

The Mapping of social ministries in the Comboni Family

REPORT OF THE WORK DONE DURING THE WEBINAR

5-6 MARCH 2021



I. A JOURNEY THAT CONTINUES

Following the webinar held on 4-5 December 2020, the journey of the Comboni Family (CF) on social ministries took a further step last 5-6 March 2021, with a new double teleconference event that aimed at animating the CF in the awareness of a mission to be lived together. For that reason, we wanted to start from experiences in the field, from the voices that come from real-life situations.

We did this first of all by taking the book of testimonies and reflections **"We are Mission: Witnesses of Social Ministry in the Comboni Family"**. In addition, we presented the mapping of the Comboni social ministries, with the following three objectives: to evaluate the significance of the Comboni social ministry; to bring forth how the Comboni family lives its ministry in the epochal passage to a new paradigm of mission; and to promote a synodal journey. Therefore, while remaining inserted in our own local realities, we would like to grow in the sense of communion and shared journey, helping each

other to overcome the great fragmentation of experiences that remain isolated, valuing them in the context of a dialogue and exchange.

Mapping is an ongoing exercise that requires updating experiences already documented. In the first phase of the project, 205 experiences of social ministry were documented and analyzed. This exceptional and impressive data offer us the possibility of a new look at what is being done: for the first time, there is an overall overview, based on systematic data and there emerges a possibility of an unprecedented

opportunity for comparison and dialogue. However, this is only the beginning of the process. There are still many more experiences to document and share.

A. Reading the Mapping

Analyzing the documented experiences, the first consideration made concerns the approach to social ministry. Historically, the social praxis of the church is articulated along two axes: **service to the least, to the excluded**, (direct service), which in turn is articulated in two directions. Namely, works of mercy and human promotion; and **justice and peace**, (social action), which expresses a prophetic dimension articulated in denunciation on the one hand, and the promotion of systemic alternatives on the other.

In the social ministries of the CF, direct service tends to prevail over the justice and peace dimension. In particular, the weakest aspect on the overall is the denunciation

of injustice, which is partly explained by the need to keep a low profile precisely where, due to the presence of oppressive regimes, the greatest violations of human rights and structural injustices. In such contexts, at the same time, one notices a commitment to build some kind of alternative, which is a sign of a deliberate choice of resistance to injustice and oppression. In practice, on average, direct service presents itself as structurally integrated into social ministries, while justice and peace are usually present with frequent practices, but not structurally integrated into social ministries. Be careful, not to misunderstand; these are only average values that describe the system as a whole, not the experiences on the ground. Regarding the latter, we must assess on a case-by-case basis. However, knowing these average values is extremely useful for understanding the trends in

approaching social ministry in the CF.

In Africa, in particular, the prevalence of direct service is slightly more accentuated with an emphasis on the educational and human development dimension, while in America and Europe there is a better balance. This could in part be due to the context - generally speaking, in Africa, primary needs are more urgent and access to basic services is more limited - and in part to the missionary tradition on the continent. In Asia, on the other hand, the presence is still rather limited and this does not allow us to make systemic considerations.

A second aspect that emerges from the mapping is a snapshot of the ministerial sectors in which the CF is engaged. In communion with the Magisterium and the social practice of the Church, two sectors emerge that are not so closely related to areas of service but

rather to processes of social transformation: integral human development and JPIC. Given that, within the sphere of integral human development and in continuity with the history of modern mission, education/training and health assume a relevant importance. It seemed



appropriate to highlight them as specific elements with their own articulations.

In the area of integral human development, we find relief, socio-economic development, the dimension of social transformation through good governance and advocacy (advocating the cause of

systemic change). In addition to all this, we also find a certain insistence on the formation of leaders, a distinctive characteristic of the Comboni charism.

In JPIC sector, we find different kinds of emphasis: on human rights, on ecology and environment, on peace and reconciliation, on social justice and inclusion, and on inter-religious dialogue as a way to build fraternity and a more just world.

B. Key trends

The trends revealed by the mapping of the social ministries of the CF offer interesting indications regarding the structural conditions that characterize the Comboni mission.

What is evident is closeness to the poor, reaching out to the excluded and making common cause with them. This is not in a paternalistic sense, but in a perspective of service that makes them protagonists in their journey of regeneration, as reflected in the commitment to facilitate

participation and the recurrent empowerment of people and communities. Various forms of insertion are key elements of these attitudes: among the excluded human groups, the disadvantaged and marginalized communities, in specific socio-cultural contexts in which the Christian community is not only a minority but also experiences restrictions, as in the case of the Islamic world.

Second, the vitality and articulation of ministerial collaboration is impressive. Undoubtedly, the documented experiences overall, speak of communities that evangelize together, deeply embedded in the fabric of the Church and in close relationship with the local church and its many realities. What is also outstanding is the dense network of cooperation with various actors, even beyond the ecclesial spheres.

A third noteworthy element is the central role of spirituality and ecclesial identity in the Comboni social ministry. This is demonstrated

by the widespread activities of spiritual accompaniment and the basic attitude of seeking the transfiguration of reality according to the Kingdom of God. An accompaniment that is fundamental in the process of building a "people" (cf. *Fratelli tutti* and *Evangelii gaudium*). There is no separation between the social dimension and the spiritual-pastoral dimension, they are lived as an interconnected whole.

Finally, there is a strong emphasis on the educational dimension, which is certainly is part of the Comboni and missionary tradition, which assumes, also in terms of the number of activities, a very prominent importance. If nowadays the mission requires a cultural revolution, the educational dimension constitutes an especially important systemic condition. The importance of this aspect is also witnessed by the Global Educational Pact, promoted by Pope Francis, which interprets the need for a social transformation that

engages the conscience of individuals and peoples, because the root of the unsustainability of today's world lies in a worldview that has lost the authentic meaning of humanity and life.

However, there are also spaces for growth to be considered, new opportunities for a prophetic presence in response to the signs of the times. The ecological dimension, as well as the one of reconciliation and peacebuilding, though present and indeed significant in some experiences, have not yet acquired a systemic dimension overall. Similarly, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, which plays an important role in social ministries in the Islamic context, can really grow in other areas. Although there are experiences to promote a new sustainable and equitable economy, this social dimension, which is as crucial today as the environmental one, is also an area

that needs more attention and involvement.

C. Towards the future

Having documented the experiences in the field, it is now possible to carry out a shared action-reflection that will allow us to build pathways toward the elaboration of context-specific or environment-specific ministries.

Prophecy is what makes the presences in the field meaningful. We see it expressed in the culture of encounter that requires openness, willingness to allow oneself to be changed, to humbly request hospitality. We also see it in the tenderness of compassion, in making common cause alongside the impoverished, in evangelizing as a community and in communion in a ministerial network. We see it whenever reality is transfigured and allows a glimpse of the coming of the Kingdom of God, the presence of the Risen One who regenerates by giving life in fullness.

However, the mapping informs us that there are aspects in which we need to grow as CF. First of all, the dimension of denunciation, in order to demolish structures of sin that are detrimental to human dignity, social justice, and the common good. In addition, we feel the invitation to structurally incorporate into our social ministries some fundamental dimensions such as integral ecology, peace and reconciliation, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, sustainable and equitable economics, and accompaniment of the young.

Finally, prophecy also invites us to have a style that is consistent with the message, uniting Word and life. Certainly, today sustainability is an unavoidable theme. Regarding both the care of our Common Home and our style of ministry and life. These aspects are interdependent. Sustainability now requires new models of missionary presence. We need to create viable missionary ecosystems at the level of

missionary ministry, at the level of



the economy - with simple structures and sober lifestyles - and at the level of our relationship with the territory. Mapping helps us to see what the Spirit is already stirring among us: it will be important to dialogue with these experiences and conceive paths that will help us to spread new models of sustainable missionary presence.

II. THE CONTRIBUTION OF WEBINAR PARTICIPANTS

A. Findings from the mapping and from the book “*We Are Mission*”.

On the second day of the webinar, the participants had the opportunity to share their impressions and reflect together starting from the mapping presentation. The working groups highlighted the **strengths** and **weaknesses** of the Comboni social ministries. From the group sharing emerged three aspects that positively touched and surprised participants. First, we find an **appreciation for the Combonian reality** articulated with many different experiences and diversified commitments, vital and varied. The mapping also enhances the **diversity of contexts and cultures** in which the Comboni charism is integrated with different approaches. As is also shown in the book, “*We are Mission*”, the stories narrated give us **a global vision of the mission**; they demonstrate that we are proceeding as a Comboni Family (FC) in a living network by adopting common objectives.

In addition, it exposes the four dimensions of social ministry, of which we are not always aware of, and offers the possibility of making critical reflections. It is positively remarkable, for example, that the human promotion approach prevails over the relief one, which is important - *in emergency situations where it is definitely needed* - but oriented more to the immediate rather than to the medium and long term, and always risky to creating dependencies.

Above all the mapping offers us an overall look at the **Comboni Family**, beyond the fragmentation and the focusing only on its own small context. As the book also discloses, several very good experiences emerge, one next to the other, but not integrated nor interconnected.

Sometimes we work in parallel, things move forward separately. Coming to a common vision of a remarkably diverse reality gives us a new vision of our mission; it gives a different breath and meaning to our commitments.



Secondly, the **ministerial and Combonian character** of our commitments emerges. It is evident how the ministries are distinct from secular social work: the pastoral dimension is well integrated into the social one. In other words, the service offered is not reduced to helping, to improving a given situation, but fundamentally, it offers the possibility of a regenerating encounter with the Risen One in the lives of persons and communities.

We can also see how the dimensions of spirituality and proclamation of the Kingdom, revealed in the Risen Christ, are a constitutive part of social ministry. Moreover, social ministry involves the lifestyle of the pastoral ministers and leads to collaboration with the Comboni Family and other ecclesial and societal realities. Indeed, this very mapping exercise promotes the **sense of communion** and of **Combonian membership**. It allows us to appreciate the relevance of Comboni's plan and of our living the charism in the regeneration of persons and of the communities. Wherever, we are with the last ones, in difficult situations, on the **existential peripheries, and** this is a positive fact.

Finally, the third emerging element is the educational character of the Comboni social ministries. This is a discovery revealed thanks to the mapping that brought this reality to light. It is clearly in continuity with the Combonian history, but we had no perception of it, especially in its articulations (formal and informal education, leaders, youth). This, too, is a sign of relevance in the current historical era that - as Pope Francis reminds us in the Global Educational Pact - requires a cultural revolution to overcome the challenges of our time.

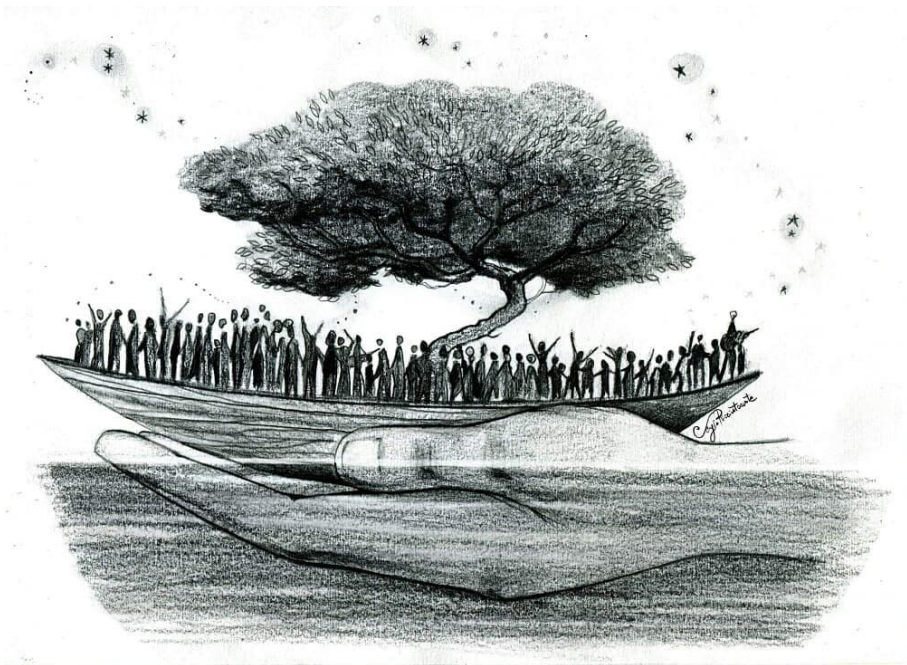
B. Critical issues that emerged

On the other hand, we also noted some critical issues. **First of all**, the dimension of denunciation, which is weaker than the other three (*relief, human promotion and shaping systemic alternatives*). While this is comprehensible considering the possible reactions of power groups, and while acknowledging that often underneath the silence there are forms of active resistance to injustice, a concern about this point did emerge. A **second** element of criticality regards the direct engagement in some of the **new frontiers of mission** such as, for example, environmental defense, integral ecology, economics, and sustainability. There are some remarkably interesting experiences in these areas but, overall, our commitment as Comboni Family in these areas is still marginal. A **third** aspect is about the **dimension of dialogue**, both interreligious and intercultural, which is not yet sufficiently present in the Combonian social ministries and is not yet a transversal dimension, as it should be. Yet, this dialogical reality with the other, with what is radically different, is fundamental in all processes of social transformation. It makes us wonder if we are prepared for it.

Finally, there are some remarks that emerge about the Comboni Family. We would like to see more documentation of the experiences of the LCMs and the Comboni Seculars. In addition, despite the great level of cooperation experienced in the experiences documented, collaboration as CF is less frequent than it should be. With reference to the book, however, it is pointed out that there is a need to clarify better the **mystique that sustains social ministry**. It is necessary to underline the spirituality that must accompany this approach.

C. Discernment and missionary discipleship with the Spirit

In the groups' sharing, we also tried to discern the presence and **guidance of the Spirit**. **Before all else**, the presence of the Spirit was recognized in the variety and diversity of the experiences documented which are implemented



with unity of purpose and inspiration. Furthermore, there are experiences in the various continents that respond to the invitation of an outgoing church, ready to receive from others. Such experiences constitute a sustainable ecosystem in which insertion, spirituality, pastoral services, economics, and response to epochal challenges complement each other. There we perceive an invitation from the Spirit to respond in a new and sustainable way to today's challenges.

Secondly, it is underlined that there exists an "**outside**", an external reality - other than us - that challenges us, that urges us to question ourselves, to live a spirituality and to networking. We believe we can respond to this call by being missionary from the margins making courageous choices, entering respectfully into the culture of the other, listening and promoting dialogue.

What is striking about the **Comboni Social Forum** is its openness to involvement, to sharing and to mutual listening. It is an **experience of communion and synodal journey** that, overcoming differences, becomes a process that belongs to everyone and not only to a few specialists. We consider as a gift the understanding and vision that we are acquiring of the Combonian mission that as the Comboni Family we are beginning to see. One of the inspirations, for example, is that of a discreet and merciful presence which contributes to social transformation in its accompaniment and support grassroots movements.

D. Continuing the process

From the sharing also emerges a broad range of possibilities for following up on the process emerged. To begin with, there are several suggestions regarding the mapping process that we feel has been a strong life experience and a sharing of the charism lived in today's concrete reality. The mapping should be continued and constantly updated. It is important to give it continuity through

specific case studies to move from statistics to life, *taking some models that work well and reflecting on their positive sides*. We suggest giving it continuity at the official level as well by increasingly involving communities more and more communities that have remained on the margins.

Finally, the analysis of the data should be brought back to the concrete experience of each Circumscription, where a serious reflection should begin as a Combonian Family in view of **practical experiences of collaboration**. The institutional members of the Combonian Family should become more and more integrated and connected.



We are aware that the process has just begun and must continue as a synodal journey, taking into consideration the following aspects:

1. Challenges to be addressed:

The participants of the Forum indicated some challenges to be faced: synodality, community processes of evangelization, the education challenge, working more on issues of regeneration and reconsidering the commitment to denounce injustice. Another aspect often raised refers to a **diversified pastoral care** that emphasizes areas such as indigenous and Afro pastoral care; pastoral care of the peripheries; youth and vocation pastoral care; pastoral care for the common home and integral ecology that questions our practices, coherence and lifestyle. Finally, the fight against the new forms of slavery (trafficking in persons present in various countries; organ trafficking; married girls/child marriage; labor exploitation, etc).

2. Specific Pastorals

Thematic reflections and **specific pastoral activities** are another path recommended by the participants. We are aware that meeting and working together is a challenge, a journey to be explored, strengthened, and walked in unity. Someone suggested prioritizing areas to avoid dispersion and personal projects. For example, **discernment processes** for specific ministries (*education, health, ecumenism, urban pastoral ministry, nomads, JPIC, migrants*) can be initiated at continental level. In any case, there is an opportunity to form thematic reflection groups and initiate participatory pathways to develop specific Combonian or area-based pastoral activities. However, others point out; continuing by areas is a dream that will only come true if the initiative is assumed by the grassroots. It is up to those in the field to take the initiative and contact others to meet, share experiences and, by

listening to each other and seeing convergence, build a synodal path. What we need is strong motivation, and a willingness to take on the responsibility of animating the process. To start is simple: we need to create a meeting space and to propose a journey together.

3. Ministerial style

We are invited to build a workstyle that unifies the Comboni Family, while avoiding flattening and homogenization. A methodology inspired by some key

words of Pope Francis: hospitality, outgoing, tenderness and mercy. Synodality must be built on this style and in this spirit. It is hoped that the synodal process will be adopted in evangelization and in missionary animation.

We feel the need to build on the Combonian spirituality and to follow Christ and Comboni as true missionary disciples. Furthermore, we need to avoid clericalism while establishing instead processes of reflection and deepening as a Combonian family.



It is important to "exude" from the whole setting of the work, its style and purpose as well as its content, that our social ministry is a missionary service to the world, and an ecclesial proclamation of the Risen Christ. Social ministry is not a goal, but a means and a way to give an answer to the Good News of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, the missionary vocation of Jesus announced in the proclamation, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me and sent me to proclaim..." (Lk 4:18), must be recovered at every moment.

4. Partnership

Partnership is an important part of ministry. In this regard, it is suggested to continue this synodal process by increasing participation and sharing more and more, not so much to see the results, but to go forward together and adopt the **missional paradigm of ministeriality**.

Partnership should be an ongoing work that begins with the local communities. For this reason, there is a need for guidelines on collaboration. We need to begin a dialogue within the local communities to open ourselves to new forms of partnership, not only as Combonian Family.

Partnership allows us to develop mutual learning. Sharing similar ministry experiences can be the starting point of new collaborations and can lead to new insights and possibilities. We need to be able to create common initiatives by bringing our ministerial projects together or even starting from a shared vision of the reality of exclusion and impoverishment. Through sharing and common reflection, we experience that we are fully sons and daughters of St. Daniel Comboni.

We feel the need to collaborate more as CFs in the areas of vocation promotion, youth ministry and formation. Organizing formative moments on specific themes, as well as taking care together of ongoing formation by harmonizing the human, spiritual, community and social dimensions, are examples of possible collaboration as CF.

There is a need to continue training in social ministry in initial and ongoing formation, fostering specializations in various areas. A space for growth and a starting point for a cultural revolution is the dialogue within the Comboni family itself. We need to welcome diversity for growth and together move forward for change. A further suggestion is to organize an assembly on education and higher training as Comboni Family. Some also share the idea

that the four branches of the CF organize a mini-chapter to improve our understanding of collaboration.

A. Moving forward to the third Webinar

The groups also offered suggestions on how to continue the journey as CF Social Forum. The webinar, used almost as an alternative due to restrictions caused by the pandemic, should become the normal method of a first phase of work. Written surveys have never yielded very good results whereas the online gatherings have proven capable of gathering many of those engaged in the service of social ministry, and to listen to their word, and listen to each other. It is also suggested that webinars be held continentally to allow each context to express itself better and more fully.



Presential meetings will continue to be useful and important, especially for decision-makings. In the meantime, we will circulate to all the communities the material presented by the commission and the material gathered and presented in the webinars.

In support of these steps, emerges the suggestion to create continental or interprovincial commissions as CF, along the lines of the commission appointed by the general coordinations for this work on social ministry.