

A portrait of Aurelio Boscaini, a middle-aged man with grey hair, smiling. He is wearing a white lab coat over a light blue shirt. On the left side of his lab coat, there is a small red cross with a black crossbar. The background features a large, dark, rocky mountain peak under a clear blue sky, with green foliage at its base.

Aurelio Boscaini

**A WITNESS TO THE
GOSPEL OF CHARITY**

**A LIFE OF BLESSED JOSEPH AMBROSOLI
DOCTOR AND PRIEST**

Aurelio Boscaini

A Witness to the Gospel of Charity

*A Life of Blessed Joseph Ambrosoli
Doctor and Priest*

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Introduction

The Beatification of the Comboni Missionary doctor and priest, Joseph Ambrosoli, is a wonderful blessing not only for the Archdiocese of Gulu in Northern Uganda, where he spent his life as a missionary, but also for Africa, the continent he so deeply loved. It is also a grace for the whole Church throughout the world.

Blessed Joseph was outstanding in many ways: in his work as a doctor and surgeon; in his selfless dedication to the sick and the injured; in his passionate commitment to pregnant women and those who were nursing infants; and in the holiness of his life. From when he first qualified as a doctor, Joseph described his project of life with the following 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 always see Jesus in me”. Later in his missionary life, his catchphrase became “God is love and I am His servant for those who are suffering”.

Father Joseph lived the values of the Gospel and strove to model himself on the life of Christ in serving all, without exception. And notwithstanding his great talents and his reputation as one of the best doctors in Uganda, he remained a simple and humble man. *A Witness to the Gospel of Charity: A Life of Blessed Joseph Ambrosoli* by Father Aurelio Boscaini traces the story of Blessed Joseph’s life, from his birth in Ronago in Northern Italy on July 25th 1923, to his training as a doctor and surgeon in Milan, to

his becoming a Comboni Missionary Priest, to his founding a three-hundred bed General Hospital and adjacent Midwifery School in Kalongo in Northern Uganda, to his untimely death for want of medical treatment in Lira on March 27th 1987 and through the long journey to his being declared 'Blessed' in Kalongo on November 20th 2022.

I was appointed to Gulu as Archbishop in January 1999, twelve years after the death of Blessed Joseph Ambrosoli, and on pastoral visits around my new Diocese, I heard many first-hand accounts of his great competence, unfailing kindness and genuine holiness. Everyone I met spoke highly of him and I was left in no doubt that *'Ajwaka Madit'* ('The Great Healer'), as people referred to Father Joseph, had been a very special person indeed. When I began to receive petitions from the Faithful of the Diocese to have Father Ambrosoli officially recognised as a Saint in the Church, I agreed to open the 'Cause of Canonisation' which I am delighted to say has now reached the penultimate stage with his recent Beatification. The lengthy Diocesan Enquiry in Gulu confirmed what I had been led to believe: that Blessed Joseph Ambrosoli not only heard the Good News but also put the Gospel into practice in his daily life in a truly extraordinary way. When, as a Bishop, I ordain a Deacon, handing him the 'Book of the Gospels', I tell him: "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe and practice what you teach". Blessed Joseph put these words into practice, living the Gospel day after day, often in the most difficult of circumstances, following the example of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

When the Holy Father proclaims an individual 'Blessed',

it is not just because of the evident and outstanding sanctity of the person so honoured, it is because he believes that the new Saint has a special relevance to us today. Saint Paul says that Christ is “the love of God made visible”: The newly-beatified Saint is a special manifestation to us, here and now, in the world of today, of the love that God has for all his children and how he wishes us, each one of us, to make that love ever more present in our world. As you read over the following pages, I am sure you will discover that Blessed Joseph Ambrosoli provides an inspiration to all of us to imitate Christ, the God-made-man, ever more faithfully in our ordinary everyday lives. He is a gift, a precious gift, that God gives to his People through the Church. My heartfelt wish is that all who come to know the life and person of Blessed Joseph through these pages may learn to love, as he loved, for he truly reflected the love of Christ in all that he said and did.

Archbishop John Baptist Odama
Gulu Archdiocese

1. The start of a great Missionary adventure

“My name is Joseph Ambrosoli. I come from Ronago. I have just qualified as a medical doctor, and I want to place my profession at the disposal of the Missions. I would like to know if, in your Order, a doctor can become a priest and if, once a member, he would be sure of being assigned to the Missions and practice the dual profession of priest and doctor”.

It is the Summer of 1949 and it is with these words that the young Doctor Ambrosoli introduces himself to Father Simone Zanoner, the Rector of the Comboni Missionary Seminary in Rebbio in the Province of Como in Northern Italy. Although Joseph says his name is ‘Ambrosoli’ he omits to mention that he belongs to the well-known and influential family of honey producers of the same name.

Father Zanoner replies: “The Comboni Missionaries were founded for the Missions of Africa, and it is therefore standard practice for those who join to go to the Missions. I can therefore guarantee that you will indeed go to the Missions!”. “In that case”, Joseph replied, “I will apply to enter. But first I will go to England to attend a course in tropical diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I would be obliged if you could give me the address of the Comboni Missionaries in London, not to ask for board and lodging but only as a point of contact.

I will look after my own arrangements”. This was the beginning of the missionary adventure of the one who would become popularly known as the ‘Ajwaka Madit’, the Doctor of the Acholi Peoples of Northern Uganda.

Sweet Roots

Joseph was born on 25th July 1923 to parents Giovanni Battista and Palmira Ambrosoli in Ronago, a charming village in the Province of Como, close to the Swiss border. The family was not originally from Ronago, but from the city of Como. Giovanni Battista had graduated with a Degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Wintenthur in the German-speaking region of Switzerland and was working in Liguria when, in 1910, he inherited the family estates around Ronago. This district was traditionally a wine-producing area but given the difficulties caused by the arrival in the 1920's of *grape phylloxera*, an insect pest of commercial grapevines, local farmers took up beekeeping at the instigation of Giovanni Battista. Beekeeping then came to replace completely the cultivation of vines. Giovanni Battista was to become the famous ‘Signor Ambrosoli’ whose beekeeping initiative developed into ‘Prodotti Ambrosoli’, one of the largest confectionary manufacturers in Italy, renowned for a famous radio (and later television) jingle: “There are all sorts of honey but nothing tastes quite like Ambrosoli Honey”. Joseph’s mother, Palmira, also from a well-to-do family, was the daughter of Doctor Constantino Valli, known in Como as the ‘Doctor of the Poor’. Joseph’s parents were married in 1906 in the Church of St. Bartholomew in Como: Giovanni Battista was twenty-four years of age and Palmira a year younger.

It was a long and very happy marriage that was blessed with eight children, six boys and two girls, of whom Joseph was the seventh.

‘Mama’ Palmira

The task of rearing Joseph and his siblings fell mainly to Palmira. The words written on her Memoriam Card describe her in the following way: “For her loved ones and for all who knew her, she was an example of evangelical witness, a gift of grace and a blessing”. In those days, many people living in the countryside lived a Christian faith filled with simplicity, humility and heartfelt concern for others all borne out of a sense of solidarity with their neighbours. Given the example set by his mother, Joseph learned how to live simply with natural, spontaneous humility. Irma Domenis, the housekeeper to the Ambrosoli Family for many years, recalls the great respect Joseph always had for servants: “He was always very kind and thoughtful to everyone no matter who they were or what their station in life”. Joseph learned from his mother that humility is a gift borne of a true knowledge and understanding of life.

Although almost nothing is known of Joseph’s early faith, we do know that ‘Mama’ Palmira was a daily attendant at Mass who taught her children to pray morning and evening and to recite the Rosary every day. Throughout his long years in the Missions, Joseph would never give up this practice which he said he had learned at his Mother’s knee. Even in the most difficult days at Kalongo Hospital, at the height of the murderous campaign by the ‘Lord’s Resistance Army’, people would often see him pray-

ing the Rosary.

As a university under-graduate, Joseph was accustomed to leaving the fresh bread and the soft honey to his fellow students on campus while he made do with bread from the day before and honey from the bottom of a discarded pot. It was the same in Africa: "First he would serve those at table, particularly any guest, and then help himself from what remained. He always served himself last." (Sister Santina Pelizzari CMS).

He was brought up never to waste anything and to be sparing in everything he used. That same sense of moderation and self-restraint accompanied him throughout his whole life. No one ever saw him, for example, enter a restaurant or buy food along the way when travelling. His lunch was always the sandwich he had prepared the previous night before setting out for the journey.

Don Carlo

Four days after he was born, Joseph was baptised by Father 'Don' Carlo Verga, the Parish Priest of Ronago. He was Parish Priest there for thirty-five years and was renowned for his devotion to the care and well-being of his flock. He was a very obliging and kindly priest, with a ready smile, who took particular interest in the education of the youth of the Parish and in visiting the sick and infirm. The example of his Parish Priest would accompany Joseph throughout his missionary life.

"I will offer him to you with joy!"

During the 1920's, illness was never very far away from families and many children died in infancy. When Joseph

was just one and a half years old, he fell ill with a serious bowel disease. He became so ill that Palmira thought she would lose him and prayed to the Lord through the intercession of Our Lady: "Holy Mother of God, don't take my child from me. Please, leave him with me. I promise that, when he grows up, and if you want him, I will offer him to you with joy!". Joseph recovered, Palmira firmly believed, due to the intercession of Our Blessed Lady. He regained his health completely.

Military Service

After the outbreak of the Second World War, with Central and Northern Italy under Nazi Occupation and the Resistance Movement led by the 'Partigiani' (*Partisans*), Joseph was called up for military service. He passed the medical examination and was declared fit to serve but was given 'unlimited leave' because the family already had two sons serving in the Army. Exempted from military service, Joseph enrolled for a Degree Course in 'Medicine and Surgery' at the University of Milan, to which he would have to commute regularly from the family home in Ronago.

Events were moving fast: the Italian Prime Minister, Benito Mussolini, was overthrown in late July 1943 and an Armistice signed with the Anglo-American Forces six weeks later. The city of Como was occupied by the Nazis, but the border with Switzerland was close by and many thousands crossed over and found refuge in the town of Chiasso in the Canton of Ticino. Following the lead of the Bishop of Como, Msgr. Alexander Macchi, Joseph helped Jewish refugees and others who were being persecuted by the local Fascist regime ('Republic of Salò') to make their



Joseph Ambrosoli (back row, far left) with a group of fellow conscripts who in 1944 went to the military camp of Heuberg-Stetten in Germany.

way across the border to safety in Switzerland. In March 1944, Joseph was forced to enrol in the 'Salò Army' and was sent to assist at the military hospital in Baggio, near Milan. A month later, in April 1944, he was sent with fellow medical students for paramilitary training to the Heuberg-Stetten Camp near Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg in Germany. Life in the camp was very tough indeed with intensive training and manual work from dawn until dusk. Fellow conscripts at the time such as (Doctor) Luciano

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Giornazzi and (Doctor) Camillo Terzaghi later recalled the great esteem in which Joseph was held by his companions due to his over-riding concern for their health and well-being amidst all the many trials and tribulations suffered through the harsh regime at the camp. Joseph was always ready to lend a hand to those in any type of need: to share his meagre rations with those who were sick or unwell; and to offer a word of encouragement and a shoulder to cry on. He never hid his religious affiliations and did eventually confide in his comrades that he intended to obtain a Degree in Medicine, specialise in Tropical Diseases, and then become a Missionary Doctor.

Despite the difficulties, Joseph considered that his life as a soldier was not all in vain. He thought that it served to strengthen his character and his sense of purpose in life. He later recalled that dying for the 'Fatherland', in circumstances such as the Second World War, meant absolutely nothing for a believer in Christ. And he believed that if the soldiers who had perished had any choice in the matter, they would all, without exception, have chosen to live. Many years later, in Kalongo, he treated hundreds of the combatants who were injured in many conflicts. These included: the two civil wars raging in Uganda in the late 1970s and then in the early 1980s: and the guerilla warfare led by Alice Lakwena, and later by Joseph Kony, against the 'National Resistance Army' (*later renamed the 'Uganda People's Defence Force'*).

'The Cenacle'

The end of the Second World War saw the start of a period that proved fundamental to Joseph's decision to become

a Missionary. His spiritual life was deeply affected by a meeting with Father Silvio Riva, the Assistant Director of 'Catholic Action' in the Diocese of Como. He encouraged the lay people that he met to join a prayer group he had founded called 'The Cenacle'. Joseph was one of the first to enrol and never missed one of their meetings.

It was a group of like-minded individuals who met regularly to pray together. They also sought to bear witness in their daily lives to the longings of the 'Heart of Jesus', as expressed by the Lord in his final discourse to the Twelve Apostles during the Last Supper and symbolised by the gesture of his washing their feet. Joseph's spiritual growth became a search for holiness, identifying with Christ on the eve of his Passion and Death not as an end in itself but for the service of others in simplicity and humility. In this way, day after day, Joseph's vocation in offering his life for the Missions matured.

Once the war was over, Joseph resumed his university studies. He graduated in Medicine and Surgery at the University of Milan in July 1949. Soon afterwards, he joined the main hospital in Como as a volunteer to gain professional experience. Doctor Luciano Terruzzi, a consultant under whom he trained (and who was later to become his personal physician and a life-long friend), remembers: "In assisting the sick and in carrying out his daily duties, Joseph was always most attentive. He always took great care, without attracting attention, to make up for the omissions of other doctors, and thanked those who had thereby afforded him the opportunity of practicing various diagnostic and therapeutic tasks which he otherwise would not have undertaken".

From Doctor to Novice

On that day in the summer of 1949 when Joseph went to the Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Rebbio looking for information, he made his decision: he would become a Comboni Missionary Doctor. But he first went to London to attend a course in tropical diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Upon returning to Italy, he wrote to the then Superior-General of the Comboni Missionaries, Father Antonio Todesco, expressing his desire to join the Order as a Priest.

At twenty-eight years of age, and already a qualified doctor and surgeon, Joseph was admitted to the Novitiate. It was October 1951 when, accompanied by his mother Palmira and his younger brother Alessandro, Joseph entered the Novitiate in Gozzano. The other Novices were all much younger than him. With his clothing in the habit of the Order at Midnight Mass on December 24th 1951, and surrounded by family and friends, Joseph officially started the first year of the two-year Novitiate along with twenty-five fellow Novices. His title of 'Doctor' was replaced by that of 'Brother', and he appeared to prefer being called 'Brother Joseph' more! The life of the Novitiate was austere. It aimed at strengthening the resilience of people, who would have to face the great challenges and difficulties that the Missions invariably offered for those destined to preach the Gospel in Africa at the time.

Infirmarian

In a very short time he settled in well, willingly accepting the rigid structure of the Novitiate and the rules and practices that dictated life there down to the finest detail.



Mama Palmira with her son as a Novice

Yet for Joseph, obedience did not mean renouncing the ability to see and consider matters for himself. He knew how to explain his thoughts and opinions, though always respectfully and patiently. What was important for him was the contemplation of the Heart of Jesus (*the Comboni Missionaries were then called 'Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus'*), finding in the self-giving of Christ the impetus for his missionary commitment. Like Daniel Comboni before him, Joseph also discovered that the Heart of Jesus had

pounded and died for the peoples of Africa too. His fellow Novices held him in high regard. One later commented: “He always wanted the humblest of tasks and was often at the sink washing the dishes, even when it was not his turn”. Despite being a fully qualified doctor, Joseph confined himself to the role of an infirmarian in the Novitiate. For example, he never prescribed medication, and when the need arose, he accompanied his fellow Novices to the local doctor.

From a Professed Religious ...

Joseph ended the Novitiate with his First Religious Profession. That was on September 9th 1953. This is the date the Comboni Missionaries celebrate the Feast of St. Peter Claver, one of the Patrons of the Order. He was a Spanish Jesuit known as ‘The Apostle of Black Slaves’. It was under his protection, Bishop (*later Saint*) Daniel Comboni placed his newly established Institutes for men and for women (*later the ‘Comboni Missionaries’ and the ‘Comboni Missionary Sisters’*): for he saw him as “a shining example of dedication to the poorest and most abandoned”. The day after his Profession, Joseph - Brother Ambrosoli - entered the Scholasticate of Venegono Superiore in Varese to attend some courses in theology.

The news of the presence of a ‘Medical Doctor’ in the Scholasticate quickly spread to the Comboni Missions in East Africa! The first one to request his services was Father Alfredo Malandra in Uganda. He petitioned the Superior-General, Father Antonio Todesco, for Doctor Ambrosoli to come immediately to Uganda – and with good reason: “I only accepted to go to the Mission of Kalongo on condition that we would develop healthcare services there”, Father

Alfredo wrote. Father Todesco gave in to the pressure and sent a letter to Joseph indicating the intention of the Superiors to allow him to be ordained a priest at the end of his Third Year of Theology (thereby bringing forward his Ordination to the Priesthood by one year), and immediately assigning him to the Mission of Kalongo in Northern Uganda.

... to a hurriedly ordained Priest

In September 1955, Joseph made his Perpetual Religious Profession as a Comboni Missionary. He was ordained a Deacon in early November 1955, and then six weeks later a Priest on December 17th, by Archbishop John Baptist Montini (*later Pope and Saint Paul VI*) in the Cathedral of Milan. During the singing of the Litany at his Ordination to the Priesthood, when Joseph lay prostrate on the floor of the Cathedral with the other Ordinands, members of the Congregation noticed that the soles of his shoes had holes in them. “From his First Religious Profession, Joseph made a point of never wearing a new pair of shoes or new clothes but chose instead to make do with second-hand ones”, one of his companions remembers. The following day, a Sunday, Father Joseph celebrated his First Mass with a packed Congregation in his home Parish of Ronago, where he had been brought by his parents for Baptism thirty-two years previously.

2. The Missions in Northern Uganda

The Pearl of Africa

At the start of February 1956, Father Joseph set sail from Venice aboard the aptly named '*SS Africa*' bound for Mombasa in Kenya. He then continued his journey overland, by rail, from Mombasa to Gulu, a town in the North of Uganda. The journey followed the winding path of the then 'East African Railways': through the Tsavo Park and the Great Rift Valley in Kenya; crossing into Uganda through the tea plantations in the Tororo Hills; the wetlands of the River Nile around Soroti and Lira; and on through the tropical savannah to Gulu. Then, for the last leg of his journey, Joseph had to travel one hundred and fifty miles by road from Gulu to reach the Mission of Kalongo in East Acholi to which he had been assigned.

Uganda, the 'Pearl of Africa' as the Welsh explorer Henry Morton Stanley described it, is rather small in comparison to many other African countries. It is roughly the same size as the United Kingdom (94,000 square miles). Located in East Africa, the country is positioned west of Kenya, south of South Sudan, east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and north of Rwanda and Tanzania. Although Uganda has no direct access to the sea, much of its border is lakeshore, including the immense Lake Victoria. It is from here that the river Nile flows for over four



thousand miles to the Mediterranean Sea. Apart from Lake Victoria, one of the largest lakes in the world, Uganda is home to Lakes Albert, Edward, George, Kyoga, Kwana, Bugondo, Opet and countless other smaller lakes which cover one fifth of the total area of the country. The diverse landscape also encompasses the snow-capped Rwenzori Mountains (known from ancient times as 'The Mountains of the Moon'), the largest mountain range on the African Continent. Its highest peak, Margherita on Mount Stanley, reaches over sixteen thousand, seven hundred feet in height. An average elevation of some three thousand feet above sea level makes for a relatively mild tropical climate in a country that straddles the Equator. It is drier and warmer in the north, where the savannah predominates; and wetter and cooler in the south, where forests, swamps and waterways abound. The year is divided into two rainy seasons from March to May and from September to December, and two dry seasons in January and February and then from June to August. As a fertile and well-watered country, the main economic resource is subsistence agriculture with the growing of millet, sorghum, corn, cassava and bananas. There is also larger-scale commercial cultivation of tea, coffee, sugar, and cotton destined for export.

The arrival of the first Comboni Missionaries

Due to the many and varied difficulties, the Comboni Missionaries only reached Uganda (by boat along the River Nile from Southern Sudan) to preach the Gospel in January 1910. This fulfilled their founder's long-held ambition, nearly thirty years after his death. The north of the country was originally part of the 'Apostolic Vicariate of Central Af-

rica' of which Bishop Comboni had been appointed the first 'Vicar-Apostolic' by Pope Pius IX in May 1872. A successor of Comboni, Bishop Franz Xavier Geyer, together with Brother Augusto Cagol and Father Albino Colombaroli, opened the first Catholic Mission in Northern Uganda in February 1910. This was at Omach, on the banks of Lake Albert, among the Alur ethnic group of North-western Uganda.

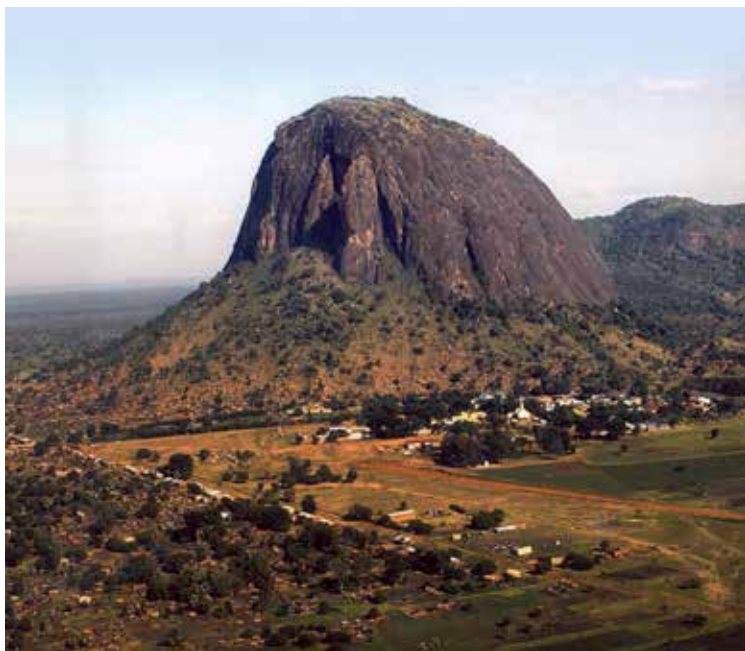
The Colonial Administration in Entebbe, the seat of government for the Protectorate of Uganda prior to the granting of Independence in October 1962, then gave permission for the Comboni Missionaries to open a further Mission, this time among the neighbouring Acholi tribe. The site chosen for the second Mission, some fifty miles from Omach, was in Gulu in West Acholi. This proved an inspired choice as, in time, Gulu developed into the administrative, commercial and cultural centre of Northern Uganda. Father Pasquale Crazzolaro, Father Albino Colombaroli and Father John Baptist Fornara were the first Comboni Missionaries to arrive and establish a Mission in Gulu in January 1911. They were followed some months later by four other priests.

From these first beginnings in Gulu, the work of evangelization undertaken by the Comboni Missionaries among the peoples of Northern Uganda flourished. The first Catholic Missions were founded among the Madi and Lugbara tribes in North-western Uganda with Moyo in 1917 and Arua in 1918; among the Lango ethnic group of North-Central Uganda with the opening of Missions in Ngeta (Lira) in 1930 and Aber in 1940; and among the Kari-mojong peoples of North-eastern Uganda beginning with the opening of Kangole in 1934 and Morulem in 1949.

The initial presence in Gulu, among the Acholi peoples who inhabit much of Northern Uganda in an area commonly referred to as 'Acholiland', led to the founding of Missions in Lacor (1927), Layibi (1952) and Anaka (1953) in West Acholi, and in Kitgum (1915), Kalongo (1934), Pajule (1948) and Padibe (1955) in East Acholi. The presence of the Comboni Missionaries in Uganda peaked in 1971, with three hundred and forty-four Confrères working in seventy Missions, the vast majority in the north of the country.

The Mission of Kalongo

The town of Kalongo, in the District of Agago, stands on a plateau three thousand six hundred feet above sea level. It lies at the foot of a mountain, or rather, of an immense spur of almost perpendicular basalt rock that towers above the surrounding area ('Mount Oret'). In the middle of the twentieth century, the town was just a village under the local government of the then much larger 'Kitgum District' which had a population of over forty thousand people. Of these, fifteen thousand were Roman Catholic, five thousand were Anglican Christians and most of the remaining population were followers of African Traditional Religion. Situated on the edge of Acholiland, straddling the boundary between the Acholi and Karimojong ethnic groups, the Mission of Kalongo was founded in February 1934 by Father Angel Fiocco, Father Joseph Calegari and Brother Louis Calderola. The Mission, however, knew difficult times from its very beginnings with the early and simultaneous tragic loss of two young Comboni Missionaries in 1936: Father Arthur Chiozza at just twenty-eight years of age and Sister Lucidia Vidale at only thirty-one.



The town of Kalongo lying at the foot of a mountain, or rather, of an immense block of basalt stone known as Mount Oret.

Mission Dispensary

In 1943, a Comboni Missionary Nursing Sister, Eletta Mantiero, opened a small dispensary for the care of those who lived around the Mission. This was subsequently enlarged under the able supervision of newly arrived Brother Angelo Avi in 1949, who also arranged for the addition of a Maternity Section five years later. The fame of the 'Cottage Hospital' spread far and wide and before long, patients were arriving from Kitgum, Lira and Gulu. Such was its popularity that the local authorities in those towns organ-

ised public transport to enable people to access the health services there.

As the numbers of patients seeking treatment continued to increase, the idea of opening a General Hospital in Kalongo, which could be equipped and staffed to provide medical and surgical services for many different conditions and illnesses, gradually took shape among the missionaries stationed there. This project came to fruition principally due to the initiative and sustained efforts of Father Alfred Malandra, a visionary Parish Priest and the Superior of the Mission in Kalongo from 1947 until 1967. Originally from Olevano in the Province of Pavia in Northern Italy, Alfred had joined the Comboni Missionaries at the end of high school and was ordained a Priest in 1929. The following year he arrived in Uganda. After working in the Missions of Lira and Gulu, he was assigned to Kalongo in 1947. One of the first things Father Alfred did was to arrange for the erection of a permanent building to replace the round grass-thatched hut, made of wooden poles and mud, that Sister Eletta had hitherto been using for the Mission Dispensary.

Father Malandra was convinced that the preaching of the Gospel in Africa rested on the twin pillars of education and healthcare. This was how the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa came to be born, he firmly believed, and so he threw his undoubted energies and enthusiasm into founding several primary and secondary schools around Kalongo and developing the Mission Dispensary into a fully operational Health Centre with a well-equipped Maternity Section. By the mid-1950's the Maternity Unit in the Mission was responsible for the delivery of an average of seven hundred

babies a year. Father Malandra's plans for the provision of Health Services to East Acholi and beyond, regardless of ethnicity, culture, creed, or social status, did not stop there. He also dreamt of opening a 'School for Midwifery' and of transforming the Health Unit into an acute General Hospital. In attempting to fulfil these dreams, Father Malandra wrote to the Superior-General, Father Todesco, in 1954 explaining that he urgently needed the 'Scholastic Medic' who was preparing for the priesthood in Venegono: "I need him as soon as possible ... See if you can speed up the date of his Ordination". Father Joseph Ambrosoli was duly assigned to him and to Kalongo, rather than to the fledgling hospital that had recently opened in the Mission of Lacor near Gulu.

Humble Servant

Arriving in Kalongo towards the end of February 1956, Father Joseph could hardly have imagined that his entire service as a Comboni Missionary would take place there. Father Malandra sent Brother Angelo Avi, accompanied by a local teacher Gino Owiny, to collect Father Joseph from the Mission in Gulu. Father Joseph insisted on giving up the seat in the cabin of the truck to Gino Owiny and happily sat instead in the back of the truck for the five-hour journey, zigzagging to avoid the potholes along the gravel roads through the savannah, from Gulu to Kalongo. Brother Avi recounted the episode much later and said, "I have always admired hard-working Missionaries who live with joy the motto 'to serve is to rule'". That motto has great parentage: it is from none other than Saint Irenaeus of Lyon.

Father Joseph quickly settled down to life in Kalongo

where he was very happy to be part of, and to serve, that Missionary Community. For him, the Community of Missionaries was the real face of the Order of which he chose to become a member and he regarded this as a precious gift from God. Throughout his life Joseph remained struck by the words that Bishop Daniel Comboni had written for his Missionaries in his 'Rule of 1871': the necessity of always evangelising as a "little Cenacle of Apostles". Joseph regarded himself and his ministry as a doctor, as being part of a family: the family of the Comboni Missionaries and the wider family of the Local Church in Northern Uganda.

Midwifery School

Almost eight years after graduating as a medical doctor, and with limited experience of performing surgery in the operating theatre, Father Joseph set to work. His first patients were two local people: one mauled by a lion, the other attacked by a buffalo. Kalongo was close to the Kidepo Valley National Park, one of the largest in Uganda, and teeming with dangerous wildlife. To sterilise the surgical instruments, he used an autoclave left over from the Second World War and managed to save the lives of the two individuals. Most of his time was spent seeing patients presenting themselves at the Health Centre and in assisting Sister Eletta Mantiero in the most difficult childbirth cases in the Maternity Section. After attending a Course in Obstetrics at Mulago Hospital in Kampala, Father Ambrosoli was given permission by the Protectorate Authorities in Entebbe to open a School for Midwifery in Kalongo. With the arrival in 1958 of two volunteer doctors, Jane MacShane from Scotland and Pietro Tozzi from Italy, and



Group photograph of the Midwifery School (1958-1959). The staff, seated from far left: (second row from back) Dr Pietro Tozzi, Dr Jane MacShane, Sr Licinia Binotto and Fr Joseph Ambrosoli; (second row from front) Sr Evelina Maggioni and Sr Eletta Mantiero.

after the visit of the new Governor of Uganda, Sir Frederick Crawford, the School was officially recognised and the first 'Course in Midwifery' began. The Curriculum was based on the training prescribed for Midwives in the United Kingdom and involved three years of full-time study combined with practical, supervised, experience on a Maternity Ward. At the end of the Course, the candidate had to sit an examination before a Board of Examiners from Kampala. Successful candidates were awarded a 'Diploma in Midwifery' which was recognised in East Africa, in the

United Kingdom and indeed throughout all the Commonwealth. A notable triumph indeed.

The example of the Good Samaritan

Although Father Malandra dreamt of opening a large General Hospital in Kalongo, building it from scratch and ensuring it was properly equipped was a rather different matter! Father Joseph remained undaunted by such a difficult task. He literally rolled up his sleeves and after he had finished seeing the last of the day's patients in the Health Centre, he became a labourer. He brought sand and gravel from the local river, collected stones from the side of the neighbouring mountain, supervised the firing of the locally made clay bricks, and drove the mission truck time and again to buy cement and iron sheets in Gulu. The Headmaster of the Mission Primary School, Mr. Kamillo Oyaró Oriik, mobilised staff and pupils alike to help in the collecting of aggregates and in preparing the crushed stone needed for laying the concrete foundations and floors. Father Joseph worked tirelessly. At first, people living around the Mission were surprised at seeing him undertaking such lowly work, but surprise soon turned to admiration and they, in turn, then showed a willingness to volunteer their services in the construction of the hospital.

Land was in plentiful supply. There was no need to construct two-storey buildings. As elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, the hospital in Kalongo took the form of a series of simple, single-storey pavilions, connected by covered shelters and endowed with large verandas. The design allowed for greater circulation of air and for the easier movement of the medical personnel around the hospital; it also facili-

tated the families of the patients who were responsible for preparing food for their sick relatives.

Often, on reflection during this time, Joseph realised that he was in danger of being overwhelmed with all the work and of forgetting what was essential in his ministry as a doctor and priest. He would then repeat to himself: “I must try to imitate my Master when he treated the sick who came to him ... If they can only see Jesus in me!”. Among the many images described in the Gospels, he found the Parable of the Good Samaritan of most relevance to his situation. In the Samaritan who became a neighbour to the unfortunate man left half dead on the road, who bent over him and bandaged his wounds, and took care of him, Father Joseph found the example to follow. With a heart like that of Jesus, which made him see, judge and act in a new way, he felt he was called by the Lord to do the same thing. He felt that his duty was to come ever closer to those in need of medical care and attention. In serving the sick in his midst, Father Joseph found the ‘hidden treasure’ he was looking for.

Kalongo General Hospital

After only three years, the ‘cottage hospital’ in Kalongo had been transformed into a fully equipped acute General Hospital with a capacity of two hundred beds (although it would eventually reach three hundred and ninety-eight beds). It was the first Catholic hospital opened in Northern Uganda and set the pattern that other Catholic hospitals founded there would follow: in Lacor in West Acholi; in Kitgum in East Acholi; in Angal and Maracha in West Nile; and in Aber in Lira District. All went through the same pro-

cess of development: namely, starting with the opening of a Mission Dispensary; the addition of a Maternity Unit; the training up of local staff; and then the establishment of a fully operational hospital. All eyes were on the hospital in Kalongo - considered at the time the model to be followed - and on its leading physician, whose fame as a surgeon began to spread with the expansion of the hospital. Patients began arriving from Lira, Mbale, Kampala and other parts of Uganda; from Kisumu, Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya; and in the 1960's from as far afield as the United Arab Emirates and India.

Unrelenting Workload

A glance at Father Joseph's daily schedule gives some idea of the amount of sheer physical effort he exerted. In addition to his work in the Operating Theatre, in the Out-patient's Clinic and on the Surgical Wards, he managed the Facility on a day-to-day basis and lectured in the Midwifery School. His day usually began early with the more difficult and demanding surgical interventions for example, thyroidectomy, partial gastrectomy, radical mastectomy, and uterine surgery. He then undertook more minor procedures, for example appendectomy, the surgical dressing of leprosy patients and the removal of cataracts. He could remain at the operating table for up to six hours at a time, always on his feet, and then immediately move to the Out-patient's Clinic without showing the slightest sign of tiredness. If called upon for a medical emergency, he would calmly return to the operating table without so much as a frown or a murmur. Sister Pierina Bodei, the Comboni Missionary Sister who was in charge of the Op-



erating Theatre in Kalongo from 1960 to 1968, recalls that she never heard Father Joseph complain that he was tired or that the work was too much, or ask if a patient was the last on the day's operating list. He continued working away until he had seen the last surgical patient, then removed his surgical gloves and gown, donned his hospital attire, and left directly for his clinic in the Out-patient's Department. He did this day after day, week after week, and month after month. Being on his feet for long periods of time would lead to ever more frequent episodes of sciatica and eventually force Father Joseph to undergo 'lumbar disc hernia' surgery in 1975.

'Ajwaka Madit'

Within a few years, people began referring to Father Joseph as *'Ajwaka Madit'* ('The Great Healer') or *'Doctor Ma-*

dit’ (‘The Great Physician’). The use of the adjective ‘great’ by the local people was somewhat surprising given that his main qualities (by common consent) were his ability to work away ‘out of the limelight’ without drawing attention to himself and his many talents; and his great humility and simplicity when dealing with patients and their relatives, staff and the workers around the hospital. These qualities were not usually associated with importance, authority, or leadership in a tribal society where the traditional system of governance was in the form of Chiefdoms, Clan Elders and a Paramount Chief. Joseph’s preference was to remain ‘in the shadows’ and allow his fellow Missionaries, colleagues, and staff to receive the credit for any success achieved while he was always ready to step in and accept responsibility for any fault or failing on their part that came to light. Telling in this regard, was his practice of invariably remaining to the side or towards the back, but never in the centre, of any group photograph taken at the hospital or in the Mission.

3. The ‘Miraculous’ Powers of Father Joseph

Fellow doctors and brother priests

Within a year of opening its doors, the General Hospital at Kalongo became the primary healthcare facility for East Acholi: it dealt with most medical emergencies which were taken to the ‘Accident and Emergency’ Department there. Medical personnel are evidently the key to ensuring that a hospital, once it is operational, functions effectively and efficiently in providing the necessary specialised medical and nursing care to patients. During the years he was at Kalongo, Father Joseph was forever looking for volunteer doctors to assist him in staffing and running the hospital. One of them, a fellow doctor and priest, Palmiro Donini, stands out among the many who were to offer their services over the years in Kalongo. Father Donini, a ‘Fidei Donum’ Missionary (*from the Latin meaning ‘Gift of Faith’ and referring to Diocesan Priests who make themselves available to work as Missionaries in other Continents*), who was originally from Brescia in Northern Italy, became the ‘right-hand’ of Father Joseph in Kalongo for nearly twenty-five years.

Doctor Donini graduated with a Degree in Medicine from the University of Parma, a city in the Northern Italian Region of Emilia-Romagna, in 1944. He went on to specialise as a dentist in the prestigious ‘School of Medicine

and Dentistry' at the University of Bologna, the oldest university in the world, dating from 1088. After graduating as a qualified dentist in 1949, rather than embarking on a career in dentistry, Palmiro felt a call to the priesthood and decided to join the Seminary in his home Diocese of Brescia, where he was ordained a priest in 1954.

For Father Donini there was a profound association between his profession as a medical and dental practitioner and his priestly vocation: placing his training as a health-care professional at the service of others, particularly the poorer members of society, was a logical application of the Gospel just as it was for Father Joseph Ambrosoli. It was perhaps unsurprising therefore that he responded to a call from the then Bishop of Gulu, a Comboni Missionary by the name of Msgr. John Baptist Cesana. At the time they met, Msgr. Cesana was on a visit to Brescia from his neighbouring home Diocese of Milan and on the lookout for doctors who could lend a hand to Father Joseph in Kalongo.

Father Palmiro arrived at Kalongo in 1963, having first undertaken courses in English and in tropical diseases at the University of Genoa. He quickly realised that the main health difficulty for the local people was the scourge of leprosy or Hansen's Disease. Leprosy is an infectious disease caused by slow-growing bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. This causes discoloration of the skin and affects the peripheral nerves in the hands and feet, in the lining of the nose and in the eyes. It is known to occur at all ages ranging from early infancy to old age. With early diagnosis and treatment, the disease is completely curable but, if left untreated, the resultant nerve damage can lead to paralysis of hands and feet, with the loss of fingers and

toes; blindness; and deformation of the nose through the destruction of the nasal cartilage.

Father Palmiro decided, given the circumstances, to undertake a year-long specialisation in Hansen's Disease at the renowned ALERT ('All Africa Leprosy Rehabilitation and Training Centre') medical and research Institute in Addis Ababa. During his years at Kalongo he was to dedicate himself to the treatment of leprosy. From his work in identifying and treating leprosy patients all over East Acholi, he was able to publish several well-received papers, especially on leprosy-related ocular pathology (LROP), in medical journals in Italy.

Healing the Heart and the Spirit

The two fellow doctors and brother priests worked in tandem dividing duties in the hospital between one another. Father Joseph oversaw the Operating Theatre, Accident and Emergencies and the adult Out-Patient Department; while Father Palmiro looked after the majority of the hospital's patients who were infants, young children, and adolescents in the Paediatric Department. He was also responsible for the Medical Wards.

Apart from ensuring that patients received the very best of medical care, Father Joseph and Father Palmiro strove to make the hospital environment in Kalongo as friendly and as welcoming as possible. They were aware that many patients and their families were unaccustomed to, and so often daunted by, such a healthcare facility. Of note was their insistence, to the surprise of many at the time, that people suffering from leprosy, the most marginalised of any group in Acholi society, were accommodated in the

Medical and Surgical Wards alongside patients suffering from other illnesses and diseases. All those needing hospital admission were welcome regardless of the nature of their sickness or ailment. “No one should feel like a stranger here”, Father Joseph would often repeat to the staff of the hospital, always accompanying his words with an unmistakable smile. Much of the success in achieving such an outcome was the time and energy the two doctors devoted into nurturing a sense of belonging among the staff, with everyone working together through shared values and trust, towards the same end. Father Joseph and Father Palmiro considered themselves more as ‘reference



The senior staff at Kalongo Hospital in 1971. Back row, from left to right: Fr Joseph Ambrosoli, Fr Manuel Albert Grau, Fr Aldo Marchesini. Front row, from left to right: Sr Donata Pacini and Fr Palmiro Donini.

persons' or 'guides' than 'directors' or 'heads', something that helped improve team spirit and which undoubtedly assisted in making the atmosphere as welcoming as it was. This fact was often confirmed down the years by many official visitors to Kalongo.

In their discussions with the medical personnel, particularly in the aftermath of some medical success, the pair were renowned for always giving the credit to Almighty God: "We may take care of the sick, but only God can heal them", and "It is all the power and goodness of God". Doctors and nurses alike were struck by their great fondness for quoting from the Bible when discussing medical care: "I will heal them, says the Lord" (Isaiah 57:19); "He heals all your infirmities" (Psalm 103:3); "He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3); and "Son, do not neglect yourself in sickness, but pray to the Lord and he will heal you" (Ecclesiasticus 38:9). And finally: "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" (Ecclesiasticus 38:12-14).

Doctor Bruno Turchetta, an Accident and Emergency Consultant from Frosinone in Central Italy, who spent sabbaticals and many of his annual vacations in Kalongo recounts: When faced with a life-threatening situation with a Muslim patient, Father Joseph would ask, "Would you like us to pray together?". To which the patient would invariably reply, "Of course I would. Don't we worship the same God?". "Indeed, we do", Father Joseph would say, before leaving everything else to one side, and spending

as much time as was needed in prayer with the person concerned. His serenity in such situations was legendary and contagious. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising that people came to have great faith in Father Joseph and see him as a 'Man of God' who had the power not only to heal the body, but the spirit and heart as well.

Jesus the Healer

In his work as a surgeon and doctor, Father Joseph consciously strove to follow the example of Jesus Christ, writing to one friend: "I am trying to impersonate (yes, that's right, impersonate) the Master when he healed the sick who came to him ... I want the sick to see in me the Jesus who heals".

The testimony of Comboni Missionary Sister, Catherine Marchetti, originally from Vicenza in North-eastern Italy, is very apt in this regard. Sister Catherine, who arrived in Kalingo in May 1965 to run the Maternity Department and take care of the Midwifery School which had opened nine years before, wrote: "I lived and worked alongside Father Joseph for twenty-two 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, the same hands treating a patient with the same reverence and respect. The two were equally precious to him. As he was in love with his Lord and Master, so he was with the sick and infirm".

Father Joseph celebrated Mass in the early morning and in his preaching would routinely speak of the love of God for all without exception. He would go on to encourage those present to love one another and to take an abiding

interest in the plight of the sick, the poor and the weak in their midst. "After all", he would usually conclude, "Isn't visiting the Sick one of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy?".

Father Joseph practiced what he preached. In the evening, he would often visit patients who had no one to care for them, bringing with him food from the table of the Community. A fellow surgeon, Doctor Luciano Tacconi from Verona in Northern Italy, who worked with Father Joseph in Kalongo for nine years, from October 1978 to February 1987, recounts a particular instance: "It is something that has always remained particularly vivid in my memory. We had operated together on an old gentleman 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 remained very precarious. Sensing that there was little hope of his father recovering, the son who had been caring for him left the hospital never to return. From that day, Father Ambrosoli made a point of always bringing food to the man in the early afternoon and again in the evening. He waited until all the Community had finished eating and left the refectory, then he would pick up what remained and take it himself to the old man. He did this for about three months. When the old man entered the terminal stage of his illness, Father Joseph would feed the man himself. And if for some reason he could not go himself because of some commitment, he would ask me or an Italian volunteer by the name of Loredana Lorenzini, to go in his place".

A Member of the Community at the time, Father Ponziano Velluto, recounts that Father Joseph would even put part of his own meal aside to ensure that any needy pa-



tient he had come across on the Wards did not go hungry. To his mind, as for Father Donini, there was no dichotomy between their ministry as priests and their service as health professionals.

Always on the side of the sick

Father Joseph's desire to be a 'servant of all' was borne of his conviction that he could see the face of Jesus, his Lord and Master, in the countenance of the patient before him, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, language or religion. His patience with the sick was legendary: never a frown, never a cross word, never a reproach. In speaking with his patients his aim was always to ascertain the truth, particularly about the prior (and likely) involvement of any traditional healer and any herbal medicine that may already have been administered. Among the Acholi, as in many



primal societies, mediums, traditional medicine men and soothsayers held great sway over much of the population. The result was that the local people often only thought of seeking out medical attention as a last resort and when all else had failed.

A direct consequence of Father Joseph's utmost respect for the sick and the suffering was that he believed they had absolute priority in his life: to his time, energy, ability, and talents. Day after day, night after night. Doctor Luciano Tacconi also recalled: "The evening before particularly demanding surgical procedures, we would meet in his room and, books in hand (he didn't spare any expense in buying the latest medical textbooks from Italy, Britain and the United States and having them sent to him in Kallong), we would go over together the surgical technique we would be adopting the following day in order to be well-prepared and not to leave anything to chance. Father Joseph demanded, primarily by example, that when called upon, surgeons at the hospital should go immediately to the operating theatre no matter whether the medical emergency was during the day or at night. I remember late one night I was called urgently for the case of an umbilical hernia but decided to postpone the operation until the following morning. During surgery the next day, on finding a complication, Father Joseph turned and reproached me for not having performed the operation immediately the night before saying, 'We have to be prepared even to sacrifice our sleep for those who are sick'. He was like that: the sick person came before everything else".

Throughout his life and ministry, Father Ambrosoli demonstrated an abiding preferential love for the sick,

particularly for those finding themselves at the 'very bottom of the heap' in society. It is very telling that Joseph, despite offers of far more prestigious positions in Uganda and further afield, remained at his post notwithstanding a myriad of difficulties in a very remote corner of Acholiland. Kalongo and its environs are widely recognised as one of the most under-developed areas of Uganda, itself one of the poorest countries in the world. Father Vittorino Cona, a companion from the days of the Novitiate in Gozzano and who worked for many years in West Acholi, testified: "Joseph remained the same person to the very end of his life: humble, modest, and always ready to do whatever he could for the sick, for the nursing staff and for his fellow doctors. Nothing was ever too much trouble; no task was ever too lowly".

4. Belonging to one big Family

A troubled Nation

Prior to Uganda gaining independence from Britain in October 1962, Apollo Milton Obote of the Uganda People's Congress Party (UPC) was elected Prime Minister. The results of the election were however hotly disputed by the rival Democratic Party (DP). Obote was from Apac, in North-Central Uganda, and was a member of the Lango ethnic group. Three years later, with the aid of his newly-promoted army commander, General Idi Amin Dada, Obote deposed the sitting President, Sir Edward Muteesa. He suspended the Constitution and the powers of the Judiciary; outlawed all political parties; and jailed all his political opponents without trial. He then declared himself executive President of the country. Conflict with his army chief arose, however, and on January 25th 1971 Obote was himself overthrown in a successful military coup d'état led by Idi Amin.

For the following eight years the country was ruled over by a regime which was noted for the sheer scale of its brutality and the semi-literate Amin came to be known as the 'Butcher of Uganda'. It is believed that over three hundred thousand people lost their lives during his tyrannical reign. Tribalism, a long-standing problem in Uganda, was brought to its extreme by Amin's outright persecution of the Lango and Acholi ethnic groups who were accused of harbouring sympathies for the return of Obote who was

living in exile in neighbouring Tanzania.

In early August 1972, Amin announced to the world's television networks that the Prophet Mohammed had appeared to him in a premonitory dream and ordered him, as a faithful Muslim, to expel all the Asians resident in the country. Up to one hundred thousand Ugandan-born citizens of Indian and Pakistani heritage, the mainstay of the country's commercial life, were subsequently forced to leave the country with only ninety days' notice and without being able to take any of their possessions with them. The expulsion *en masse* of the South Asian Community brought the country's economy to its knees causing the wholesale closure of factories, shops, and offices, with all the attendant difficulties for the provision of public services such as healthcare, education, transport and infrastructure.

With the country in dire economic straits and suffering state-sponsored ethnic violence, Father Joseph was forced to begin contacting various international organisations to look for finance and personnel to allow Kalongo Hospital to continue functioning. One such organisation was 'Caritas Bologna' with whom Father Joseph was to develop a very close relationship. This not only involved the purchase of equipment and their financing of improvements to the hospital facilities but also secured the services of professors and doctors from the University of Bologna working on temporary placement in Kalongo.

Father Joseph's difficulties in Kalongo were compounded when the Ugandan Ministry of Health asked the hospital to take on responsibility for the 'Leprosy Control Project' throughout all Northern Uganda. After managing to secure funding from the 'German Leprosy Relief Associ-

ation', a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Father Joseph entrusted the work, which involved travelling to some of the most isolated parts of the North, to Father Palmiro Donini.

Father Joseph was able to breathe a great sigh of relief when a year later the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved funding for an Italian NGO based in Padua, 'Doctors with Africa CUAMM (University College for Aspiring Missionary Doctors)'. They provided newly-qualified medical personnel from Italy to Kalongo Hospital on three-yearly assignments. The Yearly Statistics for 1973 give an indication of the work undertaken at Kalongo at the time: 44,946 Out-Patient Visits; 5,488 Admissions; 885 Infant Deliveries; 632 Surgical Operations; and 37,421 Laboratory Tests.

One big Family

Whether the doctors offering their services in Kalongo were newly qualified or were university professors or consultants – or whether they were on temporary placements, or on longer assignments or on annual leave – Father Joseph always strove to involve them as colleagues in all aspects of running the hospital. The rationale was to make them feel they were very much 'stakeholders' in the whole enterprise. Similarly, with the Religious Sisters running the Midwifery School, the Operating Theatre, and the Wards, and with the Nursing and Ancillary Staff, Father Joseph wanted everyone to feel the hospital was 'theirs'. Regardless of an individual's particular role, all had a valued and invaluable part to play in the success of the undertaking – an undertaking which, he firmly believed, was ordained by



A Witness to the Gospel of Charity

God. Everyone was welcomed and valued as a co-worker: the most experienced midwife or the person cleaning the ward, the most qualified technician or the person looking after the compound. On his hospital rounds, for example, Father Joseph always made a point of expressing his esteem and appreciation for the endeavours of the nursing staff and ancillary workers alike. He considered all those who worked at the hospital as members of one big family: brothers and sisters united in working towards the same goals, following the same path, and facing the same challenges together.

The words of Gino Owiny, the primary school teacher who accompanied Brother Angelo Avi to collect Father Joseph from Gulu when he had first arrived in Uganda, written after hearing of the Father's death on March 27th, 1987, are particularly telling in this regard: "All the Staff in Kalongo lived and worked with Father Joseph as one large happy family under his watchful guidance and care". Gino too felt very much part of that "large happy family".

With an upsurge in fighting at the time in East Acholi between the rebels of the 'Lord's Resistance Army' led by Joseph Kony and the 'National Resistance Army' (*later renamed the 'Uganda People's Defence Force'*), the mission-aries living in Kalongo together with all the medical staff were compelled by the military authorities to leave. On the morning of Friday 13th February 1987, with very short notice, they left the Mission and abandoned the hospital. In the aftermath of that forced evacuation it was Gino Owiny who organised the people living around Kalongo, at considerable risk to their own lives, into standing guard around the abandoned site for over two and a half years.

In this way, the hospital and the Mission were protected from looting and pillage which was typical in such circumstances. The missionaries, on their return to Kalongo, alas without Father Joseph, found things just as they had left them thirty months before. Even a vase of flowers in the entrance to the house of the Sisters, its contents by then completely dry and withered, was in exactly the same spot where it had been placed by Irish-born Comboni Missionary Sister Mary Lonergan all those months previously. Sister Mary, with fellow Comboni Missionary Sister Catherine Marchetti, was running the Midwifery School in Kalongo at the time. The protection of the hospital and the Mission was just one example of the immense regard in which Father Joseph was held by the people of Kalongo and East Acholi.

Aches and pains

Towards the end of 1973, Father Joseph was forced to go to Italy for health reasons. The intense rhythm of work in Kalongo over many years had started to adversely affect his health. In January 1974, he was admitted to the Orthopaedic Ward of the Sant'Anna Hospital in Como under the care of a neurosurgeon, Professor Fioroni. He remained there for some days 'in traction' in the hope of curing his 'lumbar spine sciatica' without the need for surgery on his back. On January 21st, Father Joseph left the hospital and returned home wearing a semi-rigid brace which he was told to continue using for the following four weeks. Although he was advised by Professor Fioroni to literally 'put his feet up' and rest his back, Father Joseph soon resumed the usual hectic schedule that he adopted during

the three-month long 'holidays' he would spend in Italy every three years. He contacted fellow surgeons and visited operating theatres all over Italy looking for the latest treatments, therapies, surgical techniques and equipment; he also visited individual benefactors, groups and organisations in the search of continued funding and medical personnel for the hospital. Sundays, however, were always devoted to visiting the families of his fellow Comboni Missionary Priests, Brothers and Sisters, and of the lay medical personnel, who were working, or who had worked, in Kalongo. Father Joseph didn't only think of the hospital in Kalongo on such whistlestop tours around Italy. He would also willingly solicit funding and medical supplies for what he often described as the "needier" Mission Hospitals of Kitgum (East Acholi), Maracha (West Nile) and Alito (Lira) in Northern Uganda as well. His mother Palmira, then nearly ninety years of age, would have liked more of her son's company during his home-leave and although she understood the importance of the work Father Joseph was undertaking in Italy on behalf of his beloved Kalongo, she would express the hope that he could soon return there. "When my son, Father Joseph, is in Ronago", she would say, "I hardly ever see him at home. I hope he gets back to Kalongo soon. At least there he will be able to rest".

At the end of April 1974, Father Joseph left Ronago for Uganda where he found the situation in the country ever more precarious. The widespread economic collapse was causing severe shortages of even the most basic commodities, and this was coupled with a greater incidence of theft, extortion, and robbery with violence by the ill-



trained and ill-equipped Army. The dictator's powerbase lay with the Army, but with income from the export of cotton, coffee, tea, sugar, and tobacco drying up, Amin found it increasingly difficult to pay their salaries in full and on time. Lawlessness was becoming the order of the day, with Officers not only turning a blind eye to crimes committed by their subordinates against the civilian population but often sharing the spoils of such criminal behaviour.

Despite the deteriorating economic, social and security environment in Uganda, the hospital in Kalongo, under the able direction of Comboni Missionary Brother Augustine Stocco, continued to expand its facilities and was to reach a capacity of three hundred and seventy beds by the end of 1976. Father Joseph was to describe Brother Stocco in glowing terms: "He is a very good builder. Without him, I would be lost". Apart from the addition of a new paediatric ward for severely malnourished children and new wards for the treatment of leprosy and tuberculosis patients, Brother Stocco supervised the building of a new operating theatre, hospital laboratory and medicine store. Such expansion was in response to the dramatic increase in the workload experienced by Kalongo during this time with the country in the throes of a profound economic crisis and the public healthcare system in a state of collapse. By way of example, more than forty planned operations were being performed on the three days of the week set aside for routine surgery, as distinct from surgical emergencies which were undertaken on an almost daily basis. The service of Brother Stocco at Kalongo also saw the construction of a building named 'Loc Ken' to provide hostel-like accommodation for people assisting their sick



Fr Joseph with his seven siblings

relatives in the hospital. This was the first of its kind to be inaugurated in Northern Uganda.

Mama Palmira: “One day I will see her in heaven”

Father Joseph was again in Italy in 1977 for his three-yearly ‘holidays’, for a medical check-up and to see his ninety-four year old Mother. Mama Palmira, as in the past, complained that she hardly ever saw her son during his home leave. Once the customary three month ‘holiday’ was up, Father Joseph left for his Mission in Uganda. Shortly after his return to Kalongo, he received the news that his Mother was not well and had taken to her bed. Responding to the urgings of his siblings to return home before it was too late, Father Joseph wrote: “Here in Kalongo I have people dying every day ... Mother has lived a long life and she will understand ...”. Father Tarcisio Agostoni, a veteran of the Missions in West Acholi and Superior-General of the Order at the time, intervened directly and asked Father Joseph to go home as soon as possible to be at the bedside of his dying Mother. Palmira had expressed the wish to see him before she died. Father Joseph replied to Father Agostoni in apologetic terms explaining he was unable to absent himself from Kalongo: “I am the only surgeon in the hospital at the moment. I am only able to leave when Doctor Recalcati returns from his home-leave and is able to replace me”. On 13th November 1977, Mama Palmira died. Her death caused Father Joseph the deepest sorrow, but he consoled himself with the thought of his Mother finally being re-united with her beloved husband, Giovanni Battista, in the presence of the Almighty. Of one thing he was certain, as he wrote to one of his close friends,

“One day I will see her again in heaven”. On hearing of his Mother’s passing, Father Joseph consoled his brothers and sisters as follows: “Grief over the death of a Mother is always a cause of the greatest of sorrow, even when she has reached a good age and even though we know that sooner or later we all must die ... but I think we can be comforted in the knowledge that our Mother is protecting us all from heaven for we were her very life. I have already started to invoke her intercession when undertaking journeys by car given the terrible state of our poor roads”.

Women: Bearers of Life

In his work as a surgeon, Father Joseph would always have the greatest respect for, and pay particular attention to, expectant mothers as bearers of new life. He sought to assist women to give birth naturally conscious of the risks that ‘Caesarean Section’ carried for women in the Tropics and in primal societies such as the Acholi ethnic group. He was, however, always ready to intervene surgically, acutely aware that the slightest complication could lead to the loss of the child or the mother or both. In difficult childbirth cases, Father Joseph’s efforts to protect the lives of the mother and of the child knew no bounds. Father Bruno Carollo, who spent six years in Community with Father Joseph in Kalongo said: “It was always very painful indeed for him to have a mother die after giving birth to a child, or a child not survive after being born. It would simply break his heart and cause much soul searching on his part, wondering whether anything further could have been done to prevent the tragedy.”

5. Great Trials

With the country in economic meltdown, Amin decided to pacify the Army (and thereby help foil a successful coup d'état against himself) through the 'spoils of war'. In October 1978, he sent troops to invade and annex part of the Kagera Region of Tanzania which he claimed originally belonged to Uganda. In the military campaign that ensued, the area was pillaged and thousands of innocent civilians massacred. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania ordered a counter-offensive and a few months later the territory was re-taken. A twelve-thousand strong force of the 'Tanzania People's Defence Force' (TPDF) then invaded Uganda to liberate the country from the murderous dictatorship of Idi Amin. In April 1979, the capital fell into the hands of the advancing Tanzanians without much resistance: Amin fled to Libya, then Iraq and ultimately settled in Saudi Arabia where the Saudi Royal Family gave him sanctuary in Jeddah. In complete disarray Amin's troops escaped, looting and killing as they went from around Kampala in Central Uganda through to the North and on into exile in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Sudan. The chaotic retreat of these renegade soldiers was marked by pillage and killing, in which four Comboni Missionaries lost their lives in Northern Uganda. Miraculously, Kalongo, not on a major road and somewhat 'off the beaten track', was spared such wanton violence.

In the mayhem caused by the surprisingly swift collapse of Amin's regime, however, the hospital did have to contend with the opportunistic violence perpetrated on the local people by cattle raiders from the neighbouring pastoralist Karimojong ethnic group. Father Joseph wrote: "This warrior tribe, armed to the teeth with weapons left by Amin's soldiers fleeing for their lives, are convinced that God created all the cattle of the world only for them: so they can take them back to Karamoja from wherever they find them".

The victims of these raids were brought to Kalongo in large numbers and the operating theatre often worked into the night. Father Joseph was the only fully qualified surgeon available. Doctor August Cosulich, who worked with Father Joseph from 1983 until 1985, later said: "He was the true 'General Surgeon', the kind you do not see in Europe anymore. He was able to range from abdominal surgery to urology and orthopaedics. He excelled in obstetrics and gynaecology (his great passion), but he did not hesitate to tackle eye surgery when needed ... He was a patient and very good teacher. He loved to teach the Surgical Trainees everything he knew, including those 'tricks' that make the difference between an ordinary surgeon and a great surgeon, which he undoubtedly was. His enormous experience of forty years as a surgeon, combined with his immense professional skills, allowed him to immediately understand what the problem was, as soon as he opened the patient's abdomen".

Made to feel at home

Despite his heavy workload, Father Joseph's attention towards others remained undiminished. "On coming to the

refectory of the Community for lunch, evidently tired after hours in the operating theatre, and before sitting down at the table”, Doctor Joseph Belloni recounts, “Father Joseph would look around to make sure that nothing was missing on the table for those sitting down to the meal. Whenever he noticed something was missing, a piece of cutlery, a glass, a serviette ... he would take what was needed from the cupboard and give it with a smile to the person concerned. Only then would he sit down for the meal. He was the first to give up his seat if a further place was needed. With guests, who were always addressed by their first name, he was especially courteous: for him they were ‘sacred’. When the other Members of the Community left the refectory - as they often did - he would remain conversing with the guests as if he had nothing else to do, and often after having spent many hours in the operating theatre. After the guests had left the room, he would then clear the table himself”. It was precisely these spontaneous gestures of kindness, courtesy and cordiality that won him the esteem of all those with whom he came into contact. One of the elderly Catechists of the Mission, Martin Omach, was later to recount: “Father Joseph considered everyone to be a brother or a sister and welcomed them to the Mission as if they were old friends”.

A typical day for Father Joseph

Father Joseph would wake up early, as most people in Africa invariably do, to take advantage of the cooler temperatures. At 5:30 a.m. he would go to Church for the Celebration of the Eucharist. It was the most important moment of the day for him, consecrated to renewing his encounter with Christ, risen and alive in the Communi-

ty of Faith in and around the Mission. His meditation on the Word of God nourished his communion with God and with his neighbour, regardless of ethnicity, culture, creed, or social status, whom he was called to serve as a doctor and surgeon. The Word helped him to discern the meaning of the difficulties that he often had to share with the people of East Acholi: to never give in to despondency or despair, but always to nourish hope. Imperceptibly, day after day, his heart was modelled more and more on that of the 'Good Shepherd'. Celebrating the Eucharist every morning, Father Joseph would often say, radiated light and meaning on his medical service in the hospital. It allowed him to consciously offer his talents and abilities that day for the care of the many sick and suffering who sought out his assistance. Catechist, Gino Labeja, recalls: "During the celebration of the Eucharist Father Joseph 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".

By 7:30 a.m. Father Joseph was already in the hospital, either preparing himself for performing surgery in the operating theatre or starting his rounds visiting patients on the wards. His arrival in the theatre or on the wards was always marked by an affectionate greeting and a word of appreciation to all the staff present. His smile was contagious. Many would remark that he had time for all of them, and always appeared to find the right words at the right time even in the most difficult of circumstances.

"In between operations, and at around 11:00 a.m.", Sister Catherine Marchetti CMS recounts, "Father Joseph liked to take an Italian-style Espresso coffee and a beaten



egg with a biscuit, which I would prepare for him, and he would then return to the Operating Theatre and continue with the next patient down for surgery. Operations would often go beyond 1:00 p.m. and Father Joseph, without a word of complaint, would return to the Mission to eat lunch cold and then take a short nap before returning to the hospital for the Out-patient's Clinic in the afternoon".

At dusk, when he had seen the last of the day's patients, and the cicadas had begun their nocturnal singing, Father

Joseph would return to the Mission and kneel in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in Church. After Evening Prayer, a light supper, and a moment of relaxation with the other Members of his Community, Father Joseph would return to the hospital to check on any patient about whom he was particularly concerned. Finally, he would go to his office to take advantage of, in his own words, “the quiet of the night”, for administration, writing reports and for corresponding with the many friends and Organisations supporting his work at Kalongo.

Father Joseph would personally acknowledge every single donation, large or small, that he received. He considered it an obligation to keep in regular contact with the benefactors with whom he had been blessed by Providence and whose support was vital in allowing the work of the hospital continue. Even at Christmas and Easter when he was forced to resort to sending ‘circular’ letters (so that he could reach Kalongo’s many friends and supporters), he would always add a couple of lines of personal greeting in his own handwriting. The staff on night duty often saw that Father Joseph would be working in his office until the early hours. The light was on, and they did not have to go very far to call him in the event of a medical or surgical emergency.

On his way back to the Mission, and before retiring for the night, Father Joseph would always pray a Decade of the Rosary. “Reciting the Rosary”, he wrote to a friend, “while walking under the stars of a magical African sky is something else entirely”. Father Joseph functioned for many years on only three or four hours sleep a night. When pressed to spend more time resting in bed, he would

invariably reply: "When I get to heaven, I will have all the time I need to rest!"

Uninterrupted service

In addition to the deteriorating security and economic situation facing the country following the ousting of Idi Amin, with the local currency devaluing by the day and the price of basic goods and services skyrocketing, Uganda was stricken by drought and suffered a large-scale outbreak of cholera in Northern Uganda.

In a letter to his friends at 'Caritas Bologna' in February 1980, Father Joseph wrote: "Cholera is spreading. In just two days we distributed two hundred thousand Tetracycline Capsules. It hasn't rained for five months. The sun is relentless. The heat is unbearable". The drought was to last throughout 1980 and into the following year. In June 1981, following advice from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the new Government decided to devalue the Ugandan Shilling by one hundred per cent. This was intended to stabilise the economy and facilitate the export of cash crops but it also multiplied the cost of essential commodities for the local population. Notwithstanding these many and varied challenges, the hospital in Kalongo under Father Joseph's able guidance, was able to continue throughout this period to provide a broad range of medical services to the population of East Acholi and beyond. It was a testament to the Father Joseph's great resolve and tenacity during seemingly insurmountable problems and difficulties.

Conversion Prayer often comes naturally to the fore when an individual is confronted with danger and difficul-

ty on every side. As General 'Storming Norman' Schwarzkopf, the Commander of the Coalition Forces in the First Gulf War, was later to quip: "There are no atheists in fox-holes". Father Joseph was no exception to the rule. It was during this period that he discovered the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld (commonly referred to as the 'Universal Brother') through the writings of René Voillaume, Founder of the 'Company of the Little Brothers of Jesus'. Father Joseph was to refer to this discovery as his 'conversion' and recognised that the 'Universal Brother' helped him to re-organise his prayer life: "Charles de Foucauld says that the day is for work and the night for prayer". In his overriding concern for the plight of his sick brothers and sisters and despite so many troubles and difficulties, Father Joseph was able to understand more fully the experience of the 'Universal Brother' who saw no contradiction in being completely 'absorbed in the Lord' and devoting all his time, talents, and energies in the service of his neighbour. Father Joseph translated all this into his motto: "God is love and I am His servant for those who suffer". All his life, he would ask himself the same question, "What would Jesus do in my place?" The struggles of these years were, however, but a foretaste of the Cross he would have to bear towards the end of his earthly pilgrimage.

The spiritual experience of the 'Universal Brother' would be of great comfort to him when he later became gravely ill with kidney disease and was obliged to drastically cut down on his daily workload, and when his much-beloved hospital was forced to close on the orders of the military authorities due to the rapidly deteriorating political situation in East Acholi. Then he would turn to the 'Prayer of

Abandonment' of Charles de Foucauld, written in his own handwriting on a piece of paper that he kept in his Breviary, which read:

*My Father,
I abandon myself into your hands,
do with me what you will!
Whatever you may do,
I thank you.
I am ready for all,
I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me
and in all your creatures:
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands
I commend my soul:
I offer it to you,
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.*

Aware of the precarious state of his own health and of the grave situation of the hospital, Father Joseph wrote to friends: "We must remember that our true good is in God's will and not in the limited success of our plans ... It will be as God wills". He was also heard say to fellow Missionaries: "Only now do I understand the words of Daniel Comboni and the value of the Cross in my life"

6. Courage and Determination

After the ousting of Idi Amin, national elections were organised in December 1980 under the auspices of a Tanzanian-backed 'Military Commission' headed by Paulo Muwanga, a close associate of Milton Obote. In a poll marred by multiple irregularities, the former President and his 'Uganda People's Congress Party' (UPC) were declared the outright winners. A few days later Obote was inaugurated as President. He retained the portfolio of Minister of Finance for himself while, perhaps unsurprisingly in the circumstances, appointing Paulo Muwanga as Vice-President and Minister of Defence.

In early February 1981, shortly after the new Government took office, a former Member of the Military Commission, Yoweri Museveni, and a group of armed supporters founded the 'National Resistance Army' vowing to overthrow Obote. What was to become known as the 'war in the bush' then began.

Museveni campaigned in rural areas of Uganda hostile to the regime of President Milton Obote, especially in the Central Region of Buganda and the Western Regions of Ankole and Bunyoro. It is estimated that more than five hundred thousand people were killed in the four year 'Bush War'. The majority of those died because of the 'scorched earth' policy adopted by the Obote regime in an area of Central Uganda known as the 'Luwero Triangle'. The loss

of life during this period was even greater than during the eight years of Amin's reign of terror.

Failing health

Father Joseph's frenetic pace of work in and out of the operating theatre over many years was the cause of frequent episodes of sciatica. These eventually required him to undergo surgery in 1975 for a 'herniated lumbar disc' in the Sant'Anna Hospital in Como.

This condition, together with the onset of rheumatism, required Father Joseph to take anti-inflammatory medication. The prolonged use of this medication caused Father Joseph to suffer from 'nephritis', a condition in which the tissues of the kidneys become inflamed and cause problems in filtering waste products from the blood.

His health began to significantly deteriorate in 1982, and so in early October, Father Joseph left Kalongo for medical treatment in Northern Italy. He was admitted for tests to a hospital in Tradate under the care of Doctor Luciano Terruzzi, a life-long friend from Father Joseph's days as a young volunteer doctor in the main hospital in Como. Extensive investigations led to the devastating diagnosis of 'chronic pyelonephritis': long-term damage to the drainage system of the kidneys caused by recurrent inflammation, leading to lesions on the organ's surface tissue and ultimately to renal failure. It was also discovered that one of Father Joseph's kidneys had shrunk to much less than its normal size and was not functioning properly, while the other was working at much reduced capacity.

He was forced to remain in hospital for several weeks to receive treatment for 'renal atrophy' caused by the 'chronic pyelonephritis'. He felt 'forced' into inactivity but admit-

ted to himself that he was only 'paying the price' for all the frenetic activity over many years at the helm of the hospital in Kalongo. In the face of the unwelcome medical diagnosis, Father Joseph quickly came around to accepting that it was the Lord who would decide, writing to friends: "It will be what God wills"; and consoling himself with the thought that he would now be able to pray during the day as well as at night!

On his return home from hospital to Ronago, Father Joseph wrote to inform Father Guido Miotti, the Provincial Superior of Uganda, about his "serious and irreversible renal disease". He was candid: "The results of the investigations and tests are not good. Worse rather 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 Charles de Foucauld's 'Prayer of Abandonment' frequently every day. But make no mistake: I am the usual sinner. Hope for the best. Always willing to do the will of God".

In informing Father Joseph of the results of the medical investigations, Doctor Terruzzi had confirmed: "Since your kidneys are working at only thirty percent capacity, you will have to reduce your physical activity to thirty percent of what you were doing before". In the circumstances, Doctor Terruzzi also felt it was his duty to write to apprise Father Miotti of the perilous condition of Father Joseph's kidney's: "Father Joseph Ambrosoli has been in my care since October 1982 for chronic pyelonephritis with functional renal insufficiency and a small, wrinkled kidney hypofunctioning on the left side. His general condition is fair, better than I would have expected, but with overall renal

function reduced to about one third of normal. I believe that he can return to his Mission in Uganda on condition that he drastically reduces all work and physical activity with at least ten hours of absolute rest a day and no more than two hours a day in the Operating Theatre”.

Violent clashes around Kalongo

Shortly after Father Joseph's return to Kalongo in July 1983, disputes over cattle-grazing rights broke out between the people around Kalongo and the warrior herds-men from the neighbouring Region of Karamoja. This led to violent clashes between the Karimojong and the local militia with several of the latter losing their lives and around forty sustaining gunshot wounds.

On hearing of the incident, Father Joseph drove to the scene, picked up the wounded, took them to hospital and performed surgery in the operating theatre for many hours. The situation worsened by the day with tit-for-tat raids and reprisals following each other, and the hospital became the only place of refuge for the local people. Father Joseph disregarded the diagnosis and strictures of his friend, Doctor Luciano Terruzzi. He was fully aware of the precarious state of his health, but it seemed to him a betrayal of everything he stood for as a physician and surgeon not to respond, and not to respond immediately, to any emergency. In the words of Maria Aboto who, in her primary school days with her classmates, helped to transport stones, aggregates and bricks for the construction of the hospital: “Father Joseph loved work as he loved God”. But the Superior of the Community was obliged to intervene, recalling the orders of his Consultant in Tradate: “By

virtue of your Vow of Obedience, I order you to get more rest, at least ten hours of absolute rest, as Doctor Terruzzi prescribed; to limit yourself to the Operations that others cannot perform and with no more than two hours a day in the Operating Theatre; to reduce the hours you spend in the hospital; and, above all, not to undertake any 'On-Call' night shifts". With difficulty, Father Joseph complied with the instructions of his Superior.

At the end of June 1984, Father Joseph took part in the celebrations for the Golden Jubilee of the founding of the Mission in Kalongo. In a letter to the Parish Priest of Ronggo he described the large outdoor celebrations of Mass: the first on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29th with five hundred and sixty-five Confirmations; with the celebration of sixty-five weddings on the following day; and the final Mass on July 1st with three bishops and twenty priests concelebrating. Father Joseph concluded: "I was moved to see this tormented people celebrating and praying, grateful to the Lord for the gift of the Christian faith received through Missionaries. I can only thank the Lord that I am still on Mission and that I can still offer a service, if now somewhat limited, to the People of God. The most beautiful thing is to think that, whatever happens, it will always be God's will and therefore all will be well".

The political situation in the country then deteriorated further. Unable to secure a military victory over the 'National Resistance Army' of Yoweri Museveni, the Army became war-weary and disillusioned, with the result that Milton Obote was overthrown in a largely bloodless coup d'état led by General Tito Okello in July 1985. Obote, with a large entourage, fled the country for Zambia allegedly

A Witness to the Gospel of Charity

taking much of the national treasury with him.

From August to December 1985, General Okello attempted to negotiate a peace deal with Museveni in Nairobi but the resulting ceasefire broke down almost immediately and in January 1986 Kampala fell to the National Resistance Army. Okello and his soldiers fled northward to their ethnic base in Acholiland, and Yoweri Museveni formally claimed the Presidency of Uganda on January 26th 1986. In the aftermath of taking control, the Southern-dominated National Resistance Army (*later renamed the 'Uganda People's Defence Force'*) sought vengeance against ethnic groups in the North, and particularly against the peoples of East and West Acholi, with a view to ending the alleged 'domination' of politics in Uganda by 'Northerners'.

The atrocities committed by the National Resistance Army, including murder, rape, the mass looting of livestock and the burning of homesteads led to the creation of rebel groups drawn at first from the ranks of the former soldiers of General Tito Okello. Most notable among these were the 'Holy Spirit Movement', a type of peasant revolt led by a self-declared "prophetess", Alice Lakwena; and after her defeat by government forces, the 'Lord's Resistance Army' whose leader, Joseph Kony, had gained a reputation as a spirit medium or seer in West Acholi.

The ensuing civil war, which lasted for over twenty years, led to further atrocities with mass killing, torture, mutilation and abduction being committed by the combatants against the civilian population in Acholiland. Apart from causing the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, more than thirty thousand young people were abducted and conscripted as 'child soldiers' into the guerrilla cam-

paign, and over two and a half million people were displaced by the violence. As is so often the case in such armed conflict, the civilian population was caught in the middle of a war not of their making: accused by one side of supporting the rebels and treated accordingly; by the other, of supporting government forces and having to suffer the consequences. Sadly, this is often the fate of civilians in any insurgency war. The nightmare for East and West Acholi would only end in 2008 when the 'Lord's Resistance Army' moved into the neighbouring African countries of South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic where it continues to sow death and destruction in its wake until the present day.

Courageous and determined

Amid such appalling depravity, which subsequently led to arrest warrants for 'Crimes against Humanity' being issued against Joseph Kony and his closest associates by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Father Joseph proved to be very courageous and risked his life on more than one occasion in caring for, and protecting, the sick and wounded in and around Kalongo.

One day, for example, during rebel activity around the Mission, Father Ponziano Velluto recounts that Father Joseph did not hesitate to go in search of a seriously injured local woman. He recalled: "Two women, accused of being spies for the Government, were shot by the rebels in the vicinity and left for dead. Though seriously wounded, they remained alive. One of them managed to drag herself to the hospital and raise the alarm. Father Joseph, against the advice of his staff, set out alone in search of the oth-

er woman. After finding her, he took her to the hospital where she remained out of public view for fear of the rebels discovering her whereabouts whilst being treated for her multiple wounds”.

Kalongo Hospital continued functioning and proved a lifeline to the many civilian and combatant casualties of the fighting in East Acholi, regardless of their ethnic or cultural origin. Father Joseph offered the hospital's healthcare services to all who required them from whatever side of the conflict. He did not shy away from protecting patients from the South of Uganda, combatants and non-combatants alike, who were at grave risk of reprisal from the rebels; or soldiers and government officials along with their wives and families. When, on one occasion, a group of rebels gathered menacingly in front of the main gate of the hospital, having suffered a defeat at the hands of the Army and intent on taking their revenge on anyone there suspected of supporting the Government, Father Joseph went out and told them: “You cannot come in here. If you want, go ahead and kill me but you cannot enter here”. The rebels angrily fired volleys in the air, but Father Joseph did not flinch and stood his ground. After an uneasy standoff, the rebels thought the better of it and decided to withdraw. The testimony of a local resident of Kalongo is worth recording: “Father Ambrosoli faced zealous rebels; undisciplined soldiers and officers; self-serving bureaucrats and vindictive politicians with the same courage and determination. He never stepped back out of fear for his own safety”.

7. A few drops of the Precious Blood

Evacuation of the medical personnel

The first year of President Museveni's ascension to power in Uganda was to prove the most difficult for the Mission of Kalongo since its foundation in 1937. After a battle with former soldiers of the Okello regime, troops from the National Resistance Army entered and occupied the town on Holy Saturday, March 29th 1986. Local people welcomed their arrival in the hope that the Army would re-establish a semblance of normality to their lives and restore law and order to the area.

Insecurity and fierce fighting continued around Kalongo, however, and with the likelihood of the town falling out of Government control it was decided to evacuate all the medical personnel from the hospital who were from the South of Uganda or from Europe for fear of reprisal from the advancing rebels. These nurses and doctors, forced to leave for their own safety and some having given dedicated service over many years in the hospital, left Kalongo with very heavy hearts indeed. One of the Italian doctors, Sergio Tacconi, refused to leave Father Joseph and Father Donini alone in the hospital and insisted, against the advice of the Italian Embassy in Kampala and indeed of Father Joseph and the other Missionaries in Kalongo, that he would remain.

While being directly involved in organising the evacuation of the medical personnel from the south of the country and from Europe, Father Joseph and his fellow Missionaries decided to stay on in Kalongo. He wrote at the time: "It remains for us to stay here in Kalongo to help all those we can, praying that the Lord will enlighten all minds and soften all hearts". Ignoring the orders of his consultant, Doctor Luciano Terruzzi, Father Joseph, with only Father Donini and Doctor Tacconi to assist, continued to provide medical services in the hospital. They performed surgery at all times of the day and night mainly for gunshot and landmine injuries. The demand for non-urgent medical treatment was much reduced due to the unwillingness of people around East Acholi to undertake a journey to Kalongo given the area was the epicentre of much of the fighting between the rebels and the Army. Regarding Father Joseph, Doctor Tacconi was later to remark: "When he was not working, he was praying. How I saw him praying during that time! He always had his rosary beads to hand". Father Joseph explained at the time that he preferred the simplicity of the Rosary, with his fingers sliding over the beads and his lips repeating the same words. He could pray this without straining his mind further and without having to engage in sublime thoughts, focusing instead on the simplicity with which Mary lead her life.

In August 1986 the rebels managed to retake control of the town after the Army made a tactical withdrawal to avoid their being completely encircled by rebel forces. It was only seven weeks later that troops from the National Resistance Army succeeded in reoccupying the town. The relationship with the civilian population, as with the

remaining staff and patients of the hospital, was very difficult from the outset. The government soldiers deemed those who had remained on in the town as collaborators who had connived with the rebels. This connivance, they believed, had allowed the rebels to hold out for as long as they had against the undoubtedly superior forces of the Army. The townspeople were regarded as enemy sympathisers from the start and treated accordingly by the troops of the Government. It was hardly surprising in the circumstances then that many of the local population decided to flee the town along with most of the patients from the hospital.

Forced closure of Kalongo

Ambushes on Army convoys in and around Kalongo increased by the day. Soldiers retaliated by undertaking a war of attrition against the civilian population who were accused of clandestinely supporting the rebel cause against the Government of President Museveni. Officers on the ground allowed their soldiers to act with utter impunity and 'search and kill operations', admittedly common practice in counter-insurgency campaigns, resulted in atrocity after atrocity being committed against the civilian population. In the midst of such wanton violence, soldiers arrived unexpectedly at the hospital on the morning of January 30th 1987. They ordered all the personnel from the hospital and the Mission, together with the student midwives, to assemble in the main courtyard at the entrance to the hospital.

In an uncompromising address, perhaps more accurately described as a tirade, by one of the senior officers, the



An aerial view of Kalongo Hospital and Mission

hospital staff and the Missionaries were accused of supporting the guerrilla war and told in no uncertain terms they were all confined from that moment to the compound of the hospital and the Mission. No one was to leave (otherwise they would risk being mistaken for a rebel and being shot); and no-one would be allowed to enter, under any circumstances. After a week under effective 'house arrest' the Missionaries were summoned to a further meeting on February 7th 1987. They were informed by the Brigade Commander that the Military High Command in Kampala had ordered the closure of the hospital and Mission with the evacuation of everyone there. The Commander was

unequivocal: "You all have to leave, and you must take everything with you. Nothing can remain except the buildings. Everything else you must take away. Nothing must remain for the rebels. And you have a week to get everything ready". With that, the meeting ended abruptly and the Commander left with his armed escort trailing behind.

Although not entirely unexpected, it was a devastating blow nonetheless. It meant evacuating a well-equipped three hundred and fifty bed hospital and a large Mission in a matter of days. Preparations began immediately to make the evacuation as orderly as possible. Amidst great sadness, and many tears, the personnel began the painful process of sorting out what could be taken and packing away for safety what could not; dismantling and packaging the more valuable equipment; and parcelling up the medicines and medical supplies.

At 4:00 a.m. on the morning of Friday 13th February 1987, and as previously notified by the Brigade Commander, a convoy of thirty-four large transport lorries accompanied by a thousand-strong battalion of soldiers on military trucks arrived at the hospital gates. The Commanding Officer ordered the assembled personnel to load what had been prepared on to the lorries as quickly as possible so that the convoy could leave for Lira during daylight hours. Father Joseph had already arranged for temporary accommodation for everyone in the Mission of the Comboni Missionaries in Ngetta on the outskirts of the town. Work continued uninterrupted until 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon, and then the column of thirty-four lorries together with the vehicles from the hospital and Mission, set out under military escort for Lira.

Apart from the battalion of troops, there were over five hundred civilians: the personnel and their families; the student midwives; the few remaining patients, including Msgr. John Baptist Cesana, the former Comboni Missionary Bishop of Gulu, who had retired to Kalongo in 1983 and who made the journey lying on a mattress in the back of a four-wheel drive vehicle; and the Comboni Missionary Sisters, Brothers and Priests working in Kalongo. There was only room for about twenty percent of the hospital equipment and supplies on the trucks provided by the Army. The remainder could not be taken and had to be left behind. The convoy had only gone a few hundred yards when thick clouds of black smoke could be seen billowing into the air from the hospital compound where the buildings appeared to be engulfed by fire.

“I could see the flames of fire rising up and destroying everything”, Father Joseph would later write on arriving in Ngetta, “The fire will consume the hospital and only a few smouldering bricks will remain. But no one will be able to destroy what I have built in the hearts of people ... My heart is now even closer to them, and I feel the weight of their, rather than my own, suffering”.

Concern for others

After a journey of nearly twenty-one hours, Father Joseph’s vehicle was the first of the convoy to reach the Mission of Ngetta at around 11:00 a.m. the following day. Comboni Missionary Brother Tarcisio Dal Santo recalls that Father Joseph arrived covered in dust, looking completely worn out but apparently serene and remarkably composed in the circumstances. Later that day, though, he was to write in his diary: “It was a nightmare: all those hours to cover

a distance of only seventy-five miles! We were travelling at a snail's pace and, with our vehicles interspersed with military trucks laden with soldiers and the rebels never far from my thoughts, my heart was never far from my mouth".

Despite fatigue from the journey, Father Joseph immediately set about organising care for the patients who were evacuated with the convoy, accommodation for the staff and student midwives and storing away the equipment and medical supplies brought from Kalongo. He later wrote how moved he was by the great kindness and assistance that he received from his fellow Missionaries and the people from around the Mission of Ngetta who welcomed the evacuees and tried to help them in every way they possibly could.

In the "disaster" (*his own description of the evacuation*) which had stricken the hospital and Mission in Kalongo, Father Joseph could still see the hand of God. The concept of "*beloved failure*", which he had first come across in the writings of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, re-appeared in the entries to the diary he kept during those days and in his letters. Father Joseph first broached "*beloved failure*" in a letter he had sent years earlier to friends in Bologna when he described accepting his advanced kidney disease "as a gift from the hands of God". On March 9th 1987, in a letter to Mario Mazzoleni, a contractor from Bergamo in Northern Italy who had volunteered his services over the years in maintaining the electrical installation of the hospital in Kalongo, Father Joseph was to continue in similar vein: "This year you really have to give up any idea of coming to Uganda! With great sorrow we had to leave Kalongo. But

the Lord is great and has given us the strength to accept everything from His hands. 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!”. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy that had befallen Kalongo, Father Joseph declared to Enrica Galimberti, one of the Comboni Sisters who had been evacuated in the convoy with him, “What God wants is never too much! We have but to accept His will”.

Although he was in poor health, because of the advanced renal disease, Father Joseph asked the then Provincial Superior, Father Vittorino Cona, to allow him to postpone his return to Italy for medical treatment. He was very concerned about the students from the Midwifery School as he did not want them to miss their opportunity to sit for the end-of-year National Examinations. In particular, he wanted the third-year students to conclude their Course by sitting for their finals, gain their Diploma and qualify as Midwives. Despite the insecurity on the country's roads, Father Joseph travelled several times to Kampala to speak with Officials in the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education with a view to transferring the School of Midwifery to the Mission Hospital in Angal in West Nile. After obtaining permission for the transfer, he organised accommodation at a Catechetical Centre near the Mission for the forty-two trainee midwives, the two midwifery tutors and the two Comboni Missionary Sisters, Mary Lonergan and Catherine Marchetti, who were running the Midwifery School in Kalongo at the time. Father Joseph was extremely pleased with the outcome, “As long as the young women can prepare for the National Examinations in May”.

The Blood of Christ

On March 19th 1987, the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Father Ambrosoli presided over the Eucharistic Celebration in honour of his Patron Saint in the Mission Church of Ngetta. During the homily he invited the Congregation, with many of the personnel and Missionaries from Kalongo present, “to celebrate this ‘just and wise’ man, the one who listens in faith and conforms in everything and for everything to the will of God”. He proposed St. Joseph as “a model of dedication and obedience, even when events cannot be understood, and things go badly wrong”.

The following day Father Joseph was in Kampala for further meetings in the Ministry of Health. The theology students in the Comboni Scholasticate on Mbuya Hill invited him to celebrate the Eucharist for them. During the homily he spoke several times of “*beloved failure*” without a hint of self-pity or defeatism, but rather to underline the need to submit completely to the will of God in life: “May your will, Lord, be done, not mine”.

Father Maurizio Balducci, one of the theology students present, was later to write: “At the ‘Sign of Peace’, Father Joseph suddenly staggered and to steady himself grabbed hold of the altar table. The table juddered causing the chalice to wobble and a few drops of the Precious Blood to spill on the altar cloth. Father Joseph was deeply upset. A week later the shocking news reached the Scholasticate that Father Ambrosoli had died. We all immediately linked his death to the drops of Precious Blood spilt on the altar of our chapel. His blood truly mingled with that of Christ. His “*beloved failure*” was redeeming like the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary”.

Last Communion

Father Joseph returned on March 21st 1987 to Ngetta. His health, already undermined by renal failure, was adversely affected by his many endeavours on behalf of the evacuated patients, personnel, and trainee midwives of the hospital in Kalongo. He was approaching the end of his life although no one, apart from himself, realised the seriousness of the situation. On Sunday 22nd March 1987 he accepted to celebrate Mass for the students and staff in the Chapel of the neighbouring 'Comboni College'. It was to be his last Mass. In the afternoon an attack of malaria accompanied by a very high fever forced him to take to his bed. The Comboni Sisters in the Mission were informed and the three Sisters who had latterly been working with him in Kalongo Hospital, Sister Romilde Spinato, Sister Annamaria Gugolé and Sister Silveria Pezzali took turns to attend to him around the clock.

On the evening of Tuesday 24th March, the fever subsided and the following day Father Joseph was able to take a little sustenance and appeared to be improving. It was decided, given the roads to Gulu were impassable, to request permission from the authorities in Kampala to allow a helicopter to transport Father Ambrosoli to the Mission Hospital in Lacor where dialysis equipment was available. It was anticipated that when he had recovered sufficiently there, he could then travel on to Italy.

In the middle of the night on Thursday 26th March, Father Joseph took a turn for the worse and asked Sister Romilde to call the priest who had been bringing him Holy Communion during his illness, fellow Comboni Missionary Father Mario Marchetti, as he wished to make his Con-

fession. After making his Confession, and not wanting to disturb Father Marchetti any further, Father Joseph asked that he receive the 'Sacrament of the Sick' but only the following morning. And with that he fell asleep.

“The time has come”

In the morning, the Comboni Missionary Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Ngetta gathered in the room of Father Joseph just after 9:00 a.m. when Father Marchetti administered the 'Sacrament of the Sick'. Father Joseph was serene and lucid throughout. The atmosphere was warm and familiar. The Missionaries then went about their daily activities awaiting the arrival of the helicopter from the airport in Entebbe. After a few dashed promises on the part of the Authorities it was finally scheduled to transport Father Joseph to the Mission Hospital in Lacor later that morning. When Father Marchetti returned after an hour or so, he found Father Joseph had lost none of his presence of spirit and was 'managing' his medication by advising Sister Romilde on the exact quantities of the cocktail of medicines that were being administered intravenously through the drip! Referring to the helicopter that was due to take him to Lacor Hospital, Father Joseph repeated several times, "Let me die here with my people. I have given my whole life for them. Why take me away now that I am about to die?". In response Father Marchetti sought to assure Father Joseph that he would overcome the debilitating attack of malaria as he had done countless times before.

Shortly after 1:00 p.m., and after many unsuccessful attempts by Sister Romilde to re-insert the cannula into the back of one of his hands or lower arms, Father Joseph

offered a remarkably prescient diagnosis of his condition. "At this point there is not much more that can be done", he calmly told the Sister before continuing, "The veins have collapsed. The eyesight is declining. The legs are becoming more and more numb", before almost matter-of-factly concluding, "The time has come".

Father Marchetti sent for the other Missionaries. The breathing of Father Joseph started to become more laboured, but he continued reciting the prayers with his fellow Missionaries for as long as he was able before then following with only the movement of his lips. Just before dying those gathered in the room heard Father Joseph say, "Lord, your will be done" and with that he gently slipped away: no restlessness; no frown; no noisy breathing; and no last gasp. It was 1:50 p.m. on Friday 27th March 1987. He was only sixty-three years of age. The helicopter with a Comboni Missionary Doctor, Father Egidio Tocalli, aboard landed in Lira a couple of minutes later. Doctor Tacconi was later to remark on the irony of his death in the Mission of Ngetta, "Father Joseph died without a doctor being present. The man who had been everyone's doctor!". He died exactly forty days after the evacuation of Kalongo Hospital.

In the shadow of Mount Oret

The news of Doctor Ambrosoli's death spread rapidly throughout Lira District and East Acholi. The mission compound in Ngetta was soon full of local people from the surrounding area wanting to pay their respects to '*Doctor Madit*' ('The Great Physician'). People also began to arrive from beyond the town of Lira and so it was decided to lay

the body out in the Chapel of 'Comboni College' to allow as many people as possible view the body. Many people from the Lango and Acholi ethnic groups, of all faiths and none, and from every social class and walk of life went to view the body and show their debt of gratitude to a man who had given thirty years of selfless service as a missionary doctor and priest to the peoples of Northern Uganda.

The wishes of Father Joseph were that he be buried 'wrapped in a simple mat' in accordance with local customs but for practical reasons it was decided to place the body in a very simple coffin. The coffin was taken to the Mission Church in Ngetta for the celebration of his Requiem Mass by the Local Bishop, Msgr. Cesare Asili, with many Missionary and Diocesan Priests in attendance. On the coffin was placed one of his Priestly Stoles along with his stethoscope of many years standing. The Church and the surrounding courtyard were crowded with the Faithful. During the Funeral Rites a local peasant woman, Hellen Akwero, spoke of Father Joseph in the following way: "He died for love of God and for love of the people of Northern Uganda. He especially loved the People of Kalongo. He offered his life to help the sick, the poor and the weak. Today we say a big 'thank you' to him and also to God for having sent him to us". Father Joseph had wanted to be buried in the shadow of Mount Oret in Kalongo but this was not possible due to security concerns, and so it was decided to lay him to rest, alongside Comboni Missionaries who had preceded him, under a large yellow acacia tree in the Mission Cemetery in Ngetta.

It was only two and a half years later, in November 1989, that the Comboni Missionaries were finally able to

return to Kalongo. The buildings of the hospital and Mission had not been razed to the ground as feared by the Army. The thick plumes of smoke that Father Joseph and the other evacuees had witnessed on their departure from Kalongo were in fact from the shipping containers of beans and maize stored to the rear of the hospital which the soldiers had set alight to stop the supplies of food falling into rebel hands.

The Missionaries found the hospital exactly as they had left it. In the Operating Theatre, for example, in the 'Sanctuary of Father Joseph', as movingly described by Sister Catherine Marchetti, the last day's 'List for Surgery' from February 1987 was still displayed on the Notice Board hanging on the wall. The people of Kalongo had defended 'their' hospital and 'their' Mission from the theft and looting that invariably occurs in such circumstances. The rebels, apparently out of respect for the dedicated service of Father Ambrosoli to the people of East Acholi over many years, had never ventured into the hospital or the Mission. The returning Missionaries regarded the protection of the hospital and Mission as an act of divine intervention directly attributable to the intercession of Father Joseph before the Almighty.

Welcome home

Only seven years after his death were the wishes of Father Ambrosoli to be buried among the people he loved, and for whom he had given his life, finally realised. His remains were exhumed from the Cemetery in Ngetta on Saturday 9th April 1994 and taken to his beloved Kalongo. An all-night Vigil was held in the Parish Church, packed with

local people in honour of Father Joseph, and the following day a Solemn High Mass was celebrated outdoors before an imposing crowd of the Faithful to ‘welcome home’ their ‘*Doctor Madit*’. Concelebrating at the Mass were the Apostolic Nuncio to Uganda, Archbishop Luis Robles Diaz; the Archbishop of Gulu, Msgr. John Baptist Odama; many Comboni Missionaries and Diocesan Priests; and the Parish Priest of Ronago, Father Sergio Tettamanti, who had travelled down to Uganda for the Ceremony with Members of his Parish Community from Northern Italy. After the Mass, the remains of Father Joseph were carried on the shoulders of people who had worked the closest with him in the hospital over many years and laid to rest in the Mission Cemetery of Kalongo. ‘*Doctor Madit*’ was finally at rest among his people. On the simple tomb reads an inscription reminding everyone that he was a ‘Comboni Missionary Priest and Doctor’, and beneath a phrase that Father Joseph often repeated and had made his motto: “God is love and I am His servant for those who suffer”.

8. The long road to Beatification

The path leading to the Beatification of Father Joseph Ambrosoli, a recognition by the Church of his entrance into heaven and capacity to intercede on behalf of individuals who pray in his name, began twelve years after his unexpected death in Ngetta. The people who had known Father Ambrosoli, from in and around Kalongo and from his home area of Ronago in Northern Italy, needed no convincing as to his sanctity but they began petitioning the Diocesan Authorities in Gulu and Como to have him raised officially to the 'Altars of the Church' through the 'Congregation for the Causes of Saints' in the Vatican. All such matters fall under the jurisdiction of this Roman Congregation or Curial Department of the Holy See.

Faced with many such requests, the Archbishop of Gulu (*the Diocese in which Father Joseph had undertaken his ministry as a doctor and priest*), Msgr. John Baptist Odam, agreed to open the 'Cause of Canonisation' for Father Ambrosoli. A 'Commission (Court) of Enquiry' was duly constituted in which individuals who had met and known Father Ambrosoli would be given the opportunity of presenting witness statements on which they could then be questioned on oath by the Court. The 'Cause of Canonisation' officially began with the opening of a first Session of the 'Commission of Enquiry' in Kalongo on August 22nd 1999 and continued with further Sitzings until February

4th, 2001. With the official opening of the 'Cause of Canonisation', Father Ambrosoli was declared a 'Servant of God', a title given to one of the Faithful whose life and works are being investigated with a view to their being officially recognised as a Saint in heaven. It is the first of four steps on the path to Sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, Msgr. Alessandro Maggiolini, the Bishop of Como, accepted to hear evidence about the purported holiness of Father Ambrosoli, with the Sessions in Como beginning in November 1999 and ending in June 2001.

At the Service of the Person

Over the course of two years, the Commission heard evidence from ninety witnesses: sixty-two lay people; eighteen Missionary and Diocesan Priests; and ten Religious Sisters. Among the laity were a large group of individuals from Kalongo, including nurses, catechists, teachers, and community leaders; Members of the Faithful from Ronago; twelve doctors who had worked with Father Joseph in Kalongo; and a broad representation of society from East and West Acholi including local politicians, civic leaders and a regional police chief. Written testimony from General Tito Okello, the former President of Uganda, who died before the Commission commenced its work, also formed part of the evidence.

The sanctity of Father Joseph emerged clearly from the sworn testimonies provided by witnesses from a wide variety of interests, backgrounds, and experiences. At the opening of the 'Commission of Enquiry' in Kalongo on August 22nd 1999, and later in a letter to the Members of the Episcopal Conference of Uganda, Msgr. Odama described

Father Ambrosoli as, “a gift that God has given us”, before continuing: “He was an example of heroic charity and humble service to his neighbour; a great example of a zealous Missionary; a model priest and conscientious doctor who became famous for combining medical skill with a profound spirituality; and a captivating example to young people today of someone who responded totally to the call of Christ in their vocation in life”.

“From his way of welcoming others, of interacting with them, of offering them a diagnosis, a piece of advice or a word of encouragement”, affirmed John Ogaba, a Catechist from Kalongo, “one had the impression of being in the presence of Jesus himself”. Doctor Luciano Tacconi, who worked with Father Ambrosoli for many years in Kalongo, was unequivocal in stating: “For me, the secret of Father Joseph’s ‘holiness’ lay in his great simplicity and selfless devotion to duty. Doctors who met and worked with Father Joseph greatly respected and admired him for his skill and competence, but he would insist to me that as followers of Christ we had to set an example by complete devotion to our work as physicians and our respect for the dignity of people we serve”. After hearing the testimony of witnesses in Ronago, Msgr. Alessandro Maggiolini, the Bishop of Como, was to write, “Father Ambrosoli gave a face to the Gospel with a life radically placed at the service of Christ, of proclaiming the Good News and of serving the least, the last and the lost”.

The Conclusion of the Diocesan Enquiry and presentation of the findings to Rome

All the material gathered in Kalongo and Como, the sworn testimonies of the witnesses with transcripts of the pro-

ceedings and other supplementary documentation, was collated and sent to the 'Congregation of the Causes of Saints' in late June 2001.

After a lengthy examination of all the relevant papers, the Congregation responded in May 2004 accepting the juridical validity of the investigations undertaken and giving approval for the Cause to proceed to the next phase. This entailed the piecing together of all the facts and details of the life and times of Father Joseph Ambrosoli and demonstrating in and through such events the evident holiness of the man. This information is brought together by a Postulator, the person who guides a 'Cause for Canonisation' through the juridical processes required by the Church and published in a document known by its Latin title, '*Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis*'. Such documents can often be over a thousand pages in length. In essence, the '*Positio*' is a formal legal brief arguing for the canonisation of one of the Faithful in the Church. Upon presentation to the Congregation, the '*Positio*' is examined by a 'Committee of Consultors', a group of expert historians and theologians who have relevant expertise in the subject and who are specifically appointed for the task. If the Consultors find the evidence presented in the '*Positio*' is convincing, a recommendation in this regard is made to the Pope that the candidate concerned be declared 'Venerable' – that is, worthy of devotion by believers: the second of four steps on the path to Sainthood in the Church.

Preparation of the '*Positio*' and its approval by the Congregation

It took the Postulator of the 'Cause of Canonisation', Comboni Missionary Father Arnaldo Baritussio, five years to

prepare and publish the '*Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis*' on Father Ambrosoli. It was presented on May 18th 2009 to the 'Congregation of the Causes of Saints' in the Vatican. In a Special Congress, held on December 4th 2014, the nine appointed Consultors voted unanimously to approve the *Positio* and recommended acceptance by the Congregation. The Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, and Members meeting in the Plenary Session of the 'Congregation of the Causes of Saints' of December 15th 2015, recognised that the Servant of God, Father Joseph Ambrosoli, had heroically exercised the theological virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity), the Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude) and the added virtues of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience and Humility. The Prefect (Head) of the Congregation, Cardinal Angelo Amato, referred all this to Pope Francis who, two days later, on December 17th 2015 confirmed the heroic nature of the virtues and signed a decree with which he bestowed on Father Joseph Ambrosoli the title of 'Venerable'.

According to Pope Francis, the holiness of Father Ambrosoli could be summarised in a phrase that he often repeated and had made his own, "God is love. I am His servant for those who suffer". It was a spiritual motivation that had accompanied Father Joseph the whole of his life, from his youth until his death, and had underpinned the practice of his medical profession from the day he qualified as a doctor and surgeon. It was only this spiritual motivation that can answer the question that inevitably arises when considering Father Joseph's missionary life over three decades: "How was it possible that the man was able

to accomplish everything he did, and with such simplicity, joy and serenity in a total giving of himself until the very end of his life?”.

The answer can only be found, the Holy Father suggests, in Father Joseph Ambrosoli's profound spiritual life. Father Joseph was a person who lived his Christian life in an extraordinary way. He exercised his medical profession, not simply because of his faith and love, but as an integral part of the Gospel that he preached, primarily with his exceptionally gifted hands.

The Miracle at St. Kizito Mission Hospital in Matany

The beatification of Venerable Father Ambrosoli, the third of four steps on the path to Sainthood in the Church, required recognition by the ‘Congregation of the Causes of Saints’ in the Vatican of a miracle which was directly attributable to his intercession. In effect, a miracle is the ‘seal’ that the Church seeks from the Almighty that Father Joseph had entered heaven and could therefore be rightly cited as an intercessor and example – for the Order to which he belonged, for the Local Church in Italy that saw him born and raised, and for the Local Church in Uganda that welcomed and hosted him as a Missionary Doctor and Priest for over thirty years, and saw him die serving others until the very end of his life.

Father Ambrosoli was responsible for many extraordinary healings and cures in his long career as a doctor and surgeon, but his most outstanding took place twenty-one years after his death at ‘St. Kizito Hospital’ in the Mission of Matany in North-eastern Uganda. It happened to a young Karimojong mother, Lucia Lomokol, from the



The entrance to St. Kizito Hospital in Matany

village of Iriir on the border between Karamoja and Teso.

On the morning of October 25th 2008 a twenty-year-old mother, Lucia Lomokol, reached St. Kizito Hospital in the Mission of Matany in Central Karamoja heavily pregnant and critically ill. It transpired that Lucia had been in labour for several days but was unable to give birth, despite the best efforts of traditional birth attendants in Iriir, and that the child she was carrying had already died. A lack of transport had prevented Lucia's husband from taking her to the hospital in Matany three days earlier.

The Consultant Obstetrician in charge of the Maternity Ward at the time, Doctor Erik Domini, upon seeing Lucia in the Accident and Emergency Department decided to operate immediately in a desperate bid to save the woman's

life. It was clear during the operation, Doctor Domini later testified, that the death of the unborn child had provoked the onset of sepsis. After the operation, Lucia was admitted on to the Maternity Ward, but due to her deteriorating condition, Doctor Domini had her transferred in the afternoon to the adjacent 'Labour Room'. He felt it inappropriate that the other patients (expectant and nursing mothers) witness the death of the young woman on the Maternity Ward.

Noting Lucia's ongoing deterioration due to septic shock and fearing she would not survive the night, Doctor Domini called the Parish Priest of Matany, Father Marco Canovi, to administer the 'Sacrament of the Sick'. After Father Marco had left, Doctor Domini remembered that he had a (holy) picture of Father Joseph (*with whom he had worked at Kalongo in the early 1980's*) in his living quarters and had the inspiration to go and fetch it. Doctor Domini returned to the Labour Room and, after gaining the consent of Lucia's mother and husband, he placed the card under the pillow of the dying woman before gathering the nurses on duty around her bed in prayer.

Her condition continued to deteriorate. Just after midnight Doctor Domini left for the night but not before explaining to her relatives that he feared for the worst and asking the night staff to keep him informed so that he could return before she passed away. Surprised that he had not received any call, Doctor Domini returned to the Labour Room very early the next morning and, to his complete surprise, found Lucia conscious, sitting up in bed and drinking fluids. All those present, the nursing staff, her relatives and Doctor Domini, considered her miracu-

lous recovery was due entirely to the intercession of Father Joseph Ambrosoli.

The Diocesan Enquiry in Moroto

Msgr. Henry Ssentongo, the Bishop of Moroto, in the Diocese in Karamoja to which the Mission of Matany belongs, came to know of this prodigious event and decided to officially investigate the purported miracle according to the norms and procedures laid down by the 'Congregation for the Causes of Saints' in Rome. It is this Roman Congregation alone which decides whether the healing was scientifically inexplicable or not.

A 'Commission (Court) of Enquiry' was duly constituted in the Curia Offices in Moroto and opened on September 17th, 2010. Witnesses to the presumed miracle were called to give evidence on which they were questioned under oath by the Court. These included the attending physician, Doctor Erik Domini, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist by profession; the anaesthetist, Doctor Alphonse Ayepa; theatre nurse, Mr. Daniel Irusi; Ms. Betty Agan, a senior midwife; Mrs Lucia Lomokol, a housewife and farmer, who was miraculously healed from septic shock'; Mr. Akol Lobokokume, a member of the local militia and husband to Lucia; Mrs Sabina Kodet, the mother of Lucia Lomokol; the midwife, Ms. Mary Annunciata Longole; the nursing assistant, Mrs Lilian Adwar; the midwife, Mrs Fortunata Magdalene Alany; and Father Marco Canovi, Parish Priest of the Mission of Matany. The 'Commission (Court) of Enquiry' also heard expert evidence from a consultant anaesthetist, Doctor Bruno Turchetta, and from two visiting physicians who had examined Mrs Lucia Lomokol in-

dependently, Doctor John Bosco Nsubuga and Doctor Leo Odong. The process was completed almost a year later on June 21st 2011. All the evidence gathered during the Sitings of the ‘Commission (Court) of Enquiry’, the sworn testimony of the witnesses with transcripts of the proceedings as well as the clinical and medical documentation, was collated and sent to the ‘Congregation of the Causes of Saints’ at the end of June 2011. A year later, on May 11th 2012, the ‘Congregation of the Causes of Saints’ recognised the juridical validity of all the evidence presented though a further six years were to elapse before the case of Lucia Lomokol was finally examined by a specially appointed ‘Committee of Medical Consultors’.

Approval of the Miracle and the Decree of Pope Francis

On November 28th 2018, the ‘Committee of Medical Consultors’, comprising of seven Professors drawn from Faculties of Medicine across Italy, recognised by Qualified Majority (five/two) that Lucia Lomokol had been suffering from “Irreversible Septic Shock”, that her recovery was “absolutely unexpected, rapid, complete and lasting”, before declaring that she was cured in a “scientifically inexplicable” manner. Her recovery was therefore, in their opinion, miraculous.

In a Special Congress, held on June 11th 2019, the ‘Committee of Theological Consultors’, appointed by the “Congregation for the Causes of Saints” to examine the case of Lucia Lomokol, accepted that the invocation addressed to God through Father Joseph Ambrosoli had indeed brought about her miraculous healing. The Cardinals, Archbishops,

Bishops, and Members meeting in the Plenary Session of the 'Congregation of the Causes of Saints' of November 19th 2019, presided over by the Prefect (Head) Cardinal Giovanni Becciu, resolved to refer the case to the Holy Father.

Pope Francis, on November 28th 2019, recognised the miraculous nature of the cure of Lucia Lomokol and signed the following Decree to be placed in the Archives of the 'Congregation of the Causes of Saints': "This is a miracle performed by God through the intercession of the Venerable Servant of God Joseph Ambrosoli, a Perpetually Professed Priest of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, that is to say, of a rapid, complete and lasting cure of a woman, Lucia Lomokol by name, from Irreversible Septic Shock caused by *Putrefactive Purulent Chorioamnionitis*".

Opening the way to the Beatification

It is clear that, in evaluating all this long journey leading to Beatification, the Holy Father let himself be guided by two spiritual principles: the heroic nature of the virtues of Father Joseph Ambrosoli and the power of his intercessory prayer before the Almighty. The occurrence of the miracle in Matany, however, and the decision to beatify Father Ambrosoli in Kalongo, however, raise two important questions. First, why did the Lord grant this miracle to a pregnant woman from Karamoja, given the place of women in traditional societies and the fact that the Karimojong are traditional enemies of the Acholi whose raiding parties into East Acholi caused Father Joseph no end of difficulties down the years? Second, why was Kalongo, an insignifi-

cant town off the beaten track in East Acholi, chosen for the Ceremony of Beatification rather than St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or the Cathedral of his home diocese in Como?

Signs, perhaps, that Father Joseph's way of living out his life-long missionary call provides a telling example for all believers in today's world: working in an out of the way place for over thirty years, foregoing a more illustrious career elsewhere in Uganda or in Italy; offering his considerable talents and abilities as a doctor and a surgeon completely free of charge to the many sick and suffering who sought out his assistance, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, creed or social status; defending the most vulnerable and marginalised in his midst; and welcoming and caring for all but with a particular concern for women in a very traditional and male-dominated society, most especially for women who were pregnant, giving birth, nursing infants or who were trying to conceive. All were served to the very best of his abilities and to the very end of his days with joy, simplicity, and humility. Whatever, it is clear that the Holy Father believes the missionary vocation of Father Joseph Ambrosoli is a 'sign of the times' that the Spirit is offering today to the Church and to our world.

Father Joseph Ambrosoli was proclaimed "Blessed" on the morning of Sunday 20th November 2022, the Feast of Christ the King, in a Solemn High Mass led by the Papal Nuncio to Uganda, Archbishop Luigi Bianco, the Archbishop of Gulu, John Baptist Odama and the Bishop of Arua, Msgr. Sabino Odoki. The Mass was celebrated outside in front of the Parish Church in *his* Kalongo before the President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, and a crowd of over thirty thousand people from all over Uganda, East Africa

and beyond. It was the Church where Father Joseph had celebrated daily Mass for thirty-one years in the Mission of Kalongo, and now he had truly returned home.

Conclusion

It seems fitting to conclude this tribute to Blessed Joseph Ambrosoli, Doctor and Priest, with a prayer found on a creased piece of paper between the pages of his well-thumbed Breviary, that seems to have been particularly dear to him. It seems in just a few sentences to beautifully encapsulate the life and times of the new Saint:

*Teach me, Lord, to serve you as you deserve,
to give without counting the cost,
to do my best without seeking any reward
apart from knowing that I am doing Your will*

*Teach me not to love myself,
not to love only my own,
not to love only those I already love,
but, above all, to love those whom no one loves.*

*Have compassion, Lord,
on all the poor in the world,
do not allow me to be happy alone,
let me rather feel the anguish of human unhappiness,
free me, Lord, from myself. Amen.*

The Comboni Missionaries Today

Presently almost four thousand Comboni Missionaries, priests, brothers, sisters and lay people drawn from forty-four different nationalities and working in fifty countries over five Continents, bring the Good News of the Gospel to the 'poorest and most abandoned of the earth'.

Saint Daniel Comboni (1831-1881) founded the Comboni Missionaries for Priests and Brothers in 1867 and for Sisters in 1872. Inspired by the Gospel, the Members live in Community and practice life-long Religious Vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Their aims are:

- To bear witness to the love of God for all, as experienced in Jesus Christ;
- To proclaim the Gospel of Christ to those who have not heard it;
- To foster - according to Gospel values - justice, peace and the integrity of creation worldwide;
- To serve and support young Churches, particularly in Africa, as they grow and mature;

- To promote awareness of the missionary work of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in Africa, Latin America and Asia;
- To promote the missionary vocation in all its forms; and
- To promote missionary partnership among our supporters and friends.

Prayer for Missionaries

Heavenly Father, since the harvest is great and the labourers are few, you have called us, too, to work in your vineyard alongside your Missionaries.

You have chosen us to be the support and strength of those who preach the Gospel and day by day we ask you to bless and protect them.

Grant our Missionaries a zeal for your Kingdom which will enable them to remain faithful to their noble calling. Enrich them in their poverty, love them in their chastity and lighten their hearts in obedience to you. Bless, too, the peoples among whom they live and work.

We pray especially for elderly, sick and retired Missionaries. Be the strength of their frailty and the joy of their old age.

Through the intercession of Saint Daniel Comboni raise up new vocations for the Missions: men and women of our time who are ready to offer their lives in witnessing and announcing Christ to all those who do not yet know Him.

Guide us all with your Spirit during the heat of the day, so that, in the evening of our lives, united with you and with the Missionaries we have taken to our hearts, we may at last receive the reward of our labours and rejoice forever in your presence among the blessed in Heaven.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father ...



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