

The Comboni mission in the discernment of the General Chapters (1985 -2022)

General Secretariat for Mission – November 2025

Abstract

The document "The Comboni Mission in the Discernment of the General Chapters (1985–2022)" offers a comprehensive and concise reinterpretation of forty years of missionary discernment by the Institute of the Comboni Missionaries, in light of the profound global, ecclesial, and cultural changes that have occurred since the end of the 20th century. Through an analysis of the Acts of the last seven General Chapters, the text shows how the Institute has progressively developed a coherent and dynamic vision of mission, rooted in the theological perspective of the *Missio Dei* and faithfully inspired by the charism of Daniel Comboni.

Despite the lack of a systematic, unified approach in the individual Chapters, their overall reading highlights a substantial continuity in discernment, structured around five fundamental pillars: a clear theological vision of mission as participation in God's Trinitarian action in the world; the definition of the Institute's specific mission as a mission *ad gentes*, with a preference for the poorest and most abandoned; six charismatic principles that define its style (God's hour, making common cause, the regeneration of Africa with Africa, the cenacle of apostles, ecclesial involvement, and the mission marked by the cross); three fundamental methodological elements (insertion, ministerial approach, and inculturation); and finally, the identification of priority fields of work and specific pastoral initiatives as a path to missionary redevelopment.

The text highlights how the Comboni mission has developed in constant dialogue with the Church's magisterium, contemporary missiological reflection, and historical transformations, progressively embracing dimensions such as justice, peace, the integrity of creation, interreligious dialogue, and integral ecology. A common horizon emerges, capable of uniting a variety of contexts and sensitivities, offering a shared basis for the renewal and reorganisation of the Institute's missionary service in fidelity to the charism and in response to the challenges of the new historical era.

Summary of the main ideas of the text

The document "The Comboni Mission in the Discernment of the General Chapters (1985–2022)" offers a unified and interpretative rereading of forty years of missionary discernment by the Institute of the Comboni Missionaries, placing it in the context of the profound epochal changes affecting the world, the Church, and contemporary missiological reflection. An analysis of the Acts of the seven General Chapters from 1985 to 2022 shows how, despite the plurality of emphases, languages, and priorities linked to different historical moments, a substantial continuity of vision and orientation emerges, rooted in the charism of Daniel Comboni and in fidelity to the Church's evangelising mission.

A first fundamental axis of the text is the theological perspective on mission. The Chapters clearly adopt the vision of the *Missio Dei*, developed during the Second Vatican Council and developed by subsequent magisterium: mission does not arise from the initiative of the Church or missionary institutes, but from the Trinitarian God who continues to work in history. Missionaries participate in this divine action, bearing witness to and proclaiming the Kingdom of God as an offer of full life for all humanity. Mission is thus understood as God's compassion for a wounded and divided world, as a sharing of his dream of reconciliation, justice, and universal brotherhood.

The Institute's specific mission, defined as mission *ad gentes*, is situated within this theological framework. It is directed preferentially to peoples and human groups not yet or insufficiently evangelised, especially those marked by poverty, marginalisation, and abandonment. The explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ remains an indispensable priority, yet inseparable from the witness of life, the commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, and the promotion of integral humanity. The Chapters emphasise the need for radical and courageous choices, capable of avoiding the

dispersion of commitments and directing available forces toward the true frontiers of the mission. A central contribution of the document is the identification of six charismatic principles that, taken together, define the style of the Comboni mission. The first is the hour of God, that is, the awareness that God continues to act in the history and cultures of peoples, requiring missionaries to constantly discern the signs of the times and places. Connected to this is making common cause, a typical expression of the Comboni charism, which indicates a style of presence in solidarity, sharing the lives, sufferings, and hopes of people, even to the point of assuming the risks and fragilities inherent in frontier situations.

The third principle, the regeneration of Africa with Africa, expresses a profoundly participatory vision of the mission: peoples are not objects of evangelisation, but active agents of their own liberation and human and Christian growth. This entails trust in individuals, valorisation of cultures, training local leaders, building vibrant Christian communities, and paths of inculturation of the Gospel. The fourth principle, the cenacle of apostles, emphasises the community dimension of the mission: the Comboni Missionaries are called to evangelise as intercultural communities, a sign of fraternity, communion, and reconciliation in a fragmented world.

Ecclesial involvement constitutes the fifth principle: the Institute lives its mission in communion with the local Churches, at their service, avoiding self-promotion and paternalism, while at the same time promoting the missionary openness of the Churches themselves, fostering an exchange of gifts and a shared responsibility for the universal mission. Finally, the mission marked by the cross recognises that proclaiming the Gospel inevitably involves encountering suffering, rejection, and sometimes martyrdom; this dimension is not sought, but embraced as a place of fidelity to the charism and a radical witness to the love of Christ.

Alongside the charismatic principles, the document identifies three fundamental methodological elements that permeate the entire Chapter process. The first is insertion, understood as a genuine immersion in the lives of peoples through the study of language and culture, a simple and humble lifestyle, and concrete proximity to people. The second is the ministerial approach, which values the plurality of ministries, ecclesial co-responsibility, the formation of vibrant Christian communities, and the integration of evangelisation and social ministry. Within this framework, JPIC takes on particular importance, and in recent Chapters, integral ecology as a transverse axis of the mission. The third element is inculturation, understood as a dynamic process through which the Gospel is incarnated in cultures and cultures enrich the Church, in a journey guided by the Spirit and lived in communion with local Churches.

Another central theme is that of priority fields of work and specific pastoral care. Faced with the disproportion between commitments and resources and the complexity of new global challenges, the Chapters have progressively oriented the Institute toward a missionary reorganisation based on continental priorities, specific human groups, and forms of interprovincial and continental collaboration. Specific pastoral activities thus become the preferred tool for enhancing missionary presence, avoiding fragmentation, and making evangelising service more effective.

In conclusion, a rereading of the General Chapters from 1985 to 2022 shows that, beyond the plurality of contexts and sensitivities, there exists a shared horizon that unifies the Comboni mission. This horizon brings together theological vision, charismatic identity, missionary method, and operational choices, offering a solid foundation for continuing the path of missionary renewal and redevelopment in fidelity to the Gospel and in response to the challenges of the new historical era.

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Introduction

Missiological reflection over the last 40 years has witnessed a certain dynamism and the emergence of

various models of mission. This should not be surprising, considering the great epochal changes that have taken place, both in the world and in the Church. David Bosch's now classic essay, *The Transformation of Mission* (1991), has become an essential reference, with its complex approach describing the various dimensions of mission through models, that is, interpretative schemes that seek to define, describe, and orient the nature, priorities, methods, and objectives of missionary activity. Thus, today, mission eludes a single abstract definition, but as a multifaceted reality, it lends itself to being described from various perspectives that capture its diverse and complementary aspects. It has become customary to speak of "mission as..." or "mission is..." to emphasise these aspects or dimensions that characterise mission in our times. Such an approach is suited to a rapidly changing world, which requires continuous discernment and openness to new realities. On the other hand, however, it tends to fragment the vision and create tension between different dimensions.

All this gives rise to the need and desire to arrive at a synthesis, a comprehensive vision capable of offering a coherent general framework within which to situate ourselves. The work of missiologists such as S. Bevans and R. Schroeder (cf. *Theology for Mission Today. Constants in Context*, 2004; *Prophetic Dialogue. The Form of Mission for Our Time*, 2012) testifies to this effort to arrive at a synthesis. An even more important testimony for us comes from the discernment of the last seven General Chapters (1985–2022). These show us a path that takes into account changes at the global, ecclesial, and even internal levels within the Comboni Institute, in pursuit of fidelity to the charism and mission in a changing world.

A journey of 40 years

We place our starting point at the 1985 Chapter because it was the first after the adoption of the new Rule of Life (RL). The Chapter Acts recorded major epochal changes in the world, the Church, and missionary thought, and launched the process of reviewing and requalifying commitments as the first priority. The other two priorities were, respectively, evangelising as a community and in communion with the local Church; and highlighting the values of the Kingdom of God in relation to integral human liberation. These three themes reflect the need to respond to epochal changes in harmony with the new Rule of Life. Although the Chapter intended to outline a six-year journey, it actually focused on aspects that have characterised the Chapter's reflection and discernment to this day.

The 1991 Chapter engaged in dialogue with and embraced the ideas of *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and the social teachings of John Paul II (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Centesimus Anno*). This is a very particular historical period: the end of the Cold War and the rapid expansion of economic globalisation. These, in turn, triggered movements seeking cultural roots and social justice that challenged the mission, calling for the growing need for cultural affirmation of peoples, inculcation, and JPIC (justice, peace, and integrity of creation). The Chapter Acts deepened the Institute's call for renewal, in continuity with the previous Chapter. They emphasised the need to deepen spirituality, to promote communities as cenacles of apostles, to identify priorities in terms of fields of work and frontiers, and to define a clear and effective Comboni methodology in communion with the local church.

The 1997 Chapter was influenced by the African Synod (1994) and the process that led to the beatification of Daniel Comboni (1996), as well as by missiological reflection, the Institute's growing internationality, and, more generally, by a growing awareness of cultural and religious pluralism. The energy released by these processes moves the Institute beyond a certain sense of weariness and loss of enthusiasm. "Africa's Hour" is seized upon, and specific aspects of the mission that are particularly significant in that historical context are emphasised: inculcation and dialogue, collaboration and commitment to justice and peace, and missionary animation.

In 2003, the climate was influenced by the canonisation of Daniel Comboni. It reflected expectations for a new beginning with the new millennium (Novo Millennio Ineunte), a context challenged by financial globalisation and the so-called *new economy*, the triumph of the neoliberal economic model. The development of contextual theologies called for a new missionary thrust, which, for the Institute,

also meant rethinking itself in the context of a new vocational geography and the reality of ageing and diminishing personnel. In response to all this, the Chapter Acts provided guidelines for the missionary perspective and the renewal of missionary methodology, also launching the process of the *Ratio Missionis*.

The 2009 Chapter was a special one. There was a strong desire for a unified plan for the Institute, faced with both a changing reality and mission, as well as restlessness, dispersion, and fragmentation within the Institute, with a weakening sense of identity and belonging. There is a need to reach decisions that involve everyone. The Chapter Acts emphasise that the fruit of our labour and discernment is not something radically new, but rather the awareness that we must proceed without hesitation or delay, following reflections and decisions already developed but not yet implemented.

Further impetus in this direction came from the 2015 Chapter, inspired and guided by *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) and enriched by the participation of a large number of capitulars of African and American origin. The Chapter Acts emphasised the need to reorganise the Institute, in accordance with ministerial guidelines, to better serve the mission. They defined criteria for the redevelopment and revision of commitments, outlined the path for specific pastoral services in line with continental priorities, and acknowledged the Comboni mission in Europe.

Finally, the 2022 Chapter took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the acceleration of global crises (health, geopolitical, economic-financial, climate-environmental, social, and migration), interpreted through the lens of Pope Francis's social teaching (*Laudato Si', Querida Amazonia, Fratelli Tutti*). This teaching offers not only a key to interpretation but also a cosmological perspective in which everything is connected. This is also reflected in the ministerial approach to mission. The Chapter Acts reflect the Church's journey in the context of conversion to integral ecology, which they recognise as a fundamental axis of mission, and relaunching processes of requalification through specific pastoral programs in accordance with continental priorities.

From these brief remarks, it is already clear that there is substantial continuity in the discernment process regarding the mission of the Institute. The contents of the Chapter Acts reveal a clear vision of the Comboni mission, whose various aspects are explored from time to time in response to epochal changes and ongoing ecclesial and missiological reflection. Taken individually, as they are thematic chapters, they do not provide an immediate systematic overview of the mission. But read as a whole, they outline a coherent Comboni mission that includes: a theological perspective, an awareness of the Institute's specific mission, the charismatic principles that guide it, the fundamental elements of Comboni methodology, and the priority areas of work.

The theological perspective

We do not find a systematic theoretical elaboration of the mission in the Chapter Acts, but the adoption of the perspective of the *Missio Dei* developed in the Second Vatican Council and continually taken up in subsequent magisterium is evident (CA 2022, 27). The source of the mission is Trinitarian, and missionaries are sent into the world to witness to and announce the Good News of the Kingdom (CA 2003, 31), to share God's dream of a full and happy life for all humanity (CA 2009, 23). The mission is recounted and lived as God's compassion towards a divided world (CA 2009, 56.3), as a reality that "springs from the Trinitarian God who shares his life with humanity. It is implemented by Jesus Christ, the source and inspiration of our missionary action, the cornerstone of our being and our actions. The Institute, with the whole Church, participates in this universal mission." (CA 2009, 56.7)

The mission of the Institute

The fundamental point of reference is RL 13, which defines the Institute's purpose as carrying out the Church's evangelising mission among those peoples or human groups not yet or not sufficiently evangelised with a preference for the poorest and most abandoned in relation to the Kingdom, especially those in situations of first evangelisation (CA 1985, 3). These include both marginalised

minorities not reached by the Church and neglected by society, and groups not yet or not sufficiently evangelised who live on the frontiers of poverty (CA 2003, 26). The absolute priority of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ is reaffirmed, through the witness of life, through the proclamation of Christ (RL 58-59; CA 1997, 15; CA 2003, 26.3), and through commitment to justice and peace (CA 1997, 107; CA 2003, 26.3; CA 1985, 33ff).

In a rapidly changing world, radical choices must be made to reach marginalised and un-evangelised peoples, giving priority to the proclamation of the Word of God, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God manifested in Jesus Christ (CA 2009, 57.3), which entails a commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation—liberation from all that dehumanises—human advancement, and fraternity (CA 2009, 39; 56.6). Thus, first evangelisation, bringing the Gospel into the heart of the lives of individuals, societies, cultures, and religious traditions, enables an encounter with Christ capable of offering fullness of life and opens the way to their incorporation into the Church, a privileged sign of the Kingdom (CA 2003, 39).

In more narrative terms, the 2015 Chapter described the Institute's mission as a dream: "an Institute of missionaries 'on the move,' pilgrims with the poorest and most abandoned, who evangelise and are evangelised through the personal and communal sharing of the joy [of the Gospel] and mercy, cooperating in the development of a humanity reconciled with God, with Creation, and with others (EG 74)." (CA 2015, 21)

Charismatic principles

In a world of pluralism, ongoing epochal change, widespread instability and temporality, it is difficult to orient oneself and rely on stable and universal models. Indeed, reflection on the mission also follows this trend and proposes various contextual models in response to the emergence of different situations. Nonetheless, the Chapter Acts of the last seven Chapters highlight six principles that characterise and define the Comboni mission according to its charism. Since these are principles, they provide flexible and adaptable references, a common horizon that can be recognised from any context and situation. In the Chapter Acts, in fact, we find reflections, insights, and orientations that contextualise these principles, while also demonstrating an important continuity and integration of the Comboni mission. Specifically, the six principles are:

= *THE HOUR OF GOD* (cf. RL 6)

The awareness that God continues to be present and active in the history and cultures of peoples (RL 57) and to listen to the cry of the poor requires a constant attitude and practice of discernment (CA 1997, 10; CA 1991, 6). The Holy Spirit is the true protagonist of the mission (CA 1997, 10; CA 1985, 5), he continues to create new things (CA 1991, 2.4), and to grasp his invitations and his action in history, we must pause and look at reality with the eyes of faith to discover how Christ is present in events, contemplating them in the light of the Word that is Jesus Christ, and thus being transformed ourselves and thus hearing the good news we are called to live and proclaim (CA 1997, 24). In other words, we are asked to be open to the signs of the times and places (CA 2009, 56.9; CA 2015, 22), which are not the facts of history in themselves, but as related to the Kingdom of God: appeals that God makes through reality itself, which invite us to see the signs of his presence, mercy and action in history in order to transform it (CA 1992, 2.4).

= *MAKING COMMON CAUSE* (RL 5; RL 60)

This expression of Comboni (W 3159) characterises the fundamental attitude of missionary presence for solidarity and sharing with the people. This attitude has a theological basis, as the 1991 Chapter Acts emphasise: "God, through his incarnate Son, who died and rose again, hears the cry of the poor and enters with his whole being into the history and suffering of the least. He feels compelled to take on this same history and this same suffering, becoming part of it and making common cause, even at the risk of his life" (CA 1991, 6.1).

This making common cause is expressed in various ways (CA 1991, 45.1): with the option for the poorest and most abandoned (CA 1997, 26); by engaging in the process of integral human liberation; Sharing their joys, sufferings, and hopes with them (CA 2009, 58.3), remaining with them even in dramatic situations of suffering and great risk (CA 1997, 25); with prophecy, making the voices of the voiceless resonate; and with a simple and humble lifestyle. In this regard, the importance of using modest means and simpler structures is also emphasised (CA 2015, 23), as is closeness and solidarity with the people, with patience and respect for their daily rhythm, and of a lifestyle open to welcome, hospitality, and sharing (CA 1997, 23); valuing people's initiative, their capacity for giving, and their participation in the missionary journey, avoiding paternalism and protagonism on our part (CA 2022, 42).

Finally, the mission experiences that have most shared situations of misery, violence and weakness testify that our fragility and impotence, with the pain they entail, are a sign of the strength and closeness of the Lord (CA 1997, 42).

= *THE REGENERATION OF 'AFRICA WITH AFRICA' (S 2753 – RL 7)*

Solidarity with the poor is seen as a regeneration that involves both an explicit proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the formation of the Christian community and human and social advancement (CA 1991, 6.2). The Comboni Missionaries are sent to the peoples for the regeneration "of Africa with Africa," aware that the liberation and rebirth of peoples are profoundly linked to the person of Jesus and his Gospel, and with the peoples themselves as protagonists of their own history (CA 2003, 39). The regeneration of Africa with Africa occurs through a pastoral methodological process that includes (CA 1991, 44.1):

- the discovery and valorisation of the signs of the Kingdom of God;
- respect for culture, traditions, sensitivity to peoples and their expressions – in awareness of the work of the Spirit in their culture (CA 2003, 42);
- the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ;
- great trust in the people, who become protagonists of their history and their process of evangelisation (CA 2003, 42. 100);
- the building of new communities around the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments;
- fostering growth and collaboration with the local Church, toward ministerial, economic, and apostolic self-sufficiency;
- the inculturation of the Gospel (CA 2003, 42);
- the formation of leaders and the participation of the people (CA 2009, 58.6; CA 1991, 44.2) so that people can be architects of their own future (CA 2015, 13);
- the integral liberation of individuals and peoples (CA 1997, 109; RL 61), with a commitment to peace and justice, and a prophetic voice in the face of situations of injustice and oppression, especially by raising the awareness of pastoral workers and the people (CA 1985, 34).

Furthermore, we must avoid the protagonism of missionaries and promote the subjectivity of local churches and the poor (CA 1997, 11), aware that it is God who guides history (CA 1997, 24). The poor are the subjects of evangelisation; they challenge us and help us live radical fidelity to the Gospel and our missionary charism. They help us discover more deeply the meaning of spirituality, liturgical celebrations, and theological reflection (CA 1991, 4.5); they are our companions on the journey and teachers in promoting the globalisation of fraternity and tenderness (CA 2015, 26).

= *CENACLE OF APOSTLES (W 2648)*

This iconic expression of Comboni today indicates missionary disciples united in the person of Jesus and animated by the fire of the Spirit, animated by the dream of the Kingdom that they proclaim as a community (CA 2022, 15; CA 2015, 25; CA 2009, 58.4; CA 1997, 19; CA 1991, 30.1). In other words, the Comboni vocation is to evangelise as intercultural communities living in prayerful fraternity (CA

2009, 57.2; CA 2003, 35), caring for one another, open to acceptance, collaboration, and dialogue, on a synodal journey of discernment that transforms lives and leads to a shared commitment to the mission (CA 2022, 16; CA 2003, 85), always ready to actualise the charism in the face of new missionary challenges (CA 2015, 3).

Community life is already in itself a proclamation and a translation of the Gospel we proclaim, a realisation of the Kingdom (CA 2003, 84; CA 1985, 34), for example, as a sign of communion in the face of the fragmentation of peoples, cultures, and individuals (CA 1997, 27). For this reason, all communities are called to be increasingly inserted into their context and to live in solidarity and communion with the reality that surrounds them (CA 2003, 88), centred on the mission and not on structures (CA 1997, 19). They are called to be places of communion, fraternal sharing, forgiveness and reconciliation, mutual acceptance, and fraternal relationships (CA 1997, 29).

= *Ecclesial involvement* (RL 8-9)

This fundamental principle is structured into two main aspects: the Institute's involvement in the local Churches and the involvement of the local Churches in the mission *ad gentes*.

We are an integral part of the local Churches and, therefore, we are called to overcome all forms of protagonism and paternalism, willingly participating in the processes of study, discernment, and inculturation in the various areas of Christian life, and collaborating in the creation of adequate structures that do not burden the community (CA 1997, 47). From this perspective, we place ourselves in communion (CA 1985, 33) and in the service of the local Church, enriching it with our charism in an attitude of fidelity and encouragement (CA 2003, 106), participating fully in its pastoral project (CA 2003, 107), and contributing to sustainable evangelisation initiatives, characterised by a simple lifestyle, modest means, and programs that foster community self-sufficiency. Our commitment is also expressed in constant dialogue with the local Church in pastoral planning (CA 1985, 11) and in the Institute's qualified presence (CA 1985, 12), recognising communion with it as a fundamental value (CA 1985, 33). Aware that the local Church is the agent of the inculturation of the Gospel (CA 1997, 43), we remember that Christians, in the exercise of their ministry and in a spirit of synodal communion, are called to live and express the Gospel according to their cultural values (CA 1997, 46).

On the other hand, we are also called to open every local Church to the mission *ad gentes* (CA 1991, 47), both *ad intra* and *ad extra* (CA 1997, 99), promoting a missionary communion that expresses itself as an authentic exchange of gifts between the Churches and that nourishes the missionary awareness of the People of God (CA 2009, 39). In communities of ancient Christian tradition, missionary animation is configured as a true service of evangelisation: it invites conversion, raises awareness of the needs of the poorest, opens to universality and promotes communion between the Churches, in a dynamic of mutual enrichment (CA 1997, 100). In these contexts, it becomes today a courageous proclamation of the Good News and a pressing invitation to *metanoia*, to help a new and more fraternal world grow; hence the urgency of a prophetic press and grassroots missionary animation (CA 1985, 3.4). At the same time, we are committed to opening up nascent local Churches to the mission *ad gentes*, promoting communion and cooperation among all Christian communities (CA 1991, 47) and reminding them to look toward broader missionary horizons (CA 2009, 56.6). This involves reawakening missionary vocation and responsibility, fostering spiritual and material communion and cooperation, and supporting youth and vocation ministry (CA 2009, 57.5). From this perspective, we place particular emphasis on missionary animation, personal contact, and social and digital communication, which are privileged tools for reaching people and experimenting with new forms of proclaiming the Word (CA 2022, 32). We also accept the challenge of digital transformation, which urges us to seek sustainable ways to reach people and influence Christian communities and public opinion, collaborating with networks and territories (CA 2022, 32.1), and we are committed to implementing communications plans that effectively guide and plan our work in this field (CA 2022, 32.2).

= MISSION MARKED BY THE CROSS (RL 4)

This aspect differs from the others that preceded it in that it highlights a reality that missionaries encounter on their path, which comes to them rather than being sought through commitments and planning. However, as the 2009 Chapter reminds us, "the total self-giving that requires us to take on very difficult situations is marked by the cross. Following Comboni's example, we choose these realities as a sign of profound love for the people." The vitality of the charism and fidelity are confirmed in the situations of martyrdom in which many Comboni Missionaries choose to remain and work (CA 1991, 4.2) to be close to and accompany the suffering people (CA 1991, 40.5). Pope Francis, in the message given at the audience with the Chapter members on June 18, 2022, recalled how the missionary disciple knows how to offer his entire life and risk it even to the point of martyrdom as a witness to Jesus Christ. And this is a reality that is part of Comboni history, also in conjunction with the capitular processes, as in the case of Fr. Ezechiele Ramin (1985) and of Fr. Mario Mantovani and Fr Godfrey Kiryowa (CA 2003, 15).

Fundamental methodological elements

The theme of missionary methodology has recurred consistently at key moments in the life of the Institute since 1982. Since then, all General Chapters have reflected on and provided guidance on Comboni methodology. These contributions do not provide a comprehensive framework, as they tend, depending on the situation and historical-geographical context, to focus on particular aspects or perspectives. For example, the concern of the 1985 Chapter was to review and requalify commitments, with attention to the values of the Kingdom. In 1991, the focus was on lifestyle and spirituality, as well as the means and techniques of pastoral ministry (CA 1991, 42). The perspective of the 1997 Chapter was to build the Church as God's family, focusing on certain mission models, namely, those of inculturation, dialogue, and commitment to justice and peace. In 2003, the Chapter reflected on the renewal of missionary methodology, focusing on action and contemplation, ministry and collaboration, inculturation, dialogue, and proclamation. The 2009 Chapter, influenced by the *Ratio Missionis* process, recalled elements for a renewed missionary methodology, while in 2015, the theme was still the revision of commitments, but with an emphasis on evangelisation and specific pastoral services. This latter perspective was resumed in 2022, along with the reflection on integral ecology as a fundamental axis of the Comboni mission.

However, rereading all these contributions together, we realise that three fundamental recurring elements emerge, essential reference points in the development of contextual methodologies: insertion, the ministerial approach, and inculturation.

1. INSERTION

This is the starting point for any missionary commitment and requires, first and foremost, an in-depth study of the local language and culture (CA 1991, 44.2.a). Insertion is the premise for the practical translation of each of the six charismatic principles outlined above and also a preliminary step for the processes of inculturation (CA 1997, 37).

A simple lifestyle and genuine closeness to the people are fundamental to the Comboni style of mission: the missionary community is called to share the destiny of the people among whom it lives, adopting their lifestyle, attitudes, sufferings, language, and daily rhythm (CA 1991, 31.5), cultivating a constant attitude of solidarity and sharing (CA 1991, 45.1). The choice of simple and humble structures and ways of life (CA 1991, 45.1.e), that are welcoming and shared, makes the missionary presence more human, closer, and capable of generating joy and fraternity (CA 2015, 23), while hospitality, experienced as the people experience it, becomes a concrete sign of communion (CA 1991, 45.2.a).

Insertion also means making a careful analysis of reality, capable of recognising and valorising the work of the Spirit in the local culture (CA 2003, 42). Experiences of more radical insertion are

encouraged (CA 1985, 32; CA 1991, 45.2.f), and the 2003 Chapter, furthermore, urges all communities to an ever-deeper insertion into the local context, in solidarity with the people and their challenges (CA 2003, 88). We thus dream of a missionary lifestyle fully inserted into the reality of peoples, attentive to the cry of the earth and the impoverished, supported by intercultural communities that bear witness to fraternity, communion, social friendship and service to local Churches through simpler lifestyle choices and structures (CA 2022, 28), appropriate to the social context in which we live, and useful for improving the life of the people (CA 2022, 42.2).

2. MINISTERIAL APPROACH

Since the 1985 Chapter, the Institute has opted for a missionary methodology that values trust in the Holy Spirit, the promotion of ministries, simplicity of means, and the formation of small Christian communities (CA 1985, 5; CA 1991, 42.2.c). In this way, missionaries accompany people on their journey of faith and life (CA 1997, 25), with a style of service, building evangelising communities with a plurality of ministries (CA 1991, 46.1) and accompanying them with a prophetic sense in facing their struggles, realising their aspirations, and their journey of integral liberation (CA 1991, 45.2.b).

It is therefore essential to foster the growth of vibrant Christian communities, places of communion, prayer, listening to the Word, initiation into ecclesial life, reflection on human problems in the light of the Gospel, and commitment to the transformation of social structures (EiA 89). This means promoting a "ministerial church" that discerns and promotes the gifts the Spirit distributes to all (CA 1997, 17). In this sense, special attention is given to the formation of local leaders in both the socio-political and ecclesial fields (CA 1991, 44.2.b).

The ministerial approach also involves characteristic attitudes and aspects that intersect different ministries, such as the combination of action and reflection, collaboration, dialogue, and social ministries.

The last two Chapters have indicated that specific ministry and pastoral care are the key to requalifying the missionary service of the Institute, taking up the invitation of *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 33 and 27) to be bold and creative, rethinking the objectives, structures, styles and methods of evangelisation and missionary animation (CA 2015, 39).

- *Action and contemplation (spirituality)*

Ministry is nourished by an incarnate spirituality that heals and humanises, based on the Word of God, which touches and inspires all dimensions of missionary life (CA 2015, 30). At the heart of our activities is a relationship of communion with God and the ability to interpret life and history in the light of faith, which leads to a new lifestyle (CA 2015, 29).

This involves pausing and looking at reality with the eyes of faith to discover how Christ is present in events and to reflect on whether our actions respond to the Spirit's invitations. Contemplating events in the light of the Word that is Jesus Christ, we ourselves are transformed and thus sense the good news we are called to live and proclaim (CA 1997, 24). As missionaries open to God's action within us, we experience the encounter with the Lord as disciples entirely dedicated to the mission (CA 2009, 22). The witness of the Lord's love, which brings hope to all humanity, is born from this relationship with the Lord, who invites us to be builders of fraternity, to give ourselves to others as communicators of peace, to welcome all, and to be good news among the poorest. (CA 2009, 23).

This requires rooting our spirituality in the action of the Spirit and in contemplation, and to engage in continuous discernment in the encounter between Word and reality (CA 2009, 29.36), to grasp the signs of the times and places in today's mission (CA 2015, 22). Comboni invites us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, who leads us to contemplate the mystery of God, but also

on the mystery of humanity, where we find him present in all his richness and diversity. (CA 2015, 28). Thus, our communities experience the mission as the fruit of discernment and shared commitment, collaborating with other forces present locally (CA 2022, 19).

- *Collaboration*

Ministerial collaboration in mission is characterised as a profoundly synodal process that involves the People of God in all phases of pastoral action, from planning to evaluation, so that each person can feel an active part of the mission (CA 1991, 42.2.d). In a context marked by individualism and fragmentation, choosing unity and co-responsibility in evangelisation becomes in itself a testimony to the Kingdom of God and an expression of the Comboni charism, which led St. Daniel Comboni to gather around himself all available forces for the regeneration of Africa (CA 1997, 71-72). This collaboration also extends to the institutional level, where dialogue, sharing of personnel, and coordination between Circumscriptions allow for the requalification of the missionary presence, reducing dispersive commitments and promoting specific pastoral care at the continental level (CA 2022, 31.3). At the same time, it is essential to build common paths with local Churches to develop contextualised pastoral care and, together with popular movements, activate networks capable of responding creatively and embodied to the challenges of the territories (CA 2022, 31.4).

- *Social ministries: integral ecology JPIC*

Human advancement has always been part of our mission, but today this commitment is no longer sufficient: we are called to identify and analyse the root causes of systems of structural oppression in the economic, political, social, cultural, and religious fields. To remain silent in the face of injustice would mean siding with the oppressor and opposing the oppressed (CA 1997, 107). In this sense, JPIC is not an optional addition but a constitutive dimension of the Gospel message, as the Synod of Bishops' document *Justice in the World* recalls (CA 1997, 110). Evangelising, therefore, means confronting everything that harms human dignity and creation.

Comboni himself was an example of this integration between evangelisation and social commitment: he fought against grave forms of injustice of his time, such as the Eastern slave trade and the arms trade, and promoted integral human development (CA 1997, 108). The Institute also has a solid tradition of JPIC ministry (CA 1997, 109): several magazines have played a prophetic role in denouncing injustices; the Rule of Life calls for the integral liberation of the person (RL 61), and the Institute has expressed this in promoting the values of the Kingdom (CA 1985, 35-68) and in making common cause with peoples, committing itself to their liberation (CA 1991, 6.2; 45.1). This heritage demonstrates how JPIC is a concrete expression of the Comboni charism and a privileged way to make the Gospel visible in history.

Faced with major global challenges, complex in their causes and consequences, Christian communities are therefore called to respond in faith, renewing and qualifying their option for the just cause of the poor and oppressed. This involves a commitment to identifying the causes of injustice and collaborating with all stakeholders in the ministry of justice and peace, a ministry that encompasses prophetic proclamation and denunciation, the formation of consciences, and the building of collaborative networks (CA 1991, 113-117). To make this commitment effective, it is important to create local monitoring, awareness-raising, and advocacy groups at the provincial level, to be present in decision-making bodies to foster more supportive policies, and to promote continental and intercontinental networks, such as those for human rights or economic justice through AEFJN (CA 2003, 46-47).

The economy, a crucial sphere of human experience, is today one of the least evangelised sectors in a world dominated by neoliberalism (CA 2003, 101). For this reason, we are called to show even deeper solidarity with the marginalised, promoting fundamental human rights and placing

the person—not profit—at the centre of the social project. Evangelical witness also involves lobbying, networking, and participation in justice and peace activities, both through the media and through community decisions that support alternative economic models (CA 2003, 29).

Finally, the 2022 Chapter, recognising the interconnectedness of all reality, embraced integral ecology as a fundamental axis of our mission, capable of connecting the pastoral, liturgical, formative, social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions (CA 2022, 30). Integral ecology demonstrates once again that JPIC is not a sectoral area, but an integral and transversal part of evangelisation, orienting our missionary style toward comprehensive care for the person and creation.

- *Dialogue*

Dialogue is a defining element of the missionary-ministerial approach and today constitutes a privileged way to proclaim the Gospel in a world marked by religious and cultural pluralism. In a context where diversity grows and intertwines, we are called to find new forms of relationships and collaboration that avoid conflict, competition, and proselytism, and that instead contribute to the construction of justice and peace (CA 1997, 53). The magisterium of the bishops also urges us to pursue paths of dialogue that, until recently, were viewed with prejudice or approached unilaterally (CA 1997, 45).

A particularly significant area is the relationship with Islam. Christian communities must be made aware of the importance of dialogue with Muslims (CA 1997, 64), recognising that our presence among the faithful of Islam aims at initial evangelisation through the testimony of life, interreligious dialogue initiatives in communion with local Churches, and, where possible, also the direct proclamation of the Gospel, as *Ecclesia in Africa* 66 recalls (CA 1997, 65). Furthermore, in the Comboni tradition, schools, social works, and the promotion of women are privileged spaces for encounter, evangelisation, and dialogue with Islam (CA 1997, 67). It is part of the same evangelical logic to promote dialogue initiatives, relationships of esteem and trust, and to collaborate with Muslims who are committed to respecting human rights and the emancipation of women (CA 1997, 68). In this context, the 2022 Chapter strongly reaffirms the Institute's commitment to dialogue with Islam, in light of the increasingly significant presence of Muslims in the contexts in which we operate (CA 2022, 31.8).

Interreligious dialogue, however, is not limited to Islam: it embraces all the religious traditions in which we are immersed, such as African and Asian Traditional Religions, indigenous and Afro-descendant religions, and also extends to intercultural dialogue, in harmony with the spirit of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* signed by Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi in 2019 (CA 2022, 31.7). The Spirit of Christ precedes the mission and mysteriously guides the path of peoples; in every religious tradition, elements that are the fruit of his action are found. For this reason, proclaiming the Gospel requires an attitude of profound and respectful listening to the values and concrete religious experiences of the people we encounter (CA 2003, 113). In some particular contexts, where the Church's presence is a minority, schools continue to represent a valuable place for teaching dialogue, acceptance, and coexistence.

In all these dimensions—religious, cultural, social, and missionary—dialogue is not simply a tool, but an evangelical style that reflects trust in the action of the Spirit, the centrality of human dignity, and the choice for a mission that builds bridges, opens shared paths, and promotes peaceful coexistence among peoples.

- *Specific pastorals*

Specific pastoral activities have become the key to the Institute's ministerial redevelopment, as they allow for greater coherence, continuity, and impact in guiding the mission. Along these lines, the 2015 Chapter identified the path to renewal as the establishment of larger, more stable,

and international communities, capable of demonstrating communion and fraternity and fostering specialisations that enhance our commitments (CA 2015, 44.9).

The 2022 Chapter further clarified the urgency of redevelopment of commitments according to the criterion of ministeriality, which requires the adoption of specific pastoral activities through broad collaboration as a missionary style (CA 2022, 9). For this reason, we adopt specific pastoral care, according to continental priorities (cf. CA 2015, 45.3), as a reference for the reorganisation of commitments at the level of Circumscriptions and Continents, in the logic of reduction, focus, and collaboration (CA 2022, 31). It is essential to initiate participatory processes that accompany the development of such pastoral care in relation to continental priorities, with particular attention to priority human groups (CA 2022, 31.1), and to promote ongoing dialogue with local Churches to develop specific and contextualised pastoral care, working in collaboration with popular movements (CA 2022, 31.4). In this framework, the development of JPIC finds new impetus thanks to its integration into local and interprovincial networks of specific pastorals (CA 2015, 45.5).

3. INCULTURATION

Inculturation constitutes a fundamental methodological element of evangelisation, as it is an integral part of the mission to incarnate the Gospel in the cultures of peoples (CA 1997, 31). Today, it emerges as a particularly urgent need (CA 1997, 32), especially in the context of the emergence of a global mass culture and the presence of ethnic conflicts, divisions, cultural plurality, and identity crises that weaken cultural, religious, and social references. This situation calls for a renewed commitment to the inculturation of the Gospel in concrete encounters with peoples (CA 1997, 36). The local Church is the true subject of inculturation—as *Ecclesia in Africa* 61 emphasises—called to discern, in light of the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, the values and anti-values of cultures. The process is always dynamic and reciprocal: as in the mystery of Pentecost, the Gospel introduces the newness of Christ into cultures, while the cultures themselves enrich the Church by offering new expressions of Christian life (RM 52), in line with the affirmations of *Ad Gentes* (AG 15) and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN 29) (CA 1997, 45). Comboni understood and emphasised this: Christians, in the exercise of their ministry and in synodal communion, are called to live and express the Gospel according to their cultural values. Indeed, the local Church is the primary agent that assimilates the event of Christ and re-expresses it through its own language, culture, and religious forms (CA 2003, 110).

Inculturation, however, requires a precise missionary attitude: serious and committed study of the local language and culture, combined with profound esteem and respect (CA 2003, 111). As intercultural people, we are called to discern the values and counter-values of cultures in the light of the Gospel, living an experience that helps us grow as individuals and as believers. This journey invites us to be instruments of exchange and mutual enrichment among the diverse cultures in which we work, contributing to the creation of a truly Catholic Church that is universal in communion and plural in its expressions (CA 2003, 112).

Understood in this way, inculturation is not a simple adaptation, but a theological, ecclesial, and pastoral process that allows the Gospel to take on the "flesh" of peoples and allows the peoples to imprint the colour and flavour of their own traditions on the Church, like a "brown pearl" that enriches the common treasure of faith.

Priority fields of work

The process of drafting the new Rule of Life, with a profound recovery of the Founder and the charism, triggered a need to revise commitments to promote a more authentic charismatic response to the new challenges of the mission. This need has intensified over time while the disproportion between commitments undertaken and the forces and energies actually available has grown (CA 2015, 40-41),

in addition to the emergence of new missionary challenges (CA 2009, 1). The Institute's reflection has continually sought to focus both on the selection criteria (CA 1985, 10-12; CA 1991, 3.2; CA 2003, 44; CA 2015, 44.5) and on the actual priority fields of work (CA 1985, 3; CA 1991, 40-41; CA 1997, 7-8; CA 2003, 38, 50; CA 2009, 62-63; CA 2015, 45.3 and 46; CA 2022, 31), opting for a ministerial approach and reorganisation to avoid dispersion (CA 2015, 43).

The Comboni presence is significant when we are close to marginalised human groups or in frontier situations. However, this presence does not always benefit from specific pastoral care, qualified in terms of methods and skills (CA 2015, 45.2). Hence, the need for specific pastoral services aligned with continental priorities has been felt, shared by multiple circumscriptions and implemented in broader collaboration at the interprovincial and continental levels. In this way, even with smaller communities in each country, networking allows for the development of specific pastoral care (CA 2015, 45.3).

If we look at the continental priorities expressed in the Chapters, we see that they are of two types: human groups and transversal dimensions of mission, that is, aspects that must be present in any context and ministry. It is interesting to note that the priorities for human groups, according to the Comboni charism, considered on a continental basis, are not numerous. This is a very important fact, as it offers the possibility of gradually addressing the dispersion and fragmentation of the Institute's commitments. In particular, these continental priorities are:

| AFRICA | ASIA |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human groups not yet evangelised • Pastoralists • Pygmies • Inhabitants of poor urban peripheries • Population in the Islamic context • Marginalised youth • Migrants and refugees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-evangelised peoples = first evangelisation = interreligious dialogue |
| AMERICA | EUROPA |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afro descendants • Indigenous peoples • Inhabitants of poor urban peripheries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrants and refugees |

Conclusion

In the first 20 years after the Council, in the era of Special Chapters, the great concern of religious institutes was to review their entire life in light of their charism. This profound and contemporary recovery of the Founder and the *primigenia inspiratio* was condensed into the Rule of Life. This quest also led to a review of their commitments, that is, to reflecting and evaluating which commitments truly corresponded to the founder's original inspiration. At the same time, the question arose of how institutes managed these commitments—that is, the question of method. In addition to the impetus of the Second Vatican Council, this ongoing quest was made necessary by the major epochal changes that had a considerable impact on the Institute and its mission (Pierli 1989).

The need to synthesise, to rediscover common and shared points of reference within the Institute, emerged with the new millennium. Between 2003 (with the decision made by the General Chapter) and 2012, work was carried out throughout the Institute on the *Ratio Missionis*, a theological reflection on the Comboni mission and methodology. Following the missiological reflection of those years, the process acknowledged the need to contextualise the mission, which is reflected in the development of different mission models.

Rereading the Chapter Acts from 1985 to 2022, however, shows us that there is actually a common framework within which the Comboni missionaries find themselves, while remaining within a plural

reality, in which different sensibilities and perspectives coexist, without renouncing differences and, without losing the distinctiveness of diverse contexts. This common framework includes:

1. A vision of mission defined by the Magisterium of the Church as *Missio Dei*.
2. The specific mission of the Institute, mission *ad gentes*, understood according to the signs of the times and the new global context.
3. Six charismatic principles that characterise the Comboni missionary style, which are:
 - = God's hour;
 - = making common cause;
 - = the regeneration of Africa with Africa;
 - = the cenacle of apostles;
 - = ecclesial involvement;
 - = and the mission marked by the cross.
4. Three fundamental methodological elements, namely:
 - = insertion,
 - = the ministerial approach,
 - = and inculturation.
5. Priority fields of work and specific pastoral activities as a current path of requalification.

We believe that on this basis it is possible to build together a path of requalification and reorganisation of the missionary service of the Institute, in fidelity to the charism and in response to the new challenges posed by the new historical era that is unfolding.

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