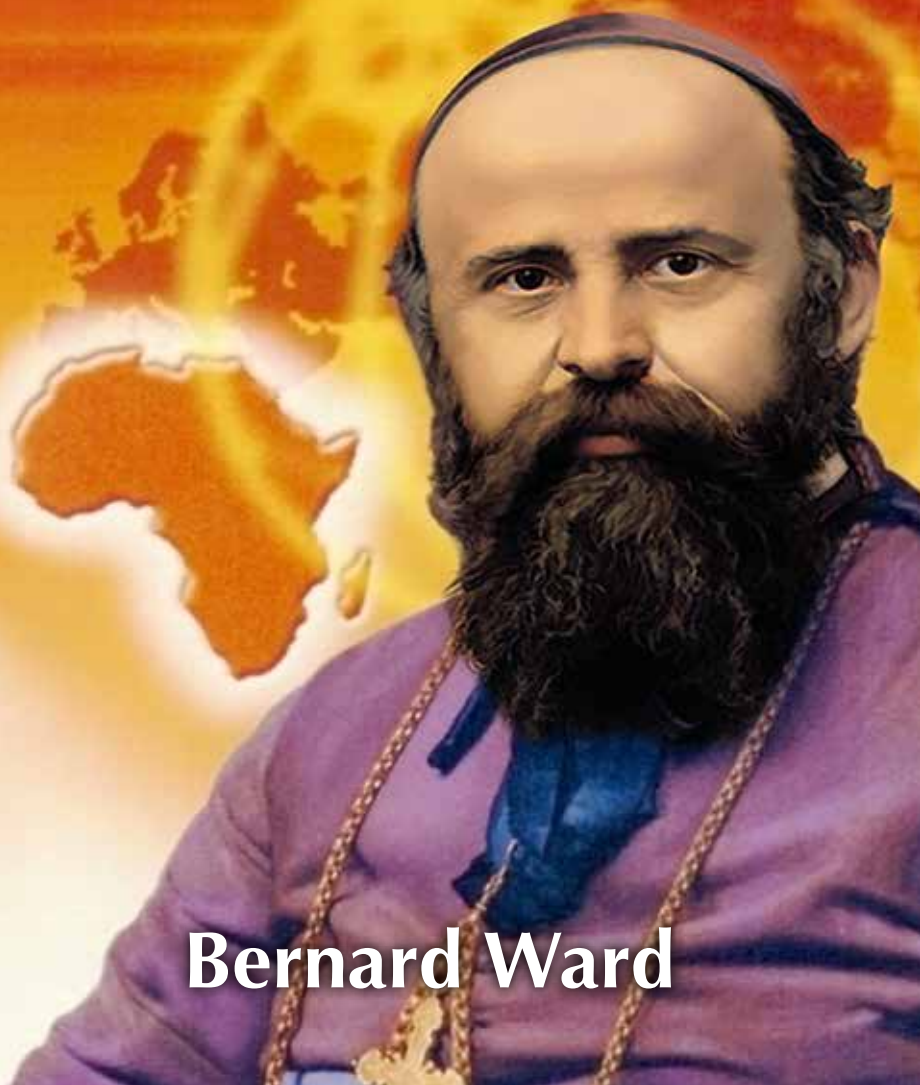


A HEART FOR AFRICA

A LIFE OF SAINT DANIEL COMBONI



Bernard Ward

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A Heart for Africa

*A Life of Saint Daniel Comboni
First Bishop of Central Africa*

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1. Beginnings

As he travelled across the desert during his eight missionary journeys in Africa, Daniel Comboni must often have thought of the water of Lake Garda in Northern Italy. Set into the hillside, his parents' home looked down onto the deep blue of the lake. It was here that Comboni was born on March 15th 1831. His parents were ordinary workers of the land. They owned a small, though very beautiful, lemon grove and in addition Comboni's father worked locally as a gardener. His mother, who worked as a housewife, bore eight children. Apart from the eldest, who lived until he was twenty-one, Daniel was the only child to survive.

A vocation is born

Daniel did well in the small village school where he remained until he was eleven years old. From there, his father, recognising his academic gifts, arranged for him to go to Verona where he could continue his education by attending the diocesan seminary as a day-pupil. Shortly after the beginning of the following academic year, it seemed he would have to return to Limone because his family could not afford accommodation for him. Fortunately, a priest from Verona, Father Nicola Mazza, had set up a school for gifted children whose families could not pay for their education. Here Comboni was accepted as a student in February, 1843.

It seems that Comboni first felt the desire to be a mis-

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Father Angelo Vinco, a former student of the Mazza College where Comboni studied as a young man in Verona. Listening to Vinco's descriptions of missionary work in Central Africa fired Comboni with enthusiasm and determination for the same cause.

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sionary when he was fifteen and read an account of the Martyrs of Japan. It was this book which first filled him with dreams of what he might do with his life. During his early years in the Mazza College (and later 'Mazza Institute'), his desire became clearly formulated, and it was the environment of the College which allowed this to happen. Furthermore, Mazza had a great concern for Africa and was interested in the possibility of using his school for the education of young people from Africa.

One of Mazza's former pupils, Angelo Vinco, now a priest, had already spent some time in the Sudan and, returning to Verona to find help, he gave a talk in the Mazza College. In an outline of his life and work written in 1876, Comboni clearly linked the birth of his missionary vocation with the arrival of Father Vinco in Verona. The first effect of Vinco's visit was, Comboni wrote, that Mazza resolved "to train and to send to Africa those of his students who wanted to do this kind of work". The second effect was that "in the January of 1849 I knelt at the feet of Father Mazza, and as a student of seventeen, I consecrated my life for work in Central Africa, and by the help of God, I have not broken that promise".

Daniel began to study for the priesthood and in the years that followed prepared himself for Africa by giving particular attention to practical subjects such as medicine. He was eventually ordained in December 1854 and shortly afterwards his knowledge of medicine was put to real use when plague broke out in villages around Verona. Comboni was sent to help in one of them, afterwards receiving a letter of warm appreciation from the Local Authorities.

The pain of a decision

It was two years before Comboni was given the chance to go to Africa. In 1857 Mazza decided to send an expedition to open a Mission along the Nile and Comboni was to be a member of it. However, he was very concerned about leaving his parents with no one to take care of them. He wrote to the Parish Priest of Limone: "There is a great turmoil in me. As I have sometimes told you, I feel that I want to follow the difficult career of a missionary. And for the last eight years I have been thinking of Central Africa ... but I am concerned about my old parents. If I give up the idea of the Foreign Missions then I'll be a martyr for the rest of my life because of the desire which has been in me since I was fourteen. However, if I do go to the Missions, I'll make martyrs of my parents".

Comboni decided that: "In the midst of this utter conflict of my ideas I think it would be wise to do a retreat, to take counsel from my faith and my God. He who is just and governs all things knows how to get me out of this impasse, to order all things well and to console my parents". After the retreat he wrote: "Having taken counsel from God and from men, I believe that the idea of the Missions is my true vocation ... Father Giovanni Marani, my spiritual director, has told me that, having had a clear picture of my life ... he can assure me that my vocation to the African Missions is the clearest and most evident that he has ever seen". His retreat director, who had known Comboni for a number of years, also helped him to understand that for the moment he was only going to see what it was possible to do in Africa. In addition to this, Comboni pointed out to his parents that because of the climate, missionaries did come home every two years or so.

2. A Dreamer and a Man of his Times

The growth of Comboni's vocation and the motives which he had for deciding to go to Africa are linked with the era in which he grew up. It was an age of great change. It was an age of rationalism, when scientific advances were making people question what they believed. In the early years of Comboni's life, Europe experienced what is known as the 'Age of Revolution'. Germany and Italy were struggling to become single nations. In England Engels and Marx were writing as the Industrial Revolution was taking place. Independence movements were springing up in Latin America. It was a time in which the nations of Europe were venturing into Africa and struggling for influence there. Great upheavals were taking place in the world. Comboni was part of this world and was also to be part of the upheaval.

Dreams

In 1865 Comboni wrote to a friend: "Bear in mind that I cannot live except for Africa and what concerns Africa". This desire for Africa grew out of many things, but the background to it was the place where Comboni was born and grew up. Comboni's home in Limone looked down onto Lake Garda and upwards to the mountains. It was by spending time looking at the lake and the mountains and gazing at the stars that Comboni gradually became aware of his own desires. The influence of the natural beauty in the midst of which Comboni lived gave him the space to be

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Comboni as a young missionary priest. When he had to leave Africa and return to Europe after his first missionary journey, he said that he had left his heart among his African brothers and sisters. He only regained it, he was to say, when, years later, he returned to them as their bishop and pastor.

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still, to contemplate and to dream. The satisfaction which he found in reading about the Martyrs of Japan and in dreaming of doing similar things helped him decide what he wanted to do in the future, and helped him to make his decision to become a missionary.

It was not out of a spirit of adventure that Comboni's desire arose but out of a specifically missionary spirit. Influenced by the lives of the Japanese Martyrs, Comboni felt, with the enthusiasm of youth, that he too wanted to be a martyr. Gradually this desire was clarified until Comboni became aware that it was not the reality of martyrdom which was important to him but rather living as a missionary, a way of life needing the same type of consecration to God as martyrdom. Gradually this desire found its fulfilment in Africa.

From dreams to action

The growth and clarification of Comboni's desire and dream was marked by many different events throughout his life. One of these events was the friendship Comboni formed in the Mazza College with a freed Ethiopian slave, Bachit Caenda. Talking to his friend about slavery, hearing Father Angelo Vinco's talk and meeting other African students whom Fr. Vinco later brought to Verona, all this helped Comboni's desires and dreams to find a clear focus.

By being a dreamer, Comboni discovered what he really wanted to do and became a man of his time. At the age of seventeen, having become aware of the terrible suffering which the peoples of Africa endured, Comboni felt he wanted to be directly involved in the efforts to remove this suffering by bringing the Gospel into this situation of slavery and oppression. Looking at the events of his time,

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and looking at his own life as expressed in his dreams and desires, he began to feel that his own happiness and satisfaction were closely linked to those of Africa.

Comboni was able to find God in many different ways, in the lake, the mountains, the stars, and particularly in his own hopes, desires, and dreams. He dreamed dreams and looked at ways of making them a reality. Part of his experience was an intuition; part of it was the gift of God. Comboni had a sense of the presence and action of God in his life which brought him alive. His intuition of what to do with his life was part of a recurring feeling or idea which he held on to instead of brushing it aside and thinking "That's not for me". Hopes, desires, dreams of going to Japan, hearing Fr. Vinco speak and then imagining what he might do for God, were the beginnings of creative stirrings in the young Comboni and the beginnings of his missionary vocation.

3. Africa and Death

In September 1857 six Mazza missionaries sailed from Trieste for Egypt. Among them was Comboni, on his first missionary journey. After having made a short pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the group travelled to Central Africa. Writing to his father, Comboni described their journey down the Nile: on either side of the river immense unexplored and almost impenetrable forests offered cover and protection for gazelles, antelopes, lions and giraffes; quite different, he wrote, from Lake Garda. The missionaries spent three months on their journey to Khartoum. Then a further three weeks uncomfortable sail in the tropical heat brought them to Holy Cross Mission, deep in Southern Sudan.

The Mission at Holy Cross

The new missionaries began to make a place to live. In another letter Comboni wrote of their work. One worked as a carpenter making such basic things as a cupboard for their medicines, a box to keep the salt dry, a table to eat off. One cooked. Another did the laundry. Comboni himself worked as a tailor. In an area of many different, unknown languages, they began learning Dinka by making a short list of words, communicating, as best they could, in Arabic for the time being. It was the rainy season and they all became ill. They had been there only six weeks when one of them, Father Francesco Oliboni, died. As he lay seriously ill he told his companions. "Even if only one of you is left, don't

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give up. God wants this Mission and the conversion of Africa to continue. I die certain of this". These words made a deep impression on Comboni and were to encourage him in the years to come.



A contemporary sketch of Holy Cross Mission where the young Comboni had his first experience of preaching the Gospel in Africa and where he learnt of his mother's death five months after the event because of the difficulties of communication with Europe.

Because of the rainy season, the missionaries were cut off from any news. And the news which did finally arrive for Comboni was that his mother had died. He had often praised his parents for the sacrifice they made in allowing him to become a missionary; he felt that he could not have asked for more generous parents. Receiving this news, he poured out his sadness to one of his fellow missionaries and in a letter to his cousin: "After all that I had left behind, did God have to ask this as well? But it is God's will. Blessed

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be God. But this upsets me so much: the loss of my mother, and my father now alone”.

The letters also brought news of further deaths among the missionaries. In fact, nineteen of those working along the Nile had died in the previous year. Comboni and those remaining were weak and sick with fever. It was decided to abandon Holy Cross in January 1859 and return to Europe.

The journey north to Egypt took six months. As he travelled Comboni wrote to tell a friend that he was continually accompanied by fever and attacks of dysentery: “These weakened me so much that I felt close to death. I was advised by all, though much against my will, to leave Central Africa, at least for some time ... What is to be done then? Nothing but surrender gladly to the will of God, return home for the moment, and await new promptings from the Holy Spirit”.

Comboni had been in Africa for just two years and had spent only eleven months in Holy Cross Mission. However, the very first group of missionaries had gone to this part of Africa only ten years before, in 1847, and none had been able to stay and work in the climate. All suffered from malaria and they had few medicines, and hardly any of these were adequate against tropical diseases. The missionaries’ only means of communication and transport was by boat along the river and by camel across the desert. Not only was this slow, so that it took several months to travel from the Sudan to Egypt, it was also a very uncertain route, often interrupted by floods or drought. These early missionaries met difficulties which they were totally unprepared for, and since Africa was unknown to outsiders at that time, there was really no way in which they could have been prepared. They were pioneers.

The experience of the Cross

Before deciding to become a priest Comboni had spent two days praying in front of the Crucifix and as he grew in the understanding of his dream and his desire to work in Africa, it became clear to him that his life would involve a great deal of personal suffering and loss. His parents had had eight children and seven had died. Clearly Comboni grew up in the midst of a certain amount of grief and sorrow. In deciding to become a missionary, he was very concerned about the extra pain this would cause his parents, who would now lose him to Africa and perhaps never see him again. His first letters from Africa to his parents indicate the loss that he felt and which he knew his mother felt: "How often I think of you each day, and of the sacrifice which you have made to the Lord. I will never cease to admire and to be grateful for what you have done for me in making this sacrifice. Many people pray for us, but I count one Hail Mary from you as having greater value because it comes from a heart which has given its whole self for the glory of God". What this sacrifice meant in reality for Comboni came home to him when news of his mother's death reached him five months after she had died.

Comboni wrote to his father immediately. The letter reveals the great sadness hidden beneath the words of comfort which he tries to offer his father. Despite the piety, it seems like a deep cry from the heart, a groan. He writes three pages on how great it is to suffer for Christ and has only one reference to his mother: "I exult for joy because now she is nearer to me than before". There is much in this letter about Comboni's understanding of suffering in Christian life and in the preaching of the Gospel. He writes that the Church grows through sacrifices. He blesses God

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who has visited them in this way but he also recognises that “in certain moments the weakness of human nature can give way to a deep sadness, but I know that the grace of the Lord, the help of Mary and the prayers of those who love us, can lift us out of this sadness to higher thoughts”.

It seems in parts of the letter that Comboni is desperately trying to console himself. This is not to belittle his faith; it is to see how his understanding of the Cross developed in the context of events. This is to contemplate the events of his life as Comboni himself had to contemplate them.

Shortly before receiving news of his mother's death Comboni had witnessed the death of his colleague, Father Oliboni, after only five weeks in Holy Cross Mission. These two deaths were the kind of events which led Comboni to see being a missionary was a kind of martyrdom.

He experienced great sorrow and sadness in the loss of his brothers and sisters, his mother, and his friend. Only by fully experiencing this sadness and loss, rather than pretending it never happened, was he able to make any sense of it.

Re-living the Passion of Jesus

The way in which Comboni made sense of his loss was by seeing his life as a re-living of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. His ability to see the Lord present in events, the capacity for forgiveness and compassion for others which developed in Comboni, did not come out of a denial of what happened to him, but out of his owning his pain and out of his identifying it with the Cross. So, in 1868 when there was strong opposition to his new Institute, he could write: “The God-made-Man showed his wis-

dom in no better way than in making the Cross: this is the true comfort, support and strength of good people; this is what forms great souls, makes them ready to carry through great things for God's glory and the salvation of souls".

Comboni's ability to see the Lord in the happenings of his life meant that he felt the Lord with him, alongside him in whatever happened. Because the Lord was present so too was the Cross. However, it was not the pain of the Cross which was important to Comboni but its power. Like St. Paul he glories in the Cross of Christ. For Comboni this Cross "came forth from the summit of Golgotha and then filled the universe with its power and has the strength to transform Central Africa into a land of blessing and salvation ... From the Cross there issues a strength which is gentle and does not kill, which comes down on souls and renews them like a refreshing dew". Part of what Comboni is saying here is that by contemplating the Risen Lord in all the events of his life, he was able to make sense of his own losses and suffering and find in them a life-giving experience, a resurrection.

The extent to which this integration took place in Comboni is brought out when he writes: "I already see and understand that the Cross is such a friend to me and is always so near that I have for some time chosen her as my eternal and inseparable bride, ... my beloved bride giving life to the proposed work for the Regeneration of Africa". So Comboni's suffering became not only meaningful and life-giving for himself, but for others too.

Joy in the Risen Lord

The suffering Christ was present in the life of Comboni but so too was the Risen Lord. Hope, affection for people, joy

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in the world around him, and a great capacity for enjoying life, are all ways in which Comboni met the Risen Lord in his own life.

It was the Risen Lord who filled Comboni with optimism and hope. Writing to his friend Father Francesco Bricolo in 1866 he says: "I am full of confidence in God. What I know for certain is that my work is the will of God". And in Khartoum, several people gave evidence about his life. Among them was a Moslem, Said Mohamed Taha who witnessed how Comboni "believed that everything came from God in whom he always placed his trust".

The Risen Lord was also present in the friendship which appears in the warm affection for people often expressed in his letters. He writes about the daughter of one of his cousins: "How is the dear and lovely Erminia? How many happy memories I have of her! Tell her that the great distance between us does not divide us and that for many years I have placed her among those for whom I have the greatest affection". His letters to his parents are full of affection, but particularly they are full of the sense of being united with them in God. He told his dear father, "I always have my heart turned towards you; I think of you every day; I am with you in your work. God guides our affairs and in him we have a good manager, a faithful friend, a loving Father".

The letters of Comboni are full of his joy in the world around him. He delighted in all the Holy Places, in the variety of daily life in Cairo, and in the wildlife along the banks of the Nile which seemed to him "like an enchanted garden of Eden".

Comboni knew how to relax and enjoy life. On one oc-

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casion, having been given a gift of several bottles of wine, he was able to report how “the famous bottles were gloriously drunk for the greater glory of God, to your health and ours in the following places: (1) two bottles in my College in Cairo with all the priests; (2) one opened with the Superior of the Christian Brothers, a good friend of ours; (3) one opened by mistake in Aswan. We wanted to treat two Franciscans after they had handed the Mission Station over to us, but treat them with a bottle of ordinary wine, instead we drank one of yours by mistake; and (4) I have the last one hidden in my case and no one knows anything about it. We will drink it in Kordofan on September 14th when there will be the Consecration of the Vicarate to the Heart of Jesus. You can see that it would not be a bad idea, in fact it would be a very good one, if some more of these sublime bottles were honoured in Central Africa ... We drink them like something come from the other world!”.

Thus, in these very ordinary ways Comboni shared in the life of the Risen Lord and in his work as a missionary he handed this life on to others.

4. Searching for a Way

Back to Europe

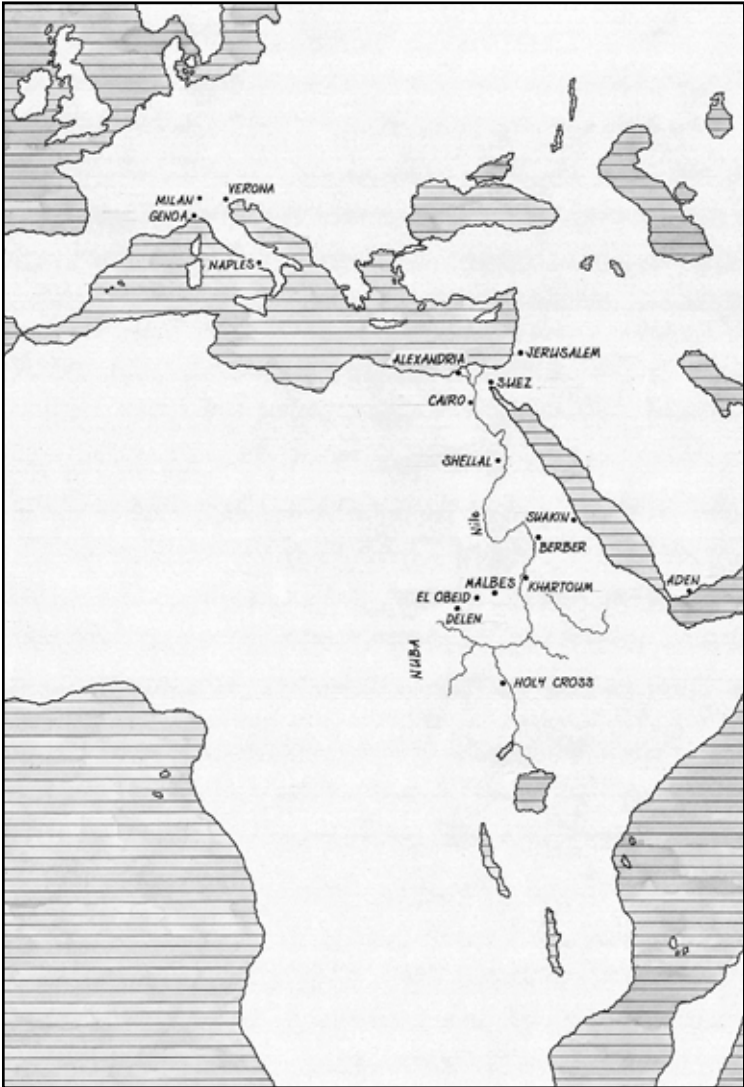
Having had to abandon Holy Cross Mission in 1859, Comboni returned to Italy to rest and to spend some time with his father. He was so exhausted that Mazza doubted if he would ever be able to return to Africa. When he had recovered some of his strength, Comboni was given responsibility for the African students in Mazza's College. Comboni describes his Superior's ideas: the development of a local African clergy, and the education of young African men and women in colleges in Europe so that having lived and worked for some time in a Catholic environment they could return home. There, according to their profession and vocation, they could teach and pass on what they had learned.

Mazza's ideas have to be seen in the context of their times, when Africans were seen only as slaves, or as mere servants and workers. It seemed almost impossible for Europeans to survive the African climate, so educating Africans in Europe seemed the only solution and Mazza wanted to give them the best education possible.

Second Missionary Journey

Shortly after Comboni had begun this work, news arrived of a group of African slaves who had been rescued by a British warship in the Indian Ocean and were now in Aden. Mazza felt that it might be useful to bring some of these young people to his College. So Comboni was sent on his second mis-

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A map showing some of the places which figured in Comboni's life.

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sionary journey which meant travelling to Aden via Egypt and the Red Sea.

In Aden Comboni gathered together a group of seven young Africans to bring to Verona, obtaining British passports for them from the Authorities. Comboni saw this work as freeing these young people from "the infamous traffic in human flesh, a disgraceful business which humiliates and degrades humanity. Human beings just like us, gifted with intelligence as a sign of divinity and made like the Blessed Trinity, are reduced to the condition of animals by this slave-trade". He told of a violent war in the Sudan as a result of which three thousand Africans were sold as slaves in the market of Kordofan. Because of laws relating to the slave-trade Comboni was stopped by customs officials as he left Alexandria and was held for two days. He bluffed his way out of this by pointing out that the Africans had British passports and by saying they were actually from India!

The pain of the slave-trade

It might be asked why Comboni was bringing these young people to Europe. Why not send them back to their own homes? However, many of them had been taken prisoner and enslaved when they were as young as seven or eight; they now had no recollection of where their homes were. One, who eventually became a priest, had no idea even to which tribe he belonged. In later years Comboni was able to take many back to the Sudan and some were fortunate enough to find their families again. One of these was a boy, who at the age of seven had been seized by slave-traders as he was leading his blind mother away from them, but did recognise certain landmarks and was able to find his own village.

A slave-caravan which Comboni met on another occa-

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sion was described by him: "In the desert we met more than twenty groups of captured slaves, whipped as they walked along. The small children were carried by their mothers. Other children who were able to walk did so tied by their necks to poles resting on their shoulders so that they could not escape. Yet others, up to fifteen years old, had goatskin straps around their necks and these were attached to reins held by the slave-traders. Adults were tied in pairs on either side of poles fastened to their necks. Others had their hands and arms tied behind their backs. Some were chained at the feet and yet forced to carry their masters' luggage. When they slowed down or were tired they were urged along by spears and sticks. Some fell to the ground and were either finished off with clubs and spears or left to die. In this way slaves are forced to march for more than twelve hours a



One of the experiences which was most deeply to touch and change Comboni's heart was his encounter with the slave-trade against which he fought vigorously.

day for up to three months". This was the kind of treatment which filled Comboni with anger and determination to do something to stop it happening.

Hope against hope

By March 1861 Comboni was back in Verona after his journey to Aden. He had hoped to return to Africa but there were further setbacks. In November 1861 a fresh attempt was made to evangelise the Sudan by handing the Mission of Central Africa over to the Franciscans. A party of fifty-one priests, brothers, and lay helpers travelled south along the Nile. Because of their lack of experience, and in their haste to reach Southern Sudan, they did not allow themselves time to acclimatise before travelling south from Cairo. As a result, the Superior and seven others died on the journey, and within a few months all had either died or returned home. It was felt in Rome that there was no hope for this part of Africa and the area was abandoned.

Comboni, though, did not abandon his hopes. He continued the education of the African students. He also began the task of making Mazza's work known in Europe. One of his reports to helpers in Germany describes how the Africans studied Christian Doctrine, Arabic, Italian, Arithmetic and Old Testament history. During these years between 1861 and 1864 Comboni was developing his ideas. He began to see that the education of Africans in Europe was not really successful. The cold climate of Verona did not suit them. In Naples a Franciscan, Ludovic Casoria, had established a similar type of work in a warmer climate. However, Comboni still felt that something different needed to be done.

5. A Plan for the Regeneration of Africa

In September 1864 Comboni had an experience which provided him with the inspiration he was seeking. He wrote later: "On September 15th 1864, while I was in St. Peter's Basilica, attending the Beatification of Margaret Mary Alacoque, like a flash of lightning the thought came to me of making a new *Plan* for the Evangelization of Africa". This was one of the most significant events in his life, helping him to understand and clarify his dreams and desires and it brought about a deep integration in Comboni himself. His ability to sense God's love, to contemplate events, to see the Lord in the reality around him, led Comboni not only to be a man of his times but to see beyond them. Hence his dream of fully involving the peoples of Africa in the struggle for their own freedom and in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Africa's new birth

The main point of his *Plan* was that a basic religious and secular education would be offered to all in schools and colleges that would be set up "in places where Africans can live without changing, and Europeans can live without succumbing to the climate. This new *Plan* will not restrict itself to the old-established borders of the Mission of Central Africa, it will include the whole African race and

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will extend its activity over almost all the countries of black Africa. The *Plan* will involve the creation of innumerable schools and colleges for both sexes to surround the whole of Africa. These will be carefully situated at the least possible distance from the interior of the Continent". Seminaries would be set up in Europe for the training of missionaries, and steps taken to allow missionaries to acclimatize as they entered Africa. There would be a gradual movement to the interior, the foundation of Christian villages, and the establishment of a Local Church.

In the colleges and centres which Comboni hoped to establish, men would be trained as catechists, teachers, as craftsmen such as carpenters, tailors, tanners, blacksmiths, builders, shoemakers. Others would become farmers, doctors and pharmacists. Women would be trained as leaders, teachers and housewives "who would promote the education of women in reading, writing, keeping accounts, spinning, sewing, weaving, and caring for the sick". In all of this Comboni shows a breadth of vision quite unusual for his time. It shows his immense confidence in the people of Africa as well as his determination to make available the possibility of full intellectual development for both men and women.

Some of the men might want to be priests and Comboni noted that "given the quick physical and intellectual development of the Africans" the training for the priesthood need not be as long as in Europe. To further the intellectual development of new clergy, so that they could be "able and enlightened leaders of the Christian communities of the interior", Comboni envisaged the establishment of "four great African theological-scientific universities".

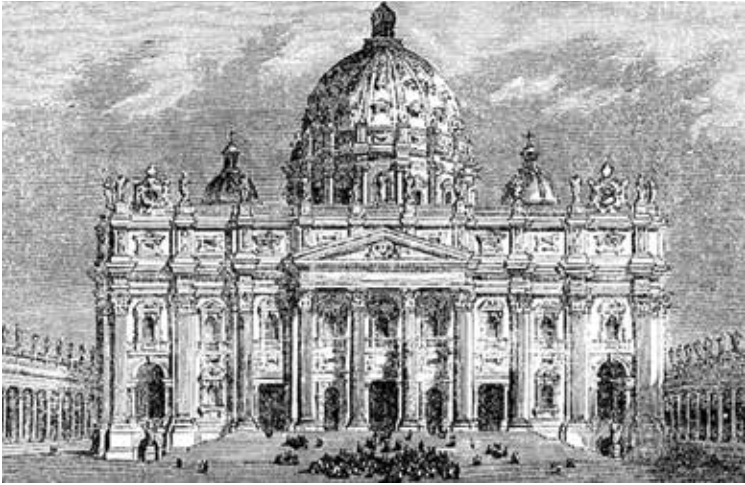
Central to Comboni's *Plan* is his phrase "the regener-

ation of Africa by Africa" which belies any claim that he wanted to impose a benevolent, paternalistic European culture on Africans. His choice of the word "regeneration" indicates a new birth, another life, something different from what went before. It is full of hope and expectation, and for Comboni this was to be brought about by the people themselves. Particularly in speaking of the role of women, and the establishment of four great African universities, he was looking forward to a time when the full richness of all aspects of African life would be developed by Africa.

A transforming experience

The event in St. Peter's Basilica became central to Comboni's life. The memory of it remained with him, vivid and fresh. He tells how "I looked upon Africa in the light of faith and there I saw an infinite multitude of brothers and sisters who belonged to the same family as myself, with one common Father in heaven ... I was carried away by love coming forth from the side of the Crucified One on Calvary to embrace the whole human family. I felt my heart beat faster, and a divine power seemed to drive me towards those unknown lands".

What happened to Comboni in this event was more than just an inspiration. He was given a deep and transforming experience of the love of God for the people of Africa. As he prayed at the tomb of St. Peter, something happened which enabled him to see and to feel that the peoples of Africa were included in the love of the wounded heart of Jesus. The experience changed Comboni's whole way of looking at his work and it gave him new confidence and hope. What happened was so deep and sufficiently moving as to inspire him for the whole of the rest of his life. It was



An artist's impression of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

a 'founding experience' in which the Risen Lord, showing his love for Africa, and for Comboni, brought about in him the integration of his dreams, hopes, and desires. Comboni was enabled to see that what he wanted for Africa, Jesus on Calvary, and now Risen, also wanted. This was a 'founding experience' in the sense that Comboni had a clearer idea of what was needed in Africa. He now had an experience of God and a concrete plan on which he could eventually base the foundation of his own missionary society.

The Pope's approval

Leaving St. Peter's Basilica, Comboni worked on a draft of his *Plan* for the next thirty-six hours. Shortly afterwards he was able to present a copy to the Pope, Pius IX. Another copy was given to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò who, as head of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith,

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had responsibility for the Foreign Missions. Both the Pope and the Cardinal expressed support for the *Plan*, and in addition the Cardinal suggested that Comboni go to France where there was considerable interest in missionary work. This too was part of the 'founding experience' in that the Pope and the Cardinal authorised Comboni to promote his *Plan*. A few days later Comboni again saw the Pope who told him "to work as a good soldier of Christ".

The Pope was probably not aware of the great energy and drive which he released in Comboni with this simple phrase. However, it spoke powerfully to Comboni who saw it as approval for his work, and the official sign he had been waiting for. Shortly after his experience he wrote: "There is a saying, 'The great works of God are accomplished neither by the learned nor the saints but by those inspired by God'. This thought, also expressed by the Fathers of the Church, encourages me much, because I am only too certain of how very far I am from being holy and possessing deep understanding ... yet in spite of this, I am sure I am doing God's will by working for the cause of Africa. Through his Vicar on earth, God has entrusted me with this Mission and I will give my life for the holy work that I have undertaken". Thus, the experience which led to the *Plan* became the foundation of Comboni's life work.

6. Looking for Help

A Journey around Europe

The *Plan* of Comboni came out of his encounter with God in prayer and out of his own dream of doing something for Africa. He looked now for a way of making his dream a reality, and so, sensing more clearly the presence of God in what he was doing and having received official support, Comboni began a long journey throughout Europe to make his *Plan* known. Between November 1864 and June 1865, he travelled to Turin, Lyons, Paris, Cologne, London and again to Paris. At this time, he wrote to one of his friends: "You will be surprised that I am always travelling and that I am presently at Brixen. But you have to know that Africa and its peoples have become the masters of my heart, which lives only for them. This is particularly so since the representative of Jesus Christ, the Holy Father, has encouraged me to work for Africa, and for this reason you will forgive me if I leave my few Africans, who are however in good hands in Verona, so that I can work for the benefit of the whole of Africa".

While in Paris, Comboni received a letter from Cardinal Barnabò who, having read the *Plan* again, felt it was too idealistic and that it would be difficult to get the Superiors of different Religious Orders to work together. Comboni replied that having worked in Africa he was well aware of the real problems. Now though, after eighteen hundred years of difficulties, it was time to do something. He was ready to

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make any sacrifice in order to destroy the oppression and poverty which he had seen in Africa, and with regard to his *Plan*, he told the Cardinal: "If your Eminence does not approve one *Plan*, I will draw up another; if you do not accept this, I will prepare a third, and so on until my death".

While Comboni was in Paris other problems arose in regard to his links with the Mazza Institute. Rumours spread that he had left and no longer belonged to the Institute. Comboni returned to Verona to defend himself and to make it clear that, as far as he was concerned, Mazza was still his Superior. The very positive outcome of this was that Mazza, now an old man, was himself encouraged in his work for Africa and in June 1865 he sent Comboni to Rome to ask for a new Mission in Central Africa for the Mazza Institute. In Rome a meeting was held at which Cardinal Barnabò asked Comboni, and Fr. Casoria, the Franciscan from Naples, to go to the Sudan to look at the possibility of dividing the Mission of Central Africa between Mazza's Institute and the Franciscans.

7. Becoming a Founder

Father Nicola Mazza died in August of 1865. Nonetheless, in November 1865 Comboni left for Egypt on what was his third missionary journey, together with Fr. Casoria. After travelling for two months, they reached Scellal, the first of the Mission Stations along the Nile. Three days later Fr. Casoria set off to return to Europe leaving three Members of his Community in the Mission. Somewhat surprised at the departure of Casoria, Comboni remained in the Sudan and Egypt for another two months travelling around to look for suitable sites where he could set up centres to begin putting his *Plan* into action. Returning to Rome in March 1866, Comboni found that Mazza's successor, Father Gioacchino Tomba, was unwilling to accept a Mission in Central Africa. Fr. Casoria was not prepared to discuss any division of the Mission, and even if he were, the three Franciscans left in Scellal were already in difficulties. Comboni was now completely alone. However, on his return from Africa, he had presented Cardinal Barnabò with a report of his journey to the Sudan. This sufficiently impressed the Cardinal for him to suggest that Comboni found his own missionary society.

It is possible now to see a certain pattern emerging in the life of Comboni: apparent set-backs lead to a way forward. Thus, Comboni had to leave Africa and was (at that time) unable to return: out of that came the *Plan* and official approval. It seemed that Comboni had been dismissed

from the Mazza Institute and from that set-back came the request for a Mission. Then, returning from his expedition with Casoria, Comboni found himself alone as the only one who believed in the future of the Mission of Central Africa, yet in this isolation he found the 'new promptings of the Holy Spirit' leading him to found his own Institute. Comboni's part in the pattern of set-backs leading to a way forward was to be patient and allow things to happen, but equally he had the capacity to make things happen when the opportunity arose.

The new Family is born

Comboni took full advantage of the opportunity which Cardinal Barnabò offered when he suggested that he found his own Institute under the protection of the Bishop of Verona, Luigi Canossa, who had long shown interest in, and support for, the work which Mazza had done for Africa. On being approached by Comboni, Bishop Canossa asked how he was to approve the setting up of an Institute which consisted of only one Member! Fortunately, three Members of another Religious Order known as the Camillians also offered themselves. Since their Religious Order, together with some others, was about to be suppressed by the Italian Government, these three men, Stanislo Carcereri, Giovanni Battista Zanoni, and Giuseppe Franceschini, who were interested in working in the Missions, took the opportunity of joining Comboni. Another priest, Alessandro Dal Bosco, who had been a Member of the 1857 Expedition, agreed to become Rector of the new seminary. On June 1st 1867 the new organization was set up in Verona and given the name of the *Institute of the Good Shepherd for the Regeneration of Africa*. The priests and brothers of the Comboni Missionaries

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take this as the date of the foundation of their Missionary Institute.

There were to be three parts to the new venture: the seminary in Verona, a committee of lay people called the 'Association of the Good Shepherd' to provide support and funds, and the colleges in Cairo which Comboni now proposed to establish.



A 19th Century view of the City of Verona with the River Adige, the Church of St. George and St. Peter's Castle in the distance on the hill. Comboni always insisted on the importance of the whole Church being involved in Mission and showed great confidence in the contribution to be made by lay people both at home and in the field.

8. New Beginnings

Return to Africa

In addition to the three priests, Comboni was able to enlist the help of three Sisters from the Order of St. Joseph of the Apparition, an Institute which worked in the Near East and in Egypt. They were joined by sixteen African girls, nine from the Mazza college, and seven from other convents in Europe. With this group of helpers, Comboni sailed for Egypt from Marseilles in November 1867 on his fourth missionary journey. On the day of their departure Comboni wrote to Bishop Canossa: "We will not breathe except for Jesus and to win souls for him ... Despite the beautiful horizon which we see in front of us as the ship gets ready to leave, we are going to Egypt expecting to suffer much. Yet for the progress of God's work, hardships and crosses must come ... We are committed to giving up everything for the sake of making God's work prosper".

The missionary expedition arrived in Egypt early in December and on New Year's Day 1868 they were able to open two colleges, one for women, the other for men, in Cairo. These colleges began to function also as dispensaries, hospitals, and as places of refuge for slaves fleeing from their owners.

Before long money ran out and in July 1868 Comboni decided to return to Europe to raise funds. He travelled first to France where he took the opportunity of going on pilgrimage to the famous Marian Shrine at La Salette. There

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he took part in a ceremony entrusting Africa to Mary and was asked to compose the prayer for the occasion. Knowing that his prayer was also to be published in the Press, Comboni took full advantage of the chance to make the needs of Africa more widely known. His prayer pointed out that although Africa was one of the most neglected and difficult mission areas, it was "the most important in the whole of the Church's apostolate". Returning to the theme of his *Plan*, he pointed out that the peoples of Africa had a great deal to offer the Church. He had found many beautiful people and generous hearts in Africa and clearly it was time that the whole of humanity, all of whom are God's people, should "become one flock under the care of the Good Shepherd". And using another image from Scripture, that of the banquet to which people are invited, Comboni felt there would be something lacking if Africa remained excluded from the Father's Feast.

New Apostles and Colleagues in the *Plan*

Leaving France, Comboni travelled to Germany to speak to a group of lay people in Cologne who had long supported his work. During his talk he spoke about the effects of slavery, recounting how "because of war and the greed of merchants, hundreds of thousands of victims are seized from their homes. They are exposed to every kind of evil and condemned never again to see their families or the place where they were born. Instead, they live under the yoke of slavery for the rest of their lives". In this talk Comboni also gave a brief biography of the missionaries working with him. Among these he included four of the African women, all former slaves, who had studied in Verona and in his college in Cairo. These were now his colleagues and the first

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Comboni's vision of what the African Church could become was way ahead of his time. Here he is shown with Fr. Daniel Sorur, a ransomed slave whom he ordained and who became one of his first African co-workers.

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fruits of his *Plan*. He valued them greatly and placed great importance on their work because, he said, "they are destined to become the first Apostles of the interior of Africa".

Comboni went on to say: "Only He, who with his glorious sacrifice on Calvary, wanted slavery banished forever from the face of the earth; only He who announces true freedom to people, calling every nation and every human being to be a child of God, to whom the reborn person can say 'Abba, Father'; only He can liberate Africa from slavery. Only Christianity can give back full freedom to that large part of the human family which still lives under slavery. Exactly in this lies the importance of our work for the Regeneration of Africa".

It is interesting to compare this passage with Paul writing to the Romans: "Everyone moved by the Spirit is a child of God. The Spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons and daughters, and it makes us cry out 'Abba, Father!' The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God ... and co-heirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory ... Creation still retains the hope of being freed ... to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God ... Creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth" (Romans 8:14 ff).

A comparison of these passages shows several similarities: slavery, children of God, fear/liberty, 'Abba, Father'. Likewise, Comboni's constant theme of the Cross is similar to Paul speaking about sharing the sufferings of Christ. Paul speaks of creation waiting to be freed, and Comboni of the human family under slavery. Paul writes of creation groaning in giving birth, Comboni speaks of the regeneration of Africa. Comboni's words mirror those of Paul. There

seems to be in this an insight into Comboni's prayer, the background to his *Plan*. It could well be that the quotation from Paul is a passage of scripture which Comboni prayed and which shaped his thinking about the reality of slavery, the Cross, and the '*Regeneration of Africa*'.

The gift of the Spirit comes out of the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus and is given to produce new life. For Comboni the gift of the Spirit will liberate the peoples of Africa in the sense that Paul speaks of. At the same time, for Comboni, it is only the Gospel which can free Africa from the slavery which abounds in reality. The liberated slave-girls, going back to evangelise their own people, are both the symbol and the reality of this new freedom.

Comboni's colleges in Cairo attracted a lot of opposition because of the efforts which the priests and sisters made to protect slaves who came to them for help. Slavery flourished because it was a source of cheap labour since slaves were not paid any wages. Thus, there was particularly strong opposition to slaves being taught about Christianity because, becoming aware of their dignity as children of God, they realised they were no longer slaves to anyone. Thus, for Comboni, the gift of the Spirit, enabling all people to cry out "Abba, Father!" was at the centre of the struggle for the freedom of oppressed people.

A wider vision

From Cologne, Comboni travelled to Paris where he set up a committee of prominent people to raise funds. His work was already international and he hoped to develop this aspect by opening a Seminary in Paris similar to the one in Verona. However, Rome did not support him in this and he had to abandon the idea. It reveals, though, the breadth

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of his vision and the depth of his trust in God for, at a time when there was a great emphasis on national independence in Europe, Comboni was bringing different nationalities together to work in his Institute.

What is clearly visible from Comboni's work in Verona, Cologne and Paris, is his confidence in the committees of lay people who helped him. He was quite clear in his own mind that he could open seminaries throughout Europe and return to Africa, because there were enough young people wanting to work in the Missions and many lay people willing to support them.

9. Challenging the Church

Visitors

In February 1869, having gained more support and backing in Europe, Comboni returned to Egypt on what was his fifth missionary journey. Four new missionaries travelled with him, a priest, a theological student, a sister and a lay-woman. Comboni did not see his work as being restricted to priests but as being open to anyone who had something to contribute to the Mission.

As soon as he returned to Cairo, Comboni was able to open a dispensary with the offerings he had received. At the same time, he bought a third house in which he opened another school staffed by African women teachers. The position of Cairo on one of the main trade routes to and from the Far East enabled Comboni to meet many people who travelled through. In June 1869 he was visited by the Vicar-Apostolic of Bombay, Bishop Leon Meurin, who, returning to Germany, came to see Comboni's work. Meurin was so impressed by what he saw that in a talk, which he gave later in Cologne, he told his listeners: "My friends, have confidence in the great work of Comboni, and most of all have confidence in Comboni himself because Providence has given him the most difficult of all the Missions. I had to overcome great obstacles in India, but in comparison with Comboni, my work is a bed of roses. I know Comboni; his name will be remembered in the future because he has found a method for the evangelisation of Africa. I came

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to collect help for my Mission, but give it all to Comboni, his need is much greater than mine since he lacks practically everything. The city of Cologne can rightly be proud of helping a Mission whose founder will one day be called the 'Francis Xavier' of Central Africa". Meurin's remarks are important because they were made by an experienced missionary. He would not have made such a positive statement without carefully evaluating Comboni's ideas and work. In particular, the Bishop invited his listeners to trust Comboni. Clearly, Meurin thought highly of him.

Comboni at the Council

Other visitors who stayed with Comboni in Cairo were three bishops on their way to the First Vatican Council which had recently been summoned. Meeting these bishops prompted Comboni to write to Cardinal Barnabò to ask if he might come to Rome to inform the Council of the needs of the Church in Africa. The Council, being the first for over three hundred years and attended by bishops from all over the world, offered the opportunity of bringing Africa to the attention of the whole Church. So in March 1870, Comboni returned to Europe and attended the Council as the theological advisor of Bishop of Verona, Luigi Canossa.

In Rome Comboni prepared a document, a *Postulatum*, for presentation to the Council and obtained the signatures of sixty-five bishops in support of it. In this, he asked the bishops to direct "at least one look of compassion towards Africa". He reminded them that Africa was more than twice the size of Europe and contained a large part of the world's population, yet it was still neglected by the Church.

The document asked the Council to find a way of sending workers into this "abandoned part of the Lord's vine-

yard", and to "invite the whole Catholic world to come to the aid of this cause by asking for effective help from all Christian people".

Comboni pointed out that bishops were present from all over the world but not from Central Africa, and so he asked that: "From the Vatican Council there may sound out the voice of the Apostles, championing with vigour the cause of the peoples of Central Africa". He wanted the bishops to make this a reality by sending some of their young priests to work in Africa.

The work of the Council was interrupted by the War for Independence in Italy and Giuseppe Garibaldi's entering Rome, and so the document was never debated. However, it is important because it reminded the Council of the missionary nature of the Church. In asking the bishops to "reawaken the apostolic spirit in the Church so that the peoples of Africa may be invited and attracted to her", he was serving the whole Church, making it aware of its mission to the world and to Africa. We see also the strength of Comboni which allowed him to be forthright in reminding the bishops that the very ministry which they exercised demanded that they work so that there could be "one flock and one shepherd". Comboni greatly respected the authority of Rome but he also saw clearly his own duty to make Rome fully aware of its duty to Africa.

"Africa or Death"

After the Council, Comboni made another journey through Europe to visit his supporters. It was during this visit to supporters in Cologne that he first spoke of the motto of his missionaries as 'Africa or Death', indicating the depth of their commitment to Africa.

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During this time in Europe Comboni was seeking to ensure that his work would continue after his death. In December 1871 he drew up a 'Rule' for the Institute of Men which he had founded in 1867, and on January 1st 1872 he founded the Institute of Women known today as the 'Comboni Missionary Sisters'. At the same time, he wrote to his missionaries in Cairo to support them in their plans to move further south towards Khartoum and Kordofan, so establishing a Mission Station in the interior.

The result of this time of consolidation was that in May 1872 Rome approved the two Institutes, officially entrusted them with the Mission to Central Africa and appointed Comboni 'Pro-Vicar Apostolic', meaning that, while still a priest, he had the full authority of a bishop in that area. It is worth noting that although alone and still quite young, Comboni had managed to rouse Catholics throughout Europe to do something for Africa. When he asked Rome for a part of the Mission in Central Africa, he was given responsibility for the whole area from the south of Egypt to the Great Lakes in the heart of Africa, and from the Red Sea in the East to the area near present-day Congo in the West. And he was given this responsibility, clearly and officially, by the Church.

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Comboni as Pro-Vicar Apostolic of the Mission to Central Africa. Although he had not yet been ordained bishop he had full pastoral responsibility for the vast territory. He was evidently not adverse to adopting headgear that helped him blend with his environment!

10. A Heart for Africa

In September 1872 together with four priests, a student, two brothers and three young Africans, Comboni set out once more for Cairo on his sixth missionary journey. From Cairo he travelled to Khartoum where he arrived in May 1873 after a tortuous journey of ninety-nine days by river and camel through the heat of the desert. On the Sunday after his arrival Comboni took official possession of the Mission. He preached in Arabic to a very cosmopolitan congregation of freed slaves, Arabs, missionaries, and European dignitaries telling of his great joy at being back among them: "The first love of my youth was for unhappy Africa, and leaving all that was dear to me in the world, I came here sixteen years ago. Because of the poor state of my health, I was obliged to return home. I left out of obedience, but I left my heart among you. And today, now that I have finally found my heart again by returning among you, I will never abandon you. I intend to belong to each one of you". Comboni's sermon makes it evident that he was deeply convinced of his vocation to bring the Gospel to Africa, and it is clear from this sermon that he saw his vocation not only as something coming from outside of himself, a call which he had to follow, but also as something from deep within him, the love of his life.

In the following October, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Comboni consecrated his Vicariate to the Heart of Jesus. A letter to a friend written at the same time

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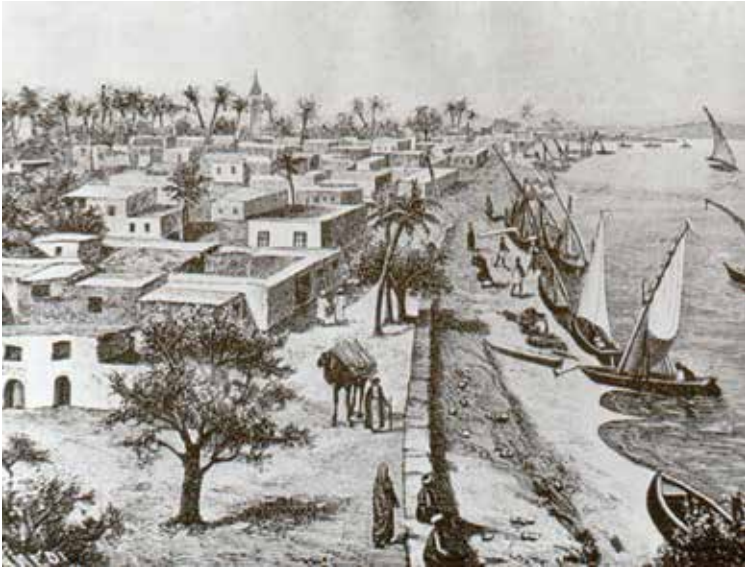
shows how his love for Africa was grounded in a very realistic understanding of its problems and of Africa's place in history. He wrote: "In China, the Missions have been established for centuries: here in Kordofan the faith has been present for only four hundred and eighty-six days. We are at the very beginning". Placed in context, Comboni and his colleagues would seem to have had no chance of succeeding. Around 1848, thirty-five missionaries had died; in 1861 twenty-two Franciscans died. How could one man, who had himself been very ill in Africa, together with a few helpers, do anything where so many others had died, and where a large Order could not risk sacrificing so many lives? Comboni, however, consecrating his Mission to the Heart of Jesus, was convinced of his vocation, convinced it was the work of God, and convinced that "the Heart of Jesus will enable me to overcome enormous difficulties so that I can make my *'Plan for the Regeneration of Africa'* a reality".

Developments in the Mission

From El Obeid, Comboni wrote to Cardinal Barnabò describing the importance of that place for moving into the interior. The missionaries were trying to learn the local languages and seeking the best and easiest way of establishing a Mission Station there. They were preparing a dictionary, a grammar, and a catechism in Nubian. Not only did the missionaries want to work among the Nubians, the Nubians themselves wanted them there to teach and as a protection against slavers.

Comboni was able to describe the visit by a chief of the Nubians, Said-Aga, who had given him an explicit invita-

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A contemporary view of Khartoum at the time of Comboni, the town where he had his Episcopal Seat and where he died and was buried.

tion to go there and set up a church and a school. These people, Comboni wrote, had repulsed many attacks by the Arab slavers and were not interested in Islam. The chief had been very interested in tools for farming and carpentry. They knew there was a God, Said-Aga had said, but they had never seen him, and did not know how to pray to him. Chief Said-Aga came three times to see Comboni who asked to be kept informed of the wishes of the Nubians. He promised to begin work among them as soon as possible and hoped to be able to find some of their children who had been held as slaves.

In his letter to Cardinal Barnabò, Comboni commented that, although the British had abolished the slave-trade, the

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law was a dead letter. The slave-trade was very much alive in Central Africa.

Writing to the director of the 'Society of the Holy Child' in France, Comboni listed his own efforts against slavery: two colleges in Cairo where young people were taught the faith, the arts and agricultural skills, two houses in Khar-toum, and two foundations in El Obeid which had a population of one hundred thousand of whom two-thirds were slaves.

In the same letter Comboni asked for money to build solid houses because "all my efforts are to strengthen these Missions where we prepare people from the tribes of the interior so that they become Apostles of the Faith in their own country". He also pointed out that many children were orphaned by the slave-trade, and many mothers and children fled to the Missions for protection from their masters. Money was needed to pay for materials and a builder to provide proper housing for them. He went on to point out that during the last five years his colleges had already trained fifty-four people ready to work in the interior, and this was in a country where people had never heard the Word of God until recently. In conclusion, he repeated that the missionaries were ready to die a thousand times for the salvation of their people. Their war-cry would always be 'Africa or Death', and with the grace of God they would be faithful to this.

In March 1876, Comboni returned to Europe to raise further funds and to defend himself against certain accusations which his colleague, Fr. Stanislao Carcereri, had made against him. Very briefly, these accusations were that Comboni had not taken proper care of his missionaries and had wasted money. The outcome of a lengthy investigation

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was that Comboni was cleared of the charges made against him and, as a sign of Rome's confidence in him, he was ordained Bishop of Central Africa in August 1877.

Famine Strikes

In December 1877 Bishop Comboni returned to Africa on his seventh missionary journey. As he left Cairo for the Sudan he wrote: "This evening we will leave Cairo on a large river boat. Everybody is praying for us and I trust in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary that this time we'll fight a successful war against evil and plant the Cross in many places. God's works are all born at the foot of Calvary. I am ready to suffer anything for his glory: Africa must be saved".

Again, it was a long, difficult journey: "It is already forty-five days since I left Cairo with a great caravan. The journey by boat was difficult, and now I am on the borders of the Great Desert of Atmur. I really need at least a hundred camels and there are only a few which are hungry and tired because this year not a single drop of rain has fallen. As a result, the Nile is very low so there is famine. There is another month and a half to go before I get my first stop at Khartoum. On top of all this, we need forty camels to carry a load which twenty usually carry because being weak they carry less".

Comboni went on to say in his letter: "I am in the worst straits in the world: double effort, double expense, double danger and double uncertainty. I am writing to you under the shade of a huge acacia tree which is our palatial residence! Three yards from the packing-case that I am writing on the temperature is forty-five degrees. The priests, the five sisters, the brothers and myself are all in the hands of God, of Mary and of good Saint Joseph. We have all abandoned

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ourselves to God's Providence".

By the time Comboni reached Khartoum the famine had got worse and relieving it became his main task. So, he reported to Rome: "Nearly all my activity is now directed to bearing, as a true apostle of Jesus Christ, the terrible tragedy, the horrific suffering that has invaded the Vicariate. I mean the famine, the drought and the complete lack of everything, and I am trying to deal with the results. But the works of God must be born and grow at the foot of Calvary. Our present troubles are a further proof that the work for the regeneration of Africa is God's work. Faced with these calamities, disasters and difficulties we don't allow our hearts to be discouraged because the Cross is the royal road to victory".

Despite these setbacks Comboni hoped to open a Mission near the Great Lakes in Uganda. However, Rome informed him that the area had been handed over to Cardinal Lavigerie and his missionaries, the White Fathers. Comboni greatly admired Lavigerie but he did not fully agree with this decision and said so quite clearly in a letter to Rome: "Your Eminence and the Sacred Congregation have, in my humble opinion, made a real blunder in giving Bishop Lavigerie four large areas which he will not be able to do justice to. The Congregation has been just a little too hasty in taking action and, with the holiest of motives, has allowed that wise consideration and maturity of judgment which is its usual characteristic to go by the board".

The famine began to affect the missionaries and several died as Comboni reported to Bishop Canossa in Verona: "What more than anything else filled my spirit with deep affliction and sorrow, to the point of nearly dying of anguish and grief, was the torment which lack of resources,

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disease and death inflicted on the active personnel of the Mission. In all these fierce trials we were inspired to stand firm in our holy vocation and to persevere more than ever with our war cry, 'Africa or Death' ". Writing to Rome during the same period he said: "I am writing only a few lines because I am worn out by fevers, difficulties, fatigue and a heavy heart. Although I am physically exhausted, by the grace of the Heart of Jesus my spirit holds firmly on. I am determined, as I have been for these last thirty years (since 1849) to suffer everything and give my whole life a thousand times for Central Africa". Here Comboni was recalling the promise he made in front of Mazza when he was seventeen years old. Utterly worn out by his work, Comboni was forced to return to Europe in May 1879. In leaving, he was not abandoning his colleagues; he was the only one left in Khartoum.

During this time in Europe, Comboni gave attention to recovering his health, putting his two Institutes on a sounder footing, and visiting his supporters. He gave talks in Paris and Cologne in which he spoke of three main difficulties for missionaries in Central Africa: long, hazardous journeys, tropical diseases, and the problem of many different languages. He was also able to obtain an audience with Pope Leo XIII and present to him five sisters from his Institute who were leaving for Africa.

Last Journey

Having regained some of his strength, Comboni embarked on his eighth and last missionary journey in November 1880. This final year of Comboni's life was spent in almost ceaseless travel, much of it in connection with halting the slave-trade. He had finally been able to open a Mission

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The first five Comboni Missionary Sisters to leave for Africa: Comboni was profoundly convinced of the irreplaceable role of women in the Mission of the Church.

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Station at Delen among the Nubians. From there he wrote that, "at Gebel Nuba together with my companions, I was able to do great work, not only for the Mission Station but also for the abolition of the slave trade". (He had been able to get the government to place one hundred soldiers there to protect the people.) Whilst in the area Comboni surveyed the Nuba Mountains with a view to finding the most suitable places for new Mission Stations.

During these travels, Comboni became ill with a fever that he was unable to shake off. He was very worried about the situation of his two Institutes in Verona, both of which were going through difficult times. Their main problem was to find Superiors who understood the problems of working in Africa. He wrote to the Rector of the Seminary in Verona: "Jesus carried the first Cross, and we his followers carry it also. At night (I hardly sleep at all, though last night I slept for three and a half hours) I find myself content to have suffered a lot during the previous twenty-four hours, more content than the times when I returned home in the evening from a great dinner in London, Paris, Vienna or St. Petersburg".

In these final months of his life Comboni was the subject of many false accusations in Europe. These were linked to a house which he had bought for the Sisters, and to his stout defence of a Syrian, Virginia Mansur, who was a postulant with the Sisters. This woman, who had already worked for twenty years as a missionary, had asked to join Comboni's Institute when her own Order withdrew from the Sudan. She had been sent to Verona where she taught Arabic. Because of her competence in her own language and because of her long missionary experience, she became the object of great jealousy. From the Sudan Comboni defended her

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Bishop Daniel Comboni towards the end of his life. He died in Khartoum at the age of only fifty, physically worn out but full of hope for the future of the African Mission. The Cross, he was to say, when borne with faith, brings victory.

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and this provoked such opposition to him that he became increasingly unwell.

On October 3rd 1881, Comboni wrote to the Rector of the Seminary: "I was right when I gave orders for the cat-falque to be left intact after the Requiem Mass following the three deaths I mentioned in my last letter. This morning the Lay Brother Paul Scandi from Rome died of typhoid fever, and as I write Fr. Francesco Pimazzoni has asked me for the Last Rites. Not only that, but my very good Vicar-General took to his bed with fever immediately after the Brother's funeral. But God's works have always been born and grow like this; the Church was founded in the blood of the God-made-Man, and of the Apostles and Martyrs. All the Catholic Missions in the world which have borne fruit have done so in the midst of death, of sacrifice and in the shade of the saving tree of the Cross".

Comboni's Vicar-General died on October 9th, and on the following day the Bishop went to console the Sisters. Later that same morning Comboni himself was again attacked by fever. He knew that his life was coming to an end. But he still had some brief moments of consciousness when he audibly pronounced short prayers. Shortly before he died, he called to his bedside the few remaining Missionary Fathers, Brothers and Sisters and said: "I am dying but this work (the African Mission) will not die ... The works of God are always born at the foot of the Cross". He received the Last Rites and died at ten o'clock in the evening. He was only fifty years of age.

11. Dream Fulfilled

Shortly after going to Africa for the first time in 1857, Comboni had written to his father saying: "Our lives are in God's hands; he does what he wants; by an irrevocable gift we have sacrificed our lives to him. Blessed is he. Here, from morning to evening, people are dying. Here there is no time to prepare oneself for death: you have always to be ready. In just a few hours a fever can reduce you to the very last of your strength and bring you to the edge of the grave". Comboni's dream was fulfilled; he was in Africa. At the same time his other dream of martyrdom was also being fulfilled particularly in the sense of being ready for death.

For Comboni the themes of mission, consecration, and martyrdom were closely connected. In the Rule which he produced for his Institute in 1871, he wrote that the Members needed "a strong desire to consecrate themselves to God for the regeneration of Africa". In the same Rule he also wrote: "No one will be admitted to the Institute who is not considered ready to consecrate himself totally and until death for the work of the regeneration of Africa". Comboni was not seeking suffering and martyrdom for its own sake but for the sake of the regeneration of Africa.

For Comboni the missionary was a person who works "for God, for the most abandoned on earth, for eternity". In his Rule Comboni wanted a missionary to be "filled with the love of God", so that "in faith he can contemplate

the work for which he spends himself", and is then able to accept even martyrdom.

Seeing another reality

In the passage above the key-words are "eternity", "love of God", "contemplate", and "in faith". Speaking of "eternity", Comboni is not suggesting that the missionary is working to gain heaven. Rather, the missionary is working with God who still creates, "making all things new" (Apoc. 21:5). The missionary continues the work of evangelisation and the process of change towards a different world which began long ago and which will continue after his death. The missionary helps people to sense and experience for themselves the love of God which has existed from eternity. Comboni means also that poverty and slavery are not meant to be. There is another aspect of reality: the plan and love of God working in all peoples, in all places, and in all times. The missionary works in difficult situations, risks death and martyrdom because he is dedicated to making this other reality come alive here and now.

Sensing and Trusting the Love of God

In speaking of 'the love of God', Comboni has in mind his own experience of that love. Comboni could not have done what he did, and endured what he did, without a deep-felt sense of being loved and kept safe by God. The way in which he makes this clear is that he never felt abandoned by God. He felt that "our life, the life of a missionary, is a mixture of pain and pleasure, of anxieties and hope, of sorrows and consolations. We work with our hands and our head. We travel on foot and by canoe. We study. We suffer. We enjoy ourselves. All this is what Providence wants for

us". For Comboni it was safe to entrust, to consecrate, his life to God. He was "happy to adore in perfect resignation the dispositions of Providence". Even when faced with the enormous problems of famine in the Sudan in the Nineteenth Century when there were not the relief agencies of today, when he was misunderstood and bitterly criticised by those in Europe, Comboni felt the pain but still felt able to trust God. He felt safe in God's hands.

Comboni's experience of the love of God, this sense of providence, was not so much the feeling that God was going to provide; it was much more the feeling of the Lord being there with him. In the suffering that he experienced because of the personal attacks that were made against him, he shared with the Psalmist the sense that "the Lord is close to the broken-hearted" (Psalm 33). Comboni did not expect Providence to protect him from being broken-hearted, but, again with the Psalmist, he felt that "the Angel of the Lord is encamped around those who revere him" (Psalm 27).

Between Gethsemane and Calvary, Jesus felt isolated and alone, but deep within himself he trusted that his Father was protecting him. Likewise, in his life, Comboni could not see the outcome of his efforts, but he hoped, and trusted the memory of when he had felt the Lord close to him and encamped around him.

No matter what happened to him, Comboni never felt abandoned by the Lord. Through his sense of providence he felt God's love and was aware of another dimension to life, his sufferings and his trials; that is, he was aware of God's presence and action. All this was based on his ability to see God in the events of his life. This is part of what Comboni means by 'contemplate': to look at events, hap-

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penings and find God there. This way of looking at things began when Comboni gave himself time to contemplate the lake, the mountains and the stars, and allowed his own desires to rise within him. Comboni's deepest desire was to do something about the terrible situation of slavery, cruelty and oppression in Africa, and to do something about this in partnership with the Lord. Hence, he was able to accept anything which enabled him to fulfill this, his own true desire. Once this had become clear to him, Comboni was able to contemplate, to look at every event in the light of what he and the Lord wanted to do together in Africa. Comboni always signed himself as an 'Apostolic Missionary', seeing himself as sent to do something about suffering in Africa. It was his deepest desire to change things by bringing the Gospel to life there. He lived a very active life, yet he was also a contemplative who sought to be where the Lord wanted him to be. Comboni found the Lord by being true to his own deepest desires, and by following opportunities to bring those desires to reality in Africa.

In faith: Life after Death

Central to the life of Comboni is the fact that he was influential to a much greater extent after his death. This forms part of what he meant by saying the missionary looks "in faith" at the work he does. Comboni felt that "God wants the *Plan* in order to lay the foundations for other things". His work was like the mustard seed which will always produce great fruit being cared for by "the divine vinedresser who will defend it and cover it with the shield of his protection".

Despite difficulties and setbacks Comboni had great confidence in God and was convinced that his work would

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bear fruit in the future. After his death, though, there was little to show for his work: a small society of missionary sisters, two colleges in Cairo, a seminary in Verona without a competent rector. And soon after Comboni's death all the Missions in the Sudan were destroyed when a rebellion broke out led by a Moslem prophet known as 'Al Mahdi'. However, in 1864, shortly after his experience in St. Peter's, Comboni had written: "The work must be Catholic, not just Spanish, French, German or Italian. The Catholic world must help Africa; all Catholics must help the Africans". This desire is fulfilled today by the nearly four thousand Comboni Missionaries, priests, brothers, sisters and lay people, drawn from forty-four different nationalities and working in fifty countries over five Continents.

Comboni's greatest achievement was to make the needs of Africa known in his own day. He wanted the voice of those held in slavery to be heard by the Church and by the whole world. This desire is continued in the Comboni Missionaries today. Like the Apostles who were sent by the Holy Spirit from the Cenacle, the Upper Room in Jerusalem, to make the Resurrection of Jesus known throughout the world, so Comboni wanted his missionaries to form "small Cenacles of Apostles" sent to make the Risen Lord known in situations of oppression and slavery.

Comboni clearly saw missionary life as being very demanding and he recognised the suffering which came with it. His goal, though, was always the Regeneration of Africa, and not suffering for its own sake. From his earliest dreams in Verona, Comboni had a sense of the Lord working in his life and being present with him. He had also a great capacity for enjoying life. Thus in 1865, shortly after his experience in Rome, he wrote of "ten delightful days which I have

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spent on the river Rhine" ... "In cheerful and light-hearted company, with good bottles, excellent beer, among very cordial hearts". Comboni would have expected such enjoyment of life to be part of his following the Lord and to be part of the life of his "small Cenacles of Apostles".

Comboni's joy in following the Lord remained with him until the end of his life when, although he still experienced a lot of sorrow and pain, he was able to look back and write: "I am rather glad that for the sake of Africa, I have been made a sharer in the Passion of Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life".

12. From Beatification to Canonization

When I get to heaven ...

Bishop Daniel Comboni was beatified on March 17th 1996, and canonized on October 5th 2003. Both occasions took place at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome - precisely the place where St. Daniel had received the great inspiration that became his *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* - and both solemn declarations were made by the late Pope St John Paul II, who, they say, had been very deeply impressed by witnessing first-hand the fruits of Comboni's life and work when he visited Khartoum early in 1992. That day, a huge crowd had gathered to celebrate Mass with the Pope, despite the deeply unfavourable social and political situation in the Sudan, and they had left St. John Paul in no doubt about their love for the one they considered their Father in the Faith.

During his busy life, Daniel Comboni never lost sight of the goal of all his journeyings: "When I get to heaven," he used to repeat to his Missionaries, adding for good measure, "and I mean to get there". Yet the heaven Comboni longed for was a Missionary's heaven - a place and a time for deepening the friendships he had so valued in the missionary endeavour on earth, and for continuing to take an active part in that very ongoing endeavour. "I will continue to bother Jesus and Mary," he would say, "so that they con-

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tinue to raise up great missionary vocations, new Pauls and Francis Xaviers, for the Church today”.

The circumstances of St. Daniel’s Beatification and Canonization – both of them the solemn affirmation by the Church’s supreme teaching authority that he had in fact “got to heaven” – beautifully expressed God’s loving blessing on, and pleasure in, this great man’s work.

Comboni had always insisted on the importance of the co-operation of all in the missionary task: he never wanted to be a one-man band. It was surely, then, no accident that he was beatified in the company of Bishop Guido Maria Conforti, Founder of the Xaverian Missionaries and supporter of the cause of Comboni’s Canonisation, and then canonized together with Arnold Janssen, Founder of the Divine Word Missionaries and personal friend of Comboni, and Josef Freinademetz, one of Janssen’s first disciples and courageous missionary to China.

At the heart of Comboni’s missionary passion, there was the burning conviction that the Gospel is for all women and men everywhere. The two miracles which confirmed, first, his Beatification and then, soon after, his Canonization spoke volumes in this sense. For the former, there was the cure of a young woman of African descent in Brazil, and for the latter - perhaps even more striking - the healing of a Moslem woman receiving treatment in the maternity hospital run by the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Khartoum, where St. Daniel had lived and died. These cures made very evident what Comboni was - and is - praying for from his place in heaven.

As is the custom, during the days of Comboni’s Beatification and Canonization a large tapestry with his portrait hung from the loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica. So many years

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before, he had emerged from this very building, rushed back to his lodgings and spent sixty consecutive hours writing his *Plan*. Pope John Paul's solemn declarations in 1996 and 2003 provided the assurance that indeed St. Daniel Comboni had seen well what was to be done, and had left us a road-map still able to guide and direct us for the Mission of the future.

13. Bishop Daniel Comboni (1831-1881)

- March 15th 1831 Daniel Comboni is born at Limone sul Garda (Northern Italy).
- February 20th 1843 Enters Father Nicola Mazza's College in Verona founded to "assist and educate poor young boys".
- January 6th 1849 Vows in the presence of Father Nicola Mazza to consecrate himself to the Missions of Central Africa for the rest of his life.
- December 31st 1854 Priestly Ordination.
- September 10th 1857 First journey of Daniel Comboni to Central Africa.
- September 15th 1864 While praying near the tomb of St. Peter in Rome, he conceives the *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*.
- June 1st 1867 Comboni founds in Verona the *Institute of the Good Shepherd for the Regeneration of Africa* (later to be known as the 'Comboni Missionaries').

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- June 24th 1870 Prepares a document to be presented to the Fathers of the First Vatican Council: *Postulatum pro Nigris Africae Centralis*.
- January 1st 1872 Comboni founds the *Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia* (later to be known as the 'Comboni Missionary Sisters') in Verona. In the same month he starts his missionary magazine: *The Annals of the Good Shepherd*.
- May 26th 1872 Nominated Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa.
- September 14th 1873 In El Obeid Comboni consecrates the Vicariate to the Sacred Heart.
- August 12th 1877 Consecrated First Bishop of Central Africa.
- May 12th 1878 Comboni begins his appeal to the Catholic Faithful in Europe on behalf of the Sudan which was suffering from a devastating famine.
- November 8th 1879 Organises an international group of Missionaries and sends them to Africa from Verona.
- October 10th 1881 Comboni dies at ten o'clock in the evening in Khartoum, surrounded by his Missionaries. His tomb is subsequently desecrated by the Mahdists in 1885.

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- February 14th 1928 The Diocesan Cause for the Canonization of Bishop Daniel Comboni is introduced in Verona.
- January 6th 1969 The Holy See recognises a third Institute inspired by the spirituality of Comboni: the 'Comboni Secular Missionaries'.
- October 25th 1970 The miraculous cure of a Brazilian girl, Maria Jose Oliveira Paixao, is attributed to the intercession of Daniel Comboni.
- April 4th 1995 Pope John Paul II signs the Decree that officially recognises the miracle attributed to the intercession of Daniel Comboni.
- March 17th 1996 The Solemn Beatification of Bishop Daniel Comboni takes place in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.
- April 11th 2002 The Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints declares that the cure of a Muslim lady, Lubna Abdel Aziz in Khartoum, is scientifically unexplainable and is attributable to the intercession of Blessed Daniel Comboni.
- October 5th 2003 Comboni is canonised by Pope St. John Paul II in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The Comboni Missionaries Today

Presently almost four thousand Comboni Missionaries, priests, brothers, sisters and lay people drawn from forty-four different nationalities and working in fifty countries over five Continents, bring the Good News of the Gospel to the 'poorest and most abandoned of the earth'.

Saint Daniel Comboni (1831-1881) founded the Comboni Missionaries for Priests and Brothers in 1867 and for Sisters in 1872. Inspired by the Gospel, the Members live in Community and practice life-long Religious Vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Their aims are:

- To bear witness to the love of God for all, as experienced in Jesus Christ;
- To proclaim the Gospel of Christ to those who have not heard it;
- To foster - according to Gospel values - justice, peace and the integrity of creation worldwide;
- To serve and support young Churches, particularly in Africa, as they grow and mature;
- To promote awareness of the missionary work of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in Africa, Latin America and Asia;

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- To promote the missionary vocation in all its forms;
and
- To promote missionary partnership among our supporters and friends.

Prayer for Missionaries

Heavenly Father, since the harvest is great and the labourers are few, you have called us, too, to work in your vineyard alongside your Missionaries.

You have chosen us to be the support and strength of those who preach the Gospel and day by day we ask you to bless and protect them.

Grant our Missionaries a zeal for your Kingdom which will enable them to remain faithful to their noble calling. Enrich them in their poverty, love them in their chastity and lighten their hearts in obedience to you. Bless, too, the people among whom they live and work.

We pray especially for elderly, sick and retired Missionaries. Be the strength of their frailty and the joy of their old age.

Through the intercession of Saint Daniel Comboni raise up new vocations for the Missions: men and women of our time who are ready to offer their lives in witnessing and announcing Christ to all those who do not yet know Him.

Guide us all with your Spirit during the heat of the day, so that, in the evening of our lives, united with you and with the Missionaries we have taken to our hearts, we may at last receive the reward of our labours and rejoice forever in your presence among the blessed in Heaven.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father ...

Comboni Mission Magazine

All the baptized - albeit in different ways - are called to share in the work of the Missions. It is, as Saint Daniel Comboni well understood, a venture that requires the involvement of all the Members of the Church. Today, the need is, if anything, even greater.

The many projects that 'frontier' Missionaries, such as the Comboni Missionaries, undertake - building churches and chapels, training Catechists, preparing Local Clergy and Religious, building and running clinics, hospitals, schools and colleges - are undertaken in the name of our shared faith. We therefore commend our ministry and our work to your spiritual and material support.

Our magazine *Comboni Mission* is intended to keep our friends informed and involved in the missionary work of the Church: of carrying out the Mission entrusted by Christ to the Apostles by bringing the Good News of God's Kingdom to the four corners of the world. You may contact us at any of the addresses overleaf:

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Visit our UK-based websites



www.combonimissionaries.co.uk



www.southworld.net



www.comboniyouth.org



'A Heart for Africa' is a brief account of the life of Daniel Comboni, the first Bishop of Central Africa and Founder of the Comboni Missionaries and the Comboni Missionary Sisters, who was canonised at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on October 5th 2003 in recognition of his decisive role in bringing the Gospel to sub-Saharan Africa in the second half of the Nineteenth Century.

As the newly-appointed Bishop of Central Africa, Daniel Comboni, declared in his first homily in Khartoum, "Day and night, sun and rain, I shall always be ready to serve your needs ... Your good shall be mine, and your sufferings shall be mine too ... I make common cause with you and the happiest day of my life will be when I can lay down my life for you". Comboni made himself all things to all people so that everyone should have the opportunity of hearing the Good News.

A couple of months before his death on October 10th 1881 at just fifty years of age, Comboni wrote, "The only thing that matters to me - and this has been the only true passion of my entire life, and it will always be until my death - the only thing that matters to me is that Africa should hear the Gospel".

Cover photograph

The portrait of St. Daniel Comboni that was displayed on the large tapestry hung from the Central Loggia of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome during the Canonization Ceremony presided over by the late Pope John Paul II on October 5th 2003.