

“ Our journey...
with Comboni ”



1st Input

A new vision of Church and Mission

Con-voked – Pro-voked – Called out

By Joaquim Valente da Cruz

«The Church presents Christ **to believers and non-believers alike in a striking manner** daily [...]. The Church thus portrays Christ in **contemplation** on the mountain, in His **proclamation** of the kingdom of God to the multitudes, in His **healing** of the sick and maimed, in His work of **converting** sinners to a better life, in His solicitude for youth and His goodness to all men, always **obedient to the will of the Father** who sent Him.» (LG, 46)

1. Beyond an hierarchical Church

Reacting to the reawakened rationalism of the enlightenment age, some intuitions towards a more holistic theological thought started to develop during the 1800s. The underlying idea was that the Church, in analogy to Jesus Christ's two natures, beyond its visible expression as an institution had also an invisible mystical dimension.

The new vision of the Church, which matured out of those ideas, was that of the Mystical Body of Christ. Such a vision confirmed what in the meantime had become a widely spread awareness of calling the laity to the apostolate and mission. Each and every faithful is called to take part in the multi-faceted Church ministry.

Comboni, who soon came in touch with those experiences and ideas, chose to live according to them. In his *Plan* he envisioned a missionary organization made up of and led by women and men, clergy and lay-people, foreign and indigenous agents.

Church community is thus both an opportunity and a challenge. Born out of an inner longing for interpersonal relations, which testifies the imprint left in us by the Trinity, it presents itself as possibility for human growth, and fullness of life (also in the Church).

Although emerging from a primordial and visceral desire, community is not something automatically given. It is rather a battle field for our will and intelligence... we have to be able to want and know how to build community.

In a community we realise that we are **con-voked**: called to be accepted and to accept, to be loved and to love. In order to find ourselves, not without wonder, **pro-voked**: called to go towards a wider horizon: beyond myself, beyond the way I am, beyond my plans... Eventually we understand that we're **called out** (ek-kaleo): «whoever gives up his life for my sake will find it»

The main condition to walk this way is that *the voice* behind those callings be the one of He who solely can give life! That the community won't be just a result of our choices, but most of all an answer to a communitarian listening to God.

2. Towards a Christ-centred Mission

Mission reflection in the 1800s was focused in finding the right means and methods. Encouraged by technological developments, which facilitated communication and travel, by the cultural optimism which such developments prompted and by the wide ideals of the revolutionary humanism, missionaries felt called to leave their own countries and reach out to other peoples in order to bring them faith

and culture, technological and moral development, which should eventually lead to better societies.

Immerged as they were in the sway of socio-economic, politico-cultural and ecclesial optimism it didn't cross their minds to pay attention to other societies, cultures and religious beliefs; and to dialogue with them.

There was not even a proper consideration about the nature and contents of evangelisation. Christ's sending ("go, teach and baptize") was quite enough a reason for leaving and as for the content, it seemed quite enough to reproduce in the mission field what had been experienced at home.

Comboni, treasuring his own experience and a wider study of the previous attempts to evangelize Central Africa, re-dimensioned the optimism of his age and found in the mystery of Christ's cross – in His passion, death and resurrection – the true foundation of mission:

The missionary is *"carried away under the impetus of that love **set alight by the divine flame on Calvary hill**, when it came forth from the side of the Crucified One to embrace the whole human family; he felt his heart beat faster, and **a divine power seemed to drive him** towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers of his."* (Comb. 2742)

Comboni anticipated the times of *"the so-called return or 'repatriation' of the missions into the Church's mission, **the insertion of missiology into ecclesiology, and the integration of both areas into the Trinitarian plan of salvation**, have given a fresh impetus to missionary activity itself, which is not considered a marginal task for the Church but is situated at the centre of her life, as a fundamental commitment of the whole People of God"* as pope John Paul II put it in *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 32.

3. Challenges for the Comboni family today

We live in a time when an hierarchical understanding of the Church seems to give a sense of security in a troubled world, and therefore the

temptation of a community closed in itself resurfaces. The ideals of con-spiracy and col-laboration within the body of Christ – which have restored the prophetic, priestly and royal dignity to the people of God – appear to have been abandoned.

Regarding mission, we are constantly falling back on the issue of the method to be followed, rather than courageously embrace the often demanding mission-modality of Jesus of Nazareth; letting the world set the agenda instead of the ecclesiastical calculations that are often alienated from reality.

As Comboni Family we're challenged to grow in our being Church, in our calling to be in the Church and with the Church, like the yeast, the salt and the light in and for the world. We are challenged to grasp in the events, the persons and the peoples we meet not only their appearance, their exterior, their skin, but rather the depths of their mystery; grasping the present moment – as Comboni suggests – as:

... a time to embrace the “new movements of God’s Spirit”

Comboni places as foundation of his specific way to follow Jesus and to live His mission the **regenerating experience of the Cenacle of Apostles**. A communitarian way of entering in the mystery of God, a school of growth in truly relational skills, a place of profound transformation and maturing of future Comboni missionaries.

Personal Reflection:

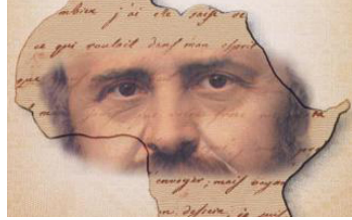
Where do I see the temptation for the Comboni family to close itself to what's new?

How do Jesus' mission and Comboni's vision challenge us to change our attitudes?

Which initiatives would I like to see in order to live more fully the novelty of the Cenacles of Apostles envisaged by Comboni?

What itinerary is the world asking from us, Comboni Family?

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2nd Input

Lay ministry service in the Work of Africa's Regeneration
Either we wash people's feet like Jesus or our hands like Pilate

1. To serve or to be served

The world, humankind, can be divided into two categories: those who want to be served and those who serve. It is our ministry, our ability to serve, and not just our creed that makes us truly Christians: women, men and young people with the heart of Jesus.

God gives us the opportunity to live with women and men, young people and children He entrusts us, sending us to share they lives and make common cause with them. He asks us to get on our knees in front of their lives, to sweep their tears, to pour balsam into their wounds and kiss their hearts.

The Foot Washing sacrament should become ever more our modality, a profoundly human and divine gesture, which opposes Pilate's hand washing that reveals his wish to deny his responsibilities towards the Man and God.

“Jesus girded the towel. I really like the expression of the Church of the Apron, that is, the Church of the service. Of course there is also the Church of the chasuble, the Church of the Word and of the Lectionary: it's beautiful, when the Gospel is carried in triumph, even accompanied by candle lights. The Church presents itself always that way: with the Lectionary for evangelization and the chasuble for the liturgy. Instead the Church that girds itself with an apron, with clothes pulled a bit up, seems to be too humble, unworthy of its greatness; instead it is a

beautiful image, and it is mentioned in the Gospel. For our ordination to the priesthood, usually some Convent Sisters or friends have given us an alb or a stole embroidered in gold... but no one has ever given us an apron. Yet this is the only priestly vestment mentioned in the Gospel. The Church of the Apron, the Church of the service, invites us to enter in a process of conversion." (don Tonino Bello)

For **Comboni** it is precisely Jesus naked and dead on the cross that becomes an inspiration and a missionary model and also a source of hope and life for a humiliated and stripped humanity, which he had met and learned to love in his first period of mission at Holy Cross. While in poor health, confronted with the death of his companions and of his mother, but feeling strong in the faith deeply rooted in his heart, Comboni, with his companions, reads his situation and his history in the light of the paschal mystery: the death that leads to life.



It is precisely **in the contemplation of the Cross** that Comboni considers the need of “a practical and deep triumph over self” (S 6875). For him, this triumph over self is so important that it does not hesitate to rebuke Sembianti, to whom he had entrusted the direction of his work in Verona: “You are not yet strong in the virtue of mortification, in self-control, in carrying the cross, or in self-denial and in being ignored [...] No matter how pure and holy your intentions, yet in matters of solid and manly virtue, of true and deep humility, and the desire to carry the cross and to become, like the Apostle, a curse to help your brother, in such matters you are still a baby.” (S 6875)

While writing on himself: “When it is a matter of love, I despise myself. I do not bother about opinions, which can be fabricated. When a single soul is in danger of being lost, I listen to my conscience alone. By the grace of God and in truth, I am perfect in this: I love to be unknown and to be considered nothing.” (S 6847)

What a practical and deep triumph over self! Both adjectives are important, because Sembranti's triumph must be not only external but also internal. He has to say no to his will, to say no to himself. To use the words of Paul, to which Comboni refers, it means to empty oneself, to want to become a curse for his brethren.

Comboni describes Jesus' death on the cross as "a mystery of so much love" and invites his missionaries to "offer themselves to lose everything and to die for Him, and with Him." And tells them: "In certain circumstances of special fervour they will all together make a formal and explicit dedication of themselves to God, declaring themselves ready, with humility and trust in his grace, even for martyrdom". (S 2722)

2. An all-Catholics-embracing Work

One of the main characteristics of Comboni's Plan and Work was its capacity to include every member of the body of Christ – whatever his or her ministry may be – in Africa's Regeneration.

According to the missiological intuition, which we've already discussed, Comboni resets the African Mission at the centre of the Church's life. Therefore every single member of the Church should feel responsible and become actively involved in the Work of Africa's Regeneration.

3. Mission animation, evangelisation and human promotion

The vastness of such a Work meant from the very beginning that there would be various levels and modalities of engagement:

- A vast majority would be expected to take part in the missionary effort by supporting the Work with their prayers and financial aid.
- Others would be involved in keeping everyone's interest alive by informing on the progress of the Work in Africa (mainly through a missionary magazine); they'd also recruit new members and provide for the formation of those called to exercise their ministries in Africa, as well as coordinate the channelling of the financial means collected.

- Finally, those who felt called to a ministry in Africa would receive a suitable spiritual and ministerial formation in a communitarian environment.

Some of the ministries within the Work would be: governance, missionary animation, formation, financial administration, evangelization and human promotion.

It's interesting to notice that none of the ministries was intended to be exclusive neither for clerics nor for laypeople.

... a commitment for life

The ties which bound supporters and members to the Work was also rather open: spontaneous and sporadic engagement, membership through a yearly subscription to the Work of the Good Shepherd, or the 10-year renewable oaths of those leaving for Africa. Only the Missionary Sisters consecrated themselves to a lifelong commitment.

Towards the end of his life, Comboni was thinking about the most suitable way to help his missionaries to embrace their missionary ministry as a commitment for life. This is the context of his thoughts about transforming Verona's male Institute, which admitted both laymen and clergy, into a religious congregation. A move which would not preclude other forms of engagement in Africa as well as in Europe.

Personal Reflection:

What role should the Foot-Washing play in our lives as Comboni Lay Missionaries?

What wisdom can we as Comboni Lay Missionaries gather by contemplating Jesus' death on the cross?

Comboni was a very gifted and skilled young man, but once he committed himself to Africa all his energies received a new focus. How should our missionary vocation influence every aspect of our life?

Where or in which kind of ministries are Comboni Lay Missionaries called to serve in the mission?