

Aurelio Boscaini

THE GREAT DOCTOR

Life of Joseph AMBROSOLI

missionary and doctor

EMI

(English version by U. Pescantini)

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PRESENTATION

In 2010 in Uganda they celebrate the centenary of the Comboni Mission. From 1910 to today the Institute made of this country one of its privileged fields of missionary activity and in 1971 it saw the considerable number of 344 Comboni missionaries working on its land. Fr. Joseph Ambrosoli is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful figures of that large group and of the entire Comboni family. For this reason we thought of offering his biography to the large public.

The Great Doctor, of Fr. Aurelio Boscaini has a historic-narrative character. It makes easy reading and highlights the figure of Fr. Ambrosoli by entering the various stages of his life, from his birth at Ronago in the province of Como in 1923, to his death in Lira, Uganda in 1987, and by going through his human and spiritual experience which made of him a brother to the poor and one of the worthiest followers of saint Daniel Comboni, who wished his collaborators to be "holy and able".

Among his achievements emerges the hospital in Kalongo, which came to have 350 beds and became a place of reference for the whole Central-Eastern Africa. There the missionary, who was a doctor and a surgeon, lived the most important years of his life, devoting himself especially to surgery and obstetrics and using the short periods of holidays for professional updating. In 1959, following the idea of Comboni of saving Africa with Africa, helped by Comboni Sisters, he started a midwifery school, thus contributing to the improvement of the quality of Ugandan healthcare. In 1972 he associated to his hospital also the leprosariums of Alito and Morulem.

Fr. Joseph was great in his professionalism, in the holiness of his life, in his love for the poor and in his unconditional dedication to the sick. He put his project of life in these words: *"I must try to re-live in me the Master in the way he cured the sick when they came to Him... May they see Jesus in me"*.

When Idi Amin Dada, the man who feared the overwhelming power exercised in the army by the ethnic groups of Acholi and Lango, came to power, Father Ambrosoli, who was working in Acholi territory, started suffering pressures and persecutions. In the end, Kalongo hospital had to be evacuated and closed. These were the painful happenings that accelerated his death on March 27th, 1987.

The collaborators said of this great missionary that *"as he was in love with Jesus so he was in love with the sick"*.

The process of his beatification is going on.

Fr. Corrado Masini
Provincial Superior

“My name is Joseph Ambrosoli. I come from Ronago in the province of Como. I just graduated in medicine and I desire to use my profession for the benefit of the missions. At first I thought of the Jesuits. But their activities are varied, while I instead think of the missions. Because of this I came here to ask for two things: first whether in your institute it is possible for a doctor to become a priest and secondly whether one, after entering the institute is sure of going to the missions to exercise his profession both of priest and doctor”.

With these words the young doctor Ambrosoli presents himself to Father Simon Zanoner, rector of the Comboni seminary in Rebbio of Como. He says that his name is Ambrosoli, but he does not clarify that he belongs to the famous Ambrosoli family that produces honey.

It is summer 1949. Father Zanoner – who will spend 40 years of his missionary life in Uganda, 16 of which in Lacor seminary – answers him that there is no objection to his desire to become a priest, leave for the missions and work there both as priest and doctor. “Comboni missionaries are made exactly for the mission and therefore leaving for it is absolutely normal. For sure!”. “If it is like this – answers Joseph – I will ask to enter. But first I will go to London to take a course in tropical medicine. So I ask for the address of the Comboni Missionaries in London, not to request for lodging, but only as reference. I will look after stay and accommodation. If you are interested in getting information about me, please contact Father Riva of the parish of St. Bartholomew”.

This is how began the missionary adventure of the one who would have become the great doctor *Brogioli*, doctor of the Acholi of Uganda.

1. NOT JUST HONEY

Joseph Ambrosoli was born on July 25, 1923 from John Baptist and Palmira Valli at Ronago, a charming village in the province of Como, next to the Swiss border. The Ambrosoli family was not originally from Ronago, but from Como. The great-great-grandfather of Father Joseph, Francis Ambrosoli, was a humanist who wrote also a Handbook of Italian Literature; he is indicated in the Treccani encyclopaedia (vol. II, p. 808).

In the early decades of the twentieth century Ronago had only a few hundred inhabitants, most of whom were farmers. Industries came later and the father of our Joseph gave his substantial contribution to it. John Baptist Ambrosoli was born in 1882 and undertook scientifically-oriented studies, graduating as a chemical expert in Wintenthur, in the German side of Switzerland, different from his father Francis, a humanist like his father and member of the Italian Parliament for four periods, from the electoral college of Cantù.

John Baptist starts working in Liguria. But in 1910 he is called to Ronago to manage family assets that are made of houses, fields and woods that a great uncle of the Ambrosoli had bought at the end of the nineteenth century.

Sweet Roots

The only activity not in crisis those years was that of silkworms and the Ambrosoli are also involved in it. John Baptist tries to improve immediately the quality of the silkworms raised by his farmers obtaining first-class cocoons demanded by the highest qualified spinning mills. This brought money in people’s pockets. But what made him great was his intuition of introducing beekeeping. He starts with a few hives at the back of the garden, without any real project, a bit by chance, as by chance are born many beautiful business companies. He did not intend to create an industry, but simply wanted to have some good honey for himself and his family. Then he falls in love with the bees, starts studying beekeeping, looking for and reading all the available literature. The environment of Ronago is favourable. In this way beekeeping replaces the traditional vine growing which was troubled by phylloxera. Things go on well with results

flattering in quality and quantity. While in Rome Mussolini comes to power, in Ronago the “Miele Ambrosoli” is born in 1923 trading a product that has the characteristics of the honey that John Baptist wants for the honey on his table.

Paul, the ninety years old brother of Father Joseph, is the one who narrates this story to me; he still looks like the captain who runs his industry. Jokingly he calls himself “Paul the sixth, with small s”. He is in fact the sixth child of Mama Palmira.

I meet him in Ronago in the office of his firm. He would have a thousand things to say and God knows how many times he has spoken of his family and of Father Joseph, his brother born after him who consecrated himself not to honey but to the sick brothers of Africa.

The family of Father Joseph takes shape on September 23, 1906 with the marriage of John Baptist Ambrosoli and Palmira Valli in the parish of St. Bartholomew in Como. He is 24 years old and she 23. It is a happy marriage that will bear eight children: six males and two females: Constantine, Francis, Josephine, Catherine, Charles and Paul; Joseph comes seventh; ten years later the last one is born, Alexander when mother Palmira is 50 years old! Today we would describe the Ambrosoli family as wealthy: it was influential and rightly well known; respected in the Como area: it can therefore set out to produce social works for the population; John Baptist in fact was for a period mayor of Ronago (1921-26) and remained always attentive to the needs of the people.

Paul narrates that during the last two years of the Second World War the company was blocked because everything was missing. “But daddy, to prevent his workers being taken away by Germans to work in Germany or elsewhere, he kept them in his firm and paid them, trying to invent everyday something to do, such as maintenance works of roads, bridges ...”.

When John Baptist Ambrosoli dies at San Remo on March 17, 1961, people realize that he has managed to make a “family” of his firm: in it all worked together with much cordiality and solidarity. The first and loyal collaborators of the company were the children of his farmers.

His son Paul narrates: “Dad was no saint; but practically he was one, although he used to go to church only for the great festivities such as Christmas and Easter”.

The mother

How could Mama Palmira accept to live with such a husband when she used to go to church every day? Paul says: “She was satisfied to know that her husband was a righteous man. In fact everybody saw in him a great honesty, righteousness and seriousness. The social sensitivity of my father led him to set for women workers a timetable that would allow them to return home in time to prepare for lunch and supper for the family. Different times, someone will say!”.

In fact the task of raising Joseph and his brothers remained more with Mama Palmira than with the father. “The words written on the card for his funeral were not a pious lie: ‘For his dear ones and for all he was an evangelical witness, a gift of grace, a blessing’. Those were days in which the mother’s role in the raising of children was dominant over that of the father: the father was giving the direction, but then it was the mother to concretely direct the behaviour, attitudes and values. In the letters Father Joseph wrote to his family there always appeared the word Mother with capital M”.

Mama Palmira also came from a well-to-do family. She is born in 1883. She marries John Baptist when she is 23 and will live with him for 45 years. After the death of her husband she lives till she is over 94. Paul says: “All agree that she had been ‘an evangelical witness’ to her dear ones, almost like she was trying to complete what she had seen lived by her father, doctor Constantine Valli, who in Como was called ‘doctor of the poor’. She was able to live naturally, almost instinctively, the evangelic spirit, spontaneously translating it in Christian words and attitudes, like that of the visit to the sick. Many mothers in those days used to live a mature faith, made of active and supportive charity, like the one expressed by the rural world. And almost naturally, together with mother’s milk, we the children of those mothers took on that common Christian attitude made out of essential things which allowed, without fear of being contradicted, to define as ‘Christian’ the whole society”. Society in fact in its majority lived a widespread moral climate, made out of humanitarianism anchored in a simple but solid religious faith, in which principles such as that

of charity and love of others were words full of meaning, because they were lived and expressed in daily attitudes and behaviours.

At Mama's school Joseph learns to live in simplicity, a kind of natural and spontaneous humility. As he grew up he recognized its value, because humility is the gift of a true intelligence and understanding of things.

Joseph must have appeared poor to his classmates in the primary school, because they nicknamed him 'stracchino cheese' because at the time this was considered food for the poor. When he will be at the university he will find it normal to leave fresh bread and soft honey to his brothers: he will be content with the bread left over from the day before and the honey that remained at the bottom of the pot.

He is trained not to waste things and be frugal, but never stingy. In this way he is trained to be moderate and self-limited, qualities that accompanied him all his life. For instance, no one will ever see him enter an African restaurant to refresh himself. His lunch will always be a sandwich prepared before starting the journey.

When, many years later, people look for testimonies on his life, Irma Domenis, the housekeeper of the Ambrosolis, will underline the respect and the attention that Joseph always had towards the house servants: "He was always kind and attentive with everyone".

The environment

The place of birth, nature and landscape in which a person grows is not indifferent to the growth of one's personality. We correctly believe to be the fruit of this or that place, of this or that family in which Providence has made us come into the world. Como and Lombardy must not be forgotten when one wants to enter into the personality of Joseph Ambrosoli.

It is possible to speak of intimate connections between the person and nature. It is never easy to describe the elements of a regional character, but one is not far from the truth when one says that the Lombard character is austere and reserved, and yet in its own way also welcoming and caring. All this we can find in Joseph's personality.

In the formation of both his human and spiritual personality, however, the presence of the parish priest weighed even more. Four days after his birth, the seventh child of John Baptist and Palmira is taken to the baptismal font. It is July 29, 1923. One could expect the name of James, whose feast was celebrated four days earlier. Instead the parish priest, Father Charles Verga, after the name Joseph, given by the parents, gives to the child also the names of Humbert and Gaspar.

Father Charles remains in Ronago for 35 years as parish priest. He is a zealous priest, as are all the 'holy parish priests' of those days totally given to the wellbeing of souls. Above all he is a priest you can find always in church, where it is right for a priest to be found. He is an excellent spiritual counselor, zealous for the sacramental life of his people, always ready to offer the correct word, committed to children's and youth's education and vigilant on the sick. The example of this parish priest will accompany Joseph in all his missionary life.

Sickness and relics

During the twenties of the past century it was easy to get sick. Infant mortality was very high. Little Joseph too, when he was 18 months old, was hit by a serious intestinal disease. The situation becomes so serious that Mama Palmira bursts in a spontaneous prayer: "Holy Mother, don't take my child. Please, leave him to me. And I promise that, when he grows up, if you want him, I will offer him to you with joy!".

Today his brother Paul has no doubt: "His healing was surely due to his mother's prayers, but also to the relics of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, the patron of missions whom the mother's cousin, Sister Pierina Valli – mother superior of the Carmelites of Parma who died in odour of holiness – used to send in plenty to Ambrosoli's house. It is not clear whether Joseph is conscious of this when he takes the decision to consecrate his life to God in the Comboni Institute. But Mama Palmira knows it. Joseph recovers, is healed and comes back to life. And, as it is common in numerous families, the little one, last child for some ten years before the arrival of Alexander, sees in his older brothers his models and his teachers. These,

however, sometime make of him the guinea pig of their children's games. In this way Joseph moves to the discovery of the world.

Prayer as music

Joseph's growth to maturity coincided with the rise of Fascism, the Second World War and the exciting but not easy years of reconstruction. The Italian people, exhausted by the long war, find in themselves the energy that will shortly take them to rebuild and to dream for a better future.

Like all kids Joseph starts primary school at six. The teachers find in him a pupil of normal intelligence, but very lively since at the age of five or six he already could play chess like a champion. His behavior is distinguished as befits a 'young gentleman', but his health is rather poor: during the last two years of primary school he manages to put together 45 justified absences. During the primaries he also builds up the first friendships that will last for life. He is therefore a normal kid who dresses up like all others and so does not like to stand up as son of the rich. But he is capable of wit and of a concrete sense of living.

During these years almost nothing is said or appears of his spiritual world as a child. However Mama Palmira teaches him to say morning and evening prayers and the daily prayer of the holy rosary. Joseph will never lose these habits during the years of missionary experience, not even during the most difficult days in Kalongo Hospital in Northern Uganda. Even at that time many will often see him reciting his rosary. We do not know whether a confrere ever asked him whether he got tired always repeating that prayer. We can however be sure that Father Joseph would have answered this way: "I pray the rosary because it is the easiest form of prayer to Mary. I take the beads into my hands and I do not need to detach immediately from what I have in mind; I can continue to follow for some time my thoughts, my worries and my state of mind. I only change the musical background, which little by little permeates the atmosphere and transforms it. The Hail Marys and the mysteries become a quiet and familiar music that accompanies my story at that moment. Now it is a person that appears to my mind and then it is the background that suggests 'Pray for us sinners'. Sufferings that cry for help are never missing, and there is the comfort of the sorrowful mysteries. At times it is a difficult situation that occupies my mind and the background suggests the coming of the Holy Spirit as strength from on high. It is marvelous to repeat for me and for many the 'May your kingdom come' of the Our Father".

Among the anonymous

When he was nine Joseph was confirmed by the bishop of Como, Alexander Macchi. Before coming to Como Mgr. Macchi had been for eight years bishop of Andria and before that he had been the secretary of Cardinal Ferrari, the Archbishop of Milan, whose dynamic pastoral vision he made his own. In 1938 Mgr. Macchi welcomed in Como the Comboni Missionaries, at Via Borgo Vico 104; in 1941 they transferred to Rebbio, not far from the city. It is obvious that Mama Palmira desired to know these missionaries and from time to time she visited them and gave them generous offerings for the missions. And – lo and behold! – it is at that very door of the missionaries that Joseph will knock to achieve his dream of giving his life for others.

After primary school Joseph is enrolled at the royal technical institute in Como. He attends it for a year to make up for the poor formation he got during the primaries in Ronago. The following year he is at the royal Institute 'Alexander Volta'. The results at the end of the year, however, reveal that the gaps in the knowledge of young Joseph are substantial. And so his father decided to send Joseph to the Calasanzio Institute of the Scolopi Fathers in Genoa-Cornigliano, where also his brother Paul was studying. In fact all the children of this family were trained in this institute. The oil painting of the first born, Constantine, ended up hanging on the wall along the staircase of the college among the 'princes of the academy' as the best student of the classical lyceum. Unfortunately neither Paul nor Joseph will end up 'hanging' on the wall in an oil painting.

Today Paul enjoys narrating: "When I failed in my fifth primary, my father commented: 'this son is like me' referring to his difficulties in the primaries".

In the new school, however, Joseph fills up his gaps. He shows greater grip on the scientific subjects (always getting 7 or 8 in maths) and a little less in literary subjects. His companions feel attracted by his faithful friendship which he knows how to cultivate and by his smiling and jovial demeanour. He was therefore a normal young man and even a sportsman, a fan of the team of his heart: the Ambrosian (that will eventually be called International). And as a good fan he happens to suffer in case of a lost game and to rejoice in case of victory.

When he finished school at the Calasanzio Institute, Joseph returned to Como and enrolled at the state high school 'Alexander Volta'. He is 16 and the Second World War has just broken out. The change from a private to a public school creates for him some scholastic problem, but all works out for the best and in 1942 he comes out "mature". There has not been a real baccalaureate examination, because the school authority did not manage to send an examining board (Italy is at war since June 1940); but the classical baccalaureate final scrutiny allows him to access university.

The result of this final scrutiny was the following: Latin 8, Greek 8, History 8, Philosophy 8, Political Education 8, Mathematics 7, Physics 7, Italian 7, Natural Sciences and Chemistry 7, Geography 7, History of Art 7, Military Culture 7, Physical Education 7.

Among his school mates, Section B, some twenty of them bear manes that will stand out as people of rare intelligence and ability and will end up being headmasters, doctors, lawyers, etc. After some decades they will remember him as one of those who were not 'outstanding' and 'not particularly attractive by his schoolmates girls'. Bice Altomare, who will become headmistress of middle school, states that: "He was one of those belonging to the anonymous band, as if he were out of the school. His interests were only religious and he expressed them by belonging to the Catholic Action".

Soldier

At the military visit Joseph was found able, but he was given a 'provisional unlimited leave'. As two of his brothers were already in the army he was exonerated from military service. He therefore enrolls in medicine at the university of Milan: he will have to shuttle continually between Ronago and Milan. His father expected a different choice, but allows him to go ahead.

World events run fast: Mussolini is ousted (July 25, 1943) and three weeks later there is the signing of armistice with the Anglo-Americans (September 8). Como is occupied by the Nazis, but the Swiss border is nearby and thousands of people find refuge at Chiasso. Joseph, after the bishop's example, gives a hand by personally accompanying beyond the border (a few hundred meters from his home) Jews and other people persecuted by the Fascists. His name will not appear among the 'righteous' Italians remembered in the Yad Vashem Memorial which was erected to "honour those among the nations who risked their lives to save Jews". But we know for sure that he did his part.

At the end he too takes refuge in Switzerland. But he does not stay quiet: his flight could bring problems to his family. And therefore he decides to return. And in order to avoid other difficulties to the members of his family on March 27, 1944 he enrolls in the army of the Social Republic of Italy (Republic of Salò). He will remember it some decades later in Kalongo hospital when also the missionaries will be insulted as 'fascists'.

In any case it was a choice without many alternatives and it will appear only a venial sin. He was sent to the military hospital of Baggio (Milan) and a month later, on April 26, he leaves for Germany, destined to the training camp of Heuberg-Stetten in Württemberg, near Stuttgart. Two days later he is there and is assigned to the second health company of the Italian Division.

Life in the camp is hard and the training goes from 6.00 to 17.00. They are young men constantly tired and hungry. Only at midday there is a break for lunch.

In an environment where there is no lack of non-believers Joseph never hides his religious belonging. But he does it with discretion, thus getting the admiration of his comrades, medical students like him, who is always attentive that everyone be well. He tells them that he intends to get a degree in medicine, to specialise in tropical illnesses and then to be a missionary doctor. Doctor Luciano Giornazzi, his comrade-in-arms, will keep an indelible memory of that period and many years later he will declare:

“We spent down there a year or a little more, side by side, suffering not the best type of life: manual work and paramilitary training (we were all students enrolled in the faculty of medicine of our various regions of origin), a lot of hunger and a good amount of abuse, more moral than material. I spent all that sad period in the same barrack with Joseph. At the end of war when, after many adventures, we returned to normal life, the memory of that young man remained in mi mind and my heart. I remember him when in the evening, tired and always hungry, we lay on the bunk beds. He always asked every one of us whether we needed anything. He was always ready at every demand, though he was as hungry and tired as we were. And there is Ambrosoli who runs with the bucket to fetch fresh water, outside, far away from the barrack, summer or winter. There he is helping someone of us to wash in order to be ready for inspection (a delay or a failure meant punishment for all the barrack). I seem to still see him while he is consoling with brotherly affection one among us who was secretly crying when remembering his dear ones (and this was quite frequent!) or when, at the end of the poor meal, he retires on his straw mattress and loudly recites some prayers, among total indifference. There he is scolding one who curses the bad luck that has brought us, willy-nilly, in that horrible place: he has a good word for all, and at the end he manages to cool down anger, sorrow and anxiety. I remember him during a training march (15 km!), when he took up also my backpack because of a sudden pain I felt at my knee that was preventing me to keep up with the group. And arriving at the barrack, he could spontaneously bent over tired companions to wash their feet. In another occasion when I was laying in the infirmary with high fever and unable to move, for almost a month he brought to me food twice a day: always with the smile on his face and some words of encouragement. In the end, during that period Ambrosoli was always at everyone’s disposal. He was different from us. He had an extra gear – moral and material – that surely came from his permanent serenity. His behaviour towards others confirmed in me the conviction that saints still exist in our days”.

Camillo Terzaghi, another of his companions in the training camp from April 29 to December 7, 1944 will tell: “Respect towards Joseph grew up as the months went by, up to the day when he officially revealed that he would graduate in medicine, would have followed a course of tropical medicine and then he would became a missionary doctor... At the end of the training he used to present himself to receive his food, like all other soldiers, but he did not eat it immediately: he used to put it aside to go first to church for a prayer”.

At the end of this training in December 1944 Joseph comes back to Italy passing through Brenner. In February 1945 his troupe (in which he keeps the accounts) leaves for the front in the area of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennine Mountains, specifically to Collecchio in the Parma province. Sometimes partisans fire at him, but he never replies. He is charged with the postman’s duties, which expose him to air raids. He ends up learning how to save his skin.

War finally ends. On foot and by makeshift means he reaches Parma, Cremona, Lodi, Busto Arsizio and Varese. From here he reaches Ronago by bike.

His military life has not been a waste of time: it helped to strengthen his character, if there were any need. But above all he now knows by personal experience that dying for your country does not mean anything for a Catholic, and that, if the soldiers who died could have been able to choose, all, without exception, would have chosen to live. Many years later at Kalongo he will welcome hundreds of wounded soldiers. He will smile at his ‘fascist’ past, almost begging to be forgiven, and he will state that his gun always fired at random objects, never people.

2. PREPARATION

The end of the war marks for Joseph a fundamental period for his missionary choice.

All of us are also the product of good luck, called Providence by the one who believes, that leads us to encounter in our journey people who become for us models of humanity and honesty, indefatigable workers who do not waste time in calculations... and whom we shall never thank enough.

The encounter that marks Joseph's spiritual life is surely the one with Father Silvio Riva. In Como he was the diocesan director of the Catholic Action and he collected the best youth in a group called "Cenacle". It is an association where the youth meet in a climate of high spirituality, of friendship and fraternity in order to pray and to live the longings of Christ's Heart as expressed on the eve of his passion in the discourse of the Last Supper together with his Twelve friends.

"The young Cenacle member"

Father Riva wrote: "That Cenacle witnessed a great evening which saw bread and wine on the table and heard the sacred words of the Master who instituted the sacraments of Eucharist and Holy Orders". This last encounter of Jesus with his apostles had started with the gesture of Jesus washing their feet. Joseph is helped to understand that washing the feet of the brother, the sister, the poor or the sick is what gives anyone the sense of a fulfilled life open to others, without whom we are not much. Father Riva writes again: "The Cenacle aims fundamentally at helping people to live that way of holiness which is possible for a young layman, because this is the only means to make fruitful and supernatural any apostolate (...) The microbe of a Eucharistic passion will always be the surest coat of arms of any young Cenacle member". Joseph will remain contaminated all his life by this "microbe": he will be faithful till death to the Eucharist. Joseph was one of the first to enroll in the Cenacle and never missed the two or three yearly meetings. Father Piercarlo Contini, member of the Cenacle at the time of Joseph, remembers: "The climate that one used to breath at the Cenacle was one of very high sense of fraternity, of enthusiasm and of deep and crackling joy. The members of Cenacle were committed to daily meditation and communion, daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament, weekly confession, examination of conscience and rosary. Father Silvio was very demanding and dreamt for us young men a solid spiritual formation, which he thought was fundamental to produce animators of the Catholic Action".

During the years 1948-50 twenty-two young members of the Cenacle entered either the seminary or a religious institute, following the Lord in priesthood or in religious consecration. The parish priest, Father Charles, used to sum up the aim of the spirit of the Catholic Action in this formula: "In order to be apostles we have to be saints". And Joseph is deeply marked by this experience of Jesus' love that burns in his heart. This is the best preparation to his choice of offering his life for the mission: authentic love for the Lord, great availability to the service of others in simplicity and humility.

Joseph is ready to sacrifice some of the time he should dedicate to his studies and offer it for the activities of the Cenacle and to animate the youth of the Catholic Action. This appears to be the meaning of the reproaches he moves to his friend Virginio Somaini of Cagno who prefers to prepare himself for exams rather than dedicate precious time to his interior formation. In a letter Joseph writes to him: "I see in the apostolate in the Catholic Action the best activity, the most valuable for God's glory and our good".

Joseph regularly participates also to the retreats that Father Silvio used to preach to his youth at Galliano, in the Como suburbs. What Joseph writes in those occasions testifies to his spiritual growth in search for holiness understood as identification with Christ. This was not an end in itself, but in view of his apostolate among the youth, students and workers, while he dreams of becoming like them, to put himself at their level, "to love them and to take interest in them". He values joining the democratic party – the Christian Democracy – but it is even more important that other people may perceive that in him there is "an expansive supernatural life which is expansive by its very nature".

Father Riva is very demanding on his youth. In a small copybook in which he jots down the resolutions of a spiritual retreat he writes the daily program: holy mass-communion, meditation, Angelus, Sext, visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the afternoon, spiritual reading, rosary and Compline.

In this way, day after day, his vocation to the mission, which he had already allowed his camp mates in Heuberg to guess, ripens. His brother Paul narrates that in Joseph's choice to study medicine one can see clearly the example of his maternal grandfather "the doctor of the poor" of Como, whom his mother Palmira often quoted as an example of a person at the service of others.

Doctor

After the war Joseph could resume his university studies by the middle of November 1946. He gets a degree in medicine and surgery at Milan University of Studies on July 18, 1949 with the qualification of 108 over 110. Soon afterwards he frequents as a training volunteer the medicine department of Como hospital. Doctor Luciano Terruzzi, who was working in this hospital for some years, starts a deep friendship with Joseph to the point of becoming his personal doctor. He remembers: "In the Como hospital also Doctor Ambrosoli came to belong to a group of young doctors who later all qualified professionally; with them I was lucky to be able to organize a close-knit team of collaboration and study and, above all, of great friendship. In this team Ambrosoli was always the most committed". And he continues: "During the meetings Joseph always sat at the back, but he was always the most active and well prepared; he was not brilliant in the exposition, but he always astonished everyone with his wise and accurate notes. He was the most attentive when assisting the sick or in other duties; always ready to make up for the omissions of others in silence and almost begging for forgiveness and thanking those who thus allowed him to make exercise in the various diagnostic and therapeutic tasks. He was always ready to serve everybody, but appearing as if he needed the help of all. At the same time he was always ready for jokes and irony".

The great step

One day in summer 1949 Joseph appears in the reception room of the Comboni seminary in Rebbio. He asks for information and after obtaining it he leaves for London where he will attend a course of tropical medicine at the *Tropical Institute*.

His father probably looks for the reason of this strange choice. But he is usually very open towards the choices of his children who are his own treasure. To the fascist chief who proposed him for a reward and a distinction because of his patience he had answered: "The distinction are my children".

As he arrives in London Joseph contacts immediately Father Renato Bresciani, whose address he had obtained from Father Zanoner. He had told him "He is a splendid figure. You will surely like him and he will help you a lot". In fact for Joseph this encounter is a true blessing. Father Renato has a very sensitive eye for the immigrants who come both from Italy and from the British colonies. His vision has improved over the years: he had begun taking an interest in them already when he was a student. And he will continue this attention also after his expulsion from South Sudan in 1964, and after having attended the last couple of sessions of the Second Vatican Council as theologian of the Sudan Episcopal Conference. He was again in England for some years as provincial superior and then returned to Rome for the General Chapter of 1969 and there he will remain for the rest of his life to consecrate his life to welcome immigrants and to found the Comboni Association of Foreign Students (ACSE).

Joseph returns to London in August 1951 and writes to the Superior General of the Comboni Missionaries, Father Anthony Todesco, to show his intention of joining the Institute as a priest: "As I desire to put my medical ability at the service of mission and as I aim at becoming a missionary priest, I request to enter the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus". On October 8, he writes also to the novice master of Gozzano novitiate: "I am afraid that my faults and defects will put your patience to the test. I will come equipped with the desire to start searching and doing the will of God in everything. I am aware of having a lot of defects and inabilities, and perhaps also a rather unorthodox mentality due the habits of life in the world. I am sure that the year of novitiate will do me a lot of good".

And so at the age of 28 he presents himself to the novitiate as doctor and surgeon. Father Riva comments "Joseph gives up an honorable profession, career, the economic position of his family... taking

seriously his vocation. He does not intend to waver, he does not make selfish calculations with God: he goes, moved by his great ideal of evangelizing souls”.

Novitiate

On October 18, 1951, accompanied by Mama Palmira and his last-born brother Alexander, Joseph enters the novitiate. He wrote to Father Leonzio Bano who in the Institute was in charge of vocation promotion: “Unfortunately I cannot avoid carrying with me all the heap of my faults and defects. I am afraid that superiors will have to exercise their patience with me”.

The Comboni novitiate house in Gozzano is an ancient building that they bought from the Jesuits in 1947. It had served as diocesan seminary and was built in the 16th century on the ruins of an old castle. The place appears gloomy, massive and crumbling. Father Lawrence Gaiga described it this way: “The heavy entrance gate of brown-smoke colour has a little peephole. The windows of the ground floor, of small size and with heavy metal grills give the impression of a prison. The inside, with low vaults, dark corridors paved with rough granite stones, with thick walls that exude dampness, appears like a fortress, or better, a prison”.

Doctor Ambrosoli is welcomed among the group of the first year novices: 21 are heading for priesthood and 5 to religious life as brothers. All of them are much younger than he: they are adolescents aging 17 and below; they come from the last year of classes that they followed in the Comboni seminaries.

The novitiate lasts for two years: the first year is entirely dedicated to ascetic formation, i.e. to prayer, work and study of the rules and traditions of the Institute, but with an eye always fixed on mission; during the second year the novices continue their philosophical studies which had been temporarily interrupted.

Contacts with the external world are practically nonexistent. Besides, a novice cannot carry any money in his pocket. News on politics and sports is banned, unless it gets through due to the complicity of a fan, and nothing is known about the life of the Church. Not even the *Osservatore Romano* gets through!

It is an austere life in the novitiate. They start early in the morning with meditation, followed by the celebration of the Eucharist and then they go for manual work. This is followed by Father Master’s conference and then by spiritual reading on books of spiritual writers of the time of Counterreformation: then the novice writes in his exercise book a summary of what he has read. In the afternoon there is another time for meditation and it is not rare to see novices doze on their books. The whole day is lived in a climate of prayer, examinations of conscience and reception of sacraments. No relaxation therefore.

The footprint left by the Jesuits – they were the formators of the first Comboni missionaries when the Institute turned into a religious congregation – continues to mark life in the novitiate with the mortifications to be practiced, with the exercise of public confession of one’s faults, making small acts of penance, etc. This is done to form the character of people who will have to face the great difficulties that await the apostles in Africa. This is also the purpose of the long trips on foot, once a week, to the *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, to the shrine of Boca, to the top of Montarone, to the shrine of Re and to lake Orta. Its logic is clear: these trips are a training for people who will have to face, possibly on foot, forests, savannah and deserts. Moreover these long trips are a safety valve for a correct psychic balance of young people who are living a decisive period of their life.

The comrades of the first year novitiate do not fail to put *their* doctor to the test. For instance, every day there is choir practice and for Joseph, out of tune like a broken bell, it is a moment of penance. The choir master seems to enjoy asking him to sing alone. And he does not refuse. But his comrades burst into prolonged and uncontrollable hilarity. And he continues undaunted quite naturally his solo. It is the same natural attitude that, once in Africa, will make him accept to celebrate sung Sunday mass for the kids: “It does not matter whether they laugh for my being out of tune. It is important that they come for mass”.

At the midnight mass of December 25, 1951, surrounded by family and friends, Joseph is “dressed”, i. e. he wears the habit of the Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For Joseph this is the official beginning of the novitiate: the title “doctor” is replaced by “brother”. And he seems to like this one more.

The novice master is Father John Giordani, a missionary from Lanzada, Como: a very simple but also very demanding man. He will be appointed Prefect Apostolic of Lower California (Mexico) from 1958 to 1975 and he will die in La Paz (Lower California) when nearing the age of 95. Before becoming novice master from 1936 he was in Abyssinia (today Ethiopia and Eritrea) in the Prefecture of Gondar, where he also served as military chaplain. In 1941 the British made him a prisoner of war and transferred him to Kenya till he was freed. The ten years he spent as a soldier and a prisoner strengthened in him his inborn sense of duty and taught him the sense of discipline, of obedience and of availability to help those who are in need, and of sacrifice accepted as a fundamental part of human existence.

Father Giordani runs the novitiate according to the strict Comboni tradition and generally that of all the religious institutes. He does not favour novelties. He is austere in his spirituality. He does what has always been done, anchored to the principle that “the old method has produced great missionaries, while nobody knows where innovations will take”.

Fr. Giordani realizes the initial difficulty felt by Ambrosoli in front of this life in the novitiate, surrounded by companions who are still children in his regard. Joseph entered with a deep religious formation and a serious scientific preparation. He grew in a manifold diocesan associative environment and he has learnt to manage independently the relations with a lively professional and spiritual environment. And yet he willingly accepts this life that runs in a rigidly structured space and that dictates everything to the smallest details. He meekly submits to the meticulous and often absurd little practices (one of his companions will describe them as “the most absurd obedience”), accepting also the narrow mental horizon of those who do not come, as he does, from the world, but has grown in the protected world of a seminary.

To the sound of rules

In a very short time Ambrosoli finds himself at ease with the thousand little rules that break the day into a puzzle difficult to compose. Such as doing gestures and actions that, at the light of reason, appear as absurd punishments. For instance, one must take off his hat every time he passes by a picture hanging on the wall (and walls are filled with images of the saints), but one has also to walk with downcast eyes, a position which makes it difficult to see the pictures. One has to climb or descend the stairs one step at the time. When the superior calls, one has to go “quickly but without running”. One has also to keep counting the little sacrifices, the ejaculations and the spiritual communions done during the day. All these things could sound rather tough for one who has been a soldier, is a graduate, has done many years of training, has obtained a specialization...and he is no longer just 18.

The day will come when people will be able to sketch a benevolent smile towards priests who will try to camouflage by putting off their cassock. Instead with Father Giordani the cassock is never taken off, or better, it is only taken off after one is hidden under the blankets before going to sleep, and it is worn again, always under the blankets, when one awakens and has to get up. It is easy to figure out the moves – absolutely ridiculous – that a novice has to follow because of the cassock. He has to wear it also when he goes to wash his face or to shave.

When a novice returns from a long trip or after some hours working in the fields mowing or harvesting, always wearing his cassock, he will not take a shower. Is this another rule? No: the shower is not taken because in the Gozzano novitiate there are no showers. And if the clothes (including the cassock) are drenched in sweat, one is only allowed to change them.

One thing however is evident to all novices: what the novice master asks of them he has first of all done it himself, without asking too many questions, with humility and conviction. Joseph knows how to go beyond exteriority and learn obedience as a death to oneself, to one's ideas, abandoning oneself with trust in the hands of the Lord, who expresses himself through the human mediation of superiors. It is not difficult for him to understand that those tests are for the novices like spiritual and psychological gymnastics for one's will to get used to radical changes, such as the ability to break one's life for others.

Even in Africa, where he is the head of a large hospital, Joseph will continue to ask – like a novice – permission for his small personal expenses which were often of very small indeed. When he was a newly

ordained priest he used to give account of small expenses such as the bus ticket or the offerings to the poor.

Regarding obedience, however, for Joseph it never comes to mean the renunciation to see and to think. He knows how to explain his reasons, always with respect and patience.

His companions in the novitiate love and esteem him. After meals, during the half hour of recreation time, they are happy to have him in their "*ternario*" (group of three novices chosen by the novice master). Even though he does not love to speak about himself or his things. All his companions unanimously recognize in him the ability to accept the new environment without boasting or looking for privileges: he just offered his availability, his charity and his competence, always choosing the less flashy services, such as the washing up of dishes and cutlery; such services always required extra time taken from recreation, because the community was large. Father Louis Sala, one of his novice mates reports: "He always wanted the lowest place and the most humble works. He often washed dishes, even when it was not his turn".

He does everything without ostentation. Even when Father Peter Rossi, the vice novice master teases him: "*Impustur!* You do it to get noticed!" But he instead seems almost to be pleased. He is happy. And in his diary he writes: "The only one who is not happy that I am here is the devil and sometimes he annoys me".

Nurse

Joseph is appointed nurse, one of the services mentioned in the list of the novitiate. His novice master, Father Giordani will testify that "He, being a doctor, boasted of his office as nurse and he accomplished it with maternal attitude". The funny thing is that, although he is a doctor, he has to limit himself to being a nurse. And so, when one of his friends is feeling sick, he has to accompany him to visit the doctor. And this does not annoy him. Perhaps he laughs at it. And, having often to accompany one of his novice mates to the dentist, he kindly asks to be allowed to assist at the various operations: removal of a cavity, drilling and devitalisation of a tooth, filling ... And he explains that he would like to learn: "Tomorrow it could be useful". Doctor Dante Bassetti, the dentist of Gozzano, remembers: "He used to come to my office to accompany the novices who needed dental care. I remember the day when he asked me whether he could assist at the surgery in order to learn. 'It will certainly be useful to me in Africa' he told me. I was puzzled because he had not yet told me that he was a doctor (I came to know from other people and much later who was Ambrosoli). He was just "brother Joseph". So I accepted to teach him a few things, but soon I realized that... he was a doctor. I was amazed at his humility, simplicity, patience and constancy.

He never lost his peace, even with his novice mates of Portugal who did not know Italian. He used to say some encouraging words to those who sat on that chair. Whenever he had a little free time he was here. I knew that his novice mates were having a weekly stroll. I asked him "But you do not go?" "The novice master has allowed me to come here". He was always attentive not to disturb, and at the end willingly offered himself to put everything in order".

Fraternal correction and penance

During the second year the novices learn to practice the exercise of correction. Each one is asked to write on a leaflet the defects he notices in this or that brother, and every week a novice undergoes this exercise. The novice master will then read in public the written remarks. There is also someone who writes some laughable remarks about Joseph. Father Giordani does not take note. But the remarks regarding "modesty" must have had their effect if Joseph wrote in his exercise book: "I must stop scratching my head, I must avoid putting my fingers in the nose and in the ears, and to put my hands on the face; I must not clean my nails in wrong moments, or walk hunchback or with arms hanging down; I must avoid compliments or to pretend that I do not know something when instead I know it".

Father Giordani does not forget that one of his novices is a doctor. One day, taking the opportunity that a cow had been killed to provide meat for the community, he had the brilliant idea of asking Brother

Joseph to offer the novices a practical lesson on the function of the heart. All novices gather in the courtyard around a very big table. Joseph wears an apron, takes a large knife, extracts the heart of the dead animal and starts explaining. But as soon as he notices that someone is taking a picture of him, drops down knife and heart, and grasps a wooden tablet to hide his face. And everybody had a sonorous laughter.

As noted before, the novice master enjoys teasing Joseph. One Sunday, at the beginning of lunch, he gets up and asks for silence. Then he solemnly puts the question: "Brother Ambrosoli, is it allowed or not to drink water before communion". Joseph knows nothing about it and attempts an answer: "No, it is not allowed". And Fr. Giordani then adds: "Alright, then read for us this piece of newspaper".

The confessor of novices in those years was Father Umberto Vitti, a priest in love with Our Lady. On his advice Joseph joins the Legion of Mary on March 25, 1952. Four days later he made his consecration which he renewed on December 8, solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, with the formula *Totus tuus*.

It is of this period the "permission to wear the chain and the discipline" that only the novice master can give. And he gives it only to the most generous novices. It is an ascetic practice tied to the spirituality of those days. Joseph knows how to grasp what in this is essential: "A missionary must be a man of prayer and of penance: professional in both". Like all other novices Joseph enthusiastically looks forward to missionary life in faraway lands. The very idea of martyrdom is not far from his mind. "I am ready for everything" he writes many times in his diary. Even though he later adds: "To remain here, in this house, to serve you o Lord, is a sort of martyrdom".

Religious profession

On 9 September 1953 Joseph concludes his novitiate with the religious profession. He reads the canonical form and then signs it *Brother Joseph Mary Ambrosoli, Fscj* (i.e. Son of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). In his written request to the Superior General for admission of July 22 he motivates this way his demand to make his religious profession: "I resolve to try to practice especially that spirit of charity, zeal and sacrifice which is the great ideal of the Sons of the Sacred Heart in imitation of the Heart of Jesus". With his formula he professes to "vow for a year poverty, chastity and obedience in the Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus".

On September 9 the Comboni Missionaries celebrate one of the patron saints of the Institute: St. Peter Claver, a Jesuit known as "the apostle of the black slaves" (*Aethiopum semper servus* – he used to sign) under whose protection Daniel Comboni put his institutes "having recognized in him a brilliant example of self-dedication to the poorest and most abandoned". Claver tried for about 40 years to bring both material and spiritual relief to hundreds of thousands of poor negroes torn from their lands and taken slaves to Cartagena (Colombia) to work in the plantations during the first half of the XVII century. To the vows practiced in the Society of Jesus Claver had added another one of his choice: to dedicate all his life to the conversion of the black people.

On the 19 of the same month, in the cathedral of Milan, Card. Idelfonse Schuster administers to Joseph his tonsure. And on December 19 the same cardinal Schuster gives to him the minor orders of door keeper and lector in the church of St. Bernardino alle Ossa. After one year it is time to receive the minor orders of exorcist and acolyte, but the See of Milan is vacant and so the two orders are given by Mgr. Lawrence Mary Balconi (former bishop of Hanchung-China-from 1928 to 1934 and then Superior General of PIME-Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) in the church of Saint Mary of the Annunciation in Camposanto on September 18, 1954.

One of the three vows professed by Joseph is that of poverty. Joseph has always taken this virtue seriously. Before he entered the novitiate he had surrendered all his goods to the Bursar General in Verona. After a few days he gave up also his watch. At the moment of his first religious profession, being asked to write his will, Joseph wrote that he intends to leave all his belongings to the Comboni Missionaries. And because in the novitiate even the clothes are shared in common, he always wore those that were abandoned by the others. The same he did with the shoes. That is why it happened that on the day of his priestly ordination, when he had to lie on the naked floor of the church, all saw the holes in his

shoes. "It was impossible to see him wear a pair of new shoes or a new suit: he was content with used ones" one of his companions remembers.

During novitiate he has also learnt to give scrupulous account of all expenses and incomes. He will continue to do this even later when he will deal with a lot of money for the management of the hospital. He will write a moving letter to the Superior General "for the offering received" (20 million lire). It really was part of the settlement of his part of family inheritance. Once it was handed over, the sum was no longer his and therefore he will consider it as coming from "other" sources. It should be noted that in the Seventies of the past century the sum of his capital assets was about 210 million. The same thing will happen for the amount of 130 million that his family sent him in 1981.

Theological Studies

The day after his profession Joseph – now called brother Ambrosoli – starts his theological studies at Venegono Superiore. Among his professors there is Father Paul Longo who teaches dogmatic theology and history of the church, and Father Bruno Ramazzotti who teaches holy scripture; both are very young (they will consecrate their entire missionary life to teach theology not only in Italy but also in mission lands).

Superior of the house is Father Joseph Baj, of those Comboni Missionaries who will leave a mark on the Congregation, not only because of living a long life (he will die at the age of 89 in 1993), but above all because of the important roles he played, all done with great humility, discretion and responsibility. Father Baj has just reached Venegono, after spending ten years in Juba, South Sudan, as superior and procurator in a period of time when the missionaries had to live not just poverty but even misery. He is not very learned in theological matters and therefore he trusts the professors, listens to them and dialogues with them. But as regards the students of theology (scholastics) he knows how to guide them. He is a man of deep sense of humanity and common sense, and he understands people beyond their school results. And therefore he does not hesitate to send ahead a candidate if he was delayed only because of poor results in his studies, but endowed with qualities of piety, sincerity, sense of duty, work and zeal for the salvation of souls. This trend is not without previous examples in the history of the Church. When John Calabria (1873-1954), founder of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, was presented to his bishop for priestly ordination, the Superiors of the Major Seminary of Verona remarked that the candidate did not have a brilliant intelligence but that he was very good at prayer. "We ordain many intelligent ones. Let us now ordain a saintly one" was the reply of the bishop. And he was a prophet: Father Calabria was proclaimed saint by Pope John Paul II in 1999. His body today lies in the church of Saint Zeno al Monte, next to the mother house of the Comboni Missionaries in Verona.

Joseph does not have particular problems with Fr. Baj. The results of the exams show that he is committed and studies, in spite of many other duties he has, including the practice of medicine in the nearby hospital of Tradate that takes all his free time; there he is introduced for about a year to the secrets of practical surgery by doctor Angel Zanaboni, with whom he will continue the contact also from the mission and to whom every year he will send the report of the operations he performed. This passion for learning and acquiring ever more knowledge will accompany him through all his life.

The news of the presence of a scholastic-doctor in the study house of Venegono runs quickly through the Comboni missions in Africa. The first one to show up to "book him" is Father Alfred Malandra from Uganda: he insists with Father General, Father Anthony Todesco, to have immediately doctor Ambrosoli. And the reason is truly valid: "He is the indispensable element to develop the healthcare work that I started in Kalongo". Father Todesco gives in to pressure and writes Joseph a letter. The letter is dated December 3, 1954, feast of St. Francis Xavier, the apostle of the Indies, and manifests the intention of the superior to allow him to be ordained priest at the end of his third year of theology, thus anticipating the ordination of one year. But Joseph feels "unprepared and unworthy". But everything has to proceed fast to get the necessary dispensations so that he may be ordained priest at the beginning of his fourth year of theology. And at the end the dispensations arrive. But there is a clause: the candidate may not be given ministry before he has completed his fourth year of theology.

Priest in a hurry

On September 9, 1955 Joseph makes his perpetual profession. As usual he prepared for it with a spiritual retreat of eight days during which he writes in his “spiritual” exercise book that he has had “difficult days” in which the devil did not let him in peace with thoughts and imaginations. He adds that he feels “a poor guy”, but that with trust he abandons himself to God.

On September 24 he receives the sub diaconate from the hands of Mgr. Joseph Schiavini, auxiliary bishop of Milan. He is instead ordained deacon in Milan cathedral by archbishop John Montini (future Pope Paul VI). And on December 7, 1955 the same archbishop Montini ordains him a priest in the same cathedral of Milan.

During the singing of the litanies, when the future priests are prostrated on the naked floor, those who are present can notice that the soles of the shoes of future priest Ambrosoli have holes in them... The following day, Sunday, Fr. Joseph celebrated his first solemn mass in the parish church of Ronago that was full to the brim.

3. IN UGANDA

On February 1, 1956 Father Joseph boards the ship “Africa” in Venice destined to Kalongo, Uganda. The Comboni Missionaries reached Uganda in 1910, thus fulfilling, after some decades, an old dream of Comboni.

A lot earlier had arrived the White Fathers – or Missionaries of Africa – whom Card. Charles-Martial Lavignerie had founded in Algiers. When in 1879 they arrived at the court of King Mwanga they had found fertile ground: 13 of his pages suffered martyrdom a few years later. That first generation of Christians had received faith with sincerity and great enthusiasm, and the sacrifice of those martyrs had gained the admiration of tyrant Mwanga himself. When he was told how they had died in the “Namugongo holocaust”, i. e. among prayers and songs, he exclaimed: “These Christians must have received from the white people some mysterious medicine because after taking it no torment will tear away their faith”.

*Già fischia e l'ancora leva il battello;
divisa è l'onda, spumeggia il mar.
Addio Patria, avito ostello!
Mi chiama Iddio l'alme a salvar!*

...

This is the traditional song the Comboni Missionaries sing at the departure of a confrere for the mission.

This tradition had to be kept also when Fr. Ambrosoli said goodbye to relatives, friends and confreres. This rite leaves an indelible memory in anyone who participates in it even only once. This song, - “our hymn” the Comboni Missionaries call it – is not a war song or a little march of conquest. Its language is certainly courtly, but it expresses very well the feelings of the one who leaves.

The Pearl of Africa

To discover that Uganda is a truly beautiful country is enough to set foot on it just once. If one lives in it even only for a short while, one ends by agreeing with Henry Morton Stanley who defined it as “the pearl of Africa”.

When the well-known British explorer arrived in April 1875, after long and exhausting journeys through the African forests, searching for the British missionary-explorer David Livingstone, he thought he was dreaming: he found himself “among ineffable African natural beauties and a socially well organised people”. The welcome received from the Baganda people and their king (*kabaka*) Mutesa I was very friendly. It didn't take long for Stanley to understand that he had arrived among people who were intelligent, industrious and strongly attached to their traditions, but also open to novelties. It was exactly under the influence of that impression that he launched his historic appeal to the world to send missionaries to Buganda.

The central part of his message ran like this: “Oh, if some missionaries could come here! What a field and what a ripe harvest for civilisation! More than a preacher, at this moment they need a practical person who may teach them how to become Christians and cure their illnesses, help them to build their houses and to improve their agriculture: a person able to do almost everything... such a man could become the saviour of Africa. Where is there ever a more promising field than Uganda?”.

Uganda is a middle size country (241.551 km², about three quarters of Italy), but rather small compared to the average of many other African countries. It is located on the central-eastern flank of Africa, among Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It straddles the equator, close to one of the largest lakes in the world, Lake Victoria, 68.000 km², almost a sea, from which the Nile flows (the longest African river and second only to river Congo for water flow rate) ascending the continent for the length of 6.671 km to flow into the Mediterranean Sea. The middle altitude of the country over sea level is of 1.000 meters. The climate is relatively mild for a country located in the tropics: it is dryer and hotter in the northern part, where savannah predominates; cooler and more humid in the southern part where forests and swamps abound. The temperature fluctuates between 15 and 27 degrees Celsius. The year is divided into rainy season and dry season.

Uganda is a predominantly mountainous and hilly country. The most imposing mountain range is the Ruwenzori, the largest mountain range on the entire continent, on the western border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, with peaks in the heart of Africa that can boast perennial glaciers that glisten in the sun even from great distances (today these glaciers are threatened by global warming and are shrinking dramatically). The highest peak, the Margherita (so renamed by Luigi Amedeo of Savoy, who first conquered it, in honour of the then Queen of Italy) reaches 5,109 meters. It seems that Ptolemy spoke of these mountains in the second century AD, calling them the 'Mountains of the Moon'.

In this paradise of forests, savannahs, swamps, waterways and lakes (besides Lake Victoria, there are Lake Albert, Lake Edward, Lake George, Lake Kyoga, Lake Kwana, Lake Bugondo, Lake Opetta and countless other smaller lakes covering one fifth of the total area of the country), in addition to the flora, fauna abounds as well: wild animals, such as buffalo and antelopes, and those domestic animals, such as cattle and sheep. The people live off agriculture, which remains the country's main economic resource. They grow millet, sorghum, maize, cassava, bananas... and other export products, such as tea, coffee and cotton.

This paradise could not fail to make the first missionaries and those who followed them fall in love. But the greatest fascination on them was certainly the population with its natural bonhomie. The missionaries felt so welcomed, perhaps also due to the simple fact that Uganda was never a colony, but a protectorate.

Hatred against whites is not part of the Ugandan tradition; rather, people express admiration and respect. Which in no way detracts from the many victims, including Europeans and missionaries, of the tribal clashes that have characterised the country's recent history. The national language is English, although Kiswahili is lingua franca, as in neighbouring countries.

The first Catholic missionaries landed in Entebbe on 17 February 1879. They were Father Siméon Lourdel and the lay Brother Amans Delmas, of the White Fathers of Cardinal Lavigerie (also known today as the Missionaries of Africa). They were received with great cordiality by the same King Mutesa I who had welcomed Stanley.

The Baganda re-baptised Fr. Lourdel *mapeera* (from the French *mon père* as people called the missionaries). He was a young missionary ardent and enthusiastic about his vocation. Originally from the diocese of Arras, he had inherited a robust faith from his parents, typical of that 19th century France that rediscovered its faith after the experience of the revolution. It was he who baptised most of those young men we know as the 22 Martyrs of Uganda, who were put to death in 1886 by order of Mwanga, the Kabaka who succeeded his father Mutesa I, who saw Christians as a threat to his kingdom and resented the rejection that the young Christians opposed to his unhealthy claims.

The *Acts of the Uganda Martyrs* recount that “amidst insults and beatings, some of the martyrs were slaughtered, others led to the hill of Namugongo. Stripped of their pagan robes, they were wrapped in papyrus mats. Thrown onto the woodpile, they were burnt alive. The martyrs, even amidst the crackling flames, took courage, saying they would soon see the face of the Lord; they prayed and sang”. On the occasion of World Mission Day 1964 (the third session of the Vatican Council II was being celebrated in Rome), Pope Paul VI proclaimed saints Charles Lwanga and his companions, also mentioning the martyrs belonging to the Anglican denomination who “have faced death for the name of Christ”. There were, in fact, many more 'martyrs', of whom however, it was not possible to collect certain testimonies. And there would be 15 Protestant martyrs (some lists speak of 23 victims of this Christian denomination).

Paul VI in his homily at the canonisation mass said: “These African martyrs add to the roll of the victorious, which is the martyrology, a tragic and magnificent page, truly worthy to be added to those marvelous ones of ancient Africa, which we moderns, men of little faith, thought could not have worthy sequel ever again. (...) The tragedy that engulfed them is so unprecedented and expressive that it offers sufficient elements for the moral formation of a new people, for the foundation of a new spiritual tradition, to symbolise and to promote the transition from a primitive civilisation, not devoid of excellent human values, but polluted and infirm and almost a slave to itself, to a civilisation open to the higher expressions of the spirit and to the higher forms of society”.

Paul VI himself, on the occasion of his pilgrimage to Uganda from 31 July to 2 August 1969 (it was the first papal journey to Africa), delivered a homily containing statements destined to remain in history: “You Africans are now missionaries to yourselves. The Church of Christ is truly planted in this blessed land. One duty we must fulfill: we must remember those who have in Africa before you, and still today with you, preached the Gospel, as Sacred Scripture admonishes us: ‘Remember your predecessors, who proclaimed the Word of God to you, and considering the end of their lives, imitate their faith’ (Heb 13:7). It is a story we must not forget. It gives the local Church the note of its authenticity and its nobility: the 'apostolic' note. It is a drama of charity, heroism, sacrifice, that makes the African Church great and holy from the beginning. It is a story that still lasts and must last for a long time, even if you Africans are now taking the lead”.

Comboni Missionaries in Uganda

While a Christian community was growing in the south, the north of the country, inhabited by Nilotic peoples, quite different in language and culture from the Bantu of the south, had not seen a missionary since time immemorial. The north had been part of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa, of which Daniel Comboni had been the first Vicar. Comboni's desire to get to Uganda had remained a dream.

Finally, 30 years after his death, in early 1910, the Comboni Missionaries arrived in northern Uganda to start evangelisation there. At their head was Bishop Franz Xavier Geyer, a German, born in Regen, who succeeded Mgr. Roveggio in 1903. *Nigrizia*, the monthly magazine of the Comboni Missionaries in Italy, in its May 2010 issue thus recalls that event: 'Always on board the boat "Redemptor", Mgr Geyer, Brother Augusto Cagol and Father Colombaroli arrived in Gondokoro on 18 January 1910, where they found a small Christian community of 24 baptised and 12 catechumens. They left on 28 January. On Sunday 29th they stopped in Lokko-Lega, to celebrate mass. It was certainly the first Eucharist celebrated in the whole of northern Uganda. On 2 February they reached Nimule. The new British commissioner and the outgoing one had not yet left. Bishop Geyer, in his historical report of the trip, noted that he was not greeted with enthusiasm by the two. Even when he showed them the letters of

commendation from the governor-general of Khartoum, they did not give it much weight. They told him that if he intended to open a Catholic mission, he would have to obtain a permit from the governor of Uganda. The bishop, knowing that London, in principle, was not opposed, agreed to appeal the government in Entebbe. And since the telegraph between Nimule and Entebbe had recently been installed, in only four days he got the response.

Meanwhile, an American tourist expedition arrived in Nimule led by the former president of the United States, with 600 carriers, bound for Khartoum. The distinguished visitor camped near the missionaries and offered them refreshments. Also present were the two British officers and, before them, Roosevelt gave the highest praises of the Catholic missions. This served to reassure the two commissioners who, to justify their lack of enthusiasm, cited the pretext that the missionaries would teach the blacks that all men are equal before God, leading them to rebel against colonial authority.

The Entebbe government authorised Bishop Geyer to found a mission along the Albert Nile. Koba, on Lake Albert, was chosen. At that time there was already a regular boat service between Nimule and the lake. Thirty of the porters continued on foot to Koba. The others, together with the three missionaries, boarded the government boat and landed in Koba on 17 February.

The British officer who welcomed them was Paul Hannington, son of the Anglican Bishop James, who in 1885 had attempted to enter Uganda and to erect a diocese there. Unfortunately, instead of taking the traditional caravan route, the bishop had chosen to cross Lake Victoria and reach Entebbe coming from Busoga. This way, however, was forbidden to foreigners. From time immemorial, it had been handed down that one day the conquerors of the Buganda kingdom would come from the east across the Busoga. True or not, King Mwanga believed the prophecy and had Bishop James and his retinue arrested and killed.

Hannington offered temporary accommodation to his guests, putting a government house at their disposal. In the following days, in agreement with the bishop, he gathered together eight Acholi chiefs and eight Alur. The bishop, through interpreters, explained the reason for the coming of the Catholic missionaries. The Alur leaders said they were willing to welcome them. It was decided to found the first mission in Omach, on a small hill a short distance from the river.

In Acholi territory (the population with which Father Ambrosoli will have to deal with) the Comboni Missionaries arrived the following year. The first to set foot in Gulu - which was to become the administrative, commercial, cultural and religious centre of northern Uganda - was Father Pasquale Crazzolaro, a giant in the field of ethnography and linguistics (he arrived on 30 March 1910 in Omach with Father Louis Cordone, Brother Clement Shroer and Brother Benedict Sighele), who on 20 January 1911 chose the place for the future mission. A month later, came Fathers Albino Colombaroli and John Baptist Fornara, a man from Vicenza who always sought a serious and methodical evangelisation, a pioneer in the training of Catholic leaders in Uganda, an advocate of apostolic authenticity and true conversion, regardless of numbers and competition.

But those who worked hard for the start of the mission in Gulu were Fathers Peter Audisio and Joseph Beduschi, the most tireless and zealous of the Comboni Missionaries "founders". They were joined by Father Louis Cordone and Brother Benedict Sighele, a construction expert.

The district commissioner of Gulu was the same Hannington who had welcomed the first Comboni Missionaries to Koba. The new environment, however, seemed rather hostile to the missionaries, both because of a ferment of the country, and the Protestants' attitude towards them: they treated them as "intruders" because they had come to a country where the Anglican church had been in since 1905. The fanaticism of some Protestants will long accompany the Comboni Missionaries in the north. Those Protestants, in fact, considered that territory reserved for them and did not hesitate to spread among the people a climate of distrust towards the Catholic missionaries, to the point of describing them as "poor peasants, good for nothing". They were not, perhaps, all the wrong, because the Comboni Missionaries were working in the fields and someone dared to reproach them: "Your institute must have a lot of members, if it can afford to subject them to such hardships that they sacrifice their health".

Today we could express those reproaches as the wrong of not knowing English (and it was true), which led to misunderstandings, and of not maintaining a standard of living more befitting Europeans living in a tropical climate.

The Comboni Missionaries, however, were not too impressed by the difficulties, including political ones, due to an opposition to British colonialism by some local groups, such as the Lamogi. The missionaries considered their first duty to get to know the people they were sent to: language, customs, history ... They visited the various areas to get to know and be known. Fr. Beduschi specialised in visiting villages, particularly where there were groups of catechumens.

The beginnings of the Comboni Missionaries' presence in Uganda coincided also with a series of 'misfortunes', which particularly affected the Acholi people: cerebro-spinal meningitis, plague, smallpox and - the crowning of misfortune! - the locusts that left behind hunger and death. And the 'witch doctors' also got involved: when questioned about the cause of so many evils, they blamed the irritation of the spirits on 'white people' who had arrived in the country. Groups of fanatics created an anti-European ferment that was particularly active in the Kitgum-Kalongo-Paimol triangle. The revolt claimed victims. The most illustrious were the two very young catechists Daudi Okelo (18) and Jildo Irwa (16), whom Pope John Paul II would proclaim blessed in 2002.

It should be stated here that 'the role of catechists has been and remains decisive in the foundation and expansion of the Church in Africa', as we read in *Ecclesia in Africa*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, published after the 1st African Synod of 1994. If it were not for the help of the indispensable local catechists, the missionaries would not have been able to evangelise the continent, and this is particularly true for Uganda. The Church of Africa will never be sufficiently grateful to these men who helped it to be born and grow.

Kalongo

The village of Kalongo stands on a plateau at 1,100 metres, perched on a mountain, or rather, on an immense block of blackish rock, which rises perpendicularly after a short distance. Although in the Acholi language it is called *oret*, the mountain, split in two from top to bottom, was christened Gebel el-habub ('the mountain of wind') by the Arabs who frequented this place at the time of the slave raids. In the middle of the last century, the population was over 40,000, of which more than 15,000 were Catholics and 20,000 followers of the traditional religion.

On the border between the Acholi and Karimojong ethnic groups, the mission of Kalongo was founded in February 1934 by Fathers Angel Fiocco, Joseph Calegari and Brother Louis Calderola, and dedicated to the Heart of Jesus. Gulu, the regional capital and centre of the diocese (erected on 25 March 1953) is 231 km away; Kampala, the capital of the country, is almost 500 km.

The mission has known difficult times from the beginning, both for the simultaneous loss of two young missionaries (Father Artur Chiozza, aged just 28, and Sister Lucidia Vidale, aged 31), and for the isolation in which it finds itself because of an immense swamp that for several months of the year isolated it from the rest of the world.

In 1943, Kalongo had a modest dispensary, run by Sister Eletta Maniero, a Comboni Missionary nurse. In 1949, with the help of Brother Angel Avi (who arrived that very year), the dispensary was transferred to a large new dispensary, to which the maternity ward was added in 1954.

The fame of the "little hospital" in Kalongo (as Sister Eletta used to call it) soon spread and sick people from Lira, Kitgum and Gulu began to come here for treatment, to the point that a public transport service had to be organised.

As the number of visitors increased, the idea of a large general hospital came to the fore. The project was realised thanks to the dynamism and spirit of initiative of Father Alfred Malandra, parish priest of the parish and superior of the local Comboni community.

Originally from Olevano (Pavia), Father Alfredo had joined the Comboni Missionaries at the end of high school, which he attended in the diocesan seminary. Consecrated a priest in 1929, the following year he was already in Uganda. In 1947 he was assigned to Kalongo. One of the first things he had done was to

build a brick dispensary to replace the mud hut in which until then Sister Eletta had been working. An exceptional nun this Eletta: she was capable of sustaining impossible work rhythms. The assisted deliveries averaged 700 per year.

Father Malandra was convinced, as was every missionary in Africa, that evangelising action in that continent rested on the two pillars of school and health. From school and health the Church was born in Africa: so it had to be in Kalongo. As the community grew, educational works (and here are the schools) and health works (and here is the dispensary) took shape.

In addition to maternity, Father Malandra dreamt of opening a school for midwives ("it is urgent to start it", he insisted) and of the transformation of the dispensary into a hospital. His dynamism and his big heart had to reckon with the resistance of the first Bishop of Gulu, Mgr John Baptist Cesana.

Born in Castello di Lecco (Como) in 1899, Cesana was appointed Bishop of the Equatorial Nile Vicariate on 1 December 1, 1950. Three dioceses were dismembered from his vicariate: Arua (1958), Moroto (1965) and Lira (1968). Resigning in 1969, he retired to Morulem until 1983. From 1983 to 1987 he will reside in Kalongo. He had no real ailments, but the 85 years (this is 1985) were beginning to take their toll: 'Senectus ipsa morbus est' (old age itself is a disease), he used to repeat. But Mgr. Cesana did not want to 'fatten Kalongo'. The expression came from Father Malandra, who seemed to think the bishop cared more about catechumenates than schools and dispensaries. The winner, however, was the 'hard noggin' of Aguata Matek (the nickname the Acholi had given Father Malandra).

Father Malandra also had it out with the Superior General, Father Todesco, when in 1954 he wrote to him that he urgently needed the "scholastic-medic" who was preparing for the priesthood: "I want him immediately ... See if you can speed up the time of ordination". And Father Joseph Ambrosoli was given to him. And when he could embrace him, he was happy as a clam. "You will stay here with me forever ... And stay in good health" he recommended. Of course he was furious when, one day, he caught Sister Romilde Spinato pulling a blood bag out of Fr. Joseph for a blood transfusion for a seriously ill person. He shouted: "You spent the night awake because of the constant emergencies. This morning you were dead tired ... and now you are being bled by the nun ... You had to rest, not give blood".

To Bishop Cesana, however, praise must be given. It is with him that the hospital season began in northern Uganda. In the forties, medical care was reduced to small dispensaries in the missions where there was a presence of nuns. Father Cesana, once made bishop, immediately decided to qualify the staff, sending two nuns to Ireland (the first of many) to attend nursing courses at the expense of the diocese. He decisively started the hospital in Lacor (Gulu), which had already been desired by Bishop Angel Negri, his predecessor who died at only 59, and with promptness sought out doctors to run it. After having given up Father Ambrosoli as head of the hospital in Lacor (but only after securing him for Kalongo), in 1961 he entrusted the hospital to Doctor Peter Corti who, with his wife Lucille, would run it for decades and to such a point of excellence that President Museveni, after visiting it the first time, said: "I don't understand why so many Ugandans go to treat themselves abroad, instead of going to Gulu". He will also allow himself to mumble against the fact that such a health facility was in the north, instead of in the centre of the country, so as to be affordable for everyone. Meanwhile, the hospitals of Kitgum, of Angal and Aber sprang up: a health network that served several thousand people throughout the north of the country.

Humble servant

Arriving in Kalongo towards the end of February 1956, Father Joseph could certainly not imagine that his entire missionary service as a Comboni Missionary would take place there.

To pick him up in Gulu, Father Malandra sent Brother Angel Avi, accompanied by the teacher Gino Owiny. And there is a first surprise: Father Joseph insists on giving up his seat in the cab of the truck; he is more than happy with the box. Brother Avi, who is pretty naive but a man of exceptional goodness, notices the fact and keeps silent. He will recount it much later and will do so always with a concluding comment: "I have always liked the hard-working missionaries who live with joy the motto 'to serve is to rule'. A motto that has great paternity: none other than Saint Irenaeus of Lyon".

After 150 km on tracks zigzagging through the savannah, Brother Avi is struck down by a strong migraine. There are still 60 km to go. He would like to grit his teeth and continue, but he is forced to give in. He asks Father Joseph if he knows how to drive a five-ton truck. "Of course I know," he replies. And he hands over the steering wheel to him. He will discover with time, he had never actually driven a vehicle like that.

As he gradually entered the reality of Kalongo, Father Joseph, according to the stipulations placed by Propaganda Fide to his early priestly ordination, attends at the Lacor seminary the theology courses he missed. He studies the theological subjects seriously and comes prepared for the exams. Attending the monthly 'morale case' meeting one day to be discussed and solved, he pulled a forceps out of his bag and explained to the priests present how relatively easy it is sometimes to save the baby in cases of difficult childbirth.

As per tradition, the 'rookies', i.e. newcomers to the mission, are recommended the classic two years of silence: first you observe and learn, then you can also dare some criticism. But one day, Father Joseph could not resist the not-always benevolent remarks of his professors on his brothers and pupils and, with a smile, he lets himself escape: "But I happened to be in a *conventus malignantium*", i.e. in a community where one gladly spits on others. Even in the Kalongo mission, years later, he will have to deal with brethren prone to that creeping form of racism that expresses itself in the conviction of being "superior" to Africans and which can go so far, in its worst forms, as to consider Africans definitely inferior to whites. Father Joseph is completely devoid of this vice, and to those confreres the love and kindness he always uses towards Africans will appear an ersatz of romanticism, if not an outright weakness.

The sense of superiority, even of missionaries, towards the natives knows no age. It is not necessarily a symptom of malice. Rather it is like a fluid that penetrates you without you being aware of it. It had also penetrated the great Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède and Montesquieu, better known just as Montesquieu. French philosopher, jurist, historian and political thinker, considered the founder of the political theory of the separation of powers, in his *Esprit des lois* (book XVI, chapter 5, dedicated to slavery) had written: "It is not possible to think that God, who is a wise being, has put a soul, especially a good one, in an all-black body ... ". And he had then added other similar racist amenities, which would nurture the western-white man's sense of superiority towards all other peoples. It is not everyone's - and missionaries are no exception - the ability to look at others as brothers with the same dignity as me, with duties and rights like mine. The decolonisation of spirits has been much slower than the political one. Not least because there has never been a shortage of those who believe naturally true the equations (denounced by Aimé Césaire): Europe/Christianity= civilisation; Africa/Paganism= barbarism.

After finishing his theology courses, Father Joseph settled definitively in Kalongo. He is happy to be part of that missionary community: for him it is the concrete face of the institute to which he has chosen to belong and he feels it is a gift. He conceives – and will always conceive - himself and his work embedded in a family, the Comboni Missionaries, and in a local Church project, that of Gulu. More: he knows that the Comboni Missionaries evangelise as a community - "as a cenacle of apostles" the founder left written in the rules - and this fascinates him.

Finally in the field

Almost eight years after graduating, but with a modest surgical background, Father Giuseppe sets to work. His first patients are two Acholi: one mauled by a lion, the other attacked by a buffalo (the Kalongo area is a natural park and teems with ferocious beasts). Father Joseph has with him some essential surgical instruments. To sterilise them, he uses an autoclave, an American war remnant. He often visits the maternity ward to assist Sister Eletta, especially in the most difficult cases. Most of his time is spent at the dispensary where many patients present themselves.

There is no shortage of problems. Government approval of the school for nurse-midwives is delayed. To issue the permission to open a maternity hospital, the colonial administration requires the presence of a doctor with a midwifery diploma issued in London. Sister Eletta Mantiero has already obtained permission from the local authorities to use forceps in some cases of difficult childbirth, but the

central government insists on requiring a doctor specialised in obstetrics and gynaecology in London. And it should not be forgotten that also making everything more difficult is the fact that the one that would like to open in Kalongo is a Catholic school, while the British administration is Anglican. The time for ecumenical dialogue is still far off.

Father Ambrosoli himself has to attend a one-month course at the obstetrics department of Mulago hospital, in Kampala, in order to have his degree from Italy recognised and to obtain permission to run a school for midwives.

Finally, in 1958, with the arrival of Miss Jane MacShane, a Scottish doctor who volunteered to work in Kalongo, and Doctor Peter Tozzi, and after the visit of the new governor of Uganda, Sir Frederick Crawford, the school was recognised and the first course could begin. The curriculum is based on the English model and involves three years of study and apprenticeship. At the end, the student must sit an examination before a board from Kampala. The diploma awarded is valid for any health facility in the colony and in all English-speaking countries.

One should not think, however, that once permission has been obtained, everything goes straight. There is also the heavy financial situation of the hospital. For this reason, Father Joseph asks the Superior General that the income from the capital in his name, which he left to the Congregation at the time of his vows, be partly assigned to Kalongo. In truth, the hospital must be built. Father Malandra dreamt it big and wants it at all costs. And here Doctor Ambrosoli rolls up his sleeves and becomes a labourer: he digs stones, transports them himself with the truck and takes care of the manufacture of the bricks. Near the hospital, there is a primary school and teacher Kamillo Oyaro Orik often helps him with his entire school group.

Father Joseph works tirelessly. He is not afraid to get his hands dirty. The people are surprised at first, then they begin to admire him and eventually they start to help him.

Space is ample. There is no need to build high. As elsewhere in Africa, the hospital in Kalongo takes the form of single-storey pavilions, connected by canopies and equipped with large verandas: they allow air circulation and easier movement for the medical staff, but above all the reception of the patients' families and relatives. It is up to the latter to procure food and cook it for their patients.

These are simple buildings. But a thousand precautions are needed. The floor must always be raised above the ground to avoid flooding or prevent invasion by insects and other small animals.

The construction material is not always available near the site on which one builds. So it is necessary to look for it where it is. Father Joseph becomes an expert truck driver: he has to go personally to fetch sand and stones from the river, or to buy iron and cement in Gulu.

Samaritan

Perhaps he realises that he is in danger of becoming overwhelmed by activities and forget the essentials. Then he stops to reflect and to repeat to himself: "I must try to impersonate the Master in me when he cured the sick who came to him ... May they see Jesus in me!".

He soon understood that to win the hearts of Africans he must use infinite benevolence. During his novitiate, he found himself several times contemplating the Heart of Christ, finding in the mystery of Christ the impetus for his missionary commitment. Like Comboni before him, Father Joseph also discovered that that Heart had also throbbed and died for the Africans. Now living with them, in their midst, one of them, as he fixes his gaze on that Heart, that is on the humanity of Christ, he contemplates the solicitude of God towards all, his becoming close to every person, regardless of the colour of their skin, their ethnicity, their culture, their social condition. That heart, open to all, had been particularly sensitive to the little ones, the suffering, the excluded, and always faithful even in the face of rejection, betrayal, suffering and death. He meditated at length on the words of Jesus: "Learn from me who am meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29). And so, his heart, day after day, inhabited the heart of Christ, "icon of the love of God, made man among us", becomes more capable of listening, more welcoming towards others. And the others become his new family, whose firstborn is the Lord Jesus, who overcomes violence and division with love and forgiveness for those who kill him. He understands that it is in his relationship with others,

starting with his own missionary brothers, that he can show that he has really let himself be truly "converted" by the Heart of Jesus and configure to it.

Of the many images described in Jesus' parables, he finds that of the Good Samaritan the closest. In this man who makes himself close to the unfortunate wounded man, bends over him, binds up his wounds and cares for him, Father Joseph finds a model to follow. He too, with a heart that determines the way of looking, judging and acting, he feels "sent to do the same thing", that is, to become closer and more in solidarity with those who live next to him and are in need. And in the sick people of Africa, Father Joseph found the treasure he was looking for.

Emergencies follow one another. Once a building is completed, medical personnel must be found, but this is not always easy. For all the years that he remains in Kalongo, he will do nothing but look for doctors for 'his' hospital, to ensure its proper functioning. And there will often be setbacks and unforeseen events, such as when a doctor will have to terminate a contract for various reasons, often family reasons, and he will have to jump through hoops to replace him. In this almost spasmodic search for personnel he will always have one fixed point: he will ask for doctors with a passion for internal medicine. "Everyone seems to snub it, or forget it. Everyone only wants to practice surgery" will be the refrain they will hear him repeat over and over again. In a letter, he comments: 'The problem of doctors is always open, never quite solved. There should be someone who retires early and comes here on a permanent basis'.

The list of doctors who offer themselves and then, for one reason or another, have to say no begins immediately. As early as 1957, Lydia Wlosczyk, a Polish doctor working in Berlin and expected for midwives' school, has to decline to come because her parents remained in Russian-occupied Berlin, while she lives in the part liberated by the Allies. And then - a constant obstacle to overcome - it is always necessary to obtain the consent of the bishop, the true 'owner' of the hospital. Many volunteer doctors will pass through the hospital: being in absolute need, Father Joseph will say yes to everyone. But not all will prove to be helpful: many will arrive bringing their personal or family problems with them and create difficulties. One day, one of these 'problem' doctors will slap a missionary in public. Great will be the scandal among the people and Father Joseph will suffer greatly. But his "victory" will be to convince that doctor of his mistake and apologise for it.

Besides, in the Comboni community itself it is not all roses and flowers. The personal character - the one we take to the grave - can easily generate unpleasant incidents and misunderstandings, if not even humiliation. But he, Father Joseph, is not afraid to reproach the one he considers guilty of his wrongdoing: he always does so with calm but also firm tone.

4. AJWAKA MADIT

At the end of 1959, the small hospital in Kalongo decidedly changed its face: it now has a capacity of 200 beds. It has also a ward for male and female missionaries and can boast the title of the first Catholic hospital in northern Uganda. In truth, it is setting the pace and the direction that other hospitals in northern Uganda will have to take. It will be followed by hospitals in Angal, Gulu Lacor, Kitgum, Aber, Maracha and others, but they will all go through the same process: starting with a dispensary, a maternity ward is added, a local staff training centre is opened and move towards transformation into a full-fledged hospital. All eyes are on the hospital in Kalongo - considered a model to be followed - and on its head physician, who increasingly identifies with the structure and whose fame has begun to spread everywhere: throughout Uganda, in neighbouring countries and even in ... India.

A simple glance at Father Joseph's daily schedule gives an idea of the amount of physical effort he takes on, both in the operating theatre and in the outpatient clinic. He usually starts with the most difficult and

demanding operations (thyroidectomy, partial gastrectomy, radical mastectomy, herniotomy, hydromelectomy, hysterectomy) and then moves on to the minor ones (uterine, surgical dressing of leprosy patients, osteomyelitis). His surgeries range from bronchial asthma surgeries, sometimes very delicate and risky, in order to restore normal breathing or better breathing, to those of orthopaedics, with sweaty operations to ensure faster healing, to those to close tropical ulcers, to the removal of cataracts (a technique he learnt through hours and hours spent in Italian operating theatres, instead of enjoying his well-deserved holidays). He does not stop either in front of lung abscesses, delicate gynaecological operations and plastic surgery.

He works unsparingly not only as a surgeon, but also as facility manager and teacher in the nursing school. He is able to remain at the operating table for six hours in a row, always on his feet, and then move to the outpatient clinic, without showing the slightest tiredness. Then, with impressive calmness, if called upon for emergencies, he returns to the operating theatre with the greatest simplicity.

Sister Pierina Bodei, who was close to him from 1960 to 1968, sharing with him the labours of the operating theatre, recalls that she never heard him say: 'I am tired', or 'But this is too much'. Not to forget that there are no air conditioners or fans. What Father Joseph leads is truly a life of drudgery. Which ends up causing him a few aches and pains. After frequent episodes of painful sciatica, he was forced to undergo a lumbar disc hernia operation in 1975.

“The great doctor”

Within a few years, people came to call him *Ajwaka Madit* (the great doctor) or *Doctor Ladit* (the great physician). The qualification of 'great' is surprising: Africans, to whom nothing escapes of the attitudes of a person, see him working in silence and humility, two qualities that are not characteristic of those who occupy an important role or have uncommon intellectual gifts. For them, the one who has authority must be recognised and must also assert himself outwardly with signs of prestige. Appearances count a lot, if not everything. None of this, however, appears in Father Joseph.

Sympathetic is the reaction of the prison commander in Gulu, when, having come to Kalongo to visit his wife being cared for by Father Joseph, waits patiently for him for a long time, only to discover that Ajwaka Madit is that man who has walked past him several times, dressed so poorly that he looked like a simple nurse or a service person. He comments: "He is the first 'big' man I see behaving like that".

Father Joseph keeps himself voluntarily and serenely in the shadows. Apart from his professionalism and managerial skills, his rightful place seems to him to be the last; the last row always suits him. Even in group photos he always appears to the side or behind others, never in the middle. There is no false humility in him: he is so by nature. A friend from primary school remembers that he was like that even as a boy: "He never showed off his superior social status. He liked to join his classmates in field work or on outings. It was known that he was a little poor in mathematics, but that didn't bother him. And when we went together to work in the meadows with a donkey-drawn hay cart, he would call the animal '*our teacher*'".

Humility, however, also makes him aware that he might end up a slave to his work and feel paid for his surgical results. He senses, in short, the danger of seeking himself, his honour, his reputation. To the Superior General, Father Todesco, he is not afraid to speak of his "faults and defects" and says he is aware "of having many faults and incapacities". Thus, in order not to fail as a missionary, he applies to himself the criteria he demands of those who want to come to Kalongo to help him: "Determined willingness to work for spreading the kingdom of God, seeking only him alone and on the cross; spirit of sacrifice; good technical preparation".

Independence

Meanwhile, the country's independence is approaching. It is not a question of "wresting it from the British, also because the latter have already hinted that they want to leave and that it is only a matter of time. A worry, however, is the struggle between the parties: who will govern after the departure of the British? From a social point of view, there is no shortage of those who resent Europeans and Indians who

have built themselves lavish villas around Kampala and in other urban centres, with gardens, golf courses and exclusive clubs. Uganda has not experienced a regime of true racial separation (apartheid), yet the Europeans who settled there have always preferred to stay 'apart' and mix as little as possible with the indigenous element. In government employment, Ugandans, with equal education, have been relegated to second-rate positions and the wages are not those of Europeans or Indians.

After being a British protectorate since 1894, Uganda became independent at midnight on 8-9 October 1962. The British flag was lowered and, for the first time, the Ugandan flag was raised to the singing of the new national anthem: "Uganda, may God protect you".

Prime Minister is Milton Obote. There are those who think, however, that in his place should be Benedicto Kiwanuka, the one who led the first Ugandan government in the run-up to independence. He studied law in Lesotho (1950-1952), then attended university in London (1952-1956) and graduated. Returning to Uganda, he practised profession as a lawyer in private practice. In 1958 he was elected president of the Democratic Party (PD) and, in a short time radically restructured it to become a very popular political formation throughout the country. So much so that, in March 1961, the PD won a majority in the legislative elections and Kiwanuka became 'chief minister' of Uganda's first legislative council. But there is a problem: Kiwanuka is a staunch Catholic and the PD is identified as the party of Catholics. The colonial establishment, on the other hand, is of the opinion that Uganda is and should be a Protestant nation. Then the need was felt to discredit both Kiwanuka and his party: people cried out to the "neo-imperialism of Rome"; it was said and written that "Ugandan Catholics are nothing but spies of the pope", at the service of a foreign power that intends to impose a new domination on the country.

In September 1961, the Constitutional Conference of Uganda was held. On 1 March 1962, the country obtained its self-government and Kiwanuka the post of prime minister. But no intimidation and fraud to the detriment of the PD ceased, with the endorsement of London and its representatives in Uganda, openly on the side of the Protestants and concerned to keep Catholics away from the 'business' of the country, and more particularly from key posts. The order is peremptory: *'Keep Catholics out'*. This policy was successful: in the April 1962 elections, the PD obtained fewer votes than the alliance between the Uganda People's Congress (CPU), the party of Milton Obote, a Protestant Lango from the north, and the *Kabaka Yekka*, the party of the Buganda traditionalists, monarchists by tradition. And it is with Obote prime minister that Uganda becomes independent.

The new chapter in the country's history does not begin under the best auspices, and the fears of many will prove well-founded. As elsewhere in Africa, the system imposed by the colonisers at the time of independence does not work in Uganda. In a short time, the CPU turns into a single party, Obote proclaims himself president and opponents, all of them, are silenced. Violence and arbitrary decisions are the order of the day. Uganda's traditional monarchies are also suppressed, that of Buganda in particular, which Obote considers a threat to his power. In 1969, Obote also throws Kiwanuka in prison and leaves him there to rot until he is freed by Idi Amin, who will appoint him president of the supreme court (but will end up killing him on 22 September 1972).

Meanwhile, a nationalist spirit also grows that sees missionaries, believed to be PD sympathisers, as spies and in collusion with the rebel Anyanya movement (South Sudan). The delay in the indigenisation of the Church is evident, especially in the north, where the Comboni presence is massive. Cyprian Kihangire, Ugandan, a priest since 1951, was only ordained auxiliary bishop of Gulu in April 1963. The most enlightened missionaries lamented such delay.

In 1963, the government nationalised all mission primary schools and promoted measures to restrict new admissions of missionaries. The strike of the Lacor seminarians in 1962 and the tension that arose between the missionary bishop and his Ugandan priests and the government suggest that the climate was not the best.

Difficult times and "the power of God"

The worst for Kalongo came with the expulsion of Father Malandra and nine other missionaries by President Obote. It is 16 January 1967. The prejudice against Catholics by the government is fuelled by the

growing influence of Catholic missionaries in the north. This must be curbed. Father Malandra does not return to Uganda, where he lived and worked for 36 years; he will end his life in a car accident near Verona, on 28 September 1973, at the age of 68.

The expulsion of Father Malandra places the burden of the hospital on the shoulders of only Father Joseph. From year to year the work in the administrative field, the correspondence and the burden of management grew. If, with the help of Father Malandra, Father Joseph managed to build a facility worthy of the name of hospital and make it functional, he now has to carry it forward. And he succeeds. Unfortunately, his extraordinary ability to organise combined with his ability to untangle himself and weave relationships, even at a high level, ends arousing some minor envy, mostly the result of misunderstanding.

The Kalongo hospital, however, continues to grow. Impressive is the amount of work that Brother Avi has to do: with the big truck for transporting the material he drives along the roads of northern Uganda always accompanied by African workers who help him with loading and unloading. Father Joseph loves and appreciates him. Of him he left a testimony that expresses all his gratitude: "Brother Avi was a true friend, as well as a confrere. He seemed to have a special intuition to anticipate the wishes and understand the needs of others. Without anyone expressing them to him, he would go out of his way to solve individual cases. Even as a missionary, he was a perfectly identified and serene man".

In Kalongo, besides the hospital, there is also the technical school and Brother Avi is in charge of running it. He takes care that all the students learn in the best possible way, aware as he is of the importance of professionalism in the arts and crafts in Africa too.

In 1963, Dr Palmiro Donini arrived in Kalongo, who, besides being a dear brother-friend of Father Joseph, was also an indispensable help as an internist, dentist and leprosy expert. In a short time, the *fidei donum* priest from Brescia became Surgeon Ambrosoli's right-hand man. Also because in him, Father Joseph finally found that safe and stable presence that guarantees continuity, so important in any undertaking, something that the contract doctors or volunteers who alternated in Kalongo could not give him.

The two doctors share out the work: to Father Joseph the surgery, emergencies and the dispensary; to Father Palmiro the departments of paediatrics and medicine. The two doctor-priests together will perform wonders, never forgetting that, if man cures only God heals.

The fact that they are priests and lovers of reading Holy Scripture, on which they are constantly nourished, has led them to come across numerous biblical quotations containing a truth that could baffle their scientific mentality as doctors: "I will heal them, says the Lord" (Is 57:19); "He heals all your infirmities" (Ps 103:3); "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps 147:3); "Son, do not neglect yourself in sickness, but pray to the Lord and he will heal you" (Sir 38:9). And above all: "Have recourse to the physician, for the Lord has also created him. Let him not be far from you, for he is needed. There are cases in which success is in their hands; for they too pray to the Lord to grant relief and healing to save lives" (Sir 38:12-14).

And here we can better understand the impressive ability of Father Joseph to combine the highest professionalism with the quick and intense invocations to the good God that escaped him in moments of danger to the life of the patient being operated on. Doctor Bruno Turchetta recounts: 'When faced with particularly serious situations, Father Joseph would sometimes ask patients: "Do you want us to pray together?" And the sick person would reply: "Of course I do. Don't we have the same God?"

Father Joseph simply wants to be the human image of Christ who passes by healing, and that the sick see in him the healing Jesus. He also wrote this in a letter to a friend: 'I must try to impersonate (yes, that's right) in me the Master when he healed the sick who came to him". It becomes, then, almost normal for Father Joseph to think that in the operating room where he operates 'miracles' happen: he is convinced of this, for example, when from the uterus of a patient he exports a tumour as big as the head of the African nurse who was lifting it. His colleagues and assistants see the successes of his operations and the amazing healings that follow, and they say: 'Father Joseph is an excellent surgeon'. But he does not give himself the credit and comments: "It is all the power and goodness of God".

Worshipper of two bodies

All his work is for the good of the people. That is why he tries to make the hospital environment as welcoming and friendly as possible. "No one should feel like a stranger here". His serenity has become proverbial, accompanied by the unmistakable smile.

From Africans he learnt the sensitivity and delicacy that characterise them. And all the staff work and live as one family of which he is the guide. An authoritative guide, certainly, but completely free of any form of authoritarianism, because his being a constant point of reference for every problem of the entire community, whether human or technical, comes not from his official role as head of the hospital, but from his level of humanity and spirituality. Perhaps this is why the air one breathes in Kalongo is so much like that of the small family hotel in Bethany, which was the home of Martha and Mary, where Jesus, at the end of his laborious days in Jerusalem, retired to spend the night there. The result is that, as the encounter with Jesus never left anyone as he found him, so the healed of Father Joseph are also "healed" inside. He feels that he must heal the whole person, body and soul. Africans are not children of Descartes, according to whom reality is divided into *res cogitans* (psychic reality with the qualities of inextension, freedom and awareness) and *res extensa* (which instead represents physical reality, extended, limited and unconscious): the African cosmovision does not divide the human person into spirit and body, but looks at it as a body necessarily animated by a soul or as a soul necessarily embodied in a body.

Significant in this regard is the testimony of Comboni Sister Catherine Marchetti, originally from Rossano Veneto (Vicenza), who arrived in Kalongo on 1 May 1965, and was immediately in charge of maternity and then of the *Midwifery training school*, the training school for midwives opened in 1956. "I lived alongside Father Joseph for 22 years and I was always struck to see the same person at the altar, during Mass, with the consecrated host in his hands, and then in the hospital, with the patient in the same hands, treating him with the same attention and kindness. The two were equally precious to him. As he was in love with Jesus, so he was with the sick".

When he preaches from the altar, it is normal for him to speak of the love of God, encouraging those present to love one another and above all to take an interest in the sick, the poor and the weak: "Is not visiting the sick one of the seven works of corporal mercy?".

And he visits them, even bringing them some of his food. Father Ponziano Velluto recounts: "I have seen him, and more than once, returning late from the safari, put aside half of his food to take it to some sick person. Seeing himself discovered, he blushed and said, 'It's for that old man who was operated on a few days ago for a tumour in his intestine and abandoned. Poor thing! There is no one to assist him!'. Doctor Luciano Sacconi, who lives and works with Father Joseph in Kalongo for nine years (from October 1978 to February 1987) also reported this episode: "It is a fact that has always remained particularly vivid to me. We had operated together on an old man from Mbale, a town in south-east Uganda, removing a tumour from his large intestine. After the operation, he had improved a little, but his condition still remained precarious. One day, with little hope left, he was left alone by his son who was caring for him. But since that day, Father Ambrosoli has always brought him some food, both at noon and in the evening for dinner. He waited until all the brethren had finished eating and had come out of the refectory, then he would pick up some leftover food and take it to the old man. He did this for about three months. When the old man entered the terminal stage, the father would also feed him. And if he couldn't go himself, because he was too busy, he would ask me to do it or an Italian nurse who worked in the mission, called Loredana Lorenzini, who later joined, also with the help of Father Joseph, among the daughters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta".

The local people have unlimited faith in the healing virtues of Father Joseph, to the point of considering him a kind of miracle worker. It happens that those who have already been treated by him, meeting a sick acquaintance or family member, tell him: "If you are sick, you only have to go to Father Joseph: he will visit you and you will come back healed". And people flock to Kalongo from all parts of Uganda, and even from Kenya and Sudan. In the collective imagination of the people, Father Ambrosoli has

now become "the man of God who has the power to heal". And to heal not just the body, but also the spirit and heart.

Always with the last ones

His being a 'servant of all' also manifests itself in the care of lepers to whom he dedicates a not marginal space in his work. Here too, lepers are the poorest of the poor and are abandoned. He, knowing perfectly well that leprosy patients did not represent a danger to others, surprises everyone by welcoming them into the wards with the other patients. He also strives for their integration into general healthcare facilities. He has given himself a rule, and he wants his assistants to follow it too: avoid as long as possible amputation of limbs compromised by the disease, and try by all means to reconstruct those already affected. And in the end, many lepers will owe it to him to recover the sensitivity of their limbs. Lepers are so high on Father Joseph's scale of values that, even though Doctor Donini is sorely needed in the hospital, he will deprive himself of him, putting him at total disposition of the lepers.

Day after day, he lets others eat up all his time, almost ending up forgetting himself. His time - whether spent in the operating theatre or in pastoral activity at the end of the week (on Saturday evenings he willingly lends himself to confessions in the parish and, on Sundays, he also gladly celebrates in the villages) - is the time of God's love given. He feels that medical profession and priestly mission can marry very well and sees no dichotomy. In the sick he sees Jesus. The sick person is his "lord and master": he therefore has absolute priority; to him belong his time, his energy, his intelligence and his sensitivity. He spontaneously lives the utmost respect for him, without ever looking at social class or political affiliation.

It is Doctor Luciano Tacconi who recounts: "The evening before particularly demanding surgical sessions, we would meet in his room and, books in hand (he didn't spare any expense in buying them and getting them there), we would go over them and study the various steps of surgical technique, and this in order to be well prepared and not to leave anything to improvisation. He set an example and demanded of us doctors that, when called upon, we rushed immediately to the hospital, always without hesitation". He continues: "I remember once, when I was called urgently for an umbilical hernia, I preferred to postpone the operation until the following morning. The next day, in the operating theatre, finding some complications, Fr Joseph reproached me for not having operated immediately. He said: 'We must interrupt sleep for those who are sick'. He was like that: the sick person came before everything else".

With the sick Fr Ambrosoli has infinite patience: he never scolds them and manages to get them to tell him the truth, especially the truth about the prior passage to the traditional healer. It often happens, in fact, that a patient, before 'surrendering' to modern medicine turns to traditional medicine.

There is in Father Josepha preferential love for the sick, especially if they are not only sick but also poor and abandoned. It says a lot that he remains to the bitter end in a remote rural area of northern Uganda, far from any major centre. He is repeatedly offered prestigious places, but he always replies that his place is there, next to those most in need.

Father Vittorino Cona, his novitiate companion, recounted: "I noticed how the hospital was growing and how it was spreading everywhere the reputation of the doctor-surgeon who could successfully perform delicate operations, difficult even by the standards of the equipped hospitals in Italy. Yet, he was the same as ever: humble, shy, ready to do all the 'lowest' services, for his brothers, for the other doctors, for the nurses".

Idi Amin Dada

25 January 1971. President Milton Obote is in Singapore to attend the Commonwealth Heads of State Conference. He left Uganda in the throes of severe turbulence. The exasperation caused by his way of governing ended up convincing Ugandans that nothing can be worse than the kind of 'democracy' that the president has imposed on the country. Therefore, when General Idi Amin Dada, supported by other military personnel, puts an end to the political instability of recent years, declares Obote deposed, abolishes parliament, suspends all party activities for five years and, on 12 March, proclaims himself president in place of the deposed tyrant, the entire country is gripped by euphoria.

It only took the Ugandans a few months, however, to realise that they had been wrong. In fact, if at first Amin presents himself as a restorer of peace and civil concord, within a short time his advent turns out to be anything but providential. From 1971 to 1979, with this semi-illiterate, mercenary become president, forced to make speeches in English, babbling deplorably with creative syntax and a confused vocabulary, Uganda experiences one of its most tragic moments. The victims are counted in the tens of thousands (some speak of 300.000!). All opponents - or supposed opponents - disappear into nothingness. For years, it seems that the country has a heart only for hate and hands only for slaughter.

Member of the Kakwa ethnic group and of Islamic religion, Amin is from a small village near Koboko in the district of West Nile and takes it out mainly on the members of the Lango and Acholi ethnic groups in the north, accused of sympathising for Obote: if not outright genocide, this is certainly genuine persecution. High representatives of religious groups are also eliminated. Anyone who overshadows him is taken out of the way.

Tragic is the mass expulsion of the Indians and Pakistanis who manage all the trade and in whose hands is almost all of Ugandan capital: they are all driven out, without being allowed to take anything with them. In the eyes of Western experts, the decision borders on madness: prudence and shrewdness would want that a more than fair nationalisation of trade and finance should proceed in steps, and only after preparing people capable of succeeding those who have managed everything up to now. But Amin, speaking to the televisions of half the world, says he had a premonitory dream, during which the prophet Muhammad himself ordered him to expel the Asians from Uganda.

The one who is writing saw with his own eyes, travelling in September 1972 on the road from Entebbe airport to Kampala, the thousands of suitcases belonging to the deportees, emptied and abandoned along the road. Many Ugandans rejoiced at the expulsion of those tens of thousands of Asians, because they shared much of the prejudice against them. Only to realise later that it was not nationalisation, but a veritable act of piracy on a national scale. Result? With a little of exaggeration - but not too much - one could say that it reached the point where it was impossible to find a pin in the whole of Kampala and you had to go and buy these items in Kenya, where Asians had found refuge.

To see the collapse of an entire country, from schools to healthcare, at the mercy of total bargaining, arbitrariness, violence and inefficiency, Father Joseph's heart can't help being deeply shaken. He is not the only one who understands that with Amin, Uganda is destined to sink. The new tyrant is power-hungry and will be guilty of unspeakable nefariousness and horrors against a people abandoned to its misery. For years, the country will remain in the hands of an individual who is a perfect blend of showman and gangster in uniform.

Moral uprightness

In 1971, the hospital was already well developed. Attracted by the fame of Surgeon Ambrosoli, patients come from all parts of Uganda. Girls from different regions of Uganda arrive to follow studies and graduate from midwifery school.

The regime shows respect for the hospital. On 24 September, nine months after his seizure of power, Amin - who holds Doctor Ambrosoli in high esteem - visits and promises two ambulances, a radiotelephone and other courtesies. But these are empty promises and will remain so.

The hospital, therefore, has to fend for itself and this becomes increasingly evident as the regime reveals its true face: the fierce one against all opponents. Father Joseph then gets in contact with the Caritas missionary organisation in Bologna, starting a valuable collaboration (it will last until his death), which will also involve professors and doctors from the university.

To get an idea of Father Joseph's moral stature and absolute fairness towards those who bring help to the hospital of Kalongo, one example will be enough. One day he receives from Caritas an offer for an appliance which, however he has already procured. And what does he do? He immediately sends the sum back to the charity. Those in charge respond, notifying him of the unanimous decision of the members: "Since we are aware that the father is about to make several important and necessary improvements to the hospital buildings and equipment, our sum is left to the father, so that he may use it at his discretion

for these works". And they conclude: "We all agreed to propose to the father to join Caritas on an equal footing with the other missionaries and thus enable him to count on our help and tangible solidarity. His exemplary moral figure and his example of apostolate in favour of those who suffer will serve, on the other hand, to strengthen our spiritual charge and our communion with the missionary world".

Since the wards already in operation were joined by one for leprosy patients, in 1972 the Ministry of Health asked Kalongo to take on the *Leprosy Control Project*, i.e. the responsibility for leprosy patients in the northern districts. Father Ambrosoli entrusted the task of administrator to Father Donini, a leprosy specialist in Addis Ababa. The German non-governmental organisation *German Leprosy Relief Association* agrees to sponsor the project.

In truth, Father Joseph already welcomes leprosy patients, even those that other hospitals refuse. Sensitive to their serious physical impairments, which lead to frustration and marginalisation, his approach is to apply the reconstructive technique.

The 1973 statistics tell the story of the workload: 44,946 outpatient visits; 5,488 admissions; 885 deliveries; 632 operations; 37,421 laboratory tests ...

Also in 1973, the Italian Foreign Ministry approved the Kalongo project as a CUAMM (University College for aspiring missionary doctors), relieving Father Joseph of the financial burdens on the doctors. He is still left with the financial burden of facilities management and the delicate task of ensuring the turnover of staff, which has now become numerous. The most difficult problem remains that of finding a way to have a full staff of doctors. In truth, it will always be difficult to find people who agree to come to Kalongo on a permanent basis. Despite the continuous turnover of doctors, the "personnel emergency" will be a constant thorn in the side for Father Joseph. He teaches the many who come and hopes that some decide to stay, but this does not happen. Above all, he seeks collaboration and creates co-responsibility: the doctors who work alongside him must feel that the hospital in Kalongo is "theirs".

Father Joseph also wants all nursing staff to feel directly involved in the running of the big hospital machine. To his doctor colleagues he gives co-responsibility and autonomy. He particularly values the local element. Deep and sincere is the esteem he has for the nuns who collaborate with him: when he goes to visit the dispensaries dependent on the hospital, he never fails to praise their work in the eyes of the nursing staff, recognising that their work is indispensable. In this regard, perhaps the most beautiful eulogy of Father Ambrosoli is to be found in these words of the teacher Gino Owiny (who later became a farmer), who knew Father Joseph ever since he went to fetch him with Brother Avi to take him to Kalongo: "All staff, that of the hospital in particular, worked and lived with him as in a happy family under his guidance". Gino, of course, also felt part of this 'happy family', to the point that, after the forced exile of all the hospital staff, he will be the one to organise with the help of the local Christian community, the defense and preservation of the hospital and the mission.

Generosity and Saving

The hospital in Kalongo is the fruit of the generosity of many people. Starting with the brothers of Father Joseph, certainly the greatest benefactors of the hospital. (It is no secret that the Ambrosoli family will continue to help the hospital after his death through the foundation *Dr. Ambrosoli Memorial Hospital*). He, well-to-do and a friend of well-to-do people, does not ask for special aid for the work. Yet this aid comes to him abundant. This includes all the new and very expensive instruments that he brings with him to Kalongo after wandering through the Italian hospitals during his holidays (which have only the name, because he spends the entire rest period in his homeland perfecting his surgical art, looking for material for the hospital, contacting the hospital, contacting support groups and visiting the families of the missionaries or doctors working in Kalongo).

From the hands of Father Joseph passes a mountain of money and of means. He does not feel himself its master, but manages it as a careful and thrifty administrator. He repeats without tiring: "These are all things that belong to the sick, the benefactors, the congregation and the church". He considers them indispensable for the work to function, but he also knows the danger. He wishes to feel free of them.

As free as he always shows himself of the wealth he has inherited, never claiming possession of it. Poor, therefore, to be free. As a good Lombard, he is accustomed to saving and is against any squandering. But this saving does not mean miserliness. If something is really needed, he buys it. For himself, however, nothing is necessary. He has even got into the habit of recycling scraps of paper found lying around or the reverse side of notepaper for his notes and memos.

The hospital storerooms are full of medicine and food. Father Joseph never wants the sick to lack anything they need. But the rumor - which is unfounded news - spreads, and is accompanied by slander and gossip. It is said, then, that in those rooms there are mountains of things to make anyone envious. Anyone who has been in any hospital, even for a short time, knows how many things are necessary for it to function properly. But in the warehouses of Kalongo not even a bandage goes to waste! Sister Romilde Spinato testifies to Father Joseph's discretion: "He used to receive many items of clothing containers, but he discreetly gave them back to us sisters to distribute, and he didn't want his name to be mentioned". Above all, there must be no waste. On saving of water, Father Ambrosoli is very demanding. He watches very carefully so that the sick never lack the precious liquid. He urges everyone to save it. Even when washing their hands before surgery (with soap, not detergents!), only the water needed should be used: "We have two elbows to turn off the tap when the water is no longer needed".

Extreme care is also required with regard to electricity consumption. Since electricity is produced by a generator with a diesel engine and this runs on expensive fuel, use is limited to three hours each evening, and only for taking X-rays and starting up the autoclaves for sterilisation of what is needed in the operating theatre the next day.

5. PRIEST AND MISSIONARY DOCTOR

There are many medical students and especially doctors who, once they come to Kalongo for an experience, ask to learn surgery. Among the names that stand out are Sr. Donata Pacini, a Comboni Sister, Father Aldo Marchesini (who will operate later in Mozambique), Father Manuel Albert Grau, Father Lawrence Tomasoni, Father Egidio Tocalli.

These two are still high school students in the Comboni seminary in Carraia (Lucca), when they meet Father Ambrosoli for the first time. It is 1961 and Father Joseph at the end of his first holiday in Italy, is preparing to leave on a military flight from the nearby Pisa airport, which allows him to transport a lot of material for the hospitals of Uganda. He has a few free hours and decides to go and say goodbye to the teaching brothers at the high school in Carraia. He is asked to speak to the young missionary aspirants, of whom there were more than a hundred. He speaks at length, telling them about his life as a missionary doctor. And he concludes: "Study well. Get a good high school diploma. Then, if the superiors ask some of you to study medicine, do not be afraid: it is possible to be priests and missionary doctors. There are no particular difficulties. You will succeed very well". It was there that Lawrence and Egidio's vocation to be missionary priests and doctors was born.

These are words that would seem to suggest that this 'double vocation' is simple, if not easy, for Father Joseph.

His letter of 20 September 1970, addressed to Father Henry Bartolucci, General Secretary for evangelisation of the institute (he was to become bishop of Esmeraldas at the end of June 1973), in response to a request from him to welcome in Kalongo for eight months two young Italians (one a medical student and the other a nurse), enlightens us on his way of understanding basic professional preparation, which must be demanding and rigorous. To the request, Father Joseph opposed a firm refusal, "on behalf

of the entire Kalongo community and Father Donini". And he justifies it pointing out that before any decision, "it is important to discuss the choice of personnel to be sent; (...) those considered suitable must be endowed with a personal spirituality, be responsible and professionally prepared. Of amateurs in Africa one does not know what to do with them!

Precise the suggestion: "The medical student must finish university. Once you have graduated, come and see for a few months". Without mincing words the conclusion: "Once these people are here, we have to keep them. If they are not spiritually formed and do not have an open mind, they also risk being scandalised here and losing what little good they had to begin with. They might end up misjudging those positions that are an adaptation to the situation. Woe then if they wanted to judge with their European head, without knowing our people here and the mentality of our Africans".

He does not, however, refuse to take in new graduates and, with patience and generosity, offers them the teaching of his expertise, even though he knows that those doctors will not stay in Kalongo to give him a hand. From them, however, he always demanded a solid medical training and a suitable spiritual base. Sister Enrica Galimberti, at his side for eight years, recalls: "It was, this, a service that robbed him of precious time, but it was part of his availability. In the time I spent with him there were 12 or 14 young doctors who came to Kalongo. If one of them made a mistake, Father Joseph took the blame so as not to embarrass him. Sometimes these were serious mistakes, which he was then forced to rectify. I remember some of them: in a prostate operation, the young doctor injured the bladder, later repaired by Father Joseph. Another severed the ureters during a hysterectomy, and Father Ambrosoli had to intervene to repair them. During an inguinal hernia operation, one injured femoral artery, and only the prompt intervention of Father Joseph saved the patient's life". Sister Enrica's list is embarrassing: "A patient was prepared on the left side, for appendectomy on the right side ... Left a gauze from the abdomen of a woman undergoing a caesarean section - shortly afterwards, she showed signs of intestinal obstruction -, reopened by Father Joseph: seeing the gauze, he made the nurse who was assisting her leave on a pretext, and quickly removed the gauze ... three men were operated for duodenal ulcers, in the absence of the head doctor (he had to travel to Kampala); immediate occlusion for all three; Father Joseph, who returned from the capital late in the evening, reopened the only survivor, saving his life".

Unmovable?

Towards his colleagues, Father Joseph is generous and respectful. In the medical environment it is easy to encounter some jealousy of one's technical knowledge, acquired through a long experience. It is easy, in short, to defend one's status achieved through merit and ability. Father Joseph, on the other hand, seems to pass on to others what experience and nature have given him.

There will be those who will go so far as to reproach him for not having prepared African doctors to accompany and replace him. There will be those who will go further, reproaching him for not having left Kalongo to go elsewhere. Like Doctor Lawrence Tomasoni, a Comboni priest: "The thing that surprised me most in Father Joseph's life is that he was not able to understand that he had to take the initiative to leave and go elsewhere". For Father Lawrence, who worked first in Uganda, then in Ethiopia and then again in Sudan, it would be a basic principle of missionary life to train the locals and then go elsewhere, "also to avoid that climate of veneration often exaggerated or even resulting in adoration, well known to all those who work lovingly and well in Africa, which at the end can suffocate you". Again according to Father Lawrence, "Father Joseph, in short, liked being in Kalongo. And since his relatives conducted their business excellently, so he was happy to carry out a work of the Church, a charitable work, in a perfect way". Not even illness was seen by Father Joseph as a sign from God to force him to change his lifestyle. Therefore, "perhaps also because of this, the Lord had to destroy the work for a short time". Finally, if there was one thing that Father Joseph did not understand, according to Tomasoni, it was "that the time of the old missionary father and master of a mission or a work founded by him and dying in it, was over. One starts, one prepares the local staff and ... off you go again, if you can".

Life itself will give an answer to Doctor Tomasoni.

We Italians, then, so attached to our local hospital - the one close to home, to be clear - can understand what importance the health facility in Kalongo can have in a vast area with no hospitals. Sister Dorina Tadiello who worked with Father Joseph as a doctor before becoming a Comboni Sister, recalls: "Had he been asked, Father Ambrosoli would have left Kalongo. He did not leave it because it was a large, complex structure, lost in the middle of the savannah: a charismatic figure was needed to run it. The management of a business like that required the ability to bring together different people, in terms of motivations, professionalism, mentality and culture, such as nuns, Comboni brothers and fathers, the lay people in general, Italian doctors and local staff. I did not see who could have run such a complex reality as the hospital in Kalongo, including the financial part, which is so important, if not Father Joseph".

Even the fact that there are no Ugandan doctors in the hospital in Kalongo does not depend on Father Joseph. There are other reasons. Certainly, doctors in Uganda receive excellent training. Makerere University churns out excellent graduates, who easily find employment abroad, including Europe and America. The lure of career and money is strong and the few who remain prefer to work in the city. It is true that at the Lacor (Gulu) hospital Ugandan doctors have worked and are working there, but because that hospital is recognised by the Ministry of Health as suitable for the training of recent Ugandan medical graduates. It is difficult, however, for them to stay and work there. Doctor Peter Corti and wife, Doctor Lucille Teasdale, who ran that hospital for many years, did not have to suffer to secure local staff. As a rule, they spent three months a year in the West to keep in touch with medical friends and support groups. Kalongo, on the other hand, was never an attractive hospital. Over the years, however, things have changed and today all the management and staff are African.

Sister Dorina, however, acknowledges that it is not easy even today in Uganda to coordinate realities as complex as a hospital. And she concludes: "A hospital is a structure that reflects a European culture, a typically Western conception of life, illness, commitment of work and service that is typically Western. Management is not only a technical matter, but also a matter of cultural conceptions, which take time to be understood, reworked, assumed".

First aches and pains

At the end of 1973, Father Joseph had to return to Italy. The intense work in Kalongo began to leave its mark on him. In January 1974, he was admitted to the Sant'Anna hospital in Como in the orthopaedic department of Prof. Fioroni and remained there a few days 'in traction' for lumbosciatica disc disease in the hope of averting an operation, which however became necessary. On 21 January he returned home. However, he has to wear a semi-rigid back brace for a month.

But as soon as he can, he starts running again. Even these holidays, like the others, turn into a mad rush. Father Joseph goes from one operating theatre to the next to perfect his surgical aptitude, he meets support groups that collect medical equipment for him that would otherwise be thrown away, but which in Africa can still be used profitably. He is always looking for new ideas, new methods, equipment and funding for the hospital. On Sundays, he devotes them to the unfailing visits to the families of the co-workers, both brothers and sisters and lay doctors.

Mama Palmira, now very old, would like him very much for herself, but gives up in the face of a fait accompli, wishing that her son can return to his mission soon. She sighs: "When my Father Joseph is in Ronago, I never see him at home. I hope he may return to Kalongo soon. At least he will rest there"! The Ambrosoli house in Ronago continues to be a logistical base for the collection and sorting of tons of medicine and food. Of these goods profit also other missionary hospitals and health structures in northern Uganda (Kitgum, Maracha, Alito ...). That Father Joseph does not only think selfishly of himself is also proven by an invitation to his friends in Bologna to send aid and medicines to Maracha "because that hospital needs it more than Kalongo". He writes: "I ask Caritas to concentrate their aid, temporarily, towards Maracha and neglect Kalongo".

Difficult times

Four months after the operation, Father Joseph leaves for Uganda. At the end of April 1974 he is in Kalongo. Great is the celebration of the local population and, in particular, of the hospital staff. A bad air is blowing against the Catholic Church. There is talk of possible expulsion of missionaries. Two months later, in fact, 16 Comboni Missionaries receive order to leave Uganda; 12 of them are engaged in the diocese of Gulu. Various and untruthful are the pretexts. For some there is even the accusation of espionage! In truth, the Amin government only wants to obstruct the Catholic Church and hit the Bishop of Gulu, Mgr Cyprian Kihangire, guilty of not keeping his mouth shut in the face of the dictator's crimes. Even Father Joseph, so discreet and sweet, began to think that the disappearance of Amin from circulation "would be truly a liberation for Uganda".

These expulsions also provoke discussion and debate within the missionary world. Some argue that they can represent an opportunity for the mission (rediscovering its profound meaning), for missionaries (to critically revisit the true meaning of their life choice) and for the Ugandan church (to become adults). *Nigrizia*, the Comboni magazine, in the issue of March 1974, takes up the debate: "In his political behaviour, Amin managed to decisively coagulate a sentiment that has been shaking Africa for years: the will to do by themselves, to achieve complete economic, cultural and political independence". Naturally, Amin "forces the process to be drastically timed, paradoxically precipitating the novelty into a dramatic emergency. It is, however, clear that we must accelerate the process of Africanisation of the Church of Uganda". Also in other countries and by other Christian denominations there is talk of a moratorium on foreign missionary personnel.

In truth, the problem of the massive presence of foreign missionaries has been debated in Uganda for years (in 1971, there were 344 Comboni Missionaries) and pressure is being put on the bishops and the fathers general to decrease, at least in part, the number of missionaries. Certainly, the African clergy expects such a move and some see in Amin an instrument of Providence. Evidently, those who have spent a lifetime in a mission dream of dying there, not of leaving. And one can sympathise with the Comboni Sister who, after receiving the news that her residence permit might not be renewed, exclaimed: "Leave? And why? If they prevent me from staying, I will go and sit on a grave in the cemetery and there I will wait for death".

Despite Amin's increasingly difficult situation, the hospital continues to improve and grow in construction to a capacity of 370 beds. To the maternity wards, paediatrics, medicine, surgery, gynaecology, radiology and infectious diseases, are added the wards for the malnourished, leprosy and tuberculosis patients. The 'ward for the poor' is also built, called *loc ken* (which in the local language means 'without care') to help poor relatives who accompany and care for their sick in hospital.

During this period Father Joseph could count on the help of Brother Augustine Stocco. Of him he says: "He is a very good builder. Without him, I would be lost". Augustine arrived in Uganda when he was only 20 years old. He had a diploma as a cook and was absolutely clueless about masonry. Yet when he was commissioned to rebuild the church in Kitgum, he managed to do an excellent job that other experienced brothers did not know how to do. "It must have been a miracle ... of obedience," commented a confrere, between the serious and the facetious. Self-taught, Brother Augustine became an expert builder. "He certainly deserves an honorary degree in architecture or engineering," say the superiors. And Father Joseph has written to the provincial superior, asking him if he could continue to have him in Kalongo. Unfortunately, in April 1972, Brother Augustine is requested in Kampala as substitute for the procurator, Brother Jerome Charbonneau. At the end of 1973, however, he returns and Father Ambrosoli breathes a deep sigh of relief. (Brother Augustine will be called back to Kalongo by Father Egidio Tocalli, Father Joseph's successor, to revive the hospital. To overcome the isolation in which Kalongo was and to avoid ambushes on the roads, in 1994 he came up with the idea of building a 1,200-metre long airstrip, which will prove to be the salvation of the area and the hospital. To say thank you to his "brother engineer", Father Tocalli will hoist a huge sign: "Aerial runway built by Brother Augustine").

With the return of Brother Augustine, work on the expansion of the hospital resumes at a rapid pace. Father Joseph writes to his friends in Bologna: "If one considers the present moment, all these works,

humanly speaking, are madness. But we are not working for our own self-interest, but for the good of our people, who will hopefully tomorrow be able to benefit from what we have done for them”.

One can be proud of the large, modern operating theatre, the examination laboratory, the medicine store and, of course, the midwifery school. Now half a dozen diesel generators run the water pump and provide electricity for the hospital, the mission, the mills and the garage. "Energy sources are fundamental for a hospital," is the conviction of Father Joseph. Alongside the main generators he has had a couple installed for emergency use. Not yet completely safe, he also wanted solar panels. And he is already talking about wind power. He explains: "Facilities must always be modernised, if we want to guarantee the best services for patients”.

The workload is enormous. In the three days a week dedicated to operations, more than 40 operations are performed. The statistics tell the hospital's leap forward in times of deep recession in the country. Outpatient visits rose from 44,496 in 1973 to 128,981 in 1997; deliveries rose from 885 to 1,332; and surgical operations from 632 to 1,206.

Death of his mother Palmira

In 1977, Father Joseph returned to Italy for holidays. Immense is his joy at re-embracing his mother, who is 94 years old. She, of course, as in the past, complains about the fact that her son does not seem to devote much of his time to her. After the classic three months, he left for Kalongo. A short time later, he gets the news that his mother is not well.

But for him, fond as he is of his mother, mission commitments come first. To the brothers' letter inviting him to return before it is too late, he replies: "Here in Kalongo I have people dying every day ... Mother is already her age ... She will be the first to understand ...".

The Superior General, Father Tarcisio Agostoni, intervened by applying pressure - not to say an injunction - to leave and return to the bedside of his dying mother, who had expressed the wish to see him before she dies.

In June, Father Joseph writes that he finds himself physically unable to move: "I am the only surgeon in the hospital at the moment. I could leave when Doctor Recalcatti returns and replaces me”.

On 13 November 1977, mother Palmira dies. Her death causes Father Joseph deep sorrow, which he accepts like any son who knows he will one day have to part from the one who gave him life. He consoles himself by thinking of his mother "in the light of God, together with father". He is certain of one thing: "One day I will see her again in heaven”.

He writes to his brothers and sisters: 'Grief over the death of Mother is always a great sorrow, even in old age, and even if we are all convinced that sooner or later we must die ... I think that Mother protects us from heaven. I have already started to invoke her one evening, on my way back from Gulu, on a road that, because of the rains, had become a sea of mud ... Mother was the centre of union for all of us. Now that she is no longer at home, we try still to feel united, as always, in the common affection of our dear parents”.

On the side of Women

In his work as a surgeon, Father Joseph pays special attention to women as mothers and, therefore, bearers of life. He recognises that these women are capable of any heroism to ensure that their child has the right to be born and to live. He understood that in the Africa of tradition, life is sacred. All members of the ethnic community are obliged to transmit it, protect it, develop it. Perpetuating life is a duty rooted in the eschatological conception of the African, which does not conceive of survival beyond death except in the descendants.

Father Joseph's love and effort to protect the life of the child and the mother are exceptional. He desires that the pregnant woman may give birth normally, avoiding, when possible, a caesarean section that her husband does not like. Or then accepts repeated caesarean sections in order not to close the woman's tubes: "If I did, the husband would abandon her”.

In this he is not always understood by his colleagues. But perhaps they do not know about the numerous cases of marital conflict due to the infertility of spouses. For him, any effort that alleviates a female condition subjected to risks and violence is justified. Never a reproach to women on his lips, not even to those with venereal diseases. If he really has to lecture, this is reserved for the husband, albeit always in a delicate tone that is sympathetic to human frailty.

Doctor Joseph Belloni, head physician, known for his expertise in delicate thyroid surgery and ready to sacrifice his holidays to give Father Joseph a hand, is among the best witnesses not only of Father Joseph's exceptional surgical skill, which borders on highly specialised fields, but of his particular attention to the plight of the African woman. He recounts: "Father Ambrosoli frequently practised the reimplantation of the tubes of sterile women: something that seemed unnecessary to me, also considering the danger of infection that in a continent like Africa such an operation easily entails. I pointed this out to him. He replied: 'Do you know what sterility means for Africans? I know very well that most of my operations will be unsuccessful. However, if thanks to them even one woman could have a child, this would repay me for all the interventions I have done'".

Father Joseph was able to deeply understand the culture of the people among whom he worked also in the sensitive area of gynaecology. And the women rely on him, knowing the delicacy and respect he brings to them. When he visits them, he does so with absolute respect of their intimacy.

Of course, even in the work of the 'great doctor of the Acholi' there are failures. But he is the first to 'register' them and suffer them, with only one intention: to prevent them from happening again. Sister Catherine Marchetti recounts: "If a woman died during maternity leave, perhaps because she arrived at the hospital after a few days of labour and already dying, he would tell me: 'We must carefully examine the cause of her death, so that we can be ready if the same case occurs again in the future and save the patient as far as we can'. And Father Bruno Carollo, who spent six years in the community with Father Joseph and knows how to use the camera, remembers: "Many times he would call me into the operating theatre so that I would film certain passages of the operations he was performing. Then he would calmly review those films several times. I often heard him say: 'What a fool I was! I could have avoided that passage and followed an alternative path'. He knew that life is always a gift, the miracle of a breath: an instant of distraction, a complication and you can cause its loss. It was always painful for him to see a mother die after giving birth to a child".

Preference for the last

Everyone in Kalongo says that Father Joseph has a preferential love for the sick, the weakest and poorest people. The testimony of the elderly catechist Martino Omach leaves no doubts: "He welcomed the poor, widows and orphans with a very special tenderness. He had a word of comfort and encouragement for everyone. He was willing to do the simplest and humblest things to help those most in need".

He, however, does not entirely agree. With himself he is of an extreme severity and feels that he should always love more. And this from his first arrival in Kalongo. In September 1957 he already confessed to himself that he did not love the Africans enough: "I do not treat them with the charity that they would like and expect from me, a doctor and missionary. I must have more patience, more understanding".

During the spiritual exercises in 1963: "Too much justice and too little mercy. I also intend to take this resolution: to treat the Africans with much more charity, affability and goodness, trying to adapt to their mentality, roughness and indiscretion". The conclusion surprises us: "I consider this as a real penance to be offered to the Heart of Jesus for their good". Also in 1965, in the brief reflections he wrote after the course of the spiritual exercises, he considered himself far from having a true love for the Africans: "I want to focus on greater charity and meekness in the way I deal, especially with Africans. Even with the Europeans, with whom I work every day, I must improve a lot".

The result is that the gospel of love, that he proclaims more with his life than his words, is immediately understood, especially by Africans. They recognise that the benefactor is not the one who

gives them money, but he who offers his whole self. Again the catechist Martino: "Father Joseph gave all his time, all his strength, all his genius for the lives of others".

With this behaviour of his, Father Joseph ends up by creating harmony between those who work and are present in the hospital (doctors, nuns, religious, janitorial staff ...), between Africans and foreigners, Europeans in particular, without ever looking at the ethnicity, if only to break down the walls of suspicion and prejudices and create communion. If God does not distinguish between people, He certainly does not look at whether the sick person is Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or a follower of traditional religion. In Christ, cultural divisions and discriminations disappear, social, religious and ethnic divisions disappear. He knows well the words of St Paul: "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcision or uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all in all" (Col 3,11).

Joyful serenity

With Father Joseph one feels good because he spreads joyful serenity. Far from being a braggart, he can be witty and jovial.

Sister Romilde remembers: "We were fine with him: he was not awe-inspiring, he was within everyone's reach, he accepted jokes, and he too, facetious as he was, didn't spare them". He is convinced that one must smile at oneself and at others and that this kind of smile is like the salt of living together. In his little notebook of spiritual exercises, much emphasis is placed on the commitment to charity, on the esteem in which he wants to hold his brothers and others, aware that "charity is nourished in small gestures of attention, of regard, of courtesy". He goes so far as to quote Alexis Carrel, the agnostic French doctor who converted by witnessing a miracle at Lourdes: "The duty of each person is not only to love others, but also and above all of making oneself lovable to others".

Natural shyness prevents him from expressing his feelings and when it comes to reporting on the work he does, his talk about it is always very documented.

In his medical service, particularly surgical-gynaecological, he deals with nuns, mothers, nurses and students. The relationship with them is always free and positive: no sterile distance but a closeness inhabited by his belonging to an Other, by his being consecrated. And if his adolescent and university classmates saw him shy in his relationship with the other sex, he is now the reference point for advice in moments of crisis. Over the years he has shown that he has acquired a great inner freedom that translates into a serene and engaging relationship with women in the service of the mission.

Father Donini recounts: 'On the ship that took him to Africa, one afternoon, he had arranged with a lady for a game of chess, a game at which he excelled. At the appointed time, she showed up the appointment in a swimming costume. Father Joseph realised the inappropriateness of sitting in a priest's robe in front of a woman dressed for the beach. Without the slightest reproach, with a smile, he therefore said to the lady: "Thank you for coming at the appointed time for the game; while you go and get dressed, I will prepare the chessboard"'.

Sister Marchetti recalls: "Once, Father Ambrosoli was walking along, praying the rosary with a girl whom he had guided spiritually in her choice to become a nun. Looking at them, someone said: 'They look like two people in love'. A few months later, that girl entered the Sisters of Mother Teresa. Another time Father Joseph was sick in bed and I offered to type the letters he was dictating to me. A doctor came into the room and saw us. He spoke with Father Joseph and left. Shortly afterwards, I went to the midwives' school and then returned to him to write more letters. As chance would have it, that same doctor returned for the second time to see Father Joseph. Seeing us, he said: "Are you still here? You are really getting along well'. I was very disappointed, because for Father Joseph's chastity I was prepared to put my hand on the fire".

The relations that Father Joseph has with women are marked by positivity and appreciation with a view to collaboration. People rely on him - it is worth repeating - because he visits men and women with absolute respect for their intimacy. He never visits a woman except in the presence of a nurse: he absolutely does not want to give rise to gossip. He is very delicate in his visiting the nuns, respectful of their virginity and they willingly place themselves in his hands. Great respect and delicacy he also shows

them in the operating theatre. The testimony of Doctor Giuliano Rizzardini and his wife, of Protestant faith, is unabashed: "Father Joseph had, according to what the Gospel says, the transparency and purity of the child'.

6. GREAT TRIALS

The coup d'état of Idi Amin Dada in 1971 and the expulsion of Asians in 1972 was followed by a period of terror. Between 1976 and 1977, Amin's soldiers massacred tens of thousands of Lango and Acholi people, guilty of having supported President Milton Obote. In 1978, Amin invaded Tanzania, under the pretext of claiming the frontier region of Kagera for Uganda. In April 1979, the Uganda National Liberation Front (Unlf), led by General Oyite-Ojok and Yoweri Museveni and 12,000 Tanzanian army soldiers crossed the border, determined to free Uganda from Amin. In their wake, Milton Obote also returned to his homeland.

Kampala easily falls into the hands of the Tanzanians. Amin, deposed on 11 April, takes the road to exile. It is Saudi Arabia that welcomes him, for his merits - more than anything else presumed - towards Islam. The chaotic retreat of Amin's soldiers - this is an army in disarray - is marked by vandalism, theft, killing, destruction, reprisals, revenge ... All that remains is to pray for the disaster to end quickly.

By a miracle of heaven, the Kalongo hospital is spared from the raids of the fleeing soldiers. However, it has to reckon with raids and looting by raiders from the local ethnic group, the Karimojong, who sow panic and death almost everywhere. Father Joseph writes: "This warrior tribe is convinced that God created all the cows in the world for them: so they can take them wherever they are". The victims of these raids are brought to the hospital by the dozens and the operations last until evening.

Efficiency and patience

In the operating theatre, Father Joseph leaves no stone unturned. He is often the only surgeon available and cannot refer a patient to the care of a specialist.

Moreover, as Doctor Augusto Cosulich, who was with him from 1983 to 1985, will testify later: "He was the true 'general surgeon', the kind you don't see in Italy any more. He was able to range from abdominal surgery to urology and orthopaedics. He excelled in obstetrics and gynaecology (his workhorse), but he did not hesitate to tackle eye surgery ... He was a patient and very good teacher. He loved to sincerely teach everything he knew, including those 'tricks' that make the difference between an ordinary surgeon and a great surgeon, which he was".

Doctor Gianfranco Carletti, a psychiatric doctor sent to Kalongo by Cuamm to work there from 1975 to 1977, will also remain eternally grateful to him for having learned from him "the calm, loving and non-violent surgery" that Father Joseph practices. He explains: "Anyone who has not been in the operating theatre with him cannot say to know him well. As amiable, friendly and sociable as he was outside the hospital, he was equally serious, rigid and strict in the medical field. In the operating theatre he would become someone else. I always remember one of his phrases: 'In the operating theatre you have to be fierce'. He used to say this mainly because of sterilisation. Where this didn't happen - like in government hospitals - there were disasters: apocalyptic things, especially because of unexpected complications". Doctor Cosulich echoes him: "What I learnt most from Father Joseph was his efficiency in the operating room, his way of giving no importance to the elegance of the surgical gesture or to the fact that the light on the operating field was perhaps not optimal ... His motto was: to obtain the maximum result for the patient with the minimum expenditure of resources. Obviously, he could do this thanks to his enormous

experience, which, combined with his professional skills, allowed him to immediately understand what the problem was, as soon as he opened the patient's abdomen".

Doctor Joseph Belloni adds: 'His professionalism was not only due to charity or goodness, but to a sense of duty that was truly exceptional. In his operating theatre did not reign democracy, but dictatorship. Or rather: only professionalism and competence. He did not accept words or advice. The patient's life depended on it".

But his attention towards others remains the same. In the last year, this attention even seems to deepen. Doctor Belloni again: "Arriving at lunch tired after hours in the operating theatre, and after prayer, before sitting down at the table, Father Joseph would look around to make sure that nothing was missing for those present. Often the cook would forget a piece of cutlery, a glass, a napkin ... He would take it from the cupboard, bring it with a smile to the one lacking it and then sit down. He was the first to give up his seat if one was missing. And with guests he was particularly careful, because they were 'sacred'. Not only did he take the suitcase, but when the others left - which often happened - he would entertain himself with them, even after tiring hours in the operating theatre. He would pick up the remaining pieces of bread and clear the table".

Precisely because he is attentive to people, it becomes normal for him to be delicate, human and friendly. It is precisely these spontaneous gestures of attention to people that make their way into the hearts of Africans and of those who come to Kalongo. A catechist testifies: "He considered everyone as his brothers and sisters. He welcomed everyone as if they were old friends. It was not always easy, especially when you live in a community, where, to welcome a guest, you always need to seek the approval of those who make community with you. Not to mention, then, that you have to make the guest feel at home and not an intruder".

Of course, there is no shortage of those who complain about his infinite patience. Like Sister Silveria. But he answers her: "Understand, tolerate, forgive, love".

Those around him do not miss his ability to listen, as if he had nothing else to do. And his patience is the same for the intellectual or the uneducated person. Whoever is in front of him feels taken seriously. Even the guests, always called by their first name, feel they have value in his eyes. Never a gesture of impatience on his part, even during his illness. He accepts to be disturbed (how many urgencies, especially at night!) in a spirit of penance.

A typical day

What is a typical day for Father Joseph? He wakes up early, as they all do in Africa, to take advantage of the cooler time of day. He goes to church for meditation and Mass, always celebrated with assiduity and concentration. It is the important moment of the day, consecrated to renewing his encounter with Christ, risen and alive in the community. His listening and meditation on the word of the Lord nourishes communion with God and the brothers and sisters of the community. The Word helps him to discern the meaning of the moments - often difficult, if not downright dramatic - that he shares with people, to never give in to pessimism and to always nourish hope. Imperceptibly, day after day, he finds himself with a heart modeled on that of Christ.

The celebrated Eucharist radiates light and meaning in his daily medical service, making it possible for him to offer his own life, in joy and pain, for the salvation of many. Catechist Jino Labeja recalls: "During the celebration of the Eucharist he often spoke of God's love and encouraged people to love each other and, above all, to take an interest in the sick, the poor and the weak".

Convinced that medical practice and evangelisation go together wonderfully well in him, having had breakfast, at 7.30 he is already at the hospital, right on time, either for operations or for visits to the wards. His arrival on the ward is marked by affectionate greeting for everyone, always warmly reciprocated. Seeing Father Joseph instills confidence in everyone.

Sister Marchetti recounts: "During operations, halfway through the session, he always took a few minutes to be fed with a little coffee or a beaten egg with a biscuit. After lunch - sometimes taken cold on days when operations took long - he would get some rest so as to be ready for work in the clinic".

Before dinner, he always takes adequate time for prayer. After eating, he entertains himself with the brothers for a recreation time or visits the doctors in their houses.

He loves - he also considers it an obligation - to keep in contact with those whom Providence has given him to meet and support his work. Late in the evening, during the long nights, a small light always shines in a room of the hospital: it is time to take advantage of the quiet of the night to take care of the administration (his reports are always precise and punctual), but above all to answer the people who correspond with him and the support groups. He sends many letters to friends and charities. He is grateful for every donation, whether small or large, and very shrewd and rigorous in administering it. Even when he is forced to resort to circulars (those 'encyclical letters' that missionaries are obliged to write at Christmas and Easter to reach the large number of benefactors and friends), he always adds in his own handwriting two lines to the addressee.

The light in the small room stays on for a long time. Often he is not there, because he is called to a surgical emergency or for a night watch.

Before resting, unailing is the rosary: "Reciting it while walking under God's starry sky, with the stars of the magical African sky, is something else entirely," he writes a friend.

His remaining hours of rest are few. "Once in heaven, I will have all the time I want to rest." Many wonder how he keeps up such a pace of work. What is surprising is not only the amount of work he manages to do, but the way he does it. He manages to be gentle even towards animals. Father Donini recounts: "After lunch, Father Joseph would take the leftovers to the kitten and the dog. As if he didn't already have enough work! And already this was surprising. But the real Ambrosoli had not yet fully emerged: one had to wait and watch him perform the incredible gesture of blowing on the saucer of soup, if it was still too hot". A gesture with a Franciscan flavour, but one that speaks of an ancient sensitivity, which comes from the time when, as a boy, he built in the furthest corner of the kitchen garden at home in Ronago an enclosure with house for rabbits. His brother Paolo: "He himself looked after them and fed them, providing them with grass and vegetable scraps that his mother would put aside. With each new litter, when the babies came out of the hut, he would call his friends to come and see how beautiful they were. And then he would say, "Too bad they come big and have to end up in the frying pan!".

Decision and courage

But when the time comes, no sappiness: Father Joseph knows how to show the hard face of the brave and determined man, capable of risking his life for others. One day, for example, he does not hesitate to search for two women accused of being spies, shot and abandoned as dead by the rebels, when they had only been seriously wounded. Father Ponziano Velluto recounts: "One of them managed to drag herself to the hospital. Father Joseph, risking his life, set out in search of the other poor wretch until he found her, took her to the hospital and hid her so that he could cure her. Unfortunately, after a few days, she died".

Nor does he shy away from heroically defending the wives of government soldiers and, in general, the people of the south, on whom the guerrillas intend to take all their revenge. When the rebels realise their imminent defeat, they gather menacingly in front of the hospital gate, claiming the people of the south in order to kill them and take revenge for their defeat. Father Joseph intervenes, placing himself in front of the gate and telling the rebels: "Do not enter here. If you want, go ahead and kill me, but here do not enter". And the rebels desist.

The testimony of a citizen of Kalongo is worth mentioning: "Father Ambrosoli faced with equal courage zealous religious, vengeful politicians and undisciplined officials. He never took a step back out of fear".

Amin was ousted, elections were organised and on 17 December 1980, at the end of a hotly contested ballot, Milton Obote was declared head of state.

But peace was yet to come. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni founds the National Resistance Army (NRA), the armed wing of the opposition party, the National Resistance Movement (Nrm). There is hunger in

Uganda. Cholera breaks out in various regions. Everywhere there is a lack of supplies of basic necessities. The local currency is devalued by the day. Prices skyrocket.

In a letter to friends in Bologna in February 1980, Father Joseph writes: "Cholera is spreading. In just two days we distributed 200,000 tetracycline capsules. It hasn't rained for five months. According to forecasts, we will have drought for another month at least. The sun is relentless. The heat is unbearable. I am writing to you with 31.8 degrees in my room. People say that we have not seen such a heavy season in years".

The emergency lasted throughout 1980 and showed no sign of abating the following year either. In June 1981, the government, in order to partially solve the economic crisis, multiplied ten times the prices of the most important products. In his circular letter of end of the year to friends, Father Joseph wrote: "There has been a run-up in prices. It is becoming difficult, almost impossible, to count only on participation in the expenses of the sick. A patient who has to undergo an operation for a duodenal ulcer pays as much money as he can make from the sale of two chickens".

Despite everything, in Kalongo, after marking time for a few years because of Amin, building is resumed. Father Joseph starts the course for midwives at a higher level ("with European-level standards"). And this speaks of the tenacious will to advance, even if difficulties and humiliations are not lacking. In December 1980, on the occasion of his 25th anniversary of priesthood, some local politicians, of Protestant faith, invited him to leave, as the hospital could now be run by Chinese staff and, therefore, his presence was no longer indispensable. He felt hurt, but did not lose his serenity.

The year 1981 holds a new sorrow for Father Joseph: the division that arose between the missionary community and that of the doctors leads to the separation of the canteens. Opinions are divergent; little attention is paid to the differences. At first, he tries to resist, but then he is forced to surrender to the will of the majority. From now on, even the management of the hospital will be even more complex and burdensome for him.

"Conversion"

This was the period in which Father Ambrosoli discovered the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld, through the writings of René Voillaume, founder of the *Little Brothers of Jesus* and guide and animator of the various spiritual families born in the wake of Father de Foucauld. He speaks of it as a 'conversion'. In the notes made on the occasion of the spiritual exercises in January 1981, we read: 'After the conversion of 18 August 1980, I find myself much better spiritually'. It is the centenary year of the death of the founder, Daniel Comboni. The theme of the course of exercises, held by a Comboni father, Fernando Colombo, was almost compulsory: "Integration between spiritual life and apostolic life in the Comboni charism". Father Joseph's note continues: "Trying to deepen my understanding of de Foucauld's spirituality over these months has done me well. The fact remains that I must continue in the effort to live the presence of Jesus in my heart and frequently ask myself what He would do in my place. I was struck by the thought of listening the word of God without defenses and the conversation with Jesus in the tabernacle without defenses".

He is surprised, however, that no one around him has noticed his change for the better. He does, however, recognise that de Foucauld helped him to organise his prayer: "Charles de Foucauld says that the day is for work and the night for prayer". He has also discovered that he can go to bed at midnight without suffering at all: "Previously, instead, those strong headaches would make me go to bed much earlier, unless there were emergencies".

The spiritual experience of the "Universal Brother" will be of comfort to him when the kidney disease manifests itself in all its severity, forcing him to drastically reduce his activities, and when his much-loved creature, the hospital, is closed due to the precipitating political situation. Then he will turn to the "prayer of abandonment", written on a note that he kept in his breviary, and will go so far as to speak of "beloved failure".

Here is the text of the 'Universal Brother' prayer:

*Father,
I surrender myself to you: do with me what pleases you!
Whatever you do with me, I thank you.
I am ready for anything, I accept everything,
provided that thy will be done in me
and in all your creatures.
I desire nothing else, my God.
I place my soul in your hands:
I give it to you, my God,
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you.
And for me it is a demand of love to give myself,
to put myself into your hands without measure,
with infinite trust,
for you are my Father.*

It is now clearer to Father Joseph to live like Brother Charles, that is, absorbed in the Lord and increasingly attentive to the needs of his African brothers. He translates all this into his motto: "God is love. There is a neighbour who suffers and I am his servant". It comes naturally to him to wonder what Jesus would do in his place. And he asks himself even now, in this moment of extreme difficulty, almost a foretaste of a way of the cross that is about to come down on him. But, evidently, not many people realise that he has changed for the better.

What could it mean for Father Joseph to "live in the manner of Brother Charles de Foucauld"? To answer this, it is legitimate to read what the theologian Joseph Ratzinger, in the booklet *The God of Jesus Christ* (Queriniana, Brescia 1978), wrote a year before becoming Archbishop of Munich. It is not known whether Father Joseph read it. Certainly, however, he would share its way of presenting the spirit of *frère Charles*. "In his search for the last place Charles de Foucauld found Nazareth. On his pilgrimage to the Holy Land it was precisely this the place that struck him most. He no longer felt called to follow Jesus in public life. Nazareth instead shook him to the innermost recesses of his heart. Now he intended to follow Jesus in silence, poverty and work. (...) In those places, in vital meditation on the person of Jesus, a new way was opened for the Church. Here working with Jesus the worker, immersing oneself in the reality of Nazareth, meant a starting point for the new figure and reality of the worker priest. It was here that one discovered the significance of poverty for the Church. Nazareth is a permanent message for the Church. The new covenant does not begin in the temple or on the holy mountain, but in the Virgin's hovel, in the house of the Worker, in a forgotten place in Galilee of the pagans, from which no one expected anything good. The Church can only begin again and again from here. It will not be able to give a correct answer to those who, in our century, rebel against the power of wealth, until it does not live in itself the reality of Nazareth".

Poor health

Father Joseph's health really began to fail. Nephritis plagued him and Doctor Corti prescribed an urgent rest in Italy. In early October 1982, Joseph left Kalongo for Italy. In the hospital in Tradate he is welcomed by Doctor Luciano Terruzzi, a lifelong friend, since 1957 chief physician and his attending physician. Doctor Terruzzi explains that Father Joseph's ailments came from his feverish medical activity: suffering from ailments of a rheumatic nature, he always defended himself by taking antiphlogistic drugs, without ever complaining, let alone stopping his frenetic pace of work. This is the cause of the frequent episodes of sciatica that forced him to have surgery for a herniated lumbar disc in 1975. Doctor Terruzzi recounts: "To be able to cope with the pressing exertions, Father Joseph had to often take antiphlogistic drugs. These favoured the onset - in 1982 - of chronic pyelonephritis".

Investigations are carried out and the appropriate treatment is decided. Then it turns out that he only has one functioning kidney. He is forced to stay in hospital for a long time to treat his atrophied kidney and the other severely compromised.

The diagnosis is precise: chronic pyelonephritis, i.e. an inflammatory process of an infectious nature affecting the renal pelvis, which leads to the onset of febrile states, headaches and kidney lesions, certainly favoured by the antiphlogistic drugs he is forced to take due to the physical pain of a rheumatic nature from which he suffers.

His kidneys are now functioning at 30%. He feels forced into inactivity. And he must admit to himself that he is paying the bill for the great strains of the long years at the helm of the hospital. But he is also refining himself in accepting that it is the Lord who will decide: "It will be what God wills," he writes. And he consoles himself with the thought that he can now pray during the day instead of at night. From Ronago he informs the Provincial Superior of Uganda, Father Guido Miotti, about his "serious and irreversible renal insufficiency". The clinical examinations are not good. Father Joseph doesn't mince words: "Rather worse than better. And that means that I must also accept this from the hand of the Lord, who makes me realise that it is he who decides and commands. I strive to say de Foucauld's prayer of abandonment. But make no mistake: I am the usual sinner. Hope for the best. Always willing to do the will of God".

Doctor Terruzzi is precise in informing him of the results of the various tests: "Since your kidneys are working at 30%, you will have to reduce your work to 30% of what you were doing before". A hard sentence for Father Joseph to accept: "30%? Very little. Almost unacceptable".

The attending physician, however, did not feel like keeping him longer and lets him leave for Kalongo. However, he feels it is his duty to warn his superiors so that they would impose on him a reduction in physical activity. He wrote to Father Miotti: "Father Joseph Ambrosoli has been in my care since October 1982 for chronic pyelonephritis with functional renal insufficiency; small wrinkled kidney hypofunctioning on the left side. He is currently in good general condition, better than expected, but with overall renal function stably reduced to about one third of normal. I believe that he can return to his mission in Uganda, with the strict condition of a drastic reduction of his activity: at least 10 hours a day of absolute rest, no more than two hours a day in the operating theatre and, in any case, exclusion of all physical exertion".

Criticism

Shortly after his return to Kalongo in July 1983, heated disputes broke out between Acholi and Karimojong, leading to violent clashes. The Karimojong killed several soldiers and injured about forty. On hearing of the incident, Father Joseph drove to the scene, picked up the wounded, took them to hospital and treated them and operated for many hours. The situation worsened day by day. Raids and reprisals follow one another and the hospital becomes the only place of refuge for the people. And he, Father Joseph, forgets of his friend Terruzzi's diagnosis.

And the criticism heard earlier also resurfaced. During convalescence in Ronago, Sister Romilde, in a letter, made no secret of her comments regarding his alleged almost morbid attachment to the hospital, but replied: "Gossip has always been in the world. If they do not speak well of us it is better, so we are closer to Jesus, who was perfect and of whom they also gossiped". He, however, added: "I will be careful not to come back too quickly". And in response to the gossip and insinuations of those who reproached him for an excessive attachment to the hospital and a desire to centralise everything on himself, he concluded: "I am also willing to leave Kalongo".

Obviously, he cannot imagine where that criticism comes from. As it happens, some criticism in this regard even comes from Mgr. Cyprian Kihangire, Bishop of Gulu, according to whom that "Father Ambrosoli is jealous of the influence he has acquired in Kampala in the Medical Bureau to the detriment of Doctor Corti". These and his wife Lucille have led Saint Mary's Hospital in Gulu to be an efficient and functional hospital.

All this criticism turns out to be unjustified: in Father Joseph there is no haughty attitude, but only simplicity and, above all, no jealousy. He, however, in his diary, returns to reproach himself with "a poor interior life, too worldly intentions, impatience and little love for the Africans".

To 'prove him wrong' was the party that the people of Kalongo organised when he returned from Italy: they rang the bells, even though it was 8.30 p.m., and many came. The party continued for hours. During the dances, the dancers he operated on kept showing their operation scars!

Father Joseph goes back to work with his usual vigour, even though he can no longer spend hours and hours in the operating theatre like before. His kidney ache torments him, especially when he is long standing in front of the operating table. This is the time when he can be heard saying: " Only now I understand Comboni and the value of the cross in my life". To his friends in Bologna he writes: "We must think that our true good is in God's will and not in the limited success of our intentions". In a letter to Doctor John Purgato he confides: "It is very good to depend on God's will, because - in bed or standing up to perform miracles - it is the same thing, and the morale never collapses". He is fully aware of his precarious state of health. But it would seem to him a betrayal to back out in an emergency. To love the other more than oneself seems normal to him. In the words of Maria Aboto, a Christian from Kalongo who in her primary school days, with her classmates, helped to transport stones and bricks for the construction of the hospital, "he loves work as he loves God".

He has lost none of his taste for work, even physical work. But now his superior is obliged to intervene, recalling him to the doctor's order: "By virtue of your vow of obedience, I order you to get more rest, at least ten hours of absolute rest, as Doctor Terruzzi has prescribed, to limit yourself to the operations that others cannot do (no more than two hours in the operating room), to reduce the hours spent in the hospital and, above all, no on-call shifts at night". With difficulty, he complies with his superior.

At the end of June 1984 he joyfully took part in the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Kalongo mission. In a letter to the parish priest of Ronago he tells of the great Eucharistic celebration outdoors on 29 June, with 565 confirmations, the celebration of 65 weddings the following day, and the great concelebration of 1 July, with three bishops and some 20 priests. "I was moved to see this tormented people celebrating and praying, grateful to the Lord for the gift of the Christian faith received through the missionaries. I can only thank the Lord that I am still on mission and that I can still make myself, albeit limitedly, useful. The most beautiful thing is to think that, whatever happens, it will always be God's will and therefore all is well, both for life and for death".

Meanwhile, the political situation precipitates. On 27 July 1985, Obote is ousted from power again by the military led by Generals Tito and Basilio Okello. But on 25 January 1986 the National Resistance Army (NRA) occupied Kampala. At its head is Yoweri Museveni, who proclaims himself president. What remains of the army, composed largely of Acholi, flees northwards, plundering and sowing death.

1986 is certainly the most difficult year for Kalongo. The government troops arrive and occupy the town on 29 March, Holy Saturday. The people have been waiting for them for a long time, in the hope that they can restore legality and peace. But the idyll between the liberation army and the people is short-lived.

The favours of the people soon shift towards the opposition. And the war resumes. The area becomes insecure. On 30 August the rebels retake control of Kalongo. It is necessary to evacuate the medical personnel, both European and from southern Uganda. They leave with death in their hearts. On 21 October, the regular army reoccupies Kalongo amid indescribable scenes of panic: not only the people, but also the sick flee. Relations with government soldiers have broken down irretrievably: it is interpreted as connivance with the rebels the mere fact of having spent two months with them. This is the fate of every hospital working in war zones.

Father Ambrosoli was concerned about the evacuation of European personnel. But this does not apply to him. He writes: "It remains for us to stay here to help everyone we can, praying to the Lord that he may enlighten our souls and soften our hearts". The recommendations of Doctor Terruzzi and obedience to his superior's orders take second place. Doctor Tacconi, left alone with Father Joseph at the hospital,

recalls: "Without letting me know anything, he would take my place on night calls even when it was my shift. How I saw him praying during that time!".

Father Joseph clings more and more to the rosary, taking the rosary often in his hand, particularly when he is most tired. He lets life flow out and slides his fingers over the beads, while his lips repeat the same words. It is the simplest way for life meets with the mystery of God and this mystery penetrates its life and existence. It enters ever more gently into the heart of God. Mary's presence reassures him as a mother who accompanies him on his path, which has now become particularly difficult, and who understands his weakness. He says the rosary because he feels poor and welcomed into the simple world of the human adventure of Christ and Mary, the source of all good, of all grace, "cause of joy for me and Uganda". He says the rosary - and more than one a day - because it binds his time with God's, without too much strain on his mind, without having to formulate sublime thoughts, but in the simplicity with which Mary lived in her existence the wonder of the God who becomes a Child and the human who becomes divine. Father Joseph can no longer live without this background music that accompanied his youthful and adult years, in moments joyful and painful, gratifying and disappointing, always with his gaze fixed on the positive outcome of the glory of the children of God. He lets himself be lulled by the background of quiet invocations, throwing off his troubles to God and finding the joy of prayer there where life meets Life, thanks to the Her who also to him made visible and brother the author of life.

Sister Romilde recalls: "In the last months in Kalongo, before being evacuated, hospital work was reduced to military cases: gunshots, amputations, wounds to be sewn or cleaning ... Other medical or surgical diagnoses were much reduced because of the rebels circulating everywhere".

7. A CHALICE Poured OUT

The end is now looming. The rebels infest the entire area, with the exception of the few centres garrisoned by the national army. And as the ambushes intensify, government soldiers round up people.

In November, the guerrilla warfare unleashed by Tito and Basil Okello slowly died down, while the movement of the "prophetess" Alice Auma Lakwena emerged, embodying a peasant revolt and 'messianic' rebellion in which some of the Acholi forces opposed to the government identify themselves. After the defeat of the Lakwena forces near the town of Jinja, in the south of the country, it will be Joseph Kony who will take the lead of the movement, which, starting in 1994, would turn into the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and will be guilty of heinous crimes in the northern districts of Uganda, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of people, the abduction of over 30,000 children and forcing 2.6 million people to live in concentration camps for 20 years. The nightmare would only end in 2008, after interminable meetings for peace talks, but without reaching a real agreement, when the rebel movement moved into neighbouring countries (South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic), where in 2010 it is still sowing destruction and death.

The situation for the hospital came to a head on 30 January 1987. Having rounded up all the hospital and mission personnel, the military authorities accuse those present of complicity with the Acholi guerrillas, of authoritarian attitudes and even of hatred against the people. Some soldiers turn to the fathers shouting: "We don't want any more Mussolinis here!".

After a week spent under 'house arrest' - everyone is forbidden to leave the defense line a few metres from the buildings -, on Saturday 7 February, the brigade commander gathers all European personnel in the courtyard and gives the order: 'Leave. Leave here only the walls. Everything else you must take away. Nothing must remain for the rebels'.

This is a terrible blow. It means evacuating a large mission, like all those that have had a missionary presence for 50 years, and a 350-bed hospital, i.e. an institution with over 30 complexes, some very large. Preparations immediately begin, amid tears and deep sadness. The military insist that the fathers and nuns take away everything, especially the food and medicines. "They must not end up in the hands of the guerrillas," the commander insists.

The exodus from Kalongo to Lira represents an authentic ordeal. Father Joseph becomes truly similar to Jesus who on Calvary appeared to many as an icon of the most complete human failure.

At 4 a.m. on Friday 13 February, 16 trucks and a battalion of soldiers arrive. The order is to load what was already prepared and to leave immediately. The hospital has already been displaced two days ago. They work non-stop amid indescribable confusion until 3 p.m., when the column of 34 lorries and cars, with 1,500 soldiers and civilians, starts up. Only 20% of the hospital's equipment found a place on the trucks. After a few hundred metres, the "fugitives", who cannot take their eyes off the hospital and the mission, see clouds of black smoke rising: what was left behind is set on fire.

It is Father Joseph himself who recounts those terrible moments, in a memoir he penned immediately after arriving in Lira-Ngeta: "Slowly, with a hiccup, the snake-like caravan winds its way over the difficult roads of the savannah. There is a knot in our throats, along with the tension and fear of possible ambushes by the guerrillas. This tension is heightened by the fact that our cars are interspersed with military trucks laden with soldiers, and they just shoot here and there in order to frighten the guerrillas. (We learn that a large group of these, stationed in Patongo, did not attack the convoy only because they did not want to risk harming us).

After 10 hours we arrive in Patongo. Hopefully we can make a short stop at the mission, at least to quench our thirst, but this is denied us. The fathers of Patongo are ready to join our convoy, but there is a new order: wait; they will leave the next day.

At 3.30 a.m., under a sky lit by a full moon, while we are stopped by a truck loaded with women and children that has run off the road in danger of overturning, we hear gunshots. They come from the savannah and are directed at us. In the infernal din of the government military's angry response, many of us throw ourselves to the ground in the hope of safety. One soldier is accidentally shot by one of his comrades and dies within a few minutes. After about half an hour, still frightened, we start moving again. We learn that a woman, already in labour when we left Kalongo, has a beautiful baby girl: they have given her the name Catherine Convoy. Life and death also continue on this journey. After 21 hours of dust, thirst anguish, fear and a lot of tiredness, we finally arrive in Lira".

There is a letter from Father Joseph which, surprisingly, bears the date 13 February 1987. It is addressed to Father Manuel Albert Grau, a Comboni missionary in Mumbere (in what was then Zaire); the letter reached the addressee in June, two months after Father Ambrosoli's death. It is difficult to establish where and how Father Joseph could have drafted this page in times of indescribable turmoil.

"Dearest Father Grau. I am writing to you as I am forcibly leaving Kalongo with a convoy of trucks. With my gaze I observe sadly at the burning hospital as I drive away ... This work that I have loved as my own creature and for which I gave my whole life, to make it ever more beautiful and efficient, will soon be no more. At this moment I see flames of fire rising up and destroying everything. The fire and the weapons of the powerful will consume everything and of this hospital only a few bricks will remain. But no one will be able to destroy what I have built in the hearts of the people. In Kalongo I have been able to help many young doctors, lay people and brothers, in the various specialisations, but I have not been able to prepare an African doctor capable of taking responsibility for the hospital. Dear Father Grau, I know you are starting a small hospital in the forest of Ituri. A word of advice: do not exceed beds, so that it is a work on a human scale, and such that the local doctors can carry on in the near future. During these years in Kalongo, responding to the needs of the population, I have been expanding the services of the hospital and had become beyond their capacity, in the various levels of hospital management. Today, as they take me far away my heart is even closer to them and I feel the full weight of the suffering. It is a death experience".

Worried for others

Brother Tarcisio Dal Santo recalls that the first to arrive at the mission in Lira-Ngeta, at around 10 o'clock in the morning, was Father Joseph: "He appeared tired. He was covered in dust. But he was smiling and apparently serene". Yet it was hell: all those hours to cover a distance of 120 km. Basically, it was at a walking pace. And always with the heart in the throat. Also travelling in the caravan, lying on a mattress, was Mgr. Cesana, bishop emeritus of Gulu, who had been retired in Kalongo since 1983. The day before, at noon, he was struck by partial paresis, the effect of a cerebral spasm, and fainted. The situation immediately appeared serious and the sacrament of the sick was administered to him. He travelled beside Federico Bonalumi, an 81-year-old Comboni Brother.

In the Comboni House in Lira is also Father Louis Varesco. When he sees Father Joseph, he makes his way to him and, wanting to console him he lets slip: "They have destroyed your creature". Years later, he confided to the writer: "I realised that he was upset about it. I believe he felt offended. My words were foolish, which escaped my mouth at that terrible moment. In truth, Father Joseph did not consider himself the "father" of the hospital in Kalongo. According to him, the creator of everything, and therefore also of the hospital, was the Lord alone. The adjective 'my' had no place in his vocabulary".

Despite the great fatigue from the journey, there is no time to rest. We have to recover the trucks with medicines and hospital equipment that some soldiers have tried to hijack. Then there is the care of the sick who were evacuated with the convoy. Everything has to be tidied up. Father Ambrosoli tries to sort out the staff, the sick, the medicines, the rescued equipment... He is moved by the great goodness and charity of everyone in welcoming the evacuees and helping them. But the arrival of all those goods in the mission warehouses worried the missionaries of Lira, always under threat of robberies by the soldiers. They therefore urge Father Joseph to find accommodation elsewhere. With the benefit of hindsight, one of them will acknowledge: "We were probably not very charitable in inviting him to seek other accommodation for all that material which made the mission too attractive for groups of armed people in disarray. You had to be there at those times to be able to judge. I only hope that Father Joseph thought like us that it was the situation that required it". Of greater concern to Father Joseph is the accommodation of the doctors, the young women from the Midwives School and the nuns in charge. He does not want them to miss the school year, but to conclude it regularly with exams and a diploma. Witness Father Vittorino Cona, his Provincial Superior: "The miracle was that he succeeded, overcoming the resistance of doctors, fathers and nuns who saw too many problems in the whole thing".

Although his kidney is shattered, Father Joseph asks the Provincial Superior to postpone his return to Italy for treatment. In the "disaster", which he lives as an exile and with a great sorrow in his heart, he can still see the hand of God. In his 'spiritual notes' of these moments, the *beloved failure* comes to the fore (de Foucauld's *beloved failure*), which made its first appearance in the letter sent years earlier to friends in Bologna, announcing to them his illness "accepted as a gift from the hands of God". On 9 March, to his friend Mario Mazzoleni, the electrician from Bergamo who has done so much for the electrical installations in the hospital in Kalongo, he wrote: "This year you really have to give up coming! With a great sorrow we had to leave Kalongo. But the Lord is great and has given us the strength to accept everything from his hand. This is, indeed, a wonderful opportunity to grow and mature spiritually and to detach ourselves from so many earthly things. So let us thank the Lord for everything!". To sister Enrica Galimberti he declares: "What God wants is never too much!" To the others he repeats: "Courage, this is the moment in which one must see why we have come here".

Despite the dangers on the country's roads, Father Joseph travels several times to Kampala to talk to the health authorities. Eventually he obtained permission to transfer the School for midwives to the West Nile district, in Angal, where there is a missionary hospital. The 42 students, the two midwives and the two teaching sisters find accommodation at the catechetical centre not yet completed: the electrical system, the furniture, the teaching materials, the fence ... Father Joseph is pleased all the same: "As long as the girls can prepare for the state examination scheduled for May".

Father Joseph sent a report on the evacuation of Kalongo to Father Francis Pierli, Superior General of the institute. The reply came quickly and brought him consolation. Father Pierli writes: "For all of us, the

hospital in Kalongo was much more than a simple hospital. It was a sign of the passionate love for the people, of taking on the wounds of the people that constitutes the most beautiful core of our vocation. For so many people, you know better than I, Kalongo was a hope, for the spirit they found there and for the possibility of serious treatment for their physical illnesses. Kalongo was also a hope for work for the girls and nuns who came to study nursing. Kalongo was a place of peace and care for not a few brethren who came to spend a little holiday, and recover from the physical, psychological and spiritual wear and tear of apostolic commitment. (...) When I speak of you, I also want to include your family who, with great missionary spirit and generosity, became deeply involved in the work and invested substantial capital in it. I make my own the words you wrote at the conclusion of your letter: "The heart suffers, but faith and hope soften everything".

On 19 March, the liturgical Solemnity of St Joseph, Father Ambrosoli presides over the Eucharistic celebration of his patron saint. The entire Comboni community is gathered in the church of the parish. Father Joseph invites everyone "to celebrate the 'just man', the one who listens in faith and conforms in everything and for everything to the will of God, obedient to the word of the angel, and wise". He says he is moved by the thought of St Joseph, who "trains to the humble art of carpenter the Son of the Most High", as the liturgy sings. He recalls how the founder, Daniel Comboni reserved a special place for St. Joseph in the spirituality of the mission, "which always demands spiritual depth and diversity, and trusting abandonment to Providence". He quotes, smilingly, a passage from one of his letters: "Saint Joseph, king of gentlemen, bursar of *Nigrizia*, who never makes bankruptcy, triumphant over the cataclysms of the universe (...) In Saint Joseph's beard are thousands and millions; I have given him so many assaults and I have made people pray to him so much, that I am very certain that the critical present position of Central Africa will soon be changed into a prosperous condition. Time and misfortunes pass, we grow old; but Saint Joseph is always young, he always has good heart and straight head, and always loves his Jesus". Finally, he proposes St Joseph "as a model of dedication and obedience, even when events are not understood and things go wrong".

Calvary

On 20 March he is in Kampala. The students of the Comboni Scholasticate invite him to celebrate the Eucharist with them. Father Maurizio Balducci, then a theology student, recounts: "With the sketch of a smile, several times he spoke of his *beloved failure*. But you could see that, deep down, there was much bitterness, certainly not consolation. At the moment of the exchange of peace he had a staggering and had to lean against the small table that served as an altar. The chalice tipped over and he was deeply saddened. For long moments, there was only silence. A week later, we received the news that he had died. There it came to us spontaneously to think of that overturning of the chalice as a sign and we all linked his death to the blood of Christ shed on the altar. Truly his blood mingled with that of Christ. Truly his 'beloved failure' was redemptive, like that of Christ".

Back in Lira, the great moment of purification and transformation began for Father Joseph. He was approaching the final stages of his life, but no one seemed to realise it. On Sunday 22nd March, he celebrated the Eucharist in the chapel of the Comboni College in Lira, for the very few remaining boys and some teachers. It was his last Mass. In the afternoon fever forced him to bed. No doctor was present and so he was the only one to realise the seriousness of the situation.

Father Mario Marchetti, an eyewitness of those days, recounts: "The nuns are immediately alerted. No alarms, because attacks of malaria fever are an ordinary thing for all of us. But Father Ambrosoli immediately says that there may be a complication for his kidneys. The fever is quite high; the next day, Monday 23rd, it shows no sign of abating. He is assisted by the three nuns who have been with him in Kalongo: Sister Romilde Spinato, Sister Annamaria Gugolé and Sister Silveria Pezzali. They know him well and know of his modesty and his absolutely not wanting to disturb others. However, they are also aware of his real state of health. Father Ambrosoli is serene, but we are surprised at his pessimism. (We only understand later that he had realised that his state of health was particularly serious).

On Tuesday 24, the sisters, seeing that Father Joseph is having difficulty in recovering and that the vomiting does not cease, they ask by radio what to do. On several occasions, Doctor Corti, from Gulu, gives precise advice and instructions; he says he would come at once, but the road is impassable and it is useless to risk it. The fever subsides. On the 25th evening it is a few lines above 37°. During the day he is continually attended to. I bring him communion. The nuns try to get him to swallow something, but the vomiting is persistent.

Meanwhile, Father Joseph continues to give instructions for the transport of the material to Angal. Very early on the morning of the 26th Brother Tognon leaves with two trucks and two other small vehicles: they go to Kampala, and then on to Angal.

On the 26th, Father Ambrosoli almost seems to recover. Even though he continues to appear discouraged, or rather, realistic. He is following the course of his illness with competence and conscience, making suggestions to the sisters and weighing up and sometimes modifying the instructions they receive by radio from the doctors.

At a certain point he has a kind of collapse, which he overcomes fairly easily. They give him the usual drip instead of feeding. Over the radio several times an attempt was made to have a government helicopter to transport him to Gulu, where Doctor Corti also has dialysis equipment (Father Ambrosoli, however, does not like this treatment). None of us thinks at all that he is nearing the end".

The last communion

Father Marchetti continues: "On the night of the 25th to the 26th, I arranged for the sisters to stay in the small flat near father's room. He resolutely objects, not deeming it necessary. So as not to contradict him, the sisters leave him around 9 pm. During the night, he moves a little to take a few sips of water and perhaps also because he is compelled by a few gags.

On the 26th I again take communion to him, handing him only a small portion of the host to avoid complications. I do everything under his instructions. The sisters are present and help him to pray. Sometimes they recite a part of the Breviary, while he follows as best he can.

The night of the 26th to the 27th promises to be ugly. Despite his insistent objections, I get Sister Romilde to stay in the fathers' house. I hear the nun moving around several times. Around one o'clock, the symptoms of a collapse appear. Sister Romilde immediately gives him help; on Father Joseph's instructions, she adds this and that medicine to the liquid in the drip. Having heard that I am in the corridor, Father Joseph begs the nun to call me because he wishes to make his confession. The nun, in the middle of the night, runs to call Sister Silveria and Sister Annamaria. They return immediately, bringing more medicine. I listen with edification to his last confession (only a few days have passed since the previous one). I try to comfort him. He appears very serene, so much so that, at a certain point, he invites everyone to go back to bed. As a last thing, he tells me that in the morning he would like to receive the sacrament of the sick. And he falls asleep.

Father Joseph does not know that we are trying to get a helicopter to take him to Doctor Corti in Gulu. The nuns are very careful not to tell him, because they know perfectly well that he would not want to. When they finally tell him in the morning, he replies: "But no! Why did you do it? I have always wanted to die with my people whom I loved so much". But then he is reassured: "The Lord's will be done. Lord, as Thou wilt. Thy will be done". He gives thanks and co-operates in everything in the preparations. He cannot, however, think about himself. He still gives precise provisions: nothing must remain in uncertainty. He enumerates the few things he will take with him to Gulu; everything else must proceed for Angal, where the bulk of the material has already been sent.

At one point he says he is ready. But he does not only talk about the journey that is about to begin. In fact he specifies: "Yes, I am now ready for everything. He is fully aware of the gravity of the situation. He continues to 'manage' the care that needs to be given to him, but he does so in the full knowledge that his end is near.

“The time has come”

"On the morning of 27 March," Father Mario Marchetti resumes, "he appears to us with a sharp nose and a slightly cyanotic colour. Yet, none of us think he is dying. We all remember how, in 1982, he overcame a severe attack of nephritis. We take it for granted that, returning to Italy, he will be treated and will recover.

At 9.15 we brothers and sisters gathered in his room. In the emotion of all, I administer the sacrament of the sick, give him communion and entrust to the ritual prayer the hope of his speedy recovery. Father Joseph actively participates in every moment of the ritual. He shows no agitation. On the contrary, he is lucid and serene. He reminds us that, shortly before leaving Kalongo, he attended the same rite celebrated for Bishop Cesana. The atmosphere is familiar. Brother Dal Santo jokingly says to him: "Soon you too will be in Verona to rest with Monsignor Cesana". Then, each of us goes back to his work, waiting for the helicopter to arrive.

Meanwhile, the Bishop of Lira, Bishop Cesare Asili, has asked for another helicopter, in case the one from Entebbe does not arrive.

When I return to see him, he is still of a lucidity that is surprising. He has lost none of his admirable presence of spirit. He follows the course of the illness step by step, advises the nuns what to do, but, at the same time, insists on not wanting to disturb them. He thinks of the helicopter that everyone is waiting for, but he insists in repeating: "Let me die here, with my people. I have spent my whole life for them. Why take me away now that my hours are counted?" He wants those present to help him pray, and he joins them with such conviction and fervour of will. I am going away for about an hour: I have to visit the school. When I return, at about 12.30, the nuns tell me that they are very worried: "Father Ambrosoli is not recovering".

Shortly after 1 p.m., the collapse comes. I invite the nuns to go and eat something, but they decide to stay. Accidentally, the drip needle sticks out of the vein, and every attempt to reinsert it proves futile: the veins have collapsed. The nun wants to try again, but Father Joseph urges her to desist: "At this point there is not much to be done. Take it easy, Sister".

Father Joseph can no longer move from his bed. I approach him and invite him to pray with me. I renew to him the absolution.

I send for the brothers and sisters. They come running. Only Brother Dal Santo is missing: having heard that the helicopter from Entebbe is arriving with Father Egidio Tocalli, doctor, has gone to the city to welcome him. The minutes run fast. Father Joseph makes the diagnosis: "The eyesight is declining. The legs are becoming more and more numb". Then, in complete serenity, he adds: 'The time has come'.

As long as he has breath, he recites the prayers with the others. Then he follows as he can the ejaculations. The last phrase is distinctly heard by all: "Lord, let thy will be done". Then he murmurs again something. I am not absolutely certain, but it could have been: '... even a hundred times'. After that, he fixes his eyes towards the wall, as if seeing someone. The breathing decreases conspicuously in rhythm, then stops altogether. No contortion. No gasps. The nun, who has been continuously monitoring his heartbeat, lifts the stethoscope and whispers. "He is dead."

It is 1.50 p.m. on Friday 27 March 1987.

Just two final comments. Mine: the Lord listened to his prayers rather than ours.

And that of Doctor Sacconi when I give him the news: "He agonised and died without the presence of none of us doctors! He who had been the doctor of everyone!".

The helicopter, with Doctor Tocalli on board, lands a few minutes later.

Before long, the small room and veranda of the Comboni House are filled with people from the mission and the surrounding area. Prayers, tears and signs of grief follow one another without interruption. Soon, people also begin to arrive from outside the city. The decision is taken to place the body in the large chapel of Comboni College. A large group of nuns, from the various institutes present in the diocese, squatted by the dead body of Fr. Joseph and remained there in prayer until late into the night".

Under the large acacia

Father Joseph always said he wanted to be buried "in the African way, that is, wrapped in a simple mat". The confreres, however, did not grant him that much. "Full of charity and obedience as he was, he will understand our difficulty in throwing dirt on him," comment Brother Bettini, Brother Dal Santo and Brother Aldo Pedercini, the latter having arrived a few days earlier from Kitgum. They prepare, therefore, a very simple coffin, place the body of Father Joseph in it and, late in the morning, transport it to the church. On it are placed the priestly insignia and the stethoscope.

On the afternoon of 27 March, there is a concelebration of the Eucharist in the chapel of Comboni College, packed with the faithful. With voice broken with tears, Father Marchetti offered some brief reflections on the humble and helpful presence of Father Joseph and on his desire to die among his own: "The Lord granted this desire of his".

There are also many people at the morning mass on Saturday 28. The solemn funeral liturgy takes place in the afternoon in the parish church of Lira-Ngeta, under heavy military escort, due to the presence of guerrillas in the area. Bishop Asili presides; numerous Comboni and local priests concelebrate. The church is packed and the large space in front of the building is also crowded. Solemnizing the ceremony is the very sweet sound of the adungu, string instruments reserved for the king of the clan and played at the end of the funeral celebrations to place the deceased among the ancestors: a sign of joy and honour for the 'great doctor' who is accorded this new status.

Many simple people want to thank him for having wanted to live next to them until the end. Hellen Akwero, a peasant woman, sums up the human story of Father Joseph with these words: 'He died for love of God and for love of the land of the Acholi. He especially loved the people of Kalongo. He offered his life to help the sick, Christians, the poor and the weak. Today we say thank you to him. And we also thank God for having sent him to us'.

According to local custom, both in official speeches and spontaneous prayers are also remembered the relatives of Father Joseph. "We thank them because, full of faith, they accepted wholeheartedly that their Joseph would remain among the people for whom he offered his life".

Father Joseph's coffin is laid to rest in the Lira cemetery, alongside the brethren who preceded him, under a large yellow acacia tree. Under a tree one lives, one suffers, one dies: this is the great mystery that Africa hides. An elderly Christian comments: "From this tomb we all know that there will come a help for the peace and concord of Uganda: that peace and concord that blooms from the tomb of the Risen One". Even after the funeral ceremony is over, people find it hard to detach themselves from the grave. The mound of earth that covers it is covered with flowers and simple garlands.

Witnesses

The echo of his death soon reached Italy. The newspapers write: "Having left the secure comforts of his father's company, he became a Comboni Missionary" (*Corriere della Sera*); "He transformed into a model hospital a building of straw and mud" (*La Prealpina*); "He abdicated the 'throne' of sweets to cure souls and bodies in Uganda" (*La Prealpina*).

The conclusion of the lecture that his friend and attending physician, Doctor Luciano Terruzzi, gave in the Napoleonic Hall of Villa Ponti in Varese on 28 April 1987, a month after Father Joseph's death: 'It has never happened to me to collect such lofty testimonies as I have seen shining in Father Ambrosoli. Never a moment of rebellion or discouragement, never an attitude of criticism or intolerance towards those who would have deserved it. The acceptance of illness in total serenity, the humble patience, fidelity to annoying periodic check-ups, without any anxiety for himself, but with the sole concern of being able to continue to serve his neighbour, lead me to formulate a conclusion: there was in Father Joseph, solid and compact, all that fabric of balance, of human virtues and consistency to the principles of faith in God who is Love, of charity for the neighbour who suffer and of hope in a more just world. On such a fabric cannot but draw the embroidery of heroic holiness'.

Father Palmiro Donini also wanted to remember him in *Nigrizia* (May 1987) by addressing a letter to him that was never written: 'Dear Father Joseph, since you left us, the film of your life has been on permanent projection on the screen of my mind. I found, then, with joy the page of the book on which you filmed it. It begins like this: Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Who would ever have imagined that you would also experience the bliss of insult and of feeling every kind of evil, you, the meek, the merciful, the worker of peace; of being persecuted for the sake of justice, you, who justice honoured with the charity of helping whoever was in need, not caring what was his record, you have been accused of being against the people. In a letter of yours, after the incredible event of the insults, without meaning to, you confided to me that you had also lived this last situation in an atmosphere of "bliss": "We should know how to exploit everything to our growth in the love of God. Pray for us, who are so hardened that we do not know how to make use of such unrepeatable occasions". Your hospital had become famous for the success of your surgeries and for the indefatigable assistance given to the sick by the nuns, but first of everything and above all because you were not simply its director and chief surgeon, but 'the chief of charity'.

In the same issue of *Nigrizia*, there is also the testimony of Anna Rizzotti Veronesi, who, sometime before, after working with Father Ambrosoli, had dedicated to him a nice brochure with colour photos, entitled *Uganda, Kalongo Hospital*, in which she referred to him as "God's surgeon", a title that the interested party had not appreciated, ordering those who had copies to destroy it: "It was what characterised him: his extraordinary generosity. He forgot himself and thought of others. He was always ready to help, to rush where there was need, at any time, never sparing himself. It was this generosity that led him to an untimely death. Dear Father Joseph, thank you. To love those who suffer is a gift that is worth life. You taught us this".

Welcome back home

Father Joseph's wish to be buried among the people he loved and for whom he gave his life will be realised in full only seven years later, on 9 April 1994.

Indescribable was the reception of Ambrosoli's remains, coming from Lira, at the Kalongo roundabout. A woman, detached from the group, comes forward to pay her respects, with the traditional funeral dance. The body enters the church to the rhythm of a hymn whose words read: "*Joseph, gift of God, you gave your life for us*".

Throughout the night, groups of Christians take turns in the vigil with songs and prayers. The next day, 10 April, in the large field in front of the parish church totally occupied by an imposing crowd, a solemn "welcome home" Eucharistic liturgy is celebrated in the open air. Concelebrating was the Apostolic Nuncio, the bishop of Gulu, many Comboni confreres and the parish priest of Ronago, Father Sergio Tettamanti, who came down to Uganda with three parishioners. After the service, the remains are carried on the shoulders to the cemetery in Kalongo and laid between the graves of Brothers Faustino Corner and Emilio Battistata. The legendary *Brogioli* (this is how his surname is 'mispronounced' by the people) of Acholi, Uganda's most respected surgeon, can finally rest among his people.

There is to be recorded what the people of Kalongo consider a real miracle: the flames and smoke that Father Ambrosoli saw rising towards the sky as he was leaving Kalongo, in truth they were not devouring the hospital; what was looted and devastated were the mission buildings.

When, in November 1989, the missionaries were able to return to Kalongo and reopen the hospital, they found that it had remained intact.

In the operating theatre, which had been, according to Sister Caterina Marchetti's beautiful expression, 'Father Joseph's sanctuary', the agenda of two years earlier is beautifully displayed on the notice board on the wall. All the people of Kalongo defended forcefully what they truly considered "their" hospital.

On 16 March 1990, the students from the school for midwives also returned, welcomed with the festive ringing of bells and with dances and songs of joy. Father Egidio Tocalli, who succeeded Father Joseph as head physician, recalls: "Everyone understood that from that moment on, the hospital would be resurrected. Today, years later, we continue to train African midwives in our school, convinced that Africa

must live by its own strength and that it is up to the African woman to rediscover her great dignity and capacity for love for the suffering".

On Father Ambrosoli's tomb there is a plaque that reminds everyone that he was a 'Comboni missionary, priest and doctor'. The real message, however, is contained in the phrase that Father Joseph repeated and that the people wanted carved in marble: 'God is love and I am his servant for the suffering people'.

Twelve years after his death, the Bishop of Gulu, John Baptist Odama, officially opens the canonisation process in Kalongo, supported by representatives of civil, religious, cultural and professional society, all touched by the shining example of Father Joseph. In his short speech during the ceremony, Bishop Odama spoke of him as 'a gift that God has given us'. In his letter to the Ugandan bishops explaining the trial, he appeals to the servant of God's reputation for holiness, Father Joseph Ambrosoli, "an example of heroic charity and humble service to his neighbour; a model of a great and zealous missionary of modern times; an example of a priest and doctor who was realised in his intense spirituality and conscientious experience; captivating and convincing example for the young people of today to wholeheartedly follow Christ in their vocation or state of life".

The saints are the Church's first resource. Father Joseph, who is certainly one of them, only wanted to follow Jesus Christ. Nothing else interested him so strongly. For him there was only Christ and, in Christ, the sick. And so he became the witness of an Africa that, beyond the many splits and divisions, the many wounds and sores, wants to make itself heard and resolutely inscribe itself in the path of the world. The Africa which Father Joseph believed in does not simply want to exist. It wants, instead, to take the initiative and demonstrate, through its dynamism, the vitality of its elites, the productivity of its peasants, the inventive imagination of its youth and the courage of its women, it wants to shout to the world that she, Africa, is the land of future.

THE END