50 years and where the struggle for survival is daily and continuous.

In the tension between the universal and the particular, global and local, and all the economic, political and geographical consequences, the debate over human rights may be dangerous: this is true both as far as it concerns children's rights and women and workers' rights often leading us to a complicated discourse where the limit not to be exceeded must be very clear. Cultures and societies are not static: on the contrary, they are always on the move in the encounter and in the dialogue, and consequently even in the conflict. Different traditional values intertwine and reach out to each other thus generating progress in the affirmation of the common good, both of the individual and of the group. Children's universal rights are an essential and unquestionable point of arrival, even if many soci-

eties in Africa which are still strongly tied to tradition have to undergo a processes of harmonisation towards cultural values and norms related to customary law.

## **The situation in Uganda**

The CRW and the ACRWC were respectively approved in Uganda in 1990 and 1994; amendments made to national Constitution and Laws protecting children's rights in 2016 were cutting-edge. At government level, the state provides an extensive network for the protection of childhood which could achieve positive results throughout the region. To enact laws in order to defend and to promote common good was much easier, however, than actually realising the process, as always in this world.

Things get complicated when traditional norms are still deeply rooted, and even if in some contexts rights are welcomed at least as far as it concerns their principles, in some other contexts (rural and economically depressed areas) they remain so far unknown. Working under the age of 18, for example, is considered child labour and thus punishable by law in urban centres, whereas in rural regions characterised by subsistence economies both male and female children start working at the age of 5 or 6 in the fields, pasture, and supply of basic need. As we said before, these facts are the standard and they are considered as normal apprenticeship to the contribution of the common good of blended families and society. According to current estimates in the Karamoja sub-region - an area of pastoral semi-nomadic tradition, north-west of the Country - the percentage related to the school population is 13% for male children and 11% for female children; we can immediately infer that life is marked by work for the most of them, and sometimes even by hard work due to the region's climate conditions. It is, in fact, a savannah suffering from erratic rains and consequently a low food safety area. Buffer zone between Kenya and South Sudan, the Karamoja has experienced long periods of instability and conflict; a period of partial peace and stability was established only in 2010 following forced disarmament. However, Karamoja's economy is still the poorest and the weakest in the whole nation. Over the last years, a phenomenon of savage and excessive extraction of mineral has started together with an ever-growing land-grabbing by private subjects and companies both national and international.

## **Trafficking and exploitation of Karamojong male and female children in begging**

Dating back to the period of economic and political instability the Country has experienced, the phenomenon of child exploitation in the beginning originates when, many young women coming from Napak, a zone of Karamoja, began to migrate to Kampala, the capital city, carrying with them male and female children to initiate them into this illegal activity. People justified this phenomenon with the need of fleeing from armed raids and to survive to endemic hunger of the region they were fleeing from. Over the years, the number of children aged 2 up to 13 years populating Kampala's streets has increased at an exponential rate through the work of an internal network of recruitment, sorting and transport. Regardless of laws ensuring children's rights and of the law enacted in Uganda in 2009 on Prevention on Human Trafficking, trafficking of children brought on the streets have been continuing unhindered for 15 years. In the last months, to this serious fact we must add the horrible crime against childhood as regards the 'sale' of female children and girl to the internal market of forced labour.

Although children in Karamoja get used to work since childhood within blended family, life on the streets controlled by adults dehumanises these children's reality and traumatises their future. They stay long hours on the streets, on the busiest cross roads, sitting on the sidewalk or skipping across cars slowing down at the traffic light; young girls carry babies on their shoulders to appeal to people's compassion. They can scrape together up to 20.000 Shillings (about 5 euros) a day. Children trafficked are initiated into begging by men and women who have been in their turn initiated into this activity. As time goes by, this lifestyle is internalised as normal. There have been attempts to eliminate this kind of trafficking through drastic actions by the government, law-enforcement authorities of the capital city and NGOs over the years. Nevertheless, children keep on living on the streets into indifference and many other forms of corruption and crime. Recently, the Ministry of Youth Policies has publicly stated that many funds allocated to eradicate this phenomenon have not been reported and that many children in Uganda keep on living on the streets in many cities. According to 2014 Human Rights Watch Report, Ugandan children living on the streets are more than 10.000, 90% of whom in the capital city: the majority of them come from the Napak Region, in Karamoja.

## **The response by Church and by the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Karamoja**

The Diocese of Moroto - that includes the central-southern Karamoja - was forced to witness, helplessly, this trafficking for years. Karamoja is one of the most remote and discriminated region in the Country and it is sadly renowned for it has already faced situations of great crisis. The Church of Kampala has transferred any response to this phenomenon to government and social entities; the children living on the streets in the capital city after all are attributable, by their way of dressing and their language, to the region that has always been despised and discriminated by the whole country. Through the diocesan desk of women I coordinate, three years ago the Diocese of Moroto began to pay more attention to male and female children living on the streets of the capital, and coming from the parishes of the same diocese. Children feel tied to priests, religious men and women who have followed them in their villages or who are known by name and respected, as the Church herself is respected in this region. A Church close to people in conditions of great instability and precariousness over years. Together with lay people and the office staff, we have begun to meet children on the streets, to listen to their stories, to accompany them in the slums where they live, to talk with adults and their community both in the capital city and in Karamoja where they are trafficked. Church closeness has opened a way made up of confidence and trust: children and adults are willing to talk, to recount their sufferings and to believe in the paths of change and of transformation we propose to them.

Evangelisation transforming society in the affirmation of common good, of peace and justice is incarnated, that means it has to become real, not just through the smell of sheep, but also dealing with life in order, for the same life, to become life to the full and recognised in its full dignity. How could we remain indifferent in front of hundreds of our children, boys and girls whose life is downplayed by a trafficking justified with endemic poverty and because it is coming from a marginalised region? How could we remain silent in front of those people thinking that, as a consequence, those children coming from those discriminated areas should be regarded as “less children” compared to the other children? We, as Church and Comboni Missionaries Brothers and Sisters, look at the periphery but we also want to live inside it and, starting from there, to promote those social changes, talking about a Gospel

entering the real life; a Gospel that leaves no stone unturned, in order to transform life into the here and now and into an opportunity for redemption. In this conviction, we have started to collaborate with various partners, local organisations, religious women of others congregations, commission on justice and peace of the local authorities with the aim of starting a programme. Although it is humble in its implementation, it is not ordinary as far as it concerns its purposes: on the one side, in fact, we aim at offer to children a space inside which they can recover their childhood and deconstruct the normalisation of street life in their own lives; on the other side, we want to struggle against human trafficking and their exploitation in particular areas of law and the communities of origin. Our approach is based on dialogue with the community and with children; it is to share strategies, and then to develop them; it is to lower resistance to change and to invite to participation.

This method is uncommon; local authorities have responded to it first sceptically, then involving us more in the elaboration of their interventions. Transformation and social change journeys are always long-term. Comboni was right when talking about the building of the posterity would have seen, in fact he never got tired of laying the foundation to this purpose. We do not know if our contribution will succeed in eradicating this scourge, and finally removing children from the streets; we do not know if international rights will prevail where the struggle for survival and the impact of the economic gap create a fertile ground for injustice to be perpetrated or if the innocent trafficking will stop, if cultural norms will be modulated in the greatest respect of childhood. There is one thing we know for sure: the Gospel, our Comboni charism, and our humanity too have led us to look into the eyes of these children, and they have captured us; we must do everything we can so that their lives, and our lives, may become that fullness promised by a God who is never tired of making us human and divine, in His image.

I conclude this brief article by Pope Francis' words at the International Symposium of the Pastoral Care of the Street in 2015; they are energy and support in the journey with the little ones who are helpless and marginalised: ***“No child chooses to live on the street. Sadly, even in our modern, globalized world, any number of children continue to be robbed of their childhood, their rights and their future. The lack of legal protection and adequate structures only aggravates their state of deprivation: they have no real family or access to education or health***

*care. Every child abandoned or forced to live on the street, at the mercy of criminal organisations, is a cry rising up to God, who created man and woman in his own image. It is an indictment of a social system which we have criticised for decades, but which we struggle to change in conformity with criteria of justice. I ask you, please: do not be disheartened by the difficulties and the challenges which you encounter in your dedicated work, nourished as it is by your faith in Christ, who showed, even to death on the cross, the preferential love of God our Father for the weak and the outcast. The Church cannot remain silent, nor can her institutions turn a blind eye to the baneful reality of street children and street women.”*

# Dar Comboni Institute for Arabic studies

**Father Simon Mbuthia**  
**Comboni Missionary**

**Egypt**

## **Introduction**

Tradition has it that Christianity entered Egypt in the year 61 AD through the evangelist St. Mark. The Egyptian Church, with its famous theological school of Alexandria, played a great role in the first five centuries of Christianity. It is in the Church of Egypt that monasticism was born and then spread throughout the world. The Council of Chalcedonia (451) is the occasion of the first of a series of divisions and internal conflicts that mark the history of Christianity in the country. During that ecumenical council, the church of Egypt was labelled as monophysite and subjected to the oppression of the Byzantine empire for nearly two centuries until the arrival of Muslims. Currently, Christians in Egypt are about 10% of the total population. The biggest part of these Christians belongs to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The approximately 240,000 Catholics represent only 0.36% of the population and are divided into 7 different Catholic rites. In the Catholic Church there are about 1,200 religious women and about 200 religious men. There is also a small minority of Protestant and Evangelical Christians. About 90% of Egyptians are Muslims. According to the Egyptian Constitution, peoples' religion is indicated on their identity cards. Egyptian citizens can only belong to the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While conversion to Islam is allowed on the part of Christians, Muslims are not allowed to change their religion.

## **History of Comboni Missionaries in Egypt**

For St. Daniel Comboni, Egypt was “the door to Africa”. He came to Egypt for the first time in 1857, with the companions of the missionary

expedition of the institute of Don Mazza. He then passed through Egypt several times. However, it was only in 1867, as head of the new missionary institute he founded that he established two institutes for Africans, male and female, at the Maronite convent in Old Cairo. Also in Cairo, in 1869 he opened a third house, the “Holy Family”, the first school with black teachers. The fact is that in the Plan for regeneration of Africa Egypt played an essential role, as a first stage and acclimatization centre for missionaries to Central Africa, as well as being the place for human and Christian formation of the Africans who would then have to penetrate the continent and be the evangelisers of their own people. For this reason, in 1879, when the second group of his missionaries arrived in Africa, Comboni constituted in Cairo the first community of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, the present day Comboni Missionary sisters. It is therefore from the times of the founder, St. Daniel Comboni, that Comboni Missionaries and Comboni Missionary Sisters continuously offer their missionary service in Egypt. Many houses and institutions have been opened and closed over the years, like the famous anti-slavery colony Leo XIII of Ghezirah (Zamalek), founded in 1888 by Comboni’s successor, Mgr. Sogaro. Currently, Comboni presence in the country consists of 6 male and 8 female communities, trying to respond in various ways to different local needs.

## **Role of Egypt in Comboni’s Plan**

The desire of St. Daniel Comboni to see Africa evangelised and his plan to “save Africa with Africa” is a well-known part of the history of the Church in Africa. Egypt is an important part of this history as it is the first place in Africa where Comboni set his foot on his way to Sudan. Comboni landed in Egypt on 29 November, 1867. It is here that he set up his first schools to train Africans who were to participate in the mission of regenerating Africa. One of the institutions founded by Comboni in Cairo was an institute for girls that he founded in 1869. It was a public parish school which was entrusted to the care of the “Holy Family Institute”. This school admitted girls of different races, rites and religions, including Muslims. The openness of Comboni to serve all kinds of people and be a sign of God’s love to them is what has characterised Comboni missionaries in Egypt and in the world at large.

The presence of Comboni missionaries in Egypt, thus, dates from the

time of the founder, making it the oldest Comboni circumscription in the world. While Comboni used Egypt as a place to prepare Missionaries for Sudan, Comboni missionaries in Egypt no longer work in order to prepare people to send to Sudan. Our presence in Egypt is no longer consider a passageway for other African countries. We feel that God has called us to work in this place that has a long history that includes biblical figures such as Abraham, Joseph, Moses and even the Holy Family. Though the population of Egypt is 90% Muslims and the remaining 10% is predominantly made up of Coptic Orthodox Christians, we, the Comboni missionaries, feel that God is calling us to work in this particular environment. Just like our founder Daniel Comboni, we work with people from different religions, races, rites and religious affiliations. Though the classic mission of proclaiming the Gospel does not work in our environment, we feel that Christ has called us to be witnesses of His love to all people, including Muslims. When we cannot proclaim Christ with words, we do it through our silent witness.

## **Comboni Missionaries and their Work in Egypt**

Egypt is a part of the Egypt-Sudan province. On the Egyptian zone of the Egypt-Sudan province, there are 15 confreres only, distributed into five communities. We carry out different missionary activities. In the community of Helwan, we have a parish serving Egyptian Latin and Coptic Catholic Christians. However, the main activity is the Holy Family School for boys which has over 1,500 students, most of them Muslims. Next to our school there is another school for girls run by Comboni Missionary Sisters. These school offers us the chance to give Christian witness to the students, their families and the people of Helwan in general. The Community of Asswan works with Coptic Catholics and helps in mission animation in Upper Egypt. The Community of Sakakini, where I worked for ten years from 2001 till 2010, specialises in the service of refugees and migrants from Sudan, South Sudan and other African Countries. The community of Zamalek has two different activities. One is the parish of St. Joseph which serves expatriates from different countries and also takes care of Eritrean refugees. The second activity is Dar Comboni institute for Arabic studies. While this institute is run by the Comboni missionaries in Egypt, it serves the Universal Catholic Church, as well as other Christian Churches across the world.

## **What is Dar Comboni?**

Dar Comboni Comboni is a Pontifical Institute for Arabic language studies, Islamic Studies and Interreligious dialogue. It is situated on the island of Zamalek, in the city of Cairo, Egypt. The institute was founded more than thirty years ago by the Comboni Missionaries in order to prepare missionaries and other church personnel who are destined to work in a Muslim environment and those who would like to be involved in inter-faith dialogue with Muslims. Dar Comboni became a pontifical institute 13 years ago, enabling it to issue Baccalaureate in Arabic and Islamic studies.

## **How Dar Comboni Began and achieved the present expansion**

The origin of Dar Comboni is linked to the need the Comboni Missionaries felt to train their members assigned to Egypt, Sudan or the Middle East in Arabic language and gives them a solid knowledge of Islam and of the Arabic culture. To this end, in the early seventies, a house was opened in Zahle, Lebanon. Unfortunately, after a few years, this house had to be abandoned because of the civil war. In the early eighties, the Comboni Missionaries opened another language school at the Sakakini Catholic Church in the district of Abbasiya, Cairo, for the purpose of continuing the preparation of missionaries in the Arabic language and Islamic culture. The school was given the name “Dar Comboni”, i.e. Comboni House.

Thus, Dar Comboni developed during the following years in Abbasiya and trained a good number of missionaries not only Comboni Missionaries and Comboni Missionary Sisters but also members of other Congregations and different Christian Churches. At the end of the school year 1993-94 Dar Comboni moved to Zamalek - Cairo, where it is currently situated. The reason of this change was due to the fact that Sakakini Church had become an overcrowded Centre dedicated to the service of the Sudanese refugees. There was neither enough space nor the tranquillity necessary for studies.

## **Objectives of Dar Comboni**

In the first place, Dar Comboni continues its original objective of preparing Missionaries, church personnel and pastoral agents from around

the world who would like to work among Christian communities living in an Islamic and/or Arab environment. These include Catholic missionaries from different congregations, diocesan priest from different dioceses across the world as well as pastoral agents from Protestant and Evangelical Churches. We also have lay people who, for intellectual or employment reasons choose to study in our institute. However, in Dar Comboni we go further than just preparing Church personnel to know Islam and work in a Muslim environment. In the light of Vatican II, Dar Comboni fosters, through its activity, interreligious dialogue with Muslims, giving at the same time a background preparation for Church personnel and committed lay people who would like to work among Christian communities living in an Islamic environment. The need to have pastoral agents prepared in this field, however, is not confined to the Muslim world. In recent years, the need of specialised persons in this field has been growing also in Western countries.

The aims of Dar Comboni are achieved through an intensive course in the Arabic language so as to have a good mastering of the contemporary Standard Arabic Language; an introduction to Islamic culture to foster mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims, as well as skills on the different forms and methods of inter-religious dialogue in order to equip the students with skills needed to facilitate Interreligious Dialogue. When St. Daniel Comboni founded institutes in Egypt, it was in line with his project of preparing Africans in Cairo and then send them to Sudan as educators, medical doctors, pastoral and development agents. In the same line, Dar Comboni is preparing people from around the world for Church work among Muslims as well as Islamo-Christian dialogue. Thus, we are helping the universal church in its mission.

## **Juridical Status**

Since the year 2006, Dar Comboni is approved by the Holy See as a Pontifical Institute and grants Baccalaureate Degrees (B.A) to those who have attended the two-year course of Classic Arabic, Islamics and Interreligious dialogue. As a pontifical Institute, we are under the authority of the Congregation for Catholic Education. We also maintain a close collaboration with PISAI (Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies) in Rome. According to this collaboration, students from PISAI who wish to deepen their Arabic during their summer break are

received in Dar Comboni for this purpose. On the other hand, PISAI receives the students from Dar Comboni who, having received a Baccalaureate in Dar Comboni, wish to pursue the course of Licentiate (Masters) in Arabic and Islamic studies. Another agreement of collaboration with the University of Oriental Studies in Naples was concluded recently. At the moment we are in talks with two other institutes that would like to have collaboration with us. This means that our reputation and impact is being felt in different countries and the need to study Arabic and oriental studies is becoming more and more felt across the globe.

## **Our Formative Methodology**

The aim of Dar Comboni is not only to offer an intellectual knowledge of Arabic and Islamic or oriental studies, but also to equip the students with the necessary experiential knowledge of Islam and Arab culture so as to enable them to be effective pastoral agents in a Muslim environment as well as help them be enlightened partners in Islamo-Christian dialogue. Being established in a Muslim country, our formation is not just academic. We create possibilities of encountering Islam in the daily life. We also organise visits to some of the important Muslim monuments, mosques and learning Institutions, including al-Azhar University, the oldest and most prestigious Muslim University in the world. We also invite some Muslim intellectuals and clerics to give talks to our students on matters such as Muslim view of interreligious dialogue. Our field experience, however, is not just limited to Islam.

Egypt has one of the oldest Christian communities represented by the Coptic Orthodox church which, according to tradition, was started by St. Mark the Evangelist. Egypt is also the birth place of monastic life, with some monasteries dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Our field visits include visiting ancient Christian sites and monasteries, as well as meeting with religious leaders from the Coptic Orthodox Church in order to know their history, spirituality and how they have survived under Muslim rule for the last 14 centuries while other churches, such as the church of Carthage disappeared. The school also offers a deeper knowledge of the Catholic Church. Egypt is a Country where seven Catholic rites (Coptic, Latin, Greek, Maronite, Syriac, Melkite, and Armenian) are present with their respective bishops. Being in Dar Comboni enables the students to discover the riches of the Catholic Church through

its different rites and traditions. We also organise meetings with other Christian denominations present in Egypt to learn how they live and profess their faith in a Muslim context.

## **Pertinence of Our Formative Program**

We are living in times where Islam has reached every corner of the world, including Western countries that were once considered Christian countries. Globalisation has brought closer different civilizations that were once far apart. As pastoral agents, as Christians and even as human being, we can no longer ignore the “other”. The presence of religious fundamentalism, religious fueled conflicts and terrorism, especially in Islam, has brought to the fore the need for Christian religious leaders and pastoral agents to be prepared in the field of Islamics and Islamo-Christian dialogue. It has often being said that religions are often the cause of conflicts and wars around the world. There is need for religions to know one another and for their members to be involved in dialogue with one another. Dar Comboni feels called to prepare the Universal Church and the world at large in this field. Looking back at the last 30 years since Dar Comboni was founded, we feel proud that we have trained students from over 50 countries around the world. The students have come from different continents, countries, races and languages. In Europe, we have had students from the UK, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Malta, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia, Armenia, Belarus, and Yugoslavia. From the Asian continent, we have had students from India, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and Vietnam. In Africa we have had students from Madagascar, Mozambique, Zambia, Angola, Malawi, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Central Africa, Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sierra Leon, Senegal, and Niger. In the Americas, we have trained students from Canada, USA, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Peru, Honduras, Brazil, Chile and Argentina. We also have had students from Australia and New Zealand.

Catholic religious congregations that have sent their students to our institutes over the years are numerous. Some of them are the Comboni Missionaries, Comboni Missionary Sisters, Benedictines, Consolata Fathers and Sisters, Dominicans, Franciscans OFM, Society of the African Mis-

sions (SMA), Salesians, Jesuits, Missionaries of Africa, Little Sisters of Jesus, Daughters of St. Anne, Canossians, Spiritans, Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), Incarnate Word, Notre Dame des Apotres, Chemin Neuf, Focolare, Neo-Catechumens, Apostles of Jesus, Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary, Augustinians, Petits Freres, Carmelites, Claretians, Capuccins, Franciscan OFM, Evangelizing Sisters, Missionaries of Divine Mercy, and Trinitarians. We also have had diocesan priests and lay people from around the world. One diocesan priest worth mentioning is Fr. Claudio Omar Uassouf from the Diocese of Buenos Aires who came to Dar Comboni in 2011 sent by his Bishop who later became Pope Francis.

While Dar Comboni was started to train Catholic Religious and lay pastoral agents to work in Muslim environment and engage in dialogue with Muslims, it has also been a place of encounter and ecumenical dialogue with Christians of different confessions who have frequented our Institute. We have had the honour to train pastors and pastoral agents from different protestant churches. Some of them came from the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church, the Mennonite Church, and several other protestant denominations from around the world. Comboni used Egypt to train Missionaries for the Vicariate of Central Africa. Today, Dar Comboni, in the footsteps of Comboni, is preparing pastoral agents for the world.

## **Collaboration in Our Work**

The success of Dar Comboni is due to the fact that it is not only the work of the director or a few members of the Comboni circumscription. Dar Comboni is a place of collaboration. Our teachers of the Arabic language are Egyptian Muslims. Their presence in an institute where students are predominantly Christians offers us with the chance to practice interreligious dialogue even within the walls of Dar Comboni. In the field of Islamic studies, we have collaborators from different religious backgrounds. We have lecturers from the Comboni Missionaries, Society of African Missions (SMA), Missionaries of Africa, Benedictines, and the Mennonite Church. In the field of Interreligious dialogue, apart from the regular professors, we invite speakers from the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, and Muslim religious leaders. These people allow us not only to give intellectual inputs on dialogue but also to give real life experiences of dialogue.

# Where is your brother? (Gen 4:9)

**Simone Parimbelli**  
**Comboni Lay Missionary**

## **Central African Republic**

The Comboni Lay Missionaries' international community, has been present for over thirty years in Mongoumba, in the Central African Republic. We share *"the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially the Pygmies, as we feel truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds"* (GS 1).

Perhaps many people are not familiar with the Central African Republic's position or they do not know where exactly is. Someone could have heard about it on the occasion of Pope Francis' visit in November 2015 for the opening of the Jubilee of Mercy in Bangui, then named *"spiritual capital of the world"*. The Central African Republic is in the heart of Africa and is bordered by the two states of the Congo and Chad. The country is moaning, suffering and bleeding because of the injustices perpetrated by the globalised economic system which is plundering all mineral resources (i.e. oil, diamonds, gas, gold and timber) and consequently reducing this land to misery, oppression and dependence on foreign powers. Mongoumba is located on the south-western border of the Lobaye Region on the edge with the states of the Congo and on the Bangui-Brazzaville road. The Comboni Lay Missionaries' international community placed herself at the service of the Pygmy population in this small, anonymous and isolated village towards an integral development to *"all men and the whole man"* (EG 181) attempting to be faithful to Saint Daniel Comboni's Plan, and inspired by the Holy Spirit that *"call on the action of European Missionaries for the education of young Africans[...] on the borders of Africa[...]. Their education should set itself the target of preparing the pupils to be the future apostles of Africa"* (W 2178).

Education as a service of human promotion and development because *"from the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement"* (EG 178): to learn, to know and to be aware, to fully become men.

Education as a service of integration between the Bantu and the Pygmy

population: to learn how to live together and “*to see an infinite multitude of brothers who belonged to the same family as himself with one common Father in heaven*” (W 2742).

Education as a service for establishing a better world, where there is no ethnic discrimination, slavery, child labour, nor violence against women trying to “*increase the regenerating apostolate of Africa more effectively [...], to assure its advance and progress [...], and lastly, to make it easier for Africa to regenerate herself*” (W 2179).

To bear witness to “*a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realizing that he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity*”, to bear witness that “*the Son of God assumed our human flesh means that each human person has been taken up into the very heart of God*” (EG 178) means to recognise that each man or woman is a man or a woman, and that he or she cannot be treated like garbage, or an object, a slave or someone who sows disease and death. Barthelemy Boganda, who is the spiritual founder and father of the Central African Republic, summarised this concept through the Sango motto “ZO KWE ZO” that literally means “MAN WHOLE MAN”; that is, each man or woman has the right to an integral development, and to become fully human beings with no exceptions nor gender, ethnic or social inequality. However, “unless the existing machinery is modified, the disparity between rich and poor nations will increase rather than diminish; the rich nations are progressing with rapid strides while the poor nations move forward at a slow pace” (PP 8) as a consequence of inequity and of the unfair distribution of resources and material goods. The Comboni Lay Missionaries’ international community in Mongoumbatries to ease the access to unalienable rights for every single man and woman. Along with the service of education, our concern is to accompany the Pygmy people towards the right to health care and access to medicines. It is to be alongside with Pygmy mothers while they are pregnant or in the post-partum period. It is to be with Pygmy children during vaccination time or while they are suffering from malaria. It is to be together with the elderly in the very last moments of their lives or during post-operative moments. It is to be with living children, women and man - nevertheless treated like if they were non-existent - to bear witness to the infinite dignity conferred by God to every human being. We are called to be the defence team of “*the most abandoned, the poorest and the dregs of society*”; every day here in Mongoumba is a challenge and a fight

against the global system that protects the few rich and elected people at the expense of a multitude of disadvantaged populations yearning to a real integral human development. “*Looking upon Africa not through the pitiable lens of human interest, but in the pure light of faith we saw an infinite multitude of brothers*” (W 2742). One day, God will ask us: “*Where is your brother?*”, and we, the Comboni Lay Missionaries, could answer: in Mogoumba, in the Central African Republic, in Africa.

# From pastoral visit to pastoral presence

**Father Saturnin Pognon**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **Chad**

The Republic of Chad is a landlocked country in north-central Africa. The population is about 11.23 million peoples, and it is composed of Muslims (55.3%) and Christians (40.6%); only 1.4% of the population practices traditional African religions. The most popular religion in the northern country is Islamism; on the contrary, most of the southern part is Christian and Animistic. Muslims have been attempting the so-called “Islamization” of lands in southern country for several years now.

The early missionaries entered the land of *Sao* ninety years ago. By contrast, the Comboni Missionaries arrived there to participate in the evangelisation of this people in 1977. The Archbishop of N’Djamena invited the Comboni Missionaries to build bridges between Christians and Muslims in 2002; consequently, our core mission in this cosmopolitan city was thenceforth to promote youth pastoral ministry and inter-religious dialogue. We were assigned to a parish dedicated to the “Sao Resurrection” due to the need and the lack of priests in the southern part of the capital.

It was precisely there that the Comboni Missionaries committed to pastoral ministry. At first, it was carried out in a traditional way. However, Pope Francis’ appeal and orientations motivated and urged them to find solutions in the light of the Gospel as far as it concerns getting out of the sacristies and going forth to the existential peripheries. It means to reach out to those people who are alone, abandoned and *rejected* by the iniquitous neoliberal system according to the *Evangelii Gaudium* exhortation.

Most of the sick people die as they do not receive any medical treatment. This is due to the impossibility of access to healthcare as a consequence of the lack of funds: visiting the sick in their living environment has made us painfully aware of such a tragic reality.

It is thus urgent and necessary to promote health pastoral care rather than pastoral care to the sick to deal with this terrible tragedy. Prayers, words of comfort and administration of the sacraments must necessarily be accompanied by concrete actions and interventions in order to help

people restoring their health status since *“the glory of God is the living man.”*

We have been following in the footsteps of the Son of Man, since we were motivated by the praxis of the historical Jesus against all anxiety, and physical and moral suffering. He was the One who reached out to people relieving and healing all sicknesses as well as freeing the oppressed by the unclean spirits to restore dignity and will, to fight for better living conditions.

Ministerial approach has led us to go from a pastoral visit to a pastoral presence. By “pastoral presence”, we mean a presence which is not just physical but also action to be taken in order to meet health and medical needs.

The most of the believers attending the “Resurrection” Parish live under precarious conditions. Such a situation does not allow them to cover health expenditure; further, the Chadian government spends less than 20% of its budget in order to meet the healthcare needs of the entire population.

It is on the basis of basic ecclesiastic ‘communities’ liveliness that a mutual health insurance was created: it works by means of an annual aid paid by the parish (1.500.000 CFA BEAC Francs - XAF equivalent to 2.300 €). The mutual insurance is also completed by the subscription of those believers who are participating in the program.

Further, a micro-credit project to the poorest was also necessary given the state of uncertainty lived by the most of the population of Chad. The project would have supported those who wished to start income generating activities. The parish provides an amount of 2.000.000 f CFABE-AC Francs - XAF every year for this project (equivalent to 3.053 €).

To this last purpose, an awareness-raising work has been undertaken so that an underlying mindset could not gain the upper hand over people. It is not in fact rare that they think funds from the parish can be used for other emergencies and individual needs.

Strategies for debt recovery of loans have been created with the help of microfinance associations as well as programs to ensure continuity to the initiative, and to relieve people lacking means to meet their basic needs.

The impact of the above-mentioned projects on the faithful’ s lives has been tangible. Women are the most committed in credits’ repayment thanks to their savings. Due to the reliability of the work we have done, a group of them has been authorised by the local bank to open an account on their own: this is a cause for immense joy, contentment, and

enthusiasm. It motivates us to promote this ministerial service which influences the concrete life of people.

The social ministry recalls some words of a wise missionary: “*Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both in order to understand the reality of a mission*”. Therefore, we can preach the Good News only if we are willing to focus our actions on peoples’ deep aspirations and vital needs. It is always crucial to take into account those aspirations and vital needs: if not so, we would miss the target of our pastoral plan.

Our faith in Jesus imposes us to act and to turn our back with determination to the mere practice of pity. It is not about underestimate faith, rather to redefine it as an experience animating people and creating life in abundance (John 10:10).

Social ministry in our daily lives was born from the encounter with people: exactly as Jesus of Nazareth, we did not remain indifferent or insensitive to the poor’s necessities. As also Pope Francis underlined during the latest Synod for the Amazon, social ministry is “**to go from a pastoral visit to a pastoral presence**”. It is necessary to take the lead and to require concrete answers to the social, political and cultural transformation of society rather than waiting for things to unfold.

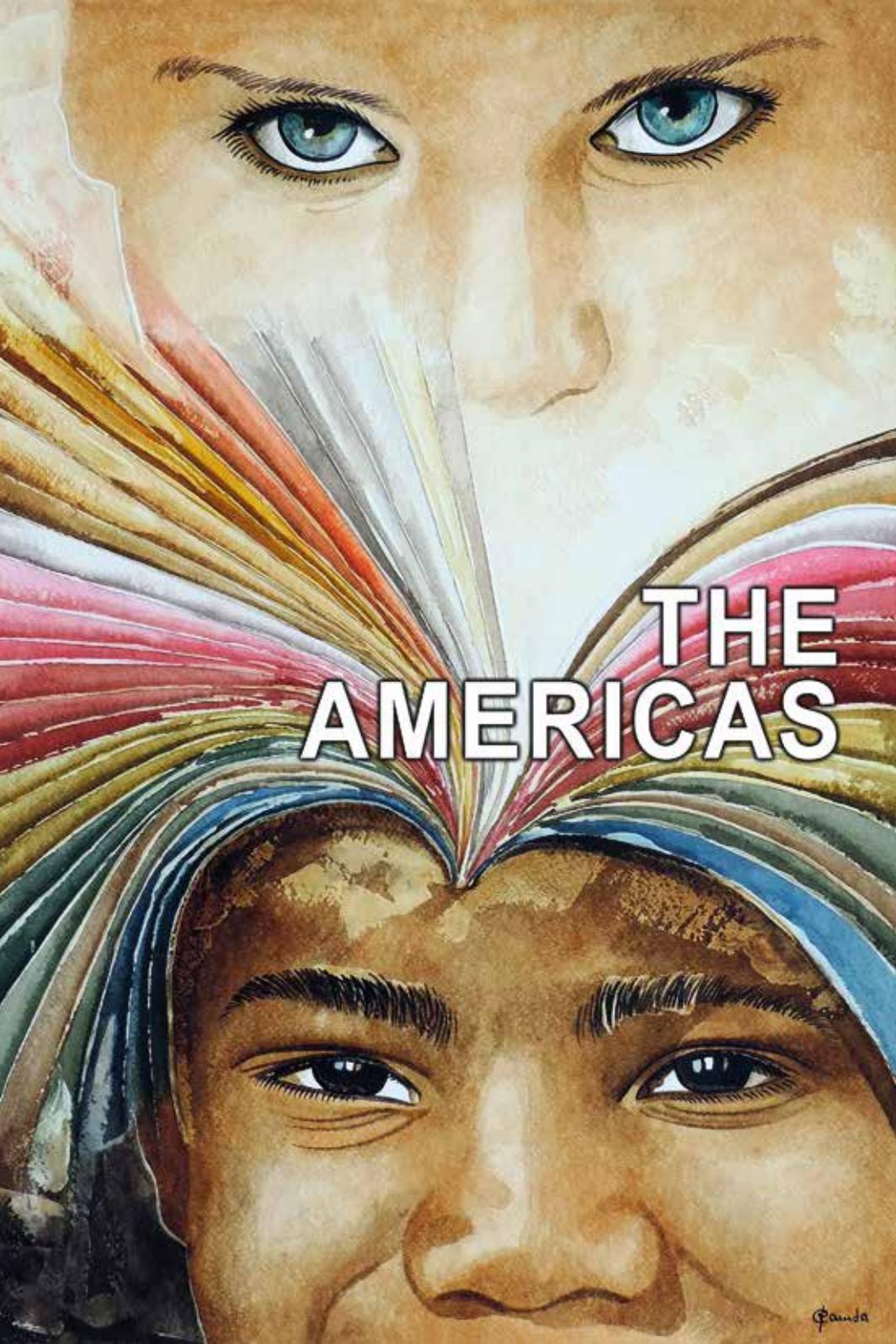
To be disciples of Jesus within our context does not mean to say to a brother or a sister without clothes, daily food and medical care, “*Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed*”, without giving what his/her body and health need (James 2, 15-16). The celebration taking place on Wednesdays in our Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) is helpful in this regard, as it always spread a message of self-maintenance to the community.

The concrete experience of our social ministry has taught us to overcome immobilism and the old saying “*we have always done it this way*”. Someone has in fact recommended to avoid the risk to put money coming from the parish in the hands of banks without being certain of having them back. Some others have stated - and criticised - that we want to take over financial institutions. However, a voice deep in our hearts said: “Risk your Exodus! The scaring dangers of the streets and the indifference dwelling among you must not prevail over your faith”.

Our survival depends on the risk of going forth, and to become an “*out-*

*going Church*". One thing is sure: we cannot act anymore, like the Levite priest of the Gospel who, after he saw the man that had been injured by the robbers, left him half dead and passed by on the other side under the guise of being headed to the temple (Cfr. Luke 10, 25-36).

It is time to write a new page on our ministerial commitment's history, announcing Christ by deeds and, when necessary, also by words.



**THE  
AMERICAS**



# God exists: I met him among the most marginalised people in the street

**Father Saverio Paolillo**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **Brazil**

I landed in Brazil for the first time on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November in 1985. I had just taken my Vows as a religious in the Comboni Missionaries Congregation when I asked my superiors to pursue my theological studies to the priesthood in São Paulo's city. I wanted to experience a different way of living the Gospel.

My immediate reaction was one of fright. The long way from the airport to the outskirts of the Brazilian metropolis' Eastern area gave me the opportunity to realise how impressively big the city was. Anyway, surprises were not finished yet. I got such a fright when I arrived to the "seminary". It was a ugly house struggling to hold onto a hill, and its exterior looked unsteady; it was surrounded by giant *favelas* where thousands of people crowded into shacks made up of wood, zinc and cardboard boxes.

I make no secret of the fact that I felt like going back home, but I rose to the challenge. Over the following weeks I realised that our poor house was the symbol of a decentralised Church stepping out of herself, breaking free from ancient and burdensome structures, changing her clothes by wearing the apron of service, and heading towards the outskirts to be on the outcasts' side.

It all began by Msgr. Paulo Evaristo Arns' plea. He was a worthy Franciscan whom was called to run São Paulo's Diocese by Saint Paul VI at the height of military dictatorship in 1970. Even as an Auxiliary Bishop, he was distinguished for his resolute defence of human rights. As a Cardinal, he was an unwavering point of reference in the defence of democracy and in the fight against torture.

When facing with slums' worrying growth, he asked religious to leave

the institute and to go out of the uptown - where the most of religious houses were centralised - to go and live in the outskirts among the poorest people sharing life conditions with them. It was no more about going to work for poor people as a lot of congregations had been doing until then; instead, it was a matter of dwelling among the poor and especially as a poor person. Father Paulo himself led by examples: he went and live in a modest house. He sold the Bishop's Palace and earmarked the proceeds to build community centres in the outskirts, where Christian communities gathered. Projects aimed at human promotion were being carried out at once, and they were especially targeting children and teenagers who ran away from slums and lived on the streets.

Many religious congregations responded to the Bishop's call and founded their communities in slums. The Comboni missionaries brothers even decided to move their seminary to the outskirts so as to seminarians could grow in their vocation in direct touch with the poorest people.

I am grateful to God for having been blessed with the possibility to gain experience in this field and to live together with this Church which has left her mark on me for life.

Community life was simple. Housework was up to us, besides dedicating ourselves to prayer and studying. We had to divide our time between community life and the challenge of being with people sharing joys and sufferings with them.

The work of Evangelization was realised through the establishment of small communities where everyone could feel welcome. This event finally returned God's word to people; it further helped those people to understand reality, and that the misery they were living in was neither a consequence of their sloth nor due to some God's whims. On the contrary, it was a sin making His heart bleeding. Our involvement in social movements - that were engaged in the transformation of society to make it a better place in terms of fairness and fraternity - emerged from this unprecedented reading of the Gospel. The mission lived as a ministry in the service of Life and of the dignity conferred, by the Lord himself, on every single person was basically taking shape.

The Eucharist was lived as a celebration time strengthening trust in God and one's natural bent to follow Jesus' footsteps in the building of a new world.

A profound synthesis between faith and life, worship and activism, mysticism and social commitment was lived in small communities. Those centres represented the heart of the Church within the world of poor people, and the poor people in the heart of the Church. The evangelic option for the poor was not a mere slogan but, by contrast, it stood for a basic trait of her identity: poor Church with poor people.

By means of small communities, I found out a new way to be a missionary: freed from burdensome structures and embarrassing collusions with power, fatherly, friendly, opened to the richness of the charisms, poor, and animator of ministries horizontally lived and marked by service. Also, I learnt how to be willing and to walk together, reunited with people to interpret reality in the light of the Gospel as a community, and to share the Eucharist. Meanwhile, I learnt how to be a Good Samaritan, participating to street life, in service of people, networking with people and institutions engaged in popular struggles in defence of human dignity. I have found myself willing to retrace Jesus' steps in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Such a missionary method is no news. It carries Jesus' fingerprint; the Teacher built no churches indeed. The street was His "Major Basilica". He was a tireless pilgrim as he constantly lived outdoors to meet people. He was present in the places where people were present - mainly where marginalised people were present - and He was there not to preach, rather to walk together, to comfort, to enlighten, to welcome, to encourage, to forgive and to set free. He was allergic to institutions. He didn't smell a scent of incense, rather "the smell of the sheep". A manger in a stable, a shelter for shepherds, a wellspring, a square, a rough street like the one leading from Jerusalem to Jericho, the alleys of Galilee's outskirts, the way out to Emmaus, and even the way to the cross: all of this was changed into the Holy Land. A place where he made an appointment with humanity. He dreamt of a boundless love community, a community that was open to the welcoming of anyone. In the end, it is the experience of being loved the one that lights the fuse of the conversion process.

Jesus' missionary method grew stronger in the early Christian communities. The Acts of the Apostles represented the logbook for those missionaries who operated in the street. Deacon Philip's experience is emblematic in this regard; he symbolises the man who can go any further and beyond the limits, the man who can demolish cultural and ethnical

barriers and who can abolish bans on access to those who don't have what it takes. He did so in order to make way for the logic of love and of welcoming. The Gospel is for everyone, from the most isolated to the most marginalised people. Within Jesus' community, the entrance is free.

Philip was in the street as the Spirit told him: "*Go and join that chariot*" (Acts, 8:29). Get closer to that "stranger" - who furthermore is "eunuch" - and listen to him carefully. Take care of his needs. Welcome his doubts with respect. Assuage his thirst of God. Don't be so fussy. Board his chariot and sit by him. Explain the Scriptures not by means of the preacher's critical tone who uses the Word to give moral lessons, rather as a travel companion sharing his faith experience with joy. Remember that the announcement's content is no cold doctrine but it is the personal encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, and not an ordinary Jesus, but the suffering Upright man, the crucified and the risen Christ who comes to serve and to give life so that everyone has life and have it to the full without any distinction.

This is the best way to proclaim the Gospel. Philip begins from a concrete problem. He proposes to that enslaved and castrated man the history of a God whose love knows no boundaries or barriers, giving him the opportunity to become aware of Jesus' project that can make his life fruitful and free. The only condition to receive the Christening is accepting to make of himself a free gift to the others. It is a great turning point. It is enough to read what the law in force stated: "*No man whose testicles have been crushed or whose penis has been cut off may enter the Lord's assembly*" that is, no one who is a castrated man (Deuteronomy, 23:2). Philip does not just open the doors to the Ethiopian eunuch, and enslaved man. He also plunges with him into the water. Differences cannot be reasons for division and exclusion. We are all God's children, we are all brothers and sisters, and we are free from any kind of slavery and discrimination form. No one is better than anyone else. We all plunge into the same water, and we are all struggling with the same history of sin from which we can rise together to a new life.

Both Jesus and Philip's missionary methods basically give voice and space to encounter and concern for people. This is a wonderful provocation for those who insist on creating pastoral plans attributing excessive importance to structures and organisations that, in the end, are not useful to the Gospel announcement, rather they feed self-reference effect of those who are the agents.

The Church of the Good Samaritan who goes out in the street to the encounter with the poorest people symbolises those *burning bush* granting a genuine experience of God. The journey towards the joy of living must be lived going out in the street, and living as the Good Samaritans would live. This applies to everyone; there are no exceptions. Is there any salvation for the mighty, the wealthy, and the arrogant people? Definitely! The same Jesus gives us the answer: “*Do as the Good Samaritan does, and you will live.*”

Among the many restorations our Churches are subject to, restoring the Good Samaritan values of the Church and of her mission is an emergency in order to recover ancient beauty. In this time of crisis when poverty is increasing anywhere, this will be the spiritual dimension that will guarantee the quality of the Church’s witness and that will restore a fundamental element to the effectiveness of her mission, that is reliability.

This is the method through which I have always tried to inspire my missionary life. I call myself a “street priest”. I have been spending my life in the outskirts for years in the service of the “*meninos and meninas de rua*”, and of teenagers and adults imprisoned under inhumane conditions, drug addicts and prostitutes, people forced to live in appalling conditions, networking so as to everyone could have access to human rights. As a priest, I don’t like that much stay within the wall of the Church because my Church is the world of the outcasts whose naves are made by police headquarters’ corridors, detention pavilions, rough streets, human realities which are insufficiently represented in economic, social and even religious stereotypes imposed by “respectable society”. I am not the same person that I used to be. God was the one who had formed me this way by giving me the witness of so many people, mainly lay men and women, who edified me with their passion for the Gospel. I have met and I keep on meeting men and women strongly and bravely committed in human rights promotion and defence on the road to the mission. Their witnesses are disarming, as their condition of “normal people” makes them weaker and more exposed to persecution. However, they do not give in. It is just by starting from those crucial encounters that we have given life together to several projects aimed at granting to the outcasts, mainly children and teenagers, the condition of legal entities promoting public policies that ensure their protection and integral development by encouraging their leadership and the full exercise of citizenship. As a Brazilian Bishop said: “Great changes do

not occur starting from the mighty, rather from poor people's leadership. Only the poor can save the poor". It is not easy. Those who defend human rights are criminalised. Insults, threats and slander are ordinary. For nearly two years I have been under escort and for more than 10 years I have been integrated into protection programs to human rights defender threatened with death. I must confess, however, that the saddest thing ever was "domestic misunderstanding". Persecution from those who do not share the Gospel is easier to digest than the hostility coming from those who share our same Word and Eucharist. Sometimes, even some of our majors couldn't understand in the beginning and, above all, they hardly recognise in this kind of service the Comboni charisma. I let myself be challenged. By revisiting the history of Saint Daniel Comboni, I felt that we were on the same wavelength: our devotion to Jesus' Pierced Heart, the persistence on the identification of the Good Shepherd who "abandons the flock" in order to find the lost sheep and takes it back home, jumping for joy, the predilection for the poor people and the intuition to promote their leadership, his indignation towards the tragedy of slavery and his commitment to rescue children from this inhuman condition; they are just some of the gifts I have received as an inheritance from our Founder Father. Nowadays, there is enough agreement. Our provincial plan is living the mission in the service of poor people in the defence and promotion of their rights. Today, it is possible to live this experience by sharing it with other confreres as we are currently doing together with Francesco D'Aiuto and Father Simon Bauce in Santa Rita's outskirts, in the north-east of Brazil. It is a community inserted in the service of the *catadores* (waste pickers), children and teenagers in danger, women who are victims of domestic abuse, and many other people exposed to continuing violations.

Some people ask me: "*How do you preach the Gospel?*", and I immediately answer: "*By looking after those who are in need*". Taking care is the best way to talk about God. Only those who love can recognise the presence of God, and they can make Him known to the others through their own witness. Selfless love is the quickest and safest way to connect people with Jesus Christ and also to relate persons to each other; confirming the fruitfulness of this missionary approach, people try to create a network of relationship of sympathy, solidarity and service witnessing the presence of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

# Along with Afro-Colombians: the ministeriality of resistance

**Father Daniele Zarantonello**  
**Comboni Missionary**

## **Colombia**

Tumaco is a municipality in the Nariño Department, Colombia, by the Pacific Ocean and near the border with Ecuador. It is a small town by the sea and it is inhabited mainly by fishermen and small shopkeepers (peasants) who are mostly Afro-descendants (about 89%). Besides the urban area, Tumaco includes a large rural area which is densely populated by thousands of *veredas*, small communities living on the river banks in the surrounding area.

Despite being a little and hidden reality, Tumaco is important world-wide: it is one of the top producer of cocaine with more than 19,546 hectares grown accounting for 11% of the national production. Moreover, Tumaco has maintained a sad primacy as the city with the highest murder rate in Latin America.

The Comboni Missionaries presence in Tumaco started in 2004 and it was aimed at supporting a land inhabited mainly by Afro-Colombians in a zone of armed conflict; this presence strengthened even more in 2008, following the Delegation of Colombia's Assembly in the Ratio Missionis reflection which was proposed by the Comboni General Council to all districts.

During the Assembly we made some decisions to guide the whole missionary presence in Colombia: we were meant to leave great facilities to live closer to people, to choose the Afro-Colombians as our “preferential option”, and to favour evangelisation as a prophetic presence in a region of Colombia which professes itself to be almost completely Christian, without losing missionary animation and vocational promotion which are the true grounds of the inception of the Comboni presence here in Colombia.

We might describe the Comboni missionary presence in Tumaco like this: an evangelising presence, within an existential periphery, at the service of the territory and of the Local Church.

1. **An evangelising presence:** when the Comboni missionaries arrived in Tumaco, the initial idea was to live in the outskirts where there was no parish, accompanying a chapel and living as a “community inserted” at the service of the territory. The land and people’s actual problems would have guided our pastoral praxis. The Bishop asked us to take a parish given the growing number of people coming to Tumaco due to the *desplazamientos*, a phenomenon that was forcing thousands of people to flee and to move to rural areas because of the violence by armed groups. The Parish of the Resurrection was born with us on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September in 2004.

We didn’t want a home of our own: we chose to rent a social housing with no service staff.

Over the years we have defined our presence as a “house with the open door” to let physically - and mainly spiritually - the life, the pain, and the struggles of our people walk into our lives.

For many years we have lived in two different houses: we used to call it “a community with two wings”, and we tried to live proximity with people as much as we could through work, pastoral, and communal organisation.

2. **Within an existential periphery:** Tumaco is a land unknown to the majority of Colombians. Recently, it has become famous only as a result of violence fuelled by drug trafficking. It is not just geographically far from the great Colombian seats of power; we also mean anthropological distance which is the one experienced by the Afro-Colombians population, which have been excluded and marginalised from centuries. Since a few decades, Afro-Colombians are taking the lead in the country’s political, social, and economic scene. First of all, because they are not a minority given that they represent 20% of the Colombian people, even if the same Colombians find it hard to believe; secondly, they are more and more taking on positions from centuries meant to be entrusted to white people. Afro-descendants have been taking the lead in the Church, too; it is a slow process of inculturation and respect. However, these steps are recent after

centuries of exclusion and condemnation. Colombia has not yet an Afro-descendant Bishop.

Tumaco Diocese's territory is immense and there are no roads to get here. Most of the land can be accessed only by sea, going up the rivers that flow into the Pacific Ocean starting by their mouth. Rural communities have no electricity, drinking water or basic services; there are few and inadequate schools, and no health centres operating. The abandonment endured by these communities is really sad: if we add armed violence to this, the groups competing with weapons for the territory and the drug cartel control causing thousands of victims, the context become even more muddled and hope weakens so much so that it becomes "anonymous resistance."

However, living in this existential periphery has challenged us a lot: it is really difficult to notice progress on the human and pastoral level; it is difficult to talk about "dreams" to young people when reality does not allow them to dream, and it is difficult to plan some possible investments or social projects as we are immediately victims of the extortion by armed groups. We had to choose a different way to be here: a presence, a light, to be "anonymous resistance", too.

Thousands of leaders have been murdered in Colombia, especially in Tumaco: they tried to defend the land from mega-projects (palm oil, gold, timber, water) or they dared to dream a land free from drug trafficking. The managers who started those mega-project were the ones to bring to Tumaco the *paramilitares*, ruthless mercenary groups who have ravaged a whole country and its people for many years.

3. **At the service of the territory and of the local Church:** we wished for people and the territory to enlighten our style here in Tumaco. We have started organising a parish and all of its structures; some of us have decided to make a living from their work through the sale of soymilk and education dedicating the rest of their time to the training of youth and lay groups; we have created three youth centres deep inside the roughest neighbourhoods of our parish where we support children, teenagers and young people by means of education, art, music, dance, catechesis and sport activities; we also are supporting on a diocesan level the training of catechists and parish

animators in order that all the diocesan area can count on a network of lay people of strong spirituality and of unwavering identity both ecclesial and cultural.

We live in a reality of war. Thousands of deaths, or *desaparecidos*, thousands of families fleeing from their homes and lands looking for a dignified and long life. Drug trafficking is the cause of war: it is a plague that destroys not just human life but also kills culture, spirituality, civic value as respect, responsibility, honesty, self-denial... it kills you inside. Our youth dream to be *narcos*, and many fisherman choose to travel through Central America with cocaine or to work in the drug trafficking supply chains that organise travels: we are talking about the world of illegal laboratories, fuel smuggling or smuggling related to the chemicals needed to produce pasta base. Many of our neighbours have disappeared, or they have been killed or imprisoned in Central America or in the United States. Those who come back alive with dollars heaps are fewer and fewer, and they don't even live enough to enjoy their swag. They are flash in the pan, lives ending miserably and quickly.

We have lived under the control of the FARC, the paramilitaries. Now it is the turn of FARC dissident groups (*Frente Oliver Sinisterra*; *Guerrilla Unida del Pacifico*), ELN (*Ejercito de Liberación Nacional*), and other paramilitary group involved in the drug trade who are on Mexican cartels' payroll. We are living in a state of siege, where the only option is the lesser of two evils here represented by the FARC dissident groups which at least are natives and have some interest in giving a future to their families. However, here in Tumaco the word "future" sounds too odd and big; it is difficult to fill it with meaning.

How to stay here lucidly and with prophecy? We are living the **ministeriality of resistance**, trying to give signs of hope, glimmer of utopia. Concretely:

1. We are trying to live responsibly and perseveringly the ordinary pastoral care in the parish: groups of families' training, catechesis for children and young people, pastoral care of young people, social parish pastoral care, pastoral councils, communal spiritual retreats, the support to different forms of popular religiosity. In every homily we talk about peace, hope, community, resistance to evil, and self-determination tirelessly proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth's utopia.

The centre of every communal meeting is the Word of God; we try to continuously be enlightened by Him. Many people collaborating in different facilities of the parish are example of resilience, concrete faith, and fight: they represent our “poor of Yahweh” who keep on hoping.

2. We have created three self-managed spaces where volunteers devote their time to people and try to establish human relationships of high-quality: the “Centro Afro Juvenil”, the centre “Educar en la calle Viento Libre”, and the “Escuela de manualidades” in the Panamá district. These centres are located inside the toughest neighbourhoods of Tumaco and they are listening spaces, after-school, and self-esteem spaces free from weapons, armed actions and words. The work tools are first and foremost tenderness and welcoming, followed by arts, music, dance, circus, training, library and toy library. Children and teenagers groups (*infancia* and *adolescencia misionera*) were born in 10 other districts one year ago to meet weekly with the help of some mothers trying to transform their faith into effective love.
3. We support the diocesan training of our catechists and animators in the rural communities through three-days meetings where we try to help our Afro leaders first to make them feel integral part of a community of resistance, filled with a strong Christian vocational and ministerial identity; then, by the popular reading of the Bible, the recovery of ancestral traditions and the empowerment. Many leaders live in isolated communities, whose only access is possible through canoes, with no electricity, potable water, health centres or wastewater, and schools where there are no teachers. Their abandonment is impressive; nevertheless, they hold onto God and His word, with faith and perseverance. The big challenge is the generational shift to young people willing to take the role of animators of the faith and of traditions.

We live a Colombia which is unknown to the majority of Colombians and of the world. A land which is unusual to those who look at this country only as a sought-after destination for its beaches, attractions, coffee and beautiful women. Colombia is a country that is known for coca but almost everyone here considers it as a game, a frivolousness, an attraction: the typical «Bring me some» we are obliged to listen always!

To choose to stay in Tumaco is to choose to live in a periphery wounded by the violence of the neoliberal market that uses weapons and cocaine to oil the wheels of his deadly system. We chose Afro-descendant people because it is up to them to break free from this latest slavery. And to us with them, too.

# Mission at the Foot of the volcano: El Misti, an encounter with Palestine at the time of Jesus

**Gonzalo Violero**  
**Neuza Francisco**  
**Paula Ascensão**  
**Comboni Lay Missionaries**

## **Peru**

The Comboni Lay Missionaries presence in Villa Ecológica, in the city of Arequipa, started in 2008. At that time Villa Ecológica was the furthest region from the Comboni parish of “The Good Shepherd”; an area where straight-line distances are short, but also where volcanic topography imposes to follow winding paths through canyons and streams. The zone consigned to the Diocese in 2013 was closer to the urban centre, and it hosted the first Comboni lay missionaries: two families coming from Spain. They began to visit Villa Ecológica’s human settlement despite its distance. This human settlement represented the first stage in the region’s settlement where there was no plumbing in the houses, and electrification was scarce. People’s major demands were undoubtedly access to drinking water and transport services. In addition, the stormy wind lashed (and still lashes) the merciless sun from the mountains in winter mornings. All these factors have resulted into respiratory diseases and eye and skin maladies with particular reference to minors.

Villa Ecológica caught the newcomers’ attention as it was a community in progress, a church which had been created recently: there were no catechists, and Eucharist was celebrated only once a month with no preparation at all for the initiation sacraments. Diamonds in the rough are abundant here: neighbours with an in-depth experience of God expressing their own faith clearly and unequivocally, in a simple and direct way.

Urban and environmental conditions blend with people’s history of abandonment. Domestic violence situations that often change into sto-

ries of suffering, from the little ones to adults, and no doubt, stories of abandonment from civil institutions. Stories of neglect, where parents who have survived to their own personal struggles are not able to love and, therefore, to be a safe haven for their children. Fragile lives where a “normal” illness can cause school dropout of sons in order for them to start working or get into debt, mainly with banks. A context which is similar to Palestine at the time of Jesus, a semi-desert landscape where people struggle for their own survival and their living conditions are awful compared to the elite group living on the other side, in the centre, and ignoring what it is like living in the suburbs. Villa Ecológica is now home to new human settlements developing at the foot of El Misti like Canteras, Expansion of Villa Ecológica, and many others.

We have started inculturation as a consequence of a detailed observation of reality in the suburbs surrounding the parish of “*The Good Shepherd*”. We have therefore realised some projects to meet the people’s needs. Let’s start from Canteras and Villa Ecológica. All the projects we have supported are based on proximity, knowledge of reality, and on the way people live and feel Peruvian. People also have included all of us in their culture and daily journey, making us feel like we were a part of them. We have talked with them about the ways forward. Our lifestyle and the main tool to be mission are visits to families and sick people, as well as the support to Saint Daniel Comboni Kindergarten. It is right through children and visits that we can be aware of the reality surrounding us.

We also study specific plans as a method of development. We mention below: Ayllu Program, “My School, my Family, and I”, and the Group for Missionary Animation in Arequipa. “My School, my Family, and I” is developed within Saint Daniel Comboni Kindergarten and the main purpose is to offer psychological and pedagogical aid to children with special-needs and their families who are often marked by violence, physical abuse and moral harassment, alcoholism, male chauvinism, difficult couple’s relationships, and moral, physical and material child neglect. Ayllu Program is developed in several fields, e.g. pastoral agents’ teaching and training, and visits to families and sick people; “*We are Family*” program consists in families’ teaching and training, adult catechesis, missionary animation, promotion of elderly people, a group of young people, and Villa Ecológica’s hospital unit. The Group for Missionary Animation originates from the desire to help people to live the missionary dimension of the Church in Arequipa, and aims at

participating in the concrete life of people surrounding us, reaching out to them, and sharing with them food, prayer, workshops, and spaces where youth, adults and relatives can meet to share the Lord's gifts.

We are all part of Saint Daniel Comboni's Plan; we are all called to be part of a whole which is the mission. To talk about the MCCJ is talking about our family in Peru. We are not referring just to moments of prayer, we are talking about sharing life experiences, true moments enhancing our lives. We must not forget that we all belong to the Comboni Family, to God's Family. Our work, as Comboni Lay Missionaries, follows the method "To Save Africa with Africa", that means working with people, for people and from people. People will always be the protagonist in God's mission, and this is our motto here in Peru. At any time we work to build leaders who will be able carry on the mission. We follow the MCCJ's example over here who in their turn follow the pastoral renewal plan through which people are being formed, and made protagonists of every single activity in the parish. Some activities formerly run by the MCCJ are now run by pastoral agents, that is people who have been trained. They are the ones carrying on some pastoral activities now.

For all this time, we have assisted to several changes as regards the number of people who sympathise with the parish and their contribution to different activities. We also have organised meetings to make them known and help each other. We know that our passage in Peru has been leaving footprints since the inception of our presence in Arequipa. On a spiritual level, we have grown up alongside these people. Meanwhile, we are sowing the Charism, this way of existing; this has caused them to seek for God and to participate more closely in the actions we are carrying out. It is important to underline that, in Villa Ecológica, we already count on a skilled pastoral agents team who take charge and responsibility of many areas such as: Pastoral Healthcare, Pastoral Care of the Family, Missionary Childhood, Adult Catechesis, Fraternal Cooperation, Pastoral Care of the Multitude, Messengers, Catechesis, the Prayer Group of the Wedding at Cana, Liturgy and Pastoral Care of Youth (Vincentian Marian Youth and Chorus). The team meets once a month to talk and to organise all monthly activities of the year. This is reflected by Sundays and Wednesdays Masses. On Sundays people come from anywhere to celebrate Eucharist, and many boys, girls and young people participate in the catechesis which is held in Villa Ecológica as well.

Challenges were (and still are) many; some plans are being renewed, and some plans have opened ways to new and much-needed projects. Today we are questioning ourselves about the reality and the mission's course thanks to the fact of having walked with people day by day.

As Comboni Charism, our missionary work is to train leaders who are able to carry out activities at any time; therefore, talking about continuity means talking about a continuous process of development of the skills enabling people not just to be the real protagonists of their own lives but also allowing them to develop community programs. Villa Ecológica is learning more and more to stand on its own two feet, and is inviting us to go to outlying suburbs, that is human settlements which are being built increasingly at the foot of El Misti Volcano.

We live in one of the most beautiful places in the world. We might just add that in this remote corner of the earth between El Misti and Chacani volcanoes lives an humble people. A people made up of faces, stories and families. Each person is a world and has a lot to tell. In each person we encounter a God who sets out. To love God is to believe that we always reach out to people and places where He waits for us, even with different faces, arms or features. We have always known that borders and limits between us and God are huge; however, He loves us and makes us feel like brothers, and little by little a single and equal people.

Many people welcome us with open arms and a smile on their faces. We recognise the love, the affection and the joy of Jesus Christ in them all. We feel like a son who is coming back home. We feel like a family. We feel that wherever God may be, there are two arms where we can serenely build our home.

Every day, we wake up with faith and go to sleep full of gratitude in this wonderland. This mission is not ours: it is of all those who walk along with us and even of those who are still waiting for us to come. The mission is for everyone who, as a whole, helps us writing and living the history of Jesus Christ in the present days.

Leaving for Peru was leaving for a journey of self-awareness and complete devotion to God. We are happy with what we were and what we are able to live with and among people. We have always lived and shared the "little piece" of God we hold in our hearts. To be and to stay, to share

what we are unreservedly “giving our lives drop by drop” (Sr. Carmela): this is our way to live and to be mission. We build and we are home in Villa Ecológica. We are not talking about a physical space, rather about embraces, tears, and speeches on the doorstep at sunsets.

We find a shelter in the embrace of the elderly. We live the witness of the Gospel favouring the little ones in the smile on a child’s face. We find the essence of our mission in the eyes of many women and families.

We often rest our gaze in the landscape through prayers and hope. Between the braveness of El Misti and the Chacani’s quietness, we dare to offer the greatest gift: the ability to love day by day and to see in our brothers and in any situation the gentle and bold touch of the greatest love. The love of God.

We will never be indifferent to the life of whosoever enters our door; although reality is harsh, we rejoice in a Gospel which is not just ours. It is a Gospel that fervently needs to be brought into the world, and to the ends of the earth.

# Comboni Work of human promotion Ocp in Guayaquil

**Br. Godfroy-Abel Dimanche**  
**Comboni Missionary Brother**

**Ecuador**

## **Why was Human Promotion activity born?**

Being faithful actors and incarnation of Saint Daniel Comboni, we made ways and swore we would have been His hands, heart, and soul, and would have abandoned ourselves to African people in their diaspora all over the world. This Negritude that, within the geography of Esmeraldas in the 1960s, had experienced a condition of abandonment, oblivion, and disinterest from civil and even religious authorities until we arrived. We felt to guide them towards Jesus' commandment under oath of Our Order *“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”* We abandoned with trust into His hands.

## **Let's get to work**

In Esmeraldas province, it was established the Comboni work, “the Boys' Town”. It consisted of a Polytechnic campus of integral human development where craft and industrial techniques were taught; meanwhile, the engine of growth in that place was faith. For a long time, hundreds of boys and girls benefited from and took part in this lifestyle within a context where civil authority was present at last; they had never experienced anything like that before.

The initiative was run and directed by the Comboni Missionary Brothers who guided the practice of HUMAN PROMOTION. Later, due to political decisions resulting from the fact that it was decided to build an oil refinery - residuals would have contaminated most of “the Boys' Town” - the activity was suspended.

## **It seemed like everything was over but the spirit blew again**

We were meant to reconsider our presence as Comboni Missionary Brothers, that is to say in which scenarios and by which means; above mangrove swamps, in the mud, with no landownership and services in order to live a dignified life. Thousands of people from Esmeraldas moved over there; thus were born ghettos in Guayaquil in the decade from the 1970s-1980s onwards.

It was a fitting scene to carry out Jesus' principle according to Daniel Comboni; so it was born the early generation of missionaries in the Comboni community house.

## **History of the Community**

We, the Comboni Missionary Brothers who form the community, are the continuity of a process of analysis, reflection and contextualisation of the charism in this city. The community was born in 1981; the founders were Fr. Rafael Savoia, Fr. Camilo Ortega and Br. Agostinho Jamal. They were followed by Fr. Martín Balda, Fr. Eladio García, Fr. Aldo Pusterla, Fr. Francisco Gómez Uribe, Fr. Julio Celadón, Br. Joel Cruz Reyes, Fr. José Negri, Fr. Francis Manana, Fr. Antonio Oliveira, Br. Alberto Degan, Br. Roberto Misas, Fr. Gustavo Guerrero, Fr. Francisco de Jesús Gaspar, Br. Simone Bauce, Fr. Rafal Leszczyński, Br. Jacques Eluma Nsele, Br. Abel Dimanche Godfroy, Fr. Enzo Balasso, Br. Aboudou Albert and Br. Antoine Kasusi. We began as "Afro-Ecuadorians Cultural centre" since our direct recipients were Afro-descendants, though the activity of Missionary Animation was also included soon after the opening.

Since the beginning, the interest of the community was in the apostolate among Afro-Ecuadorians. Consequently, some CHRISTIAN BLACK COMMUNITIES (CCN) formed on the outskirts of towns (Guasmos, Cristo del Consuelo, Esmeraldas Chiquitas, Western Periphery, Bastión Popular, Isla Trinitaria, Malvinas, Durán) through initiatives of training and community production, and the social training of black leaders serving their own people as well.

## ...Some years later

The Comboni Missionary Brothers who were in the province - as we were summoned by the Father Provincial (Fr. Enea Mauri) - gathered in February 2000 to re-think about our presence there, on the basis of the national and Latin-American reality. We opted for a “significant work” coordinated by brothers from Guayaquil, and oriented to human promotion with the priorities of social dimension, service to people, vocational promotion of Brothers both at local and continental level. Some fields were selected: Afro-descendants, Justice and Peace, Marginalised groups and Young people in direct connection with missionary brothers who collaborate with local lay people. The initiative consisted of a facility and a pastoral area in the outskirts of Guayaquil.

The work was officially approved by the General Direction as a pilot-community and as a reference point for the vocation of the Brother at the continental level.

In October 2003, together with the Father Provincial (Fr. Enea Mauri) and the General Direction, we decided to transform the Afro Pastoral Centre into the physical centre of the community: it was named **Comboni Work of Human Promotion** OCPH (DC 09, n°63.1) and was aimed at ensuring the Comboni participation in its entirety (Brothers and Fathers) while maintaining the Brothers’ specification (Human Promotion). It was established that three brothers and one father would have worked in the OCPH.

We agreed that the core feature of the work was and would have been the Afro Pastoral, the more coherent and faithful sign to our Institute. This would have given a distinctive feature to each of the four areas of service:

1. African Americans
2. Young people
3. Social field
4. Missionary Animation

This way, the initiative serves different areas of responsibility through many services which are directed to various slums, the Archdiocese of Guayaquil, the Comboni Province of Ecuador and the Church of Ecuador.

One of these services consists in the production of pastoral and social material (books, brochures and so on) on different issues, notably: Afro, young people and social field. Those materials have also been used in other dioceses.

Audio-visual materials about the Afro Pastoral and the American Missionary Association were also produced (videos, music CDs, multimedia CDs and so on).

At the Archdiocesan level, the activity has achieved two main results:

- Afro-Ecuadorians lay missionaries' formal recognition as an archdiocesan ecclesial movement
- Archdiocesan Commission of Justice and Peace continuity

Renovation work in the house of the Afro Centre started in 2008. The General Direction financed it on the condition that the initiative went on with the priority commitment of the Afro Pastoral, and that it continued to be a point of reference for the vocation of the Brother.

The community continued to carry out its activities in the house of the Claretian Missionaries in Leonída Square 3700 and in Bolivia at the time of renovation (first half of 2008 up to second half of 2019).

Since January 2010, we are living in the restored headquarters.

Over the last years, we keep on accompanying the Afro Pastoral in different areas: for example families, young people, and Palenque' sons (new process consisting in Christian and cultural initiation of childhood and adolescence in slums which are predominantly Black). As far as it concerns the social field, we are regularly accompanying Afro civil society organisations with the objective of educating free human beings that can turn into Afro Christian communities little by little.

We have achieved two important goals at the local Church level; namely, the coordination structure of the Archdiocesan Afro Pastoral with the participation of priest and religious men and women from other congregations devoted to Afro people on the coast, and the establishment of two CCA branches in Nigeria slum (Juanito Bosco community centre and Our Lord's Transfiguration Parish) on the Mount Sinai to strengthen the effect by means of pastoral support in Afro communities of those areas. Then comes the group of American Missionary Association training new staff indifferent parishes.

In the Missionary Animation: setting up of a diocesan commission for the permanent mission and its training schools; parish animation and the birth of the group "Friends of the mission", regular mission on site and involvement by the Comboni Lay Missionaries. Then comes the group of American Missionary Association teaching new members in several parishes.

In the JPIC field, we are accompanying various social groups: Comboni Popular Evangelisers (CPE), Social Apostolate Communities (SAC), PROHUMA Youth Movement operating according to a social approach and the Pastoral Care of the Prisoners with legal advice. We collaborate with organisation which are similar to Human Rights and human mobility associations (ACNUR and CDH).

Components:

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| <p>1. Local context and challenges motivating the initiative</p> | <p>Ecuador is the fourth country with a majority of Afro-descendant population (7.2%) after Brazil, the United States, and Colombia. Guayaquil is the most populous city in the country: more than 300.000 Afro-descendants live in the outskirts in conditions of exclusion, discrimination and poverty. In addition to this, we have noticed a lack of missionary spirit in the ecclesial reality which represents a field of action to Missionary Animation (about 220 parishes and many schools, parish groups and apostolic movements).<br/>The city of Guayaquil is of great economic</p> |
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dynamism with its airport, its gulf, some sea ports and its access to the sea; it is a trade area, thus generating a commercial impetus and tourist attraction.

From an anthropological and cultural point of view, there are many ethnic groups: natives peoples (indigenous people on the coast), mestizos (people of combined European and Indigenous American descent which forma part of the indigenous people), Afro, and the Italian-Lebanese minority.

The whole population coming from every region of Ecuador - coast, Andean, and Amazonian - concentrates here. Those areas are different as regards production, from access to entrepreneurship to factors affecting consumption.

It is usual in these cases that the minority running the trading system also controls the political, strategic and even cultural system that is energy, banking, industrial and communication services, among others.

The municipal system is structured as a society with its own features, and it is distinct from the central system. The Black people - so named from a constitutional point of view - have lived within this situation over the last 50 years; a people marked by generation of immigrants coming from the Esmeraldas province that, being displaced because of the progressive propaganda perpetrated by the media and the *vox populi*, lost the succession to the lands and, since they could not count on a production system, they had to abandon those lands.

Hundreds and even thousands of Black People

coming from the Esmeraldas province move for their daily survival; they do this of their own free will but also under the pressure of social abandonment and of timber industries' campaigns that obliged many people to sell what they have inherited; others, with a few exceptions, have remained.

Great migrations of Black men and women to Guayaquil caused the population growth and expansion, a phenomenon that had its effects on the allocation of funds which are proportional to the total amount of inhabitants. At a working level, this generated a great amount of manpower; however, employers deprived people of their social insurance and they paid what they wanted to. Black people who had nothing before that moment were quite happy to have something, and this was quite important to them. This fact generated a current of thought of "welfare".

Black men carried out heavy duties like in building, or they cleaned sewers, worked as guards, loaded and unloaded timber, sacks, products and so on. In a first moment, they worked roughly and with no technique.

Women carried out housework, home repairs, or they looked after children, cooked, did the laundry and so on. It might sound decent; nevertheless, they always received the same treatment: a behaviour imitating the colonial system, a mind-set which was not yet forgotten, and that confined Afro to the last social and working rung.

As a consequence to this great demand, employers accumulated great wealth since there was no institution to supervise, to defend and to demand rights for the Black people. Moreover, Afro were not considered original

citizens in the sense of native people. It is only recently that a paragraph on Common Rights was recognised to Black People, and more specifically in the constitution of 1998.

### **LIFE IN THE SUBURBS**

Black people arrived in Guayaquil with nothing; they moved to the city's boundaries which would have been called later "outskirts" or "suburbs". They carried with them only what they had learned in their peasant communities: manual labour in order to survive. They form part of the population living in poverty in terms of access to education, dignified life, health, development, and funding for placing their products on market.

**Ecclesiastical problems:** we notice, in general, a conservative local church which is very clerical and not prepared to the mission *Ad gentes*. Therefore, we involve lay agents in the pastoral little by little. Meanwhile, we report a rise of Pentecostal Catholic movements pushing lay people away from social commitment. Finally we notice that initiatives for survival and organisations among poor people asking for assistance, training and support are on the rise.

Besides suffering from racial discrimination, the Afro-descendant population is the most vulnerable in every sense; economically, politically, religiously and culturally. We encounter a reality of people which is often abandoned and generally less accompanied in his quests.

2 - Fundamental grounds (spiritual and of social interpretation)

## THE STRENGTH OF CULTURE, FAITH AND DRUMS

Such a reality originated the social phenomenon of linking black people with poverty; on these premises, a great multitude of vulnerable boys and girls living in those ghettos misinterpreted their own development and familiar values at the social level.

The voice of Saint Daniel Comboni beats in every Missionary Brother and Member of the Comboni Family's heart; thus began the accompaniment through visits dealing with "country sickness" and the reality in those places.

**Drum rolls** of a living culture resonated out there, in those slums "socially condemned" to expand and to live forever in precarious conditions, even if "culturally and theologically dignified" as season were lived celebrating THE VIGILS OF THE SAINTS. It is a community rite evoking feelings of the village of origin and rekindling faith in order to continue to walk along those violent ghettos fuelled by armed violence, drugs, neighbourhood issues, conflicts, social abandonment and indifference.

The meaning of faith (also considering the influence of protestant groups) was born this way; women that traditionally had the responsibility to give birth to a family-community-neighbourhood. Another element was the way of perceiving and expressing death by the *alabados* (funerary and religious songs) like in the north of Esmeraldas. This particular form of great anthropological and pastoral value allowed in some way to keep a SPECIFIC VALUE on the meaning of death. Unfortunately, it was not preserved over time

because somebody considered it as a rural matter.

The social culture of Marimba, danced by a group of people in time of social life, enjoyed popularity and originated a social category: to be a musician, a dancer. Those who could get into contact with this cultural event are now able to understand that it is about entering into contact with the ancestors of all life. A tradition they could preserve exclusively within spaces of freedom, and not just from the colonial system, but also legally free.

Traditional cults and marimba dances strongly characterised of our Afro culture which originated in the province of Esmeraldas, in the outskirts of Guayaquil.

The Comboni Missionary Brothers support communities with their own identity, since they have noticed that those values are progressively being lost. The risk for the new generation in Guayaquil is to break off the sense of belonging to this culture, and to adopt a suburban lifestyle which seems closer to their way of being. It has both a literal and figurative sense. May they support the faith of their ancestors and bring it back to life within the context of Guayaquil's outskirts, through cultural groups bringing to life those ghettos where there are no real initiatives to support dignity and the Black people's empowerment. They are left at the mercy of the authorities and visited only when it's time for political or election campaigns.

The Book of Exodus; the experience of the people of Israel which is very similar to African people's experience from Esmeraldas

to Guayaquil, and from Africa to America. In Chapter 3, 7:11: *«I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt, and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know about their sufferings, and I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.»*

To meet a God that sees, listens, feels the sufferings of His people and which is not just in the sky but comes down (He incarnates in Moses) to share their sufferings, and to take action.

Following our encounter with the Gospel, this was our inspirational and motivational text: “**I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full**” was the sentence breaking any paradigm of faith that was tragic or that demanded blind submission; that is, God does not want people to make a living from *cachuelos* (temporary and lower-paid jobs) rather He wants people to live a full life within a social, cultural, educational and productive system marked by growth. In short, this kind of lecture spread more and more and turned into an avalanche; this provoked the desired reaction.

Among other texts: “Go and baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”; the multiplication of loaves; healing the paralytic at Capernaum; our Lord’s Transfiguration; the weeding at Cana; the Resurrection Sunday (which is meant to involve women in God’s project); the ancestors of Jesus, the incarnation, and needless to say, His Passion and Death, the Pentecost and His first community, as well.

*The Confraternity of the Comboni Lay Afro-Ecuadorians missionaries - a unit trained and formed to be and to carry out the Afro Pastoral - originates from this process. It is officially acknowledged by the Archdiocese of Guayaquil; these Brothers represent the pillars of the Afro Pastoral in the city and one of the most significant Comboni experience of the whole province.*

The Confraternity of the Comboni Lay Afro-Ecuadorians missionaries is composed by a group of men and women coming from several Black slums; belonging to the Comboni House, they decided to unite and swore to be “a single soul and a single heart who loves and who gives its life to the African Americans.”  
THE AFRO MISSIONARY PROFILE.

### **THE AFRO TURNS INTO GOSPEL**

It is right here that Comboni’s dream can come true: only Africa can save Africa; in the social application, only the Black can save the Black. For this reason, our missionary style is the same as Comboni’s. Afro missionaries were born to be Church, and to be citizens in their dignity as Afro-descendants in order to get where the Church cannot go or simply does not want to arrive: in Black ghettos.

In some way, we go back to being Gospel interpreters and we apply it to cultural values assimilated through the history of faith starting from our superiors. Our discipline, perseverance, resources and faith can be represented by the Wedding at Cana; the request of Jesus to fill the jars (to play drums) revitalises our methods and manners to enliven the mission.

### 3 - Features and methods used

Among features, teamwork (intended as action, prayer, reflection, planning, evaluation and celebration) stands out. This is very important because in this way we generate the pastoral chemistry which conciliates our mission.

Methods supported and used are:

- a. from the point of view of people we are accompanying (and)
- b. from the point of view of what we encounter within society.

In people, we find faith, culture, language, symbols and expressions of historical heritage to be considered assets and even richness for the Church; all that the Afro culture expresses as far as it concerns spirituality.

People we encounter in society refers to mass media that contribute to the socialisation of our pastoral activities. However, we have to bear in mind that the protagonism is of people. We have created fields of accompaniment in the Evangelisation, as Bible and Liturgy, in order to insert appropriate elements in the conventional liturgy.

The Afro pedagogy, based on original and technological elements creating a mechanism which has an impact on new generations, in order to give them back dignity through faith and social rights.

Business methods generating progressive sustainability to people we are accompanying. Resource management is to us an important mechanism of growth; due to our experience, we are convinced that there are always people who are willing to collaborate; it is enough

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|   | <p>to introduce our way of walking sincerely and transparently, and aids will arrive. Management's sense of responsibility towards goods at the service of people. And that lay people, being part of the people of the Church, may be part of this growth; in order to eliminate situations where the Brother leaves and everything eventually resets - this will enable to save medium and long-term institutional alliances. In other words, the protagonism of lay people becomes actual and real; according to the ideal of Comboni who wants the Black to be not just a recipient of the Gospel but also a key player in the coming of the Kingdom of God, here and now.</p>  |
| <p>4- Comboni Family's engagement (when present) and people's protagonism</p> | <p>TEAM SPIRIT: the Comboni Missionary assumes a field of activity. Legitimacy of leadership, safeguarding the project in the fields: Afro Pastoral, peace and missionary animation. It is unconceivable to us, the Comboni Missionaries, to work individually and not as a team; we have to avoid to be confined within the walls of our community-houses; to us, contact with people is really important and this can be realised in the community representing the sphere of influence. Over there, where the majority of the Church's members cannot go; it is right there, in the Black slums, that we observe situations; together we feel and devise strategies for dignification. In a first moment – with no economic planning - making sure that the individual, or every community's member, reawaken his or her feeling of transformation. We plan, analyse, celebrate and promote. In our pedagogy, people support the cause not because we are the heart of the Mission: it is Jesus Himself who rejoices when Black people</p> |

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|  | <p>play drums and spiritual songs (<i>arrullos</i>) to His Glory and come out from the bottom of their hearts.</p> <p>In other words: without the sound of drums, problems will continue to be problems; however, the sound of drums means that those problems are going to be overcome, and that socially affected people will be biblically and theologically dignified as they are those who have been called.</p>   |
| <p>5 - Results achieved and failures</p> | <p>Leaders' training. We see leaders as people who incarnate Jesus not just in His social trend, but also in His behaviours as accustomed officer. We encourage leaders who have the maturity to govern themselves and from that moment on to establish connections between gifts and talents.</p> <p>As a failure, self-reference (personalisation or paternalism). We have noticed that local members - who were effectively accompanied and showed feelings of devotion - abandoned their journey after they had left the mission site. They gave us the impression of having been there just to supervise, and not for the Evangelisation's cause. This problem is going to be solved thanks to associations between individuals (e.g. the Afro missionaries Confraternity which is now 20 years old); that is, when starting from Evangelisation and faith, a system of continuity is formed by means of a Christian figure which is recognised by law and who can grow up in order to offer service to the Christian and social community.</p> <p>In the case of the Afro missionaries, they constantly partake in the ongoing renewal of the Evangelisation towards the Afro people.</p> |

6 - Continuity and sustainability for the future

New areopagi (forms of mission and sites).

Sustainability: by means of community entrepreneurship and productivity. Autonomy and social identity.

One of the most satisfying thing was the birth of the Afro missionaries Confraternity, along with the process' continuity; we want the project to have a maturity that can be efficient even for the purpose of the management. On its own independent journey and belonging to the Comboni community.

From our part, another satisfaction is represented by lay people properly qualified to have an impact on social needs, starting from Christian principles. The warranty lies in the evangelisation starting from childhood, by means of Palenque of Christian Cultural Initiation. Its development in youth groups: Ubuntu as a social and cultural proposal, until the individual decides to be a Member of the Afro missionaries Confraternity. Patterns of incidence and inclusion on a social level: clubs, associations, committees and so on.

Finally, to put our activity into the hands of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who will complete the work, with the satisfaction on our part of having given everything to the People we swore to love, to defend, and to make grow in Jesus Christ.

We also count on the institutional policies' validity and updating that, by means of the General Direction, will allow the Comboni Missionary Brother's stability, continuity and innovation for continuing the Work; together with lay people who are already following a path and who deserve the opportunity to be directly involved in the running of the Afro Evangelisation.

7 - What have I learnt from this experience?

- a) To live in community is one of the first teachings, since we are not executives; we are consecrated to community life, to a life of prayer and this implies to be brave and to value several individual personalities by overcoming any attitude hiding prejudice, rather considering those diversities as divine grace and blessings. In addition to this, team working, fraternity and sharing talents making the others notice that our differences will never be cause of conflict; on the contrary, they will be signs of enrichment and growth.
- b) People: in them we see Jesus' face in His braveness, within the reality of a practical situation. To incarnate the mission enlightened by THE GOOD SHEPHERD in all of His FULLNESS, the love, the task of suffering together with people being an African in my genuineness; all this has marked my experience.
- c) To discover the work of the Afro Pastoral; this is a hidden treasure to the Kingdom of God we want to make known. It was not at all easy when every Brother, by his own style, tried to meet the needs of the reality he was accompanying.
- d) I wish that all this continues, that other Brothers can do the same experience and have protagonism in the running and in the management of the community, and that our walking together grows.
- e) I wish that they receive the adequate training. I feel the need to be more prepared both on an intellectual and professional

level, according to the demands of the current mission. It is not easy; we suffer when some members assigned to the mission are not interested at all to recipients (the Afro) or to the reasons why they were assigned to the work that they are trying to evade in some sense. Fathers as much as Brothers should have the sensibility to fulfil the mission they were entrusted to.

- f) It helped me to grow up (spiritually, humanly, and professionally) both as a human being and consecrated in my vocation as an African Comboni Missionary Brother.
- g) I appeal for the General Directions and the Districts of the continent to generate the financial sustainability which is necessary to the OCPH mission's development. Financial resources are essential to this kind of mission; supervisory mechanism over the work must be created. They might invest to achieve results.

# Having a voice Ahlma Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the Usa

**Sister Inma Cuesta**  
**Comboni Missionary Sister**  
**President of AHLMA**

## **The USA**

It all began following an encounter between two religious women from different congregations. They both believed that it was important to share the feeling of religious life in the USA with Latin American congregations since those sisters had come to serve the migrant population. As missionary women, Latinas sisters had to know, to walk and to dialogue with several conferences of U.S. sisters representing religious life in this country. In this way, bridges could be built and forces could be joined in order to serve, to accompany and to celebrate the faith of the migrant people who were coming to the USA, not just to help them improving their economic conditions but also seeking security and pursuing equal opportunities for them and their family members.

## **Going back to the origins**

Sister Ana Gabriela Castro - a Mexican-American Guadalupean Missionary Sister of the Holy Spirit - noticed the absence of Latin American Congregation's executives in the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Woman Religious) national assembly, and wondered why they were not there. She realised in this way that sisters from those congregations did not participate fully to US religious life journey because their elderly superiors sisters lived in their home-country. However, Ana Gabriela felt that Latinas sisters' voice was important within US religious life. The cultural barrier and the language were a challenge within national religious conferences to the participation of both sisters coming as missionaries and elderly superiors.

She shared her concern with other Latinas sisters who were present in the LCWR, but she did not receive any encouragement until she was supported and listened by Sr. Joan Mc Glichney - Comboni Missionary Sister and vicar for religious of the Archdiocese of Chicago - who, exactly as Sr. Castro, was participating in the assembly. They decided together to convene some religious women from different Hispanic communities who were working in the USA; the meeting would be held in Chicago, Illinois in 2008. Cardinal George - who was at that time President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - sustained them along with NRRO (National Religious Retirement Office): they obtained the necessary funding for the first encounter, and 57 sisters from 29 different communities attended. It was the dawn of the Association of the Latin American Missionary Sisters in the USA (AHLMA) formerly known as ARHEU (Hispanic Religious Association in the United States).

## **The beginning of a new chapter**

In collaboration with the organising committee, a board of directors was held in 2014 following a number of national encounters organised every two years by ARHEU. The committee consisted of the two above-mentioned co-founders, and two other sisters: a Teresian Carmelite Missionary Sister and a Comboni Missionary Sister. The need to formalise the association originated from those meetings; it was also necessary to give legal effect to the organisation in order to consolidate the initial vision by creating spaces of encounter and dialogue among the Latinas sisters working in the USA. The first step to be taken was a meeting with Sr. Joan Marie Steadman - belonging to the Sisters of the Holy Cross and then executive director of the LCWR - who welcomed us, and proposed us to associate to LCWR to keep on collaborating by supporting each other. Thus began a new transforming chapter for AREU whose presidential direction was - and still it is - headed by the Comboni Missionary Sister.

## **Turning our dreams into reality**

Thanks to the support and the collaboration by LCWR and MACC (Mexican and American Catholic College), AHLMA was given the opportunity to organise its internal structure as the national association

of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the USA. Without the help of GHR Foundation, this dream would not have been possible. At present, AHLMA counts on an executive committee and further has the opportunity to employ workers who support internally and exclusively the association. Despite the difficulty of some congregations to send one of their members to this service, a religious woman was hired to serve as AHLMA's executive director in 2018 together with an Administrative Assistant to respond to the needs of the association. Thus, we are now celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our existence having a face, an identity and recognition at national level due to the authentication as a non-profit organisation.

AHLMA aims to be a cultural bridge between associations and congregations in order to carry on the Catholic Church's mission, and all that promotes God's Kingdom and life. The mission is to serve Hispanic sisters who were sent as missionary women to work inside the US Church.

## **Widening networks**

AHLMA is building several networks in addition to LCWR: it associates with whoever endorses our recognition and transforming process unconditionally. For this reason, we want to express our gratitude to Dr. Arturo Chaves, president of MACC, who walks with us and advises us, and to Archbishop Mgr. Gustavo-Garcia Siller, Missionary of the Holy Spirit, who welcomed us in his archdiocese and has walked with us since the beginning given that he participated in the first encounter of 2008 as an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Furthermore, AHLMA joins the efforts of Latin American associations that are serving on a pastoral level the Latin American migrant population in the USA. It is therefore part of the General Pastoral at national level with six associations, and it participates in the organisation of the Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry organised by the ministries on Hispanic matters at the USCCB.

AHLMA is currently part of the project "Rivers of Hope" with several religious conferences, religious priests and brothers to encourage the ministry of those religious men and women who wish to find methods to keep on supporting these hard times by faith and hope, and to learn methods to help pastoral agents who serve the US migrant population.

## **Giving meaning to our “being bridges”**

Networking is a wonderful experience allowing us to live the culture of encounter with many organisations, to work together, and to seek the paths to serve the migrant people to the USA as Latinas missionaries sisters. This way, we can build bridges uniting and favouring team work for the sake of the Church’s mission by giving concrete answers to the challenges arising from globalisation and the migration phenomenon. To be bridges means to walk together as Latinas religious women, to promote dialogue between sisters superiors who have their seats in Latina America, and to send their members to fulfil the mission in the United States: they are executives women who have already settled in this country together with the rest of the consecrated Us life. Now more than ever, we have to unite our thoughts to serve efficiently a society which is more and more intercultural and pluralist.

## **The main purposes of AHLMA’s national meetings**

All the meetings aim at promoting the culture of encounter creating spaces where Latinas sisters can meet, know each others, share and celebrate together the gift of missionary life in this country. In each encounter we foster on the one hand, the spiritual issue proposed by CLAR (Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious) to favour reflection and theological interaction between sisters and their congregations of Latin American origin; on the other hand, we share the reflection and the path we are walking within the US Church to accompany Latin American people according to the guidelines established by the local church.

## **Stepping forward**

AHLMA has to look ahead on a global scale thinking about the religious life’s future which should be global and intercultural, after ten years of the association’s life, of its international relationships, and in particular of its links with conferences of religious men and women. Therefore, it is important that AHLMA is provided with a member’s council whose congregations have already settled in the United States. May this association be a point of reference and support for all those

sisters coming to this land to be missionary, even when their congregations have their seats in Latin American countries. AHLMA has always left the door open to all the congregations that rely on Latinas sisters or on Missionary Sisters working in Latin America. AHLMA cannot exist outside of religious contexts whose frame of reference makes people hear his voice beyond his limits.

### **The Comboni Missionary Sisters' role within AHLMA association**

The Comboni Missionary Sisters has assumed a key role in supporting local religious women in their training, and in shaping the religious and administrative structure of the association. This was meant to be a consolidation of their own identity. Thus, AHLMA has obtained benefits thanks to the Comboni Missionary Sisters' support. Comboni's dream to networking for the sake of the Church's mission is now a tangible reality, and his members keep on carrying it out through their humble service or by means of important cooperative relationships for the mission's sake. This way, the Comboni Missionary Sisters keep on nurturing the culture of the encounter as a part and parcel of their own missionary identity which is reflected in a global, inter-congregational and intercultural context.

# The Comboni Missionary sisters presence in Mexico's southern border Tapachula, Chiapas

Sr. Martha Verónica Vázquez Floriano  
And Sisters of her Council

Mexico

## Local context and challenges pushing the missionary presence

Tapachula is a Southern Mexico's main border city; it is estimated that about 400.000 people a year cross this border (IOM data - International Organisation for Migration). The southern border has geopolitical



importance in human mobility across the region for two main reasons: first and foremost, Mexico's southern region is the main point of entry for Central American citizens; secondly, this area has

the highest concentration of refugees and asylum-seekers.

According to the REDODEM<sup>18</sup> report (Network for Documentation of Migrant Defense Organisations), Central American countries have gone through an unprecedented volume and speed of human mobility. Caravans of thousands of migrants headed to the United States left from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador in October 2018. Only the refugees who passed through shelters in the Mexican territory where

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18 REDODEM is a network of 23 homes, canteens, residences, shelters and organisations in 13 States of the Mexican Republic. It provides humanitarian, legal, psychological and medical aid.

36.190<sup>19</sup> of which 3.881 unaccompanied children.<sup>20</sup> The first issue to emphasize is that 78.1% of the caravans' members came from Honduras.<sup>21</sup> They only asked Mexican government and people: *"Please, help us! Don't send us back!"*. Defender of migrants' human right Father Pantoja states: *"These people flee from poverty, from forced exodus, and mainly from social isolation and dead threats. They escape because someone is killing them, because their spouses have already been murdered, and because they are blackmailed by the Maras."*<sup>22</sup>

US and Mexican current immigration policies are more and more restrictive as they are focused on "safeguarding national security" rather than providing humanitarian assistance.

As a consequence, these policies tend to criminalise refugees and Human Rights Defenders instilling xenophobic attitudes against diversity into the civil population.

At the same time, these political strategies are causing the refugees to stop before reaching their destination: the United States. They are detained in Tapachula, Chiapas. This city has changed into a sort of "waiting area" to thousands of migrants seeking asylum; it is becoming an endless waiting time, and it may be of six months, one year or even more. Living on the street exposes migrants to risk, so their vulnerability makes them easy "prey" for organised crime and human trafficking. It looks like "new waiting policies" are aimed at pushing refugees to the limit, and to bend them to the governments' will in order that they abandon the idea of continuing their journey. The challenge of starting a new presence in Tapachula was pressing, so we started collaborating with other associations for the protection of migrants' human rights in order to create dignified and welcoming "waiting" spaces where the human being is respected, and guided through his regularisation process and his search for better living conditions.

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19 The REDODEM2018 report. "Migratory processes in Mexico: new faces, the same dynamics"; p. 20. <https://www.redodem.org>

20 Ibid, 40

21 Ibid, 32

22 Father Pantoja's statement to the press: <http://cenitt.com.mx/padre-pantoja-en-mexico-los-migrantes-son-tratados-como-una-mierda-o-una-mercancia/>

## Fundamental grounds: spiritual, charismatic and of social interpretation

This reality of pain and suffering is crying out for help; this strikes and involves us, as Comboni Missionary Sisters in the light of our faith and charism. Our faith in Jesus who used compassion as his principle of action «*Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful*» (Luke 6:36) and «[who] *has come so that they may have life and have it in abundance*» (John 10:10) calls on our Christian sensibility, and motivates the desire to join so many humble people who contribute by their actions and acts of solidarity to a better and dignified world for everyone.

Before the “exodus of thousands of migrants” who crossed Mexico’s southern border in October 2018, some derogatory remarks had appeared on social networks against the caravans who entered the country; we were deeply outraged by the event. However, this invited us not to remain silent or indifferent in the face of rejection and prejudice against our brothers. Some of these messages were: “We need strong barriers. We won’t allow immigrants to enter in our country illegally”, “These people endanger the security and the quietness of our city”, “Borders will be militarised”, “They are stealing our jobs”, “They destroy the environment”, “Go back to where you came from”, “They are criminals”, “Let’s build a wall” and so on. Their only purpose was to poison people’s mind, and to go against the Gospel charity - as stated by Father Pantoja.

Jesus teaches us the logic of love, of charity, and of solidarity facing human suffering: «*He saw a large crowd, had compassion on them, and healed their sick*» (Matthew 14:14). At first, the disciples themselves had to walk their own journey of conversion when Jesus openly asked them: “*Where will we buy bread so that these people can eat?*” (John 6:5); for their own fears and mistrust, they said: “*Send the crowds away so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves*” (Matthew 14:15). However, He teaches His disciples compassion as God’s way of being and of looking at the world. “It is exactly God’s compassion which makes Jesus sensitive to people’s suffering and humiliations.”<sup>23</sup>

Comboni learned how to contemplate this compassionate Heart of Jesus and to assimilate His feelings, letting himself be transformed by those very feelings; his passion and his apostolic dedication derives

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23 PAGOLA José Antonio, Go back to Jesus. PPC Editorial 2018, p.88-89

from this “*saving love of the Good Shepherd who offered his life on the Cross for humanity*”.<sup>24</sup> Following the example of our Founder, as Comboni Missionary Sisters, we feel called to keep on contemplating Jesus’ Heart letting ourselves be transformed from the inside, assimilating His feelings in the context we have inserted into. The cry of our migrants brothers has touched our hearts: “Please, help us! Don’t send us back!” is the cry of the poorest and the most abandoned of this world<sup>25</sup>; now we are trying to be life-mates and companion of hope in the journey of so many migrants brothers and sisters on Mexico’s southern border by small actions and networking with many people of good will.

## **Features and methods used**

Our presence in Mexico’s southern border began following an appeal by the association “Fm4 Paso Libre”. As Comboni Missionary Sisters we have been collaborating for 5 years with this Association for the protection of migrants’ human rights in the attempt to cope with the humanitarian crisis that the city of Tapachula, in Chiapas was going through. This was due to the arrival of thousands of migrants detained in the area until the failure to resolve their immigration papers’ regularisation. Teamwork and cooperation in the organisation and development of a refugee centre for asylum-seeking were the services initially provided. Within this space, migrants were provided with information about migration procedures, listening and legal assistance if necessary as well as attention to their primary needs.

This service went on for a month and a half, but humanitarian crisis has continued and still continues now. For this reason, Fm4 invited us to participate again in a project of assistance to migrants seeking asylum and still detained, “waiting”, on the Southern border. The project is to inaugurate a refugee centre where a dignified and complete assistance is offered to all of our brothers and sisters who often live on the streets of Tapachula, continuously exposing themselves to greater dangers. The sisters who are working in the newly born community of Tapachula are currently 4. They have inserted themselves into the reality of the place, and they are training to this ministry in preparation for the project: they collaborate with the Fray Matías Human Rights Centre,

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24 Rule of Life, 3.

25 Pope Francis, 1 January 2018, World Day of Peace, Chapter Acts, 1998, Rome, n.50.

the Belén Migrant Shelter in the Diocese of Tapachula, and they have visited the camp where Haitians and Africans are still detained. We believe that establishing network is a relevant and prophetic reply to the complexity of the human mobility this country is experiencing.

### **Future sustainability and mission continuity**

The presence have been started to respond to an emergency situation so it will last as long as the emergency lasts.

Our main commitment is to collaborate with lay people in the Diocese of Tapachula, in order for them to carry out new initiatives arising provided that the sisters' work is more effective. At present, sisters are visiting families living in the area where Fm4 Refugee Centre will be built, and they are working together on some plans to the improvement of the social environment.

### **What we have learnt from our experience**

We have to keep a watchful eye on the reality in which we are present; by means of listening and a keen eye, we try to be attentive to what is going on in order to welcome the right moment to answer God's calling. We have to involve and collaborate with other forces of the Church and of society so that the work we carry on may spread and get to the root of the problem. Not just with our own strength (which is limited); rather, in networking with anyone trying to provide answers to this issue.

# Slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**Sister Kimala Nanga Benjamine**  
**Comboni Missionary Sister**

## **Peru**

I believe it is important to provide an overview of the phenomenon that violates so many people's *Freedom* and *Dignity* before sharing my experience in the local context of human trafficking in my mission country, Lima - Peru.

According to the Global Slavery Index published by the Walk Free Foundation, more than 2.4 million people are currently being exploited in the world; every year thousands of women, men, boys and girls are exploited by criminals: only 22.000 of them are rescued. About 600.000 to 800.000 people are trafficked across international borders annually; 80% of victims are women or girls, and 50% are minors. However, figures do not accurately represent the full extent of Human Trafficking; these are just rough numbers.

President Ramón Castilla abolished slavery in Peru in 1854; nevertheless, the phenomenon did not stop. Only slaves who joined the nationalist army could gain freedom.

Still today, tens of millions of people throughout the world are forced to work against their will; they are cheated, threatened or kidnapped even by their own families to be exchanged between the trafficker and a third party; e.g., there are sons or daughters who take their elderly parents away and leave them on the streets begging, mothers who lead their own daughters to prostitution, and children who are forced under psychological and physical abuses to sell candies on the streets or on buses.

Peru is a country of origin (where people are abducted), transit to other countries (Ecuador, Spain, Italy, Japan and the United States) and destination (where people are exploited) of Human Trafficking. The most affected people are women, children and teenagers aged 13-17 years according to Public Ministry's figures. Human trafficking in Peru has the face of a 13-year-old girl.

The main purpose of human trafficking in Peru is sexual and labour exploitation (sex tourism and forced labour in mining industries, farming and manufacturing), not to mention beggary, domestic servitude and child labour.

The Law against Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling (n.2895) does exist; subsequently, a Law to perfection legal classification of Human Trafficking in the Criminal Code (Law n.30251, Article n.153) was passed. Despite that, state funding for multi-sector initiatives aimed at tackling this crime is scarce.

We cannot remain silent and turn a blind eye to this tragic reality. This has caused us to carry out a spiritual reading inspired by the Gospel of John 10:10 “ I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.”

## **Charismatic reading**

As “Kawsay Network Peru” where I work as Comboni Missionary Sister “we feel outraged and we denounce the crime of Trafficking in persons and proclaim it as a grave offense against the dignity of the person and a serious violation of human rights”. (Declaration)

## **Social reading**

Every year about 2 million people in the world endure in silence slavery and sexual subjugation; 1 million of them are children, 700.000 are women, and 300.000 are men. Therefore, human trafficking is one major challenge in the struggle for implementing Human Rights and development policies; besides the high human, social and economical costs, it brutally deprives countries of human resources which are fundamental to their development.

According to the Secretariat of Public Security’s statistics, an estimated 250.000 victims a year in Latin America make 1.35 million dollars in profit to smugglers. However, data vary considerably and the UN warns that human trafficking systematically rose in the last decade.

CATW- LAC (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Girls in Latin American and the Caribbean) estimates that more than 5.000.000 girls and women were kidnapped by criminal networks in the region, and 10.000.000 people run the risk of falling into their hands.

Human trafficking in Peru is related to social issues: poverty, corruption, and the very little political commitment ever existed to put an end to this crime; gender-based violence often legitimises and normalises

trafficking in women and girls along with the lack of information on this crime; high social tolerance of sexual violence and exploitation of women and minors and of child domestic servitude is often hidden behind “godmother-ship”.

Following the training I received by Talitha Kum Network - online and in first person, during two mandates in Rome - the information has lead us, as a province and community, to engage more actively through training, outreach, prevention, information, and awareness seminars both as teachers and pupils, students, social groups, religious and non-religious institutions. We have immersed ourselves mainly in the district of Lima, and also in other districts and regions of the country (Selva, Costa and Sierra) where Human Trafficking is alarming, in order for the same population to get involved and to struggle this crime against humanity. There was a good reception from people in the departments where we work, mass mobilisation and even requests for interviews from radio listeners and viewers.

The project “We need your help to be free” was planned to carry out our commitment in this ministry; it has been presented, and then approved by the alternative economy through the Comboni non-profit organisation. This is facilitating movements and costs for implementing the activities in order to reach a greater number of people; it is mainly useful to reach minors, teenagers, young, groups of women, and other people living in conditions of vulnerability who could be potential victims.

## **Results achieved**

Being in contact with people, I have increased my knowledge of vulnerable conditions leading people to fall into the hands of traffickers. Sometimes, ignorance is a contributing factor, as well as corruption. I have understood more about the condition of fragility lived by some teenagers, young and women.

The support of our General Council, of the Provincial Council and of the community are major points. Inter-congregational work is a new way to serve in the consecrated life starting from Talitha Kum and Kawsay allowing me to improve my capabilities to work within the commission (JPIC) and in team; all this enabled me to give my best.

So far it has been easy to reach educational, academic and ecclesiastical institutions, formative groups, and interviews on TV and radio channels.

## Challenges

We have to create alternatives and opportunities for the youth of the Amazon and of other areas who want to study at Lima University by offering them a dignified shelter in our house, allowing an integral development to people in vulnerable conditions, and also granting continuity and supervision where the activities are realised.

There will always be a sister dedicated to this task, and to us, the daughters of Saint Daniel Comboni, the man who fought against the slavery of his time in Africa, granting, therefore, continuity to the work established by the congregation and the province; however, human trafficking is spread throughout the world and does not look race, colour or social condition...

Although human trafficking is spreading worldwide, according to the General Assembly Report this phenomenon is particularly worrying in Africa.

I am aware of Human Trafficking' situation in Latin America: although there many networks, NGOs, political and religious institutions this crime still continues. Figures are alarming, and they don't even reflect the actual extent of the situation. As already underlined, CATW- LAC (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Girls in Latin American and the Caribbean) estimates that more than 5.000.000 girls and women were kidnapped by criminal networks in the region, and 10.000.000 people run the risk of falling into their hands. Let's imagine the situation where there is lack of (or there are no) inter-congregational and political organisations, or NGOs working against this crime. Some time ago, women and young girls were found imprisoned somewhere in Africa; they were used as real "children makers" for adoptions. Similarly, some time ago I saw a reportage on Channel 7.1 in Peru where some children were shown; they were in chain, locked up, and brought out of their jails only when they had to beg and then to take money to their abusers. As we perfectly know, many cases never emerge. I am outraged by this!

This experience gave me a global and local view of the actual condition of Human Trafficking, the opportunity to first-hand experience the condition and the wounds of so many people in situation of vulnerability and much more: families, young and victims' relatives who often do not denounce because of fear; this prevents us from taking effective actions against this crime. I realised that this crime is almost invisible and not properly addressed; in this way, the number of victims increases. I also understood the importance of a specific training to carry out such

a complicated work. To work together with political and non-political institutions, establishing networks such as Talitha Kum and Kawsay, the cooperation with other international, national, Catholic and inter-religious organisations are valuable experiences: they all represent the richness of the Charisms, united in a single purpose.

Over these two years of struggle, I noticed that most people mistake the term “Human Trafficking” confusing it with “fair exchange”. My work is intended to explain that talking about Human Trafficking, smuggling of human beings, exploitation or forced labour, they are different terms to refer to a unique concept: MODERN SLAVERY.

# “The man enters, the crime stays outside”

**Valdeci Ferreira for APAC  
Comboni Lay Missionary**

## **Brazil**

The APAC method was born in 1972 in the city of São José dos Campos, in the State of São Paulo, from the vision of a Christian volunteers group under the leadership of Dr. Mario Ottoboni, journalist and lawyer. At that time, the association was operating in Humaitá Prison to evangelise and to give moral support to prisoners. Our inexperience in the world of criminality, drug trafficking, and prisons has favoured a revolutionary experience. The acronym for APAC means “*Loving you neighbour, you will love Christ.*”

In 1974, the Pastoral Care of Prisoners’ team concluded that only a legally authorised entity would have been able to face difficulties and to deal with the vicissitudes that was permeating prison’s daily life; it was thus established the *Association for Protection and Assistance to Convicts* (APAC), a non-profit legal entity whose purpose was to assist Justice in the enforcement of the penalty of imprisonment rehabilitating inmates, protecting society, helping victims and promoting Restorative Justice.

Therefore, the legally constituted entity of the APAC (Association for Protection and Assistance to Convicts) supports the APAC (Loving your neighbour, you will love Christ) work on the Pastoral Care of Prisoners; it also promotes the works of Christian Churches which are close to inmates, so it respects the other’s faith in accordance with national and international rules on human rights. They support each other, despite being different. The legal aspect ensures the spiritual aspect, and the spiritual aspect in its turn ensures the legal aspect. Both works share the same goal: to help convicts to start over and to reintegrate into society.

The APAC is a civil entity of civil law with its own legal personality which is dedicate to inmates’ recovery and social reintegration. It also works as a subsidiary body to the judicial and the executive branches re-

spectively in the execution of penal sentences and in the administration of the execution of prison sentences.

The APAC is based on 12 principles: 1. Involvement by the community; 2. Recovering - helping - recovering; 3. Work; 4. Spirituality; 5. Legal assistance; 6. Healthcare; 7. Human promotion; 8. Family; 9. Volunteering and training course; 10. Social Reintegration Centre (CRS); 11. Merit; 12. Liberation day with Christ.

The APAC purpose is to promote prison's humanisation without losing sight of the punitive goal of the penalty sentence imposed. The objective is to prevent recurrence of crime and to offer alternative ways to the convict's recovery.

The APAC work follows the method of human promotion, which is linked to evangelisation, offering to prisoners the conditions for their recovery.

**In the APAC system, prisoners are called *recuperandos* (or “recovering people”) and they co-responsible for their own recovery.** Volunteers are fundamental in order to offer spiritual, medical, psychological and legal assistance to convicts in the recovery phase. Security and regulation are carried out in collaboration with the same *recuperandos*, and also with the support of some volunteers and employees without the intervention of police or prison officers.

Therefore, we support the philosophy: “Kill the criminal, save the person.”

The APAC's daily routine starts at 6:00 in the morning and stops at 22:00 in the night. During the day, everyone studies, works and trains, thereby preventing idleness. The APAC has formed a *recuperandos* Council by means of a strict discipline: it contributes significantly to order, respect and supervision of regulations.

In the APAC, families are respected and co-participate in the recovery. By means of training sessions, celebrations, and home visits the APAC tries to re-establish contacts between the *recuperandos* and their loved ones. The APAC also recovers the family of those who are serving their prison term.

In the APAC, the spirituality is ecumenical. Every recovering person is encouraged to assume the faith he or she professes in order to encounter the God of Life. Respecting one's neighbour religion is fundamental, and this guides the spirituality of the APAC.

Finally, in the APAC the execution of the penal sentence is individualised. This is the reason why the APACs are small units which have been built in the same community where the convicts are serving their prison term. These units have been projected to host a maximum of 200 *recuperandos*.

A prison that applies the APAC method is infinitely more convenient to the State, as a prisoner in the APACs costs one-third less than the amount normally paid in the common system. Further, to build an APAC is far cheaper than building a prison.

The positive results such as the low recidivism rate, the low cost, the absence of violence or rebellion and the low rate of escapes have contributed to the application of the APAC method, and to make it known.

Overall, in order to start the process of the APAC installation together with the FBAC (Brazilian Fraternity of Assistance to the Convicted - fbac.org.br) which is the association responsible for congregating, directing and inspecting the APACs, it is necessary to follow the steps below:

- 1) *Realisation of a public hearing in the district*: the public hearing is aimed at dealing broadly with the APAC methodology, mobilising and raising awareness to increase the participants' sensitivity to the need of the involvement of civil society, and of its co-responsibility in the execution of penal sentences' issue and in there-socialisation of convicts.
- 2) *APAC formation*: setting a representative Commission up with the aim of legally establishing the APAC in front of competent public authorities, and starting study group on the method's basic bibliography.
- 3) *Visit to a working APAC by the Commission, international and national point of reference to recovery and prisoners' re-socialisation as indicated in the FBAC*.

- 4) *Implementation of a study seminar on the APAC method for the community* with the aim of recruiting volunteers for the local APAC.
- 5) *Organisation of a volunteers group* with the aim of improving school education (primary and complementary education), vocational trainings courses (workshops), healthcare (doctors, dentists, and psychologists), spiritual assistance (religious groups) and legal assistance (lawyers) and even the possibility for *recuperandos* to work in the form of open detention in the local public prison. These jobs will be useful to the staff training.
- 6) *Physical installation of the APAC, and Social Reintegration Centre (CRS) formation*: to the full accomplishment of the method, it would be recommended to own a headquarter made up by different sections respectively dedicated to the different penal regime: open, semi-open and closed regime.
- 7) *Building partnership with*:
  - Municipalities in the District and their Secretariats (Healthcare, Education and so on).
  - Foundations, institutions, private companies, educational and religious organisations, collective bodies, NGOs and others.
- 8) *Long-term volunteer training*(about 4 months).
- 9) *Internships for recuperandos*: for 2 or 3 of them (the ones showing leadership and with a longer prison term to serve) from the District, from 2 up to 3 months in well-established APACs with the aim of assimilating the method and the daily functioning of an APAC.
- 10) *Internships for employees in well-established APACs*: when the opening of the Social Reintegration Centre is close and entirely run by the APAC (with no agents of civil, military, and prison police), the administrative staff (safety inspectors, administrative agents, security guards and so on) should do an internship within an APAC that is already under advanced development and methodological consolidation.
- 11) *Conclusion of an agreement on costs with the State*: food and consumptions good expenditures.

- 12) *CRS opening and transfer of recuperandos*: following the Social Reintegration Centre opening, *recuperandos* in training should come back to their District of origin, accompanied by 2 or 3 *recuperandos* of the hosting APAC District where the internship has been carried out (up to a maximum of 15-20 days) in order to collaborate in the method's implementation. The *recuperandos* in the new APAC should be transferred from the common system to the Social Reintegration Centre in groups of 7 at regular intervals of 10-15 days.
- 13) *CSS (Council of Sincerity and Solidarity) formation made up of recuperandos*: considering the experience of the *recuperandos* who did the internship, they are the most suitable to form the first CSS team in the new APAC.
- 14) *Course of Acknowledgement on the APAC method and Liberation Days with Christ*: as soon as the APAC reaches a significant number of *recuperandos* it should plan with the FBAC the Course of Acknowledgement on the APAC method, as "*recuperandos* are the very ones who must be aware of the APAC method with first priority following the volunteers as they make the best contributions to the success of the Method." (Ottoboni M., Ferreira Valdeci Antonio, "*Parceiros da Ressurreição*", Paulinas Cile, p.151). "The Liberation Day with Christ is no doubt the highest part, the peak of the method; we should not talk about the APAC Method without applying this essential complement as it is the distinguishing mark, the before and the after, in the life of the day." (Ibid, p.31).
- 15) *To develop periodically lessons on human promotion and spirituality, anti-drug preventive education programmes, and meetings of different groups of recuperandos coordinated by volunteers as well.*
- 16) *Participation in annual events aimed at training multipliers*:
  - Study workshops on the APAC method - Training for the APAC supervisors.
  - Liberation Days with Christ for *recuperandos* and the APAC's leaders.
  - Long-term volunteering training courses
  - APAC's managers and multipliers training courses
  - APACs National Congress and others.

17) *To establish a constant dialogue with the FBAC*

18) *Organisation of new public hearings, seminars, and vocational courses for volunteers:* to promote periodically awareness-raising campaigns and mobilisation of the community on the prison problem whenever necessary, as a part of its continuous process of consolidation and development.

***«It is essential to plan and to organise the enforceability of the method in order for the material assistance non to become dependency culture, for the spiritual assistance not to become proselytizing and for the legal assistance not to become a law office.»***

### **The prisoner's journey**

The Program “The prisoner's journey” was a tool offered to *recuperandos*; it is an ecumenical biblical study on human promotion that, through the Gospel of Mark, presents Jesus Christ in 8 sessions of 2 hours each by three simple and important questions on Christian life:

- **Who is Jesus?**
- **Why did he come?**
- **What does it mean to follow Him?**

Besides the apparently theoretical and basic explanation on Christianity, the course aims at promoting the human beings fostering self-esteem and reflection on Christian values, and inspiring the participants to become true and faithful followers of Christ. This is possible putting into practice learning in a dynamic and inclusive way, in groups organised up to a maximum of 12 participants led by 2 facilitators.

The Programme also uses a promotional video inviting the participants to embark on this journey, and 16 episodes distributed in 8 meetings as well as telling them real stories of people who found Jesus Christ behind bars in prisons throughout the world.

## How did the idea come from?

It is based on the contents of the course “Knowing Christianity” which was held for the first time twenty years ago in the All Souls Church in London, England. The aim was to let the Gospel tell about the Gospel, with no doctrine, to those free people who wanted to know who Jesus Christ was.

Thanks to the outstanding results and the expansion of the project in more than 80 countries, the *Prison Fellowship International* (PFI), a worldwide association with associates in more than 125 countries, 50.000 volunteers, the greatest Ministry of Criminal Justice in the world and the UN advisory body for prison matters has thought: why do not follow this course even in prisons?

So, the course was redesigned to prison system and since 2013 *Prison Fellowship International* (PFI) has enlarged it to other countries such as South Africa, Chile, Colombia, Spain, Honduras, Portugal and Uruguay among others to reach the global purpose to make Jesus Christ known to a million prisoners all around the world.

## Evolution

Since 2015, the program has been managed and run by the FBAC too.

Initially, when the partnership between PFI and FBAC was signed in November 2014, the attention was completely focused on *recuperandos* (prisoners) in the APAC. There wasn't any perspective of expanding it to jail units, as the FBAC did not carry out any work inside the communal prison system up to that moment.

However, due to the excellent results achieved by the APACs' *recuperandos* and in collaboration with the Superintendence for the Assistance of Prisoners (SAPE) of the Government of Minas Gerais, in April 2016 prison units started to expand all over the State.

Now, the programme counts more than 340 facilitators volunteers in 44 APACs and 13 prison units in the State of Maranhão, Paraná, and mainly Minas Gerais that has reached a number which is far superior to 2.700 units as regards inmates until now.

The Program also collaborates with partners such as “Subsecretaria de Humanização do Atendimento” of the Government of Minas Gerias (Under-Secretary for the Humanisation of the Service), and the Biblical Society of Brazil, of Minas Gerais and Bahia which donate a Bible to each one of the inmates concluding the course with the aim of giving continuity to the biblical study.

# Piquiá De Baixo

*Community in Brazil's Amazon Region suffers from pollution and struggles for a dignified life paying particular attention to elderly and children*

**Flavio Schimdt**

**Comboni Lay Missionaries and the Comboni Family**

## **Brazil**

Piquiá de Baixo is a community of **about 1100 people (312 families)** in the Amazon rainforest who settled on a rural area in the municipality of Açailândia (State of Maranhão, Northeast Region of Brazil) fifty years ago. Since the arrival of the iron and steel industry thirty years ago, the community has been affected by five pig-iron plants<sup>26</sup>, a railroad and other Vale<sup>27</sup>'s industrial facilities; plants operate continuously and they are very close to homes. Piquiá de Baixo suffer therefore from air, soil, and water pollution. This caused the community to be ranked as **“impossible for human life”** according to a technical evaluation carried out in 2007. The incessant pollution and the continuous deterioration of water resources along with the extremely precarious health-care system had a huge impact on the residents' living conditions as well as on their lands, affected their livelihoods, and increased the insecurity and poverty of the affected communities, in violation of their right to health, and to an adequate standard of living.

Since the establishment of those industries in the region, it has been noted a high rate of respiratory diseases and eye and skin maladies with

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26 Companhia Siderúrgica Vale do Pindaré, Ferro Gusa do Maranhão Ltda. (FERGUMAR), Gusa Nordeste S/A, Siderúrgica do Maranhão S/A (SIMASA) and Viena Siderúrgica S/A. The whole production of pig iron is exported, mainly to the US and also to Europe.

27 *Vale* is the second largest mining company in the world and it operates in 38 countries. The giant transnational corporation extracts iron ore from Carajás mine, in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, and sends it to Piquiá, Açailândia to be processed and transformed into pig iron. *Vale* also takes the whole production of pig iron by its trains towards its ports in São Luís do Maranhão. *Vale*'s activities represent close to 82% of total iron ore exports in Brazil. The firm is responsible for two of the worst environmental crimes ever committed: the Mariana dam disaster, Doce River Basin(2015), and the Brumadinho dam disaster, Paraopeba River Basin (2019).

particular reference to children and elderly. There have been lung and other organ cancer. Many inhabitants have been left with some permanent disability while others have died. There also have been deaths of children following the contact with the so-called *munha*, a white-hot slag which is picked up and discharged near the community; this processing residual looks like a heap of sand, but beneath an apparently inert surface it keeps on burning. An investigation conducted by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in 2011 attested that 59% of the families living in Piquiá de Baixo had fevers in the fifteen days before the survey<sup>28</sup> and it also revealed that the residents suffer from lack of access to health service.

A survey carried out by a medical team of the European Institute of Oncology in Milan (2016) evaluated the respiratory failure of the residents in Piquiá de Baixo by means of spirometry tests, and identified 28% of pathological conditions compared to the average resulting from surveys carried out in other countries which cover a range from 4 to 14%.

The State of Maranhão has not taken any specific action to control pollution neither adopting precautionary measures nor attributing any responsibility to industrial corporations for the damage they caused in the last thirty years.

Piquiá de Baixo community is located inside the area of Santa Luzia Parish whose patron is St. Joseph; the community is accompanied by the Comboni Missionaries. Piquiá's inhabitants have asked for help from *Carmen Bascarán Centre for the Defense of Life and Human Rights* (CDVDH/CB) that has suggested them to contact us, the Comboni Missionaries, to work together to solve the problem. These people has finally found a support and a guide in us; thanks to this, they have mobilised organising in the *Piquiá de Baixo Residents' Association* (ACMP) in a struggle for the resettlement of the community in another area where it was possible to live without any risk. Since then, the community has achieved significant results to the resettlement of the 312 families thanks to the pressure exerted on those who are responsible with demonstrations and public denouncing acts. Social animators, social workers and lawyers formed a *Social-legal Team* (ESJ) to ensure

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28 Carried out in collaboration with the Brazilian organisation *Justiça Global* and *Justiça nos Trilhos*, and available on [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/report\\_brazil\\_2012\\_english.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/report_brazil_2012_english.pdf).

that the community mobilisation took place by means of the bureaucratic processes needed for fulfilling these people's dream (social surveys, household registration system, documentation collection and organisation and so on). These experts have made possible the realisation of the process advising at every stage of it. Since the beginning, the team has been accompanied by the missionaries and from 2017 on it was assisted by the Comboni Lay Missionaries (CLM) who came to the mission of Piquiá. After long years of struggle, our main accomplishment was the conquest of a new land in a place which is well located for families and far from the risks caused by the industries. Another accomplishment was the housing and the neighbourhood project design realised by the same residents; this was possible thanks to the architectural technical advice from the Usina-CTAH, and to an intensive process of self-organisation by the families with the active involvement of children and women. The project reflects the families' desire to a decent housing, as well as to a neighbourhood equipped with leisure facilities and services according to the community' needs and desires. Finally, the Brazilian State has obtained financial resources for the building of the neighbourhood and of the houses through the program *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (My house, My Life) managed by the Caixa Econômica Federal state-owned bank (CEF). Families are now handling the work they began on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November in 2018 through the residents' association on the principle of self-management. Executive management's main position (finance, purchase and warehouse) are filled by residents which are chosen during the assembly.

The Comboni Family in Piquiá accompanies the community in this struggle supporting the Management Board of the association, being present in the assemblies held in the community, supervising their daily work, but mostly organising with them actions on the public and private authorities, and supporting directly *Justiça nos Trilhos* Network and other associates. This brought the matter of Piquiá's resettlement to worldwide attention; therefore, allowing the UN Special Rapporteurs to address twice to the Brazilian State questioning on the governments' actions.

The Amazon Synod held in Rome in October 2019 was a great opportunity for visibility. One member of the Executive Council of the residents' association joined the meeting *The Amazon: Common Home* which worked in parallel with the Synod, and reported the current situation regarding the challenges with the project.

Despite the budgetary deficit (that was approved in April 2017, and whose funds were released in November 2018 with no adjustment), some contingencies related to the federal government and the delay in the transfer of the funds, construction works of the new neighbourhood - named as Piquiá da Conquista after a vote by residents - keep going. The soil has already been cleaned, and the ground levelling carried out. The shed for the buildings has been constructed, and drilling activities associated with wells have been completed. Further, drinking water distribution system has been installed in the neighbourhood. Houses foundations are being built.

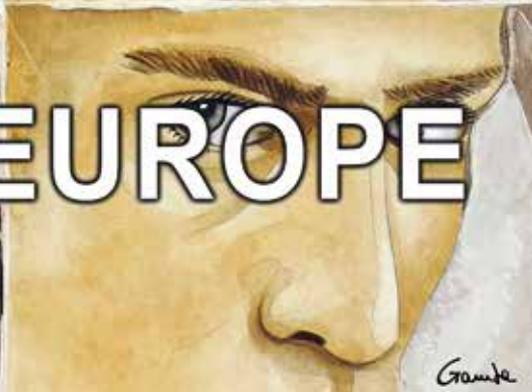
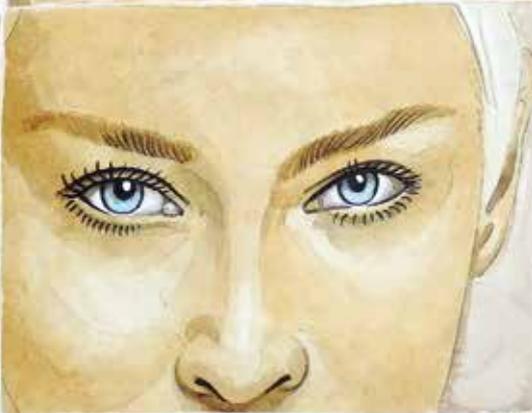
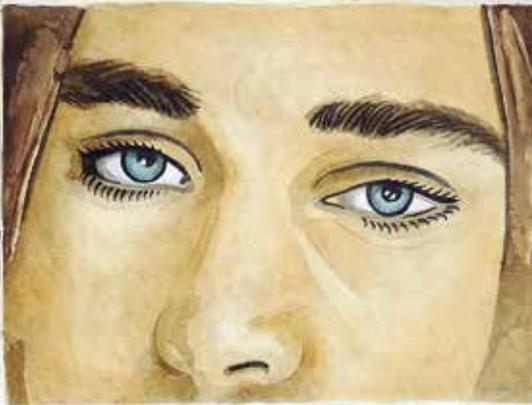
Faith was of great importance rising to all these challenges, and strengthened the community's struggle. It gave breath during the process' most critical and demanding moments; it has taken much effort from the community, and mainly from their leaders. In this sense, the dialogue with pastors of the evangelical churches which are present in the new neighbourhood was important to the strengthening of the resettlement process, and it was realised through ecumenical moments at the start of our the work and during assemblies.

We face hardship in ensuring the involvement of all the families in the process and in the building of the neighbourhood in order, for them, to be the real protagonists of this struggle and of their own lives. Many of them stand on the side-lines with the passive approach of those who expect results neither compromising nor involving themselves. On the other side, there are people who are willing to actively participate in meetings, training sessions, assemblies and many other activities. We clearly see in them a development in their initiative, active participation and the ability to call into question certain events even in front of the authority or their representative.

These leaders in training - especially the younger ones - are the hope for the continuity of the residents' association, and for the struggle of this community. All these people are well aware of the fact that this process will not end by the housing construction in the new district; on the contrary, they will have to continue claiming their fundamental rights within the neighbourhood, the city, the Federal State, and the whole country. These are people of great critical awareness and well aware of their rights, their duties, the instruments and the methods to be used to mobilise the community for their own self-fulfilment looking for the common good.

Through this experience, we approach what Comboni had already described in his Plan “*To Save Africa with Africa*” more than 150 years ago: the great value and the importance of formation and education in order to empower people and lead their own struggle, the claim for their own rights never neglecting the communitarian dimension, caring for others, and searching for collective benefit.





**EUROPE**



# A land where God awaits to be accepted

**Mariella Galli**  
**Secular Comboni Missionary**

## **Italy**

To live a vocation, whatever it may be, means to be constantly and closely connected with God, who is the origin of any calling. It also means to be endlessly connected with history; He indeed melded with history as He incarnated in Jesus Christ who “pitched his tabernacle” among us, and now He is present on every human being’s face especially the outcasts and the rejected ones. Such a reality has gradually become conviction in my life, and ever more deeply. This awareness fired a kind of unquietness in my heart which originated a quest soon after. I just wanted to understand where to focus all my energies in order to recognise and to serve Christ among the poor.

I was inspired by the model and the life of Saint Daniel Comboni who had chosen the most abandoned people of his time, the Nigrizia. I remember that the Word of God challenged me intensely in those days, and I had the feeling that the provocation was pointing to one direction: the option for the poor. This is the way God operates when He wants to push us beyond boundaries... It was October 2009 when a priest proposed me carrying out my ministry in prison. The proposal took me by surprise: jail was so far away and remote... I let myself be inspired and began the bureaucratic procedure to obtain entry authorisation. I started attending Lucca’s prison, in Italy in February of the following year.

In the beginning I was accompanied by Massimiliano, who had almost thirty years experience in the field. I have learnt a lot from him; he taught me how to behave towards convicts, prison guards, and the staff who works in the penal institute. He also gave me precious advice on the place we were working in. I listened and above all observed during the four months of my apprenticeship, and then I launched into talks with inmates. It was a social cooperative for drug addicts to involve me in this project. This community also works as a shelter as an alternative

disciplinary measure. When convicts enter the prison, they realise soon that the highest price to pay is freedom's deprivation. Thus, they often ask to join in the drug rehabilitation centre to avoid prison regime even if they do not own a strong motivation. The rehab facility is a place which provides space for reflection on your own life path, and inmates are often supported by therapists prepared to this end. There also exist opportunities for debate with other people who experienced similar situations, and the possibility to challenge themselves daily looking after animals, by means of farm work and full self-management. Rehabilitation centre's users seldom work outside the facility. Facilities housing rehabilitation centres are often quite far from residential areas, so as not to create opportunity to escape or abandon it. The day is therefore marked by scheduled times, and this does not allow them to slip into sloth which sometimes is the origin of bad habits and unwholesome projects; hence, if prison is hard, rehabilitation life is no exception. Such a method, indeed, enable people to take control of their lives, to create an interruption and to change course.

I have never worked directly in the rehabilitation centre, but I collaborate with facilities' substance abuse social workers. The aid I give in prison consists in filtering entrance in consultation with the Ser.T.<sup>29</sup> My tasks are just listening and moral support. I also provide users with basic information about drug rehabilitation centre life. I work there once or twice a week, and I usually meet five or six people on the average. This men's prison is mainly inhabited by immigrants whose crimes are theft, drug trafficking, robbery... Most of them are young, and they are under thirty. They often have experienced real suffering in their lives, and they come from disordered families causing them to break the law. Sometimes, I feel that the common thread of those crimes is despair. Despair because they do not feel loved; despair because the ones who should give them love, attention and care only offer violence, contempt, and hatred; then, life means nothing, and they can even waste it! Sometimes, even loneliness is a bad advisor involved in the worst decisions. Young immigrants coming from other countries do not have relatives here, so they are more exposed to fall into the abyss. Just think about the serious difficulties they will get into: for example, job and house loss, and even the lack of documents.

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29 Ser.T. is the acronym for "Servizio Tossicodipendenza". It is equivalent to the "Addiction Treatment Service".

Talks are held in-person, and face to face. In general, it is easy to create an atmosphere of trust and honesty. People share with me the stories of their lives upset by familiar sufferings and leading them to wrong choices they are expiating through detention. During my years of presence and service in prison, I really appreciated monthly meetings in which all staff members collaborating with the Facility were involved: Caritas, voluntary associations, prison educators, institutions organising activities (such as computer courses, painting, cooking, reading classes and so on), and - last but not least - the chaplain. All those gatherings were intended to share opinions, impressions, doubts, and uncertainties in order to coordinate our activity, and to work in synergy to the prisoners' advantage. All at once meetings were cancelled without notice, so now we are getting the impression of carrying out an important ministry in a climate of total isolation. It might make our job less efficient. However, prison is this, too; it is to resist to those who want to throw a spanner in the works, and to keep on being at the inmates' side in the belief that devoting ourselves to those brothers is worth. It is always worth to reach out, and to tell them: "You are not alone anymore, we can walk this path together". This is the way to "make common cause" as Comboni would say.

Imprisonment generally let people think about their own existential journey. I am always astonished by the weakness and the fragility showed by detainees. Another emerging feeling is the long for saving family relationships which are often damaged - or even broken - as a consequence of the convict's behaviour. The burning desire not to break the bond with their mother - even when she refuses to see her son - is striking. I remember about a hulking young sailor man - whose mother has visibly rejected him - who told me: "At night, I dream of my mother. She hugs me, and I would like that this dream would become true". I am moved by men who strongly desire a tie with their mother. I don't know what I would do to help them to restore such an important and significant connection.

In the early years of my ministry it was possible to telephone relatives and lawyers to speed up procedures on the prisoners' request. It is a long time since the service is no longer available in compliance with the administration's orders. Now, I'm not able to do anything else but listening; I can try to highlight the hidden qualities of the person I am listening to in order to help him look ahead to the future trustfully in case of hopelessness. No experience, not even the most negative can

prevent from flourishing or changing course; actually, that very experience could stand for the starting point to discover a personal ability and to make it available to others. As Pope Francis wrote in a letter to Velletri's inmates in 2016: «Always be sure that God loves you personally, for him it does not matter your age or your culture, it does not matter even what you've been, the things you have done, the goals that you have obtained, the mistakes that you made, the people we have hurt. Do not enclose in the past, turn it into the path of growth, of faith and charity. Give God a chance to make you shine through this experience!».

People look at detainees, but they can't perceive the man in them; neither they notice their faces scarred by pain, nor they glimpse the dull stare in their eyes due to confinement. They only look and see a blameworthy conduct; they look at the splinter in their brother's eye, but they can't accept the call for mercy. They often follow preconceived ideas and stereotypes. This is a further reason why I have accepted to carry out this ministry: to learn how to be a disciple of mercy, and a disciple of the gentle and humble Teacher who gives liberty and dignity back to anyone who reaches out to Him.

At times, I hear myself saying to young internees: "You are one of a kind. You are precious in God's sight, He loves you and He will not forget you. He has heard your cry of suffering. He is with you, and He shares your sufferings with you"; then, I can see their shining faces and their hopes still blossom. I feel like prison is a land of mission which God has entrusted me. He does exist in the inmates' hearts beyond their religious belief, and He awaits to be accepted. He is already there for them in the thirst for change they hold in their hearts, in the embrace and in the acts of friendship of those who work hard to help them and to go with them along a journey of social and human rehabilitation. He is present on their faces, in their stories injured by contradictions and failures.

I met a lot of nice people in prison: Oltian, an Albanian man, with whom I talked about the true values of life; sometimes, he gave me poems as a gift; Ali, a Moroccan man, who was in love with nature and brought me coloured drawn flowers; Lazar, an Algerian man with whom I spoke for a long time about Islam and Christianity... It has often happened that some of them were moved to others correctional facilities, and I have never seen them again. However, I hold in my heart a persistent memory

of those encounters which enhanced my spirituality through their stories of a wounded humanity, in need of love and care, and looking for a new opportunity.

# Assistance Ministry to our elderly and sick sisters

**Sister Maria Rota**  
**Comboni Sister**

## **Italy**

In the history of our Congregation we mostly have considered assistance to our elderly Sisters as a “rotation” moment, and sometimes even a little bit imposed. We have always waited for this period to end to come back to the mission *ad gentes* which is inherent to our vocation as Comboni Missionary Women. I have paused and reflected on this point and upon the several ministries I lived at the Congregation service many times. At present, we have a more comprehensive understanding also in the Congregation - not only from a single point of view - and we do recognise this ministry as an integral part of our mission.

We host a great number of Elderly Sisters within our houses - especially in Italy - who devoted themselves to the mission *ad gentes* for over forty or fifty and sometimes even sixty years with extraordinary enthusiasm, zeal and passion; their heroic faith is what strikes us most while listening to their contributions. Many of them had left indeed neither with language preparation nor with professional training; however, thanks to their faith, the love towards their vocation and people they were sent to, they had founded with deep humility hospitals and churches which are today acknowledged by local governments and inhabitants. They also had prepared thousands of catechumens, and they sided with women promoting their empowerment. Sometimes, they even inspired women to be leaders in different fields and at different levels; such an achievement and “glory” were attributed to others most of the time. Sisters often tell me that obedience does wonders, and this had been true to them. Now these sisters are in need of help, assistance and care. Thinking of them, I cannot help remembering Simeon and Anna’s Icon described in Luke 2:25-38.

***«There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel’s consolation,***

*and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah (...) There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers.»*

The story deals with two people of advanced age; it does not deal with their ailments or limitations despite being prevalent. It is told instead that those people were waiting for the coming of the Lord in the temple. It is said that Anna did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. The prophetess Anna represents our Sisters' Icon spending hours in the presence of the Lord and praying night and day for humanity in desperate need of Him. Prophetesses of our times invoke peace and pray for a lot of people for a long time now exhausted by exploitation and disasters and who are still at war. Their lives has changed into a prayer which ascends to God night and day. I am sure that their prayer is really appreciated by the Lord.

The ministry of assistance to our Sisters requires ongoing self-giving. Sometimes, it is not easy because we try to provide them with holistic support, and this is not limited to healthcare environment but it includes all aspects of their lives. When Sisters enter our facilities they often carry with them the sorrow of leaving the mission, that is to say, the people they have served by giving their lives and strength, and besides, their difficulty of accepting the limits of their health and their old age. This delicate experience is suffered, and never enough assisted. It is not easy to pass from being always in contact with people and being engaged in several ministries and then agreeing to be assisted, and maybe even neglected by the very people to whom they have devoted themselves fully. In this regard **WELCOMING** and **LISTENING** are really important aspect of our ministry. We have to combine some issues to achieve results in this direction:

- First of all, we have to welcome them as loving persons in the full awareness of their wisdom, inner wealth and talents. We also must be conscious of their imperfection and weakness with no judgment, but above all we must not forget who they are and what they have done.

- Secondly, we have to encourage relationships with relatives and facilitate their visits. Sisters often hold in their hearts the pain of not finding the Christian Italy they have left behind: frequently, their nephews do not live according to Christian values anymore and their faith is weak.
- Further, we have to make them feel at home, that is, part of a community by favouring as much as possible dedication to a few services; we also have to grant them the possibility to express themselves and to take an active part in community meetings and prayer.
- Moreover, we do not have to minimise their health necessities by means of proper medical assistance. It must not be limited to the mere professional practice; it must go much further. I feel close collaboration with the lay staff - especially doctors and nurses - they play an essential role in this aspect. In my own experience, they are a precious resource highly appreciated by our Sisters. We have a lot to learn from them, too. Comboni, gave us an example how essential cooperation with laity is!
- The final stage is very delicate and difficult: as suffering and death approaches one feels powerless; these are experiences that frighten everyone. Even if we strongly desire the final encounter with the Lord, the moment of passing away scares us. We are hardly ever prepared to this step: some sisters struggle for their existence and hardly accept this difficult phase. Such a feeling of great suffering is revealed by requirements, but not complaints regarding their life as missionary and consecrated women. Being with Sisters however, I have noticed that beyond fear there always exists a time of preparation followed by a phase of acceptance leading to complete abandonment in God's hands. Many times, the words of the elderly Simeon have sounded honest to me:

*«Now, Master,  
 you can dismiss your servant in peace,  
 as you promised.  
 For my eyes have seen your salvation.  
 You have prepared it  
 in the presence of all peoples  
 a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
 and glory to your people Israel.»*

I am convinced that old age is a life-stage to be prepared since youth; I believe what Sisters confide me:

***“My life is moving fast towards old age but I am happy and calm because I have loved and I helped other people to love the One who is to come to stay forever with Him. It is vital to foster a habit of positivity: among people, within the community, in the encounters and events, and to feel ourselves missionary women through the end of our life.”***

***“Intimacy with God and love to our community are getting simpler and more essential than ever in this time of our life. The number of people who shared with us work, efforts, ideals, hopes and joy is decreasing. Our physical strength has diminished. As we identify too much with our role, our job or carrier, our triumph or state of health we end up in tragedy and we find ourselves empty and worthless because these things are doomed to fall. The Lord loves us and wants us to bring forth fruit in every season of life.”***

***“This is a valuable time to revisit and to recover the path God has walked with us throughout our life. Energy and activity are diminishing in this time while sickness increases, and responsibilities do not exist anymore. We stay alone with the Lord and the Good we could have done in our life. Sometimes, we feel lonely and useless and it makes us feel sad. The idea of dying often occurs, and this is scary.”***

One of the Sisters told me that it has been really helpful to her to have been prepared to old age and educated at the school of God’s Word according to faithfulness to private and community worship, even though sometimes it has a high price.

For us, Sisters called to this ministry, I implore the Lord for the talent of listening, patience and love which overcomes the tiredness and the challenges of everyday life. I ask mainly to live this significant and difficult ministry with passion, and always, feel a part of the Institute’s mission given by our founder, Saint Daniel Comboni.

A young sister has spent some days with us while she was preparing for her Perpetual Vows. I felt that her words were also mine:

***“Thank you, Sisters for doing this. We are here because you were here***

***before. Thanks for preserving with faith and joy the charisma of Comboni and for inspiring us to be Holy and capable Sisters as Comboni would have wanted us to be.”***

I will end here by a poem that Father Aldo Marchesini, a Comboni Confrere, has dedicated to a Sister:

***«There’s a tree praying in N’Riba. It is dry, it has no leaves, its naked branches point to the sky. It has nothing but prayer. It neither bears fruits nor it has fronds to give a shadow. Even its bark has gone. It has deprived itself from everything; it isn’t anymore the tree which was once; henceforth, it is nothing but prayer.»***

# Comboni Community on the way with migrants

**Father Sergio Agustoni**  
**Father Carlo Castelli**  
**Father Daniele Moschetti**  
**Comboni Missionary Brothers**  
**Castel Volturno, Italy**

## **The reality**

It is difficult to describe in a few words the complicated history and reality of Castel Volturno, in the province of Caserta. Over the last fifty years, great changes have affected this area; it went from living a period of tourism and building development marked by illegality and record-breaking achieved at the beginning of the 1960s, to the arrival of many people from other places of the Campania region due to the earthquake and the Bradysism of the 1980s, to the countless numbers of migrants mainly coming from Sub-Saharan Africa (notably Nigeria and Ghana), and from Eastern European countries (Ukraine and Poland) in the 1990s. Unfortunately, in addition to the omnipresence of the Camorra and of organised crimes, the Nigerian mafia has locally spread over the last years; those criminal organisations operate where they see great business opportunity: human trafficking, prostitution, illegal hiring, drug trafficking, construction site-contracts, waste disposal and so on. Environmental degradation has spared nothing: air, rivers, sea, nature, pinewoods, lands, roads and houses. In our collective imagination, Castel Volturno has been reduced to being a village covered by mountains of garbage abandoned along the roads, a zone populated by prostitutes who stroll along the Domitian, and by the great number of Africans who are present on the region; an area that was built on illegal and ruined houses, characterised by the extreme simplicity of finding drugs and by all the negative things we can imagine. Mass media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines and social networks) are often partial and manipulative especially when political or economic interest come into play; they are not interested in highlighting all the excellence and the efforts by people and the communities who are struggling to

improve the beautiful things we can find here, even in the midst of great difficulties. Progress has been made in different fields; as far as it concerns waste management however, Castel Volturno is still one of the last municipality in the province of Caserta to provide proper treatment of separate collection. According to 2018 data, proper waste disposal amounts to 35%. In this land, the practice of open burning of waste is sadly on the rise, and there are still no measures to remove tons of toxic materials buried in the infested land of the low province of Caserta and the high Neapolitan province and/or to reclaim those very land, better known as Land of Fires. Cancer risk is really high and there is no family here who escaped the tragedy of having a relative suffering from this terrible disease. In this area of Campania, cancer rate is 20% higher than the rest of the whole region and even higher compared to the rest of Italy.

Once a small village of farmers who bred the Italian Mediterranean Buffalo, Castel Volturno has now rapidly and chaotically changed into a small town inhabited by about 40.000 inhabitants. Italian people living in this area are about 20.000 while immigrants here belong to 78 different ethnic groups; of them, 5.000 have a regular residence permit, about 10-15.000 have no permission, expired permits or in the process of renewing. Since many years, our reality is characterised by a marked multi-ethnicity and multiculturality.

The easiness of finding a home which is often illegal and in bad conditions (maintenance has never been done in most of the buildings of the area), and the possibility to survive and to act illegally are factors that still attract many migrants. In addition, recent repressive and restrictive policies keep on nurturing arrivals.

The municipality of Castel Volturno overlooks the sea and stretches along the coast for 27 km covering a surface of 72 km<sup>2</sup>; a wonderful Mediterranean pinewood extends from the Tyrrhenian Sea, the beach and the ancient Roman road, the Domitian. The ancient village in the old town has developed in dozens of boulevards starting from the main road and leading to the beach. It is really difficult to run and to manage a territory with these features both as regards services needed by people and also because the number of security forces is derisory to operate within such a complex and large-scale reality.

Incompetence, inefficiency, staff shortage and lack of basic infrastructures, financial disarray and corruption have characterised the several city administrations. Since the 1990s up to 2012, the municipality of Castel Volturno was put under temporary receivership three times due to collusion and the Camorra's infiltration in administrative acts. Besides political affiliation, to run this district is a great challenge to everyone as the main critical issues have been accumulating over years and no one has ever solved them.

Many migrants, and mostly Africans, established there decades ago. Their children are growing up here, and they are fully integrated into schools; these boys and girls are actually Italian even if they are not Italian by law. Hardships are huge and countless to the migrants' community, but they originate mainly from the difficulty of regularising documents and finding a stable job which guarantee a dignified life. This adversity is also experienced by large part of the Italian community, and primarily young people.

Multiplicity and plurality characterise the religious sphere, of course. Besides our parish - whose title is *Ad personam*, that means not geographically limited and for immigrants - there are two parishes and mosques, and about forty Pentecostal churches.

## Our presence

Castel Volturno has been and will continue to be a significant place for the Comboni presence. The Comboni mission and the mission of the Church of Europe should be even more involved in those realities, and proclaim the Gospel with braveness and boldness to those people living in existential and geographical peripheries. The mission is global and more oriented to a return to the North. The Six-Year Plan of the Italian Comboni Province strongly reaffirms that: **“The commitment in the field of migration is of every community. The province maintains however Castel Volturno and the ACSE for more qualified and specific services”** at n.32.4. Further, the purchase and renovation of the house in summer 2017 reaffirm the intention to stay on this land in a more qualified way and through a vision which can involve the diocese, local clergy, Italian citizens, and above all the migrant themselves as best as they can and with great missionary spirit.

The Diocese of Capua has been showing interest in this land since the beginning of the 1980s given the presence of migrants especially in the agricultural sector; even then, this community endured significant hardships and sufferings. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January in 1998, Msgr. Luigi Diligenza, Bishop of Capua, prophetically erected the *Ad Personam* Parish of Santa Maria dell’Aiuto in Fernandes Centre managed by Caritas, Castel Volturno “***to the aim of providing the pastoral and spiritual care of Immigrants who are present in the Archdiocese***”. However, no priest was assigned to this special and particular ministry.

In the second half of the 1990s, mission to Europe was not an issue to deal with as it was considered a land of missionary animation and training, while the South of the World was still considered the mission place par excellence; nevertheless, a new way to understand and interpret the concept of mission, evangelisation and charism was making its way through the Church and the Institute. The Magisterium of the Church and the General Chapters’ conclusions symbolise this reflection. The world, and Africa in particular, had arrived here. Fr. Giorgio Poletti - who was in Casavatore at that time - visited Castel Volturno, and recognised this reality as a challenge to the Comboni Brothers. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January in 1997, Fr. Poletti was appointed first priest by Msgr. Diligenza. Fr. Franco Nascimbene joined him soon after and thus began the presence of a Comboni community. Since then, various confreres have joined the community and each of them have brought his sensibility and commitment, trying to be faithful to the mission the Province had entrusted him with and that our charism demanded. There were moments of conflicts with the director, with the Fernandes Centre and the local Church and, unfortunately, there were also some fruitless personalisms; little by little, we have cleared things up and communication and cooperation have improved. Now, we are trying to work and to collaborate positively. Since 2018, the community has assumed the responsibility of the first welcoming of migrants in the Fernandes Centre starting from Fr. Antonio Guarino (and now also with Fr. Daniele Moschetti). The social dimension, evangelisation and pastoral and spiritual care have always been present. The foundation of the *Black and White Association* is proof of that; the association has carried on different initiatives since 2001, namely, a kindergarten for the children of African working mothers, an after-school program which is opened to everyone both to Italians and migrants, and women’s empowerment. At present, the association works within a very marginalised and decentralised neighbour-

hood known as Destra Volturno where more than 50% of the population comes from Africa.

Even the relation with the local clergy, both in the Vicariate of Basso Volturno, the presbytery of the Diocese and the Bishop is now more peaceful and positive. Many people esteem and appreciate us and look for our collaboration in different fields.

## **The present**

We are grateful to the Lord for the long journey we have walked until here, and for the generosity and the dedication of those who came formerly. Over the last six years there has been a great commitment to the aim of becoming more and more a presence of communion in the way of living community life and proposing paths of communion and interaction between our parish for immigrants and the civil and religious local reality. We took advantage of any opportunity to provoke a greater interaction and integration being aware of the fact that it is a long and difficult journey. The interaction with the local church has increased thanks to our assiduous participation to diocesan initiatives; we also have tried to give the Church her own identity proposing several initiatives for instance creating new groups, establishing the patronal feast, and organising the Parish Pastoral Council. The desire to help people to grow up autonomously and in the full responsibility has convinced us to make them the protagonists of their own lives besides being just protagonists of the community's journey. Also for this reason, we have organised summer camps for boys and girls of second-generation, and we have progressively entrusted responsibility to the older kids, who are now teen-agers, and young people so that they look after the little ones. We have tried to interact with the Italian parishes of Castel Volturno, and mainly with the Chapel of the Village of the Sun which is geographically very close to us through initiatives as the inter-parochial choir, the Festival of Marian Songs, the missionary vigil, catechesis in communion, Palm Sunday, Via Crucis for Lent and others without achieving great results.

We have to remind that we have also made a journey with the Polish community - which is now very small and so they have accepted to walk with all the others - and with the Ukraine community of Greek-Catholic rite that every 15 days finds its place in our Church for the celebration.

Meanwhile, we have to humbly be self-critical and to recognise that the physical presence of the parish in the Centre managed by Caritas has led us all to identify with it. After twenty three years of presence, in fact, many inhabitants of Castel Volturno do not even know that there is a parish called Santa Maria dell’Aiuto. Many of them think that the fathers work in the centre and for the centre under the guide of a lay director. Since its foundation, the Centre is at the migrants’ service, and mainly African migrants; even though we have never excluded other nationalities from our project, this service unfortunately does not favour a path of integration because the most of Italians living here do not even get close. According to the most of them, the Centre is just for African people even if many citizens in need and undergoing difficulties have welcomed favourably the presence of the institute in the territory.

The model proposed by the Parish “*Ad Personam*”- which was once useful and brave - no longer works. The migratory and local realities have really changed: thousands of migrants are resident on the territory of Caserta and of Campania for decades now. The initial choices have led, actually, to the creation of a Nigerian ethnic community tied to its cultural traditions, to its way of being Church in the country of origin, and that is carrying with it divisions and ethnic rivalries of Nigeria therefore excluding the most of the Ghanaian migrants. This makes of the Christian community a block, and it is very difficult to the non-Nigerians to integrate into the parish community. The presence of Nigerian sisters which lasted here for 14 years (from 2000 up to 2014) has surely be of assistance to women’s empowerment, welcoming and accompanying of female victims of trafficking, and in many cases their ransom but at the same time it has reinforced the **Nigerianity of the community**. The community is not growing, and we haven’t yet succeeded in training firm leaders who are attentive to common and individual good. The meeting among people is focused on Sundays celebrations, and it is a great effort for us to propose moments of prayer and training in other times of the week. It took decades to propose the use of the Italian language in liturgies besides English. Some families living in neighbouring countries got used to participate in the life of our community and did not integrate in neighbouring Christian communities where they have been living for years now. Those who visit us, usually Italians, are happy with the joy and the liveliness of the celebration, music and liturgy, the captivating rhythm of songs but they will never join us to make a journey of community.

## Future perspectives

Since some months, we are praying, reflecting and making considerations on the ministerial path ahead as a Comboni community which is now present in this diocesan reality and in Castel Volturno's reality. We have discussed about it with the Bishop, the Provincial and the Director of the Fernandes Centre and some priests.

- We are convinced that it is necessary to reconsider the legal form of the parish *ad personam* as in the current migratory situation this form has no longer sense and it is now limited to the pastoral accompaniment of a reduced and decreasing community. This style of presence, which was useful and important to the emergency of the 1990s, has not favoured interaction rather it has created an island, a sect closed in on itself, almost a ghetto. We can continue to offer welcoming, celebration, catechesis, and training to our immigrants sisters and brothers as a chapel without necessarily being a parish. The real challenge is to plan and to put into practice a pastoral and missionary presence which favours interaction, integration and paths of communion within different communities of both migrants and Italians. Neither we must keep on carrying out this ministry in this neighbourhood, for example: even though we live here, we can open ourselves up to other degraded, marginalised and border realities in these lands, like the one in the neighbourhood of Destra Volturno.
- We want to be a missionary community which is opened to various realities and disposable towards them starting from our ministry of service to migrants. Collaborations with priests and lay people are being undertaken in order to give life to a Missionary Diocesan Centre which is the engine of initiative and training to the social doctrine of the Church besides the missionary consciousness to priests, groups, parishes, young people, schools, and dioceses. We feel the importance to commit in the field of the pastoral diocese, where the missionary dimension is almost inexistent. It could be useful, in this sense, the work on the missionary dimension in close collaboration with the diocesan Migrants that oversees migrants and the environmental and ecological dimensions; these dimensions are of vital importance here, as we are in the Land of Fires.
- Collaboration with the Fernandes Centre managed by Caritas for the

accompaniment of migrant people who are welcomed in the Centre is always important, precious and steady in our ministry. Our African experience, the good knowledge of English and other languages makes it easier and enriches the impact on the service we offer. Our collaboration must necessarily be clear in the roles and in the respect of mutual autonomy.

- Over years, the *Black and White Association* has won the esteem of people and of local institutions through the Comboni Missionary service which was offered in after-school activities by four operators also working in the House of the Child in Destra Volturno. Families were satisfied with the help offered both to migrants and Italian boys and girls often coming from uncomfortable familiar situations connected to the reality where they live. Operators are qualified and motivated people. In the last few months, we are trying to create a network of friends, collaborators, and partners as well to extend the range of action and of presence. We believe that the *Black and White Association*, which was born to help people to integrate and to sustain dialogue and interaction between migrants and Italians, can become a centre for aggregation and for proposal not just for kids in the after-school and for women in the solidarity tailor's shop which is now present in the House of the Child, but also for families, young people, teenagers, and adults. Particular attention is given to civil society in general in the area of Destra Volturno which is left to its own devices and that needs spiritual, social and pastoral responses due to the huge number of criticalities which are present. Always networking with no anxiety of protagonism, cooperating with all those who are willing and dispositive to collaborate; besides, after-school, there are activities and social tailor's shop; we want to open ourselves up also to cultural, artistic, and sport proposals which will surely be a benefit for the purposes of human, spiritual, and vital growth for a population which is so strongly worn out and broke up. Even the collaboration between the *Black and White Association* and the *Fernandes Centre/Caritas* could grow up taking actively part in joint commitment.

## **Time for change**

The time has come to make this pastoral, ministerial, and physical change with braveness and boldness; with no hurries rather with pas-

sion and determination, dialoguing and making discernment with the Bishop, the diocesan priests, the Provincial and His council, lay people and the migrants themselves. However, we have to support the conviction that our presence and our ministry can no longer be valid just to us, the ones who are present here and now, but they have to include a broader vision and look ahead. We must therefore count on a qualified and significant presence to migrants we want to serve, but mainly and meanwhile, a presence that through its actions can provoke the ***right repercussions*** on Italians and the diocese in which we are present. With the Lord's help and through the intercession of Saint Daniel Comboni, we move forward with faith and with a great Hope.

# The Malbes Missionary Community

**Sister Carmela Coter, Comboni Missionary Sister  
Sister Marina Cassarino, Comboni Missionary Sister  
Carla and Mario Zarantonello with their daughters**

## Italy

*«Then the word of the Lord came to me, asking, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I replied, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” The Lord said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I watch over my word to accomplish it” (Jeremiah 1:11-12)».*

*The Hebrew word for almond means “awake” as it is the first tree to wake and to rise from its winter repose, the one that blossoms with attentive eyes even when the cold is biting. Jeremiah sees a flower blossoming in the hardest time of the year, the time of sudden frost and not of fine weather. In this difficult season, we have to grasp with attentive eyes the signs which are already inside winter during the transition to spring.*

*Pope John XXIII opened the Council saying that we have to reject the “prophets of dooms”, and to pay attention to “the signs of the times”, not hampering their evolution and doing like the earth does when accompanying spring buds. In some moments, the world is renewed not just because those very moments add something new, rather because they go back to their source, where diversity is harmony.*

*Faithfulness to oneself and to one’s neighbour is the ability to “preserve and to watch over” the love that needs time to grow, mutual promises to keep, choices at a high cost. Even when things do not seem to change, even when everything seems to go as before, the one who is faithful observes the horizon, smells the air, sows the seed leaving it to the ground; the dream of future is all inside this tiny opportunity that can transform a lighting or a spark into a light (L.Verdi, Il domani avrà i tuoi occhi, Ed. Romena 2009).*

This long introduction seems to us a faithful description of the birth and of the short journey of 4 years of the Malbes Missionary Community, formed by Carla and Mario with their two daughters Alice and Sara along with Sr. Carmela Coter and Sr. Marina Cassarino, Comboni Mis-

sionary Sisters. Years ago, as we were trying to give a deeper meaning to our lives, we saw a blossoming almond tree. The path walked with the GIM (Giovani Impegno Missionario) had made us enjoy the beauty of the Word both listened and shared, had enlarged our vision of the world, and made us know the prophet: Saint Daniel Comboni. Once we had walked this path, we felt the urge to start another journey following on the Comboni Charism's heels. From the winter of our individualistic world, we have seen a blossoming almond tree that was calling on us to community and fraternal life with people.

In the same way, we, the Comboni Missionary Sisters, rediscovered a blossoming almond tree: the faith in our Founder was urging us to share the Comboni charism with lay people, considering it as a gift of the Holy Ghost, a part of the charismatic identity bringing mutual enrichment between spirituality and mission, in the certainty that these two vocations, both lay and religious mutually enlighten one another (Capitular Acts SMC 2010). In other words, we have seen a blossoming almond tree in winter, in a time of search for new evangelical paths for lay life and religious life more authentic and faithful to the Word and to everyday life. After long years of reflection, prayers and discernment, we have decided to DARE and therefore to start walking step by step and dreaming of a layman, laywomen and religious community that, even in the diversity of their vocations, could share the Comboni charism in daily life. This was a hard choice both for families which had to change city and schools for their children or to move away from work, and the congregation that had to send staff trusting the capitular intuition and the presence of the Spirit that blows anywhere and how He wants. It was not easy to get used to a communal lifestyle which was very different to the traditional consecrated lifestyle to religious women, too.

## **Who we are**

It is 1877. Malbes is a small village in Sudan, and it has a special feature: it is a community that lives on its work along with sisters and priests. Religious people of this community integrates in their different ministerialities bearing witness to concrete faith in daily life. Malbes is the implementation of Saint Daniel Comboni's dream whose motto is "*To save Africa with Africa*"; lay people, religious men and women united for the regeneration of Africa.

Today, all that remained, are a few huts and a big baobab; however, the spirit animating the village has found its expression in the Malbes Missionary Community in the Parish of Santa Maria Assunta al Bassanello, in Padua, Italy. The community was officially born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December in 2015 through the Eucharist celebrated in the parish by former Episcopal Vicar Msgr. Renato Marangoni.

Our WAY OF BEING is summarised in three key words:

**Word:** lived in the morning meeting of communal prayer, where we read and pray together the God's word of the day which guides and supports our personal and communal paths.

**Mission:** lived in the welcoming and in the open-minded style of reaching out, announcing the Word and bearing witness to communal living.

**To make a common cause:** taking to heart every person's life: in the family, in the community and of those we encounter along the road.

## Context and challenges

It wasn't us to choose the place where to start the new community's project on the basis of a context which responded to our charism: the proposal to live in the rectory of Santa Maria Assunta al Bassanello in Padua came directly from the Diocese of Padua. We have therefore tried to read and understand the religious and social context that was hosting us, without knowing anyone or anything but with the help of former Bishop Msgr. Mattiazzo who strongly believed in this new project. We immediately found ourselves plunged into a difficult context "disapproving" us as the parish community had just had a negative experience with another ecclesial group. Nevertheless, we tried to establish strong and friendly relations with priests and people along the way.

We have found a quite static community that is mainly composed by elderly people with a few ministries lived and a few people dealing with all the tasks to carry out; a community where great importance is given to "worship" rather than charitable and relational field; further, the sense of the Christian community rooted in the Word, and questioning itself about the major challenges of the contemporary world in the light

of missionary and social challenges (immigration, welcoming, social injustice and so on), is almost unperceivable.

So, starting from an initial context which was not very supportive, the Malbes missionary community has committed itself in an evangelising path lived not just by words rather by small daily gestures of welcoming and proximity, mainly towards the weakest and the most vulnerable in a reality which is strongly influenced by the fear of the other or of the diverse.

We have thus tried to open new spaces:

- Proposing the popular reading of the Bible to everyone as it helps to be “people” in following Jesus and his Gospel starting from everyday life.
- Organising meetings on current events social issues (immigration, welcoming, integration and so on).
- *Telling* other groups *about us* so that they know our community and grasp the newness about our life choices which are far from official schemes and models traditionally established.
- Collaborating with the Caritas of the parish, with the Missionary Diocesan Centre, and with other communal enlarged realities linked to other religious Institutes and community of families on the territory (for example, Bethesda, Missio KM 0, Missionary Families KM 0).
- Being available to teach Italian to the refugees hosted by a Cooperative which is not far from us, with whom, besides the teaching of the language, we have established a friendship relation. We welcome them in our homes for lunch or just for a visit, helping them as much as we can with their needs and difficulties.

The path of our community took a major turn when the Social Services proposed us to welcome a woman from Togo and her three children, the first of whom was disabled. The woman was alone, she had nowhere to go or a house to live in after the childbirth of the fourth baby that was only of 3 weeks when she arrived in our community.

One year later, we were proposed to welcome a Muslim woman from Senegal, with a sad familiar story behind her and whose baby was only a years old; further, there was the difficulty of communicating as this woman only spoke her local language.

We are concretely experiencing what it means to make a common cause with these women living with us. Pope Francis' words echo profoundly in us thanks to the experience of welcoming: *“Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people”* (EG 270).

Our desire and commitment to be “bridge” and place for integration between people of different nationalities and religions - which is another strong point of our spirituality and Comboni missionary methodology - have materialised with the arrival of Mariette and Aida. We have established a friendship relation and a relation of exchange and mutual aid as well with this two women and their babies living with us and also with refugees. We experience how it is like to sit down together at the well (John 4:1-22) to give each other water and to quench our thirst.

Many difficulties affect our daily lives: in fact, welcoming is not easy. It is not enough to offer people a bed or a roof: it is also necessary to get totally involved and to be able to “say good night”, as Tonino Bello suggested.

## **What future for the Malbes community?**

We are aware of the fact that our experience of community composed by laymen and women and women religious is concretely opening new paths. To live together, in the diversity of paths and vocations, enriches our spirituality and makes us walk together in the wonder of admiring how diversity can always teach something precious for our lives. The option of living in an ongoing comparison through communal living,

sharing joys and sufferings, is a great treasure! Living inside great religious structures makes it easy to forget how it is difficult to live outside them, and as a consequence we often drag ourselves in a whirlwind of individualism. To live in close contact with laypeople teaches us the effort of daily living, of precariousness, of generosity, of welcoming, of the endless patience in the difficult art of educating children, of earning our daily bread, of making a selection of what is necessary and what is superfluous in order to make it by the end of the month.

Sharing our daily living with religious women allows us to experience a lively and incarnated spirituality; it also allows us to be active presence, as a community, in all those fields and contexts where we, as laypeople, cannot arrive due to work or family commitments; it stimulates us to live a 360-degrees missionariety which is opened to the “here and now” and to a look to the other part of the world; it helps us to keep Saint Daniel’s Comboni Spirit alive and our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ.

Today, even in the Church, this experience seeks space; it is an innovation often breaking the mould. However, walking together with other similar realities helps us and strengthens our spirits.

We also feel that it is important to have a clear proposal: we feel called to be sign of sharing and fraternity, and to be ministerial sign to the service of charity. Finally, we feel this strong vocation as a received gift calling us to be fruitful men and women. This makes us feel in the right place and give us a real and profound joy.

What future? We don’t know that; when walking, the path will open up as the Latin American saying goes. However, the fact that a young couple is approaching our community and is asking us to be a part of it is a great sign of hope representing the future for all of us.

*«Then the word of the Lord came to me, asking, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I replied, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” The Lord said to me, “You have seen correctly, for I watch over my word to accomplish it” (Jeremiah 1:11-12)».*

# Wake up to hope

**Father Padre Horácio Rossas**  
**Brother José Manuel Salvador**  
**Sister Mary del Carmen Lopez y Gálan**  
**The Comboni Family**

## **Portugal**

### **Social condition**

Fetais is one of the 26 districts in the neighbourhood of Camarate, north of Lisbon airport. This is a typical suburban neighbourhood, and it was built by its inhabitants with great sacrifice and no urban planning. Most of the constructions in the area are illegal. In addition, houses are extremely small and show signs of degradation.

Immigrant families from countries such as Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Bangladesh and Pakistan came here to seek better living conditions in the 1990s concomitantly with the building of Expo '98 and the Vasco da Gama Bridge. Further, there is a large part of the population coming from Portugal's far corners as a result of the internal migration of the 1960s. Finally, we cannot forget the Portuguese who lived in colonies and returned to their homeland following the independence of 1975: most of them settled in this area, the Greater Lisbon district.

Many families living here are single-parent families: the mother also fills the role of the father, and she is obliged to work many hours a day to grant her own survival and the survival of her children, too. Women often leave their home at 5:00 in the morning and they return at about 8:00 in the evening, if not later. This means that children are frequently left to their own devices when they are not at school; as a consequence, their school performance is very poor.

The people's needs - especially school pupils' needs - are visible to our eyes, and they are at the heart of the attention and of the efforts of those missionaries brothers and sisters who works in this reality. Thanks to

years of experience in Africa and Latin America, they have realised that mission is as urgent here as there.

## **An initiative by the Comboni Family**

The Association *Jovem Despertar* (Awakening Youth) is an initiative by the Comboni Family and it was born as a response to those children's needs. This Association aims to be a space where around 40 children meet every day after school in order to study, do their homework, play, have fun, socialise and develop cultural activities with the aid of some generous volunteers.

The initiative originated from the will of the Superiors belonging to the Comboni Family: they wanted to promote a joint effort that responded to the migrant community's needs. Such an initiative is a good basis to build bridges between cultures, and also a journey towards a closer integration of communities coming from different cultures and inhabiting this region.

*Jovem Despertar* is an opportunity for learning, integration and formation in order to live and to embrace differences as a value enriching all of us by welcoming children from different ethnic groups and of different nationalities. The Summer camp - which is held every year in Santarém in July - represents a crucial moment in the process of integration and of the enhancement of cultural differences. It is exactly here, in Santarém, that the Comboni Missionaries have started the European Novitiate.

We can tell many stories with a happy ending about children who have visibly improved their school performance after they started to attend *Jovem Despertar*. The Centre has become a reference point for children and teenagers, and a place where they feel welcomed so that they come here even when they do not need to study or to do their homework.

## **A mission of close proximity**

Our experience in Camarate takes us within the reality of other cultures: this makes us more aware of the fact that the mission is here and now. Africa came to us, and it is exactly here that we are called to live our

missionary vocation at the service of the impoverished and the most abandoned people in the style of Comboni. Our service is lived with patience, and we must be able to listen, and to share the other people's life by living a simple and poor lifestyle which makes us really feel like brothers and sisters.

We are constantly challenged to reflect seriously on our mission and on the style of our presence in Europe as Comboni Family. We often feel helpless when meeting daily challenges concerning the vastness of the social needs of people we live amongst.

### **Some challenges**

We are dealing with major challenges to keep *Jovem Despertar* open and operating; to pay the rent, to pay for electricity and water are just some of them. Nevertheless, the main problem is to expand urgently the space we work in since it is too small for the number of children who attend it.

The missionary staff also desires to widen his field of action in order to give an answer to children and teenagers, and even support to the family situation they live in. This can be achieved through the development of some activities in collaboration with the children's mothers to help these women living their lives with the greatest possible dignity. It is further necessary to empower them to fight for their own rights in a society which is marked by discrimination against women, especially when their culture is different.

Activities in collaboration with young people and teenagers attending *Jovem Despertar* are being planned. We plan to start a dance and music group as a mean to promote and defend the rights of the diverse migrant communities. We believe that this a way to integrate young people, and to help them to value themselves and to develop their talents at the same time.

### **Vision for the future**

The sustainability of the project is a great challenge to all the missionaries brothers and sisters who work in it, both financially and personally. A colleague of ours who works in Africa once said: "Educational

projects will never be self-sustainable". We understand that when we look at the local social reality, it will not be easy to achieve financial self-maintenance for this project; the beneficiaries, in fact, would find difficult to participate in its sustainability in a substantial way. Our presence here is motivated by this extreme difficulty.

*Jovem Despertar* has been working also because of the generous dedication of some volunteers. They are all extraordinary people who daily devote some time to stay with these children and teenagers. We feel the need for a definite commitment by the Provincial Councils of the Comboni Family on our part. We would like them to guarantee the sending of other missionaries brothers and sisters for the continuity of the project.

The missionary staff's desire to widen its physical space - at present, *Jovem Despertar* operates in a garage! - and fields of activity are motivated by the will to respond more effectively to the needs arising every day.

The future of *Jovem Despertar* also involves networking with other associations such as Caritas Portugal in Lisbon, Camarate Parish, Camarate Community Centre, Sacavém Health Centre, Schools, Torre's neighbourhood Association and Gypsies Diocesan Pastoral Care with whom we have been working for years. We are supported also by the Focolare Movement.

There is still much to be done! We keep on walking along paths of hope at the service of the disadvantaged groups of our society in the certainty that our contribution stands for the seed mentioned in the Gospel. Although it is small, the seed is growing and bearing abundant fruit for the building of the Kingdom.

# New lifestyles and mission

**Antonio Fazio**

**Chiara Battacchi**

**And the Comboni Lay Missionaries Group**

## **Italy**

We chose to deal with New Lifestyles<sup>30</sup> in 2011 following the encounter with Adriano Sella<sup>31</sup> and his work for the “Interdiocesan Network New Lifestyles” which combines experience and animation activities of Italian dioceses committed in the field. Some members of our community began to attend the study group “Plot a course”, a campaign by Francesco Gesualdi<sup>32</sup> in Bologna; this initiative was aimed at thinking, bringing forward proposals on the best practice, and developing new economic models. The study group gathered representatives of different realities involved in the territory (in terms of gas distribution, fair trade, ethical finance, access to land, organic, co-housing and so on), and individual citizens interested in the matter. We were therefore provoked to be well-informed and trained both in the ecclesial and in the extra-ecclesial context, and to learn more about local realities. As a missionary group, we have been guided by the awareness that a globalised and networked society requires a great deal of effort: it is in fact vital to evaluate the extent to which our daily actions - on a personal, communitarian and social level - affect the survival of Planet Earth and the lives of peoples seemingly far from us. It seemed thus important to us to be aware of the tools that people hold in their hands; those very instruments can be used by anyone both to change their daily lives and relationships and to influence policy and economic decision-makers’ choices. After two years of training, we realised the time had come: we had to use our knowledge to raise awareness especially within the Church where awareness on such issues is considerably lower than in the secular world even now.

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30 New Lifestyle will be indicated by the initials NL in the subsequent parts.

31 Adriano Sella from Vicenza is a lay missionary of the creation and new lifestyles. He has worked for many years in the Amazon (Brazil) where he was coordinator of the Commission Justice and Peace and Social Pastorals of the Episcopal Conference of Brazil of the North II region.

32 Francesco Gesualdi was a pupil of Fr. Lorenzo Milani; he is an activist and the founder of the New Development Model Centre in Vecchiano (Pisa, Italy).

We have been doing animation within churches and also in other contexts since 2013, and we have been using the material provided by the inter-diocesan network website by revising it in a personal way. We started by the “new lifestyles pavilion” (for informational purposes only), and then we went on by the “boycottshop” which helps thinking about<sup>33</sup> critical consumption.

Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* has given a great contribution on raising awareness on these problems, and it also has enabled us to carry out our campaign on a deep spiritual level. In the light of his words, we have organised moments of popular reading of the Bible which were linked to these topics. The popular reading of the Bible is a tool which enables us to analyse reality from a faith perspective. We seek to question ourselves and the system we live in starting by the Word of God and contextualising it into areas of daily life. It is crucial to find again the Dream of God and His preferential option, and not to passively accept all that our social-economic system (we should call it “mammon”) induces us to think and to do.

«*The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume*» (*Laudato Si’*, n. 204) reminds us Pope Francis. Consumerism - the key feature of the capitalist economic system- in which we are daily immersed needs for this relational, idealistic and communitarian void. It is necessary to underline that, while dealing with economical and social subjects, the focus of the work on NL is the changing of relations we are living in four areas: with things, with people, with nature, and with the world community. This changing is well depicted by the interdiocesan network’s symbol: an open hand with four different coloured fingers representing those relations and the thumb - the fifth finger - that stands for the “spirituality” allowing us to combine them and to make them resonate by snapping them.

«*The creation accounts in the book of Genesis (...) suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to “have dominion” over*

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33 You can visit the website: <http://www.goccedigiustizia.it/>

the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it”» (Gen 2:15 - *Laudato Si*’, n.66). This reading key of NL’s proposal takes on a spiritual meaning, thus becoming a call to conversion.

The people we encounter and who are committed in this field have proven to be responsive and open-minded precisely because these topics are concrete, and they influence everyday life. The response by the parishes has been highly positive and has obtained the proposal of further meetings. Furthermore, we have realised that to be informed on the actions carried out by multinational companies and States is becoming more and more challenging, as the economic reality is complex, ever-changing and tends to escape controls.

Bishop Matteo Zuppi’s arrival has fostered reflection on NL even in Bologna; under his impetus, the diocese has joined the interdiocesan network. Consequently, the “Diocesan table for the creation” has been created. The latter involves different realities including our group. As LMC group, we are committed in learning and teaching the encyclical letter “*Laudato Si*” by means of encounters and prayer vigils. On the occasion of G7 Environment in 2017, we have organised a special vigil in the city centre of Bologna.

Documents on the “*Laudato Si*” were drawn up by the Commission Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation of the Comboni Missionaries Italian Province; they are a further tool to keep on doing animation in the years ahead, along with *Nigrizia* and *Combonifem* magazines whose articles are often used by our groups.

As diocesan table’s members, we had the opportunity to participate in the last two editions of the Franciscan Festival where we had proposed workshops addressed to adults and children.

Within the “Table”, we also have given our contribution to the adaptation, writing and distribution of a short guide on new lifestyles<sup>34</sup>; it is directly addressed to parishes, and it also has inspired the organisation of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation which was held in Bologna for the first time.

To be involved in this field represents a highly enriching experience to us, as we can question ourselves and intertwine relationships with realities dealing with these issues, both inside and outside the Church. As missionaries, we also consider that is vital to be present in those

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34 You can consult the online website <https://reteinterdiocesana.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/piccola-guida-interni.pdf>

areas where Christians represent the minority or they are totally absent. Our involvement in the STOP-TTIP campaign and in the protest movement to G7 Environment held in Bologna originates from the urgency of working together on concrete topics beyond differences. We also support local campaigns such “Regeneration, no speculation”<sup>35</sup>; it was born by a group of citizens as a protest against the building of another shopping centre in the largest green area of the city, and it addresses to the Municipality of Bologna the request to redevelop this area as a “urban forest”.

To deal with issues linked to the NL in this historical moment is our chance to discuss this economical and social system in its essence, since it has adverse effects on million people and on the whole planet’s ecosystem. The NL could stand for the stone that broke off, struck the statue on its feet of iron and fired clay, and crushed them.<sup>36</sup>

This is a hard challenge requiring an open-minded approach, inclusion and dialogue with other groups who are often outside of the religious world and, nevertheless, have been committed in these themes for a long time.

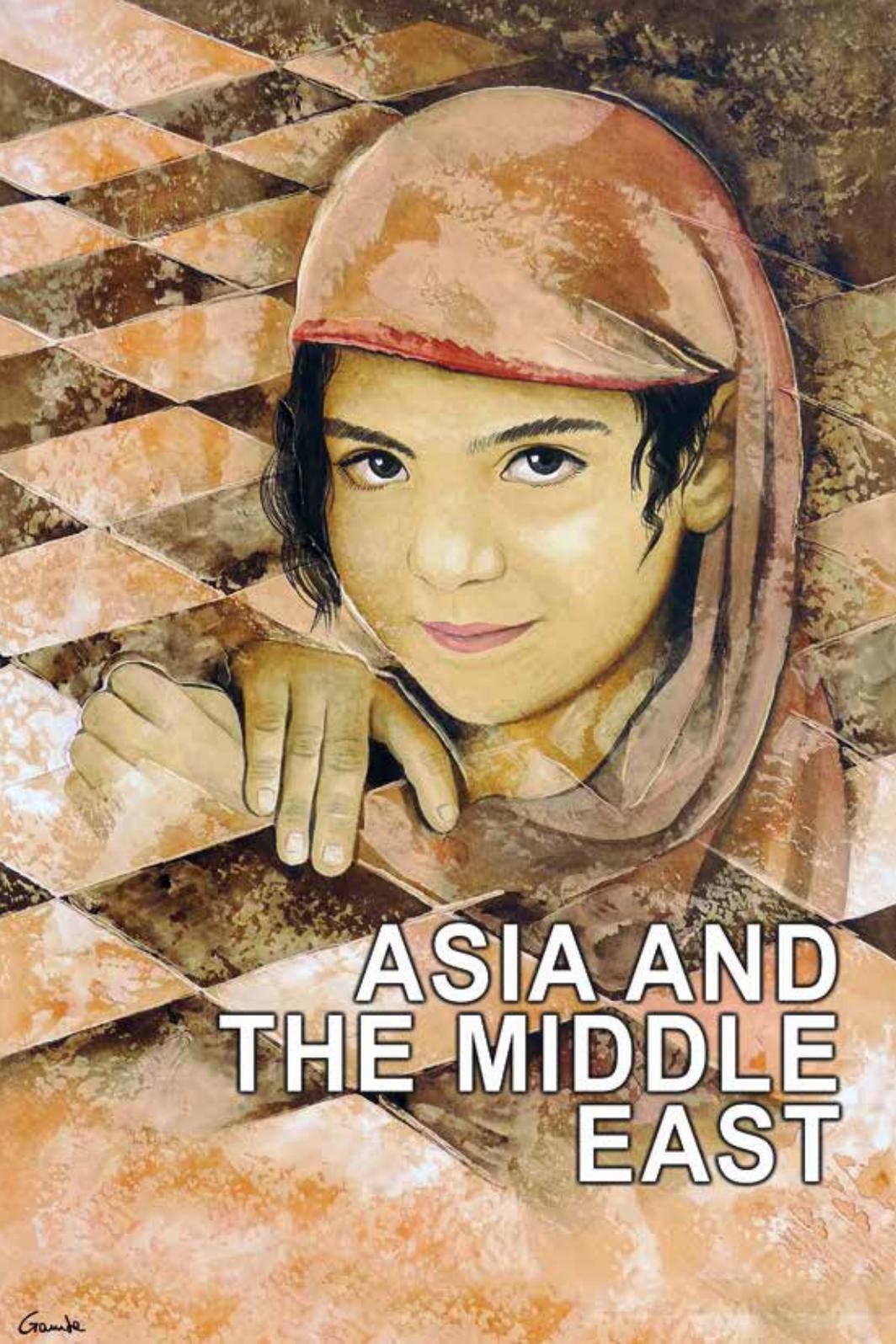
As a group, we are trying to create synergies with different local groups facing difficulties resulting from our limited number of members. We believe that it is fundamental to start over from direct knowledge, from walking together with people by overcoming differences and rather focusing on the values we have in common. This is more and more important in a historical period where reference points are diminishing and mistrust is increasing. Saint Daniel Comboni’s motto “*To save Africa with Africa*” can be now extended on a global scale: we are all responsible for the contexts we live in, and their salvation depends on any little decision we daily take.

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35 <https://rigenerazionenospeculazione.wordpress.com/>

36 Daniel 2:24-49



A painting of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored headscarf with a red band. She is looking directly at the viewer through a diamond-shaped lattice pattern. Her hands are resting on the lattice. The background is a textured, brownish-gold color.

# ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST



# Human bridges as a community and Church

**Azezet Habtezghi Kidane**  
**Agnese Elli**  
**Comboni Missionary Sisters**

## **Israel**

The Comboni Missionary Sisters are present in the Holy Land, or more precisely in Bethany, since 1966. The community - that was first plunged into the complex Arab-Israeli conflict and which is now inserted into a context characterised by extreme political instability - lives under the shadow of the West Bank barrier. The wall affects the local residents' life and splits the community and the village in two. The small Christian community is suffering all the more the consequences of this condition which lasts over time.

Bethany's community is important and strategic as it is inserted into a context where world balance is put at stake. The Comboni Missionary presence is essential and necessary here: we promote some initiatives inspired by ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and we are cooperating in order to encourage the evangelical teachings on justice and peace. This community is blessed with the gift of living in those Holy Places where the Salvation History took place. Such a gift is for us a responsibility of prayer and intercession towards reconciliation between peoples; it is also a witness and a commitment because today, as a Cenacle made up of female Apostles, we incarnate and bear witness to the existence of Christ and to the values of the Kingdom in this holy and tormented land.

The Occupied Palestinian Territories' Economy is marked by a gradual decline since 2000, when as a response to the terrorist attacks following the Second Intifada the Government of Israel imposed the building of a barrier which would separate the two populations on a selective basis. The Israeli strategy of closing borders, the complete closing of several areas, the building of the Separation Wall which is often referred as "security fence" - nevertheless used exactly as a separation wall -,

the interruption of entrance permission into Israel to Palestinian workers for security reasons still have severe effects, such as the dramatic growth of unemployment rate. Around 26% of the Occupied Territories' inhabitants are unemployed and 60% of the families live in poverty or deprivation.

The West Bank barrier's influence economy and fundamental human rights in relation to property; land, water, work, health, and education is devastating. The impossibility of encounter and exchange between the two peoples is one of the most serious consequences of this "separation" causing the annexation of large areas of the Palestinian territory. Starting from 2014, a whole generation of children on both sides of the wall is condemned not to meet and to know each other neither to exchange their dreams for the future, their fears and their history of oppression as a result of the adults' phobias.

In recent years the Comboni community in Bethany has begun new activities in attempting to reach people, in particular the ones affected most by the adverse conditions of the country.

The choice of our presence among the Jahalin Bedouin in the West Bank, Judean Desert, and the collaboration with local and international organisations of Justice and Peace, such as *Rabbis for Human Rights* and *Physicians for Human Rights - Israel* originated from our faithfulness to the Comboni charism "*to make common cause with the poor and the outcasts*". The Jahalin Bedouin tribe is one of the most discriminated peoples in the Israeli - Palestinian society, and they were the first victims of the land requisition committed by the army. Their camps in southern-east Jerusalem and the majority of their grazing lands were quickly fenced in and requisitioned. The surrounding areas and water sources were declared natural reserves and as a consequence pastoralism was banned. The massive action of colonisation which would have changed forever the face of the regional planning in this area was with the nomads who were urged by any means to change their traditional lifestyle and to abandon the practice of pastoralism. Their camps are now located in residual spaces limited to narrow border regions threatened by the advancing of the wall, settlements, military infrastructure and the fast-growing urban development characterising the area. Tents was replaced by shacks made up by recycled material; those areas are now absolutely similar to African and Asian metropolitan suburbs'

shantytowns. There are no basic services, and the sanitary and social indexes turn out to be sharply lower than the already alarming Palestinian average.

The Jahalin are confined in the middle of the desert, and they live in tents hosting from 100 up to 150 people in camps which run parallel to the Jerusalem-Jericho road. Those lands are far from infrastructures, services, and water springs. With the loss of the access to water and pastures, the Jahalin community had to reduce the number of their flocks, and consequently to increase the request for food aid. The aid mainly came from the UNRWA - United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - until a few months ago. However, the policy of the president of the United States has now cut funding thus making the economical situation of those communities even more critical. Some villages which are camped in the middle of the desert are totally devoid of water sources, and people are obliged to buy water from tank trucks.

Our presence in their midst shall be a symbol of reconciliation and justice: we are human bridges among these people and also the concrete sign that God never leaves them, even when they are abandoned by their own Palestinian brothers and forsaken by the international community.

We tiptoed in this reality. First of all, we needed to get to know each other and to experience their culture and traditions since they were crucial features in order to be accepted and welcomed by them. Now, we are fully integrated into their families. On our part, there is great respect and highest regard to their ancestral culture and to the sacredness of the host after the example of Abraham and Sarah.

We attempt to convey evangelical values, such as fairness on both sides and forgiveness. The latter concept is missing in Muslim religion so often it arouses admiration.

It is vital not to introduce ourselves as individual sisters carrying out some specific ministries, but to present ourselves under the name of the Comboni Missionary Sister and of the local Church. We strongly believe that this is the gateway to our ministries' continuity, especially when unavoidable changes occur in our lives, the Missionary Sisters' live.

The inadequacy of the education level - closely tied to poverty, underdevelopment, continuing pressure, uncertainty and precariousness - significantly contributes to the marginalisation of the Bedouin community: hence, our commitment alongside the Palestinian Bedouins towards whom any right is denied. Education is a liberating weapon. Destruction and forced relocation are opposed to any international law standard, indeed.

The continuous raids by the Israel Defense Forces into Bedouin villages and the campaigns carried out by Israeli and Palestinian activists, although they are motivated by a spirit of solidarity towards the Bedouin's cause, considerably disturb the communities' quiet life. They cause stress as they jeopardise nursery and primary schools' proper functioning; the emergency of aggressive behaviours in children are negative consequences of the above-mentioned episodes. Our task is, therefore, to provide teachers with essential tools enabling children to channel their aggression into constructive activities. Aggressiveness is actually a message the child addresses to his or her parents and teachers, and the society he or she lives in; this often hide behavioural problems.

The great instability and the precariousness which characterise nearly all villages where our nursery schools are located has called for a stronger solidarity action. To this end, the mission coordinator and the Bedouin leaders give advice on how to act in order to manage stress and anxiety caused by the Israel Defense Forces' continuous raids in villages, priceless to us.

We organise several meetings with the Bedouin leaders and under the supervision of the coordinator in order to shed some light on intervention issues. We have a great cooperative relationship with them. In the beginning, the collaboration was focused on choosing those Bedouin girls who would have worked as kindergarten teachers, and the facilities which would have welcomed nursery schools. Now, it mainly deals with the measures to be adopted in delicate balance conditions related to a context of great insecurity and precariousness which is constantly threatened by demolition orders.

On the one hand, we have faced several challenges which were due to the location of the Bedouin villages on the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel; on the other hand, we can state that we have achieved

positive results in the last few years as regard to:

- The improvement of the education level and of children's school performance by preparing the little ones to the insertion into the school world.
- The teacher's staff training to carry on the running of individual nursery schools independently. A great attention has been given not just to new teachers' formation, but also to updating training through workshops on different subjects.
- Female integration into the labour market as an alternative to the high unemployment rate recorded among Jahalin youth thanks to the development of first-aid, hairdressing, and cutting and sewing courses.
- Finally, we have started an awareness campaign in collaboration with Al-Quds University on the genetic disease among Bedouin families attributed to consanguineous marriage.

The path we have walked together with this community has led to the independence of one the nursery schools which was initially established; then, two kindergartens were incorporated into it and now new schools are opening. A more responsible involvement by the village leaders, the children's parents and the whole community are tools to be used towards a further autonomy of nursery schools. A great hope supports every single step we take.

# Our mission in Sri Lanka

**Sister Libanos Ayele  
And Sisters of the Community in Sri Lanka**

**Sri Lanka**

## **Introduction**

In 2005, a Sri Lankan couple based in Dubai and working alongside our sisters in St. Mary's Parish, presented a proposal from the Bishop of Kandy to our sisters there. Raymond and Priyanthi, while visiting Europe planned to meet our Superior General in Rome to present the same proposal, tragically, the day before this encounter was scheduled to take place, the life of Raymond was cut short by a fatal car accident, leaving Priyanthi seriously injured and widowed.

The proposal ended there, or so it had seemed at the time.

In 2008, in response to the reflection of the Inter Chapter Assembly held the previous year, a team of three sisters was asked to explore possibilities more closely, through a visit to the Philippines and to Sri Lanka. The findings of the team led the members to propose an opening in Sri Lanka, in response to that still open invitation from the Bishop of Kandy. A further longer visit followed in 2010, in order to gather more information and to present a more detailed proposal to the Chapter. Then, as the Chapter Assembly voted positively to accept the proposal to open in Sri Lanka, the community of Talawakelle was born, at least in theory.

## **The context**

Sri Lankan society is made up, mainly, of three ethnic groups: (1) **Singhalese** who are Buddhists or Christians, (2) **Tamils** who are either Hindus or Christians, and (3) **Moors** who are Muslims. The religious percentage in the whole country of Sri Lanka is as follows:

- Buddhists = 70.2 %
- Hindus = 12.6%
- Muslims = 9.7%
- Christians = 7.4 (Catholics = 6.1%)

In the up-country, where Talawakelle is situated, approximately 90% of the population is of Hindu religion, 2% Buddhists, 2% Muslims and 6% Christians. Among the three groups, the 'Indian Tamils' who live and work in the Tea Estates are the poorest and most abandoned and discriminated in the country. They were brought by the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as cheap labour for the tea plantations. Due to the fact that they come from the lowest castes of Indian society, they are discriminated by the government. Only recently, according to Bishop Vianney (the Bishop of Kandy) has the Catholic Church begun to take a stance to promote these people and to try to improve their living conditions.

The area of the up-country, is divided into Estates and is dominated by tea plantation and factories. The wage of the workers is little. In fact, not having enough money, quite many of them borrow from the tea factory and when the salary comes, they remain with little money in their hands.

The families find it hard to cope with the economy of their household. So in many instances, one of the parents goes far away, even abroad in search of better jobs and income.

## **The motivation**

The Bishop of Kandy, when visiting Dubai saw the work of our Sisters, he was highly impressed by their ability to involve the lay people and organise the parish work and activities in a very effective way. **So he asked for our presence here among the tea plantation people** so that they may be empowered. Being tied to the tea plantation, the people have little opportunities to improve the standard of their lives.

The dream of the Bishop is to educate the children of the estates towards a better future. In order to do this, his plan was to gradually transform

the school from Tamil medium to English medium. By doing this, possibilities of higher University education, and better employment prospects would be opened up for the young people. Through education in English, the doors of the isolated world of the tea estates would open up to other possibilities and perhaps to freedom from a life of hard labour and poverty. Perhaps, it would also make this social group more conscious of their rights to dignity and equality. So, the task of the sisters would also be to train, accompany and assist the teachers of Talawakelle in this process.

## **The response**

As it is stated in the introduction, it took long time for our Congregation to respond to the request of the Bishop. However, at one point our Congregation decided to extend our presence in the Far East also because from Dubai we got vocations of Indian and Philippino descends.

In March 2012, our mission was started in Talawakelle, St. Patrick's College and Parish, in the Diocese of Kandy.

The Diocese of Kandy has 17 parishes in the Nuwara Eliya district which is an area exclusively dedicated to the production of tea. Therefore, the majority of the population of the Diocese are tea plantation workers.

St. Patrick's Church is a parish among the Tea Estates of the Nuwara Eliya district. The parish numbers about 1,200 families (6000 parishioners), spread over an area of about 30 kilometres. There are 63 small substations with 21 chapels which are served by the parish priest and his assistant. People who live further away can come to the main Church only very rarely. However, every two months there are Masses in the substations. As the roads within and around the estates are very bad, it is not easy to reach out them. This pastoral work is done in the evenings after the people return from work on the plantations.

Next to the Church, there is St. Patrick's College that hosts around 600 students. It has 1 to 13 grades.

## **The ways and means of the beginning**

The General Superior and her Counselors (General Direction = GD) took charge of the mission.

The GD called the first three sisters to Rome and gave them the chance to know each other, and to come to know something about Sri Lanka. For this purpose, Sri Lankan priests and nuns (who were studying in Rome) were invited to come and talk about their country to the sisters.

With great solemnity, the sisters were sent from Rome to Sri Lanka and accompanied by one of the general Counselors.

The orientation period ended with a sending ceremony held in the Generalate. In her parting message to the sisters, Sr. Luzia Premoli, Superior general, underlined that, *“this is a moment of the Spirit, a moment which concludes several years of reflection, dialogue, exploratory visits, discussions and a decision in Chapter. Now we are ready to extend the presence of the Combonian charism already present in Asia in diaspora and to go beyond. It is a moment characterised both by continuity and discontinuity: Continuity because with your readiness to respond to the proposal, you are answering the call, always ancient and always new, to go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News (Mc. 16.15). Continuity because even today, the Spirit invites us to widen the space of our tent, and go beyond, because the mission never ends. Discontinuity because this is the first mission on Asian soil, the first enculturation of the charism, feminine style, in Asia., the first call to Save Asia with Asia!”*

One of the Counselors has taken the responsibility to accompany and follow closely the sisters and the process of opening; however, one at a time, all the members of the GD came to visit and assist the sisters.

At the beginning, a good amount of money was given by the GD to the community to put it into the bank so that with its interest the community could have some financial support.

The sisters really appreciated the closeness and support that the GD showed towards them.

After a while, the GD passed the responsibility to the Middle East Province, and so now the community of Tallawakelle is part of the Middle East Province.

## **The results /objectives**

The insertion within the school and the parish was almost immediate. Although the problem of Tamil language was a block for direct communication with the people, the sisters tried their best to remember the recommendation that was given to them before they left Rome:

*Be happy – because our happiness is a powerful witness to people;*

*Be Present – because people generally desire our presence rather than our work;*

*Be there – that is, deeply in touch with the realities and the culture of the people.*

In St. Patrick's College, the sisters started teaching English. In order to help the students to acquire more knowledge of English, they taught extra classes in the after-noon or during the week-ends.

After some research and consultation, it was decided to start a bilingual programme and not English medium as it would have been the Bishop's dream. The English medium programme is too expensive and hard for the majority of the people. Therefore, during the academic year 2015 - 2016, the first batch of bi-lingual students started from grade 6 only. This first batch is in grade 9 and in January 2020 they will be in grade 10. Since then every year a new group is being admitted in the bilingual programme; therefore there are grade 8, grade 7 and grade 6 students and the number is increasing.

Besides, the community is also involved in the pastoral work of St. Patrick's Parish. They teach catechism to bilingual students, they go to distribute Holy Communion to the sick in various Estates. As they are busy in the school during the week days, they do the pastoral work during the weekends.

## **Challenges**

As the sisters of the new community of Talawakelle started to settle down, the task of familiarising themselves with the Tamil language and Tamil culture, with no doubt they had to discover the wisdom of sr. Luzia's parting words to them about new beginnings.

*“Surely, our Father, St. Daniel Comboni, in his wisdom and eloquence, whispers softly to us: The works of God are born and grow at the foot of the Cross. I am certain that the beginnings of this new mission have already been sealed in the sign of the Cross. Yes, difficulties and tribulations will not be lacking, especially at the beginning. Rejoice! It is the sure sign that the presence is truly Combonian.”*

In fact, the first challenge the sisters met was learning the Tamil language. They could not find proper teachers who knew how to teach Tamil as second language to adults. For some months the sisters tried to study Tamil, but they found it hard.

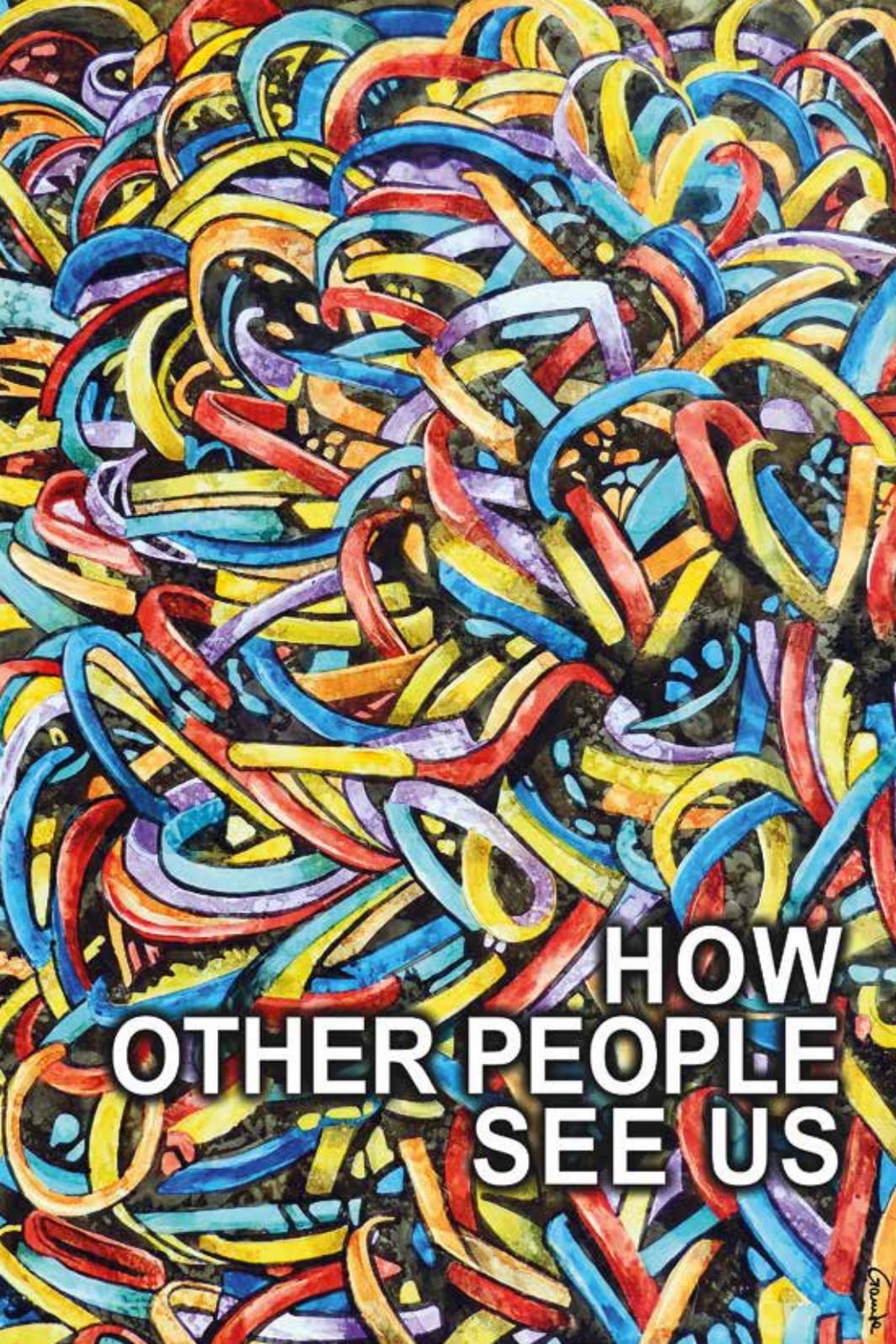
One of the sisters went to try to Jaffna side (in the north of the country) in one community of the Holy Family Sisters who speak Tamil. Somehow it was helpful, but she did not stay long enough to learn more. Another sister went to India for the same purpose only for two months. Due to the fact of little knowledge of Tamil, the sisters find it hard to communicate properly with the people.

Another dream and plan of the sisters is to train English teachers; however it is not easy to find such teachers in this area and from other parts of the country, teachers are not willing to come. Teachers find it hard to accommodate themselves in this poor area.

## **Conclusion**

Now the community has four members and all are happy of the ministry they are involved in! The dream to empower the people (somehow) is coming true and in the near future, the sisters might have an expanded community which will be of more support, morally and physically!





**HOW  
OTHER PEOPLE  
SEE US**



# Blooming almond trees

**Giuliana Martirani**  
**Committed lay woman**

*«Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you not see it?» (Isaiah 43:19)*

This verse never had more important realisation than in these experiences selected by the Comboni Missionary Sisters to illustrate their *RES NOVAE*, that is to say the new that is blossoming or their “*Blooming Almond Trees*”. I invite you to read this volume by the **METHOD**:

- **SEE**: their stories within this book here divided by me into three thematic groups uniting in an interfaith - ecumenical - interreligious way all world religions:  
JUSTICE, PEACE AND INTEGRITY OF CREATION.
- **JUDGE**: to read them in the light of the BEATITUDES, of the WORD OF GOD or the HUMAN WORDS chosen by the Comboni communities who are narrating.
- **ACT**: some links to:
  - Deepen the already exposed CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMICAL, POLITICAL AND INTERNATIONAL INNOVATIONS.
  - Organise SPEECHES, DEBATES AND NETWORKS DURING AND FOLLOWING THE SOCIAL FORUM.

## **JUSTICE** **EARTH, COMMON HOMELAND**

### **1. WAKE UP TO HOPE, PORTUGAL**

*«Wake up, my soul! Wake up, harp and lyre! I will wake up the dawn.» (Psalm 57:8)*

## **2. CHILD TRAFFICKING FOR EXPLOITATION IN BEGGING IN THE REGION OF KARAMOJA, UGUANDA.**

*«The Church cannot remain silent, nor can her institutions turn a blind eye to the baneful reality of street children and street women.» (Pope Francis)<sup>37</sup>.*

*TOWARDS AN EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL INNOVATION:*

- Dance, Art and Sculpture GROUPS that will become later COOPERATIVES.
- ORCHESTRA PROJECT according to the Venezuelan method of José Antonio Abreu who was the founder of EL SISTEMA.<sup>38</sup>
- TWINNINGS AND NETWORKS with NGOs, Associations and Municipal Institutions of towns which have experienced - and still experience - this problem: to connect, towards a Cooperation Project, the Portuguese and the Karamoja experience to the Neapolitan experience in Sanità district, and the Palermitan one in Tau Centre.<sup>39</sup>

## **3. PRESENCE OF THE COMBONI MISSIONARY SISTERS ON THE SOUTH BORDER OF MEXICO, TAPACHULA, CHIAPAS.**

*«Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.» (Luke 6:36)*

*TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL AND SOCIAL INNOVATION:*

- To develop contacts and actions in collaboration with the GLOBAL SANCTUARY MOVEMENT.
- To spread the GENEVA CONVENTION and its NON-REFOULEMENT PRINCIPLE and the UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION on MIGRANT WORKERS as well.
- To create Networks through the use of HUMANITARIAN VISAS and CORRIDORS.<sup>40</sup>

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37 *International Symposium on the Pastoral Care of the Street, 2015.*

38 <https://www.informagiovani-italia.com/jose-antonio-abreu-e-il-metodo-el-sistema.htm>

39 <https://www.facebook.com/orchestrageiovanilesanitansamble/>  
<http://mediatau.it/centrotau/centrotau/>

40 G. Martirani, *Porte Aperte. Qui nessuno è Straniero, Atlante delle Migrazioni*, 2017:

#### **4. SAINT DANIEL COMBONI COMMUNITY CENTRE, THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**

*Ignorance makes you a prisoner. However, not just walls are prisons but much more. A closed mind will live in prison forever.*

#### **5. SLAVERY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, PERU**

*Women trafficking in Peru has the face of a 13-year-old girl*

*TOWARDS A SOCIAL AND ECONOMICAL INNOVATION:*

- Implementation of a full path on SOCIAL AND PERSONAL REGENERATION: healthcare, educational, social, overall political, working and legal.<sup>41</sup>

#### **6. OUR MISSION IN SRI LANKA, SRI LANKA**

*«Be happy - because our happiness is a powerful witness to people.»*

*TOWARDS A CULTURAL AND ECONOMICAL INNOVATION:*

- The BAREFOOT COLLEGE creates RURAL COLLEGES and educates Illiterate Women coming from rural areas as SOLAR ENGINEERS in Africa and Asia. In order to overcome the language barrier, they teach through sign language.<sup>42</sup>

## **PEACE NON-VIOLENCE**

#### **7. ASSISTANCE MINISTRY TO OUR ELDERLY AND SICK SISTERS, ITALY**

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[http://ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/book\\_data/interno/1215259/](http://ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/book_data/interno/1215259/)  
<http://ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/libro/saggistica/338768/porte-aperte-4>

41 R. Giaretta, *Osare la speranza. La liberazione viene dal Sud* (Oasi).

<https://www.amazon.es/Osare-speranza-liberazione-viene-Oasi/dp/8861243053>  
<https://www.google.com/search?q=roy+bunker+barefoot+college&oq=roy+bunker&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.9966j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> - <https://www.barefootcollege.org/tag/bunker-roy/>

42 <https://www.google.com/search?q=roy+bunker+barefoot+college&oq=roy+bunker&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.9966j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> - <https://www.barefootcollege.org/tag/bunker-roy/>

«There was also a prophetess, Anna (...) and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers». (Luke 2:25-38)

*TOWARDS A COMMUNITARIAN INNOVATION:*

- To value on the basis of what recommended by Fr. Tonino Bello<sup>43</sup> the opportunity not to displace the elderly and sick sisters from their offices due to the possibility given by TELEHEALTH<sup>44</sup>, currently present even in the South of the World.

## 8. SOLIDARITY WITH SOUTH SUDAN, SOUTH SUDAN

«Since you will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard.» (Acts 22:15)

*TOWARDS A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL INNOVATION:*

- To accompany their 5R with the “R PATH” OF NON-VIOLENCE and MILDNESS.<sup>45</sup>
- To carry out a RESTORATIVE JUSTICE Plan.<sup>46</sup>
- Among the individual person, and the person-victim or the community-victim (RESTORATIVE JUSTICE).
- Among groups belonging to the same geographical area or country (United Nations Truth and Reconciliation Commissions<sup>47</sup> and Permanent People’s Tribunal).<sup>48</sup>

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43 G.Martirani, *Nonviolenza*. Don Tonino Bello, Oscar Romero, Charles De Foucauld, 2017.  
To read it: <http://reader.ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/v/1223837/>  
To buy it: <https://ilmiolibro.kataweb.it/libro/saggistica/391674/nonviolenza/>

44 <https://www.amref.es/news/nueva-plataforma-help-de-telemedicina-en-afrika/>  
<https://agensis.it/mondo/2019/06/01/cooperazione-bartolo-global-health-telemedicines-onlus-la-telemedicina-sta-rivoluzionando-la-sanita-in-afrika/>  
*Patients enroll and download the application on the online platform «AFYA PAP».*

45 G.Martirani, *Nonviolenza*. Don Tonino Bello; quoted in footnote 6; Hildegard Goss-Mayr, *Come i Nemici diventano Amici*, EMI, 1997:  
[https://inbox.unina.it/horde/imp/view.php?mailbox=INBOX&index=209410&actionID=view\\_attach&id=2.2&mimecache=18dfd4ffd62391244e281202d66690b7](https://inbox.unina.it/horde/imp/view.php?mailbox=INBOX&index=209410&actionID=view_attach&id=2.2&mimecache=18dfd4ffd62391244e281202d66690b7)

46 G. Martirani, *Legalizzazione della vendetta o riparazione e riconciliazione?*, *Rivista Desk on line, Unione Cattolica della Stampa Italiana*, <http://www.ucsi.it/desk.html>

47 [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commissione\\_per\\_la\\_verita%27C3%A0\\_e\\_la\\_riconciliazione](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commissione_per_la_verita%27C3%A0_e_la_riconciliazione)

48 <https://www.fondazionebasso.it/archivio-storico/fondi-archivio/sezione-internazionale/tp/>

## 9. INTER-CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE ITALIAN HOSPITAL UMBERTO I - CAIRO, EGYPT

«We celebrate the Eucharist some days by the Coptic rite, and some days by the Latin rite in Italian.»

*TOWARDS AN EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMICAL INNOVATION:*

- To share the INTERNAL STATUTES which was elaborated by them with PARISHES and RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES.
- PARTNERSHIPS ON INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT with European Universities and the DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT of the Vatican State to a new *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*.<sup>49</sup>
- ERASMUS + FOR AFRICA and the UE- AFRICA STRATEGY, JAMBO and CLICK.<sup>50</sup>
- INTERCULTURAL PARTNERSHIP between Schools of the South of the World and European Schools for student exchange program aimed at students attending the second to last year of the secondary school.<sup>51</sup>

## 10. MALBES MISSIONARY COMMUNITY, PADUA

«What do you see, Jeremiah? I replied: I see a branch of an almond tree. The Lord said to me: You have seen correctly, for I watch over my word to accomplish it.» (Jeremiah 1:11-12).

*TOWARDS A SOCIAL AND INTERNATIONAL INNOVATION:*

- THE 7 CHURCHES PROJECT of Social Cohesion (PARISH) and

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49 G.Martirani, *Piano per la Rigenerazione dell’Africa, Piano pastorale Meridiano con gli occhi e i cuori dei ‘secondi’*, Simposio sul Piano per la Rigenerazione dell’Africa e sulle Regole del 1871, Archivio Madri della Nigrizia, settembre 2013, p. 263.

50 <https://www.google.com/search?q=%E2%80%A2+ERASMUS+%2B+PER+L%27+AFRICA+e+LA+STRATEGIA+UE-AFRICA&oq=%E2%80%A2+09ERASMUS+%2B+PER+L%27+AFRICA+e+LA+STRATEGIA+UE-AFRICA&aqs=chrome..69i57.3266j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

51 <https://www.intercultura.it/paesi/sudafrica/>; - <https://www.intercultura.it/paesi/ghana/>

Solidarity (MISSION)<sup>52</sup> to regenerate *Christian parish communities* responding to specific work needs on 3 goals: Abolition of Xenophobia, War and Hunger.

- GROUP OF UNIVERSAL CIVIL SERVICE (UCS)<sup>53</sup> divided into 3 sectors: *Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation* in order to manage and to elaborate the suggestions named here, identification of further suggestions, and collaboration on the “7 Churches Project” of Social Cohesion and Solidarity .

## INTEGRITY OF CREATION BEAUTY

### 11. MOTHER EARTH CENTRE, ZAMBIA

*«Sustainable farming and eco-friendly attitudes and actions in a holistic approach.»*

*TOWARDS A SOCIAL AND ECONOMICAL INNOVATION:*

- To carry out FAIR TRADE and ETHICAL FINANCE PROJECTS in collaboration with European NGOs committed to solidarity and the TASK FORCE FOR RURAL AFRICA<sup>54</sup> for the processing, production and manufacturing of the MORINGA, the highly nutritional plant which is produced in the Centre.

### 12. HUMAN BRIDGES AS A COMMUNITY AND CHURCH, PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

*«The community lives under the shadow of the West Bank barrier. The*

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52 G.Martirani, *Sognatori. Gli scienziati della Giustizia, della Pace e della Integrità del Creato, Senza Confini*, Ilmiolibrokatweb, 2020.

53 *Linee guida contributo per le attività di formazione generale per i volontari SCN/SCU* : [https://www.serviziocivile.gov.it/menu/top/normativa/circolare/lineeguidiformvol\\_scn\\_scu.aspx](https://www.serviziocivile.gov.it/menu/top/normativa/circolare/lineeguidiformvol_scn_scu.aspx)

54 <https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en>  
<https://www.fasi.biz/it/notizie/strategie/20063-task-force-per-l-africa-rurale-l-agenda-ue-per-investimenti-e-occupazione.html>; <http://www.maefahluang.org/>  
<https://www.google.com/search?q=roy+bunker+barefoot+college&oq=roy+bunker&aqs=chrome.1.69i-57j0l5.9966j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>; <https://www.barefootcollege.org/tag/bunker-roy/>

*wall affects the local residents' life and splits the community and the village in two.»*

*TOWARDS A SOCIAL AND ECONOMICAL INNOVATION:*

- NETWORK WITH POPULAR MOVEMENTS, the Landless Peoples' Movements, and the Indigenous People Networks.<sup>55</sup>
- DESERTEC PROJECT FOR SOLAR POWER.<sup>56</sup>
- WARKA WATER TOWERS, that is THE TREE OF WATER<sup>57</sup> for endogenous and participatory water production in the village.

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55 <https://www.google.com/search?q=Reti+dei+Popoli+Nativi.&oq=Reti+dei+Popoli+Nativi.&aqs=chrome..69i57.6306j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>  
<https://agensir.it/quotidiano/2016/6/9/rete-ecclesiale-panamazzoneca-incontro-popoli-indigeni-di-peru-brasile-e-colombia/>

56 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desertec>

57 <http://www.bioecogeo.com/warka-water-lalbero-che-in-etiopia-produce-acqua/>

# Continue to blaze trails and keep fighting

**Francesco Gesualdi**

**Coordinator of N.D.M.C. (New Development Model Centre)**

## **Italy**

I don't know what it means "doing mission", but I felt a profound connection with all the experiences I read in this book. All of them are consistent with the invitation that God addresses to us, that is to take part in His plan for the integral salvation which embraces the whole of creation from the perspective of eternity. All those experiences are further consistent with our Constitution which is not just limited to recall the importance of rights; every citizen and the whole community are in fact asked to play a part in achieving them. We are now living in a globalised world so we are required to take these actions not just here in Italy, but anywhere in the world especially in this historical period. We immediately attribute to the term "globalisation" an economic interpretation; however, we should point out that environmental globalisation has always existed, and it has always been deeply iniquitous due to the way human beings induce natural phenomena. Many environmental emergencies - starting from water scarcity and air pollution - were caused by a system that has been pursuing growth for two centuries, never wondering about the impact this would have had on the planet. Climate change is the theme attracting the attention now; it is caused by a carbon dioxide production which is far superior to the oceans and the plant system's absorption capacity. Unfortunately, it mainly affects tropical and subtropical areas: the poorest countries are therefore suffering the consequences, and it is putting them through hell after five centuries of colonial nightmare. However, Filipinos, Haitians, Bengalis and Chadians were not the ones who had produced carbon dioxide, although they were hit by the scourge of hurricanes, floods and drought. It was us, instead. The inhabitants of the so-called First World: Europeans, North-Americans, and Australians are the ones who produce carbon footprints six times higher than the sustainable ecological footprint which is about 1.7 ha per capita. It is in fact known that the 20% of the world population - the one whose per capita income is more than 25 \$ a day - produces the 68% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Therefore, wealthy countries cause pollution while poor countries bear the consequences

of it: this is the tragic reality of an unfair economic system which is interwoven with the environmental matters. If we really want to save our planet and the whole of humanity, rich countries are the ones who must change their attitude. It is right here that conversion must occur; consequently, it could not exist a more fitting prayer than the words in favour of Fr. Alex Zanotelli when he was about to come back to Italy. More or less, it went like this: “Oh Lord, send Your Spirit to him so that he may return to his white tribe to convert them”. To convert them mainly towards a different idea of progress so a different cosmology. The pillars of our culture are linearity, mechanism, reasoning and dualism. Linearity as a concept of time moving in one single direction, as a future-oriented arrow. Mechanism as an idea of nature working as a machine based on repetitive automatisms. Reasoning as a method of analysis based on splitting with a tendency to consider true only what is provable. Dualism as reality divided into opposing sides: on one side, the noble part based on common sense; on the other side, all the rest where the noble part - i.e. mankind - is entitled to submit everything, and nature in the first place.

As a result, linearity has caused people to lose their roots, as well as the inability of appreciating the past and the ousting of our predecessors on the part of those who judge our work. Mechanism has induced us to see bodies separated from each other making us believe that neither relations nor interdependency exist. Reasoning has pushed us to focus on details and losing sight of the wholeness. Dualism has made us believe that we could intervene in nature as we please, and oblige it to give us everything we wanted. This is the Anthropocene, an epoch dominated by human through the “technocratic paradigm” as defined by the *Laudato Si’*.

This powerful formula has increased the world GDP to 23 times from 1880 to 2020; this caused environmental changes which endangers our own survival, and simultaneously inequalities exploded. Amazon populations including indigenous people - and more in general Latin America peoples-compare and contrast well-living to the technocratic paradigm. Well living is a vision based on the assumption that we live in a permanent state of relation with everything that surround us, both animated or inanimate, on earth or in the sky, in the past or in the future. As everyone’s condition is affected by the whole condition and at the same time it influences the whole, we cannot analyse details without taking into account the whole, and we cannot act on details without changing the whole. Within a relation of constant interrelation

any change has an impact over the rest, not just in terms of space but also in terms of time. “You are me, and I am you; we are all part of the same painting, we are part of the earth and the earth is a part of us, we are part of the universe and part of a whole”: it is written on the wall of a school set up by Unicef in a remote corner of the Amazon. Therefore, reality cannot be faced by a linear and partitioned approach rather by a spiral and systemic thought being aware that acting without taking into account all that surrounds us causes mayhem, while acting attentively causes positive effects for everyone. This is well-living which is at the same time cosmic vision, rule of life and social plan. A plan of integral harmony with oneself, with community, and with nature in the awareness that there is no separation between individual and group, nature and mankind, present and future. A plan based on the conviction that if the single individuals are fine, then the community is fine and vice-versa. So everyone is required to act responsibly in front of the community, and the community in its turn to look after all of his members. Everyone is required to take care of nature that in its turn responds by allowing us to live well. A mutually plan which is integrated in the past and look ahead to the future in the belief that Earth has been borrowed for our children.

Ecological conversion of the opulent is the millennium challenge, and some signals give hope. These signals intertwine some experiences of this volume. The first sign is represented by Greta Thunberg’s *Fridays for future*. The movement still has no precise connotation but it has already underlined that in order to reduce carbon dioxide emissions we have to reconsider our consumption. The word “sobriety” is on everyone’s lips, and nevertheless it has many enemies. It is therefore fundamental to multiply initiatives to let people understand that sobriety is not a synonym for renunciation rather for sovereignty. It stands for the capacity of regaining possession of our willpower in order to evaluate what is really necessary to us and what is induced by advertisement, instead. Sobriety is not the return to the Palaeolithic or to the Medieval era rather the release from modern slavery, a subjugation made of useless and unnecessary things. This is the importance of the initiative in Bologna, an action which is aimed to the promotion of more fair and sustainable lifestyles.

The second sign bearing hope is the Sardines movement which is equally still not well defined. It was born to say *Stop!* to a climate of violence and hatred that some members of the right-wing are trying to foment. “We are normal people of all ages: we love our houses and families,

we are committed to our work, volunteering, sport activities, and free time. We put passion into helping the others, when and how we can do it. We love funny things, beauty, nonviolence (both verbal and physical), creativity and listening”. Here are some words taken by a message from them; a message expressing a great desire for a peaceful coexistence inspired by the logic of solidarity and welcoming. This is the importance of the initiative in Castel Volturno that, besides promoting the immigrants’ right to a dignified work and life, is trying to promote interaction and integration processes along with the local population. Castel Volturno, on a par with Riace, demonstrates that if the failings can create alliances, they can improve everyone’s condition, both immigrants and locals exactly as Barbiano’s motto says: *“To get out of this on our own is greed; to get out of this together is policy.”*

The third sign of hope comes from Taranto, or more precisely from mothers living in Tamburi, the neighbourhood close to the ILVA steel mill. They are calling for the closing of the factory in the name of their son who risk to get cancer anytime they breath; the air is in fact heavy with dioxin and other poisons. Many of them cry for their children who died as a consequence of blood cancer, malformations and other deadly diseases. They have lived for years in silence accepting the blackmail, that is work at the expense of their own health. Now they are well aware of the fact that life and health come first, so they are calling for the factory to be closed and to be opened again only if it is possible to produce without ever compromising anyone’s life, neither the workers’ life nor the city inhabitants’ life. Other experiences demonstrate how through appropriate investments it is now possible to produce without polluting. So the real dilemma is not between work and health, but profit and health. Mothers from Tamburi no longer have doubts: the logic of a system which gives priority to profit over life and to GDP’s growth at the expense of health must be rejected. The community of Piquiá de Baixo in Brazil is on the same wavelength since Vale multinational corporation’s steel mills are causing diseases, pollution and death.

I know that in the past there have been contacts between Taranto’s struggle and the Brazilian fight; it could be useful that a worldwide institute like the Comboni Institute count all the ongoing struggles in defence of health which are threatened by mining and steelmaking companies, with the intent to coordinate them in a worldwide network. It could be the way to welcome Pope Francis’ exhortation at the end of the Third World Meeting of Popular Movements: *“I ask you to continue to blaze trails and to keep fighting.”*

# A toolbox for social ministry

**Sister Maria Teresa Ratti, Comboni Missionary Sister**

**Brother Alberto Parise, Comboni Missionary**

**Father Domenico Guarino, Comboni Missionary**

## **Towards life in all its fullness**

We would like to offer the opportunity to walk serenely along the ministerial journey by means of this article, since everything becomes easier and even more engaging with a toolbox in hand. Starting with this reflection, we let ourselves be inspired by the Founder who knew a lot about ministeriality both in the social and religious dimension. We are well aware of the fact that Comboni was strongly drawn to the urgency of communicating the completeness of life in abundance to Central Africa's peoples by words and deeds. He travelled, wrote, and struggled beyond measure to this end. What were the grounds which encouraged, sustained and pushed him so far? We are convinced that these grounds can be found in his deep understanding of the fact that all the goodness God ceaselessly creates had - and still it has - to be made available to every single person. To him, Lord's gift to the others was represented by Central African's Vicariate at that exact historical time. He named this gift 'catholicity' (*Writings*, 944), and by this very term he visualised the future of a prophecy which now affects us all perhaps without even realising it. Wherever the Charism may lead us, indeed, we all, brothers and sisters, are called to give tangible contributions on the 'fullness' of what is good today more than ever, so that a life lived to the full symbolises the gift par excellence by the Gospel: a gift to a humanity looking for meaning, solidarity and sinodality.

## **From the teaching of Pope Francis**

The *Evangelii gaudium* (EG) apostolic exhortation invites the Church to a *new* evangelisation and explains the reason why this is "new" as a result of pastoral and ecclesial renewal. Pastoral and ecclesial dimensions are two sides of the same coin and they are represented at their best by the icon of a Church which goes forth: being in a permanent state of mission, the

Church needs new styles, approaches, languages, and structures as appropriate channels to evangelise current world. This is the ministerial Church example: a Church which is missionary by its very nature and also able to announce and to witness the Gospel with joy and prophecy. To evangelise is to make the kingdom of God present in our world (EG 176); EG dedicates a whole chapter - the fourth, which is also the longest - to the social dimension of the evangelisation. It is not an addendum nor a corollary to evangelisation, rather it is a constitutive aspect of it which cannot be separated from pastoral and ecclesial dimensions (cf. *Justice in the World* 6).

From an operational point of view, a missionary approach to evangelisation requires a ministerial path which EG sums up in five phases: to take the lead (*primerear*), to get involved, to accompany, to bear fruit, and to celebrate. The beauty of this contribution lies in the path's naturalness, spontaneity, and lightness. It is easy to identify ourselves with it. Actually, we can recount missionary experiences efficiently by following this point of reference right because it simplifies the focusing on key aspects. Further, five phases' evolution and linking provide a methodological guidance through which, by approaching a given situation, one is able to find his way and the path to follow, from where to begin and the best way to end. These paths are generally KISS<sup>58</sup>, that means they succeed when they are simple and comfortable to go. However, an in-depth knowledge on the dynamics carried out by the method is necessary, and it is also useful to have a proper "toolbox" at our disposal for specific and targeted interventions when facing complicated situations. As the old saying goes: "If your only tool is a hammer, then every problems looks like a nail". It is therefore important to have an appropriate range of skills and abilities at our disposal on the way to an effective social ministry: several people belonging to the same ministerial staff will make their contribution while sharing the general methodology. We can therefore match some operational tools to each phase that will enhance the ministerial staffs' abilities.

## 1. To take the lead

Listening skills about reality and communal discernment are vital to this phase. The element which causes to take the lead is the voice of

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58 I.e. "Keep It Simple and Short".

the Spirit in the cry of marginalised people, destroyed Creation, and existential peripheries. This fact requires spiritual incarnation, and the ability of joining together, listening to reality and analysing it. Further, it is also necessary to let ourselves be touched by reality and to call into question. It is clear that we all carry out analysis: however, results do not always match. On the contrary, our conclusions frequently are completely different. Many times, it depends on the analysis level we attempt; it is therefore important to be aware of the *types of analysis* since the kind of consciousness- hence the quality of pastoral choices we can make on a personal and communitarian level-is subject to them. For instance, uncritical consciousness derives from linear analysis while critical consciousness originates in structural analysis. Similarly, clear-headed conscience derives from conjunctural analysis.

It is crucial to own the “ability to wonder” while analysing reality, and this is not at all obvious. It is also critical to let oneself be challenged by otherness, and not by others. This is the commitment to approach reality with living skin... barefoot, and not by dead skin (the sandals made of death animals’ skin)! We can state that this is true recalling Moses’ experience, who is called to remove his sandals when approaching the burning bush.

Therefore, listening to reality leads to a shared emotional answer given by the heart - a docile, attentive to the Spirit heart - rather than to an individual gut reaction. It is really helpful to act according to a process of communal discernment which is in its turn based on a specific method facilitating it. Discernment is a judgment or a process through which we can perceive and recognise differences among things. It means to see facts lying ahead, and the condition of our pastoral presence in certain place; it further implies to understand what the God of Life asks us to do in this sense. The need of such a discernment was already underlined at the time of Vatican II.

«With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage» (*Gaudium et spes*, 44).

Discernment - like any other tool - must be able to take its steps in order to reach a firm decision. In fact, it is often easy to come to opposite conclusions which are both complicated: on the one hand, we give it a try individually in situations of need without any discernment; on the other hand, there are frequently communities or ministerial staffs which do not make any decision nor they are active in the field. Thus, it is useful to adopt a proven method as it helps to overcome extreme situations starting from the signs of the times and of the spaces. According to Comboni Charism, this is the same as seizing “God’s hour”, and cooperating with the Spirit throughout history.

## 2. To get involved

This issue - which is strongly related to our ministerial path - requires systematic nature and dynamics for promoting integral human development. If they are not accompanied by an appropriate method or a correct attitude, enthusiasm and good will alone are not enough. Easily, it all ends with dependence and misunderstandings rather than liberating processes. Here we can discover once again the sense of “making a common cause” with people according to Comboni. The social teaching of the Church proposes the method *See- Judge- Act*<sup>59</sup>, which is also known today as the *pastoral cycle*. This is an evolution which organises the process by highlighting the importance of insertion within reality. It is not only about a single tool which runs and manages our social ministry, but it is also a ministerial *forma mentis* which puts together social sciences and spirituality, systemic vision and practical instruments, professional and pastoral skills. Even in this case, we encounter a set of skills and operational tools which are very useful to our toolbox in each stage of our pastoral cycle. They are, namely, tools for a systematic insertion or for the social, cultur-

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59 The *See-Judge-Act* method was first developed by Joseph Cardijn and the JOC in the Twenties of the XXth century. It has been officially recognised in the social tradition of the Church in 1961 (*Mater et magistra* 217). It had a great influence and development in Latin America, thanks to the contribution of the Liberation Theology, and has developed more and more over years. Today, it is used all over the world and called in different ways (for example “pastoral cycle”, “pastoral spiral” and so on). This method consists of different forms: each of the maims to underline some important issues which are often neglected. Even if there exist 3, 4, 5 and sometimes even 6 phases related to this process, we always and however deal with the same methodology. In this case, with reference to the “pastoral cycle”, we are discussing a 4 phases’ cyclical process: integration, social and cultural analysis, theological reflection, and unfolding process. The latter includes planning, training, application, follow-up and verification, celebration.

al and systematic analysis of reality. Theological reflection - intended as the reflection on the experience in the light of the Word and of the faith leading to a firm decision - is a further point of our dissertation. There is no wonder that such a fundamental stage is seldom accomplished: if you do not any have practical instrument in order to facilitate theological reflection, it is clear that a relevant reflection cannot take place.

Not to mention, the time for ministerial experience *verification*. This action is normally overlooked or it is common practice to run it out through brief and vague considerations. Ministerial action which settles for repetition is an easy prey for tired and apathetic passiveness. Verification helps clarifying the service carried out both regarding the situation's analysis and assessment, and the planning's enlightenment and orientation.

### 3. To accompany

Involvement and accompanying walk together. It is like saying that the pastoral cycle methodology is not only a ministerial staff's task; it also stands for a path to walk together with community and people who are the real transformation's protagonists - to borrow from Comboni "of Africa with Africa." An accompanying action worthy of the name makes use of several tools: first of all, the ones which facilitate participation. There exist different methods and participatory approaches to be used beyond core competences on facilitation, conscientization, mobilisation and organisation. One can also draw inspiration from a rich legacy in a critical way: indeed, "techniques" in and of themselves do not ensure an authentic popular participation rather they provide a basic approach, and they teaches attitudes or affect one's way of interacting. Actually, we have been witnessing the exploitative purpose of those participation techniques with the aim of controlling and manipulating over the last two decades. This trend strongly contradicts the intention of empowering people within contexts of projects and development initiatives.

Another keyword towards the achievement of an accompanying action is "collaborative ministry", which is the ministerial Church's highest expression. Collaboration cannot be improvised: it must be built upon awareness and conviction of its own significance, not just for pragmatic reasons but also for theological grounds. Sofield and Juliano<sup>60</sup>, as an

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60 Sofield L.& Juliano, C. (2000).*Collaboration. Uniting our gifts in ministry*. Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press.

example, propose a model for collaborative ministry which is equipped with a huge variety of strategies and practical tools suitable for helping ministerial staffs to work at their best.

Accompanying groups and communities must necessarily have recourse to skills for intercultural dialogue and social reconciliation<sup>61</sup> within nowadays' increasingly multicultural contexts, which are due to the dynamics of globalisation. These abilities will have to be used as a great opportunity to growth and evangelisation, and not just to overcome challenges in this field. The same EG dedicates an important space to the matter, as also the Amazon Synod does. The latter returns to the issue of interculturality as a chance to inculturate faith and Gospel. Thus, we must mention the importance of spiritual, personal, group and communal accompaniment tools along with intercultural dialogue tools.

#### 4. To bear fruit

Comboni plan's core idea can be found again in this phase: Regeneration. This is an interpretation on bearing ministerial fruit according to the logic of the gift and of the grace by Comboni. Such a fructifying flows through the Easter Mystery, just as it was for Comboni<sup>62</sup>. Here comes into play the spiritual dimension supporting the ministerial work which is based on faithfulness, and not on triumphs. A spirituality that refers to the four principles in order to move towards the building of a peaceful, fair and brotherly people in relation to the social ministry and the social transformation processes (EG 217-237):

- a. time is greater than space;
- b. unity prevails over conflict;
- c. reality is more important than idea;
- d. the whole is greater than the part.

We don't have enough space here to go into details on how these four principles are hinges along the paths towards an evangelical transfor-

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61 Cf. Schreiter, R. (2009). *Reconciliation paths. Spirituality and strategies*. Bologna, EMI.

62 "God's works are born at the foot of the cross".

mation of reality. However, it is enough to stress that they offer guidance on the complex journey to walk together with networks and popular movements.

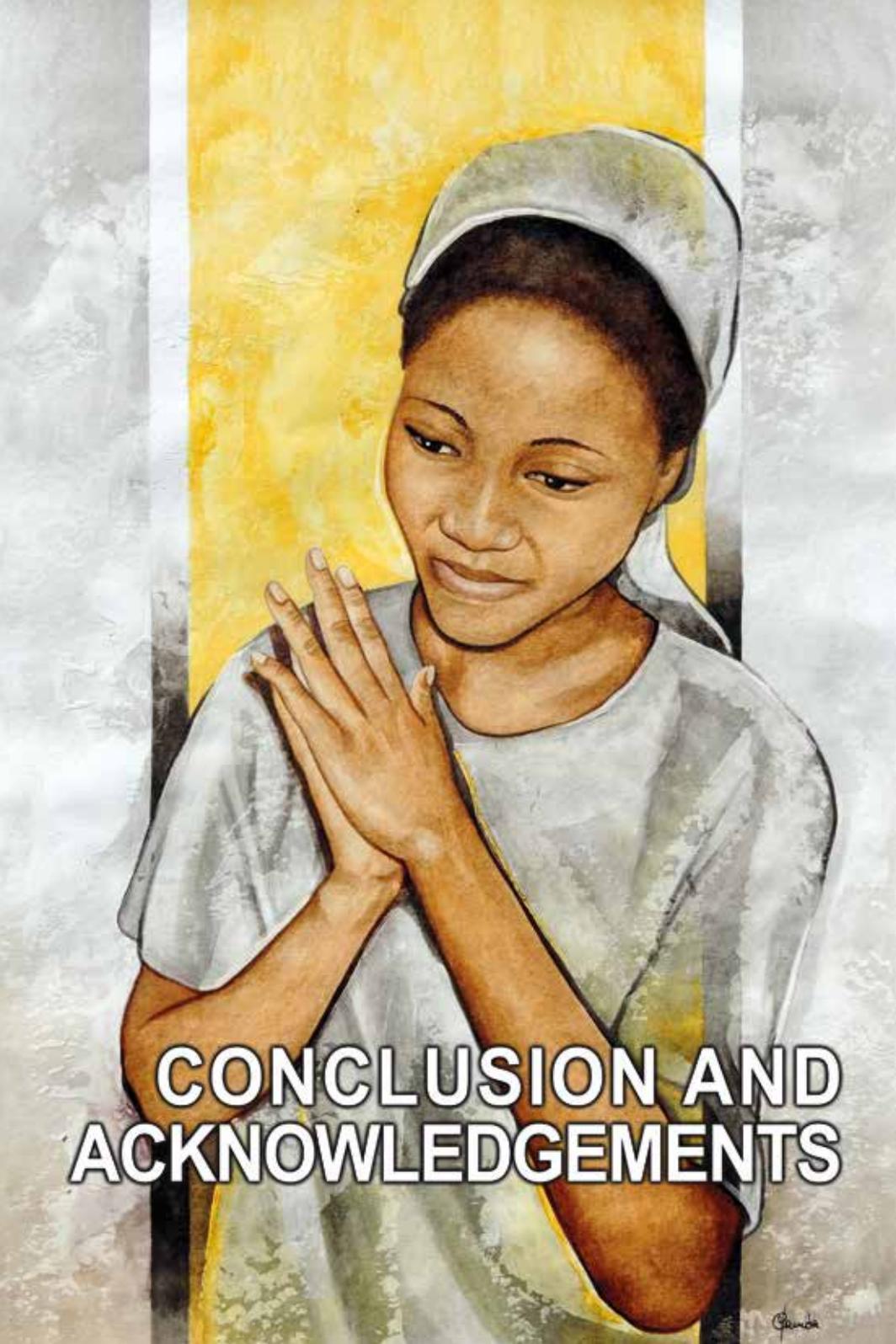
## **5. To celebrate**

Celebration often goes hand in hand with the ministerial verification step, which consists in taking different elements of the planning into account in order to assess the extent to which they have been implemented, and consequently to introduce the necessary modifications. Anyway, verification is not limited to give quantitative measure to results rather it expresses a wisdom-filled assessment on the present - ecclesial, cultural and social - moment. It is a discernment and communal soul-searching form, as well as a form of thanksgiving; being a tool, there are some concrete goals to achieve in this case, too.

- Comparison of the results achieved to what has been planned (purpose).
- Confirmation of the positive results achieved as compared to the plan (objectives).
- Identification of problems when developing action.
- Discovering the causes which had an impact over failures.
- Identification of alternative options which can impact future action (replanning).

The time for ministerial verification must be enhanced as an opportunity of personal and community growth at the service of the Gospel and of the Reign of God. Therefore, it is important that ministerial verification is celebrated even through the liturgy: in a dialogue between Word and life so in a celebration experienced as a thanksgiving party, as a transformative moment, as the hope of the promise and fulfilment of life in its fullness.

Good journey of life!



**CONCLUSION AND  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**



# Conclusions

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The contributions and description of the Comboni's work in social ministry, presented in this second volume, are part of the Church's diaconal and martyrial commitment, which proclaims and makes visible the "already" of the Kingdom of God, inaugurated by the Messiah, for the recapitulation of all the creatures on earth and in heaven in Christ.

In the social ministry, Jesus' men and women disciples profess that He is the Lord, who regenerates and frees the oppressed and overthrows the bullies, the arrogant and the usurpers of power, in the confident expectation of the eschatological manifestation of His final victory.

Social ministry, albeit with different nuances, has always been a fundamental characteristic of the believers: that of living in the world, without being of the world, with the task of transforming it according to God's plan, as the Apostle of the Gentiles reminds us: "*Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and to know what is good, what is the perfect thing to do*" (Rom 12, 2). This vision, in the middle of the second century, is reaffirmed in the letter to Diognetus, in which it is stated that: "*Christians do not differ from other men either by territory, or by the way they speak, or by the way they dress. (...) They live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh. They live on earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven. They observe the established laws, but by their way of life*

*they are above the laws. They love everyone, and they are persecuted by everyone”* (Letter to Diognetus, Chapters 5 and 6. Funk 1317-321).

The living tradition of the Church in her pilgrimage has always impelled and motivated believers to enter the world and not to flee from it, as the Gnostics of all times would wish, because “*God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him*” (Jn 3:17).

Faithful to this orientation and to the Comboni charism, the heirs of Saint Daniel Comboni, despite their smallness and fragility, contradictions and resistance, have sided, like many others, in the commitment to the transformation of the unjust system, which kills and discards the poor. Their most original contribution was that of inserting themselves and becoming “**yeast**”, mingling in the life and in the day-to-day reality of the poor and the excluded; believing in their capacity and potential for regeneration of themselves and of every system; but also alien to any self-referentiality and self-promotion, since Saint Daniel Comboni recommended to his sons and daughters to be “**hidden stones**” of a building, of which only others will be able to admire its beauty.

Reading the narratives and contributions made in this text helps us to understand that, even in the multiplicity of situations, approaches and initiatives, the social dimension is **the transversal factor of every ministry**; in the sense that every service, understood as a gift from God, by its very intrinsic strength, proclaims the liberation of the oppressed, the year of grace (Lk 4:18-19) and reveals to the people “*the new heavens and the new earth*” (Rev 21:1) in God’s original and providential plan.

The narration of the praxis of social ministry, for this reason, enriches the paradigm of reference of the mission, increasingly incarnated in the complexity of today’s world and attentive in reading the signs of the times and places, in order to be able to tell again to all peoples the faith in Jesus Christ, with appropriate languages and styles of presence.

The process begun in this concrete space of today will be long and gradual through time, but it will be able to make use of some topics and suggestions highlighted by these sharing and many others that will be expressed in the mapping proposed to all the communities of the Comboni family and that will find its moment of synthesis, discernment

and re-launch in the Forum on Comboni Social Ministries to be held in Rome, next July 2020.

We are not starting from zero or from theories, but from the events lived and narrated in the daily life of the Comboni mission, which we present here in synthesis:

**a) Some distinctive elements** (described through some verbs):

***To see: “discerning eyes and a generous heart”***: discerning eyes and a generous heart to take up the challenges and opportunities for the proclamation of the Gospel, the good news for the poor, as John Paul II taught us at the beginning of the third millennium (Novo Millennio Ineunte. 2001).

***To become neighbourly***: in the dynamic of a missionary and “**outgoing**” Church, which lives on the margins and touches the wounds of its brothers and sisters, taking upon itself the odour of sheep and the way of life of the poor. As compassionate and charitable brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers, just as Comboni desired.

***To encounter***: living and promoting **the mysticism of the encounter**. To profess catholicity and to shorten the distance between creeds and cultures, through dialogue and ecumenism, for a global fraternity. For the Comboni family, in fact, people come first and among them the privileged ones are the excluded. Moreover, in the vocabulary of Social ministry, there is no clash of civilizations!

***To regenerate***: to allow ourselves to be challenged by reality and to strive to seek **the five loaves and two fishes** of the little ones, **the widow’s offering, the water of the purification** of peoples, so that everything may be presented to Christ for the multiplication and realisation of the providential and merciful project of the Father.

***To transform***: It’s no longer time for modification; **it’s time for change!** It is time to address the causes of inequality between persons and between peoples and the culture of waste. Aware of the risks, persecution, exclusion, derision and indifference, but also according to the Combonian motto: “*Nigrizia or death*”, to remain faithful till martyrdom.

**To celebrate:** Everything that gives substance to the social ministry and configures the disciples to the Paschal Mystery of Christ, is proclaimed every day in the final doxology of the Eucharistic prayer: “**Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ**”. This is the life project and the support of faith in the daily life of the mission, which, from the perspective of Comboni mysticism, motivates every Comboni man and woman to lay down with Christ on the Cross, so that there may be regeneration; willing to give one’s life a hundred times over, if necessary, so that everything and everyone may be united in Christ.

**To start again:** The planned intermissions for personal and community evaluation and discernment for the revision and requalification of commitments are the providential oases, where the disciples, men and women, rest in God and in Him draw living, gushing water. In the vision of the Spirit, in truth, there is no longer room for self-glorification and vainglory; everything is experienced in the flame of fire which purifies and impels us to dare and **take new paths and roads**, so that they may ever more be the ways of God.

## **b) Purpose**

The great goal in social ministry is to listen to the cry of the poor, to make an alliance with them, so that their expectations may be fulfilled and make them capable of transformation. The smiles of the poor and the excluded are like rays of sunshine that warm the hearts of the disciples and confirm them in the Gospel logic of the Lord “*He who was rich, became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty*” (2 Cor 8:9).

**It means rejecting the culture of waste**, which eliminates the unchosen, the redundant, the homeless, the landless, the unemployed, the objectified and commercialised women, the exploited children, the human trafficking and, as Pope Francis teaches us: “*it is not simply an unknown phenomenon, as an action of exploitation and oppression, but a real new phenomenon. With the use of exclusion we strike at its roots the bonds of belonging to the society to which they belong, since in it we are not simply relegated to the basements of existence, to the suburbs, we are deprived of all power, but we are thrown out*” (Pope Francis, interview with Sole 24 Ore, 7 November 2018).

## c) Areas

In sharing the experiences presented, we can identify some privileged areas of Comboni's work, which we list here:

### 1. The formation of consciences, preparation and qualification of professional leaders

This is a typical and charismatic area since the beginning of the Comboni work. In the Plan for the regeneration of Africa with Africa itself, Comboni in fact wrote: “*we have adopted to the strategy of a siege. Our institutes, set up around the periphery of the great African peninsula, are like the redoubts and fieldworks necessary for this approach*” (Writings 2789). To besiege with the creation of university centres and technical and professional schools for the formation of Africans, making them more and more subjects of their own regeneration. One only has to think of the *Comboni College* in Khartoum, Sudan; of the University of Asmara, Eritrea; of the professional school of Carapira, Mozambique; of the school of *Dar Comboni* in Cairo, Egypt; of the *Ciudad de los muchachos*, Mexico; of the *Institute for Social Transformation* in Nairobi, Kenya... without forgetting the hundreds of primary and secondary schools, the *foyers* for the formation of women in every part of the world, where the Comboni family lives and works.

### 2. Media and communication

Comboni himself had recognized the effectiveness of communication and was often preparing reports and studies on Africa for associations, geographical research institutes and *Propaganda Fide*. He wrote thousands of letters, addressed to people of all kinds and social conditions, to motivate everyone to support the cause of “*unhappy Nigrizia*”. It was Comboni who wanted a magazine entitled “*The Annals of the Good Shepherd*”, which later took the name of “*Nigrizia*”. Today the Comboni family continues this tradition, updating it to the requirements of digital and internet communication systems and by having set up networks of nine diocesan radios, such as the *Catholic Radio Network*, promoted in South Sudan.

### 3. Care and attention to people

There are many in the Comboni family who live their ministry, adopting **the Gospel of care**, both in our homes for the sick and elderly, as described for example by Sr. Maria Rota, for the elderly and sick Sisters in Italy; both in hospital facilities in situations of great need and emergency, such as the work in South Sudan carried out by Br. Rosario Iannetti and the one described by the community that brought together the Comboni Sisters and the Sisters from other Institutes, to continue the presence of fraternal witness in the Italian hospital in Cairo, Egypt.

### 4. Existential suburbs

Within the existential peripheries a large part of social ministry is involved, reaching different people and contexts, depending on the challenge that local realities pose: from prisons to the attention of street children, often used in armed conflicts and as cheap slave labour; from solidarity for Afro and indigenous minority communities to conflict resolution; from the exploitation of women to the pursuit of means and organisation of cooperatives for the welfare of families.

### 5. Human mobility

One of the characteristics in this epochal change, accentuated in the field of human mobility, sees the Comboni work increasingly involved on all continents, in the promotion of the culture of welcoming, intercultural and religious dialogue, as for example the “*Malbes*” community in Padua and the “*Zattera*” in Palermo; the community that, between the border between Mexico and the USA, facilitates the legal and juridical accompaniment of migrants, in the ever conflictual crossing of borders. The pastoral care of *Migrantes* takes on more and more substance and is articulated with other ecclesial and lay forces, especially in Europe, such as the communities of Castel Volturno and Acce in Rome in Italy and that of Granada in Spain, promoting the effective citizenship of migrants and refugees. Of significance in Palestine is the community that fosters dialogue between different ethnic groups, for a culture of peace.

## **6. Safeguarding the common home**

It increases the protection of the common goods and the right to fighting alongside the indigenous peoples, in order to prevent the predatory pillaging of the oligarchies, such as the community ministry in Piquiá, Brazil. In many communities, the ministry for ecological conversion and the adoption of new lifestyles, such as the one presented by the Comboni laity in Bologna, is increasingly accentuated. The associations that defend the right to land, free access to drinking water and work are growing. Agricultural production in biological form is promoted, such as the *Mother Earth* project in Zambia, in order to promote conditions suitable to everyone's health and to fighting hunger.

## **7. Liturgy and catechesis**

A great ministerial work is carried out in these two areas, especially in the commitment to read the Word of God and to celebrate the Paschal Mystery incarnated in the daily reality of the poor. Significant was the choice made in many communities, the popular reading of the Bible and the effort in liturgical celebrations, to make people understand in a holistic way the link between the environment and their social life. The goal is to nourish and live a spirituality that combines the liberating power of the Paschal Mystery with the liberation of the people and of nature itself that “suffers and groans in childbirth to this day” (Rom, 8, 22).

## **d) Perspectives**

The process initiated in placing the emphasis on the social dimension of ministries cannot and must not be considered as an action of circumstance and limited in time, but rather as a long journey, according to the living tradition of the Church, which must be sustained, nourished and revised in the quicker pace of epochal change, if we want to give effectiveness to the missionary and charismatic presence of the Comboni family in today's world.

The social dimension in ministry, therefore, invites us to review the idea of mission and consequently of what we want to be and what we want to achieve for the good of humanity.

The common thread is always the mission, with these particular characteristics:

- the transformation of the system that generates the culture of waste;
- the promotion of the Gospel of caring for people through the Samaritan proximity and compassion;
- the synodality, in the involvement and effective participation of all the ministries;
- the ecological conversion, aware that by safeguarding the common home we will create worthy living conditions for all, especially for the excluded.

This is why the title of the second volume, “**We are mission**”, becomes a call to mission, lived as **a community of renewed people and a communion of Combonians** among sisters, brothers and lay people, increasingly articulated and interconnected with other ecclesial and lay groups and associations, as an integral part of the People of God.

A process that has already begun in the Comboni family, also with concrete examples of collaboration and coordination, such as, for example, the commitment to GIM youth ministry and the commitment to migrants in the Centre of ACSE; the participation of more than 13 years as a Comboni family in the World Social Forums; which, however, needs to be increasingly made concrete and effective in every community, as suggested by some of the Chapter’s orientations:

*“The Intercapitular Assembly emphasized the commitment to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, in the search for new strategies of mission and vocation promotion and JPIC as a transversal dimension to every evangelizing action. The need to give continuity to these commitments was stressed, especially by valuing networking, to be implemented in all areas. The journey made by the Institute with the workshops on ministries has been reviewed and a rich synthesis has been included in the Acts of the Symposium” (CMS, pp. 10-11 Intercapitular Letter - 2013).*

*“We are now called to understand and live the process of ministry experienced in these years in the light of the Mysticism of the Encounter.*

*(...) For this reason we believe ...that the A.M./A.V./GPIC and the DIALOGUE are charismatic aspects that characterise our ministries and run through them in all their forms and expressions. (...) We believe in a ministeriality lived together, with a more holistic, circular and sustainable style, which is translated into ministerial projects shared in community”*. (nos. 13.1 and 13.2, Chapter Acts 2016 - XX General Chapter - Daring the Mystique of the Encounter).

*“We are urged to rediscover the Comboni family as a charismatic place outside of which we cannot grasp in its entirety the prophetic intuition of Saint Daniel Comboni”* (MCCJ, Chapter Acts, 2015, n. 34).

*“An important way to upgrade our missionary presence is the option for specific pastoral services: inter-religious dialogue, JPIC, education, health, media, mission promotion, urban ministry, pastoral among indigenous peoples, Afro, nomadic shepherds, migrants, refugees and youth.*

- *These pastoral services should be in line with continental priorities (AC 03, nos. 43 and 50; AC 09 nos. 62 and 63), shared by several circumscriptions and lived in a broader collaboration, at the inter-provincial or continental level.*
- *In this way, while reducing the communities in each country, by working in a network (Comboni family, other pastoral agents, organisations, reflection and research centres), it will be possible to develop a specific pastoral care.*
- *In addition to the specializations foreseen at the level of the circumscription, we will be able to share personnel and skills and make plans for specialization at the inter-provincial level”* (MCCJ Chapter Acts, 2015, n. 45.3).

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To you, who are discovering this journey while reading. To you, who make yourself available to continue and renew it following the Wind of the Spirit, so that the mission we were entrusted with keeps on putting

at the centre the Values of the Kingdom of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation as soul and heart of the Comboni mission anywhere in the world through a renewed social ministeriality permeated with a spirituality which is incarnated in Life.

**The Commission for Social Ministeriality:**

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Father Arlindo Pinto**

# INDEX

## INTRODUCTION

### **Why a second volume?**

*Sister Luigina Coccia and Father Tesfaye Tadesse* . . . . . p. 5

## PRESENTATION

*Members of the Social Ministry Commission: Father Daniele Moschetti,*

*Sister Maria Teresa Ratti, Mister Marco Piccione,*

*Sister H el ene Isra el Soloumta Kamkol, Father Fernando Zolli* . . . . . p. 9

## THEOLOGICAL, BIBLICAL AND PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

### **Social ministry: learning from Africa**

*Francesco Pierli, Comboni Missionary* . . . . . p. 19

### **A glance at the social missionary dimension in Matthew’s Gospel**

*Father John Ikundu, Comboni Missionary* . . . . . p. 36

### **Everyone is mission**

*Fr. Alex Zanotelli, Comboni Missionary* . . . . . p. 41

### **The general chapter and ministeriality**

*Brother Alberto Parise, Italy - Mission Secretariat Curia* . . . . . p. 50

## AFRICA

### **Comboni College: the ministry of education within an inter-religious context**

*Father Jorge Carlos Naranjo Alcaide, Comboni Missionary* . . . . . p. 57

### **Solidarity with South Sudan**

*Sister Esp erance Bamiriyo, Comboni Missionary Sister* . . . . . p. 63

### **Mother earth centre**

*Sister James Thoompunkal Anns, Comboni Sister* . . . . . p. 66

### **The experience of the inter-congregational community at the Italian Hospital Umberto I**

*Sister Pina De Angelis and Sisters, Comboni Missionary Sisters*. . . . . p. 72

### **Hospital and health system in South Sudan**

*Brother Doctor Rosario Iannetti, Comboni Missionary*. . . . . p. 79

### **Africa through the lenses of social transformation**

*Brother Jonas Dzinekou Yawovi, Comboni Missionary*

*Director of the Institute for Social Transformation*. . . . . p. 84

|   |        |
|---|--------|
| <b>Catholic Radio Network (crn) the gospel of peace and reconciliation through the airwaves</b>   |        |
| <i>Sister Mary Carmen Galicia, Sister Elena Balatti, Sister Paola Moggi, Sister Cecilia Sierra, Comboni Sisters, Father José Vieira, Brother Alberto Lamana, Comboni Missionaries</i> . . . . . | p. 90  |
| <b>Afriquespoir centre, a ministry in the mission of the Church</b>   |        |
| <i>Father Jean Claude Kobo, Comboni Missionary</i> . . . . .  | p. 95  |
| <b>Significant ministerial activities: School of Carapira</b>   |        |
| <i>Brother Giovanni Luigi Quaranta, Industrial Technical Institute</i> . . . . .  | p. 101 |
| <b>Saint Daniel Comboni Social Housing</b>  |        |
| <i>Sister Henriette Mfutu Beya Ndongo, Comboni Missionary Sister</i> . . . . .  | p. 105 |
| <b>Child trafficking for exploitation in begging in the region of karamoja, Uganda we cannot remain silent</b>  |        |
| <i>Sister Fernanda Cristinelli, Comboni Missionary Sister, Women Desk coordinator</i> . . . . .   | p. 111 |
| <b>Dar Comboni Institute for Arabic studies</b>   |        |
| <i>Father Simon Mbutia, Comboni Missionary</i> . . . . .  | p. 118 |
| <b>Where is your brother? (Gen 4:9)</b>   |        |
| <i>Simone Parimbelli, Comboni Lay Missionary</i> . . . . .  | p. 126 |
| <b>From pastoral visit to pastoral presence</b>   |        |
| <i>Father Saturnin Pognon, Comboni Missionary</i> . . . . .   | p. 129 |
| <br>  |        |
| <b>THE AMERICAS</b>   |        |
| <b>God exists: I met him among the most marginalised people in the street</b>   |        |
| <i>Father Saverio Paolillo, Comboni Missionary</i> . . . . .  | p. 135 |
| <b>Along with Afro-Colombians: the ministeriality of resistance</b>   |        |
| <i>Father Daniele Zarantonello, Comboni Missionary</i> . . . . .  | p. 141 |
| <b>Mission at the Foot of the volcano: El Misti, an encounter with Palestine at the time of Jesus</b>   |        |
| <i>Gonzalo Violero, Neuza Francisco, Paula Ascençao, Comboni Lay Missionaries</i> . . . . .   | p. 147 |
| <b>Comboni Work of human promotion Ocpf in Guayaquil</b>  |        |
| <i>Br. Godfroy-Abel Dimanche, Comboni Missionary Brother</i> . . . . .  | p. 152 |
| <b>Having a voice Ahlma</b>   |        |
| <b>Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters in the Usa</b>  |        |
| <i>Sister Inma Cuesta, Comboni Missionary Sister, President of AHLMA</i> . . . . .  | p. 170 |
| <b>The Comboni Missionary sisters presence in Mexico's southern border Tapachula, Chiapas</b>   |        |
| <i>Sr. Martha Verónica Vázquez Floriano, And Sisters of her Council</i> . . . . .   | p. 175 |
| <b>Slavery in the 21st Century</b>  |        |
| <i>Sister Kimala Nanga Benjamine, Comboni Missionary Sister</i> . . . . .   | p. 180 |

**“The man enters, the crime stays outside”**

*Valdeci Ferreira for APAC, Comboni Lay Missionary.* . . . . . p. 185

**Piquiá De Baixo**

*Community in Brazil’s Amazon Region suffers from pollution and struggles for a dignified life paying particular attention to elderly and children.* . . . . . p. 193

**EUROPE**

**A land where God awaits to be accepted**

*Mariella Galli, Secular Comboni Missionary* . . . . . p. 201

**Assistance Ministry to our elderly and sick sisters**

*Sister Maria Rota, Comboni Sister* . . . . . p. 206

**Comboni Community on the way with migrants**

*Father Sergio Agustoni, Father Carlo Castelli, Father Daniele Moschetti, Comboni Missionary Brothers, Castel Volturno, Italy.* . . . . . p. 211

**The Malbes Missionary Community**

*Sister Carmela Coter, Comboni Missionary Sister  
Sister Marina Cassarino, Comboni Missionary Sister  
Carla and Mario Zarantonello with their daughters* . . . . . p. 220

**Wake up to hope**

*Father Padre Horácio Rossas, Brother José Manuel Salvador, Sister Mary del Carmen Lopez y Gálan, The Comboni Family* . . . . . p. 226

**New lifestyles and mission**

*Antonio Fazio, Chiara Battacchi  
And the Comboni Lay Missionaries Group.* . . . . . p. 230

**ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

**Human bridges as a community and Church**

*Azetet Habtezhgi Kidane, Agnese Elli, Comboni Missionary Sisters.* . . . . . p. 237

**Our mission in Sri Lanka**

*Sister Libanos Ayele, And Sisters of the Community in Sri Lanka* . . . . . p. 242

**HOW OTHER PEOPLE SEE US**

**Blooming almond trees**

*Giuliana Martirani, Committed lay woman* . . . . . p. 251

**Continue to blaze trails and keep fighting**

*Francesco Gesualdi  
Coordinator of N.D.M.C. (New Development Model Centre).* . . . . . p. 258

**A toolbox for social ministry**

*Sister Maria Teresa Ratti, Comboni Missionary Sister*

*Brother Alberto Parise, Comboni Missionary*

*Father Domenico Guarino, Comboni Missionary* ..... p. 262

**CONCLUSION** ..... p. 271

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ..... p. 280

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