
Preparing the XIX General Chapter



With St. Daniel Comboni

Studium Combonianum



1

Taking Roots in the Vatican II

The Chapter as Encounter

Introduction

Beginning with reflection on the 19th General Chapter and its preparation, it is good to return to the Rule of Life and what it says about the nature and purpose of General Chapters. "The General Chapter", says RV at number 146, "is the supreme authority of the Institute, exercised in an extraordinary and collegial manner, and expresses the participation of all the missionaries in the life of the Institute itself. The Chapter must faithfully preserve the patrimony of the Institute: the charism of the Founder, the purpose, the spirit, the character and the healthy traditions of the Institute". And

then, in number 153, it specifies the competences of the Chapter, stressing that "the General Chapter has first of all the responsibility to promote the fidelity of the Institute to its specific mission in the Church".

Taking root in Vatican II

This approach of the Rule of Life echoes the vision of the Second Vatican Council and what the Council asks of institutes and congregations: "The renewal of consecrated life involves a continual return to the sources of every form of Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of institutes, and at the same time the adaptation of institutes to the changing conditions of the times" (1). And again: "therefore, let us know and faithfully observe the spirit and aims proper to the founders, as well as sound traditions, since all this constitutes the patrimony of each institute" (2).

And the Vatican II adds a statement, which it is important to underline at a time when we need to think about the preparation of the General Chapter and discernment of its working methods. "Effective renewal" says the Council, "and true adaptation is not possible without the collaboration of all the members of the Institute". And it concludes: "the superiors, then, in everything that concerns the fate

of the entire institute, should consult and listen to the members as befits them" (3).

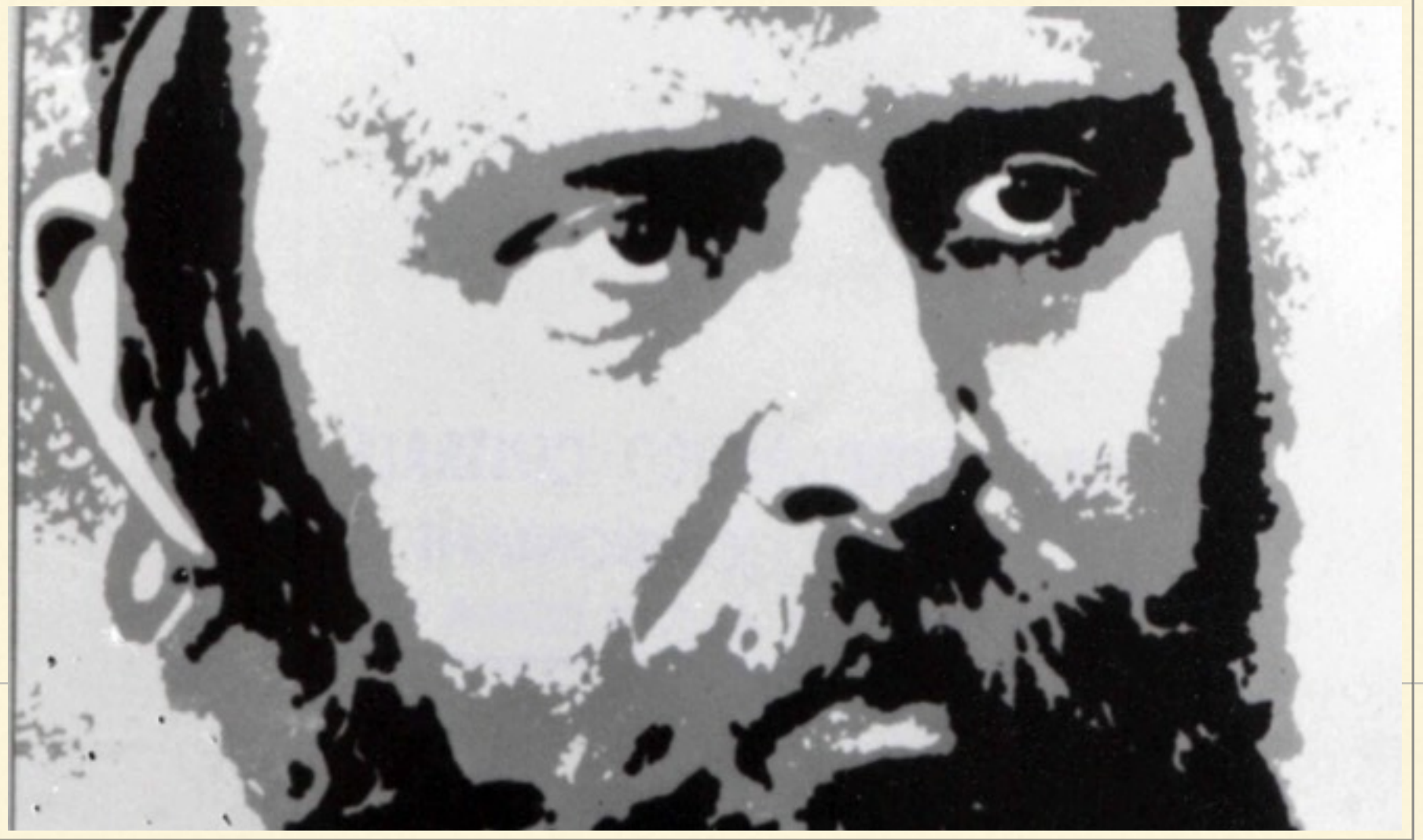
The objective of the renewal of the Institute, to be pursued in every General Chapter, is placed by the Council between two margins: the return to the Founder and to the healthy traditions of the Institute, on the one hand; and attention to the signs of the times and places, on the other. As we have seen above, the Council calls for "continuous attention to the changing conditions of the times" and speaks of adapting "the way of living, praying and acting (...) to today's conditions (...) everywhere, but especially in places of mission" (4).

Also in the decree *Ad Gentes*, the Council underlines the dimension of the continuous renewal of missionaries, assured and supervised by the General Chapters: "The messengers of the Gospel, in order not to neglect the grace that is in them, must renew themselves day by day entirely in their spirit" (5). And Vatican II concludes: "Therefore, all missionaries (...) must be individually prepared (...) so that they are up to the task they will have to perform" (6).

Thus, each General Chapter should help the members of the Institute to be up to the missionary task in the context of each moment of our journey.

Chapter as a meeting

As a basic category of our reflection I propose the concept of encounter, which is used frequently today to indicate the most relevant dimension of Christian sequela and of the Christian mission, and which we can adopt to try to see the General Chapter not only as a canonical fact but, above all, as a charismatic and spiritual event, which leads the members of the Institute to an encounter with the Founder, the intermediary of the encounter with Christ; to an encounter between them, helping them to rediscover their fraternity and communion in the common mission; to an encounter with the Church, urging them to live their particular charism in the building up of the Church *semper reformanda* and in proclaiming the Gospel to the people for the coming of the fullness of time; to an encounter with the societies in which they live and work, putting their charism at the service of the transformation of society according to the Gospel.



2

The Chapter as an encounter with the Founder

In the dynamics of preparation for the 1969 General Chapter, Father Pietro Chiocchetta had prepared and offered a reflection for the members of the Central Commission who were in charge of preparing the Chapter (7). It was from this reflection that I drew inspiration for the preparation of this first point.

First of all, we must try to answer the question of what the return to the Founder, requested by the Council and therefore by each General Chapter, can mean and the relevance that his personal and historical charism has for us today. Fr. Chiocchetta suggests the image of the seed: Comboni, to each Combonian generation, is given to us as a seed to transform, with the dynamism of the Gospel, our

life and mission. To prepare a General Chapter means, therefore, to prepare the ground, which is the Institute, to receive this seed so that it may bear fruit.

Comboni's life acquired the potential of the Gospel seed at the moment of his death (October 10, 1881, in Khartoum). To accept him as a seed means to enter into the dynamic of his Easter, in the handing over of his life to Christ ("I am happy on the cross which, carried willingly for the love of God, generates triumph and eternal life").

To return to the charism of the Founder means to grasp the interior and personal elements of Saint Daniel's spirituality, exemplified in the last months of his life.

First, humility and trust in God.

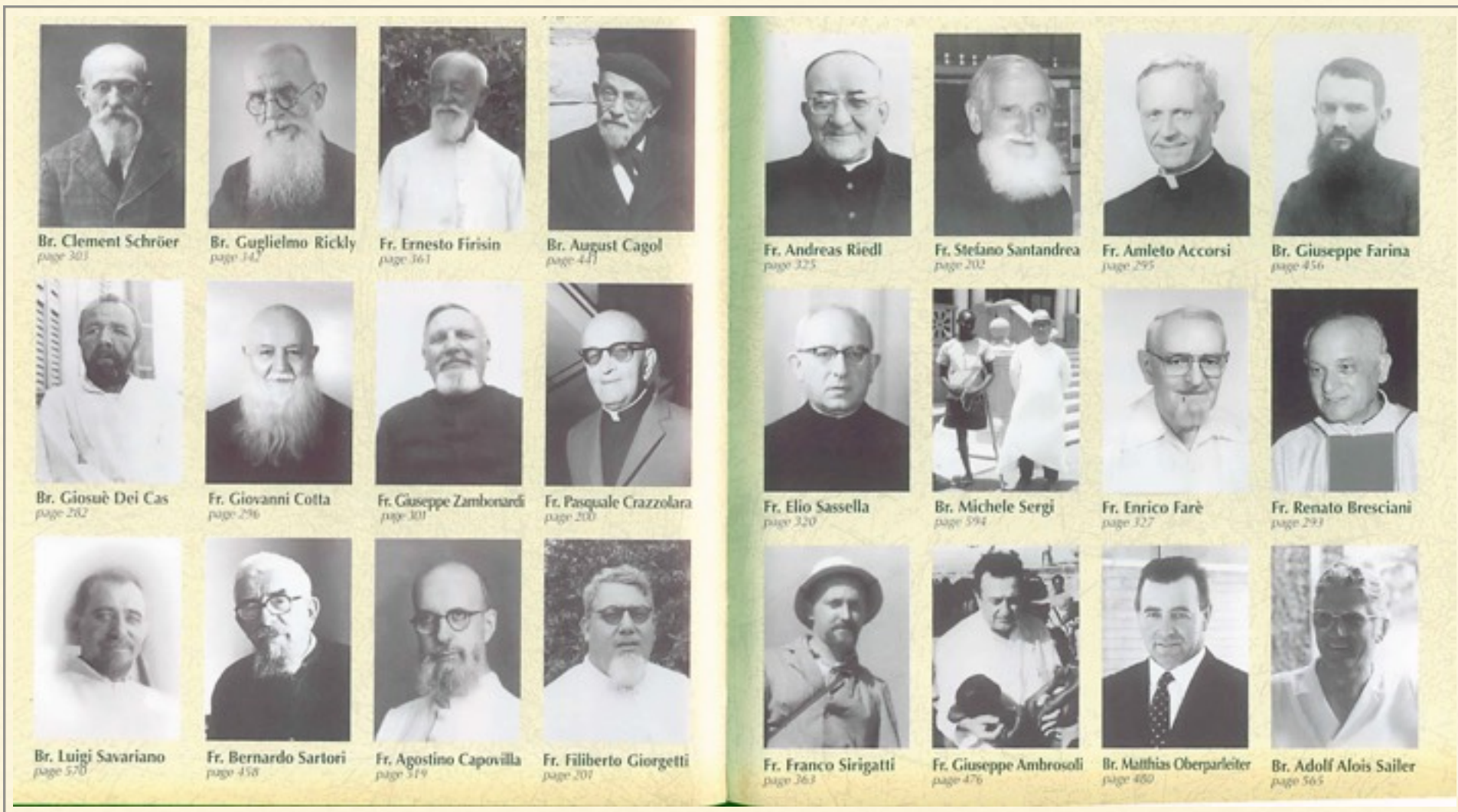
Second, patience, that is, willingness to step aside to make room for God and his plans: knowing how to wait for God's time. The reading of the letters of the last year testifies to Comboni's patience and magnanimity in dealing with questions of persons, problems of the Institute, situations in which he was humiliated and not taken into consideration...

Third, zeal for God and the regeneration of Nigrizia, this letting himself be kindled by the fire of love, "by that charity lit with divine flame on the slope of Golgotha, and

coming out of the side of the Crucified One, to embrace the whole human family", to put it in Comboni's words.

"Comboni is a seed. And few things, in nature, are more fragile than "a seed". But perhaps none is more tenacious and fuller of hope than it. Even if it falls into the bare rock, it will always try to find a slit where to sink its slender root. And it is because of this tenacious faith of his that the earth is green and we are alive" (8).

At the hour of renewal, which each chapter seeks, "Comboni is the seed of our hope. As he offered himself in agony, saying to his own, "Courage for the present... And above all for the future" (9). The challenge is, in the preparation and holding of the Chapter, to allow oneself to be guided by these original seminal, sapiential principles, rather than by the protagonists of ideologies or personalities.



3

The Chapter as an Encounter with the Institute today

To look at the Chapter as an encounter with the Institute today helps to consider it as an event-date for all members, in the search for a deeper awareness of the common identity and mission. It also helps to understand and emphasize the task and responsibility of the members of the Chapter, provincial superiors (by right) and elected members.

The first thing to emerge in the preparation phase is, therefore, the responsibility of each and all, of each Combonian, in the destiny of the Chapter, of its preparation and realization. A salient moment of this responsibility is the choice of the chapter delegates. But it is not the only one: it is important to emphasize the responsibility of everyone and every community and provincial gatherings, in view of the preparation of the

Chapter, starting with the letter of the Superior General and his Council and the themes and questions proposed by them for the Chapter's discernment.

In this context, it is also good to emphasize the importance of the working method, both in the assemblies and in the preparatory meetings and in the conduct of the Chapter itself: the importance of seeing, judging and acting. Above all, of seeing, of the consciousness that the members and the whole Institute have of themselves and of their mission. The Chapter offers the opportunity to look us in the eye and recognize our weaknesses and strengths. Each Chapter offers the possibility of this in-depth look at the state of the Institute and its members, and it is an opportunity to promote that reflection on our experience, which is felt, in the opinion of many, to be a great lack, since action among us tends to prevail over reflection and we run from one plan to another, from one project to another.

The Chapter is the supreme authority (RV 146), but this authority must be exercised in "collegiality," at the service of "the participation of all members in the life of the Institute," says the same RV number, as we have seen above. This means that the members of the Chapter are sovereign to the extent that they represent the members of

the Institute. The Chapter members are repositories of the "seeing, judging and acting" of the members, that is, of the discernment of all members. This consciousness must be enlivened in the conduct of the work and should lead the Chapter to seek ways to remain as connected as possible to the members of the Institute, awakening the common consciousness, openness to the discernment in progress and acceptance of the Chapter decisions by all.

Both in the process of preparation and in the course of the Chapter event "it is necessary to free oneself from the disorientation of individualism and clientele; because, as it is said in *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 4 (as we have already mentioned above): "It is not possible to proceed with effective renewal and true adaptation without the collaboration of all the members of the Institute" (10).

This commitment to "find the whole Institute" in the Chapter event and to promote in the Institute an inclusive renewal that leaves no one behind (to use two expressions that are fashionable today) will help to avoid two traps.

On the one hand, the emergence of a certain mentality which acts as a "contrary bastian" and blocking element, which knows a certain order of things and tends to resist renewal (in the 1969 Chapter, the

group of personalities accustomed to leading the Institute and perpetuating themselves in the exercise of authority).

On the other hand, the affirmation of an ideological mentality, of the ecclesial fashion of the moment, of change at all costs and quickly (in the Chapter of 1969, for example, the group of "minor prophets", the "enlightened" who later... left the Institute).

Keeping this vision of the Chapter event as an appointment for all the members of the Institute helps to find the path of synthesis that leads to inclusive renewal (in the 1969 Chapter, the involvement of everyone in the Chapter event and the sense of responsibility of the Chapter members helped to take the path of synthesis and to carry out the apostolic reconfiguration of the Institute as we know it today).

The Chapter, each Chapter, is not a gathering of eminent members called to exercise a task through "infused representativeness" or personal "ideological clairvoyance". It is, instead, an assembly of people who have received a mission from the members of the Institute and must bring it back to them at every moment. Therefore, in each Chapter, "imposed solutions" and "closed answers" that always leave cracks and divisions should be avoided; and "open answers", in line with the open personality

of St. Daniel Comboni, should be preferred (11).

Including, in the themes proposed for discernment, the question of the revisitation and revision of the Rule of Life, the 19th General Chapter will gather the work of reflection done so far and will offer the Institute a unique moment of encounter with itself.



4

The Chapter as an Encounter with the Church today

The careful reading of the letters written by Daniele Comboni to Propaganda Fide (to Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, for a total of 20 long letters) during the last year of his life (January-October 1881) reveal a passionate missionary attached to the Church, even (and above all!) when he feels mistreated by it (the relationship with Lavignerie and the question of redrawing the boundaries of the Vicariate). This zeal for the missionary Church of his time, this sense of communion and devotion grow in the hour of suffering, when the seed is about to be sown, and in sincerity and *parresia*. Comboni, in fact, does not refrain from criticizing decisions taken and methods followed nor from making suggestions, uniting freedom of spirit and conscience with fidelity and devotion.

This ecclesial reference, the call to the Church as the People of God, in which our discernment must be inserted, is present in the most recent General Chapters (12). In the documents of the last Chapter, however, this reference is rather weak, reduced to a passing reference (see n. 6, which affirms communion with the Church, and n. 46.2, which states that the local Church is the subject of the mission).

In general, in these Chapters we limit ourselves to quoting the magisterium without deepening the question of our insertion in the Church and, consequently, in the local Churches. These statements seek to help the members of the Institute to be in tune with the Church of our time and places.

This is what we also do with the magisterium of Pope Francis, which offers us so many ideas for fundamental reflection: we quote the Pope every day for our use and consumption, passing from one quotation to another without promoting an integral reflection in order to understand, in what the Pope says to the whole Church (he, in fact, speaks to the whole Church, with his call to a missionary reform), what are the elements that we must appropriate to operate our missionary reconfiguration, according to our charism and our concrete possibilities (of persons and means).

To see the Chapter as an encounter with the Church of our time, and with the Churches of the places in which we find ourselves, and to situate our renewal in the ecclesial sphere, does not mean simply seeking to broaden our "circle of knowledge" about the situation of the Church (people today have a way of broadening their knowledge of the Church and its path). It is, instead, a matter of helping our confreres to broaden "their circle of influence" (13); that is, to assume one's responsibilities as a member of a Church that wants to be missionary (outgoing or at the frontiers, to use the well-known expressions of Pope Francis). For us it is a matter of triggering that zeal for the Church and Nigrizia of which Saint Daniel lived: zeal, originally, has to do with a burning fire in the heart, that flame of love that comes out of the pierced Heart.

The fact that the 19th General Chapter includes in its agenda the theme of ministries will help us to live it as an intense moment of encounter with the Church of our time and will spur us to assume, in our life and mission, the vision of a Church rich in ministries and charisms and to renew, promoting a charismatic Church, the awareness of the charism which, by the grace of God and the mediation of St. Daniel, is ours.



5

The Chapter as an Encounter with Humanity today

In the letters of the last months Daniele Comboni appears as a missionary hunted by difficulties but passionate in his donation, rooted in faith and attentive to the needs of the society around him; a missionary who takes initiatives to fight slavery (with his trip to Kordofan and the Nuba mountains) and plans a new missionary opening in that region.

He put together, we can say, passion for God and passion for the regeneration of Nigrizia. These last months of his life constitute a precious fragment that reveals the whole of his life and his missionary commitment; that combines together, in a single grammar of love and commitment, the passion for God and for Humanity.

In his gaze at the society that surrounds him, Saint Daniel departs from and arrives at the Cross of Christ.

Between himself and society, he placed Christ and raised the Cross as the source of the effectiveness he sought: "I am happy in the Cross, which I gladly carry for the love of God generates triumph and eternal life."

These words, written to P. Sembianti in the last period of his life, enclose in a crucial moment the state of mind of his whole life as a missionary. This return to the foot of the Cross, to contemplation of the pierced Heart, where everything began, fills the time now nearing its end with light and courage. And this is the gaze on society that leaves us as a charismatic heritage, as a seed destined to transform our gaze and our action.

The attention to the transformation of the societies and peoples in the midst of which we live has grown in the last General Chapters. Among the various dimensions of society (cultural, social, political, economic...) interest in justice and peace has prevailed (14), followed by interest in culture and dialogue (15). Our most up-to-date look at humanity today can be found in the Acts of the 2015 Chapter (especially in nos. 7-14); going beyond the traditional approach, which focused the Comboni gaze on Africa and the Americas, the 2015 Chapter also deals with Europe (nos. 46, 1-5).

Usually our gaze on society and our encounter with the peoples waiting for the Gospel tend to be prophetic and denouncing. We are inclined to think that our vision, our stance makes a difference and has an influence on processes... at least at the level of the members of the Institute.

Looking at Comboni, we need to go beyond prophecy and denunciation - which he too was able to do in his time and circumstances - and arrive at the Cross, at this capacity to look at society with the eyes of Christ, and to place the Lord and his Gospel between us and society, drawing the consequences for the denunciation that is imposed and, above all, for the action that is required. Only in this way will our discernment of times and places, to which the Church calls us at each Chapter, as the unique moment of our renewal, be in line with the Founder's inspiration and charism.



6

The Chapter as a multifaceted event, with various timings

There is a perception that runs through the life of St. Daniel and gives consistency to his vision and action, as a thread: the certainty of God's plan, the meaning and the expectation of God's Hour. God writes a story with times and priorities that escape us and we are not always able to discern. Events, in God's plan, flow according to their own times and deadlines, which we must discover and understand.

Daniele Comboni maintains this perspective of God's hour also and above all in the midst of the

difficulties to be overcome and the difficult decisions to be made: "The hour of the redemption of nigrizia has sounded, and one of the signs that this hour has been triggered is the present tribulation that oppresses the Vicariate" (Writings, 5153).

In this perspective, the Chapter's attention focuses on God's times and His plans for the Institute and its mission, amid the difficulties we find on our journey.

Each General Chapter, in this sense, is a waiting theophany; and Chapter discernment helps us to understand and see how the light of God illuminates the diamond of a thousand faces, that is the Institute in the variety of its members, of new splendor and beauty. The search for this perspective of God helps to neutralize the influence of personalisms and psychological and emotional elements that, in each chapter, create destabilizing waves that risk de-centering the Chapter discernment. It is therefore necessary to find a renewed synthesis between reflection and contemplation, between professional deepening and openness to divine grace in listening to the Word of God and in reading the signs of the times and places, in the light of the Word.

This perspective is to be sought in the three stages of the Chapter event, which must be seen together: the preparation;

the conduct of the Chapter; and the transmission of the Chapter discernment to all the members of the Institute. The chapter is to be seen as an event with various deadlines and dynamics: the preparation phase is the phase that allows for a greater variety of approaches in view of the participation and interest of all; the phase of the development is more conditioned by its own timing and dynamics (only the chapter delegates, a limited time, a statute and chapter rules to be followed..., etc.); the transmission phase is the most open and longest, since it has a six-year period ahead of it and requires more perseverance and commitment.

In our past, we have been interested above all in the preparation phase and in the development phase; and we have neglected the transmission phase. It is necessary to find ways to involve the Chapter delegates in the transmission of the Chapter and to counter the sentiment of many of them, who consider their task completed on the day the Chapter closes, leaving it to the members of the new General Council to transmit the Chapter discernment. To be effective, this needs dynamism in transmission, implementation and verification, to be established by the chapter itself or by the General Council and/or Provincials. It is a question of bringing the charismatic ex-

perience of the chapter to the life of individuals and communities.

The consideration of the chapter as a multifaceted event, a diamond with as many faces as there are members of the Institute, allows us to look at the richness that constitutes the variety of participants, which is increasing in recent chapters. The increase in the number of chapter delegates, in itself, may increase representativeness but does not ensure discernment; on the contrary, it risks making it more difficult, if we then consider the lack of preparation and knowledge of the situation of the Institute and the issues to be dealt with by not a few capitulars. Looking at the Capitulars, a greater numerical balance should be sought between those who, by office, have knowledge of the Institute and the questions to be discerned (members of the General Directorate and provincial superiors...) and those who are elected without necessarily taking this criterion into account. One way of solution would be to find a way of guaranteeing the presence in chapter, for a specific period of time, of experts and persons prepared in the subjects to be discerned, so as to help the capitulars in their reflection and decision.



7

The Parable of the Seed: to Start again from our Frailties

A final observation, in conclusion, inspired by the image of the seed, on the message of the General Council for the 153rd anniversary of the Institute, which I quote freely.

The convocation of the 19th General Chapter takes us at a completely unexpected moment; we lived and are emerging from a time of surprising revelation, a time that has forced us to review criteria and priorities, to confront our sense of freedom and responsibility, to question our security and to face our weaknesses. A time that has made many people say that, at the moment of recovery, "nothing will be like before" and that makes us suspect (without pretending to be prophets!) that

even "the next Chapter will not be like the previous ones".

The next General Chapter presents us with the challenge of stopping for a while to evaluate our life, our mission, to look us in the eyes; it offers us the opportunity to start again from that discovery that we all made during the "confinement" caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (beginning with Pope Francis, that March 27, 2020, in prayer in St. Peter's Square): our common weakness and fragility. The virus has made our ideological certainties disappear, it has grounded our certainties, it has reduced our claims to dust, it has disrupted our projects.

From the Gospel (see Mt 13, in particular 31-33), from the parable of mustard grain and yeast, from the Founder, from the Church, from society and from the time in which we live, comes this invitation to have the courage to begin again and again from our weaknesses, leaving to God the initiative, the primacy; an invitation to live "this time of trial as a time of choice" (16); to "reset the course of our life and mission towards the Lord, and towards others" (17), to those waiting for the Gospel. Saint Daniel is given to us as a seed of hope and he pushes us in this direction, inviting us to

"have courage for the present and especially for the future" (18).

P. Manuel Augusto Lopes Ferreira, mccj

8

Notes

(1)-*Perfectae Caritatis, On the Renewal of Consecrated Life*", n° 2.

(2)-*Perfectae Caritatis*, n° 2b. The italics are ours.

(3)-*Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 4. The italics are ours.

(4)-*Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 3.

(5)-In *Ad Gentes*, no. 24.

(6)-In *Ad Gentes*, no. 26.

(7)-Pietro Chiocchetta, Danilo Castello and Stefano Santandrea: Daniele Comboni, indications and suggestions for our post-conciliar hour. Organized by the Central Commission of Comboni Missionaries, Rome 1968.

(8)-P. Chiocchetta, *op. cit.* p. 24.

(9)-P. Chiocchetta, *op. cit.* p. 113.

(10)-P. Chiocchetta, *op. cit.* p. 81.

(11)-P. Chiocchetta, in the quoted text, speaks of the "crisis solutions" that have marked the path of the Institute and that have "left cracks".

(12)-Chapter Acts of 1991, nn. 1-4; Chapter Acts of 2003, nn. 10-14 and 24-27; Chapter Acts of 2009, nn. 49-52.

(13)-The expressions "circle of knowledge" and "circle of influence", I believe, are by M. MacLuhan. For him, today,

in a globalized society, people have a circle of knowledge that expands infinitely, because they have the opportunity (TV, media, social networks, etc.) to know everything at the very moment it happens. But they see their circle of influence getting narrower and narrower because their ability and possibility to intervene in events diminishes. This situation is at the origin of the widespread sense of frustration and information saturation that we feel today in people and also among ourselves.

(14)-Chapter Acts of 1997 (nn. 107-118); of 2003 (nn. 46-48); of 2009 (nn. 66-67).

(15)-Chapter Acts of 1997 (nos. 32-52); 2003 (nos. 109-112); 2009 (n. 65).

(16)-Pope Francis, Extraordinary Moment of Prayer, Churchyard of St. Peter's Basilica, March 27, 2020.

(17)-Pope Francis, Churchyard of St. Peter's Basilica, March 27, 2020. Adapted quote...

(18)-In Annals of the Good Shepherd 27, January 1882, p. 55.