

## PROVINCE OF ETHIOPIA – COMBONI DAY

Hawassa 25 October 2022

# To remain and to bring fruits

**“I am the Vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him, will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” Jn 15,5**

I start with three premises:

**1.** What does it mean for a missionary Congregation to start a General Chapter with this passage of the Gospel as the inspiring word of Jesus? What is the meaning of this verse for a missionary Congregation with the charisma *Ad Gentes*, which goes where the Gospel has not been proclaimed yet? How can we Comboni live the Comboni charisma in 2022 in front of the challenges of the world today starting with this Gospel? What is the meaning for the Comboni Province in Ethiopia with our specific charisma in this country and in this Church to have this Word as the starting Word for our reflection in this Comboni Day and for our missionary enterprise?

**2.** The Chapter has started on the Day of Pentecost with the opening Mass of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the Mission. Just some verses before Pentecost in Acts there is the Promise of Jesus and the mission entrusted to them. It has been taken by the Pope to give the theme to this Missionary Month: “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria until the end of the world” (Acts 1,8).

The Missionary Month for a Missionary Congregation what does it mean? How are we involved? Only for animating the others? “You will be my witnesses” Where and How is a challenge also for us?

**3.** In order to live the Mission today for us Comboni, there is not only the *General Chapter* which gives views, inputs and guidelines on how to live Mission today, but there are the challenges coming from events that happen in the world and near us, and challenging suggestions coming from the Church: eg. The *World Mission Sunday* with its theme as I said; then the *Universal Synod* of the whole Church that we are celebrating, together with a methodology that the Pope reminds as typical of the way the Church works that is the Synodality (the Togetherness), the Pope says “You religious are the experts of this Walking Together”. Still, we can add, the recent *Encyclical Letters* which are guidelines also for us:

- On the Eucharist ‘*Desiderio desideravi*’ good for our Spirituality,
- the *Evangelii Gaudium* with guidelines also for our Mission,
- the *All Brothers* on our living together and evangelizing as community.

I keep these three aspects in my meditation.

### **1. “WHOEVER REMAINS IN ME AND I IN HIM WILL BEAR MUCH FRUIT”**

**1.1** This verse is in Jn 15,1-8. Jesus addressing the disciples clearly says his expectations: **“I want you to bear much fruit”** v.8. It is a sign of the trust that Jesus has in the disciples, that Jesus has in US. Since you are here and go in My name, I want you to bear much fruit.

The Gospel is in the context of the Last Supper. Jesus opens his heart to the Apostles: To be apostles and to bear fruits, you first have to be Disciples. Only if we are united to Jesus, we can carry out the mission that Jesus entrusts to us and we can bear fruits.

Jesus presents himself as the Well of our life, our work and of our bearing fruits. He gives himself to us in many ways: prayer, sacraments; through the people whom we meet on our journey; through situations, events, meaningful experiences; through the phantasy that the Lord uses to give himself to us.

Jesus uses the image of the Vine and the Branches. The Branches can bear fruits only if they are united to the Vine, only if they receive the lymph-sap-life from the Vine. If one branch cuts itself from the vine produces nothing, dies, becomes useless and is thrown away.

With this image, Jesus says: 'I am the Vine and you are the Branches'. I mean You are My branches, you are my witnesses, you are my instruments, that is, I want you to produce fruits, good fruits, MY fruits. I want to make use of you today to make my Love-Forgiveness-Nearness-Protection reach all through your life: Your work, your deeds, your way of speaking; there where you are.

And we are honored that the Lord chooses US-ME, we are honored that He trusts us, that He makes us His witnesses, His messengers. We are honored!

And 'WE' we mean not only we single persons but also we as Comboni reality here in Ethiopia and we as Comboni Missionaries in the present Word.

This Gospel is addressed to the Congregation and to us today. Jesus is telling us that all this mission can happen, that we can bear good fruits and be His witnesses only if we are attached to the Vine (to be united to Him). Exactly like the branches that, united to the Vine, receive the sap/lymph and therefore can give fruits.

Therefore, Jesus is telling us: to bear fruits you must be united to Me. What does it mean to be united to Jesus in order to bear fruits or better 'to bear the fruits of Jesus'? My fruits?

Jesus is telling us to bear fruits in general in our life BUT even more in the specific Mission that He has entrusted to us Comboni in the world and Comboni in Ethiopia. What does it mean to be first Disciples and then Apostles? In the middle of all my running, how can I be united to the Vine?

**1.2** The Tradition of the Church and of our own Institute have always stressed that **to bring fruits, the fruits of Jesus, I need to be attached to Jesus** and receive his life through: regular Personal Prayer, Lectio Divina, a good Spiritual Reading, the Eucharistic Celebration, the Sacrament of Confession, the Rosary, the prayer in Community and the prayer with the people in the church as they pray. This is the way we mean our Spirituality.

In this way we receive that life from Jesus that allows us to bring fruits, to be witnesses, to bring 'My fruits' says Jesus. Fruits in My way-style, says Jesus. It means: 'my work with dedication and sacrifice' even, the place of mission not where I want but where I am assigned, the joy and fulfilment in staying with the people in simplicity, to go sometimes over the work time when there are to see the people of my ministry in some need, the capacity to forgive whole heartedly, the extra that I am able to do, to accept the limits and the mistakes of others, when it is asked of me just to work in a hidden way without others realizing and giving praise, the capacity to work together whole heartedly... Each one can add My Fruits, Fruits in the way of Jesus but we all take into consideration the fruits in the specific Mission that Jesus has entrusted to us Comboni.

From these fruits, "they will recognize that you are my disciples" says Jesus. Jesus is telling us to be ACTIVE that is to bear His fruits, and to be CONTEMPLATIVE. Clearly Jesus says that to be Active and to bear fruits in HIS way, that is, Much fruit and My fruits, we must first be Contemplative, to be attached to Him: 'If you remain in Me and I in you, You will bear much fruit' v.5.

There was a Bishop in the South of Italy, Tonino Bello, he used to say that we must be ContemplACTIVE: We start being contemplative and only in this way we manage to be also Active, our being active depends on my being Contemplative that is we bring in our life, in the activities that we do, He whom we have contemplated and from whom we have received His life. In other words, like Jesus, the Christian must have Feet on the ground and Eyes in the skies: he works, is involved in the reality BUT with the Eyes in the skies=united to God from whom gets life, light, strength.

The CHAPTER stresses the importance of Remaining. It is not an isolated event but a constant reality, that is, to be linked as single and as community to the well that is Jesus. To be sons of the Father asks of us to put ourselves in an attitude of constant Listening to the Word of God because only in this

way the branch gets life from the vine in order to live in the way Jesus wants and bear fruits. Each one has his specific fruits to bear: as single, as community where you are, as Comboni where we are.

**1.3 From a real listening to the Word of God comes naturally the listening to one another in the community and in our work of evangelization.** Pope Francis on 18 June met the Capitular Fathers and underlined that ‘we can do many things, initiatives, programs, campaigns... many things. But if we are not in Him, and if his Spirit does not enter and pass through us, all that we do is nothing to the eyes of Jesus; it means that it may be good but it has no value for the kingdom of God’.

We need to give time to this staying with Him which becomes also a receiving and becoming able to bring fruits. The Pope knew some elements of our Congregation and of our Founder. He said: “You Comboni are called to live your vocation and mission with the eyes in the Pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd, on the footsteps of St Daniel Comboni who had understood that in the open Heart of Jesus there was the mystery of the love of God for all men and women and you, expert of that love, you bring it and make it taste to the people to whom you are sent: the last ones”. It means: we remain, we receive, we give.

On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our foundation, the Pope told us that “*as Combonians of the Heart of Jesus, we contribute to the mission of the Church with the charism of St Daniel Comboni which finds its qualifying aspect in the merciful love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the last ones. In this heart there is the well of the Mercy which saves and you are called to imitate the merciful Jesus so that you too can take care of the most abandoned of our time*”.

It is all taken for granted but we need to ask ourselves how this link is present in our life and what priority we give to the attitude of Mary, Jesus’ friend, one of the two sisters, who was at the feet of Jesus listening, we ask about the time and the forms of staying and remaining united to the Vine.

**2. REMAINING AS COMMUNITY. We go a bit ahead and consider this Remaining as Community.**

**2.1** We are in October, the Missionary Month. This year with the theme “**You will be my witnesses**” addressed to the Apostles one of the last times before Jesus went up to heaven: “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria until the end of the world” (Acts 1,8).

It is a month and a theme that concern us directly, not only as occasion for animation but mainly because we are directly involved in that mission which is still a challenge for us. Remaining and Listening to the voice of the Spirit helps us reflect on this mandate, where the Lord wants us to bring fruits, where to go in His name. The verse still stresses that for any activity the priority is to be given to the action of the Holy Spirit. Only then, you will bear fruit, only then you will be my witnesses there where I send you.

There is a Plural. In that YOU: they were 12, but in that number there are the disciples of all time and there is in that You a style to do mission. The plural form stresses the communitarian-ecclesial character of this missionary mandate of the disciples of Jesus. It means that each baptized is called to the mission of the Church not in an individual way as if it is he who has decided to go and do. It is not a private business.

**The mission is done/lived/carried out together, in communion.** Even if you are alone to do a work but always in communion with the Church which has sent you. Each baptized person is called to mission, in the Church and by the mandate of the Church: consequently, mission is carried out together, not individually, in communion with the ecclesial community, and not on one’s own initiative. Even in cases where an individual in some very particular situation carries out the evangelizing mission alone, he must always do so in communion with the Church which commissioned him. As **Saint Paul VI** taught in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 60, Communion with the Church means:

- In communion with the Universal Church: it is the same mission that we are carrying out in the different parts of the world; It is the mission of Jesus; with words and works. In union with the Pope.
- Then in communion with the local Church. It means to know the journey of the Vicariate-Eparchy-Archdioceses, the themes on which we are working, the problems, to pray for the Local Church, the pastoral program, the school program, the clinic program, the activities.
- In communion with the Congregation and the Province which have sent me here, to know the programs, the reality of the other communities, in comm. With the Provin Superior...
- In communion with my community, the confreres with whom I live: *I share my activity*, not once a year when the Provincial comes but spontaneously when in the evening we are together and regularly in organized meeting. The work that I am doing is not mine, therefore we need this sharing and this reflection together in community.
- There is a togetherness that Jesus himself from the very beginning has decided as the main characteristic of our work “You my witnesses” plural.

This is not enough because there is a communion also with the Apostolic Community. We carry out the same mission of Jesus to be His witnesses: The Father in a way and the Sisters in another way. There are frictions, misunderstanding but for the sake of the common mission that we have received to carry out in the same place... We talk, we share, we see how to overcome... so that we can give a witness of togetherness. (How many situations...). Communion is promoted with Mass together, supper... Sharing programs, new...

**Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi, 60 says:** “Evangelization is for no one an individual and isolated act; it is one that is deeply ecclesial. When the most obscure preacher, catechist or pastor in the most distant land preaches the Gospel, gathers his little community together or administers a sacrament, even alone, he is carrying out an ecclesial act, and his action is certainly attached to the evangelizing activity of the whole Church by institutional relationships, but also by profound invisible links in the order of grace. This presupposes that he acts not in virtue of a mission which he attributes to himself or by a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name.”

It is not a chance that Jesus has sent the disciples 2 by 2 (work together). One is me and the other is my confrere. But also: One is my community and the other is the community of the Sisters. The ideal in the mission is where there are the 2 communities. It is a blessing for the mission where there are the Sisters: it is a blessing for the Parish, for the Fathers, for the people: all, the girls, women: already the only presence. But with this characteristic. Communion, togetherness. Jesus also said: “They will recognize as my disciples by the love that you have for one another”. It is true in the community.... How difficult! It is true in the apostolic community. The Christians perceive immediately and... speak, make comments... People are not happy, it is not a good example.

‘But we do our work? Yes, but it is the work of Jesus, and this is not your work, must be done in the modalities of Jesus. The togetherness is essential, the 2 by 2. How is the communion within the community and with the Sisters? Not the bearing one another but loving one another... but the communion.

**2.2** Where to bring fruits – Where to be witnesses? Our starting point is always to remain and to bring fruits. Where to bring fruits? Where to be witnesses?

The risen Lord tells his disciples of all times where they are sent: **v.8 to Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** In the Jerusalem/place where you are, you do the work and through the work you give witness.

There is the universal character of the mission of the Church: all the ends of the world. There is stress here to the geographic concentric circles: Jer... Judea... Sama... ends.... Always a bit more, always a bit beyond the usual places. There are geographical zones where the Good News has not arrived yet (realistically speaking it is true for Daye there is a beyond, QI, HW, clearly for GB, GBK) but there

are also social and existential zones also near to us where the presence of Jesus needs to be brought. The human situations of border where to give witness to Jesus and to his love, where there are people waiting.

The Pope – there where the Church is – stresses a Church “going out”. It means in the place where you are carrying out the mission entrusted to you, what does it mean “*the ends of the earth*”? A bit beyond the usual places? Where is the Church called to go beyond? “The Peripheries” existential... Inside the mission where I am, where is the Beyond? What is the Beyond?

Do I care in my spirituality of the Gospel to reach the ends of the earth? How, staying in Hawassa, I can reach the whole world?

In the place where I live, in the work that I do where is the Beyond, the ends of the earth, the existential periphery, the Church “going out”? There is always the risk of being satisfied, feel settled, I am happy with what I am and what I do! I already do a lot!

Where the Spirit shows me to go? Where does the Spirit show to us to go? As we reflect on the geographical place also we reflect on the social/existential places!

Clinic or school or Church and chapels is not enough maybe, but going out, go where the people are: in the streets, in the houses. To visit them. People remain touched by this, more than the usual work in my place of work that remains very precious. “The Father has come to my house when I was sick, or when he heard that I had a problem”. Where there is a particular situation: people crying or a contrast... Going out/beyond?

Strong awareness in **Jesus to go over/beyond**, not to be happy with what He does/achieved [Lk 4, 42-44 (43 “*To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent*”)].

The Church is called to go beyond... We too.... Actually, the Church expects that we with our going beyond be a sign/challenge to the Church. Because the single person, where each one is, is important to Jesus and therefore to me. (Jesus in the Gospel: the care for the single one)

How do I care of a single situation/person/sheep? Am I present among the people reflecting Jesus going into the houses...to the single?

### **2.3 ‘You will be my witnesses’: “(To do all this) you will receive power when the Spirit comes”.**

In order to be Witnesses, where is the REMAINING IN ME so that we bear Fruits?

In giving the mission, Jesus knows that it is difficult in itself and to carry it out and also the fruits that He expects us to bear and in the modalities of Jesus; therefore, for such a great responsibility Jesus has promised the Holy Spirit.

And in fact, as we read in the Acts, soon after the descent of the Holy Spirit the apostles went out and with courage proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus, with the kerigma, that is, the missionary discourse of Peter to the people of Jerusalem.

With the descent of the Holy Spirit starts the time of the evangelization by the apostles who before were weak, fearful and closed. “You will receive power”: The HS strengthens them, gives them courage and wisdom to give witness to Christ in front of all.

The same is ... for a small Province like ours: to be open to new ways-modalities you need the inspiration and the help of the HS which comes in a variety of ways (through...) on the Apostles who were together and asking themselves together what to do and also on US, also as we are gathered here and reflecting together on our how and where and to whom to carry out the Mission that Jesus has entrusted to us and to bear My fruits.

**The Holy Spirit** has a fundamental role in the missionary life as the One who inspires and gives strength and wisdom for the words to say and the choices to make, the places where to go. The role

of the Holy Spirit is true for a choice of life but also in the daily life: constantly we need inspiration and strength of the HS. The role that it has in our life: to ask for it in any need that I have. He gives the right word to say and in the right way. The right choice to make. He is the main protagonist of the Mission.

This is also an aspect of this Remaining attached to the Vine: for each single one and also for us as group.

We always need to remember that Marta and Mary are not in opposition. Which one of the two? Who comes first? Jesus is clear: to do mission in his name and in his way, we first need to sit at His feet, look at him and learn from Him. Then we can act in his name. He sends us.

First the HS and then we go, not where we want and the work that we decide, but where the Spirit inspires me .... Remain: the Vine and the Branches!

How is the Pentecost in our life? In my everyday life when I have something difficult: a choice, a word to say, a problem, a situation to face.... How is it This remaining attached to the Vine?

The Church “going out” so dear to Pope Francis: what does it mean to me in my daily activity? How do I see it linked to the Holy Spirit?

Each one personally (most of us) has fulfilled the geographical going out. What about the social, existential going out/beyond that Pope Francis invites us to consider? In my present Today? Where I live...

As Province, we have fulfilled the geographical going out. We need to ask ourselves all the time what going out-beyond – existential peripheries ... means for us as a Province!

We can consider:

How do I live this union-communion: with Universal Church, Hawassa Church, Congregation, Community, Apostolic Community?

Which one should I improve? How?

How do I live the 2 by 2? What do I mean? To what do I apply it?

How do I get involved the community in what I do? Do I share my apostolic work: at table, in prayer? Do we have in community regularly a meeting of sharing on apostolic work so that I give also a report since it is in the name of the community that I am doing that work and I give also them the possibility to tell me something about my work? In order to improve and *become more the continuation of the work of Jesus!*

I go towards conclusion.

### **3. LISTENING TO THE CHURCH AND TO THE WORLD**

As I said, in order to live the Mission today for us Comboni, there is not only the General Chapter which gives views, challenges and guidelines on how to live Mission today, the highest authority, but there are the challenges coming from events that happen in the world and near us (covid), and challenges coming from the Church.

I mentioned the World Mission Sunday with its theme, then there is the Universal Synod of the whole Church that we are celebrating and where, together with a methodology that the Pope reminds as typical of the style of the Church, that is the Synodality, the Pope says: “You religious are the experts of this *Walking Together*”.

There are some recent **Encyclical Letters** which are guidelines also for us:

- on the Eucharist: ‘**Desiderio Desideravi**’, good for our Spirituality and still stressing that ‘Remain in My Love’,
- the **Evangelii Gaudium** for the Mission,

- **All Brothers** on our living together and evangelizing as community.

I keep also these three aspects in my meditation.

To “Remain in the Vine” in order to bear fruits in the modality of Jesus, there is a communion with the journey of the Church, at this moment, which is also a way to be attached to the Vine that is to the Church.

### **3.1 Last year the Church has started the journey of the Synod. With the theme: “For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”.**

We make this journey, besides reflecting on the present reality and see how the Church can be meaningful, but even more in order to promote a Church where there is this Synodal Style, this Walking Together, where each single person feels to be part of It, is involved and gives his contribution for the mission of the Church. A Church where there is Communion, Participation and Mission.

The first phase of the Synod is finished with the report of each parish shared in the Dioceses and then at Episcopal Conference level. Reflecting and sharing reports was not the only aim of this first phase. The aim underneath was the Walking Together, to get everybody involved in this reflection. This is already to implement the aim that the Synod promotes with its style, that is, the Walking together, the get each one involved in any reflection and any decision, be it for the Synod of Bishops, or Provincial Council, or Parish Council or School Director. And the Pope says that We Religious are the experts in this aspect which is a constitutive element of the Church. Therefore, give your contribution.

Walking together wherever you are, in any context with the richness of each one. To consult, to reflect together, to get the contribution of each one and then the authority takes decisions.

There is a contribution of each one to give in this process and each one asks himself on his own Walking Together.

The General Chapter reflected and wrote on this Walking Together with other terms.

Comboni was dreaming a community of Brothers where there was Listening to one another. It is always good to remember when in the Christian Spirituality we say that Jesus speaks to me also through the other confrere. This is/means also To Remain attached to the Vine.

**3.2 It is normal to think of the Encyclic Letter “All Brothers”** (3 October 2020). It is addressed to believers and not believers, for a universal Brotherhood but with its many inputs it is a challenge also for us, for our religious life. Comboni was anticipating a lot reflecting on his experience and saying that his Institute was not German, or Italian or Spanish but catholic, that is universal, open to all. In a world that closes itself and builds up walls, Comboni is a constant invitation to be open to the diversity, to the multiculturalism also in our Institute and in our Province and working together with the richness of each one.

As for us to Remain in the Vine implies to Listen to the Word of God, as the branch gets life from the Vine to live, the same, to be children of the same Father and to live in community implies this Listening to one another, sincere appreciation and collaboration in view of a significant and brotherly living together and for our common work of evangelization. We still have the characteristics of the Synodal Style: this togetherness.

For the common work of evangelization: the same characteristics to promote among the direct collaborators and the lay people: this listening, appreciation, and collaboration.

Together with this, to know the journey of the Local Churches in which we are inserted, interest in knowing others’ ideas working there, well get involved in the Local Church with our specific contribution and open to the diversity.

The Pope speaking to US stressed that as the Pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd was the source for Comboni’s Spirituality so we as Comboni Missionaries we are called to draw our spirituality from

the same source 'Pierced Heart of the Good Shepherd' with its characteristics of mercy, compassion, closeness, harmony, communion, openness and tenderness. This is what makes our life together a **life of quality** and these are the characteristics of which we are so impregnated that this is what we live among us and we give as our specific contribution in whatever we do and wherever we are. This is the specific contribution that we give to the Local Church.

### **Conclusion:**

We have Jesus challenging us today:

- with his word in the Gospel
- With his word in the life of the Church
- With his word speaking to us in the present reality in which we live

Concretely:

1. "Whoever remains in me will bear much fruit". It is addressed to the Comboni Missionaries today in Ethiopia: to each one, to our communities and to our Province.  
How to remain? What are the fruits that Jesus expects of us to bear?
2. In this line there is the theme of the World Mission Sunday "You will be my witnesses" addressed to us: there where you are: consider the going out/beyond/to the social and existential peripheries. What is for us the Being His witnesses? Where is the Beyond?
3. To remain and to bear fruits in the style of Jesus: the fruits that He expects of us in line with what we are. There is a Synodal Style: the togetherness and each one involved with his own specificity.

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