

Specific Comboni Pastoral Care

Abstract

The document of the General Secretariat for the Mission (June 2026) presents the development path of Comboni's specific pastoral programs, as outlined by the 19th General Chapter and in continuity with the discernment begun in 2015. The underlying orientation responds to the need to move beyond "generic" pastoral care to embrace a deeper contextualization, in harmony with *Evangelii Gaudium's* invitation to an "outgoing" Church, capable of inculturating the Gospel in diverse realities and cultures. The continental priorities—divided into priority human groups (evocative of the *ad gentes* dimension) and transversal elements (such as JPIC, missionary animation, and the media)—become the criteria for reducing the fragmentation of commitments and requalifying missionary presence, in communion with the local Churches.

The text identifies four pillars that define the development of these pastoral programs: *synodality*, understood as a shared path at the continental level and with local Churches; *ministeriality*, which articulates diverse services within a common vision; *integral ecology*, which embraces all dimensions of reality in connection; and prophetic dialogue with religious traditions. The document also emphasises the connection with initial formation and the reorganisation of circumscriptions, in a context of shrinking missionary forces that urgently requires greater collaboration and consolidation.

The central part of the document proposes a methodological framework for defining each specific pastoral program, divided into six elements: vision (the result of critical analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral discernment), insertion (style of presence and proximity), pastoral orientations (best practices and guidelines), ministerial articulation (coordination and structures), synodality (levels of communion), and models of presence (description of starting points, essential elements, horizons, conditions, and limitations). These models, defined as "dynamic and evolving," are a valuable tool for accompanying new confreres and for revitalising existing commitments.

Finally, the document illustrates the process initiated by the General Council to map specific pastoral activities across continents through research groups, questionnaires, and validation webinars. The goal is to achieve a communicative synthesis that fosters missionary animation, confrere orientation, and initial formation, while also creating continental ministerial networks for reflection and collaboration. The mapping exercise is presented as the starting point—not the end point—of a synodal journey of revitalisation, which requires the active involvement of communities and confreres to generate lasting fruits in the Comboni mission.

Synthesis

Five key points of the document on specific Comboni pastoral ministry

In our understanding of specific pastoral care, there are fundamental elements and a logical structure that allow us to describe it systematically. Thanks to this methodological framework, it is possible to arrive at a communicative synthesis of these pastoral programs—a crucial outcome for several reasons: first, for a synodal and shared journey that encompasses the great diversity of contexts and experiences; second, to clearly communicate our choices externally and account for them; and finally, to orient our confreres toward these pastoral programs and for the ministerial formation of young student missionaries. The following five key points highlight the characteristics of our approach to specific pastoral programs.

1. From generic pastoral care to specific and contextualised pastoral care

The heart of the Comboni transformation is the move beyond generic pastoral care—which does more or less what is done everywhere—to embrace specific pastoral care, rooted in the contexts,

cultures, and priority human groups. This is simply an organisational adjustment, but a genuine re-development of missionary identity.

The document begins with an honest observation: many Comboni presences, despite being located “on the frontiers of the mission,” effectively carry out indistinct pastoral care. This generality risks betraying the specificity of the Comboni charism, born to go “beyond” and reach peoples not yet evangelised. The choice of specific pastoral care according to continental priorities therefore represents a return to the sources: a conscious recovery of the vocation *ad gentes*. The inculturation of the Gospel becomes the fundamental criterion: it is not a matter of applying pre-packaged schemes, but of allowing oneself to be challenged by particular cultures and situations.

The circumscriptions are called to reduce, focus, and collaborate, abandoning the logic of multiplying commitments to embrace that of depth and quality.

2. Synodality as a method and style of missionary life

Specific pastoral care cannot be developed in isolation. It requires a synodal journey that involves local Churches, continents, circumscriptions, and individual missionaries in a process of listening, sharing, and mutual collaboration.

Synodality is not an abstract concept, but an operational and spiritual necessity. At the local level, insertion implies communion with the particular Church: the missionary is a travelling companion who walks with the people of God. At the continental level, synodality translates into shared specialisations, personnel exchanges, and reflection groups. In a context of diminishing staff, the pooling of resources and skills becomes not only an evangelical value, but a strategy for regeneration.

The continental councils become key players in coordination. The circumscriptions are encouraged to overcome nationalistic logic and open themselves to broader collaboration. Formation must include specific preparation for synodal work.

3. Ministeriality and the articulation of services

All specific pastoral care is structurally arranged as a variety of ministries that, while diverse, are united by a common vision and the practice of collaboration. Ministeriality is not just a style, but a structure that shapes pastoral action.

The document distinguishes between “specific pastoral care” (the area of intervention) and “ministries” (the concrete services). This distinction avoids two opposing tendencies: generic confusion and fragmentation. The challenge is to maintain unity and plurality, requiring coordination structures (teams, planning, monitoring) that do not become paralysing bureaucracies. Ministeriality also involves a formative dimension: ministers must be prepared for collaboration and an interdisciplinary interpretation of reality.

Each district must equip itself with coordination and monitoring tools. The training of local lay people and religious as pastoral agents must be emphasised.

4. Integral ecology as a key to universal understanding

Integral ecology is not an additional or sectoral theme, but an interpretative paradigm that encompasses all dimensions of pastoral care: social, economic, cultural, ecclesial, spiritual, environmental, and political. Everything is connected, and pastoral care must reflect this interconnection.

The reference to integral ecology, borrowed from the teaching of Pope Francis, is one of the most innovative elements. It is not a matter of adding “ecological pastoral care” to the others, but of recognising that every pastoral intervention has implications on multiple levels. A youth ministry that

does not consider the economic and social conditions of young people risks being abstract. Integral ecology thus becomes a design criterion: every action must be considered in its complexity.

Pastoral teams should include diverse expertise (social sciences, economics, ecology, theology). Planning must include analyses of reality that include deep structures.

5. Mapping and systematisation for a proactive path

The document does not merely outline principles but initiates a concrete process of mapping and systematising specific pastoral activities, aimed at creating a “communicative synthesis” that serves the missionary animation, formation, and orientation of the confreres.

Mapping is not a bureaucratic exercise, but an act of community discernment. It involves systematically assessing our current status with each specific pastoral activity, documenting visions, insertion models, orientations, and consolidated practices. This work allows us to learn from experience, creates a shared heritage to pass on to future generations, and fosters the creation of continental networks. Mapping is presented as a “starting point, not a destination”: a dynamic process that is continually updated.

Communities and confreres are called to participate actively in data collection and validation. The Continental Councils are responsible for guiding the process. Initial formation should integrate the results as teaching materials.

Conclusion

The five key points outline a coherent and organic path: it begins with a choice of field (specific and contextualised pastoral care), implemented through a synodal method and a ministerial structure, interpreted in the light of integral ecology, and finally documented and systematised through a mapping process that becomes a tool for growth and regeneration. All of this is driven by the awareness that we are in an “epochal change” that requires courage, creativity, and a spirit of communion. The resulting communicative synthesis is not an end in itself, but a means to journey together, account for our work, guide our brothers, and train young missionaries to serve specific pastoral needs.

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General Secretariat for the Mission – June 2026

The journey of the Institute

The XIX General Chapter confirmed the orientation already indicated by the preceding Chapter regarding the development of specific pastoral care:

“We assume the specific pastorals according to continental priorities (cf. CA ‘15, 45.3) as a reference point for the reorganisation of commitments (reduction, focus, collaboration) in the Circumscriptions and on the Continents”. (CA ‘22, 31)

The discernment conducted in 2015 revealed that, in many cases, by the grace of God, we are present at the frontiers of mission, in line with the Comboni charism. However, the pastoral work we carry out is often generic; that is, we do more or less what is done in other contexts. The call of *Evangelii Gaudium*, which inspired that Chapter, was a stimulus to reconsider our pastoral approach for greater contextualization, the fruit of an outgoing Church, attentive to particular situations and cultures, which also need to be evangelised, to inculturate the Gospel.

This orientation also represents an opportunity to revitalise our missionary presence, in communion with the local churches. On the one hand, we grow in the practice of insertion, starting with knowledge of local languages and cultures, making common cause with the people, and serving them so that they emerge as protagonists of their own journey of evangelisation (cf. the Regeneration of Africa with Africa), with a view to inculturating the Gospel.

On the other hand, faced with an excessive number of commitments—considering the availability and strength of our staff—and their fragmentation, which makes it very difficult to ensure continuity and develop coherent and comprehensive approaches, we realise that it is possible to reduce dispersion and fragmentation by focusing on continental priorities, on which there has been a consensus for a long time. Specifically, a critical analysis of these priorities reveals two distinct types of continental priorities: those that concern priority human groups and are therefore highly evocative from a charismatic perspective, as they actualise the *ad gentes* dimension. The interesting thing is that there are not many of these priorities, which means that it is possible to achieve, at the continental level, a focus that helps us overcome dispersion and fragmentation. Then there are priorities that are actually elements that cut across every missionary context, such as JPIC, missionary animation, or the media.

Reaffirming the orientation of specific pastoral programs according to continental priorities, the 19th Chapter also emphasised other aspects that characterise their development. There is the aspect of synodality, hence the awareness that this is a journey that cannot be undertaken alone. Communion with local churches is required, but also reflection, collaboration, and exchange at the continental level, which may include shared specialisations, personnel exchanges, and discussion and reflection groups. (CA '22, 33)

Then there is the aspect of ministry, which, in addition to indicating the pastoral style of service and collaboration, also speaks to us of its articulation, so that within a specific pastoral program, we will find various ministries that proceed from a common vision and complement each other.

This is connected to a third aspect emphasised by the Chapter: integral ecology and the teaching of Pope Francis. Indeed, when we speak of integral ecology, we do not simply mean the environment or climate change. Since everything is connected, since everything is related, all dimensions of reality (social, economic, cultural, ecclesial and spiritual, environmental, political, and so on) fall within the pastoral sphere. (CA '22, 29 - 30)

Finally, the participatory and dialogical aspect of developing specific pastoral programs also requires openness and dialogue with religious traditions (RTA and Asian, Islam, local churches, etc.), in line with a mission that becomes "prophetic dialogue." (CA '22, 31.7)

The development of specific pastoral programs at the continental level is also a good opportunity for the process of reviewing formation and the consolidation of circumscriptions. The final phase of initial formation—scholasticates and CIF—has the task, according to the *Ratio Fundamental*is, of specifically promoting the missionary dimension of ministry. It is hoped that students at this stage of formation will be able to develop the skills necessary for service in line with the Institute's missionary priorities. Regarding circumscriptions, with the trend of decreasing and ageing personnel, it is foreseeable that there will soon be a significant reduction in missionary forces in the field. This will have considerable repercussions on the ability to pursue missionary reflection and study, to innovate, and to respond to new missionary challenges. However, closer communion and collaboration between circumscriptions, which could even lead to a merger, focused on specific shared pastoral care, could facilitate ongoing missionary regeneration and renewal, even with smaller numbers of personnel and communities across a national territory.

To achieve this, we must be proactive and systematic. A commitment made by the Chapter, in fact, is to launch participatory processes to support the development of specific pastoral care in relation to continental priorities, with particular attention to priority human groups. (CA '22, 31.1)

This should be part of provincial and continental planning, as a supported and monitored process (CA '22, 31.5). Obviously, depending on the case, these processes can take on very different characteristics, also considering the fact that the specific pastoral care we have prioritised is not necessarily at the same level of maturity. In any case, we are not starting from scratch, but there are already several elements, practices, and tools that are part of an acquired tradition. The first step, therefore, will be to systematically and concisely report our current status with each specific pastoral care program.

Elements of specific pastoral care

When drawing up a summary of the state of the art of specific pastoral care, some fundamental elements must be kept in mind, namely:

1. Vision

The pastoral vision indicates the horizon, or dream, toward which pastoral service is oriented. A concise vision does not require many words; nevertheless, it is the fruit of extensive work based on a critical analysis of reality, theological reflection, and pastoral discernment.

Critical analysis aims to understand reality in its complexity, using the tools of the social sciences to grasp the big picture, the trends, the underlying causes of social phenomena and their implications, the underlying mentalities and cultural assumptions. In short, it leads to a systemic vision of reality, starting from experience and moving from the descriptive and anecdotal level to the overall structural level.

Theological reflection is fundamental for a reading of reality that captures the seeds of life, the presence and action of God in history. Illuminated by Scripture and the Magisterium, theological reflection also helps to uncover the structures of sin, which then have consequences on the lives of individuals and peoples, and to energise a community of believers toward an alternative inspired by the Kingdom of God.

Pastoral discernment is fundamentally oriented toward listening to the invitations of the Holy Spirit and identifying ways to respond to those invitations. Clearly, it is an ongoing process, unfolding step by step as we respond with action to the challenges posed by reality.

Out of all this, a vision gradually grows, and, the more mature it is, the more it simplifies, in the sense that it increasingly grasps the essence and the invitations of the Spirit. (cf. EG 35)

2. Insertion

As well as a comprehensive vision, specific pastoral care requires appropriate starting points for accessing the people's experience, taking the initiative, engaging, accompanying, reaping the benefits of, and celebrating the experience of salvation, the transfiguration of reality (cf. EG 24). Insertion determines the way to reach people, to journey together, and includes lifestyle, the structures available and used, and the way of relating and collaborating. Learning the language of the people is essential, as this allows the missionary to gain a deep understanding of their culture. There may be different ways of practising insertion within the same specific pastoral care, depending on the type of service, the characteristics of the ministers, and the environmental conditions. It is therefore possible to create different models of presence within the same specific pastoral care in a given circumscription. For example, youth ministry may contemplate different modes of presence: in schools, in parish groups, on the street. These are different modes of presence that help reach different recipients and accompany them starting from their specific contexts.

3. Pastoral orientations

Starting from experience, critically reflecting on reality, and following the promptings of the Spirit, good practices emerge, strengthened by time, which develop pastoral wisdom. Similarly, experience also teaches us what impedes or hinders fruitful pastoral action. Through sharing experiences and critical reflection, to understand what works and why, it is possible to develop guidelines for pastoral action. This is an important step to avoid starting over and over again and repeating the same mistakes, to learn from one another, and to forge a coherent and constructive path together. Pastoral guidelines in themselves are general indications, which then require contextualization and creativity at the local level. They should not be adopted mechanically, as if they were some kind of magic wand, but rather critically understood, to be able to apply them in a detailed and appropriate manner, without forgetting that they are means, not ends in themselves.

4. Articulation and ministerial structures

Within a specific pastoral ministry, there will be various ministries and pastoral agents who will co-operate as agents of a pastoral ministry of communion. To maintain this ministerial richness, it is essential to have a pastoral coordination team, the capacity for ministerial collaboration, good communication, and structured moments of planning, review, reflection, prayer, and celebration. The various ministries must engage, interact, and create synergy. The risk is that the process will become bureaucratic, multiplying meetings and superstructures, sapping energy and freshness from the service: the challenge is to find a balance and constantly nurture communion.

At the same time, this articulation will reflect the organisation of a series of pastoral structures, which, while diverse, must create a certain synergy and unity within plurality. These pastoral structures can serve both as ways of integrating into the local area and as centres of training, study, and reflection that are focused on specific pastoral work and have a characteristically interdisciplinary nature.

5. Synodality

Specific pastoral care is an ecclesial fact; it cannot be developed in isolation, on its own. From the Chapter's perspective, it is a reality that encompasses various levels. Insertion implies, first of all, communion with the local church, which is essential for pastoral action. But there are also other levels, as in today's world, truly isolated realities no longer exist; instead, interconnectedness and mutual influences are felt everywhere. In our case, for example, the continental level is strategic, with the possibility of sharing, exchange, and even collaboration between circumscriptions. Depending on the issues, ecclesial coordination occurs at regional or global levels, as in the case of the work of some dicasteries.

6. Models of presence

As mentioned above, there may be different modes of presence and ministerial forms within a specific pastoral ministry. These characteristics may vary depending on the context and situation, while still sharing a general vision and common pastoral orientations. A description and critical understanding of these models is very useful for guiding new experiences and confreres in their ministerial service, allowing them to benefit consciously from the experience of those who preceded them and thus ensure continuity. For those starting a new presence, there is no need, so to speak, to reinvent the wheel: it is sufficient to discern which starting model is best suited to the context. Awareness of models that work, and an understanding of why and under what conditions they work, also constitutes considerable assistance in requalifying commitments. Living within an epochal change, we very often find that the models of presence that worked well in the past are marking time. Having new models available can be of great help in responding to new situations and socio-cultural conditions.

When describing a model of presence, the method of insertion stands out. It shows how to reach people meaningfully, while taking into account the various contexts, historical situations, cultures, ongoing social transformations, etc. In other words, it is a matter of finding the ideal starting point for the specific pastoral service.

Secondly, it is helpful to be aware of the essential elements of that model and the main activities they entail, focusing on what constitutes the distinctive feature of that ministerial approach. It is then important to be clear about the point of arrival, the horizon toward which the service is oriented, and what the seeds of life are, or the action of the Spirit guiding the journey. This aspect, evidently, is the fruit of discernment, not of an ideology or a personal plan. Overall, the description of the insertion model must explain the starting point, the reference points along the way, and the destination to be reached.

To better utilise the model, it is also important to understand the conditions required for it to work and the skills it requires. This includes an awareness of the major obstacles to overcome, the model's implicit limitations, and how it can be sustained, even financially.

Naturally, a presence model will never be a fixed, crystallised reality; it will also evolve, reflecting the rapid changes that characterise our time. We are therefore talking about dynamic, constantly evolving models. Consequently, they must be periodically evaluated, updated, and reported, noting the promptings of the Spirit that could guide them toward new forms of implementation.

Forging ahead with determination

The General Council's letter on the mission (May 1, 2025) mandated the General Secretariat of the Mission to initiate continental programs "to conduct a study to document the reality of specific pastoral care on the ground. We need to understand, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the state of our commitments as an Institute in these specific pastoral care programs, and then go even further, through shared research and reflection."

These processes were initiated in collaboration with the Continental Mission Councils, which selected the continental pastoral program to begin with, according to priority human groups, and the communities involved in such pastoral care on the continent. They then formed research groups, tasked with administering the questionnaires to collect data for mapping purposes. This exercise will also allow us to arrive at a communicative synthesis of these specific pastoral programs, which is very important both for missionary animation and for the orientation of confreres who wish to participate in these pastoral programs, and for initial ministerial formation (basic formation).

Webinars will then be held to validate the results of the research and syntheses, which will also offer the opportunity to create continental ministerial networks to further joint reflection, share experiences and practices, initiate potential collaborations, action-research projects, etc.

In conclusion, the mapping exercise and the communicative synthesis of specific pastoral activities are the starting point, not the final goal, of the process of ministerial requalification of the Institute's missionary service. This process will bear fruit to the extent that the confreres and communities who have undertaken these pastoral activities engage in this synodal journey, participating in the mapping exercise, the validation of the communicative synthesis, and the formation of continental ministerial networks.