

# Familia Comboniana

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MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE COMBONI MISSIONARIES OF THE HEART OF JESUS

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793

February 2021

## GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

### Perpetual professions

Bro.Kitha Mumbere Mwangaza (CN)	Butembo (RDC)	07.01.2021
Sc. Kutsaile Matthews (MZ)	Juba (RSS)	19.01.2021
Sc. Alionzi Ronald (U)	Mbuya-Kampala (UG)	25.01.2021

### Ordinations to the priesthood

Fr. Onyait Nicholas (U)	Toroma-Soroti (UG)	09/01/2021
Fr. Jaleta Gurmessa Geda (ET)	Kotam-Nekempte (ETH)	23/01/2021
Fr. Biangbali Abaingu Blaise (CN)	Isiro (RDC)	24/01/2021
Fr. Malema Bati Maurice (CN)	Isiro (RDC)	24/01/2021
Fr. Izakare Amoko Isaac (U)	Dzaipi-Arua (UG)	30/01/2021
Fr. Horbé Richard (TCH)	Sarh (TCH)	30/01/2021
Fr. Gokam Djasgombaye (Bienvenu) (TCH)	Sarh (TCH)	30/01/2021

### Holy Redeemer Guild

February	01 – 15 C	16 – 28 EGSD	
March	01 – 07 CO	08 – 15 E	16 – 31 DSP

### Prayer intentions

**February** – That by our gestures of love and forgiveness we may succeed in bringing everyone to encounter Christ. *Lord hear us.*

**March** – That the ministry of the Comboni Family may strengthen “gender justice” and especially the protection of women and girls. *Lord hear us.*

## **Publications**

Mundo Negro, the Comboni publishing house in Madrid, has published, in December 2020, the book “*Testimonios de la Misión*”, by Fr. Martin Devenish, mccj, a translation of the book “Supreme Witness”, published in the London Province in 2019.

As the author states: “The book “*Testimonios de la Misión*” covers the lives of twenty-five missionary brothers and sisters who died in the service of the Gospel in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Brazil and Mexico. These men and women were killed for having expressed the love taught by Jesus and put into practice, in his name, the values of the Gospel, teaching the faith, visiting the sick, consoling the afflicted and promoting the integral development of every human person regardless of race, culture or religion”.

## CONGO

### **The first two Comboni priests of Saint Anna**

On Sunday 24 January, two new Comboni priests were ordained: Fr. Blaise Biangbali Abaingu and Fr. Maurice Bati Malema. It was a great feast for the parish of Saint Anna in Isiro, in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The celebration was presided over by Mons. Julien Andavo Mbia, Bishop of Isiro-Niangara, and lasted almost five hours.

Blaise and Maurice are not the first Comboni Missionaries native of Isiro, but they are the first from the parish of Saint Anna, founded by the Combonis in 1970. Everyone wanted to be present at such an important event to thank God for the gift of their lives.

Maurice studied in South Africa, Blaise in Italy, but they met again to live the moment of their ordination. They knew each other from childhood since both grew up in the area close to the parish, were members of the same youth group and witnessed the work of the many Combonis who passed through Saint Anna whose footsteps they are now following.

Richard and Charlotte, Blaise’s parents are both very committed in the parish as a married couple and are members of the Family Committee and are involved in other services as well.

The same may be said of Maurice’s parents Justin and Baleya. Justin is committed to assisting the musicians and choir members. It is

wonderful to see how missionary vocations come about in such dedicated Christian families as these.

## CURIA

### **Spiritual exercises online**

Fr. David Glenday has recently directed the spiritual exercises online with the confreres of Colombia. In the second reflection of the six full days, he invited the participants to enter prayerfully into conversation with the Founder, asking him some fundamental questions related to our missionary life. The themes, presented in Spanish, were as follows:

1. Daniel, who are you for me?
2. Daniel, who was God for you?
3. Daniel, how did you grow in the mission?
4. Daniel, why the mission together?
5. Daniel, where did you live Easter?
6. Daniel, how should one live the crisis?

Those who wish to have an audio recording may contact Fr. David [dkglenday@gmail.com](mailto:dkglenday@gmail.com)

## ECUADOR

### **Ordination to the diaconate**

After two anxious months due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Comboni Family in Ecuador and the local Church enjoyed a moment of celebration and hope with the recent ordination to the diaconate of Sitwaminya Mughanyiri Étienne, originally from The Democratic Republic of Congo, who is doing his missionary service in the Province in preparation for his ordination to the priesthood.

Etienne, also known as Fiston, completed a long journey before reaching such an important stage in his life. He commenced his formation in 2009 and took first vows in Benin, in 2015. After studying theology in Kinshasa (DRC), he arrived in Ecuador where he learned Spanish and was appointed to the Comboni parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in El Carmen Canton, Manabí (in the Archdiocese of Portoviejo). He did his pastoral work in various fields, especially among the youth whose presence and dynamism are remarkable in

the parish, thanks to the work of the Combonis and the Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

On 15 November, Etienne made his perpetual profession in the parish. Fr. Ottorino Poletto, the Provincial Superior, presided at the Eucharist. Some Combonis and diocesan priests were present at the ceremony which was organised mostly by laypeople and pastoral agents. The importance of the event and the affection of the people were shown by the warmth of the participation and the typical moments of the African culture that enriched the event, thanks to the Servants of the Sacred Heart, from Kenya.

On 5 December, while observing the restrictions required by the pandemic, Étienne's was ordained at the Daniel Comboni Youth Centre, in Quito, by Mons. Alfredo José Espinoza Mateus, SDB, Archbishop of Quito and Primate of Ecuador. A number of people were present coming from different parts of the country including religious, members of the Comboni Youth Movement America Misionera e Amigos de la Misión. The event was facilitated by the generosity of many different people and the nearby parishes. The Eucharist ended with expressions of affection and esteem towards the Combonis by the Archbishop who invited the missionaries to resume the commitment of Afro Pastoral and to take on a parish in the outskirts of Quito.

The 'yes' uttered by Deacon Etienne was certainly a breath of fresh air for the Church and the Province, as well as being a fine example of witness for the youth coming from the various parishes: we hope that, motivated by the response of this young missionary, many others will feel the desire to follow Jesus who continues to call missionaries to his Mission.

## SOUTH SUDAN

### **Fr. Matthew Remijo ordained bishop of Wau**

Our South Sudanese confrere Fr. Matthew Remijo Adam Gbitiku has been ordained bishop of Wau, in the esplanade in front of the cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help on Sunday 24 January 2021, in the presence of a large congregation of faithful Catholics who had come to celebrate and acclaim their new pastor. The appointment of the bishop of Wau comes more than three years after the death of former Bishop Rudolf Deng Majack, in March 2017. The event was

attended by more than 100 priests, all the bishops of South and North Sudan and around 10,000 people.

Bishop Matthew Remijo, 48, was born on 5 May 1972 in Wau. He attended elementary school at Mboro and then Wau Day Secondary School. His parents were Remijo Adam Gbitiku, deceased, and Asunta Juyee Longo. He was baptised on 20 June 1972 and received confirmation in 1984, in Bussere, Wau. He then joined the Comboni Missionaries and was sent to study theology in Lima, Peru, where he was ordained deacon on 18 November 2003. After returning to South Sudan, he was ordained priest in Wau by the then Bishop Rudolf Deng, since deceased, on 3 October 2004. He became a curate and was later parish priest of the parish of Masalma, Omdurman, Khartoum, until 2008. Due to his exceptional pastoral talents, he was sent to Rome for further studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University where, in 2010, he was awarded a master's in Spiritual Theology. On his return, he was appointed Vocations Director in the Archdiocese of Khartoum until 2012 and Spiritual Director of St Paul's Major Seminary until 2013. He was also Vicar General of Khartoum Archdiocese until 2017. He was afterwards sent to Nairobi, Kenya, as Vice-rector and Bursar of the Comboni International theologate.

### **Perpetual Profession**

On the evening of 19 January, during the Provincial Assembly of the South Sudan Comboni Province, being held at the Good Shepherd Peace Centre in Juba, Kit, the scholastic Matthew Kutsaile celebrated his perpetual vows. It was a simple though memorable celebration, together with around 30 missionaries from all parts of South Sudan who joined Matthew in his definitive consecration. He was presented by Fr. Alfred Mawadri, parish priest of Holy Trinity Parish, Old Fangak, and by Fr. Gregor Schmidt, superior of that community. Vicar General and Fr. Jeremias dos Santos and the provincial of South Sudan, Fr. Luis Okot were the main celebrants. Matthew Kutsaile is originally from Malawi-Zambia and will be ordained deacon on 14 February at Old Fangak, Upper East Nile, South Sudan.

### **The Covid-19 situation**

The world is going through another wave of global health crises as the number of new infections rises. The pandemic has caused incalculable social, political, economic and cultural crises. It has shown up the weakness of public health systems and the methods of

response to catastrophes, not only in poor countries but also in others that are very well off.

In South Sudan, the first Covid-19 case was recorded on 5 April 2020, a foreign humanitarian worker. Since then, despite the preventive measures implemented by the Ministry of Health and the WHO, the coronavirus has reached the level of community transmission. The government has now revoked some restrictions including the obligation to be tested when travelling between states and the prohibition of gatherings, so life is returning to normal. For some months now, the churches have recommenced liturgical functions and celebrations without limits on numbers of participants.

These facts have contributed to a lack of exact figures of infections and deaths and have even increased scepticism regarding the pandemic. Many people do not believe the Covid-19 exists. The majority say this is a disease of white people that does not affect blacks and cannot exist in a hot environment like ours but only in cold places. Contact tracing, tests and the registration of infections have diminished. For the present, the country continues to fight the pandemic with limited tests and personnel. At the same time, the health requirements of the country continue to increase apart from the direct impact of the pandemic on public health. The context is complex: chronic poverty, internal conflict, limited infrastructure, poor public health systems (despite aid given by China and other donors) and the limited investment by the government in basic social services is an additional burden for the nation and especially for the more vulnerable. This year, floods have struck the most of the country and internally displaced people have not been able to return to their homes.

When the epidemic first appeared, the government set up a high-level national task force to establish guidelines for public health developed by the Ministry of Health and partners to moderate the spread and impact of the virus. In May 2020, this task force was dissolved for reasons unknown and it was reconstituted as a National Task Force Commission (NTC) with yet another national directive commission. These task forces instituted by the Ministry of Health received many donations from the inter-government Authority for development, the Japanese agency for international cooperation, the Commonwealth and the UK Office for Development, the African Development Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, the European Union and other donors within the country and abroad. Despite the generosity of these contributions, the government is struggling to manage properly the

cases of infection, and has just one centre, in Juba. Other centres have been planned but they failed because of inadequate equipment and the lack of human resources. At the moment, the statistics are as follows: 3,670 confirmed infections, 3,181 recoveries and 63 deaths. If the tests had been carried out more efficiently, the statistics might be different.

The situation has opened the way for the privatisation and commercialisation of tests for people travelling in South Sudan: South Sudanese citizens are charged 75 USD while people of other nationalities are charged 115 USD. The national Ministry of Health is still doing the tests without charge.

As regards the Catholic Church, diocese-level task forces have been set up and these extend the work to the parishes. The various diocesan heads continually remind the people of the existence of Covid-19 and ask everyone to observe the preventive measures during Mass by wearing masks, keeping the proper distance and sanitising their hands. We continue to pray that all this may soon end.

## IN PACE CHRISTI

### **Bro. Benito Ricci (30.09.1941 – 04.11.2020)**

Bro. Benito was born on 30 September 1941 at Sant'Omero (Teramo Province, diocese of Teramo-Atri, Italy). He did the first year of novitiate in Gozzano and was then sent to Sunningdale where he learned English and took first vows on 7 October 1961. He stayed there for six years doing technical studies and administering the magazines. He took perpetual vows on 9 September 1967. In 1968, he was appointed to Uganda where he remained for all his missionary life except for a period of four years in Kenya (1985-89) in charge of the procure and as provincial bursar; in those years, his presence in Nairobi was a real blessing for all the confreres working in Uganda in a situation of guerrilla warfare.

In Uganda Bro. Benito always worked in the accountancy sector. During his first period, he worked at the missions of the West Nile and then in Kampala. After returning from Kenya in 1989, he worked for seven years in Moroto, another seven in Kampala and then in Layibi, in the Archdiocese of Gulu, as procurator and bursar as well as superior of the community (2011-2020).

Bro. Benito passed away at Lacor hospital due to Covid-19 on 4 November 2020, together with Fr. José de Jesús Aranda Nava from

South Sudan, who also died the same day at St Mary's Hospital Lacor, and was buried in Gulu cemetery at Negri Village.

The funeral started with Mass at Gulu cathedral celebrated by Mons. Sabino Ocan Odoki, Bishop of Arua Diocese.

There were only seventy people present (the maximum allowed by the pandemic regulations), among whom were the provincial superiors of Uganda and South Sudan, many priests and many sisters. Many other people attended while remaining outside the church.

During the Mass, Bishop Odoki recalled the dedication of Bro. Benito to his service, emphasising especially that his wise guidance of the administration of the Archdiocese of Gulu will never be forgotten.

Bro. Jorge Fayad wrote: "I met Bro. Benito in Kenya and he later came to Moroto. He was courteous and good to me; he was very affectionate. I greatly appreciated his help in time of need. He gave me suggestions regarding my work as coordinator of youth ministry. Those were hard times but I enjoyed his company and brotherly affection. He was a quiet and peaceful sort of person. He had a good personality and was a professional Comboni Brother. I thank God for having given me such a good community member".

Fr. Umberto Pescantini remembers Bro. Benito as a quiet and thoughtful person. They met for the first time in Sunningdale in 1961 when Bro. Benito was newly-professed and was attending administration courses while Umberto was starting his novitiate. They met again a few times in Nairobi in the eighties and later in Moroto and Kampala. Benito always made sure he did things properly and was very patient.

### **Fr. Claudio Altieri (22.07.1940 – 15.11.2020)**

Fr. Claudio was born in Bolzano on 22 July 1940. After the novitiate in Gozzano, where he took first vows on 9 September 1961, he went to Venegono for the scholasticate and made his perpetual profession on 9 September 1964; he was ordained priest on 26 June 1965. A few months later, he was appointed to the NAP. In New York, he took degrees in biology and English.

In September 1968, he was appointed to the Province of Ethiopia-Eritrea (EE) where he remained for his entire missionary life, up to 2012.

He was sent to Asmara (Eritrea) to teach in the secondary school; he was Vice-Headmaster of Comboni College middle school and assistant of various youth groups composed of Catholics, Orthodox and Moslems.



In 1973, he moved to the south of Ethiopia where he served in various communities – Teticcia, Dongora, Arramo, Addis Ababa, Shafinna, Fullasa and Awasa – in various posts: school director, teacher, parish priest, a guide in a variety of activities and diocesan delegate on the national pastoral commission. He also wrote a *Ghedéo* grammar and translated sacred and liturgical texts into the local languages of the missions. Every three or four years, he would go home to Italy “for some rest and intellectual and spiritual updating”.

In 2013, he returned to Italy and stayed for some years in Rebbio. Regarding that period, Fr. Luigi Consonni, who knew him well wrote: “I was surprised at the death of Fr. Claudio. I vividly remember when he was part of the community of Rebbio. I remember his strong and determined commitment to the migrants, even though limited by his poor health. He wholeheartedly dedicated his life to the mission in Africa and in the circumstances in which I knew him”.

In 2015, he celebrated his fiftieth anniversary of ordination in Rovigo, a city to which he was very much attached: on Sundays, he often celebrated Mass in Commenda attended by a good group of parishioners.

In 2019, Fr. Claudio was transferred for treatment to Castel d’Azzano where he died a victim of Covid-19 on 15 November 2020.

The following is taken from a report of his passing published on the solidarity network *Como senza frontiere*, of which Fr. Claudio was an active member: “Father Claudio is no longer with us. But it is not so. He is and remains in our experience, and – we must add – in our history. Ever since we started to come together for the experience of *Como senza frontiere*, Father Claudio has been there. Around those tables, in front of that railway station, during those discussions, we are different and a bit eccentric, and the little group of Combonis (from Como-Rebbio and Venegono) is quite substantial, four or five, odd like ourselves but strong in experience, in their commitment and their availability. Father Claudio is always there right to the end (or almost), until, having had to come to terms with his health problems – he moved to Verona.

Some remember how, in the station gardens he offered to dialogue in an ‘original’ language (he had been many years in Ethiopia and Eritrea) with the young refugees there, a concrete opportunity to make them feel less ‘foreign’ and more a part of the community. All of us remember his far from routine interventions, his ability to draw fundamental indications and suggestions from his personal experience and that of his Institute, and to ‘recount’ even that which

did not yet exist but which we ought to create. Those who went to visit him in Castel d’Azzano in recent months found him suffering but never indifferent, full of passion as always and interested in all of us now distant men and women”.

### **Fr. Luigi Zanini (28.02.1926 – 16.11.2020)**

Fr. Luigi Zanini was born on 28 February 1926 in Grezzana, in Verona province. He joined the Venegono novitiate where he took first vows on 15 August 1946. As a scholastic, he went first to Rebbio and then to Venegono, Brescia and again to Venegono where he took final vows on 20 September 1951. He was ordained a priest on 7 June 1952. He stayed for eight years in Thiene, Italy, as local bursar and doing missionary animation, and also in Brescia. In 1960, he was appointed to Ecuador where he remained for over fifty years.

Fr. Luigi carried out his mission among the indigenous Chachi and Awas, in the north of Esmeraldas province. It was a territory inhabited mostly by descendants of Africans who had been taken as slaves among whom the Combonis arrived in the fifties. Fr. Luigi succeeded in making himself welcome in isolated villages. Each day, he would go to teach and then play football with the children and young people on the mission football ground. We must remember that Fr. Luigi was working in a territory where priests were not welcome due to widespread anti-clericalism and that Esmeraldas, on the border with Colombia, had to deal with situations of conflict related to drug-trafficking, as well as having to contend with malaria. Fr. Aldo Pusterla who worked with him when he arrived in Borbón in 1984, emphasises in his testimony: “He was a man of deep spirituality, who loved the mission and the people of Borbón. The greatness of the Comboni charism that filled him was tangible. He was always positive, smiling, open to dialogue with everyone, patient and always attentive to the needs of those who approached him ... he was a master in everything”.

During his final mission years, Fr. Luigi worked in ministry in the city of Esmeraldas: he would take food to the poorest and made room for the youth. In 2012, on 7 June, he had celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination and fifty two years of missionary presence in Esmeraldas where he had worked in the parishes of Limones, the Cathedral, San Lorenzo and La Merced. The celebration was held in the last of these parishes, in the presence of all the Comboni communities Borbón, San Lorenzo, La Merced and El Carmen and also of Mons. Eugenio Arellano Fernández, Vicar Apostolic, who

presided over the Eucharistic celebration and had spoken of the great work done by Fr. Luigi and his constant presence in the north of Esmeraldas. During those years, Fr. Luigi also did Trojan work in Pampón, a difficult area full of contrasts, dominated by gangs who called him “dry bones” because he never had anything worth stealing. In 2014, he returned to Italy for health reasons. He stayed first in Verona, at the Mother House, and then at Castel d’Azzano where he died on 16 November 2020, due to the Coronavirus.

### **Fr. Cesare Pegoraro (01.03.1934 – 17.11.2020)**

Fr. Cesare was born in Montecchia di Crosara (province of Verona and diocese of Vicenza) on 1 March 1934. He joined the Florence Comboni novitiate where he took first vows on 9 September 1956. He did the scholasticate in Venegono where he made his perpetual profession on 9 September 1958. He was ordained priest on 14 March 1959 and sent to Brescia as a teacher and formator in the minor seminary. In 1961, he moved to Crema with the same duties. In 1965, he was appointed to Togo where he spent his entire missionary life (almost fifty years).

As we know, two events gave rise to Combonis going to Togo: the expulsion from Sudan and the request of the archbishop of Lomé. The first Combonis arrived on 19 January 1964. The first two missions were Kodjoviakopé, an area to the west of the capital, on the border with Ghana, and Afagnan, about 80 km from Lomé, near the border with Benin. On the following Sunday, the missionaries were received in Kodjoviakopé to be presented to the Christian community of the cathedral. They were met as they entered the village, located close to the sea, and were led in procession to the mission to the accompaniment of songs. These missionaries were soon joined by four others, one of whom was Fr. Cesare.

This is what he wrote in mid-1966: “After the intense work at Easter, it is now possible to rest a bit and write to distant friends. For a year and one month, I have been in the front line of the mission, here in Togo. I would have many things to say to you but I feel something of the typical African laziness and tiredness. I have spent eight months in Adjido. The language spoken in the mission is somewhat different from what I learned during my first six months in Togo. How long will it take me to become fluent? It will certainly be a long time given that after a year and three months I can hardly understand anything and can only say a few words. On the other hand, the work is consoling. In a village that comes under Adjido, which I see to personally, I have

administered over eighty baptisms and about a hundred First Holy Communion. My health has always been sound. It is just that I have been suffering from insomnia for six weeks now. Perhaps it is the heat or the humidity in this maritime climate. My superior has decided to send me for three weeks to Afagnan, for a change of air”.

After going to Afagnan, Fr. Cesare was sent as parish priest to Aklakou and was for two years Provincial Superior. He then worked as curate at Cotonou for about six years. In 1989, he was again in Cotonou. “The parish of Fidjrossè” we read in the history of the province, “dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi, is the eleventh parish of the archdiocese of Cotonou and was given its first Comboni community on 29 October 1989. Its members were: Fr. G. Montresor Fr. Cesare Pegoraro and Bro. A. Guzzardi”. From 1996 to 2007, Fr. Cesare stayed in the parish of Toffo as local superior and in ministry and then moved to Cotonou.

In 2014, he returned to Italy for reasons of health and went to Castel d’Azzano where he died, a victim of Covid-19, on 17 November 2020.

### **Fr. Luigi Marro (11.10.1925 – 28.11.2020)**

Fr. Luigi Marro was born in Cuneo on 11 October 1925. He did the novitiate in Gozzano and in Florence, taking first vows on 9 September 1950. He then went to the Venegono scholasticate and made his final profession on 19 September 1952. On 30 May 1953, he was ordained priest. He was then appointed to Ecuador and assigned to the community of Esmeraldas where he was to stay for 25 years.

Concerning this period, we have the testimony of Fr. Natale Basso: “I can only speak of Fr. Luigi during the period from the first years in Esmeraldas up to 1966 as I never saw him again after that time.

He was one of the first three Combonis to come to Esmeraldas. He was to be the bursar. As such, apart from his ‘Piedmont’ character, he had to see to it that there would be something to eat the following day. He therefore had to make sure that the little he had would be enough to meet all our needs.

In those days, the bursar was the one who provided everything and was 24 hours and 365 days of the year at the disposition of the Vicar Apostolic, the only absolute authority of the group (the representative of the Superior General was isolated in the extreme north of the country and could only communicate (all being well) every fortnight and only by radio.

Nothing of all this prevented Fr. Luigi from dedicating himself to his pastoral work. He taught religion – numerous periods – at the middle

school for girls run by the Providence Sisters, provided spiritual care to some villages near Esmeraldas, organised the formation of some catechists who were working with him, collaborated as much as he could with the parishes of the city and organised formation courses. I cannot imagine how he found the time to do all this.

One important aspect of his personality was his innate ability to avoid – and help to avoid – clashes or misunderstandings between us or differences with the Vicar Apostolic; but none of this prevented him from sticking to his principles or standing by his decisions”.

In 1977, Fr. Luigi returned to Rome for the Aggiornamento Course and spent a couple of years in the Verona Mother House as provincial bursar. He was then reassigned to Ecuador, where he was appointed to the provincial house in Quito, again as provincial bursar. In 1990, he was called to Rome where he remained for about eight years, engaged in missionary animation and the ACSE travel office. In 1999, he was again sent to the Mother House and then the Verona CAA where he stayed until 2015 when he was transferred to Castel d’Azzano where he died on 28 November 2020, a victim of Covid-19.

### **Fr. Silvester Engl (31.12.1937 – 11.12.2020)**

Fr. Silvester was the eleventh of thirteen children in a family of small farmers and was born on the last day of 1937 in Gais, then a small mountain town in South Tyrol (Bolzano province). As he himself stated, his roots in a large family shaped his contacts with people and his love for his fatherland throughout his life.

Due to family contacts with the Missionary House of the Sacred Heart in Milland, near Bressanone, he attended secondary school there. In 1951, he began to attend the diocesan minor seminary in Bressanone up to the maturity exams in 1959 when he decided to enter the Comboni novitiate at Mellatz (Germany) and to follow the call to the missionary life. He took first vows on 30 October 1960. After the novitiate, he returned to Bressanone to study philosophy and theology at the major diocesan seminary. On 13 March 1964, he took final vows and on 29 June of the same year was ordained priest in the cathedral.

He was then sent to Spain where he worked from 1965 to 1976 in Saldaña, at the new seminary, as formator and director and later as community superior. He looked on those years as a great challenge to learn, grow and mature, and so as a preparation for the tasks which would be entrusted to him later on. He liked formation work, being of sound character and he did it knowing he was doing missionary work.

The students in Saldaña nicknamed him “Fanta”, since, like the smiling character on the advertisement for the soft drink, he always had a smile for everyone.

He spent more than ten years in Spain and was then transferred to the DSP. From 1976 to 1984, he worked as formator and director at the Comboni minor seminary, local superior and a member of the provincial council. That was a period of crisis for the minor seminaries of the Institute and marked the end of a model of formation and vocations promotion. None of his students chose the missionary life; though they were good people who later went on to occupy positions of responsibility in civil life.

In 1984, a dream he had nurtured for years came true when he was sent to Peru where he remained until 1998. Those fourteen years in that country were the happiest of his missionary life. He considered his encounter with the people of the settlements of Chorillos in Lima (1985-1990) and then at Arequipa (1995-1999) as gifts from God, even though he sometimes felt helpless and unable to respond to the needs of the people. From 1990 to 1995, he was Provincial Superior of Peru. Being close to the people, sharing and inspiring, offering hope and comfort by means of social action and community celebrations of faith: these were the activities Fr. Silvester remembered all his life.

He spent the last part of his missionary life in the DSP. From early 1999 to the end of 2004, he was Provincial Superior. During his mandate, he was obliged to take some unpleasant and weighty decisions such as the closure of the “Werkstatt für eine solidarische Welt” in Ellwangen and the handing back to the diocese of the parish of Halle due to a lack of personnel. At the start of the year 2005, he took on the job of superior of the community of Milland which lasted ten years. He considered the house of Milland, opened in 1895, as his second native home.

In September 2015, Fr. Silvester, then almost seventy and ill, took charge of the parish of Latzfons, 16 km from Milland, where he worked with dedication as an esteemed pastor until he retired due to illness in July 2019. With great inner tenacity, he continued to fight the cancer he had suffered from for years. After a month in hospital after a brain operation and with kidney failure and infected with Covid-19, Fr. Silvester passed away on 11 December 2020, at Brunico hospital.

As he had wished, he was buried in the cemetery of his parish. During the funeral service, Bishop Ivo Muser, who was born in the same town, spoke of the friendship that bound him to Fr. Silvester and the

gratitude of the diocese for the various services he provided as a parish priest, a member of some diocesan commissions and by taking part in the synod. (*Fr. Hans Maneschg mcccj*)

### **Bro. Martin Ploner (06.01.1929 – 10.01.2021)**

Bro. Martin Ploner was born on 6 January 1929 in San Martin Enneberg, South Tyrol, Italy. He took first religious vows in 1955 and perpetual vows on 9 September 1961.

Bro. Martin served the mission in three different countries: 6 years in Germany (1955-1960 and 1983-1984), 22 in Spain (1960 to 1982) and 37 in Mexico where he arrived in 1984, remaining there until the very day of his death on 10 January 2021.

In Spain, Bro. Martin belonged to the Palencia community. His work was to cultivate the land and look after the animals; he had great affection for the cows and knew each one of them by name. He was very sad when they were sold off.

In Mexico, his ministry as a Brother underwent a radical change. He was sent to work among the indigenous “Chinotecas” communities in the forest-covered mountains of Oaxaca. He worked as a builder and a carpenter and, at the same time, engaged in pastoral ministry. He conducted liturgies of the Word, visited the sick and looked after the poor. He was a true apostle of charity to the most vulnerable.

After more than ten years of service to the indigenous communities, he was sent to the Comboni seminary of San Francisco del Rincón, Guanajuato. There he was in charge of maintenance but also spent much of his time in pastoral ministry. He visited prisoners, took Holy Communion to the sick and carried out an apostolate ‘of his own’, that could only have been done in the Mexican context and, in particular, at San Francisco del Rincón. This city is very Catholic and most jobs there involve the manufacture of sports footwear: on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, all the factories have a celebration. Mass is celebrated, the factory is blessed and there is a feast for all the workers with food, drink, music and dancing; the same is done at Christmas.

This was the context. This was the apostolate of Bro. Martin: every weekday, he would visit a factory. At mid-day, when he arrived, work stopped and both workers – usually 20, 30 or more – and the factory owners gathered round him to pray the Angelus. Bro. Martin would pray with them, say a few words and bless them. This was how he evangelised the world of work.

Bro. Martin was a humble missionary, simple, happy, optimistic, sensitive and generous. He was truly a man of God: he dedicated his life to prayer, service to his community and his pastoral ministry. There was room for nothing else in his heart.

When he got sick and could no longer work, he became a great missionary animator for the Mexican missionaries working outside their country; he provided great spiritual support for them by his prayers. He devoted the last years of his life to writing letters to missionaries and praying for them. All his letters were written by hand in a beautiful style of handwriting. He never did learn to use a computer. While I was in South Sudan, he wrote to me a couple of times and his message had two themes: on the one hand, he spoke of the world in which he lived his sickness and, on the other, he expressed his solidarity with people who were suffering due to the war and with the missionaries accompanying the people.

The missionary life and death of Bro. Martin may be summed up by the expression: we have lost a great missionary here on earth but we have gained a holy missionary in heaven. (*Fernando Mal GatKuoth*)

### **Bro. Antonio Marchi (14.08.1928 – 16.01.2021)**

Antonio was born in Santa Maria di Sala (Venice, Italy) on 14 August 1928. He did the novitiate in Gozzano where he took first vows on 5 August 1953. After a few years in Verona, at the Mother House, he was sent to the Pellegrina community as formator of the Brother aspirants. He made his final profession on 15 August 1958 and, after some years at the Rectory in Thiene looking after the house, in 1968 he was appointed to South Brasil and assigned to São Mateus to help run the sawmill and the diocesan printing press.

From 1978 to 1979, he helped maintain the Comboni seminary of Jerônimo Monteiro, assisting especially in Burarama, one of the largest communities of the parish and belonging to the diocese of Cachoeiro de Itapemirim, in Espírito Santo state, made up of Italians originally from the region of Venice.

From 1984 to 1987, he was assigned to Porto Velho, the capital of Rondônia. The city had been chosen by the Provincial Council since it was the capital of Rondônia and with a growing population. The Comboni community was open to all and received not only confreres passing through but also members of CIMI (Indigenous Missionary Council), of OPAN (Native Amazonia Operation) and many other short-term guests. The house became a source of information on all the problems of the territory.



Bro. Antonio also worked in Ouro Preto do Oeste (RO) where he arrived in 1995, the year the new “Mother Church” was inaugurated, taking the place of the old one that had been destroyed by persons unknown five years earlier.

During that period, a group made up of Bro. Antonio, Fr. Manuel Valdez Treviso and the Comboni sociologist Fr. Mansueto Dal Maso, was assigned to indigenous ministry. The CIMI had been set up to defend the rights of the indigenous peoples and to recover their lands, since they were the legitimate owners. Our missionaries sought to spread indigenous culture and religion so that they could be preserved and respected, avoiding any manipulation on the part of the Church or the state.

When Fr. Mansueto left the group in 1985, Bro. Antonio temporarily took responsibility for coordinating indigenous pastoral, working among the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau, who called themselves Jupaú, present in the north of Rondônia. “The Indios are hungry for dignity, health and education - Bro. Antonio would say – a religion that helps them to live. They hunger for dignity since the foundation of the dignity of a person or a people is to have their rights recognised and respected. What struck me most of all and what is dearest to my heart was the sense of community that a celebration has for them. They have a strong sense of community which does not, however, eliminate diversity but gives it importance by means of songs, games and celebrations that are always carried out simply and fraternally. Everything was shared”.

“One day – writes Fr. Giovanni Munari – Bro. Antonio made it possible for me to accompany him on a visit to the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau. I greatly admired what I saw. He had won over the Indios and they had allowed him to build a hut in their village that was his home. He knew the people by name, spoke with them, discussed their difficulties and problems and he wrote down the things he needed to get once he returned to the mission: medicine, schoolbooks and tools for the work. He would find them and bring them. He showed many small signs of solidarity and the desire to broaden his range of action so as to overcome the walls of indifference and prejudice surround the indigenous questions. That was his work in the city: to go frequently to the authorities and visit the public administrators and the FUNAI (National Indios Foundation) to try to obtain whatever services the village needed whether in the field of health, education, alimentation or preventive public health”.

In 2003, Bro. Antonio and Fr. John Clark were sent to Alto Alegre, in the far north of the country, almost on the border with Venezuela and

a long way from the other communities of the Comboni province. At that time in those communes and in that of Taiano, there was a reserved area of more than 18.000 km<sup>2</sup>, with 16 villages of indigenous Wapichana and Macuxi who lived in small groups of 100 inhabitants surrounded by large farms. The poor land made many indigenous people leave everything and go to the city where they then became dependent upon aid from the government.

The last stage of his mission in Brazil was at São José do Rio Preto (SP). There, Bro. Antonio spent some years at the service of the community. He would go to do the shopping and willingly taught catechism to the youth of the parish of Christ the King, then being served by the Combonis. After some years, he asked to return for good to Italy. He spent three years in Limone, at the native home of the Founder and was then transferred to Castel d'Azzano where he died on 16 January 2021: even though he had recovered from the Covid-19 infection, he never regained his strength and his condition steadily worsened.

### **Fr. Matthias Gamper (21.07.1937 – 15.01.2021)**

Fr. Matthias was born on 21 July 1937 in the mountain village of St. Pankraz, in the province of Bolzano. The fifth of eight children three girls and five boys, he grew up on a small farm. His parents were deeply religious. In one of his diaries, Matthias wrote: "From childhood, at the age of four, I felt the call of God. I must have said at different times that I wanted to be a priest. One Sunday afternoon, I remember that day very well, a missionary came to our house and asked my mother about the boy who said he wanted to be a priest ... On 27 April 1949, I left with my mother to go to the house of the missionaries in Milland". After secondary school, Matthias began the novitiate in Bamberg (1957-1959) and took first vows on 1 May 1959. During the second year of novitiate, he studied two semesters of fundamental theology. He then returned to Bressanone to continue studying theology at the major diocesan seminary. On 6 April 1962, he consecrated himself to God with final vows and on 29 June 1962, he was ordained a priest in the cathedral of the city.

He began his service in the institute as a formator at the Milland seminary. He sang very well and was an enthusiastic volleyball player which made the other students happy to be with him. After a short time at Milland and an even shorter term at Saldaña (Spain) seminary, he was appointed to the mission of Peru.

On 21 November 1965, he sailed from Genoa bound for Lima. His presence in that country lasted five years (1965-1970). He was assigned to the parish of Junin at a height of 4,100 metres above sea level. Junin was an Andean city in the Prelature (later to become a diocese) of Tarma. He taught religion in the primary and middle schools; at weekends, he devoted himself to pastoral service in the faraway villages of the vast parish. He wrote in his diary: "It doesn't seem right merely to baptise and administer the sacraments without teaching the people the Christian faith. Those five years among the Indios were difficult ones".

In 1971, Fr. Matthias returned to Milland where he remained until 1981, dedicating himself to missionary animation (Holy Redeemer Guild) and to vocations ministry. He visited the schools, showing slides about his work in Peru and occasionally holding conferences on religious themes. He closely accompanied a group of women collaborators in the work of the Holy Redeemer Guild, organizing pilgrimages with them. During the following five years, he carried on the same work in Messendorf/Graz. He organised two pilgrimages to Limone. He believed it was important for our benefactors to know our Founder through personal contact with Comboni's birthplace.

In 1986, he returned to Milland, busying himself with vocations ministry in the middle schools. At that time, our minor seminaries were in a deep crisis and lacked the personnel to run them. Fr. Matthias was appointed rector but in 1989, all the minor seminaries of the province were closed.

During the early part of 1990, he took part in the Renewal Course in Rome and, as we may read in his notes, it was a positive experience for him.

After the course, Fr. Matthias asked the superiors for permission to teach religion in the middle schools of Bolzano province. From 1990 to 1997, he devoted himself to this work with permission to live outside the community. The monks of the Bolzano Benedictine Abbey offered him accommodation. He carefully prepared his lessons and was highly regarded by the students. During that time, he went on study journeys with teachers and students to various European countries, including Sicily, Denmark and Poland.

In 1998, Fr Matthias ended his teaching service and was assigned to the community of Bamberg, doing pastoral work up to 2003, attending especially to the adults, the elderly and the sick in the "Klinikum". From 2003 to 2008, he carried out the same services in the community of Neumarkt.

In 2008, he had been invited to be the assistant pastor of the Dominikus-Ringeisen-Werk, in Ursberg, in the diocese of Augsburg, and he wrote to the person in charge: "I cannot wait to work with the disabled in Ursberg". However, due to health problems, he had to refuse this service.

Then, at the end of 2010, he returned to Milland. Fr. Josef Altenburger, the provincial Superior at the time, wrote to him: "I trust your health will allow you to render these small services, always calmly and without any pressure. At this time of your life, you may have some rest. You may pray very much for us, for our commitments and our concerns". And that is what Fr. Matthias did.

One beautiful occasion was the celebration of his Golden Jubilee of priesthood fifty years after his ordination in his native parish of St. Pankraz in 1962.

From 2015 on, Fr. Matthias' health was worsening; he could no longer go to the parishes and was increasingly housebound, eventually needing 24-hour assistance. On 4 May 2018, he was transferred to Ellwangen where he was lovingly cared for up to the day of his death. Before he left for Ellwangen, his five surviving brothers and one sister came to Milland to greet him and one of them told him: "You have always been a positive reference-point for us", and I would like to add: "for our humanity and your faith". Matthias was a very vivacious person, always learning and a lover of life. His suffering and death were a special encounter with his Creator, the most important encounter of all. (*Fr. Hans Maneschg mccj*)

## LET US PRAY FOR OUR BELOVED DEAD

**THE FATHERS:** José de Jesús, of Fr. Luis Francisco Arellano (M), Martin, of Fr. Markus Körber (DSP).

**THE MOTHER:** Teresa, di P. Emmanuel Ssempeera (U).

**THE BROTHER:** Artur, of Fr. Martinho Lopes Moura (P), Rev. Giovanni, of Fr. Gaetano Gottardi (+)

**THE SISTERS:** Amabile, of Fr. Pietro Bracelli (I), Mariela, of Bro. Gustavo Montoya (CO).

**THE COMBONI MISSIONARY SISTERS:** Sr. Martia Rosa Tosi, Sr. Fiorina Luisa Baldessari, Sr. M. Patrizia Clerici.

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