

*Discourse of the Holy Father Francis
to the Participants of the General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries*

Saturday 18th June 2022

Dear Brothers, Good Morning and Welcome!

I am happy to meet you. I thank the Superior-General for the words he has addressed to me on behalf of all of you who participate in the 19th General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus. You invited me to your Generalate to celebrate the Feast of the Sacred Heart next Friday. Thank you, I will be there with you in prayer; but already today we live this encounter of ours in the perspective and in the spirit of the mystery of the Heart of Christ, to which the Charism of St. Daniel Comboni is linked.

The theme and motto of your Chapter also orient us in this direction: *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Rooted in Christ together with Comboni”*. In fact, the Mission – its source, its dynamism and its fruits – totally depends on union with Christ and on the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus clearly said this to those whom he had chosen as “Apostles”, that is, “those sent”: *“Without me you can do nothing” (John 15: 5)*. He did not say: *“You can do little”*; No, he said, *“You can’t do anything”*. What does this mean? We can do many things: initiatives, programmes, campaigns ... many things; but if we are not *in* Him, and if his Spirit does not pass through us, everything we do is as nothing in his eyes, that is, it is worth nothing for the Kingdom of God.

Instead, if we are like branches that are well attached to the vine, the lymph fluid of the Spirit passes from Christ into us and whatever we do bears fruit, because it is not our work, but it is the love of Christ that acts through us. This is the secret of Christian life, and in particular of Mission, everywhere, in Europe as in Africa and in the other Continents. The missionary is the disciple who is so united to his Master and Lord that his hands, his mind, his heart are ‘channels’ of Christ’s love. This is the missionary, he is not one who proselytizes. Because the ‘fruit’ that He wants from his friends is none other than love, *His* love, that which comes from the Father and gives us with the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of Christ that carries us forward.

This is why some great missionaries, like Daniel Comboni, but also, for example, like Mother Cabrini, lived their Mission feeling animated and ‘pushed’ by the Heart of Christ, that is, by the love of Christ. And this ‘push’ allowed them to go out and *go beyond*: not only beyond geographical limits and boundaries, but first of all beyond their own personal limits. This is a motto that for you must ‘make noise’ in your heart: to go beyond, to go beyond, to go beyond, always looking at the horizon, because there is always a horizon, to go beyond. The thrust of the Holy Spirit is what makes us come out of ourselves, from our being closed in on ourselves, from our self-referentiality, and makes us go towards others, towards the peripheries, where the thirst for the Gospel is greatest. It is curious that the worst temptation that we Religious have in life is ‘self-referentiality’; and this prevents us from *going beyond*. *“But to go further I have to think about it, to see ...”*. Go, go, go! Go towards the horizon, and may the Lord accompany you. But when we start with this psychology, this ‘mirror’ spirituality, we stop going beyond and always go back to our heart that is sick. We all have a sick heart and it is only God’s grace that saves us, but without God’s grace *kaput*, everyone! This is important: to go beyond with the Spirit.

The essential traits of the Heart of Christ are mercy, compassion and tenderness. This should not be forgotten: the style of God, already in the Old Testament, is this. Closeness, compassion and tenderness. There is no ‘organization’, no, just closeness, compassion, tenderness. And then I think that you are called to bear this witness of the ‘style of God’ – closeness, compassion, tenderness – in your Mission, where you are and where the Spirit will guide you.

Mercy, tenderness is a universal language, which knows no boundaries. But you carry this message not so much as individual missionaries, but as a *Community*, and this implies that not only the personal style, but also the style of your Community, must be taken care of. Jesus told his friends: “By how you love one another they will recognize that you are my disciples” (*John 13:35*), and the Acts of the Apostles confirm this, when they narrate that the first Community of Jerusalem enjoyed the esteem of all the people because people saw how they lived (*Acts 2,47; 4,33*): in love. And many times, I say this with great sorrow – I speak in general, not of you particularly because I don’t know you –, many times we find that some Religious Communities are a real hell, a hell of jealousies, of power struggles And where is love? It is strange, these Religious Communities have rules, they have a way of life ..., but love is lacking. There is much envy, jealousy, struggle for power, and they lose the best, which is the witness of love, and which is what attracts people: love between us, that we do not ‘shoot’ each other but rather always go on.

To this end, so that the lifestyle of the Community gives good witness, the four aspects on which you have decided to work in your Chapter are also important: the Rule of Life, the Formative Journey, Ministeriality and the Communion of Goods. Discernment concerns the modality, the way in which these elements are set up and lived, so that they can respond as much as possible to the needs of the Mission, that is, of witness. This is very important: it is part of the “urgent ecclesial renewal” in a missionary key to which the whole Church is called (cf. The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Nos. 27-33). It is a conversion that starts from the conscience of each one, involves every Community and thus comes to renew the entire Institute.

I would like to point out that here too, even in the commitment to these four aspects – interconnected as they with each other – everything must be done in docility to the Spirit, so that the necessary plans, projects, initiatives, all respond to the needs of Evangelization, and I also mean the style of Evangelization: that it is joyful, meek, courageous, patient, full of mercy, hungry and thirsty for justice, peaceful, in short: the style of the Beatitudes. This matters. Even the Rule of Life, Formation, Ministeries, the Management of Goods and Services must be set on the base of this fundamental criterion. “An evangelizing Community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, He has loved us first [...]. An evangelizing Community is supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelization consists mostly of patience [...]. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds [...]. The disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, yet the goal is not to make enemies but to see God’s word accepted and its capacity for liberation and renewal revealed. Finally an evangelizing Community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of Evangelization” (*Evangelii gaudium*, No. 24).

Here, dear brothers, I wanted to recall this passage from *Evangelii gaudium*, knowing that you have it in mind, precisely for the pleasure of sharing with you the passion for Evangelization. May the Lord bless you and Our Lady keep you. I wish you a successful continuation of the work of your Chapter. I cordially bless you and all your Confrères. And I ask you, please pray for me. Thank you!