**SUMMARY**

**LETTER OF PRESENTATION** I

**INTRODUCTION** p. 1

**SHARING OUR MISSION STORY** p. 7

**1 Positive Attitudes and Experiences in the Process of the Ratio Missionis** p. 7

1.1 The Challenges p. 7

1.2 A desire to get together and take stock of the current

 Situation p. 8

1.3 An Experience of Discernment p. 8

1.4 The Expectations p. 8

**2 The Theological Sphere**  p. 9

2.1 A variety of theological positions and problematic aspects p. 9

2.2 New Horizons and Theological Openings p. 10

**3 Elements of Comboni Identity**  p. 13

3.1 Spirituality p. 13

3.2 Community Life p. 17

**4 Places and Elements of a Comboni Missionary Pastoral**

**Approach**  p. 23

* 1. The Local Church p. 23
	2. The Laity p. 26
	3. Local Culture and Insertion p. 28
	4. New Horizons of *Mission*: New Areopagi and Modes of

Missionary Activity p. 31

**RE-READING OUR EXPERIENCE**  p. 45

1. **A Multi-Polar Mission**  p. 45
2. **Essential Elements of Missionary Life**  p. 47

2.1 Discernment ………………………………………………………. p. 48

2.2 Dialogue/Listening…………………………………………. p. 51

2.3 Context/Contextualization………………………………..p. 53

2.4 Collaboration…………………………………………………….p. 56

2.5 Participation p. 58

2.6 Prophecy p. 62

2.7 Presence/Martyrdom p. 64

2.8 Communion p. 66

1. **Theological Models**  p. 70
	1. Models of Church p. 72
	2. The ‘Faces’ of Christ p. 75
	3. New Perspectives in *Mission*  p. 77
2. **Conclusion**  p. 84

**LETTER OF PRESENTATION**

**OF THE RATIO MISSIONIS**

*“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone*

*who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”*

*(1Pt 3,15)*

Dear brothers,

Our Rule of Life reminds us that “Daniel Comboni distinguished himself for his total dedication to the missionary cause for which he spoke, worked, lived and died” (RL 2), and that our Institute “is entirely dedicated to missionary service. This determines its activities, life-style, and organization, as well as the preparation of its candidates and the renewal of its members” (RL 2.1).

Fidelity to mission has been the guiding principle of our history which now stretches back over 150 years. And it is this fidelity which leads us to an attitude of constant listening to the signs of the times and to constant renewal. As again our Rule of Life says, the Comboni Missionaries, “publicly commit themselves to a particular way of life in order to fulfil better the missionary service in mutual responsibility and edification. Aware that they respond to this call in an inadequate and uneven fashion, they accept the necessity of constantly revising their way of life in order to live in the world as a sign of salvation” (RL, Preamble).

It is in the context of this fidelity to, and constant renewal of, our Comboni charism that the *Ratio Missionis,* which has occupied us as an Institute since 2003, finds its place.

The aim of this process was less that of drawing up a normative document (similar, for example, to the *Ratio Fundamentalis*), than of stirring us all into a movement of renewal understood in the widest sense, and including our theological motivations, spirituality, methodology, fields of mission, and community life. The experience thus lived has now become part of our missionary journey as individual persons and as Institute.

The process has also generated important questions, affirmations, reflections, experiences, proposals and suggestions, which the XVII General Chapter thought it right to gather, organise and offer to the whole Institute. In practical terms, the Chapter asked the General Council to name a commission that “in collaboration with the SGEV, might undertake a systematic re-reading of the material produced in the last few years during the process of the *Ratio Missionis*. The theological reflection on mission and on Comboni methodology that emerges from it will be presented at the next Intercapitular” (CA ’09, 11.1).

This commission, coordinated by the General Secretary for Evangelisation, worked very well, and drew up a document, which was presented to the Intercapitular Assembly and which is now published here under the title *Our Mission. Experience and Reflection. Conclusions from the Process of the Ratio Missions*.

The word “*ratio*” may be understood with different meanings. The sense which seems most appropriate to our case is that found in 1 Peter 3.15, where it is said that the Christian must “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason (*ratio, logos*, in the Latin and Greek respectively) for the hope that you have”. So *ratio* has to do with giving the reason, the deepest motivation, for what one is and does. The *Ratio Missionis*, then, has to with saying what we do, and how and why we do it; it is an effort to define, that is, what mission means for us, the Comboni Missionaries of the 21st century, and the implications of this in terms of our attitudes, our criteria and our choices.

The document now in our hands is, naturally, unfinished, because it needs to be contextualised in the various situations where mission has led us. It is unfinished also because mission never stops, especially in these times of rapid change: reflection on mission must continue. In this sense, the *Ratio Missionis* will always be a dynamic process, because every historical change demands a redefinition of mission in all its various aspects.

Finally, as long as our Institute still seeks to say, at times also amidst resistance and opposition, what it means for us to be missionaries in a particular context and epoch - to elaborate, that is, a *Ratio Missionis*, then we will know that the Comboni Institute is still alive, and that mission is still capable of setting us on fire with passion and life.

In presenting this document to you, we want to thank the Commission who worked on it and all those who cooperated along the way. At the same time, we express the hope that it will help us to nourish in ourselves the missionary passion of the Founder, aware that “the Spirit who raised in Comboni a love for the people of Africa, continues to guide us towards the poor and the forgotten” and that “it is the same Spirit that pushes us to a deep personal and community renewal in love – a gift received and lived as consecration, unveiled and offered in the mission” (CA ’09, 19).

*The General Council*

Fr. Enrique Sánchez González

Fr. Alberto Pelucchi

Fr. Tesfaye Tadesse Gebresilasie

Fr. Villarino Rodríguez Antonio

Bro. Daniele Giusti

**INTRODUCTION**

The Chapter of 2009 entrusted to the General Council the task of instituting a Commission which, in cooperation with the Secretariat of Evangelization, would embark on a *“systematic re-reading of the material produced during these years in the process of the Ratio Missionis”* (CA ’09, No. 11.1) This “systematic re-reading”, aiming at a theological reflection on *Mission* and Comboni methodology, was to be presented to the Intercapitular Assembly in 2012.

The Commission, formally established by the General Council, gathered in April 2011. The first question to be clarified was the meaning of the sentence, “a systematic re-reading of the material” and therefore to clarify the themes of the *Ratio Missionis*; to then decide what, out of the mass of material produced between 2005 and 2008, needed to be sifted through and studied; and finally how to proceed in analyzing the material so gathered. The Superior-General, in his letter nominating the Members of the Commission, had underlined that the material should *“help the Confrères to take better advantage of the living experience done during the journey of the creation of the Ratio Missionis (…) so that it will become a true instrument of growth in order to answer faithfully to the Comboni Charism and to our missionary commitment”.*

One thing seemed clear to the Commission. Considering the ‘liquidity’ of the present time (in the world, in the Church and in the Institute) it would not seem appropriate to draft a *Ratio Missionis* as a well-defined document that seeks in some way to be definitive. To speak of a *Ratio Missionis*, could in fact be misleading – if by this we intend a manual of principles and of practical rules meant to direct our missionary work as the era of manuals seems to have well and truly ended; it seems to be closer to the reality of a ‘liquid’ age such as ours to pursue a ‘narrative’ literary form, which expresses itself in ‘telling the story of *Mission*.’ The above-mentioned difficulty however, must not stop us from taking stock of the present situation, knowing that we must be constantly vigilant and open to the evolution of the reflection on *Mission* and its praxis. It turned out to be important to ‘recount to ourselves’ the experience of *Mission* thereby revealing its many dimensions and essential dynamics.

The Commission therefore decided that a document on the *Ratio Missionis* would have to show what had emerged in the various phases of the process, namely it would have to give a voice to the Confrères following three criteria: first of all, how was the process of the *Ratio Missionis* lived (more properly concentrated on attitudes – difficult to assess it is true, as the material was more descriptive and oriented towards questions of identity and work methods more than on narrating experiences of life, but possible nonetheless). As a second criteria we chose to highlight, in as much as it was possible, the theological reflection; and, thirdly, to highlight indications of a Comboni Missionary praxis. Each of these three criteria was then made more detailed in a framework that would facilitate the reading of the material itself. This was the first interpretation given to the expression ‘re-reading of the material’ given by the Chapter. The conclusions (General, Continental and Provincial) of the phases ‘See-Judge-Act’ adopted by the process of 2005-2008 were therefore repositioned – even though the original meaning was kept – according to the other criteria of interpretation.

Furthermore, it was necessary to make a choice of the material to be studied. It was decided to read and analyze the General and Continental syntheses (Europe, French-speaking Africa, English-speaking Africa, and the Americas/Asia) and some Provincial syntheses (three or four) that each Member was free to choose without following prior criteria. Each Member of the Commission was given the task to read and analyze the conclusions of a Continent following the criteria mentioned above.

The Commission met again in June of the same year. The work of the Members was analyzed, weighed and discussed. It was decided that the Secretary-General of Evangelization would gather the material and piece together a cohesive narrative following the criteria of experience-theological reflection-Comboni methodology, without indicating, generally speaking, from which Province or Continent the material was coming from – this was done in order to facilitate the reading and also because the Provincial and Continental syntheses had already been done and could be consulted. It was further deemed opportune to edit the whole in such a way that the exposition would not just be a compilation of the material (albeit an orderly one), but that the Commission would add marginal notes (that eventually took the form of ‘inserts’) that would highlight the questions that had been discussed and remained ‘open’; these ‘inserts’ would then propose methods of missionary praxis.

The Commission met again in September to read once more and to correct the material prepared by the Secretary, integrated by the notes/corrections proposed by the Members of the Commission itself. In the meantime, the material had also been evaluated by the Members of the General Council and by some Confrères. However, at this meeting a problem arose. The material of *Ratio Missionis* turned out to be ‘dated’, namely some situations were no longer current or were in need of further elaboration: there had been an effort to solve the problem with the ‘inserts’, but the question arose whether it would not have been better to re-elaborate the document *ex novo* and give it a form more in line with the situation of today. A second possibility would have been, instead, to keep the document unchanged, namely by keeping it as a logical and coherent compilation of the material gathered, since any debatable question would be introduced by notes, as had already been decided. The second option was chosen in part out of a sense of fairness towards the Confrères who had contributed to the *Ratio Missionis*.

Naturally, the possibility of re-reading the material from a different point of view came up again in following meetings of the Commission, in November 2011 and in February 2012. During these meetings it was finally decided to produce a document in two parts. One that would contain the contributions of the Confrères according to the above mentioned criteria – a document that by now we had in draft form – and another which, instead, would opt for a different manner of interpretation: the material already produced would be read again highlighting the essential dimensions of missionary work and of our life – the ‘supporting pillars’ or, to use a word borrowed from some theologians, the ‘constants’ – so that the *Ratio Missionis* would not only be a ‘dated’ memory, but would give the essential directions of our work. Furthermore, it was decided to add some questions in order to facilitate personal and community reflection.

The present *Ratio Missionis* is, therefore, offered in two parts: the first, which has as its purpose to “share our *Mission* experience” (who we are, what we do, what we would like to do and the more problematic aspects of our life); and the second, which seeks to “re-read our *Mission*” presenting the essential aspects of our life and activity.

This document is the conclusion of a long period of reflection which started with the General Chapter of 2003. It was at that gathering that the process of producing a *Ratio Missionis* for the Institute had its beginning, a process that has involved the majority of our Confrères, plus experts in various fields. Its ups and downs notwithstanding, the process has certainly produced positive results.

One of them – well beyond what was written and produced – is that many Confrères have had the opportunity to tell their own story, to share their experiences, and to listen to what others were doing: the process has been one of listening and sharing, it has been a *community* event. It would be a pity if we were to lose the enthusiasm and the desire for community that has moved us and, above all, if we lost the desire to get together to speak of ourselves, of what we do, or of what could be done.

The process has also helped us to clarify terms and situations, to highlight doubts and perplexities, to see honestly our limitations and our motivations: these are questions that recurred through the Chapter of 2009 where references to the *Ratio Missionis* abound, in connection with themes such as our identity, spirituality, basic and on-going formation. The *Ratio Missionis* has been, therefore, a *Mission* event.

This long labour, which started in 2005, would not have been possible without the support of the General Councils and without the passion, the dedication and the encouragement of two Secretary-Generals of Evangelization, Fr. Fernando Zolli and Fr. Enrique Rosich Vargas. To them go our heartfelt thanks and our gratitude. May the Lord fill them with blessings and enthusiasm.

It is our desire that this text may not only ‘document’ who we are, but that it may be an instrument of on-going formation and that it may inspire personal, Community and Provincial reflection: as a means of comparisonand a criterion of planning for our missionary activity, that it may “rekindle the hope that is in us” and our passion for *Mission*.

The Commission for the Ratio Missionis

Fr. Mariano Tibaldo

Fr. Jorge O. Garcia Castillo

Fr. John Baptist K. Opargiw

Fr. Massimo Robol

****

**SHARING OUR MISSION STORY**

**“Ready to answer to anyone who may ask the reason for our hope” (1 Peter 3:15)**

**1. Positive Attitudes and Experiences in the Process of the Ratio Missionis**

* 1. The Challenges

We live in a time of rapid and epochal changes: the challenges of globalization, the hegemony of neo-liberalism and the market economy, the culture of consumerism, violence, war and extreme poverty, developments in the scientific and technical fields and in communications, all lead to disorientation and uncertainty. All these challenge our style of life and our missionary presence. In this historic time, it is not clear what our *Mission* might be and this gives rise to feelings of malaise and uneasiness within our Institute.

Even though we lack a habit of reflection in order to understand fully the new challenges and the new situations, we feel within ourselves a heart-felt desire for transformation, a will to be more relevant, incisive and effective with our presence and with our missionary activity; we perceive a deep desire for a pastoral style specifically ‘Comboni-like’, which will lead to common reflections and evaluations in view of a common pastoral approach which is marked by a certain continuity.

While, on the one side, we feel this need to have clear signs of identity in a changing world, the difficulties of *Mission* must not give rise to dejection or to a nostalgic look at the past, but should rather be the occasion to live in a time like the present, laden with opportunities.

* 1. A desire to get together and to take stock of the current situation

The process of the *Ratio Missionis* fulfils this desire and need for change. It has awakened in most of us the will to walk together, to meet and to share our experiences of *Mission*, our joys and difficulties, and to find answers to the problems of our *Mission*. This is a time of grace, a new *“kairòs”* for the Institute, a new source of renewal as a starting point for the future of the Comboni *Mission*, a help in discovering and integrating the new faces of the Institute and in giving new strength to community life, breaking down prejudices and helping one another in mutual attention, questioning ourselves and beginning a process of conversion.

* 1. An Experience of Discernment

Our getting together has favoured a sapiential reading of the Comboni charism and traditions, and has helped us to discern the ‘signs of the times’ and the ‘signs of the places’ (namely those social, historical and cultural places that are contexts of revelation and salvation, places where Christ allows us to find him); it has made us more attentive to the Spirit, to the point that we wish that the same methodology would be used also in our various Assemblies and Provincial Meetings.

* 1. The Expectations

From various parts we note the fervent wish that the process of the *Ratio Missionis* should end up in the cellar of our history and that its fruits may not just be one document among many which, in the end, will be relegated to the shelves of our libraries, but that it should be an occasion for renewal, or even better, for ‘regeneration’.

If, on the one side, we want a means that guides us in this moment of epochal change and that helps us to define common criteria of evangelization and rules for our pastoral commitment on behalf of the poorest, we want to have, on the other side, a *Ratio Missionis* that is flexible and dynamic, which can state the general and fundamental lines of our identity and *Mission*, and which can allow for its contextualization in the various environments where we work.

**2. The Theological Sphere**

2.1 A variety of theological positions and problematic aspects

We have a common identity as Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, but this identity expresses itself in different sensitivities, ways of life and understanding of *Mission* that often seem to be in tension among themselves, if not diametrically opposed to one another.

Today, in the Comboni *Mission*, we find many of those elements that have characterized the Comboni presence in various historical periods: most of the times these aspects of *Mission* live side by side, but without ever reaching a fruitful synthesis.

Next to the traditional ways of *Mission* – for example, *Mission* understood as *salvation of souls* and *plantatio ecclesiae* with a strong emphasis on sacramentalization, and with human promotion seen mainly as construction of religious and social institutions – we find other ways and attitudes that respond to a more varied concept of *Mission*. For example, *Mission* as formation of leaders and of a ministerial Church in which the apostolic community becomes an essential means of evangelization – and this implies a concept of Church seen as communion; *Mission* expressed as ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue; *Mission* as commitment in the field of justice, of reconciliation and of peace, underlining in this the prophetic stance of the Church itself; and, finally, *Mission* shown as an attitude of trust and of open-heartedness towards the people we serve, letting them evangelize us.

The concept of *Mission* has already assumed new dimensions, so that there is a perceived need to contextualize what is specifically ours in the face of the challenges of the era in which we live -just like the Confrères of ages past lived their missionary ideal incarnating it in their own historical period: it is necessary, however, to define again what concepts such as *ad extra* and *ad gentes* mean and entail in practice.

We lack a serious reflection on evangelization and it would be necessary to clarify the meaning of the expression “peoples not sufficiently evangelized”. To contextualize these ideas becomes, therefore, a priority for our Circumscriptions.

For this reason, the systematic and critical study of evangelization in the Institute and its definition of the type of Church we want to promote are urgently necessary and a task of contextualization in our Circumscriptions. Even though *Mission* and the various modes in which it expresses itself must be varied and take on the shape of the context in which it is carried out, we feel the need that some missionary dynamics express our identity as Comboni Missionaries.

2.2 New Horizons and Theological Openings

The spreading of the Institute in many areas of the world and the coming in contact with diverse cultures and peoples and with different theologies, has given rise to new theological sensitivities and to innovative interpretations of the charism.

2.2.1 Jesus Christ

Comboni underlined some fundamental aspects of the Mystery of Christ: the Heart of Jesus, Jesus the Good Shepherd, and the historical Jesus. In Comboni, Jesus is contemplated in the image of the poorest human being, in order that this same poor individual, the object of Jesus’ love, be ‘regenerated’ in all the dimensions of his humanity. It follows then that for us to contemplate Christ in the suffering image of the poorest means to make *‘common cause’* with them and to commit ourselves to their integral liberation.

To contextualize the historical Jesus means also to try to incarnate our spirituality in the various environments and socio-cultural places where we find ourselves.

2.2.2 Criteria of *Mission*

Even though we may desire to further specify and contextualize the classical criteria of the *Mission* *ad gentes, ad extra, ad paupers* and *ad vitam* – some raise doubts about the opportuneness of adopting such missionary criteria that seem to reflect more the past of our *Mission* – an innovative interpretation of these principles is coming of age.

*Mission* is to go beyond human borders, to those who are farthest away, to those to whom no one wants to go. It is the choice of the *Mission* which is ‘difficult’¹. Borders, rather than geographic, are essentially human and spiritual, because it means to go out of ourselves, of our criteria, our structures in order to go to live with the poor and share their fate; to get away from a comfortable life to live in more vulnerable situations, ‘inserted’ in the local culture. A *Mission* shaped in the style of Jesus, who gave his entire life so that the poor may have that life that the system denies them; a *Mission* of fidelity to the charism and to the Gospel of Jesus; a *Mission* which is the manifestation of compassionate love and which promotes joy and simplicity of life. A *Mission*, furthermore, that manifests itself in the search for reconciliation of ethnic groups divided by war and hatred.

Above all, we will live all the more in environments that are culturally and religiously pluralistic (the presence of Islam being one of clearest signs); the new criteria of *Mission* must therefore be defined as a presence *‘inter gentes’*.

|  |
| --- |
| **1** The discussion which followed the use of the term ‘difficult *Mission*’ showed the need to further develop this concept because it lacked the specific criteria that would define its meaning. We think, therefore, that this concept needs to be further elaborated upon reflection. |

2.2.3 The Poor

Faced with a situation of injustice and in open contradiction with a vision of the world and of a market philosophy where the human person becomes something to be exploited, the ‘poor’ becomes the theological milieu and the central figure of *Mission*, the receiver and the carrier of the Gospel and of the message of liberation. Hence we speak of a clear option for the poorest of the poor: the indigenous people, the people of African descent, peasant farmers, women, those who live in the wretched slums of our large cities, the immigrants, the nomads and the Pygmies.

It is by this contact with the poor that the face of the Comboni Community changes, taking on the aspect of fraternal communiion with simple structures and poor means; that it lives the compassion of Jesus and the preferential option for the poor as a manifestation of His compassionate love and promotes an environment of joy and simplicity of life.

2.2.4 The Church as People of God

The idea of the Church as the People of God, even though it may not be so elaborated, becomes more and more central in our perception of *Mission*. This has an important influence in our work and in our attitudes: in fact, we want to build a ministerial and participative Church where we missionaries are not the protagonists but rather cooperators; a Church where lay people are not reduced simply to the role of secondary actors and where clerical attitudes do not dominate. The slogan *‘to save Africa by means of Africa’* underlines the will to see to it that the people themselves become the protagonists of their own destiny.

**3. Elements of Comboni Identity**

**3.1 Spirituality**

3.1.1 A Holistic Spirituality

We think that in this field we must first of all distinguish between ‘devotion’ and spirituality.

The second term indicates a rapport with Christ and with Comboni which influences the world of our values, our attitudes, the choices and the practice of *Mission*; more importantly, Comboni spirituality is a way of incarnating the ‘feelings of Christ’ (Phil 2:5) as they were lived by Comboni. This type of spirituality must necessarily lead to contemplation, in the sense of being able to see the face of Christ in those who suffer. *Mission* and contemplation, spirituality and missionary practice are two complementary aspects of the same missionary call.

For sure there are elements of the charism that are present in our life, such as Comboni and his ideals, Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Sacred Heart and the Cross - whose effects are a passion for God and for the poor. The things that qualify our missionary identity, spirituality and vocation are faith in Jesus Christ, Comboni, *Mission* and the history of the Institute. There is a perceived need, besides, to deepen, inculturate and re-interpret the charism, the plan of Comboni for today’s world and the theology of the Heart of Jesus, particularly in its dimension of mercy and reconciliation.

Naturally, there is no true spirituality without an effort to cultivate the encounter with God in the Sacred Scriptures and in prayer; other sources of inspiration for our spirituality are the Writings of Comboni, the Rule of Life, and the tradition of the Institute. On-going formation as well becomes a useful tool with which to deep our spirituality. In this world that seems to elude us we nurture *an attitude of on-going formation* in order to acquire the tools with which to judge and be able to distinguish the ‘signs of the times’ and the essential elements of our being from what is transitory.

3.1.2 The Cross, Mart*y*rdom and ‘Presence’

Martyrdom and the Cross are dimensions of our identity that have accompanied our missionary work since the beginning of our *Mission*: first with Comboni and, immediately after his death, during the Madhia Revolt in the Sudan. Furthermore, the number of Confrères killed, wounded, expelled, imprisoned or simply worn out after trying experiences of *Mission*, is witness that martyrdom and the Cross are part of our being and a constant element in our missionary work. These dimensions underline also our will to ‘be present’, to ‘stay with’ the people, especially in difficult moments of war and other challenging situations, when even our missionary activity may appear ‘useless’ and reduced to ‘mere’ presence. Without wanting to hide cases of unfaithfulness and perhaps even of betrayal, we remember with admiration the Confrères who in areas of conflict and war, stayed with their people and shared their uncertainties, fears and difficulties, thereby giving courage and hope to their people. Martyrdom, the Cross and being present ‘to the end’ become constitutive elements of our being Comboni Missionaries.

3.1.3 Problematic Aspects

We realize, however, that Comboni spirituality, the knowledge of its necessity notwithstanding, finds difficulty in becoming a qualifying element of missionary life. While, on the one side, we agree on the importance of a healthy spiritual life, on the other side we realize that our spirituality is often weak and uncertain, with the profoundconsequences that this carries in its wake. Among the negative consequences are the lapses in community life and the weakening in our sense of belonging; the lessening of the spirit of sacrifice, the weakening of a certain ‘charismatic boldness’, the lack of enthusiasm and the fear of a difficult *Mission*. Even more, we see a kind of schizophrenia between being missionaries and our dimension of consecrated religious, between faith and life. Fundamental elements of our identity, such as the Heart of Jesus in a spousal, impassionate and ardent love for the Church, the people and the Institute, draw in practice only marginal attention. Again, the charism, in some, is interpreted in a totally subjective way so that, from the operative point of view, any choice is justified and justifiable. This point does not concern so much the practice of the Institute, which keeps its own spiritual identity, but more the practice at a personal level, which is very irregular and heterogeneous. Another symptom of a weak spirituality, going against the trend of the modern world in which people tend to gather around clear principles, is that we favour dispersion, fragmentation and this may well lead to the taking of commitments that are beyond the Comboni charism².

|  |
| --- |
| **2** It appears that, at times, many Comboni Missionaries look for spiritual energy in the “spiritual movements” of our age. This could be the sign of some weakness in our spirituality – in its communitarian expressions at least. Some seem to be in search for ‘personal ways’ of spirituality, either individually or participating in the life of these movements. The 2009 Chapter points out, “*At times we reduce our spirituality* *to a religious ritualism that does not reach the heart of our missionary life. On the other hand, without practical and regular expression, faith will be extinguished”* (*CA ’09, No. 17*).The 77th Assembly of the Major Superiors of the Religious Institutes (May 2011) has pointed out “some elements of innovation in new communities” that could inspire the life of religious communities. It is important to name them:* A meaningful spiritual experience in contrast with the secularized world.
* Evangelical austerity and radicalism, breaking with an individualistic and consumerist model.
* Centrality of the figure of the Founder and of leadership.
* New ecclesial self-awareness: the importance of the

 laity and catholicity, communion and faithfulness.* Flexibility and institutional agility.
* Strong sense of community and priority of communion over action.
* Missionary boldness and use of means of social communication.

(Union of Superiors General, *Identity and Prophecy. Theology of Consecrated Life Today*, May 2011, pp. 72-73).  |

**3.2 Community Life**

3.2.1 A Cenacle of Apostles

We profess to be a *‘Cenacle of Apostles’* so that the Community becomes the privileged means of evangelization, especially in places where ‘direct evangelization’ is difficult. More precisely, ‘Cenacle of Apostles’ implies living ‘Community Life’ as a gift, seeing it as a place of dialogue, discernment, planning and evaluation; it means to share faith, to make the most of human relationships and to practice fraternal correction. To this end it is important to work out a common project which takes the form of a ‘Community Charter’. In this ‘Cenacle of Apostles’ everyone has a role and a place: the priests and the brothers as they can become a sign and stimulus to form communities that are less clerical; and the sick and the elderly because they are a resource for the community which the community must nurture.

3.2.2 Internationality and Inter-Culturality

The Institute is changing and by now the future, if we are to believe the statistics, belongs to the Confrères coming from the South of the world. There may arise fears over the international opening of the Institute, but we are convinced that both internationality and the inter-cultural approach are gifts: our Communities are becoming ever more international and we want to see this process continue.

3.2.3 New Forms of Community Life

We want to dream of ‘Cenacles of Apostles’ open to new forms³ where lay people, and both men and women religious will live a form of community life inspired by the charism of Comboni and by the passion for the proclamation of the Gospel. It is also important that the Community be open to other Communities of the Circumscription and of the Institute by taking part in meetings and by networking.

|  |
| --- |
| 3 This is a new reality in the Comboni landscape, which we have almost never faced seriously, but that other Institutes already practice. The cooperation can also be laborious. It becomes fundamental, therefore, to favour a greater communion and sharing among all the Members of the Comboni family – brothers, sisters, priests, lay and secular missionaries. These elements can be helpful: a greater mutual knowledge; greater consultation in activities; the possibility of working together in common initiatives; going beyond preconceived ideas and prejudices; learning how to appreciate one another; favoring moments of reconciliation and the healing of open wounds; and finding ways of sharing our resources. |

3.2.4 The Exercise of Authority

In a ‘Cenacle of Apostles’ authority is exercised as a service and this requires understanding, an attitude of listening, dialogue, fraternal correction and all that favours the nurturing of a Comboni identity and a sense of belonging, but which also requires prophetic courage.

We are convinced that the crisis of leadership and of authority which conditions our Institute at various levels does not lead to a healthy community life.

3.2.5 Structures and Economic and Financial Means

3.2.5.1 Structures and Real Estate

The relationship with structures and with finance is vital if we are to be credible witnesses: we must review our structures that must witness to a simple style of life⁴; it is necessary to take courageous decisions, over whether or not we should keep certain structures and open others.

|  |
| --- |
| **4** There are some who are worried over the multiplication of international meetings with apparently scarce results. It may be opportune to reflect over this way of getting together, considering that modern systems of communication can substitute for long and expensive trips.Our presence in a certain territory must have meaning above all through a style of life which is simple and hospitable, thus placing a question mark on some of our structures that are too large and expensive to maintain. There is a lot of talk about evangelizing our finances, favouring a more just distribution of money and its more transparent and honest use. On our part we have to connect faith and life in a more meaningful way so as to better practice what we profess and preach.  |

3.2.5.2 Administrative Organization

We think that we need to streamline the central structures of the Institute that appear to be heavy, bureaucratic, and over-centralized.

3.2.5.3 Economic and Financial Means

To be a reflection of the Kingdom, the Institute must ‘evangelize’ its economic structures and the way it deals with financial matters. It is therefore necessary to have an ethic of transparency with regard to the funds destined for the Missions⁵. It is also indispensable that our Circumscriptions work towards economic self-sufficiency. Each one of us is called to evangelize the way we live and use the material goods placed at our disposal.

|  |
| --- |
| **5** The Total Common Fund should be a more communitarian way of managing our resources. The Total Common Fund of a Circumscription is in fact the instrument for the participatory management of their economic resources. With this fund we give substance to community planning and to *“pursue Provincial objectives as the fruit of community discernment” (CA ‘03, No. 102).*Through the Total Common Fund we want to reach an ever higher level of sharing and fraternity, of transparency and equity, and a sense of belonging and responsibility. |

3.2.6 Some Problematic Aspects of Community Life

We want to shed light on some negative dynamics of our Community Life.

We cannot hide the fact that there is a tension between community life and apostolate, between the specifically religious aspect and the missionary one: at times religious life, with its community dynamics, is lived as a burden limiting or even disregarding our missionary life.

Individualism, activism, wanting to be the protagonist, superficial relationships, lack of communication and, consequently, difficulties in sharing experiences, are elements that block our life together. Furthermore, it becomes unlivable when the number of the Confrères is not sufficient to allow a dynamic community life⁶.

|  |
| --- |
| 6 To speak of more consistent Communities implies an important change of a missionary and methodological view, a change encapsulated in the Rule of Life where it is written that the Comboni Missionary evangelizes as part of a Community (RL, No. 23). Various voices speak today of the necessity of giving more consistency to our communities, to favour a better quality of life, seeing that today’s world wants witnesses more than teachers. Our communities are called to become “test beds” of that “other world” which we dream about and announce. |

At times, there is a tendency to be isolated from people, a lack of planning and common action, a scarce knowledge and practice of the Rule of Life; even more, the use of funds to initiate or carry on personal projects becomes, for some, the rule; and again, we see evidence of a trend towards a bourgeois outlook and using the Institute to one’s own personal advantage. Our sin is to have a somewhat parochial view of the Institute – a negative consequence of a difficulty to think ‘big’ beyond our own mental categories and geographic borders, coupled with a superficial knowledge of our past history and of the Institute itself.

**4. Places and Elements of a Comboni Missionary Pastoral Approach**

**4.1 The Local Church**

4.1.1 The Local Church as Protagonist

The Local Church is the subject of *Mission* and of evangelization. In many places, especially in countries marked by the absence of the State and by an enduring climate of insecurity, the Church becomes a sign of hope and fulfills an indispensable role in the social life and in the development of civil society – this is especially true in the fields of education and health care. We note with joy of the fact that the young Churches of Africa, Latin America and Asia live their faith with enthusiasm and exuberance. In these continents the Local Church continues to grow and affirm itself. The large number of priestly and religious vocations in the countries of the South of the world is the sign of a particular moment of grace. We want to underline with joy the realization of Comboni’s dream, of a Church which is fully African, the *‘brown pearl’* shining together with the other *‘celestial gems’* that adorn the crown on the *‘head of the Mother of God’.* The calling of a Second Synod of the Bishops for Africa in the space of fifteen years is a sign of the concern of the Universal Church for Africa and of the fact that the African Church itself is assuming an ever-increasing central role in the Church.

4.1.2 The Local Church and our Presence

We believe that our role in Local Churches in a changing world needs to be re-defined. The Comboni Missionary is part of the Local Church and works with it in communion, ‘inserting’ himself in structures of the diocese where he is working. ‘Insertion’ and co-operation imply that we do not cut ourselves off and do not work as if we were a separate entity, but rather co-ordinate our work with the pastoral agents present in the territory.

The necessary ‘insertion’ in the Local Churches, however, must be in line with our identity as missionaries. First of all, we are aware that we can contribute to the Local Church through our missionary experience, but at the same time we feel the duty to animate it to be missionary in its own surroundings, without abandoning its desire to go beyond its borders for a *Mission* *ad gentes,* to commit itself to the universal *Mission*, and thereby helping it to outgrow a certain tendency to close in on itself.

Our task consists also in contributing to the formation of leaders, to the inculturation of the Gospel, to the dialogue among people of different ethnic groups, to the meeting of religions, Islam in particular, and to favour the growth of ecclesial ministries. We think it is important to contribute to making the Local Churches financially self-sufficient. We also believe that we have a prophetic role in the Church and, with respect and humility, we want to be its critical conscience speaking, above all, by the way we live our lives totally dedicated to the Kingdom of God.

4.1.3 Problematic Aspects

In all honesty we must also admit our limitations and our tendency, in many cases, to work as if we were a separate entity. Even more, in our work we have often stressed the sacramental rather than the prophetic aspect of our ministry.

A certain paternalism, both in the way we do pastoral work and administer finances, and also in the initiating and managing of projects, has often prevented the Church from becoming self-sufficient. For this reason Local Churches often appear to be too tied down to structures and over-dependent on external assistance.

We note a certain ‘closing in’ on itself of the Local Church merely centred on seeking solutions to its own internal problems and ‘clipping the wings’ of its prophetic impulses and of its being missionary, in relation to areas of evangelization within its borders and *ad extra*. This generates a loss of identity, runs the risk of giving rise to internal divisions and opens the door to tribalism, ethnocentrism and nationalism.

An aspect which, at one and the same time, is a cause and a consequence of our paternalism is the degree of pessimism we have concerning the ability of the Church itself to be self-sufficient both financially and from the point of ministry.

We must painfully admit that there are tensions and prejudices between our missionaries and the local clergy and strong differences, if not real conflicts, between our missionaries and the hierarchy. All of this to the detriment of a credible witness to the Gospel.

At the same time, we cannot ignore that there are serious cases of counter-witness and abuse among the clergy and among the religious that are a source of scandal for the Faithful.

The challenge of the sects, the presence and the growth of Islam, the religious ‘nomadism’ of many of the Faithful denote, on the one side the desire for spirituality on the part of the people, a ‘thirst’ for God and for words of consolation, but also a ‘façade’ of evangelization, a lack of ecclesial leadership and an excessive attention to structures and bureaucracy that do not respond to the spiritual yearning of the people. Pastoral agents too are not free from blame in this regard.

**4.2 The Laity**

One of the realities that confronts us and demands more space in the Church is certainly that of the laity⁷.

|  |
| --- |
| **7** In our documents there is frequent talk of cooperation with lay people. But rarely are distinctions made, thus running the risk of being too generic and not sufficiently precise.- **First of all, we have lay people who are members of the Christian community.** We must have a model of Church of the laity, that is not overly clerical, and where lay people are ‘Members’ of the community and not just ‘consumers’ of religious services. The priest – or the religious – is not the ‘Lord and Master’ of the Christian community, but rather its servant.**- There are lay leaders within the Christian community.** The (Small/Basic) Christian communities are usually organized with lay leaders (presidents of the community, catechists, lectors, cantors, servants in various forms…) who must be treated with the respect that is their due and at whose service we place our preparation and service of communion to help them be better prepared and formed.**- There are ‘professional’ lay people,** who cooperate in the various pastoral activities (Members of the Church or not): teachers, secretaries, doctors, accountants, … . We are also called to establish relations of mutual respect with them, recognizing the rights of their work, their competence and experience, and so on.**- There are the Comboni Lay Missionaries** who share with us our spirituality and missionary zeal, with whom we form the ‘Comboni Family’, a family that must find new styles of life which are more ecclesial and far less clerical. |

We think that the Institute must promote the participation of

the laity and, in general, look for co-operation with other lay movements. The Comboni Missionary must network, establishing an active collaboration with lay people, organizations, institutions and popular movements, associations that work for justice and peace, finding ways of acting in common and of being committed in the Local Church, in civil society, all aiming at the construction of the Kingdom. It is also fundamental, in a society and political arena that dismiss the social values of Christianity judging them totally irrelevant for society, to form the conscience of lay people especially in the field of socio-political commitment and in the defense of human rights.

Many of us still have a clerical vision of the Church which tends to centralize all the activities in the hands of the clergy. We need a change of mentality, where lay people are not simply seen as servants or employees but co-operators. The ‘know-it-all’ attitude of certain clerical circles must give way in humility to recognizing the professionalism and the qualified contribution of the laity.

In under-developed areas, to co-operate with lay people means to know how to ‘dialogue’ with their reality, walking at their speed, patiently, but with great love and respect, leaving behind the virus of protagonism which prevents the creation of a Church of communion. We must remind ourselves that the true protagonist of *Mission* is the Holy Spirit.

We are convinced that our charism should not only be shared by lay people, but that lay people themselves, as our Founder dreamt, can become a manifestation of the Comboni charism and part of the Comboni Family⁸. Hence the necessity of starting in every Circumscription a group of Comboni Lay Missionaries, a reality still *‘in nuce’* but which must become a priority in our work.

|  |
| --- |
| **8** The expression *“Comboni Family”* must be further deepened and verified. In official documents co-operation with the Members of the Comboni Family is underlined (*CA ‘09, Nos. 9.3; 58.5*). However, while on the one side we agree that we are members of the family that bears the same name, on the other side co-operation is still rather precarious and left to the goodwill of a few ‘pioneers.’ It is, therefore, necessary to work toward the creation of a sense of family, which is still in an embryonic stage. We do not want to lessen the importance of the term, but rather underline the long journey still to be done in order to be just that: members of the same family not only in word, but in deed as well. The Comboni Family could be more effective and meaningful if it could recover the spirit that animated Comboni in his missionary endeavours.  |

**4.3 Local Culture and Insertion**

As missionaries we feel called to be ‘inserted’ in local cultures in a fruitful dialogue with the religions⁹ and the culture of the people. The missionary is respectful of the local culture, knows how to adapt to places and realities that are not his own, has feelings of esteem and sympathy towards the people and their culture, and respects the changes that are taking place in society and in the Church. For the Comboni Missionary, to ‘make common cause’ with the people of the place where he lives and works means accepting all these traits, but it also implies maintaining a critical and prophetic spirit, open to the ‘signs of the times’.

|  |
| --- |
| **9** Inter-religious dialogue is one of the greatest challenges of *Mission*. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* of 1991 lists four forms of dialogue: Dialogue of life, dialogue of activity, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience (*No. 32*). The Comboni Missionaries are involved in dialogue with Islam especially with the Centre ‘Abraham’s Tent’ in N’Djamena (Chad) and the Institute Dar Comboni in Cairo, Egypt. The latter Institute is involved in theological dialogue and in the exchange of religious experience, besides giving courses of introduction to Islam. Inter-religious dialogue is one of the ways of *Mission*, according to the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio, No.* 55, and is not against *“the proclamation of Christ*” but both must unite*“in the context of the Mission ad gentes”*.There is no doubt, however, that there will always be a certain tension between the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the only mediator on the one hand and the saving power of God who operates also through other religions on the other, between the Church as universal sacrament of salvation and the salvation from God who works beyond the visible frontier of the Church. To study how this tension can be resolved is the task of theologians and the source on not a few occasions of misunderstanding between Church authority and the theologians themselves. |

A fruitful dialogue with reality, cultures and religions as an expression of our being missionaries, is therefore necessary in order to find our specific place within societies that have changed and continue to change. This further stimulates us to find new ‘languages’ that fit the times and the places we inhabit and to be properly understood by the women and men of our time.

To respect the various cultures becomes a commitment not only in the Circumscriptions of the South of the world, but also in Europe at a time when the Continent is experiencing an influx of people from the South. Our Communities, that are endeavouring to live in an international and inter-cultural spirit, can become a sign and instrument of dialogue in a world torn apart by division and conflict.

In our effort of ‘insertion’ in these new emerging worlds we cannot limit ourselves to simple good will which, in the end, is naïve and sterile. Rather we must seek the help of the proper scientific instruments for an analysis of reality in view of understanding it and of an effective methodology of ‘insertion’. There are laudable cases where the process of ‘insertion’ is carried out in a serious and systematic way through adequate planning on the part of the Province.

4.3.1 Problematic Aspects

Next to the lights there are also shadows.

It is beyond discussion that there is tension between the temporary stance of the missionary and the indispensable ‘insertion’ in the local culture which, in its process, implicates a certain stability. For various reasons, this temporary nature and precarious position seem to have become part of the modern mentality. This makes the process of ‘insertion’ and the learning of the language more difficult than in the past.

The fact that the Superiors of various Circumscriptions have repeatedly to insist upon the necessity of learning the local language well, point to the fact that on the part of at least some there is not a great commitment in this field. It should also be said, however, that the responsibility for failure in this regard often lies at the door of Provincial Administrations when the time allotted to the study of the language and to the gradual ‘insertion’ into the local culture is left to the good will of the individual, who often finds himself alone and almost ‘held hostage’ by various emergencies.

**4.4 New Horizons of Mission: New Areopagi and Modes of Missionary Activity**

The various situations where we give witness to our faith and our hope speak of the different ‘faces’ of Christ, of different ‘theological places’ that urge us to change and therefore to adopt new modes of doing *Mission*.

It is a challenge that makes us qualify anew our work. While in the past, in Africa and in Latin America, the work took place mostly in traditional Parishes with a commitment to First Evangelization and with criteria that were principally geographic, and our presence in Europe was directed mainly to the ‘classic’ Missionary Animation, now new fields of commitment are emerging with a far greater diversification of work. This undoubtedly requires a greater qualification and specialization on our part: a commitment that challenges all our Circumscriptions. Not only are we asked to change our commitments but the new challenges of *Mission* make us modify our very life-styles¹⁰.

|  |
| --- |
| **10** The Chapter of 2009 often underlined the necessity of reflecting over the style of life of our Communities (*CA ‘09, Nos. 7.4; 11.3*).Our presence in a given territory must be a visible sign that it is possible to create an alternative to the existing system. If we are able to live ever deeper relationships among ourselves and practice real charity, we will be able to foster a critical conscience among the people to open their eyes and to make courageous choices. This will be possible if we make ourselves ‘fellow travellers’ of all those who live at the margins of society, through listening, sharing and mutual respect. |

4.4.1 Pastoral Work

Our priority is the proclamation of the Word and the integral formation of the person: evangelization in the widest sense of the term is our reason of being. Our preferential option is for the poorest of the poor: the outcasts and those excluded at the religious, social and political level; our preference goes especially to those who, among the poor, do not know Jesus Christ and who have had access to the Gospel of justice and peace denied them. So these are the categories, both socio-economic and religious that become the criteria of identification for the *‘poorest’* and the *‘abandoned’* as Comboni understood them.

We think, therefore, that the important fields of our missionary pastoral activity are various in the different Continents where we are present:

1) Situations of First Evangelization, above all with a specialized pastoral approach which pays attention to particular environments and groups (Nomads, Pygmies, Islam,

the shanty towns of the great cities, immigrants, the great religions of Asia, the Afros, and the indigenous people of Latin America).

2) Among the groups that need our presence are the youth, who more often than not are in conflict with the life choices of the societies in which they live - societies which themselves are in a constant state of change - and who as a result experience feelings of insecurity and lack of opportunities for the future. Such difficulties make the youth especially vulnerable, notwithstanding their great desire to change society and their innate aversion to shallowness and superficiality.

3) The formation of leaders and of pastoral agents.

4) We want to favour respect for cultural diversity and for pluralism within the Church, according to a vibrant theology of the Local Church; to favour a pastoral approach that nurtures dialogue and that supports an abiding commitment to inculturation, together with a study of symbols, of manners and customs, of the language and the values of the people with whom we live.

5) The creation of Small/Basic Christian Communities not only in the South of the world but also in Europe.

6) The creation of pastoral structures according to local needs.

7) We want to favour the participation of the laity and start projects and structures that can be sustained by the Local Church; for this reason we must avoid attitudes of paternalism and give priority to mutual co-operation and collaboration.

8) We stand for a Church where ministries are recognized and encouraged, both at the level of Institute – for instance encouraging a Comboni Brother to be the Superior of a Community and to be responsible for social structures – and in the Local Church.

4.4.2 Justice and Peace and Reconciliation

Human promotion is part of the social dimension of the proclamation. In the history of our Missions the activity in the field of human development has always been present and has given a notable contribution to the social and economic development of many peoples; we are referring, above all, to our contributions in the fields of education and health, not to mention in the ethno-linguistic arena.

Without forgetting about our traditional commitments, our ministry must now point at other dimensions of human promotion, in faithfulness to the Comboni charism that prefers the human groups that are the poorest and the most vulnerable:

- *Formation* of consciences and of society: organizing courses of formation, information and raising awareness in the fields of justice, peace and the protection of the environment.

- A clear *prophetic witness* as proclamation of the Kingdom: a witness that not only *promotes unity and communion* but also expresses itself in the *denunciation* of all injustice, particularly grave violations of human rights by being the voice of those who have no voice, and all forms of racism, xenophobia, violence and corruption.

- In a world torn apart by division, our ministry must be an instrument of *reconciliation* by supporting initiatives that help resolve tensions and conflicts both locally and regional.

In order to realize all the dimensions of human development outlined so far, it is indispensable to cooperate with International Organizations (such as AEFJN, VIVAT, …) in their lobbying and advocacy activities.

4.4.3 Missionary Animation and Mass Media

Among the new *areopagi* that require the attention of our missionary activity, a special place is reserved for the means of social communication and particularly for the digital media. The means of social communication must become an ever more effective instrument of social education, of the proclamation of the Gospel and of Missionary Animation. The use of these means is important in the work of formation, information and denunciation which truly influences public opinion.

While, on the one side, we are aware of the fact that Missionary Animation is one of the priorities in our Circumscriptions and is an integral part of our missionary activity, we are also aware of the fact that this priority commitment must be re-thought and re-qualified in order to give it more strength. Particularly in Europe, the contact with and the following of mission groups must be one of the tools of Missionary Animation. However, the new situation prevailing in Europe requires that we re-structure our work, moving from ‘Missionary Animation’ to ‘Missionary Presence’¹¹ where attention is given to immigrants, frontier situations and to Justice and Peace/Integrity of Creation.

|  |
| --- |
| **11** The new connection between evangelization and Missionary Animation, two dimensions of the Comboni charism, was already described in the Chapter of 1997. It is clear by now that all evangelization – in all Continents – must have a component of Missionary Animation that will help all the Local Churches to always have a missionary tension within themselves and to help them go beyond their geographic, social, cultural and religious boundaries. On the other hand, all Missionary Animation must evangelize, leading people and the Church to a deeper contact with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel of universal fraternity, which proposes an alternative way of life to the prevailing one and which today cannot be taken for granted. All the Comboni Circumscriptions are looking for ways to fulfill this new vision of *Mission* and Missionary Animation.  |

4.4.4 Basic Formation

Basic Formation and Vocation Promotion are also activities that need to be revised.

The problem that arises in Vocation Promotion is one of methods and contents, namely of how to use a ‘language’ that can be understood and will facilitate the contact with the younger generations who ‘absorb’ a cultural climate where a commitment for life is considered well-nigh impossible. The structures and the roles of Vocation Promotion – that in some Circumscriptions are called GIM – must be revised.

In Basic Formation we feel the need to be more exacting with our candidates and to concentrate on the values and the elements that are proper to the Comboni identity such as the dimension of life commitment to *Mission*, the total gift of a life for the poorest of the poor and the availability to move out of one’s own geographical and cultural borders. These essential dimensions must become our criteria of discernment.

Furthermore, it is necessary to renew and unify the choice of formators, besides reviewing the formation curriculum and structures.

4.4.5 Structures of Government and Cooperation

In a world that is constantly changing, to review our commitments, to determine our choices, to have the ability to answer swiftly to the new challenges of *Mission* and to contextualize our life in common by adapting to the reality of each country where we are present, all become critical tasks.

The authority of the Institute, at all levels, must discern, judge and act on our *Mission* and must face also choices, sometimes painful, that may not please everyone: to form Provincial entities that do not coincide with national borders¹² is something that can’t wait any longer; new times impose on us not to postpone *sine die* the re-qualification of our commitments. For this reason the Institute must adopt a missionary plan that will shed light over the choices and the essential elements of the Comboni *Mission*¹³.

The complexity of *Mission*, invites us to review the system of *rotation* in view of the *Mission* itself. It is necessary to accompany in particular the Confrères who return to work in their Province of origin: some of them experience frustration and great difficulties in ‘inserting’ themselves in that new reality.

|  |
| --- |
| **12** The clustering of Circumscriptions was one of the themes of the 17th General Chapter (*CA ‘09, No.128).* The grouping – a result of the marked reduction in our personnel and consequently our inability to maintain the number of commitments we presently hold – has the purpose of *“ensuring the missionary service proper to the Institute and for the Institute”.* The problems arising from the implementation of this task are real – and they are enumerated by the Chapter itself – and the resistance of the Confrères appears equally strong. The merging of Circumscriptions demands a creative manner of approaching the problem: the possibility of grouping must not be thought of only from the point of view of geographic and national realities, but also from the point of view of activities and missionary situations (for instance, among those who work with pastoral people, or the Confrères who work in the shanty towns of the large cities).**13** For a long time there has been talk of a “Comboni Plan”. On the one side, the need is clear and the 17th General Chapter has entitled its final document: “From the Plan of Comboni to the Plan of the Comboni Missionaries”. Yet on the other side, experts state that at this very time, which is so ‘liquid’, it is impossible to draft precise plans. It may be possible to adopt some principles and orientations, but it is not wise to have plans that are too detailed. It is certainly necessary to be vigilant and to work with a certain goal that will orient us in the future but that will be flexible and adaptable to new situations and to persons. |

We are also convinced that promoting the autonomy of the Local Church in the countries of the South of the world is a commitment that we simply cannot renounce. Rather we are called to encourage the growth of Churches that are indeed self-ministering, self-financing and self-propagating. For this reason we recommend that Missions which enjoy a certain self-sufficiency in terms of ministry, finance and missionary commitment should be handed over¹⁴.

|  |
| --- |
| **14** This is a thorny problem, especially for the Confrères of the South of the world, who see in Parishes that are self-sufficient the means to keep up Provincial activities and the guarantee of a certain financial autonomy for the Province. Decisions to hand over such activities cannot come about without fruitful dialogue with the Radical Members of the Province and through an attentive listening of their reasons and different sensitivities.  |

Co-operation within the Institute and with other entities present in society and in the Church is required by the complexity of society and of *Mission*: this means to work together with other Institutes, besides the other above- mentioned international organizations, and to share and coordinate activities in various Circumscriptions, especially in Missionary Animation, Basic Formation, Justice and Peace, and the means of communication. It is equally important that there be communication between the General Council and the various Circumscriptions.

We believe that we need Confrères who are specialized in the various sectors of our activity; however, we are convinced that such specializations must be planned according to the needs of the Circumscriptions.

The problems and the evolution of *Mission* demand the formation of groups of theological reflection and require the knowledge of Church documents, besides a constant effort in the field of On-going Formation. It is through reflection groups that dimensions yet unexplored or barely sketched of our identity and missionary work can be outlined and contextualized.

4.4.6 A New Style of Presence

Generally we opt for frontier situations, faithful to the commitments taken, especially in difficult areas. It is a sign of missionary vitality and love for the Missions that many Comboni Missionaries live generously and heroically their vocation, even in situations of conflict, trying to keep close to the people they serve.

*Mission*, more than ‘doing things’, consists in narrating the personal experience of the encounter with Christ. We do *Mission* above all by meeting with and sharing in the life of those who are in situations of poverty and neglect; a *Mission* that entails listening patiently, giving courage to people in time of crisis; and a *Mission* that reveals itself with dialogue and compassion. The missionary evangelizes through the witness of his life with a presence that is humble, discreet and courageous, especially in difficult situations. We think that the *Communities of Insertion*¹⁵, in environments that are poor and in ‘frontier’ situations, will become more and more a way of announcing the Gospel.

A new style of presence does not exempt us from facing our own history. To know and recover the memory and the practice of Comboni and of his missionaries, to refer to the spirituality of the historical Jesus and of the missionary values of Christ the Good Shepherd, become points of reference in how we live out our charism, giving vitality to our witness.

|  |
| --- |
| **15** One of the basic principles of Comboni methodology is found in the phrase of Comboni himself: “to make common cause,” which is a way of saying ‘insertion’, a principle that the Comboni missionaries have tried to follow. Insertion takes place at different levels:**- Insertion into a country that** we tend to adopt as our own, learning the language and the culture, and taking an interest in its political and socio-economic reality.**- Insertion into a Local Church,** making our own its history, its priorities and its pastoral plans, establishing personal relationships with its priests and lay leaders.**- Insertion into a Christian community,** accepting its history, knowing its members, listening to its needs and priorities. Accepting its gifts, … .**- Insertion into the Comboni Community,** at the local and Provincial level taking part in its life at all levels: human, spiritual, organizational, … .In recent times, there has arisen a tendency of mission methodology and pastoral practice which speaks of ‘insertion’ as a way of living and acting which is closer to the living conditions of the people to whom we have been sent as missionaries. Naturally, the word denotes a tendency and not a rigid and fixed rule, rather a dream that several Comboni missionaries share. The principle of ‘living close to the people’ needs to be interpreted and lived according to the different social, cultural and pastoral realities. For instance, in some places, the principle moves the Comboni Missionaries to not use their own private means of transportation, while in other places these are an absolute necessity, … . The concrete decision, therefore, must be taken at the local level, by those who live and work there. But the principle remains: the Comboni Missionary tries not only to ‘make’ common cause with the people (in the sense of ‘doing things for the people’), but, as far as is possible, shares their conditions of life, thereby avoiding structures and means that only serve to distance the Missionary from his people and their daily lot. The 17th General Chapter has given a signal in that direction. |

4.4.7 Problematic Aspects

Often our ideals and what we would like to plan for clash with our reality. We run the risk of making grandiose plans, but without an adequate and realistic acceptance of who we are.

There is no doubt that there is a marked decrease in the numbers of personnel in our Institute coupled with an increase in the average age of the Membership: this creates problems with regard to the availability of active personnel for the Missions. This poverty of ours necessarily leads us to review the ‘re-qualification’ of our commitments. The choice of frontier situations, of being ready to embark on a cultural, spiritual and geographic journey and to make common cause with the poor and the downtrodden, must be organized within a pastoral plan elaborated at the level of the Circumscription. Such planning needs to realistically take into account the resources in terms of personnel that are readily available now and in the foreseeable future. The imbalance between commitments and personnel is becoming more and more acute. To plan keeping in mind our reality, however, does not mean that we have to make undemanding choices.

We also take note of negative attitudes, understandable in this age of transition, but which dampen the enthusiasm for *Mission*: a certain pessimism, especially in Europe, with regard to Missionary and Vocation Promotion; the fear of anything new and the lack of courage for investing in frontier situations and in the new *areopagi*; a preference for pastoral work that seeks to ‘maintain’ the status quo, and which by definition is rather predicable, parochial and often too tied up with material structures and assuring a certain financial security. A *Mission*, in short, that doesn’t want to think of anything ‘new’ or to risk taking prophetic decisions. We end up preferring pastoral work in the rural areas rather than in the cities and in this regard we often note the misunderstandings that arise between the Confrères who work in the shanty towns and those who work in more rural parts. Many of us seem to be stuck in the past.

Even at the level of Institute there can be an attitude of closure and the temptation to invest in bureaucratic structures: instead we would like to see the Institute, accepting the changes that are taking place in the world, promote the Kingdom through courageous choices.

As has already been stated, there is not just one model of evangelization, because the contexts of *Mission* are different. But it seems to us that in some cases we prefer a model of *Mission* which ideologically gives priority to human development¹⁶, minimizing the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ who, instead, is the very one who gives it essential meaning: in doing so we risk reducing *Mission* to mere social messianism.

|  |
| --- |
| **16** To give priority to social action or to human development does not seem to be based only on a choice of methods. What is at play, in fact, are the various ways of understanding *Mission*, salvation, the Church and, above all, the role of Christ as the sole mediator of salvation. Justly John Paul II in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* spoke of this problem: *“Nevertheless, also as a result of the changes which have taken place in modern times and the spread of new theological ideas, some people wonder: Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant? Has it not been replaced by inter-religious dialogue? Is not human development an adequate goal of the Church's mission? Does not respect for conscience and for freedom exclude all efforts at conversion? Is it not possible to attain salvation in any religion? Why then should there be missionary activity?”*(*No.* *4*). But the Pope adds: *“Our own time, with humanity on the move and in continual search, demands a resurgence of the Church's missionary activity. The horizons and possibilities for mission are growing ever wider, and we Christians are called to an apostolic courage based upon trust in the Spirit. He is the principal agent of Mission!”* (*No. 30*). |

On the other side, there is the danger of a ‘disembodied’ evangelization that does not take into account all the dimensions of the human person¹⁷.

|  |
| --- |
| **17** “The task we have to set for ourselves is not an easy one, situated as it is somewhere between immediate engagement in politics – which lies outside the Church’s direct competence – and the potential for withdrawal or evasion present in a theological and spiritual speculation which could serve as an escape from concrete historical responsibility”. (*Africae Munus, No.17*). |

**RE-READING OUR EXPERIENCE**

**“Watchman, what time of night?” (Is 21:11)**

**1. A Multi-Polar Mission**

There is no doubt, as the Confrères point out, that we are living through a time of great change. According to the sociologist Z. Bauman, we live in a ‘liquid society’ in which social forms and institutions do not have the time to establish themselves on solid bases and cannot be a point of reference for human activity and for long-term planning; thus individuals must find other ways of organizing their own lives: what is required today is that we be flexible and adaptable. We live, therefore, in uncertainty and in darkness: people seem to have lost sight of the great points of reference (what the philosopher J. F. Lyotard called ‘meta-narratives’) and the guiding principles for social living.

Our century is defined by many sociologists as ‘multi-polar’, in rapid and continuous evolution. Thus the Comboni *Mission* as well is becoming multi-polar and is in a constant state of change, both of places and commitments, of challenges and styles of *Mission* and of the origin of its missionaries. All this has evident consequences for the way we understand and live *Mission* today.

In this ‘runaway world’ there exist among our Missionaries differing attitudes – concerning our life and our missionary praxis – which the *Ratio Missionis* only alludes to against the background of the spoken and written word, in that it has not brought such attitudes all the way to the surface or elaborated them in any great detail. There are those, and they are the majority, who live their missionary life amidst the contradictions and difficulties of the present moment in a pro-active and positive way, in faithfulness and with enthusiasm. Others seem to opt for extreme positions: the memory of a glorious past – remembered with nostalgia and regrets – expresses itself in the desire for precise rules, ‘solid’ structures in a mono-cultural environment; or we see the position of those who attempt dangerous flights into the future, impatiently breaking with the past and uncritically accepting all that is new. But there is also what we could call a ‘grey zone’ of subtle dissatisfaction, disillusion and pessimism that is seen in the repeating of gestures without passion, or in ‘giving up’ when one is overwhelmed by a world which seems to be beyond understanding and in which one no longer appears to belong. Although we have not yet reached breaking point, these attitudes seem to live side by side in the Institute.

It is probably because of this ‘critical’ period that, in the *Ratio Missionis*, there is a request for clarity of identity in defining common criteria of evangelization and of rules for our missionary commitment, knowing full well that we live in a complex world which is sensitive to cultural differences, so that the ‘insertion’ into new contexts – where different ways of intervening apply – is indispensable. Therefore the question the Confrères ask is: “How can we contextualize our *Mission* while, at the same time, maintaining our identity as Comboni Missionaries?”. A perfectly legitimate question that we can re-formulate in this manner: What does it mean to be Comboni Missionaries today? What are the tasks? What are the attitudes? How to understand the questions of the world that demand an answer from us?

**2. Essential Elements of Missionary Life**

After having shared the story of our *Mission*, having said what we do, what we would have liked to have done and having recognized honestly our mistakes, now we ask ourselves whether in describing ‘who we are and what we do’ there emerged some essential elements of our missionary life and of our work that are common in all spheres. With the theologians Stephen B. Bevans, Roger P. Schroeder and Andrew F. Walls[[1]](#footnote-1) we could call them ‘constants’ or ‘continuities’ that define cultural differences and the diversity of commitments notwithstanding, our being and our work at this time; here the words ‘constants/continuities’ are not taken in the diachronic[[2]](#footnote-2) meaning given by Bevans, Schroeder and Walls – who interpret them as stable elements that define the essential dimensions of Christian faith through various missionary ages – but in the sense of attitudes and dimensions that remain unchanged in the various missionary contexts and that qualify our being missionaries.

There seem to be eight constants that emerge from our experiences: discernment; dialogue/listening; context/ contextualization; co-operation; participation; prophecy; presence/martyrdom; communion. These dimensions imply new theological models that, even if not fully expressed, interest ecclesiology, Christology and *Mission*.

Without pretending to present a systematic treatise, we want to give a succinct – which at times may give the impression of being excessively brief – but sufficiently clear presentation of these constants and theological paradigms, highlighting the more relevant themes and the challenges for our *Mission*. The choice of the biography is reduced on purpose: some documents of the General Administration, writings of the Popes or of some Vatican offices and some theological treatises. This choice has been made in order not to unduly lengthen this document and to facilitate its reading.

**2.1 Discernment**

Discernment as a method of reading reality and discovering the ‘signs’ of the times and of places has been confirmed by the Chapter of 2009: *“Discernment, which may take a variety of forms, may be understood as a personal and communitarian tool, enlightened by faith, and favouring the union of the Word of God and reality; this comes about in particular during moments of decision at Community Councils and Assem­blies of various kinds”* (*CA’09, No. 36*). We could say that the attention given to discernment has been one of the fruits of the process of the *Ratio Missionis*.

2.1.1 A New Vision of History

Discernment, even before being a method of analysis, presupposes a way of facing reality and history: it means accepting them as theological places and contexts of the encounter between God and man. It means to accept the significance of the incarnation in all of its ramifications. The Incarnation is first of all a ‘given’, a gift: it is the assumption of human reality on the part of God and the way of meeting man. This ‘temporality’ of God then becomes a challenge and a commitment for man himself. The God who becomes part of history is the fundamental and ‘typical’ paradigm of the way to be a Christian who makes history and reality – with its limitations and human frailties – the context where he ‘gambles’ everything. The Christian meets the challenges of faith not in the timelessness of myth, but in the contradictions of a reality lived to the depths, but sanctified by the incarnation of God.

Thus discernment becomes a sapiential and prophetic reading of reality in order to explore and to discover in it the ‘signs’ of the times and of the places, the *kairoi*, namely those positive signs and seeds of life that stimulate change: to discern therefore is to search together the presence and the will of God in order to act upon reality “according to the designs of God” (Rom 8:27). It means to anticipate the future with a vision which is vigilant and attentive to the present and which translates itself in operative choices. It is also evident that these ‘signs’, to be such, must be positive and enlightened by the Gospel and confirmed by the community, and not, therefore, the fruit of personal analysis which, in reality would only be a means of escape. The community itself must become the context of, and the challenge to, incarnation.

2.1.2 Attention to the ‘Signs of the Times’

The ‘signs of the times’ indicated by *Gaudium et Spes* (Nos. 4a; 11a) are those events, requests and aspirations of men and women that manifest the presence of God in a determined epoch, and which the entire People of God share the task of interpreting. Yet beside these ‘signs’ of historical and general significance there are those ‘signs of the times’ of an ordinary nature that manifest the will of God for single individuals, for an ecclesial community, for a people, a Province of the Institute or for the Institute itself. It is to this second group that we generally refer.

It seems to be beyond dispute that discernment has become – at least in the realm of our intentions – the way to read reality at the level of Community, of the Province and of the Institute, even though a lot remains to be done. It is not rare to notice that some choices made in planning do not start from a deep discernment of reality – which in planning must dialogue with principles in order to reach a fruitful synthesis – but, on the contrary, these choices are the direct application of principles to reality, thus limiting the capacity to read the ‘signs of the times’. It is also important to have a ‘penetrating eye’ with regard to on-going historical happenings in particular contexts where we are present and to discern the real questions of the people involved and their aspirations that need to be transformed, eventually, in choices of pastoral activity. Pope Benedict XVI affirms this in the pastoral exhortation *Africae Munus* though speaking of the sects in Africa: “Various syncretistic movements and sects have sprung up in Africa in recent decades. Sometimes it is hard to discern whether they are of authentically Christian inspiration or whether they are simply the fruit of sudden infatuation with a leader claiming to have exceptional gifts. […] The Church’s theology and pastoral care must determine the causes of this phenomenon, not only in order to stem the haemorrhage of the Faithful from Parishes to the sects, but also in order to lay the foundations of a suitable pastoral response to the attraction that these movements and sects exert. Once again, this points to the need for a profound evangelization of the African soul” (No. 91). Here discernment must first become ‘dialogue’ with reality. Dialogue and discernment are two aspects of the same sapiential reading of reality.

**2.2 Dialogue/Listening**

2.2.1 Fundamental Attitude

The Confrères speak of dialogue practiced in various milieus: in the community, with religions and cultures, in the Christian Churches, in the exercise of authority, with reality (in its historical, cultural and social manifestations), and, finally of dialogue practiced as a pastoral method. Each sector implies a differing form of dialogue with its own specific set of characteristics. Dialogue is not simply a tactical expedient but the fundamental attitude of the Church in its relation to the world. “The Church – says Paul VI in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* – must come to dialogue with the world in which it lives. The Church becomes word; the Church becomes message; the Church becomes dialogue” (No. 67). It is an indispensable dimension that applies to all the dimensions of life: in religion as in politics, in society as in the disputes among peoples, in the institutions as in inter-personal relations.

The reason for dialogue is, first of all theological: it is God who invites the person, from birth, to dialogue with Him (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19). But there is also a Christological reason, namely, the conviction that the ‘Seeds of the Word’, its footprints – those we usually call the values of the Kingdom – are present in every cultural and historical circumstance. Dialogue, therefore, implies listening with profound respect, sincerity and humility; listening that becomes ‘discernment’ because it sees traces of truth and of the Truth in the other – the ‘other’ as a person, or as a cultural or social fact. “We do not have all the answers – writes the missionary theologian David J. Bosch – and […] we are ready to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge, […] we regard our involvement in dialogue and mission as an adventure, are prepared to take risks and […] anticipating surprises, as the Spirit guides us into fuller understanding. This is not opting for agnosticism, but humility. It is, however, a bold humility – or with humble boldness”[[3]](#footnote-3).

2.2.2 The Challenges of Dialogue

Dialogue, it follows, does not mean to opt for scepticism and relativism, but means to witness to one’s own convictions, listening, at the same time, to the deepest motivations of the other. Nobody can take for himself the exclusive right to possess the truth, on the contrary, it is in the meeting with, and in the sincere listening to, our neighbour and his world that we may discover new aspects of the Truth and different nuances of truth in their varying historical manifestations.

There can be three risks that will hinder the positive results of dialogue in the inter-personal relationships of our Communities, in our relations with the Local Church or with the socio-political and cultural reality around us: the authoritarianism of those who believe that they possess the truth and want to impose it on others; prejudices that limit true listening and discernment, and, finally a pre-conceived and ideological way of reading reality that imposes a ‘predetermined’ interpretation of it, but which, in fact, distorts it. These dangers are in fact present in all human relationships and in the planning of commitments.

Among the various forms of dialogue, the inter-religious one – especially in view of the presence, in many societies, of a religion that is becoming the catalyst for the deepest aspirations of the people and the driving force for socio-political and even economic change – is the greatest challenge for the missionary presence over the coming years.

**2.3 Context/Contextualization**

2.3.1 Importance of the Context

‘Context’ and ‘contextualization’ in theology can be expressed in different ways: inculturation, indigenization, liberation theology, feminist theology and so on.

In our Institute these words refer to various sectors of our life: the fields of work where we pay special attention to the specific socio-cultural elements of people (Pygmies, Afros, Pastoralists, the shanty towns, …); the process of ‘insertion’ of the missionary in a cultural and social reality different from his own, and it is this sense we properly speak of ‘insertion’; and our common life together is called to be contextualized in the particular reality of a place. Contextualization also involves the form of government in the Institute as in its Circumscriptions and here we recognize important differences: thus we speak of subsidiarity, Continentality, co-operation and co-ordination. We further underline the importance of ‘incarnating’ the charism in today’s world. Naturally, some assertions would need further elaboration and specification, but it is an undeniable fact that the context has become a ‘constant’ in the process of reflection practiced in the Institute and the reasoning behind much of our present planning.

Attention to the context speaks of the importance given to the cultural, socio-economic and religious processes considered in their own particular setting and in their importance as theological *loci*. This interest did not arise recently: already in the Chapter of 1985 there was talk of ‘missionary situations’ pointing at groups of people as well as at special situations of conflict that claimed the attention of our pastoral activity. However, the importance given to the context has grown in time to include not only a method of work tied to a particular situation, but also a style of presence, a mode of community life and of governance.

2.3.2 Common Elements

There are some assumptions in contextual theology in its form as theology of liberation – or as ‘presuppositions’ of a model of contextual theology called ‘model of praxis’[[4]](#footnote-4) – that, though implicit, are indeed part of our missionary praxis.

The first is that the interest given to the context is not purely academic, but aimed at intervening in an historical situation in order to transform it: the emphasis is therefore on the commitment, or using a term dear to the theology of liberation, on the ‘orthopraxis’. Said in different words, we are present in a given situation, we study it, we understand it, and we ‘insert’ ourselves into it – in the widest sense of the word – in order to change it by conforming it to the Gospel of Jesus. But the contrary is also true, namely, that the context transforms the person and the group. It’s beyond doubt, for instance, that differences of theological perspective, ways of working, understanding of the governance of the Institute or of the way to exercise authority exist between Confrères who work in Europe and those who work in America or in Africa – without taking in account the differences between Confrères of different ethnic backgrounds.

A second important element which is common to the reflection of contextual theology is that the privileged persons of the praxis are the poor and the downtrodden; in different words, the preferential choice of our activity, but also the point of reference for our life choices, is for the ‘poorest and the most abandoned’ intended both in their socio-economic and in their religious realities. Within this perspective the radical ‘insertion’ of the missionary and of the community in an environment which is socially and economically poor is a logical consequence – even though ‘insertion’ as a process of ‘inserting’ oneself into a culture and in an environment requires other aspects besides the socio-economic ones.

Having said this much, we do not want to minimize the difficulties and the challenges. There is the risk of turning the context into an absolute, making of our experience the point of reference and the ultimate criterion of judgment over other contexts and experiences. In the same way, it is equally perilous to ‘raise the drawbridge’ in defense of a particular culture seen as a settled and unchanging system, or worse still hiding behind, or making excuses for, behaviour that has very little to do with the culture. Each context – just as any experience, culture or social group – must undergo the test of critical judgment which discerns according to the values of the Gospel and of the Comboni traditions in a spirit of open dialogue. Namely, context and culture cannot be uncritically accepted as exclusive and fundamental realities.

|  |
| --- |
| ***For our Reflection****- What are the fundamental questions (expressed or not) of the people in the context in which we live? What do we think the true needs of the people may be?**- How do we plan to answer to these questions/needs?**- Discernment is a method for reading reality and discerning the ‘signs of the times’. Is it practiced regularly in your Community as a planning tool? How is it done? Do we think that the particular context where the Community/Province live becomes the environment of our planning?**- Do we feel that we can say that dialogue/listening are the fundamental attitudes in our relationships with others (pastoral agents, Local Church, other religions/Churches, …)?**- What are some of the negative experiences of the lack of dialogue and some of the positive experiences? What are the underlying reasons for a lack of sincere dialogue/listening?* |

**2.4 Collaboration**

Collaboration is fundamental in a complex world which requires a high degree of specialization and competence, and is also required by a Church of communion, which respects the individual charisms and the autonomy of temporal realities, a Church which is ministerial and participative. “To collaborate means to put one’s own creativity, intelligence and energy together with others in order to face great and complex problems” – we read in the letter of the General Councils of the three Comboni Institutes, *Justice as Relationship Generating Life,* written in the year 2000 (No. 32).

2.4.1 Fundamental Dimension of Missionary Life

The Confrères recognize that collaboration is one of the fundamental dimensions of missionary life; a collaboration that covers various fields: the Local Church, lay movements, international organizations, other missionary and religious Institutes and other Church organizations. For each of these fields, collaboration takes on specific purposes and dynamics: the collaboration of religious institutes in international organizations – which requires lobbying and advocacy in order to promote a particular cause – differs from the collaboration required in a Local Church.

The purpose of collaboration is not simply that of being more efficient and more productive, but rather of giving priority to the goal for which we work, namely, Christ and his Kingdom, and thus for overcoming tensions, conflicts and undue competition. Other motivations – perhaps more or less consciously recognized as legitimate secondary ends – lose all meaning, such as the search for greater esteem for the Institute, that “accursed religious and clerical selfishness” condemned by Comboni. Comboni, in fact, dreamed of missionary work in Africa as a co-ordinated synergy of all the elements of the Church as being essential for success.

Clericalism, protagonism, individualism and activism are ailments that damage *Mission*. “Contemporary thoughts and events – underlines the document *Collaboration for Mission* written by the Comboni Missionary Institutes in 2002 – strongly move us to recognize the identity of *Mission* today in its capacity for communion and collaboration” (No. 2). In a Church of communion, therefore, the differences – of personal attitudes or of gender, of work or of style of intervention – become an enrichment when they are placed at the service of a common project: “our being man or woman” […] – states the above mentioned document *Collaboration for Mission* – opens us to reciprocity and complementarity that become more and more real in knowing and accepting one another with openness and maturity, by placing in common our gifts […]” (No. 34).

Today, one aspect of collaboration is the ability to network, namely to collaborate using the potential of the *World Wide Web*, creating ties and connections in a world divided into ever more specialized sectors, but that require high degrees of inter-dependence and collaboration.

**2.5 Participation**

2.5.1 Two Meanings of the Term

In sociology and in political science the term participation means the involvement of the person or of a human group in social life and in its main orientations: it is a person who ‘inserts’ him or herself actively in social life by responsibly assuming the necessary obligations inherent in such a choice. In a way we could say that the person *becomes* part of the social body (by a progressive insertion and involvement) while *taking part* in it. In theology, the word takes up a deeper meaning that involves the ontological structure of the person: the gift of God to the human being consists in letting him or her take part in the Trinitarian life itself by laying the foundation of a common life that is expressed in mutual love, and thereby giving birth to the *Mission* which expresses itself in witnessing to such love. This love and this *Mission* are, in fact, the reflection of the participation in the life of God. Therefore, we have two different meanings with different modalities: in the first it is the person that acts by ‘inserting’ him or herself in society, taking up the necessary responsibilities and burdens; in the second, participation is essentially a gift – divine life – in which the person is invited to participate without assuming absolute ownership.

2.5.2 Dimension of Solidarity

In the *Ratio Missionis* the concept of ‘participation’ is not explicitly stated. We think, however, that from the general reading of the text and from the motivation behind certain choices, the term can express two important ways of living the charism of Comboni.

The first meaning implies to ‘make common cause’ with the poor, sharing their life and their fate; it is ‘to live in more precarious situations’; it is ‘to abide with’ the poor even in situations of violence and insecurity, taking part in their life. ‘Participation’ includes also the way the missionary relates to the life of the Local Church where he is not the protagonist, but a collaborator who takes active part in the Church’s life and choices. It is evident that, in this case, the accent is on the involvement of the missionary who, ‘inserting’ himself in a certain environment, in a people and in a Church, takes part in their destiny and in their life. In this case, participation, the being and becoming part of them, takes on the dimension of solidarity. This is a type of dynamic that was certainly present in Daniel Comboni as it can be seen in his words during the homily on the occasion of his arrival in Khartoum as Vicar- Apostolic in 1873: “Rest assured that my soul has an unlimited love for all times and for all people. I return to you in order to never cease to be yours, and consecrated forever to your greater good. Day and night, come sun and rain, you will always find me equally ready to cater to your spiritual needs: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the young and the old, the owner and the servant will always have equal access to my heart. Your good will be my good, your pains will be my pains”.

2.5.3 The Lay Dimension

But there is also another meaning. The *Ratio Missionis* says that the charism must be shared with the laity – this is something that was picked up again by the Chapter of 2009 (Nos. 6c; 9.3) – even more, that the “lay people themselves become a ‘manifestation’ of the charism”. This is a statement that denotes a deeper reading of the charism, namely the knowledge that the charism of Comboni is not simply bestowed in a bountiful manner to others who are not Members of our religious families: lay people are not simply partial expressions of the charism, and, even more, they are not there simply a resource to be ‘exploited’ for our missionary endeavours.

The charism of Comboni is, first and foremost, a gift of the Spirit to the Church which, as it is stated in the letter of the General Council *Comboni Missionary Laity* of 1994, […] “goes beyond the actual Comboni Institutes born from it” (No. 11.3). It is a charism that does not belong exclusively to any one of the Comboni families. It is instead a charism that shows itself in various manners of ministry, in a variety of cultures and personal attitudes. To say it in a provocative way, Comboni does not belong to anyone in an exclusive way. Therefore the charism is not possessed as ‘a plus or a minus’, is not subdivided and fragmented, but is something that we *participate in*, as a gift which is freely offered and to which each one answers according to one’s own ministerial position (besides one’s own character and culture). “There are lay men and women – states the above-mentioned letter – who feel touched, inspired, attracted by the charism of Comboni in their Christian and apostolic journey and who, therefore […] are born to a specific form of missionary vocation. For this reason Comboni belongs to them as well. These people, living the charism of Comboni as lay people, enrich and develop it in its lay and secular dimension” (*Comboni Missionary Laity*, No. 11.3).

The *Ratio Missionis* opens the way to new forms of community life “in which lay people, religious men and women can live a form of life in common inspired by the charism of Comboni and by a passion for proclamation”. It goes beyond the traditional religious community with its rigid division of gender and juridical shape. At the centre of this new communitarian way stands the charism of Comboni and his passion for *Mission*. These are new forms of community life, based on the consciousness of *participation* in the same charism as new life in the spirit, a source of inspiration and activity that can give rise to new ways of expressing the charism itself.

|  |
| --- |
| ***For our reflection****- How much do we think that attitudes of individualism, of wanting to be the protagonists and of clericalism are present and may have a negative influence in our relationship with others in carrying out fruitful pastoral activity?**- What is our evaluation of the level of collaboration in the community and in pastoral work? What could be the reasons that hinder a true collaboration? How can we go beyond them?**- If ‘making common cause with the people’ is an essential dimension of our missionary presence, do we think that a* *sufficient effort has been made to learn the language and the culture of the people? If the answer is negative, what are the* *reasons?**- In what does our ‘insertion’ in the people where we live consist? What are its practical aspects?* |

**2.6 Prophecy**

Prophecy is the proclamation of the Gospel in its entirety: the witness of Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life; the standard against which every human value and any travesty of truth and of justice is measured; and the evangelical sign of contradiction against any human power structure that is an end unto itself. In other words prophecy is a type of memory which, in history, shows to the community that the only absolute is the Lord and his Kingdom. But prophecy referred to in the context of the ministry of authority is also the daring to make choices that go against the tide which, in the process of discerning the ‘signs’ of the times and of places, guides the community towards a fuller compliance with the will of God.

2.6.1 Prophetic Choices

In connection with these meanings of prophecy the *Ratio Missionis* covers several aspects: the Local Church in which the missionary presence becomes a reminder not to close in on itself, but to open out beyond its own borders; the culture towards which we must have, besides respect and esteem, a critical and prophetic attitude; the Community itself which, living in dialogue, with compassion and with an inter-cultural character, becomes a prophetic sign in a divided world; and more, prophecy is practiced in denouncing injustice and in promoting communion, liberation and reconciliation. Prophecy is practiced in choices of governance through painful but necessary decisions needed in order to answer to the challenges of *Mission*, and in the courage shown by investing not in bureaucratic structures but in *Mission*. Finally, prophetic choices are shown also in the courage to leave behind a pastoral approach that is geared towards ‘maintenance’ in favour of frontier situations and the new *areopagi*.

2.6.2 Prophetic Dialogue

Prophecy, therefore, is not simply one of the dimensions of missionary ministry, but rather a dimension of *Mission* itself as the proclamation of the Kingdom and judgment over every divinized worldly power. But if it is true that dialogue, besides prophecy, is one of the pillars of our missionary experience and an essential characteristic of today’s *Mission*, then prophecy should be exercised essentially as prophetic dialogue. This means that dialogue with, and listening to, the Local Church, culture, society or Members of the Community or the Institute – as attitudes and capacities that know how to resolve the deepest questions of human activity without being judgmental – must always go hand in hand with, and in a certain way even precede, prophecy. As Bevans and Schroeder state in the above-mentioned book: “Without dialogue, without a willingness to ‘let go’ before one ‘speaks out’, Mission is simply not possible”[[5]](#footnote-5). When prophecy is merely denunciation without dialogue, it is simply unproductive if not destructive; a prophecy that does not build, but, on the contrary, demolishes. The type of dialogue that accompanies prophecy is a powerful antidote against the temptation to be intransigent or to be the protagonist; in other words, truth must always be united to charity in order not to fall into intolerance and fundamentalism. But love, at the same time, must be accompanied by truth to widen its horizons and give it historical consistency.

**2.7 Presence/Martyrdom**

2.7.1 Total Self-Surrender

The type of ‘presence’ which the *Ratio Missionis* underlines is that of ‘making common cause’ with the people, choosing the poor and sharing their fate, a way of ‘being’ not as a transient moment of life, but as a permanent state. This meaning is very similar to the word ‘participation’. But what makes it differ – in the specific case of the *Ratio Missionis* – is the aspect of ‘martyrdom’, as the ultimate consequence of solidarity in destiny and in life. It is a presence that witnesses to the truth of the Gospel up to the point of giving one’s life in total abandon ‘to the very end’ for what one loves. It is therefore a presence that becomes ‘martyrdom’ as the greatest sign of love for the Other and for the Gospel. ‘Presence’, in this case is analogous to John’s word *‘remain in’*: a phrase, which in expressing the fact that God does not change and his promises are not transitory, underlines God’s unconditional faithfulness to his People. The term further expresses the participation of the life of Christ with the believer – and, in Christ, with the triune God – in a mutual dwelling that gives rise to a solidarity of destiny and of *Mission* between Christ and the believer: to *‘remain in’* is inseparable from *‘giving one’s life for’,* namely with the total donation of oneself so that the other person may live.

2.7.2 Fidelity to the “poorest and most abandoned”

The combination of presence/martyrdom is a dimension that contains two distinctive elements. Firstly, it is the attitude of unconditional dedication to the “poorest and most abandoned” up to the point of denying oneself and denying one’s need for self-realization. It is an attitude that becomes an essential element of our spirituality and gives rise to a style of life which consists in “living the missionary commitment with the humility and availability of many Confrères who are offering their lives out of love, in silence, without making the news and in the knowledge that they will go down in history without many monuments erected in their memory”[[6]](#footnote-6). When the *Ratio Missionis* states “our willingness ‘to be present’, to ‘stay with’ the people, especially in difficult situations of war and conflict, when even our missionary work seems ‘useless’ and reduced to a mere presence, it underlines this aspect of ‘martyrdom’, of total involvement up to the “denial of ourselves, even in little things”, as Comboni himself stated with conviction.

2.7.3 Fidelity to the Missionary Contexts

Yet presence/martyrdom also underlines a second aspect that involves pastoral activity carried on in fidelity to the context and to the various missionary situations that we find ourselves in: non-Christian environments, hostile to any type of preaching; contexts of First Evangelization among people who seem to indifferent to the Christian message; in situations of injustice and of great social unbalance; and in societies impregnated with practical agnosticism and religious indifference that show a worrisome loss of hope, fear for the future, a fragmented existence, increased loneliness, division and conflicts[[7]](#footnote-7). All of these missionary contexts, and many others, demand an indispensable and realistic adaptation of work and of life without false idealism, destructive discouragement or unproductive criticism that serve only to kill passion for the *Mission* and the strength of our witness.

But to ‘deny oneself in faithfulness to the context’ means also “letting the people become the protagonists of their own destiny.” It is the opposite of being a protagonist, of individualism and of paternalism.

In this sense, presence/martyrdom is the availability to become ‘all things to all people,’ according to the famous expression found in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians “[…] I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:22-23).

**2.8 Communion**

2.8.1 A Cenacle of Apostles

‘Communion’ is the proper dimension of living our life and of exercising our missionary ministry[[8]](#footnote-8). It is essentially a ‘theological event’, namely a gift from God that takes shape in a particular community, a gift that needs concrete environments and ways to express itself.

Therefore we live community in two specific places: in the Comboni Community itself and with the other persons with whom we live and work (and by this we mean the lay people, the religious, the local clergy, the hierarchy of the Local Church, and the people in general with whom we come into contact because of our work).

The *Ratio Missionis* describes various possibilities of living and creating ‘communion’ both within and beyond the Community: it speaks, therefore, of creating constructive and sincere relationships, of inter-cultural exchanges, of authority as service, of the proper use of financial means to create communion, of opening to new communitarian forms, of fraternal correction, of being close to the people, of dialogue and reconciliation … the list could go on and on because the entire *Ratio Missionis* is pervaded by this desire for communion. It is, therefore, a communion that expresses itself in different dynamics and at various depths. *Mission* is primarily an event of communion, as the *Ratio Missionis* rightly affirms, as it consists first and foremost in telling the story of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, and thereby creating relationships of communion.

2.8.2 Missionary Community

What seem to further emerge from the reflection are some specific traits that the Comboni Community assumes in its internal dynamics. Namely, the more the Community lives the

essential dynamics of communion – dialogue, reconciliation, respect for differences, solidarity, … – the more it becomes missionary and takes the shape of a prophetic Community, an evangelizing Community in the ‘classic’ expression of ‘Cenacle of Apostles’, and a Community which is capable of creating communion. These are the three distinctive signs that characterize it, in essence, as a *Community for* *Mission*.

Hence the Community becomes the sacramental sign of communion because it lives within itself what it proclaims and shares this with others by showing it to be credible and achievable: “Fraternal life in common – states the Vatican document *Fraternal life in Community* – as an expression of the union brought about by the love of God, besides being an essential witness for evangelization, has a great importance for apostolic activity and for its ultimate end. From this comes its strength as symbol and instrument of fraternal communion in the religious community. Fraternal community, in fact, stands at the beginning and at the end of the apostolic work”[[9]](#footnote-9).

It is however a Community that lives within a context. Namely, the ways of life and of work of its Members are determined by the historical and cultural context in which they live (one is the shape or form of a Community ‘inserted’ in a shanty town – with its proper needs due to the type of work undertaken, time, commitments, particular difficulties, … – and another is that of a Community ‘inserted’ in a place of First Evangelization; and yet again, local Communities in Africa often have a different configuration from ones in Latin America). It is, however, always a Community-in-context, because it is made up by the reality of its Members, and is therefore not ideal, but in constant need of self-examination and conversion. It is therefore a Community which, in order to be credible, must constantly be in a *state of Mission.*

2.8.3 Inter-Cultural Community

One of the themes more deeply felt during these last several years – and appropriately underlined by the *Ratio Missionis* – is the inter-cultural aspect to which unfortunately we can only briefly touch upon here. The effort to form inter-cultural Communities – avoiding on the one hand the assimilation of the single individual by the dominant culture present, and on the other the *melting pot* where everyone, although cooperating with the other Members, does not truly ‘connect’ or ‘bond’ with the Community – aims at having a fruitful exchange of the cultural values proper to each member that are assumed in order to give a new face to the community. “We start from one’ s own identity – so we read in the letter of the General Council *Cross-Culture in the Comboni Community* – but new values and new contents are acquired through dialogue and inter-dependence. Someone has called it the ‘conviviality’ of differences”[[10]](#footnote-10). It is a difficult challenge that involves various levels of the Institute – government, formation and finance – besides the Communities in the Missions, and will be one of the most decisive in years to come. In a time of cultural, national and religious clashes, a Community that lives this inter-cultural aspect as a gift and a challenge is a powerful indicator that ‘another world is indeed possible’.

|  |
| --- |
| ***For our reflection****- What are the truly prophetic actions demanded by the situation and the people where we live?**- How do dialogue and prophecy co-exist in the situation in which we find ourselves? How can we express a missionary presence that will not only possess the dimension of dialogue but also that of prophecy?**- What attitudes and practices of sacrifice (at the personal and Community level) are required by the situation in which we live?**- When and how has a healthy desire for self-realization interfered with the differing requirements of missionary commitment? How was the conflict resolved? With what motivations?**- Are there in the Community genuine relationships that help us grow and face difficult situations?**- Do we believe that the Community is the real subject of our planning the pastoral work we undertake and how we live? Do we desire to make community with our helpers, the Local Church and the people we serve?* |

**3. Theological Models**

Generally speaking, ‘models’ in theology are images used in a reflective and critical way in order to deepen the historical understanding of a reality, for example Jesus Christ or the Church. A model that becomes dominant in a certain age is called – according to Avery Dulles – a ‘paradigm’[[11]](#footnote-11). It is important to underline that a certain model is not verified or disproved according to scientific processes, but is verified in practice, namely in its capacity to lead the Christian to live Christ within a particular social and cultural situation of the time, helping him to face actual problems. A model, therefore, is not examined through analytical methods, but according to the interior presence of the Holy Spirit, namely the internal illumination of grace which allows the Christian to discern the values and the limitations of the model itself[[12]](#footnote-12). For this reason, the model has a theoretical as well as a practical reason. We ask ourselves if there exist images of the Church and of Christ considered in a critical and reflected way that will help us live our missionary life. The *Ratio Missionis* leads us to the conclusion that a serious reflection does not exist or, we may add, at the most it is confined to doctoral dissertations that in the end are often of no practical consequence; reflection groups – so strongly recommended by our documents – hardly exist, or their activity is reduced to a minimum, or, if they are active, they do not influence our missionary life. This last possibility is probably caused by a separation between the leadership and the reflection group so that the suggestions of the group are not received and contextualized in order to be transformed in qualified choices and practical decisions in missionary methods and content.

However, each missionary method and pastoral option has at its base a model – even if not plainly expressed – of Church, of *Mission* or an image of Jesus Christ that justify such practical choices.

**3.1 Models of Church**

3.1.1 Dimensions of Church

The ‘constants’ that we have described above and that qualify our way of being missionaries today are also dimensions of the Church: discernment; dialogue/listening; collaboration; participation; prophecy; presence/martyrdom; and communion. Our pastoral practice – as it is worked out in the *Ratio Missionis* – adds a few more: a Church without borders, made of small Christian communities, where the lay people are the protagonists; a Church with inculturated liturgy and pastoral activity, with autonomous leadership and finances, open to *Mission* beyond its borders, promoting justice, peace and reconciliation; a Church which is ministerial and participative, subject of Mission and of evangelization.

Some of the dimensions mentioned above indicate, in a very general way, some of the models of Church present in our work. We ask ourselves, however, if we could find some that would, in a certain way, include and justify the various elements mentioned above and help us explain our pastoral activity while guiding it in practice.

Describing the various models and in order to fully place in evidence their applications, the theologian Avery Dulles formulates three questions: what are distinguishing traits that characterize relations within the Church? Who are the beneficiaries of its Mission? What’s the aim of its Mission? Each of the five models analyzed by Dulles requires, evidently, a different type of development in reaching an answer to the questions[[13]](#footnote-13).

In our case, instead, we could invert the process: starting from the questions, keeping in mind the above-mentioned dimensions, in order to reach, in a second step, the configuration of some models of Church that will help us make sense of the dimensions we have found.

The first question asks what the unifying bonds of the Church are. The primary bond of communion is faith in the Gospel and the acknowledgement of the charisms; but of equal importance are also inter-personal relationships, dialogue, mutual fraternity and sharing, and relationships based on the acknowledgement of the cultural elements of a people.

The beneficiaries of the activity of the Church are, it is true, the Christians, but also all those other people – no matter what their ethnicity or religious adherence – especially the poorest, those who need a word of consolation, who ask for justice and who yearn for reconciliation.

Finally, the purpose is to proclaim the Gospel, to form mature Christian communities and to build the Kingdom of God – the ultimate horizon of the Church and of *Mission* – through promoting integral human development, prophetic words and gestures, and the discerning of the ‘signs of the times’.

3.1.2 Specific Elements of the Models of the Church

With these answers we can now identify the models of Church that are theoretical references to all the various dimensions of our life and work. There seem to be principally three models: the ‘Church as Communion/People of God’; the ‘Church as the Messenger of the Gospel’; and the ‘Church at the service of the World and of the Kingdom of God’. Each dimension, in each of the models, is present at different levels of profundity. In the ‘Church as Communion/People of God’ the accent is on the charismatic element, faith and charity, the collaboration of the laity, the ministries, dialogue and inter-ecclesial communion, and inculturation. In the ‘Church as Messenger of the Gospel’ the accent is on faith as the answer to the proclamation of the Gospel, the formation of small Christian communities, the announcing of the Gospel, but also on inculturation and dialogue with other religions. In the ‘Church as Servant of the World and the Kingdom’ the accent is above all on the fraternity that binds all people, irrespective of their ethnic or religious belonging, the action in favour of the poor, prophecy, justice, the discernment of the ‘signs of the times’ and the Kingdom of God as the point of reference for any activity.

The model of ‘Church as Institution’ does not seem to be relevant in pastoral practice – even though *Mission* taken as *salvation of souls and plantatio ecclesiae,* understood in a certain way, could refer to this model. It seems more logical to think that some dimensions of evangelization survive together with the ones that are more in line with the new developments of *Mission*.

It is interesting to note that the charismatic intuitions of Comboni – ‘Cenacle of Apostles’, the passion for the poorest and most abandoned, to save Africa with Africa, the going beyond a restricted and parochial view of evangelization – give strength to a type of pastoral work that is the practical application of the models we have mentioned above.

However, we seem to detect that a certain model may be stressed more than another in a given context: the ‘Church as Messenger of the Gospel’ may very well be the prevailing model (though not the exclusive one) in areas of First Evangelization (in Europe, Africa and Asia), while the model of ‘Church as Servant’ is more prevalent in Latin America and the model of ‘Church as Communion’ is principally where lively Christian communities are present. Once again, it is the context that ‘establishes’ the specific qualities of life and work.

**3.2 The ‘Faces’ of Christ**

3.2.1 The Historical Dimension

The few references in the *Ratio Missionis* to the person and the activity of Jesus Christ do not allow us to present a sufficiently complete analysis and to state with the help of data how the Confrères live their faith in Jesus Christ in their spirituality, and what dimensions of the Christ-event may be prevailing in their preaching or in their reflection. We note though that the Confrères of Latin America have studied this topic and its importance in the society and the history of that Continent in greater depth.

Reading the *Ratio Missionis* from a Christological point of view we can perhaps detect some important indications with regard to the person of Christ, the meaning of salvation and the relation between Christ and the various proposals of salvation in different religions.

The first point is the *historical dimension* of the reflection on the person of Jesus Christ through images often borrowed from liberation theology. It is a Christ who is identified, speaking in analogical terms, with the poor and who walks with them sharing their fate. It is, therefore, the face of a Christ poor and suffering that comes to the surface; a crucified Christ, who shares the fate of all the crucified throughout history: in Comboni’s terminology it is a Christ with a ‘pierced heart’. This is a type of Christology that develops in history, in its contradictions and injustices, a Christology that we could cautiously define, as coming *from below.* But it is also a Christ who, in history, has come to set the poor free: it is the face of Christ the liberator which is often underlined, the face of the Good Shepherd who gives his life so that others may have life in abundance.

3.2.2 Existential Christology

Salvation, seen in this perspective, is not limited to a world beyond and outside of history, but is integral liberation, which covers all the dimensions of the human person (social, economic, political and spiritual): a liberation which is ‘regeneration’ as Comboni intended it, namely true human and Christian ‘promotion.’ But it is also a liberation/salvation which rebuilds and strengthens the relations within the community – and is therefore, not simply individualistic –, a salvation which seeks and creates reconciliation. It is a Christology which becomes a challenge in one’s personal life and which translates itself in *Mission* as a preferential option for the poor, as an event of communion and a task of liberation. This is therefore an *existential* Christology, well expressed in the words of the document of the Bishops of Latin America who gathered at Aparecida in 2007: “Our faith proclaims that Jesus ‘is the human face of God and the divine face of man’. Therefore, the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, to enrich us with his poverty. This option is born of our faith in Jesus Christ, God made man, who made himself our brother (Heb 2:11-12)” (No. 392).

This type of existential Christology *from below*, by necessity attentive to the Spirit of God who works through history and culture and who makes dialogue into the principal dimension of his relations with the world, is a Christology that seems to have an inclusive perspective: while it proclaims the uniqueness of the salvation brought by Christ, it sees ‘elements of grace and truth’ and ‘seeds of the Word’ (*Ad Gentes,* Nos. 9;11;15) in other religious traditions. In them the mystery of salvation in Christ is present and works through the Holy Spirit.

As has been underlined, this Christology is more ‘lived’ than ‘critically reflected upon’ and some basic ideas of this Christology are deduced by interpreting the *Ratio Missionis* in its entirety more than being the result of theological elaboration. While not expecting volumes of systematic theology, it does seem apparent that the absence of profound reflection in this regard, and the consequent breaking down of the historical/theological reflection itself into individual projects that are an end unto themselves, makes it impossible to generate the stimulus to think and to live a *Mission* well anchored in today’s world.

**3.3 New Perspectives in *Mission***

3.3.1 New Concepts of *Mission*

The *Ratio Missionis* underlines that the present time of *Mission* has new demands and proposes new challenges: to engage in a systematic study of evangelization; to re-define the concepts of *ad extra* and *ad gentes* and their theoretical and practical application; and to clarify the expression found in the Rule of Life No. 13, “peoples not sufficiently evangelized”. These are challenges that have far-reaching consequences in missionary practice and that require constant contextualization. We have come to the conclusion that today nothing is simple and that precise formulas that will give us security in a rapidly-evolving world simply do not exist; what exists instead is to undertake the labour of research, of study, of questioning oneself, of community discernment and of choices at times painful, but necessary nonetheless[[14]](#footnote-14).

Rather than speak of solutions, therefore, we speak of emerging perspectives of *Mission* and of how these make us re-think our *Mission*.

The terms *“ad gentes, ad extra, ad pauperes, ad vitam”* by now seem to have been left behind by the new reality of *Mission*: today, missionaries come from all cultures and from the Churches that in the past were considered the ‘Missions’. The General Chapter of 2009 uses the following expressions: “consecrated and sent to evangelize (*ad gentes*)”, “exiting the restricted environment of our cultural borders to open ourselves to the entire world (*ad extra*)”, “to spend one’s life in its service [the proclamation of the Gospel] (*ad vitam*)” (No. 5.1a,b) and “choosing peoples and groups in greater need at the level of faith and living conditions (*ad pauperes*)” (No. 5.4a). Naturally, the difficulty in terminology shows a deeper difficulty in the prevailing concepts of missiology. In brief, we have difficulty in expressing the qualities of our specific contribution as Comboni Missionaries. Probably it is necessary to find a new language which will express the reality of a multi-polar *Mission*, in which missionaries do not go from the ‘centre’ to the ‘periphery’, but work in the world in a ‘transversal’ manner, thereby going beyond a missionary paradigm tied to the Western world and to the colonial experience.

3.3.2 New First Evangelization

It is a fact that the geographical horizon of the term *First Evangelization* is being re-evaluated. It is undeniable that the Institute came into being in order to do First Evangelization in Africa. But the difference between the Africa of Comboni (with less than one million Catholics, without local priests or bishops) and the Africa of today (with 170 million Catholics, tens of thousands of priests, 600 bishops, an abundance of vocation to the consecrated life, …) could not be greater, even though there are still situations of First Evangelization and of extreme social need and poverty. Comboni was able to see the challenge of First Evangelization of his time. So we ask ourselves: where do we find, today, these challenges? For certain in some areas of Africa and of Asia. But it is by now clear that there are areas of First Evangelization also in Europe and in North America. The new *areopagi*, in Europe and in North America, are found in the slums of the large cities where people arrive from all over the world (as migrants), with different cultures and religions, looking for new avenues of economic well-being, but also looking for ways to live the cultural and religious dimensions of their lives (in the fullest sense of the word). Undoubtedly, in today’s globalized world there are human situations that hunger for the Gospel, the Good News, for ‘First Evangelization’: in this sense we could speak of a new First Evangelization even in places where up to not too long ago society was considered Christian. At the Assembly of the European Provinces held in Pesaro in February 2012 there was agreement that, faced with a Europe of financial markets, new technologies, the rejection of foreigners and of a type of globalization that produces ‘throw-away lives’, as Comboni Missionaries we are called to enter into a process of new evangelization in communion with the Local Church and in full fidelity to our charism which privileges the poorest of the poor.

But here we face a question and a challenge: should we open ourselves to these new situations or should we remain in the traditional situation of First Evangelization in Africa?

We are going through that time of uncertainty where the old securities and the terminology that supported our missionary practice have disappeared, or are disappearing, and we struggle to find new ones. “The era inaugurated with the Great Wall of China or Hadrian’s Wall and which ended with the Berlin Wall – so says the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman – has ended forever. In this global planetary space it is no longer possible to draw a border behind which we will feel really and totally safe […]. In the light of our inter-dependence the ‘solidarity of destiny’ is no longer an option”[[15]](#footnote-15). The attempts of various types of fundamentalism notwithstanding, it is no longer possible to draw clear borders and by now everywhere (be it geographical or virtual) people of different cultural, economic and religious backgrounds live in close contact to one another giving rise to new cultural paradigms and to a kind of ‘religious nomadism’. This is why a new idea of *Mission*, as the *Ratio Missionis* has underlined, is taking shape in the missionary world: the *Mission* *inter gentes*, where the expressions *ad intra* and *ad extra* become difficult to define or are even rendered totally obsolete.

3.3.3 Mission as Announcement, Dialogue and Witness

Among the new dimension of the concept of *Mission*, the term *New Evangelization* has by now established itself in the language and in the practice of the Catholic Church on all Continents. With this term – which includes also a pastoral ‘movement’ – it appears we are thinking of the large masses of Catholics who not only in Europe or in North America, but also in Africa, Latin America and Asia have moved away, not only in the religious sense but also culturally, from the Church. Many of us work in this reality with our pastoral activity; others seem to be afraid that, within the term New Evangelization, there may be a hidden plan to return to a vision of Christianity from the past. It is necessary to offer an accurate description of this reality and on what it entails. The urgency of the task comes from the very words of the *Lineamenta* of the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization: “New Evangelization […] allows us to learn that Mission is no longer a movement from north to south or from west to east, because we must detach ourselves from geographical borders. Today, Mission can be found on all Continents. It is necessary to learn to recognize the sectors and the environments that are outside the realm of faith, because they never found it and not only because they moved away from it. Freeing ourselves from these borders means to have the energy to propose the question of God in all venues of encounters, of mixing, or reconstruction of the social tissues that take place in all our social contexts”[[16]](#footnote-16).

In this situation, the search for new ways of dialogue and of witness – especially with those who “only know God from far away”[[17]](#footnote-17) – is expressed in the image of the *‘courtyard of the Gentiles’.* The above-mentioned *Lineamenta* explain why: “The image of the ‘courtyard of the Gentiles’ comes to us as a further element of the reflection on the ‘New Evangelization’ which show the daring of Christians to never give up, to positive look for all the avenues leading to forms of dialogue that will intercept the deepest aspirations of humankind and its thirst for God. […] sharing one’s own experience of research and narrating as a gift the encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ”[[18]](#footnote-18).

But the image of the *‘courtyard’* can assume also other meanings. It is to create spaces of encounter and dialogue among religions (external spaces but also ‘internal’ ones as places of personal freedom set free from prejudice) not as subtle expedients for conversion, but as necessary instruments in order to build peace. The *‘courtyard’* could also be taken as a metaphor of places of encounter where it will be possible to create an atmosphere of trust that will make communication possible, where to speak the truth without fear, where to re-establish a climate of cooperation between those who suffered violence and those who caused it: namely, places of reconciliation which, as the theologian R. Schreiter says, will be one of the most important challenges of the *Mission* *ad gentes.*

|  |
| --- |
| ***For our reflection****- What models of Church sustain our pastoral commitment?**- In our spiritual life and in pastoral work what dimensions of Christ are most present?**- What models of mission guide our pastoral work?**- What is meant by evangelization? What is the connection between the commitment to justice and peace and the explicit witness to Jesus Christ, between witness and inter-religious dialogue? How do these dimensions of Mission show themselves in practice?* |

**4. Conclusion**

At a critical moment in the history of the Kingdom of Judah, the prophet Isaiah describes himself as a sentinel watching over the city walls looking for the first light of dawn, ready to answer to anyone, still immersed in darkness, who asked: *“Sentinel, what time of night?”* (Is 21:11). It is the prophet who searches, discerns the time for seeing the beginning of a new dawn laden with promise and who, by his presence, becomes a witness and a sign of hope. It is this image of the prophet/ sentinel that seems most appropriate to describe the missionary of today: a man who examines, in dark and confused days such as ours, the signs that will show the novelty of the Kingdom, interprets them as the bearers of a new world which is about to be born; present in situations of conflict, he gives witness to the light, to reconciliation and to solidarity in a chaotic world torn apart by division and violence; he is a man of hope, of reconciliation, of dialogue and of peace. We must recognize, however, that this ideal image of the prophet/missionary has not always matched our lives and ministry. On the contrary, many times we have closed in on ourselves, falling victim to fears that ‘clipped the wings’ of our courage, thereby rendering us incapable of embracing something ‘new’, as a consequence of undertaking prophetic decisions and new pastoral activity. Fear of being the voice of the voiceless against the powerful of the moment, and the fear to disturb our ‘comfort zone’, characterized as it is by deeply-rooted attitudes that do not make us credible witnesses of the presence of the Kingdom and true signs of contradiction in the face of the transient values of power, money and success. But we are also convinced that we love Christ and that part of his People with whom we share our lives, and we love our missionary vocation with its history of heroism and timidity, faithfulness and infidelity. For this very reason, with the strength of the Spirit, we want to ‘take charge’ once again of our lives and resume the journey that the Lord is calling us to continue in this life.



1. Stephen B. Bevans, Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today*, New York: Orbis Books, pp. 33-34. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, pp. 3-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Namely through the changing of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* New York: Orbis Books, 1999, p. 489. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, New York, Orbis Books. 1994, pp. 63-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bevans, Schroeder, *Constants…,* p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. General Council MCCJ, *Give Reasons for the Hope that Is in You. A Letter on Spirituality,* Rome, January 2011, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa,* June 28, 2003, Nos. 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. That the terms ‘communion and community’ and all that pertain to them are absolutely central to our life is shown by the attention paid to them by the Rule of Life, the General Chapters and the various letters and documents of the General Administration. In particular, *Comunità Comboniana Evangelizzatrice*, Rome 1991; *Cross-Culture in the Comboni Community,* Rome 1999; and *Attention to the Person in the Comboni Community,* Rome 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Congregation for the Institute of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal life in the Community,* Rome February 1994, No. 2d. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Cross-Culture in the Comboni Community,* A Letter of the General Council to the Confrères, Rome, January 6, 1999, No. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church,* New York: Image Books, 1978, pp. 27, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. pp. 30-31, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., pp. 39-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In the days of Comboni the terminology used was of ‘Foreign Missions’ intent on the propagation of the Christian faith and the expansion of Christianity. These ‘Foreign Missions’ were entrusted to Religious Orders/Congregations under the direction of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which assigned to each one a certain designated territory (*jus commissionis*). To this concept of *Mission* corresponded a concept of Church as a ‘perfect society’, in the shape of a ‘papal monarchy’ in which the Church was seen above all in its aspect as a ‘social body’, structured under the authority of the Bishop of Rome. This societal ecclesiology, juridical and hierarchical, went hand in hand with a concept of *Mission* that was ‘geo-political’ and ‘territorial’: the easy wedding of ‘Christianity’ and a particular cultural form – (true) faith and (true) ‘civilization’ – whose antithesis was the ‘rest of the world’ which was not Christian and perhaps ‘not civilized’. Thus, the ‘gentes’ in the European and missionary imagination of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, although no longer the demonized ‘aliens’ as envisioned during the great missionary advance of the 16th century, were still distant people, exotic and primitive, whom the missionary as ‘hero’ and perhaps ‘martyr’, was going to ‘lift’ and save from darkness of hell. Affirming that the Church “is sent to peoples to be the universal sacrament of salvation” (*Ad Gentes divinitus missa … Ecclesia - Ad Gentes,* No. 1), Vatican II establishes a comprehensive and positive meaning of ‘*gentes’* (we ourselves being part of *‘gentes’* and these ‘*gentes’* themselves are visited and enriched by God) and goes beyond a “territorial” (geographical) notion of the *extra* of *Mission*. The Council sees in *Mission* the nature of the Church itself, always and everywhere as sharing in the flux of the life of the Trinity, as communicating to the world and as searching for the ‘Kingdom of God’. The risk, very real and not simply hypothetical, is that the expression *ad gentes* be re-absorbed into the orbit of that dominant meaning of *Mission* that prevailed from the 15th up to the middle of the 20th century, to define once again *Mission* in terms of territory and of proselytism among ‘non-Christian people’. It would be important in this regard to see, through an historical and critical study, beyond an apologetical approach to the figure of Comboni, how much in this regard he was a son of his own time, and also in what way he may have prophetically anticipated a different future. This type of research would be part of that work of the ‘liberation of the charism’ from the trappings of history, in order to see in it the traces of the Spirit who renews the face of the earth, imprinting in it, in ever renewing and surprising ways, the face of Christ crucified and risen. (For a further understanding of the concept of ‘*ad gentes’* and of ‘g*lobal Mission’* see also R. Schreiter, *Global Mission*, Quaderni di Limone, July 2008, No. 2, pp. 75-95). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Zygmunt Bauman, *La società sotto assedio*, Laterza, Bari 2008, pp. XIX, XXIV. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Synod of Bishops, 13th Ordinary General Assembly, *The New Evangelization for the transmission of Christian Faith. Lineamenta,* No. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. No. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid No.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)