

Mission promoters

By Fr. Paulino Mondo, MCCJ

As we celebrate our Missionary Institute's 150th anniversary, we should go down memory lane so that we resist deviating from the basic principles that have brought us this far. In one of his off the cuff talks, St John Paul II once said that *"if you have anything difficult to be done in the Catholic Church, simply assign it to the Comboni Missionaries and they will do it to your satisfaction on record time"*. Who are these Comboni Missionaries?

The Comboni Missionaries are committed religious men and women with a few lay people who were founded by St Daniel Comboni in 1867 and 1872 respectively. Comboni Missionaries were purposely founded for the reality of Africa which was then known as a lost, dark and dangerous continent. Due to tremendous dangers, Comboni insisted on having only holy, capable and determined missionaries to be his companions for this missionary venture.

In 1885 Comboni Missionaries became religious congregations under the name of Sons and daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. After the First World War, the male wing Congregation split into two branches: the Italian group kept the name of Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, while the German group took the name Missionaries Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In 1979 the two branches would only be made to unite again under the name Comboni Missionaries of Heart of Jesus as a condition for the process of Daniel Comboni's canonization to proceed.

Today, Comboni missionaries number approximately 1700 present in about 41 countries. Their identity is defined by their Rule of Life: *"The Comboni Missionaries are a community of brothers called by God and consecrated to him through the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience for missionary service in the world, according to the charism of Daniel Comboni"* Rule of Life no. 10.

Comboni Missionaries work presently in Africa, Europe, North America, South America and in Asia. These capable men and women are exclusively missionary; dedicated to evangelization of peoples, the formation of future religious and lay missionaries. They also dedicate themselves to missionary promotion in the Local Church.

What characterizes Comboni missionaries?

The characteristics of their missionary service are four-fold: Comboni Missionaries both male and female branches with their Lay Missionaries are radically *ad gentes* (to the Nations) because they go out to peoples, areas and situations where evangelization has not yet been completed or even initiated. They are missionaries, *ad pauperes* (to the poor), because they opt to give their entire lives and talents to the poor and most abandoned from the point of view of faith and human dimensions.

They are missionaries, *ad extra* (beyond borders), because they are consecrated men and women who work without borders. They go outside their personal, family, geographical, cultural, social and religious frontiers always with a clear view that they may never return to their homes of origin. They are missionaries, *ad vitam* (for life) because their consecration is for life to God for the people and the missions of the Catholic Church.

Comboni missionaries In action Comboni missionaries choose the most remote and isolated areas in the interior or the slum areas around cities, such as Nairobi, Kinshasa, Khartoum, Lele, Mexico City, Cairo and São Paulo. They are

missionaries for nomadic and semi-nomadic people such as the Karimojong in Uganda and the Turkana in Kenya: they look out for minorities in danger of extinction, like the Pygmies in the Central African Republic or the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Indians in Amazonia, Peru and Mexico.

They assist and support movements that are engaged in recovering the historic memory and the dignity of their race, such as the Afro-Amerindians of Brazil, and Ecuador. They work in centres for the defense of human rights and assist movements struggling to obtain land for the landless peasants. In all the continents they foster the growth of Basic Christian Communities which is an effective means of evangelization.

Particular attention is paid to young people through education and professional formation. They build and support numerous schools, both in the city slums and in little villages lost in the vast savanna forests. In this way the Comboni missionaries collaborate in making the local churches increasingly autonomous and able to manage themselves and even go out to others in other continents as missionaries born and evangelized in the missions. This was always the ideal of St Comboni that people must be formed, prepared and empowered to transform their lives for the better and later share their faith with others beyond their borders.

St Daniel Comboni, the Missionary Promoter

Comboni was an original missionary for Africa with Africa in his heart. In spite of all the problems and misunderstandings he had to face, Daniel Comboni strived to drive home his intuition; that the whole European society and the Church are called to become much more concerned with the mission of Central Africa as he called it at that time. He undertook a tireless round of missionary promotion all over Europe, begging for spiritual and material aid for the African missions from kings and queens, bishops and nobles, as well as from the simple poor people.

As a tool for missionary animation, Comboni wrote hundreds of letters by hand to express this concern. He addressed dignitaries in palaces, cathedrals and even the First Vatican Council; he launched a missionary magazine *La Nigrizia*, the first ever missionary editorial in Italy. Today, that magazine is still alive under the name *Nigrizia*.

What is missionary promotion?

By missionary promotion, we mean every activity carried out to create and keep alive in the Church the awareness of being sent to proclaim Jesus Christ to all peoples, and to stir up in Christians the need to bear witness to him with generosity even to the giving up of one's life. More specifically, missionary promotion fosters the ensemble of activities carried out by the Church primarily to proclaim the Gospel "*to those who do not yet know Christ, the redeemer of mankind*" Redemptoris Missio No 31 to take up the challenge of evangelization and make oneself an authoritative participant in re-awakening the Church to her original call. The Church is made to evangelize.

It is therefore crystal clear that the first and defining quality of missionary promotion is evangelization in its missionary identity because "*Without the mission ad gentes, the Church's very missionary dimension would be deprived of its essential meaning and of the very activity that exemplifies it*"; Redemptoris Missio No 34.

Missionary promotion today

The methods vary from one place to another. However, the teaching of the Church states that *“the mission of Christ the Redeemer is still very far from completion”* Redemptoris Missio Noi. Some people may wonder how this can be possible after two millennia of evangelization?

All one has to do is look at the statistics of the population of our planet which contains about seven billion people. Two thirds of these do not yet know Jesus Christ, while the number of Catholics is over a billion and that of all Christians nearly two billion. The growth in numbers of Catholics is slower than that of non-Christians. Despite the continual increase in those belonging to the Catholic Church, the percentage is around 17.4%, with a slight drop in the last few decades. The map of the missions is also changing. With massive immigration, various regions of old Europe are already experiencing the reality of mission ad gentes, thus pointing to the need of a vigorous re evangelization.

At the same time the young Churches in Africa are growing and now account for 15% of the population. Latin America which once boasted the highest number of Catholics is being challenged by evangelicals and Pentecostal Churches. Vocations to missionary life and religious from Europe and America seem not to be encouraging because of materialism and consumerism. This calls us to wake up and live to the reality of St Daniel Comboni. The Church already pointed out that *“there is a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians... No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all the peoples”* Redemptoris Missio, Nos. 2-3.

Missionary promotion on every continent and in every Church, both of old and new foundation, must move along two basic lines that however coincide, that is: to inform and to form. Following the foot steps of St Daniel Comboni, our missionary promotion efforts after 150 years have to champion the precise aim of orienting the whole ecclesial community towards missionary cooperation in all its facets and thus awakening every particular Church and every person to get involved not only by right, but also by fact.