

SAINT JOSEPH
ON THE MISSIONARY PATH
OF SAINT DANIEL COMBONI



(Extract from a text of Fr. Carmelo Casile)

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INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Lent, on 19 March, the Church celebrates the feast of St Joseph, just as it celebrates the feast of Mary during Advent on 8 December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the declaration of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church, is an invitation to the whole Church to fix its contemplative gaze on the person of St Joseph, who is a key figure for understanding some essential dimensions of the Christian vocation. It is an invitation, therefore, to go beyond the image of traditional iconography, which often presents St Joseph as an old man with a white beard and hair or bald, with a somewhat sad expression and a distant, almost worried look, bent under the weight of his destiny, in order to identify the historical-salvific mystery in the basic dimensions of his personality **within the Holy Family**.

For us Comboni Missionaries it is an invitation to remember the original inspiration of the Founder. In fact, the Holy Family of Nazareth had a strong influence on the spiritual life and missionary service of Saint Daniel Comboni and his first companions and on the tradition of the Institute.

1. **Joseph, model of fatherhood**

Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter presents us with the figure of Joseph as a model of fatherhood, as a man with a father's heart, *Patris corde*: "With a father's heart: this is how Joseph loved Jesus, called in all four Gospels 'the son of Joseph'.

The two Evangelists who emphasised his figure, Matthew and Luke, recount little, but enough to show what kind of father he was, and the mission entrusted to him by Divine Providence.

We know that he was a humble carpenter (cf. Mt 13:55), betrothed to Mary (cf. Mt 1:18; Lk 1:27); a "righteous man" (Mt 1:19), always ready to carry out the will of God manifested in his Law (cf. Lk 2:22, 27, 39) and through no less than four dreams (cf. Mt 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). After a long and arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, he saw the Messiah being born in a stable, because elsewhere "there was no room for them" (Lk 2:7). He witnessed the adoration of the shepherds (cf. Lk 2:8-20) and the Magi (cf.

Mt 2:1-12), who represented respectively the people of Israel and the pagan peoples.

He had the courage to assume the legal paternity of Jesus, on whom he imposed the name revealed by the Angel: "You shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). As is well known, to give a name to a person or a thing among ancient peoples meant to attain membership, as Adam did in the Genesis account (cf. 2:19-20).

In the Temple, forty days after his birth, Joseph and his mother offered the Child to the Lord and listened with surprise to the prophecy that Simeon made concerning Jesus and Mary (cf. Lk 2,22-35). To defend Jesus from Herod, he stayed as a foreigner in Egypt (cf. Mt 2:13-18). When he returned home, he lived in hiding in the small, unknown village of Nazareth in Galilee - from where, it was said, "no prophet rises" and "nothing good can ever come" (cf. Jn 7:52; 1:46) - far from his native Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where the Temple stood. When, during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they lost the twelve-year-old Jesus, he and Mary searched for him in anguish and found him in the Temple while he was arguing with the doctors of the Law (cf. Lk 2:41-50)".

Joseph is a true father, even if not a parent; a new figure, to be discovered and in no way resembling certain traditional stereotypes. Hence the various qualifications put forward for this type of paternity: as a putative father, an adoptive father, a legal father, a virginal father... without any of them being exhaustive.

In fact, "Joseph did not find himself father of Jesus by chance. If circumstances (place of residence, age, kinship, love, etc.) had naturally led him to bind his life to Mary's with the bond of marriage, then comes this divine moment when God enters as master into the domestic sanctuary to inaugurate that superior "economy" which demands a new generation not dependent on flesh and blood. The previous bonds are not dissolved, and it is precisely for this reason that Joseph is urged by the angel to take Mary with him; but he must understand that the part he is taking in the plan of redemption makes him "father" in an order of "kinship" that is not the same as the natural order of the Lord's "brothers and sisters" (= relatives). Kinship of blood is not the kind of kinship that has rights in the kingdom of God. Joseph becomes part of a family that originates only from divine initiative. This entry presupposes a call from above and a response permeated by

obedience of faith, instruments of the new generation. The true kinship that binds us to Jesus cannot be founded on personal and natural rights, but on the divine will alone" (cf. Mt 12:15; Lk 11:27: T. Stramare).

2. **The desert, Joseph's spiritual environment**

Joseph, an illustrious but hidden man, comes from the experience of hiding in the desert. A careful reading of the Bible shows that practically all the men whom God has used most powerfully have passed through the desert, some in the most literal sense, others in the spiritual sense. The focus of the wilderness is the discovery of God's will and the generous surrender to that will as it manifests itself in the ordinary circumstances of life.

In the Gospel we encounter in the person of Joseph a wonderful figure of a man of the desert, who lives in constant contemplation and seeks nothing else but to discover and fulfil the will of God.

Matthew expresses all this marvellous reality in a single sentence: "Joseph was a righteous man" (Mt 1:19). Matthew himself speaks of three "dreams" that Joseph had.

"While he was thinking about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said to him, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary, your wife, with you, for what is begotten in her is from the Holy Spirit'" (Mt 1:20).

During Herod's persecution of Jesus, "an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him, 'Arise, take the child and his mother with you and flee into Egypt, and stay there until I give you warning'" (Mt 2:13). (Mt 2:13).

Thirdly and finally, the Gospel recounts what follows: "When Herod had died, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him, 'Arise, take the child and his mother with you and go into the land of Israel'" (Mt 2:19-20).

The theology of primitive Christianity, having always in view the great value of prayer, has already given the explanation of these Gospel passages: in meditation (= in "dream"), such a profound reality in which life reaches the last limits of the universe, the eternal destiny of man himself, his vocation, can become perceptible and visible (= the "angel"); in meditation the unmistakable mission of man transpires.

While meditating quietly in the silence of the night, Joseph was able to enter into Mary's destiny.

Tormented by doubt and uncertainty, Joseph, in deep prayer, was able to enter into the mystery of the Incarnation. It was then that he willingly accepted the angel's message. He always led his life in a climate of faith and trust, despite the uncertainties, the unexpected and even the darkness that enveloped his soul.

Thanks to his simple and humble life, Jesus was his son perhaps even more so than if he himself had begotten him: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph?" (Jn 6:42), "Is this not Joseph's son?" (Lk 4:22), "Is he not the son of the carpenter?" (Mt 13:55), "Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph (Lk 3:23).

Joseph was the great pilgrim of humanity, of the universe. His hands were always empty. God proved his love in many ways, yet Joseph never uttered a complaint. In the end, all he had to do was to leave the world and carry the doubts he had been struggling with into eternity. Everything would be transformed into the Love beyond which nothing else remained to be desired.

We can also be certain that Joseph's love for Mary was sincere and deep. A voice (that of the angel) broke the silence in which he was submerged and announced events that he could never fully understand (cf. Mt 1:20). But Joseph obeyed, although he did not understand.

Before the mystery of his Son (whom he could not even call Son) was completed, and before Jesus fulfilled his mission on the cross, Joseph had already taken upon himself the burden of a destiny and a mission similar to that of Jesus.

It was an inner mission. And in fact, he was a suffering and self-sacrificing man, crucified.

For this reason, Joseph is a man of the desert, even though he never left his home and workshop, since the fulcrum of the desert is contemplation and, through it, the complete abandonment of oneself to the will of God (cf. Ladislaus Boros, *Cristo e os homens diante da tentação*, Ed. Paulinas, 1972, pp. 12-14).

3. "The poetry of Saint Joseph's greatness".

Daniel Comboni entered into communion with Saint Joseph from the time of his youthful formation at the Mazza Institute, where he entered in 1843. In the church of the Institute, dedicated to St Charles, he began to contemplate that picture that Fr Mazza had placed there to symbolise "the main devotions" that he "wanted to instil in young people": in the middle the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary with St Joseph at the side. Perhaps this is where the reference to St Joseph in union with the Hearts of Jesus and Mary comes from in Comboni's writings.

This period is fundamental for understanding the way Comboni related to Saint Joseph. Born, in fact, into a poor family and educated in a poor Institute under the gaze of Saint Joseph, he found himself having to find his work practically "from scratch". Finding himself almost alone in organising a colossal work, it became obvious to him, in his logic of faith, to turn confidently to Saint Joseph, to choose him as the Bursar of the Mission, and to turn to him with casual confidence whenever he found himself in need.

Therefore, it is not difficult to see that the texts in which Comboni expresses his relationship with Saint Joseph find their spiritual roots in the religious formation he received in Verona. In them he developed the sense of Providence inculcated in the Mazza Institute, finding very concretely in Saint Joseph the heavenly and sure instrument of it. This fact is essential to understand that Comboni's way of expressing himself about Saint Joseph is never limited to purely material interests, but always stems from a relationship made up of "spirit and faith" and extends to the spiritual and missionary field.

This relationship was deepened after Pius IX, during the First Vatican Council, on 8 December 1870, proclaimed St Joseph Patron of the Universal Church.

From this act of the Magisterium, Comboni's special relationship with St Joseph took on greater consistency. Comboni, in fact, saw the Mission in relation to the Church and therefore, for him, if Saint Joseph was "Protector of the Universal Church", he was also the Protector of Nigrizia.

From that moment Comboni began to venerate him as the Protector of the Catholic Church and of the Nigrizia, and even more so he confirmed him as Bursar of the Mission, thus clarifying the deep faith in Providence that had

always animated him as a young man. Thus, starting from his intense personal devotion and in harmony with the ecclesial tradition, for Comboni, St Joseph is Protector, Patron, Patriarch, Father of the Nigrizia, King of Gentlemen, etc., and he is also known as the Bursar of the Mission.

Towards the end of his life, in a letter sent to Sembianti from El-Obeid on 20/4/1881, he speaks of "the poetry of the greatness of St Joseph":

“I kept forgetting to ask you to collect from Mgr Stegagnini (I even forgot to collect them in Verona, and Mgr Steg. forgot to send them to me at home) the several copies of the little booklets on the Sacred Heart and St Joseph that he composed, and that the Girelli sisters from Brescia gave me, and sent me as soon as they were published. Moreover, I would like every missionary and every Sister in Central Africa to possess and become thoroughly familiar with these two stupendous books (as well as Kempis and Rodriguez) so as to know fully the riches of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ and the poetry of St Joseph’s greatness.

These two treasures, together with fervent devotion to the great Immaculate Mother of God, the wife of the great Patron of the Universal Church and of Africa, are a safe talisman for those who work in the interest of souls in Central Africa among the people of both sexes in these lands, and give courage and enkindle the charity necessary to deal with them in a friendly and relaxed way to convert them to Christ and Our Lady” (To Fr. Sembianti, from El-Obeid, 20/4/81, S 6652-6653).

This text is very significant because it helps us to understand in depth Comboni's experience in his relationship with Saint Joseph. Being written towards the end of his life and referring to his missionaries, it almost assumes the meaning of a spiritual testament for all Comboni missionaries of all times.

In particular, the expression "the poetry of the greatness of St Joseph" makes us understand that St Joseph in Comboni's prayer is much more than the heavenly Bursar of the Mission, even if this expression already comes from a heart moved by "spirit and faith"; it makes us understand that over the repetition of the formulas of prayer of request emerges in Comboni the depth of his affection for St Joseph, in a context of communion, esteem and trust,

which leads him to place him among the "treasures" of his life, next to the Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Mary.

In order to read Comboni's affection in depth in his communion with this treasure that is Saint Joseph, the following text by J. Benigne Bossuet, which seems to echo Comboni's words, can help us:

"God sought a man after his own heart to place in his hands what he held most dear: I mean the person of his only Son, the integrity of his holy Mother, the salvation of the human race... he sought an even more unknown man, a poor worker, namely Joseph, to entrust him with a mission, for which the angels would feel honoured, because we understand that the man after God's own heart must be sought in the heart, and that it is the unknown virtues that make him worthy of this praise.

If ever there was a man to whom God gave himself with pleasure, it is undoubtedly Joseph, who keeps him in his house and in his hands, and who is present to him at all hours, more in his heart than before his eyes... **The Church has nothing more illustrious, because it has nothing more hidden".**

Certainly, Joseph emerges in Comboni's heart as the "type" of the believing man, who embodies the mystery of divine Providence (S 314), which governs with its "universal patronage" the whole of Salvation History. He is the silent man, who meditates, obeys and keeps silent, in a total availability to God's plan for him, which makes him the "model" of the missionary of Nigrizia, whom Comboni describes in Chapter X of the Rules of 1871: "The life of a man, who in an absolute and peremptory way comes to break all relations with the world and with the dearest things according to nature, must be a life of spirit and of faith" (S 2698).

Comboni's life resumes the ideal of not asking "God for the reasons for the mission he has received, but to act on his word, and on that of his representatives, as a docile instrument of his adorable will" (cf. S 2702).

Joseph, having fulfilled his role of knowing the mystery of the Incarnation and putting it into practice, by inserting Christ into the people of salvation, is eclipsed. And the missionary "in every event repeats with deep conviction and lively exultation: *servi inutiles sumus; quod debuimus facere fecimus*. Luc. XVII" (S 2702).

Comboni, after having made his own the "philosophy of the Cross" (S 2326), seeing in it his "bride for ever" (S 1710), after having deeply felt its weight, while all around him there was darkness and absolute moral isolation, he uttered words that testify to the authenticity of his apostolic heroism, founded on a pure faith and on an ardent love for Africa to be saved, which likened him to the Pierced on the Cross:

“Although I am certain that I will soon succumb to so many crosses, which in conscience I feel I do not deserve, still may my Jesus be ever blessed, the true vindicator of innocence and protector of the afflicted. Africa will be converted; and if I am not to have consolation on earth, I will have it in heaven. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are always with us, and if we are abandoned by men, God will not fail us, and will see to it that Africa is saved (To Father Sembianti from El Obeid, 9 July 1881, S 6815).

It happens in Comboni just as it happened for Joseph, who lived his earthly life immersed in the adoration of God, to whom he entrusted himself totally, and at the same time engaged daily in hard material work, and before the mystery of "his Son" was fulfilled, before Jesus consummated his Mission on the Cross, he had already taken upon himself the weight of a destiny and a mission similar to that of Jesus. Comboni sings "the poetry of Saint Joseph's greatness", first of all with his confidence in his protection; a confidence pushed to the point of audacity and expressed in terms full of enthusiasm:

"The Vicariate of Central Africa, thanks to the powerful assistance of the illustrious Patriarch St Joseph, who became the true Bursar of Central Africa after the Holy Father proclaimed him Protector of the Catholic Church, will never lack sufficient resources" (Report to Cardinal A. Franchi, Rome, 29 June 1876, S 4170).

"Yesterday was a happy day, because I was able to speak clearly to S. Joseph. I understand that one has to be bold with this blessed Saint" (To Monsignor Luigi di Canossa from Vienna, 20 March 1871, S 2416).

"St Joseph was, is and will always be the King of gentlemen, and a master of the house, and a Bursar of great judgement, and also of a good heart" (To Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò from El Obeid, 12 October 1873, S 3434).

"Long live St Joseph, Protector of the Universal Church, and Bursar of Nigrizia" (To Cardinal Alessandro Franchi from Khartoum, 26 June 1875, S 3849).

"St Joseph is the true father of the Nigrizia" (To Cardinal A. Franchi 1876, S 4025).

Comboni sings again "the poetry of the greatness of Saint Joseph", because he finds in him an exemplary style of "following Christ", who "from being rich, became poor for your sake, so that you might become rich through his poverty" (2 Cor 8:9):

"Oh! St Joseph was poor in order to provide for others" (S 1516). And again: "My bursar, although he was very poor in his life, now that he is the distributor of Heaven's treasures, has never failed to help me" (S 3520).

It is a style practised by Comboni: always a beggar on earth to give Africa "Catholic faith and Christian civilisation" (S 6214).

Having elected St Joseph as bursar of the Mission was not just a pious consideration for Comboni, but a factual reality in which he believed and trusted, as the following text shows:

"However, I have by no means spared my dear bursar, St Joseph, to whose care I had commended myself for a safe journey from Kordofan to Khartoum. Since this dear saint let me have such a terrible fall from the camel, I well and truly fined him to the tune of one thousand gold francs a day for every day I would have to keep my arm in a sling. Since I had to keep it in the sling for 82 days and was only able to say Mass five times during that period, my much-respected bursar is condemned to paying me a fine of 82,000 francs. So, on the feast of Saints Faustinus and Jovita, patrons of our dear Diocese of Brescia, (82 days after my terrible fall in the desert), I prepared a promissory note for my dear Saint, setting out that he would have to pay me four thousand one hundred Napoleons over six months. Already I can see that, as usual, my good Bursar is honouring my signature since, from that day until today, as I write to Your Excellency, I have received 38,706 gold francs. These include 5,000 florins sent to me by those miracles of charity, Her Apostolic Majesty the Empress Maria Anna and the Emperor Ferdinand I from Prague, and 4,000 francs from that jewel of a true Catholic Prince, His Royal

and Imperial Highness, the Duke of Modena, Franz V, writing from Vienna.

So my bursar, although he was very poor during his own life, is now the distributor of the treasures of heaven, and he has never failed to help me. In the mere six and a half years since I began this work, he has provided me with 600,000 francs, that is, he has paid me letters of credit for 30,000 Napoleons. I assure you, Monsignor, that St Joseph's Bank is more reliable than all the Rothschild Banks. On top of all this, this good bursar maintains for Africa, without a penny of debt, two houses in Verona, two in Cairo, two in Khartoum and two in El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan with more than 100,000 inhabitants, where Mass was celebrated, and Jesus Christ adored for the first time in 1872 (To Monsignor Girolamo Verzieri, Bishop of Brescia, from Khartoum, 10 March 1874, S 3519-3520).

Trust in Saint Joseph means faith in Divine Providence, which will certainly not fail in such a holy work as the salvation of the Nigrizia people:

“How could anyone ever doubt God's Providence or the care of the ever-industrious Bursar, St Joseph, who in only eight and a half years, and in such disastrous and difficult times, has sent me more than a million francs to found and set in motion the work of the Redemption of Africa, with houses in Verona, in Egypt and in the African Interior? The material and financial means to keep the Missions going are the least of my worries. It is enough to pray.

If a cataclysm happened in France, in Prussia and in Austria, then along with Central Africa nearly all the Missions in the world would suffer the same fate. Then there will always be St. Joseph, who will triumph over every collapse in the world, and for my part, hope will always remain unshaken (Report to Cardinal Alessandro Franchi, Rome, 29 June 1876, S 4171, 4175).

Comboni's trust in Saint Joseph extended from the temporal field to the spiritual and missionary ones. St Joseph's protection embraced the mission and the Institutes founded for the Mission:

“I hope firmly in the divine Heart of Jesus, which beat for Africa too, in Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and in my dear bursar and general administrator for Central Africa, St Joseph, the patron of the Catholic

Church, in whose beard there are millions and who can support this difficult, trying and important mission because his Jesus also died for Africa.

Far from being discomfited, therefore, I have more strength, courage and confidence than ever in the extraordinary charity of Christians, especially of the fervent Catholics of Europe, the friends and lovers of the Sacred Heart and of my dear St Joseph. Jesus, Mary and Joseph will knock on the hearts of good Catholics” (To Can. Cristoforo Milone, 1878, S 5437).

In giving courage to the Rector Fr Joseph Sembianti, Comboni tried to instil in him that trust in St Joseph which he felt alive in his own heart:

“Therefore, my dear Father, courage, go ahead, do not be dismayed: sustained by the Heart of Jesus (to whom I am dedicating the church that I now want to build here in Cairo between the male and female Institutes, the foundation stone of which I shall lay next Christmas, and for which everything is already excavated), by Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, by our dear bursar Beppo... we shall succeed in everything. The whole universe does not frighten me. It is a matter of the interests of Jesus and of the Church, and we will succeed in becoming stones not to be despised in the foundation of the great edifice of the African Church... As for financial means in Verona, do not trouble about it, Beppo will be there to help you in need” (To Father Sembianti, 17/12/1880, S 6172.6182).

In the last days of his life Comboni again revived the rector Fr Sembianti to an evangelical type of trust, founded on a deep love for Jesus:

"Confidence in God! which is so rare even in pious souls, because people know and love God and Jesus Christ so little. If people really knew and loved G. C., they would move mountains... I tell you this to warn you to have firm and resolute confidence in God, in Our Lady and in St. Joseph... *Modicae fidei, quare dubitasti?* Let her do everything, and have St. Joseph pray ad hoc" (To Fr. Sembianti 13.9.1881, S 7062-7063.7067).

4. The "three dear objects of our love"

For Comboni the Holy Family constitutes "a most holy Triad", formed by Jesus, Mary and Joseph, whom he venerates as the "three dear objects of our love" and to whom he entrusts his Cairo Institutes (S 5891; 5866).

Comboni's relationship with the Holy Family, which began during the years of formation in the Mazza Institute, deepened with the pilgrimage to the Holy Land and then to Egypt, where the Holy Family, led by Joseph, fled Herod's persecution and stayed for seven years.

On his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Comboni, who "visited" it, was clearly "visited" by the mysteries of Christ's life that were realised there.

Comboni met the Holy Family again and the providential role of St Joseph in Cairo, on the occasion of the first foundations (1867). These were the Institutes of Cairo, called: Institute of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a branch of the Institute of Verona (S 2895) and the Institute of the Sacred Heart of Mary:

"I rented the Maronite's Convent for 336 scudi a year in Old Cairo. It has an old house annexed, a hundred steps from the grotto of the Blessed Virgin Mary, where tradition has it that the Holy Family lived during the exile in Egypt. I have inaugurated and started two small Institutes in the two houses which are separated by a fairly spacious Church. By the grace of God, they are thriving" (S 1578).

The Institute of the Sacred Heart of Mary for the regeneration of Africa is entrusted to the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition:

"Should we not in all this perhaps admire adorable Providence, who precisely chose the Daughters of St Joseph to be the first directors of our first Institute for the conversion of Africa? A set of providential circumstances gave birth to this Institute *in the famous land of the Pharaohs, a few paces from the Holy Grotto where that great Patriarch lived with the Holy Family, and its presence there for seven years* has brought down the idols of Egypt and founded in their place the faith in Jesus Christ and a seedbed of religious life which produces so many heroes for Heaven and, by spreading everywhere, has adorned the Catholic Church with so many models of virtue. Through its marvellous works and its glorious conquests in the whole universe,

it has crowned the Church with triumphs through all the ages and will crown it till the end of time" (S 1804).

Writing to Card. Franchi in 1874 he was able to affirm that the "good effects" registered in this Institute were to be attributed first of all to the "providential protection of St Joseph", but also to the "love and trust that they nurtured for this dear Saint their father" (S 3672).

In these Institutes Comboni committed himself to breathing the healthy air of the Holy Family, where the mystery of communion with God is lived in a sublime way. He, in fact, carries out the service of animator who, among elements "all heterogeneous", is called to create "perfect harmony, and to reduce them to unity of purpose and flag" (S 2508).

We are in the presence of the Cenacle of Apostles sketched out in the footsteps of the Holy Family, which is gradually being translated into a life of communion, under the banner of the first Christian community.

5. The "three dear objects" of Comboni's love need a donkey...

It is good to think and remember that among the "three dear objects" of Comboni's love there is a very discreet and humble but precious and necessary presence, which is the donkey. In the Bible, the donkey is an animal of burden, a symbol of work, of availability and is used in times of peace. It appears for the first time when, laden with wood for the sacrifice, it accompanies Abraham on his way to Mount Moria to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:3.5).

A passage from the book of Numbers shows the donkey capable of 'seeing' the signs of God and opposing the obtuse man who does not understand the word of God (cf. Numbers 22:23-35). The donkey becomes a sapiential figure, because it recognises God's will even before the man who considers himself a seer.

The figure of the donkey is presented as a modest mount for the Messiah as a sign of humility. The prophet Zechariah announces that the victorious Messiah will ride on a donkey (9:9). The Gospels present Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. He himself asks the disciples to provide him with a donkey and it is interesting to note that the donkey is the only one Jesus claims to need (cf. Mt 21:2-7; Lk 19:29-38). In the eyes of the disciples and

the crowd, Jesus presents himself as the non-violent Messiah, the bearer of peace, the one who fulfils Zechariah's prophecy.

Comboni does not mention the presence of the donkey among the "three dear objects" of his love, which he proposes to us as well, but the reality symbolised by this animal can be glimpsed in his way of conceiving, living and envisaging missionary life, as can be seen in Chapter X of the Rules of 1871. Here, in fact, he proposes to himself and to the missionary *"to think of himself as just one unnoticed worker in a long line of missionaries, all of whom can only hope for results, not from their own personal work, but from the gathering together and continuation of efforts mysteriously guided and used by Providence"* (cf. S 2700).

Assuming the symbolic meaning of the donkey offered to us by the Bible, in particular by the story of Comboni's "three dear objects of love" and our own, also encourages us to broaden the horizons of our spiritual life, welcoming the whole of life aware of being in relationship with everyone and everything. *"To go beyond, to transcend oneself, is not to force, accelerating without limits our power always in the direction of expansion or affirmation, but it is to gather in oneself the cosmic universe, to have an awareness of relationship with the whole, which is the greatness and beauty of our vocation as humans, suspended between earth and heaven"* (Jonny Dotti and Mario Aldegani, Giuseppe siamo noi, S. Paolo 2017, p. 119f)