

COMBONI MISSIONARIES

A SIGN FOR THE TIMES

Who they are and What they do



Comboni Missionary Publications
United Kingdom and Ireland

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A Sign for The Times

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UNITED KINGDOM AND IRELAND

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Introduction

Comboni Missionaries: Being 'A Sign for the Times'

Khartoum - 1881. It is the night of October 9th and Monsignor Daniel Comboni, the first Bishop of Central Africa, lies in the grip of a severe tropical fever. He knows that his life is coming to an end – this same fever had claimed the lives of many of his Missionaries in only a few short years. Only brief moments of consciousness remain to him. He murmurs some short and barely audible prayers and calls to his bedside the few remaining Fathers and Sisters. "I am dying", he says, "but the work of the African Mission will not die ... The works of God are always born at the foot of the Cross". Comboni knew that this work could not die because it was the work of God. He died the following morning. He was only fifty years old.

Seventeen years earlier, on September 15th 1864, he had been kneeling at the tomb of St. Peter in Rome when he received an inspiration for what he called 'The Plan'. "It was a revelation from on high", he would say to all who read it. 'A Plan for the Regeneration of Africa'. It could be

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summed up in a few words – ‘Save Africa with Africa’. But others were convinced that now was the moment to close the Mission to Central Africa, not to re-launch it. It had already cost the lives of sixty-four young Missionaries. ‘Wait for more auspicious times’ was the conventional wisdom of the day. Pope Pius IX, however, did not agree. He approved ‘The Plan’ and supported it, so that “the most difficult Mission in all the world” as Comboni boldly described it, was once again launched with renewed commitment and fervour. Where could Missionaries be found who would be ready to leave for those lands at the ends of the earth? Comboni’s answer was simple: “Among the priests, religious and laity of the entire Catholic Church. The Universal Church must, as it were, lay siege to Africa in order to gain that unfortunate Continent for Christ”. In response, the Head of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò said to the ‘mad prophet’: “Either you bring me a medical certificate guaranteeing that you will not die in the next forty years, or else you must establish an Institute that will carry out your Plan”.

And so it was. On June 1st 1867 the ‘Institute for the African Missions’ was founded for men, and the ‘Institute for the Missionary Sisters of Africa’ followed in 1872 to promote the role and development of women in African society. From these two Institutes, or ‘Cenacles of Apostles’, as Comboni liked to call them, Missionaries would emerge, ready to give their lives, so that the ‘Black Pearl’ (*Nigricans Margarita*) could be set in the diadem of the Universal Church. In 1885, four years after the death of Comboni, the ‘Institute for the African Missions’ became a Religious Congregation like the Missionary Sisters and so

began the dynamic and fruitful journey of the Missionary Family that is proud to bear his name and continue his work down to the present day. Remaining faithful to the original inspiration, the Followers of Comboni have adapted to ever-changing situations and responded to many invitations from the Church. But one thing has never changed – they remain on the side of the ‘poorest and most abandoned’.

Today the Comboni Missionaries, with Members drawn from forty-four different nationalities, work in fifty countries over five Continents.

Their Mission is defined by four key characteristics:

- They are sent ‘*ad gentes*’ – to those peoples who have not yet effectively heard the Gospel of Christ.

- They have a ‘*preferential option for the poor*’ – in the sense that they focus on the least, the last and the lost in society.

- They are Missionaries ‘*ad extra*’ – which means that they leave their own cultures and countries in order to preach the Gospel of Christ further afield.

- Finally, they are Missionaries ‘*ad vitam*’ – in that they consecrate themselves to God and the Mission for the whole of their lives.

The Comboni Missionaries are present in countries with areas of ‘Primary Evangelisation’ where the Gospel has never been preached. They also go to the places that are the most remote socially or geographically. This might include the suburbs of large cities such as Nairobi, Kinshasa and Khartoum or Lima, Mexico City and São Paulo. They have hundreds of Members who live among nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples such as the

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Karamojong in Uganda and the Turkana in Kenya. They also live among ethnic minorities threatened with extinction, such as the Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. Wherever they go they support social movements that work for the dignity of the peoples they live amongst. These might be people of African descent or Indigenous Peoples living in Brazil, Ecuador and the United States, or the landless whose rights they champion through working alongside Organisations that are committed to the dispossessed in society.

The Comboni Missionaries pay special attention to the academic and professional education of the young, by coordinating dozens of schools on the outskirts of cities and in villages across Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pastorally their emphasis is on creating and sustaining 'Basic Christian Communities' that can evangelise and live out a new way of being 'Church'. Following the inspiration of their Founder, they have established centres of biblical, theological, professional and social studies in Africa and in Latin American to train local 'Pastoral Agents' in the field of evangelisation and human development. In this way, they aim to collaborate in making Local Churches ever more autonomous: capable of self-administration and even of reaching out to Churches in other lands, thus fulfilling Comboni's vision of being able to 'Save Africa with Africa'.

The Comboni Missionaries are much involved in the world of social communication. At present they produce twenty-four Missionary Magazines on all five continents and also have a growing presence in Social Media. In a world that is divided by war and dominated by a globali-

sation that often seeks to exclude the poor, the Comboni Missionaries wish to confirm their commitment to the downtrodden of the earth. They are aware that they are the heirs of Comboni who was passionately involved in struggling against slavery and the slave trade, in the face of the rich and powerful, who saw him as being 'out of his mind'. The Comboni Missionaries endeavour to put 'first' those whom the world regard as 'last'. In their commitment to 'Justice and Peace' and the 'Integrity of Creation', they aim to be signs and instruments of contradiction, whilst knowing full well that the cost of such a determined stand may well be persecution or even martyrdom.

Fr Martin Devenish mccj
Provincial Superior

1. South Sudan: Living the Present with Passion

A young Ugandan Comboni Missionary talks about his pastoral activities in one of the remotest Missions in South Sudan.

Our Mission in Old Fangak is located in the northern part of Jonglie State under the Diocese of Malakal and is the remotest Comboni Mission in the whole of South Sudan. There are no roads, no vehicles, no motorcycles and no bicycles. There is also no mobile phone network.

Being a remote place, Old Fangak has become the safest place since the beginning of the current conflict in South Sudan and many people have taken refuge in the area. This has meant a tripling of the local population. We live among pastoralists – the ‘Nuer’, who call themselves ‘Naath’, meaning ‘The People’.

Our lives are dedicated to caring for the different Communities in and around Old Fangak, fostering education, women’s rights and empowering local people to build a better future for themselves. From the centre, we cover an area of between thirty to forty thousand square kilometres and all our pastoral visits are made on foot. It takes four to five days to reach the farthest Communities in Ayod.

Most of the pastoral outreach is made possible through the catechists who stay in the villages. They are the ones

keeping the Christian Communities together and sustaining their faith.

About ninety-eight per cent of the population in the area can neither read nor write. Since the start of the present conflict in December 2013, the only functioning primary schools in the whole region are the three in which we are lending a hand.

The conflict continues and our region is under the control of the rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (S.P.L.M./I.O.). It is very hard. Although the rebels respect us as Missionaries, we cannot perform our activities with complete freedom, since we are constantly being monitored. Given the military intervention by Uganda in the conflict, my presence here as a Ugandan is particularly risky. I have to be very prudent in what I say.

The conflict that has emerged in South Sudan is but a continuation of the unresolved ethnic tensions there that were never adequately addressed by the so-called 'Comprehensive Peace Agreement' (C.P.A.). Contrary to its name, the C.P.A. was an elitist bargain between Sudan's ruling 'National Congress Party' and the strongest element of the resistance in South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (S.P.L.M./A.). It was not comprehensive at all, because it did not include the other political parties, all the other groups of rebels and, most importantly, the people of South Sudan.

It was simply an agreement between the S.P.L.M./A. and the Government in Khartoum. There was no proper process of integration of the rebel militias into a single national army. Many soldiers remained loyal to their leaders so that when the current conflict re-ignited, they re-

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grouped very quickly under their original, tribal leadership. With the rainy season well underway and the fact that peace negotiations have not made any tangible progress, the conflict has settled into a stalemate.

According to the latest reports of the United Nations, hundreds of thousands have died in the fighting, nearly two million people have become refugees in neighbouring countries and over two million have been internally displaced.

Every day, in our Mission in Old Fangak, we hear the sound of gunfire. People are living in fear, not knowing what will happen even tomorrow.

There are many child soldiers in the rebel militia and in the Army. Recently, over one thousand five hundred children were recruited by the S.P.L.M./I.O. from our own area alone.

The conflict has made basic commodities very hard to come by. The only practical means of transport – travelling by boat along the Nile to neighbouring towns – has been cut off. This, together with the sharp devaluation of the local currency, makes it almost impossible to buy such basic commodities as salt, oil, sugar, soap and clothes.

There used to be two other Comboni Missionary Communities among the Nuer, in Ayod and in Leer. Unfortunately, however, last year Ayod was captured by government forces from Juba and the entire population fled. The two elderly missionaries there fled with the local people, and are now in Mogok, where they are assisting the displaced by running an emergency school. The Leer Mission in Unity State is located near the birthplace of the leader of the S.P.L.M./I.O. and was closed last year because

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it was attacked and looted in succession by government forces and by the rebels. The four Comboni Missionaries and three Comboni Missionary Sisters in Leer were forced to flee into the bush where they stayed for almost a month until they were rescued by United Nation Peacekeepers and evacuated to the capital, Juba. Only recently have they been able to resume some of their missionary activities around Leer.

Our life in this challenging mission field reminds me of the words of Pope Francis, who said in his recent Letter to Religious for the 'Year of Consecrated Life': "Remember the past with gratitude, embrace the future with hope, and live in the present with passion".

Father Alfred Mawadri mccj

2. The Arab World: Choices in Life

An Anglo-Egyptian Comboni Missionary, who has been working in the Arab world for the last twenty-five years, talks about the influences in his life and his experience of working among Christians and Muslims.

Growing up in Kuwait and in Lebanon in my early childhood, I liked to conjure up images of my native Egypt – to see in my mind the great magnificence of the Pharaohs and the ancient beauty of Coptic Christianity.

The picture I forged of Egypt, inspired by the literature of ancient history and my visits to museums and exhibitions, gave me a sense of great pride and self-confidence around my identity.

An opportune contact in London made it possible for my father to take me and my two younger brothers to England on the eve of the Lebanese civil war. And so I became a teenager in 1970's Britain, growing up with the music of Simon and Garfunkel, Carly Simon and Abba. I combined these influences with a passion for science and technology which in the end led to a certain, creative, discontent in me. For it was the systematic analysis of the scientific disciplines that led to my quest for meaning in life and in the music of 'The Sound of Silence', I pondered the purpose of my being.

The quest for meaning and God's design

As I sought for meaning in solitude, I came to realise that my heritage was not to be the source of my significance in life, but was rather a call to a new destiny. I saw that Christ himself had been an itinerant in foreign lands and it was on this fabric that God had drawn his design for me. I became a Catholic Missionary with an Arab background.

Sudan and Egypt were obvious destinations. Sudan had been a former British Colony and Egypt a British Protectorate. As a joint British and Egyptian passport holder I was able to acquire my visas to these countries with ease, whilst others had to wait for years at a time. It was as if God had designed me for the purpose of being sent into these Islamic lands.

In the popular imagination, Arabs and Muslims are often seen as the same thing. What then could be the use of preaching to Muslims or to Arabs? Although it is true that Sudan and Egypt are Islamic States, there are, in both countries, significant Christian minorities. It is our mission both to care for those Christians and to witness to the Muslim majorities through the health-care and the education we provide.

Proselytising or Conversion?

While humanitarian aid does address the needs of people who are on the edge of survival, it cannot by its very nature create a self-sustaining society. For fourteen years in Sudan emergency after emergency occurred and this fact dug an ever deeper pit of dependence and of poverty. With aid as bait, state-sponsored Islamic proselytising spread swiftly through the country and indeed throughout much of sub-

Saharan Africa.

Notwithstanding this and the fact that there is a legal ban on conversion to Christianity in Sudan, Sudanese from the South have embraced Christianity regardless of the persecution and discrimination. The joy of converts amidst misery and oppression has been a repeated miracle. I witnessed unconditional joy in their laughter, in their singing and in their dancing – as pure as it was spontaneous.

This exuberant delight does not come from owning possessions, but rather from their sense of belonging to God and to each other. Their wealth is their community, so that even when dispersed, they find each other and when they come together, they sing and they dance.

Where we missionaries speak of sharing and teach about the 'common good', they live this before they have even given it a name.

However there are elements of their cultural heritage that impede the spread of Christianity: tribal adherence and polygamous marriage, that forges alliances for generations to come, are particularly powerful forces. Christianity has other advantages – the gift of inner freedom.

The spread of Islam and democracy

Catholic education is a gift that can bring a whole new experience of understanding that choices really do exist. It is through the process of educating people in the nature of choice that I enter into a fruitful dialogue that forms the heart of my work as a missionary.

Let me explain. Islamic education differs from Catholic education in both method and content. Although a certain

degree of bias exists in every system of education, the anthropological philosophy underlying a belief-system determines its objectives. In Islam the past is seen as better than the present - the Age of the Caliphates is the model for all governance and the Abbasid Age was the peak for all science and knowledge. For Islam, obedience and submission to God supersedes human will or choice. As democracy is based on human opinion, it will always be errant in comparison to divine will as expressed in the Shari'a.

Becoming a Muslim guarantees a predestined future to being counted among the elect. A true Muslim is God's slave ('Abd Allah'), and a faithful, obedient servant to the Shari'a and to Muhammad's Practices ('Sunnat al-Rasul - the Rules of the Messenger'). Humanity is predestined by God to the reward of Paradise or condemnation to Hell. Since Islam is the ultimate religion, it abrogates what comes before it in Judaism and in Christianity. Thus the Islamic mission calls all humans to believe - to accept this ultimate truth or else be consigned to eternal damnation.

A Mission of Choices

Education and human development in Catholic anthropology on the other hand respect the human conscience, with all its limitations, for conscience is an essential part of the fabric of human dignity.

Working in the Sudan during the Sudanese referendum which led to the birth of the Republic of South Sudan (2009), and then in Egypt during the so-called 'Arab Spring' (2011), I spent much time listening to and understanding people's motivations and convictions. Sudanese and Egyptians, Arabs and black Africans alike, seek choic-

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es. Among these various groups I heard a frequently-asked question: "Are humans created to be predestined and thus merely submit to our fate, or do we in reality have choices?"

My missionary experience changed from trying to proclaim values, into asking questions and helping the people I meet to reflect on the reality of our freedom to make choices in life. I try to help them to consider that the life we live together as human beings acquires its meaning and dignity from the One who desired and created our very being. As we journey together on a quest to discover the purpose of our being, I share what I believe and how I came to discover it.

Father Paul Annis mccj

3. Chad: At the Heart of the People

A tiny group of Christians, in a predominantly Muslim environment, are determined to forge ties of friendship and dialogue in a society that still bears the wounds of thirty years of civil war. Father Filippo Ivardi mccj tells the story on behalf of the Comboni Missionary Community in Abéché.

Abéché town is on the edge of the Sahara desert in Eastern Chad. Just over one per cent of people are Christian – Catholics and Protestants – in an ‘ocean’ of Muslims.

We are three Comboni priests: Father Bernard from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Father David from the United States, and Father Filippo, from Italy, who assist in a Parish with a score of Catholic Communities spread out over four hundred thousand square kilometres. The Catholic Community furthest to the north, in Fada, is four hundred and eighty kilometres from the one furthest south, in Tissi, a place well known in these parts as the meeting-point of three borders – Chad, Sudan and the Central African Republic – as well as for the tensions between the nomadic groups that move between them.

The territory is so vast that, even four years after our arrival, we are still discovering new places and, more importantly, new Christian Communities.

It takes days of travelling to reach our Communities;

endless kilometres and hours and hours of dirt-track roads that run between the Sahara desert and the Sahel, the strip of land that goes across the continent, separating it from Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. Journeys are physically hard not only because of the jolting over rough roads but also due to having repeatedly to dig the jeep out of sand or pushing it across rivers. When you reach your destination, you are hosted in a small room attached to the chapel with a sleeping bag for a bed, or if there is no chapel in the home of a local family. We drink tea seated on a mat and talk about life, the family and the Community: joys and sorrows, dreams and setbacks. We organise meetings with the leaders to see the state of the community. We visit our people in their homes to be close to them. Without waiting for an invitation, we simply go to where they live, converse, have a glass of water and pray, and then move on to the next family.

Fruits of the Gospel

All of our Christians are from the South of the country. None of the original people of this sacred Muslim land are Christian and we are not seeking to convert them. We prefer to build bridges of friendship, encounter and collaboration. We are well aware that it is not just numbers that build up the Kingdom of God but the passion and the dreams that we have within us as we work among various ethnic groups, cultures and religions.

Among our Christians we find teachers, nurses, doctors, soldiers and students as well as many businessmen. They spend a few years with us and then move on. In an effort to ensure the continuity of our service we have learned to

work all together as a team. If anyone leaves, others take over their work.

Naturally there is the temptation for people never to fully commit themselves since they are never sure how long they will be staying on. In response we encourage people to give of themselves in the present with passion and without reserve. The 'fruits' ripen when we really commit ourselves.

Some become catechists or trainers of the youth. Some take care of the sick and the imprisoned. Others cultivate the community field, or act as custodians of the chapel library, or prepare food for meetings, courses and celebrations.

We first came to Abéché in September 2013 with Father Abakar, a Comboni priest from South Sudan, in an attempt to build a bridge across the Muslim divide and to accompany the small, isolated Christian Communities in the region. One hand we give to the Muslims, the other to the Christians. We are called to become 'salt' and 'light' in a country that is bearing the wounds of thirty years of hatred and war. Divided between Islam and the West, we try to proceed with hope.

Collaboration is our method

We have schools and cultural centres run by Christians and Muslims working together. They provide literacy classes for women and girls of all ethnic groups and religions and support small income-generating projects – a sewing business, an oil press and a restaurant.

Above all, we have friendly and respectful dialogue with our neighbours and collaborators. We have meetings with

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religious authorities on festive occasions and can celebrate the reality of young Christians and Muslims living alongside one another in peace.

All of this is possible when the Christian Communities are accompanied and encouraged to see inter-religious encounter as an opportunity for growth and development, both of the individual and of the community. It also requires confidence in God: confidence and the prayer of others that moves us to pray. This is why we give ourselves to reaching Christian Communities no matter where they are and help to train their leaders. When they are well trained and accompanied, lay people carry out wonderful work in catechesis, para-liturgies, the formation of youth, the development of schools, sustaining of cultural centres, initiating of 'Justice and Peace Committees' and undertaking dialogue with Islam.

Gazing at the one God

When we came here in 2013, we were very careful to get to know what God had done through the Jesuit Missionaries who had been there for the past sixty years, and especially through the lay people who, in very difficult places, live out their confidence in God and organise themselves into vivacious and courageous faith communities. All of them need to be visited and supported so as to feel part of a family. Despite the distances and the desert, we are the 'People of God', on a journey, faced with the great challenge of taking our Church forward at all levels. It is the lay people who organise the Communities through meetings and groups of leaders. It is they who organise Sunday prayer and, in some Communities, daily prayer. They follow up

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the youth and the elderly who wish to become Christians, they direct the choirs and readers. Importantly, they collect funds to build chapels and fences, to bring water to difficult places or to build huts for community schools.

Each Community contributes its quota to help with the fuel for our jeep. We may say that, little by little, with pride and dignity, our Christians are meeting the needs of their missionaries. They are also very happy to support their Communities. In the past, everything was provided from outside and this created an attitude of dependency rather than of self-reliance. Now, much is provided from within, and people are proud of the fact that they beginning to stand on their own two feet.

Our Communities are not composed of people who just stand around like spectators: the 'Justice and Peace Committee' of Abéché is doing everything it can to restore dignity to the young child-shepherds who look after flocks of goats, camels and cows in the surrounding arid wastes. These are the slaves of the 21st Century, stolen from their families in the South to provide prestige to the powerful in a country where those with the biggest herds are considered the most important in society.

In Chad, traffickers of children and migrants going to Libya have been arrested. We watch the slave routes and rescue children who escape from their tormentors and restore them to their families. We organise awareness meetings and endeavour to let people know their rights.

Caritas has taken over the service of prayer and accompaniment for prisoners and families in greatest difficulty, the small income-generating projects and the literacy classes for women. We want to accompany the disabled to meet

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their thirst for knowledge and their search for dignity. In all this we have at heart the dream of lending a hand to the fallen, to help them to their feet again.

The Rewnodji Women ('Good Journey Women') have organised a bank of cereal seeds to respond to the times of drought, and also a course of professional training for the youth: information technology, electricity and mechanics.

In this way, in Eastern Chad the Gospel sits well with the small Christian Communities and the encounter with Islam. It is a matter of the 'faces' and the 'stories' of people who truly want to turn a new page, to leave behind war and division and to open a new era of peaceful co-existence: the true challenge for Chad now and for the future.

Father Filippo Ivardi mccj

4. Kenya: The Missionary Dowser

He explores the sun-scorched savannah with a wooden stick in his hand. Silently, he listens for the vibrations of water. He is an Italian Comboni Missionary diviner who, for thirty-five years, has sought the life that flows beneath the ground.

He moves slowly with his forked stick in his hands, he stops, moves on again as it is not easy to achieve harmony with the vibrations of water. In the arid wastes of Turkana in Northern Kenya, the sun is already high in the sky. Brother Dario wears shorts and a t-shirt with a sun hat on his head and a pair of well-worn sandals on his feet. At last the stick begins to vibrate. He smiles. That is where they must drill. He is quite certain. There is plenty of water here.

This year, the drought affecting Kenya could become a humanitarian disaster. The shortage of rainfall has sparked episodes of violence between the groups of nomadic pastoralists who seek to access and control the meagre sources of water which are essential for human survival as well as that of their herds of goats, cattle and camels. The emergency is also affecting other countries in the area. According to the Red Cross, thirteen million people are in immediate need of humanitarian aid.

Brother Dario Laurencig, sixty-six years of age and from Friuli in Northern Italy, is well aware of what drought

means. He still remembers today how his work of water divining began in 1982, after a terrible drought had brought the local population to its knees in Western Kenya. When the humanitarian emergency was over and the aid had been distributed, Brother Dario decided to do what he could so that a shortage of water would not cause such devastation again in the future.

"I did not know how to combat drought. Wells were needed. I had not studied geology and I was no hydrologist", the missionary recounts, "However, I remembered having seen, when I was young, a shepherd in the mountains at home looking for water using a forked stick. I thought it best to gather some information about water divining and I began to practice it. I must confess that I felt strange with that stick in my hands. But gradually I realised I was developing a sensitivity that helped me find underground streams".

Water is essential for life

Thirty-five years have gone by since he first found water. Now he can claim to have provided over three hundred wells in Northern Kenya. He recently visited Sudan. "There is an emergency situation there. Already last year I was asked twice to go there to look for water. I did not go because of the civil war. The previous year I had gone there to drill a well and set up a solar pump. When I was finished, the rebels did not want to let me leave. The United Nations had to intervene to evacuate me out of there by plane."

"This year I could not refuse to go because there is a bad drought in the whole of East Africa. I found a chaotic situ-

ation. Continual attacks by government and rebel troops have caused more than three million people to flee. Many had to seek refuge in nearby countries including Kenya. In Juba, the capital, there are no supplies to be found and when there are, prices are extremely expensive. There are long queues of people waiting to buy fuel for vehicles and the roads are almost empty. Most of the shops are closed. Only a few people take the risk of trading, for fear of being robbed by the different armies and placing their lives in danger. The few workers still there are mostly immigrants since the locals have been compelled to join the army, and they take things very calmly. However, we succeeded in drilling three wells and indicating four places to drill more. Unfortunately, the only company still present in the capital city (the others have fled) has no fuel to carry out the work”.

Back in Kenya, he already had a car at the airport waiting to take him to look for more water. “I have so many requests – Brother Dario continues – that I can no longer carry out my own work. On the other hand, water is essential for life and I believe it takes priority over other commitments. Due to the drought, we have to increase our work this year”.

Over the years, Brother Dario has seen his work recognised by many NGOs, hydrologists and various drilling companies. “In reality, as a missionary, I am more than happy to see the joy on the faces of the people when water starts to flow. Water is life. I remember one place west of Lodwar in Turkana. There, fifty metres down, I found water. Soon after, the well was drilled, and it changed the lives of three hundred people. The inhabitants of the area

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no longer had to dig with their hands in dried-up river beds. They no longer had to walk for tens of kilometres under the burning sun to reach a well. And, even more importantly, they no longer had to fight over water". Brother Dario notes a small camel coming to drink at the well. "God has given me this special sensitivity of finding the life that flows underground". He has spent more than forty-two years on African soil. A life to give life by giving that most precious of commodities, water.

Father Carmine Curci mccj

5. Sudan: A Glass of Water for the Kafir

Just asking for a glass of water in a Darfur refugee camp became a source of fruitful dialogue between a Catholic and a Muslim. A Comboni Missionary from Portugal, who has been living in Darfur for over twenty years, shares his experience.

As has been happening every month for many years, on the last Friday the children leave their villages to come to the church at the Mission of Nyala. There are more than 200. It seems that the security conditions today make them believe it will be a day without danger of attacks from the armed militia, the Janjaweed.

The children have been arriving since the early hours of the morning. This day, known in the Parish as *Yom maftooh*, is dedicated to various religious, cultural and recreational activities in which children between five and ten years of age are both actors and spectators. It is one of the ways to sustain the Christian Faith in the Sudan where the Followers of Jesus are just five per cent of the population.

Yom maftooh is always a great day for the children, but also stirs all in the Parish, particularly the youth who are in charge of preparing and animating the various activities.

The first meeting of the day started as I was leaving. I was planning to visit an 'Internal Displaced Persons' (IDP)

Camp not far from Nyala. In less than a quarter of an hour, a Toyota Combi, the city's public transport, left me a kilometre away from the IDP Camp of Dreije where about eighty thousand people are trying to survive. There are more than one hundred such camps scattered across the Darfur Region in Western Sudan, an area approximately the size of Spain.

Peace be with you

The day was very hot and dry. Passing by the first shop I came to, I asked for a bottle of water. "We sell only glasses of water", said the child sheepishly on the other side of the counter. "*Kafir* ('Unbeliever')", I heard someone muttering. Although I couldn't see the person who uttered the word, he clearly wasn't far from me. It was without doubt meant to be an insult, but I thought to take it otherwise. I calmly looked around and asked: "*Kafir?* Where is he?" A man immediately appeared, getting out of the *Angareb*, the typical Sudanese hammock made of sisal ropes. After the usual *Assalamu Alaikum* greeting ('Peace be with you'), I told him politely that I had a correction to make: "I'm not a *Kafir*; I believe in Allah (God) who loves us all equally. I pray and ask Allah to bless you and your household".

The man behind the counter looked into my eyes while his bearded face acquired a grave expression: "Remember, *Khawaja* ('Foreigner'), that if you had met another Muslim instead of me, you would have been kicked out of here. However, for my part, let me tell you what is essential for us who follow the Islamic religion. Allah sent Muhammad to this earth. It was through this distinguished Arabic messenger that the world has known or will one day embrace

the majestic Islamic religion. Since then, it became clear that all other religions, those which came before and those that may come after, are not fit for the true worship of the Almighty and All-powerful”.

“Here was a human being deeply convinced of his Islamic religion whose words contrast with my Christian faith”, I thought to myself. “In spite of that, I didn’t perceive in him a proselytising or extremist attitude. My inclination was not only to show him my respect, but also give thanks to God for the peace and serenity I was experiencing at that moment in that place. I was undoubtedly in front of a good-hearted man”.

“I was forgetting”, the man added while reaching out to a large aluminium mug at the end of the counter, “we have no bottled water. I only have a *zeer* (‘earthenware pot’), which keeps the water fresh ... but I also have ice, because these summer days are very hot”. He disappeared to emerge after a few seconds with the mug almost full of water, in which he dropped two pieces of ice and offered it to me.

“*Shukran* (‘Thanks!’)”, I said as I took the mug. Then he resumed the conversation: “In the *Khalwa* (Qur’anic School), we learn things which later in life when we find someone who is not a Muslim, we repeat too easily and without thinking – as that word you heard from my mouth earlier, *Kafir*”, he said in a sort of apology. I told him not to worry because I hadn’t taken it as an offence.

“By the way, I’m sorry! I haven’t yet introduced myself: my name is Abdallah and I am from Bulbul, a village some sixty kilometres from here. There was no hunger there; it was enough to sow and till the land during the *Khareef* (‘rainy season’), and we had food for the whole family -

until one day, seven years ago, the Janjaweed came. They destroyed, killed, and burned everything. Two of my children disappeared in that bloody and diabolical attack”.

Abdallah paused briefly, trying to control his emotion, and after a while continued: “I imagined my children as fugitives and then wanderers looking for bread and security, hoping for the happy occasion to meet them again. After a few months, however, we had to surrender to the sad reality that they were of this world no longer. The pain is even greater when we can’t bury our deceased ones. We, the survivors of Bulbul, came slowly, camping here and there, until we reached the large IDP Camps on the outskirts of Nyala. In the beginning, I stayed with my family in Salam but a year later I moved to this place, where I knew most people of my clan were living. Here, it is easier to get together – to remember and relive the past”.

“Is there a purpose in remembering sad things?”, I dared to interrupt. “Yes, there is – in remembering our dead and bringing to mind the destruction, the fires and the plunder of all our property”, he answered. “Do you think we should forget the women and girls whom the Janjaweed abused and shot soon after, leaving them in a pool of blood? Those who forget, no longer live; they are as good as dead. On the contrary, recalling it allows us to live and gain new energy to fight for life”, he asserted firmly.

Abdallah continued: “Some of my displaced friends and neighbours whom I came to know in these years have already lost hope of returning to their villages of origin. As for me, I’m still not convinced that I am a displaced person and I don’t like that label being applied to me. It is true

that Darfur has become, on the world map, a dark spot where there is no security but I hope that my story will not end here”.

Come again

The loudspeakers of the nearest mosque thundered. The proclamation of the *Azan*, the call to prayer, majestically sung by the Muezzin calls to the heavens and penetrates the space around: “*Allahu Akbar* (‘God is great’)”.

It is Friday. I see some men wearing the white *Jalabia* walking towards the temple. From the shop’s interior, a woman appears with the *Ibreek* (a small, plastic watering can); she puts it on the bottom shelf and starts clearing the counter. She seemed to be a very resourceful lady and full of energy. She is accompanied by a little boy whom she helps put on the *Sirwal* (the white pants that are worn under the *Jalabia*) and teaches him how to tie the cord around his waist. The small shop is closing. It is the weekly Muslim holiday.

I notice that Abdallah, having rolled up the typical long sleeves of the *Jalabia* to the shoulders, is now doing his ablution, that is, the ritual washing before prayer. He holds the *Ibreek* in one hand and pours water on the curved palm of the other hand which he gently lifts up a bit above the elbow. Without interrupting the ritual ablution, the faithful Muslim tells me: “My friend *Khawaja*, I am not sending you away but the Muezzin has already called for prayer”.

I didn’t even let him finish talking, “*La samah Allah* (‘God forbid!’). It should not be because of me that you arrive late to the appointment of prayer in the mosque”. Taking some coins in my hand, I continued hastily, “I don’t

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want to leave without settling my account." I saw him react gently but seriously. "Do not offend me with your words", he said, while shaking the last drops of water from his hands. "When you come again, I hope to be able to offer you not only drinking water but also lunch and more time to be together. *In Sha Allah* ('God willing')", he concluded.

"*Shukran* ('Thank you!')", I answered gratefully. He shook my hand firmly. "Ah, before you leave, accept please my apologies for calling you *Khawaja* ('Foreigner'), without even asking your name". "That's no problem at all; we shall talk the next time I visit", I replied.

Father Felix Da Costa Martins mccj

6. The Democratic Republic of Congo: Mission in the Forest

Mexican Comboni Missionary Brother Juan Carlos Salgado is a medical doctor and has been working in Africa for the past sixteen years. We asked him to share his experience with us.

I am working in a Mission Hospital in Mungbere in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many people come to us from far away places, even though Mungbere can only be reached by motorcycle or by small airplanes. Most patients arrive by motorcycle. The most common medical conditions needing attention are malaria, dysentery, fractures, AIDS and respiratory problems. We have a total of five doctors – two Comboni Missionaries, two local Congolese doctors and a volunteer from Italy – working with the help of thirty local nurses. Besides taking care of the hospital our team also teach at the adjoining Nursing School.

Part of my work consists of supervising five Health Centres within a thirty mile radius of Mungbere, which may not sound much, but to cover thirty miles takes me about three hours, travelling through the forest, the tall grass, the mud and army road-blocks. The soldiers know I am a doctor so they usually let me pass, but at times they ask for money.

Around the fire

To reach one of the Centres I have to cross a river, which is not always easy. The reward is that in the area there are a lot of good fish. Not too far away there is a national park and people hunt all kinds of wildlife. Generally, however, people are subsistence farmers. I am constantly amazed by the generosity of the people I meet. They open their humble homes to me, they feed me and make me feel like part of the family. If I have to spend the night anywhere, people get together at night around the fire.

There was a time when things around here were much better. There were plantations and progress seemed to be around the corner. Then the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, fell apart due to wars, political corruption and foreign business interests. By God's grace the soil is very fertile, so that people can still make a living by farming.

Not far from our Mission there are several Pygmy villages. They live deep in the forest, are hunter gatherers and have an intimate connection with nature. Since time immemorial Pygmies have been looked down upon by neighbouring tribes and by the Colonial Authorities to the point that many consider them almost less than human. Instead, they are simple and friendly. We have always tried to protect them and even suggested ways to them to improve their lot, such as taking up farming. However, they prefer their own ways.

The gift of life

Several families are now sending their children to school and some of them have already completed high school.

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Some of the girls have become midwives and work in the health centres. Others are learning dress-making from the Comboni Missionary Sisters. We hope that their love of nature and their simple lifestyle will continue to influence their surroundings. They are close to God, even if they do not know it.

After sixteen years of ministry as a missionary doctor I still look forward every day to what God has in store for me. It is a great satisfaction to have the opportunity to foster the gift of life at all levels, both spiritual and material. The gratitude of the people I live with is my reward already on earth.

Brother Juan Carlos Salgado mccj

7. South Sudan: Witnesses of Hope

Years of war have deeply affected women and children in South Sudan. A Costa Rican Comboni Missionary Sister recounts her experience of journeying at their side.

The newest nation on the planet has not yet found peace. A clash in the capital Juba, in December 2013, between the followers of Vice-President Riek Machar of the Nuer tribe and those of President Salva Kiir of the Dinka tribe brought the country to civil war, and the conflict then spread to other parts of the country. Various attempts have been made to reconcile the different parties but, to date, despite the eight peace accords signed in the last four years, violence still rules in many parts of the country. Despite this situation, there are many missionaries who have decided to remain alongside the local population and some of them are also present in the refugee camps in nearby Uganda.

Sister Lorena Morales, a fifty-four year old from Costa Rica, works in Malakal, one of the regions most affected by the violence. "I have always worked in war zones. It is an experience that has left a deep mark on my missionary life. It means being 're-born' every time. It means living in precariousness. One never knows what may happen tomor-

row. We are living through a war that, like all wars, is absurd. It means touching with our hands the effects of the violence particularly on women and children”.

They deserve respect

Sister Morales, with more than twenty years of working in South Sudan, says: “There are many cases of violence and sexual abuse both by the rebels and the Army. Women are captured and taken away to be their wives. Some come back; others do not”. “In recent months I have worked directly with groups of these women”, Sister Lorena continues, “we provide what we call ‘trauma therapy’ by which we try to create an atmosphere in which the women can tell their stories. They feel at ease and express themselves without fear and they know they are being cared for. They take part in projects that help them make progress and look after their families. I admire these women. They deserve respect. They are able to organise their lives in a war zone”.

“The most striking aspect of all this is the instability. Attacks can take place at any moment and then the only thing to do is to flee. The first thing the women do is to send the children immediately to the forest, to the swamps and the small islands in the Nile. They themselves then move away, taking with them their food, the goats, chickens and whatever they can.

The women are kept informed by a system of communication known only to themselves and they are often able to get away in time. When the rebels or the military come they manage to hide. They know the paths through the swamps and the places where the UN distribute food. They

also know it is very dangerous to go there as, to do so, they have to pass through areas controlled by the rebels or by the military. But they have to risk everything to get food for their children and the elderly”.

Sister Lorena admires the strength and determination of the South Sudanese women and says: “The women play a key role in the survival of individuals and of the community itself”.

My faith as a woman and a missionary

Sister Morales often uses a canoe to visit groups of women and children hiding in the forests or lagoons. “Yes. I travel sometimes for days on end, by canoe or walking through the swamps or open areas. This involves real danger since there may be groups in the area who may attack us, steal all our food and carry us off”.

It is already evening and sitting under a mango tree, Sister Lorena speaks a little about herself: “I feel that my faith is like a pathway, a process, and I have gone through different processes. It is something that is growing. I realise now that I cannot tell if peace will come to South Sudan tomorrow or in twenty-five years’ time; this I do not know. But what I do know is that, being here means placing all my faith in life, in the dignity of these people, in love and in reconciliation. We all have to keep going. This is my faith as a Religious Sister and a Missionary. I have to believe, to wait patiently and to work hard. I believe in this country and its peoples”.

Sister Lorena Morales CMS

8. Kenya: Missionaries for Social Justice

A group of Comboni Missionaries living in one of the slums on the outskirts of Nairobi share their experience of life with us.

We live in Korogocho, one of the largest of the two hundred slums that surround Nairobi. These slums are home to about sixty per cent of Nairobi's population. However, they occupy only five per cent of the residential land in the city. Every day we meet people who come to us and ask for our assistance and our prayers in their struggle to secure dignity, the dignity that is their due as persons made in the image and likeness of God. What they crave are not riches or wealth; they just want to experience being 'Children of God' in their ordinary, everyday lives.

When we listen to the 'Prayers of the Faithful' during the celebration of Mass, we hear people asking for God's intervention ... to sway the hearts of the politicians who do not appear to care; to enter the hearts and minds of the police who shoot and kill with impunity; to provide a public hospital for the three hundred and twenty thousand residents of Korogocho; ... and to guarantee them entry into heaven because they have already experienced hell on earth.

At the end of Mass, we say "May the Lord bless you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit", but while we are readily available to be the instrument of God in imparting these blessings, we are not in conscience able to tell the Faithful of Korogocho that they should just sit back, accept their lot in life and wait for their blessings in the hereafter: 'Pie in the sky when they die'.

Personal presence

The Church must become rather a space for actively seeking the intervention of God in the lives of our people. As priests, we are not able to say that the absence of a public hospital in Korogocho is an issue which is not our concern but should be dealt with by civil society. No, the lack of a public hospital for three hundred thousand people is immoral; it is against the will of God and demands redress by the Authorities.

It is such sinful situations which define our Mission. In this Mission, we are not trapped in a divide between the 'secular' and the 'sacred'. What is called 'Social Justice' in the realm of secular politics is what the Mission of the Church in Nairobi is about today.

We believe that to faithfully follow the call of the Lord as Comboni Missionaries in Korocho, we have to work in three areas simultaneously: in Evangelization, through popular movements like the 'Kutoka Network'; in co-ordinating national and international pressure on the government to change policies that cause direct harm to the least and last in society poor; and thirdly, in promoting the religious legitimization of change.

We are convinced that there are many opportunities to spread the gospel in the sinful situations of Nairobi. This

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this can only be achieved, however, through a Church presence that strengthens the fellowship of the urban poor and encourages them, notwithstanding the diversity of their ethnic origins or their religious affiliations, to come together and struggle peacefully for change on the basis of 'United they stand, divided they fall'.

It seems to us that we must dedicate our time and energies to a presence that supports the Followers of Christ who toil for the cause of right and who believe in the change embodied in Jesus Christ himself. In doing this we shall be responding to the call of Christ to follow the narrow path. It is a path which, although not popular, is perhaps the most explicit expression of the Mission of Christ in today's world.

The Comboni Missionary Community of Korogocho

9. Brazil: Justice on the Rails

Some years ago, the Comboni Missionaries founded the network "Justiça nos Trilhos" ('Justice on the Rails'). They work with a number of other groups and associations to carry out the gospel challenge of 'taking care' of Creation and of Life in Amazonia.

We are a small Comboni Community who work in Piquiá, a small town in Maranhão State, in North-East Brazil. Maranhão is recognised as being the poorest region in the whole of the country. Every day, dozens of trains loaded with iron ore (more than three hundred thousand tons per day), pass the shacks in which our people are forced to live. The railway was built to export minerals abroad, but this wholesale plundering of natural resources is destroying the land and pollution is affecting the population living around the mines, and all along the nine hundred kilometres of the railway.

Vale SA, a Brazilian-based multinational mining corporation, is the principal player that benefits from this telling example of the post-modern colonial economy in Latin America.

Some years ago, the Comboni Missionaries founded the network *Justiça nos Trilhos* ('Justice on the Rails'). We joined together with other social organizations, human rights

groups, trade unions and academics that support the communities affected by this economic policy.

The collaboration with movements and associations from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Peru, Italy and Mozambique led to the creation of the 'International Network of People Affected by Vale'. We, in the increasingly ravaged outback of the Amazon Rain Forest, feel deeply committed to the evangelical challenge of 'taking care' of Creation and Life.

While *Justiça nos Trilhos* is mainly a local initiative, operating in Eastern Amazonia, the 'International Network of People Affected by Vale' is an Organization whose reports have shown themselves to be among the most effective strategies in exposing the omissions and misstatements in the annual sustainability report of Vale SA.

Communication and Advocacy

Our daily work consists of visiting neighbourhoods around the town, indigenous or Afro-descendant rural communities or villages of fishermen, and encouraging people to speak out against the devastating impact of the mining industry on their way of life and of the human rights violations that have followed in its wake. We strongly believe in the importance of communities themselves taking the initiative in claiming their rightful role in the management of the resources of the local area. This alone, however, is not sufficient to have an impact on the international investment in our region. Such investments are inevitably linked to national politics which often unfortunately do not have the long-term interests of the local people to heart. We try therefore to make the most of the strategy of advocacy on behalf of these local communities.

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Advocacy is a challenge in that it compels us to enter into dialogue with individuals, groups and institutions that are very different from ourselves, in terms of ethos, aims, objectives and methods of work. However, since we are known as a Faith-based Community that is well-integrated in the area, a region which is suffering serious socio-environmental conflict, our considerations carry weight within the national and international context.

We operate locally, putting pressure on those public institutions in Brazil, the *Ministério Público* ('Public Prosecutor's Office') and the *Defensoria Pública* ('Public Defender's Office') that are charged with defending the rights of the local community. In Maranhão State, perhaps the most 'forgotten' of the Union, public institutions are often not present with the result that political and economic interests allow the 'turning of a blind eye' to wholesale environmental degradation and the systematic violation of human rights. People who want to denounce such injustice often have to travel hundreds of kilometres to reach the State Capital, São Luís, only to be told an official is not available and that they should return on a different date in order to file their complaint. We are trying to win the right to have public institutions represented throughout the State and not only in the Capital and the larger cities.

Working 'in the field'

Although the Government of Brazil has long promised a new mining code for the country, a draft bill has yet to be presented to Congress. The Comboni Missionaries have been committed at a national level over recent years to

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ensuring that communities and territories are spared from further widespread environmental damage, and to this end have founded along with a number of leading civil society organisations, the 'National Committee for the Defence of Territories from Unrestrained Mining'. This Committee which works with international Organizations such as Greenpeace and the International Federation of Human Rights is very active in lobbying for the defence of human rights and of the environment throughout Brazil. Our presence carries weight in the Committee due to the respect we are accorded for our working 'in the field'. The National Conference of Bishops has now joined the Committee and as the Church is well-regarded in Brasil we are far more hopeful of progress in our common cause for 'taking care' of creation and of life in Amazonia.

The Comboni Missionary Community of Piquiá

10. Colombia: Mission in Conflict Zones

On the Southern Pacific coast of Colombia, the city of Tumaco, has been the scene in recent years for clashes between rival gangs for control of the very lucrative local cocaine market. Nevertheless there are those who have chosen to remain, to grow in faith with the local people and to respond to numerous social challenges. The following is the testimony of a young Italian Comboni Missionary.

When I arrived for the first time in our Mission in Tumaco, I soon realised that there were invisible walls that clearly marked the borders of the areas occupied by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and by other groups which were under the control of the *Rastrojos*, a right-wing paramilitary organization involved in Colombia's armed conflict. The paramilitaries left and a relative calm returned to these neighbourhoods. In their absence the FARC have further encouraged the cultivation of coca among the local population and worked alongside drug cartels from Mexico and Central America to promote the export of cocaine to the United States and Canada. The new rich of Tumaco are earning huge sums of money, and in the eyes of many of our young people, have become examples to be aspired to. Drug use has increased dramatically among teenagers, who have become more and more

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isolated from society at large and suspicious of anyone who wants to work with them.

Today, security has worsened dramatically in all the cities of Colombia, where several militias, who are former members of the FARC, operate at will. They are either *Bacrim* (criminal gangs) as some call them, or simply drug traffickers. Tumaco is no exception. New armed groups have now settled in the area: the Úsuga, the AUC, the Aguilas Negras and the Gulf Clan; all competing for control of the local, very lucrative, drug market. The number of murders, particularly contract killings, has rocketed and hundreds of families have been forced to leave their neighbourhoods because of the violent feuding between the different armed groups.

Reasons to stay

The first and most important reason for our presence in Tumaco is the awareness that God is among us. We can see His presence in many of the people that we work with: community leaders, families, women and men, who, though they have been abandoned by the State and though they live in extremely precarious conditions, are witnesses of faith, civic responsibility and resistance to evil. We can attest to the nobility of these people, their passion for life and their generous love. Every day I feel I am loved, embraced and protected by them.

A further reason to work in Tumaco is that no one else wants to do it. If there are many reasons for coming to Tumaco, it seems that there are none to stay! As our Founder, St. Daniel Comboni taught us, we have chosen to stay, to share our lives with people and walk together with

them. We, Comboni Missionaries, have been entrusted with the responsibility of the Parish of *La Resurreccion* and, in accordance with the 'Pastoral Plan of Evangelization' for the Diocese, we are committed to the training and promotion of lay leaders. The work in the local neighbourhood has led us to focus our attention on several sectors of the Parish 'Pastoral Plan', and we are trying to walk together with the local people and community leaders in responding to the many social problems in our midst.

Voluntary service and pastoral work

Three years ago, thanks to the help of some local families, a small school was built, in order to meet the 'educational emergency' and the *Educar en la Calle Viento Libre* Project was created to support the most problematic and disadvantaged children of the neighbourhood. The *Centro Afro Juvenil* has been established for the promotion of culture and spirituality. It is a multi-purpose centre where groups of young people develop their creativity through dance, music, literacy programmes, sport and catechism classes.

Our Parish Church is located in the El Carmelo District of the city where we have established the 'St. Daniel Comboni Youth Centre' with a library and an internet room. A group of extraordinary women, who cooperate in running the Centre, make up the *Buen Viento* Choir. Their songs express the problems of their community along with the hope and the faith with which they try to face them. We, Comboni Missionaries, offer spiritual assistance to all those who come to the Parish, which is a meeting place for catechists, family groups, devotional groups and Church Lay Movements.

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In addition to pastoral work in the Parish, we are involved on the diocesan level with work among the Youth and Vocational Ministry, Missionary Animation and Social Communications. We try through such ministries to reach suburbs where 'the cry of life' demands to be heard, as the 'Conference of Religious of Latin America (CLAR)' recently affirmed, and to go regularly to the rural areas of our Diocese in order to visit outlying communities. We also keep in touch with these people through the Diocesan Radio, Mira, and through providing training programmes for lay leaders and Catechists. Our goal is to help the laity to serve a missionary and prophetic Church.

Father Daniel Zarantonello mccj

11. Peru: The Gospel along the River

For some years now, a group of Comboni Missionaries has been present among the Ashaninka and Nomatsiguenga indigenous peoples in the Central Selva of Peru. In the area, there are also powerful drug traffickers and terrorists.

San Martin de Pangoa is a District of the Province of Satipo located in the Central Selva of Peru. The majority of the people in Pangoa are members of the *Ashaninka* and *Nomatsiguenga* indigenous ethnic groups along with a smaller number of settlers who moved into the region in the 1980's from other parts of the country. The main source of income in the area is derived from agriculture – the cultivation of coffee, cocoa, oranges, pineapples and other tropical fruits. The land is fertile and irrigated by large rivers. This area is known as the 'Valley of the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro Rivers'.

Father Percy Carbonero, a Peruvian Comboni Missionary, tells us, "The Parish is dedicated to St. Martin de Porres and covers practically the whole region of San Martin de Pangoa. Our work consists mostly in accompanying the Christian communities scattered throughout the territory. This involves the formation of leaders and the preparation of children for the Sacraments".

Father Percy shows us a map of the territory saying, "The

sheer size of the Parish is a huge challenge. The District of Pangoa counts three hundred villages spread all along the Valley. The Valley of the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro rivers is an area of about twelve thousand square kilometres. In the valley of the Ene River, for example, there are centres and indigenous communities that we can reach only after an eight-hour journey by boat. The right bank of the river belongs to the Rio Tambo District". Nevertheless, the Missionaries from Pangoa visit the Christian communities on both banks of the river since there is no Parish able to assist the other District. "This is considered an area of particularly high risk", Fr. Percy comments, "because of the drug trade and the continuing existence of the terrorism of the '*Sendero Luminoso*' or '*Shining Path*' Guerrillas. This is the reason why there are so many military bases along the rivers".

To give their lives for the Faith

Fr. Randy Recalme, a Filipino Comboni Missionary, continues, "According to a recent report by the Office of the United Nations for the Control of Drugs and the Prevention of Crime (UNODC), this is the second largest area of coca cultivation in the world. The activity is controlled by drug traders. The farmers prefer to grow coca because it requires very little labour, unlike tropical fruit that is often attacked by parasites that destroy the fruit completely". In the 1980's and 1990's, terrorist groups like Sendero Luminoso entered this territory, burning houses, killing the local officials and abducting boys and girls. A large number of Religious were ordered to leave the area under pain of death. There were also martyrs among the

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Christian leaders who gave their lives for the faith.

Fr. Randy describes the situation today, "Sendero Luminoso continues its presence in various remote areas of the region. It is the only terrorist cell active in the country, killing indiscriminately and abducting people. We have the testimony of people who managed to escape. Their accounts are horrific. Sendero Luminoso offer protection to the drug traffickers who control the cultivation of coca and the production of cocaine. In exchange, they receive arms and communication systems".

"Another problem is that of the environment", Fr. Randy continues, "The valley of the Apurimac River produces a lot of cocaine and the river is badly polluted. When the coca leaves are soaked in tanks and the chemical has been extracted, the water enters the small streams that become contaminated with heavy metals. These streams reach the river Apurimac River and contaminate it". Given their experience of violence and death, it is easy to understand that some Ashaninka groups have lost confidence in the Local Authorities and are inclined to mistrust people from outside, such as the Missionaries. The *Nomatsiguenga* have reacted differently. Even though they have suffered much violence, they have welcomed and accepted the presence of the Missionaries. From the point of view of evangelisation, this group has made significant progress in the past ten years. This progress is confirmed by the fact that the New Testament has now been translated into the *Nomatsiguenga* language. Fr. Percy points out, "The more time we spend with the *Ashaninka* and the *Nomatsiguenga*, speaking their languages and coming to know their traditions, the more we are convinced that these two ethnic

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groups, despite their long drawn-out sufferings, are open to the Gospel. We must not be in a hurry but must rather walk with them”.

The Comboni Missionary Community of Pangoa

12. Brazil: The Gospel of Mercy behind Prison Bars

An Italian Comboni Missionary for more than thirty years, Father Saverio defends the human rights of youths imprisoned in Brazilian juvenile prisons.

Taking advantage of a pause in the incessant autumn rains, I made my usual visit to the 'Educational Centre for Youth' in João Pessoa, the capital of the State of Paraíba, in North-East Brazil. It is meant to be a rehabilitation centre for juveniles convicted of crimes, but the structure, compared to underground mediaeval-style prisons, leaves nothing to be desired. Built in the 1970's, the Centre has room for a maximum of seventy young people but it houses on average, one hundred and sixty. Youths are locked in cells with no ventilation, very little light and with sound-proof walls. The ceiling is full of cracks. The mattresses are piled up in the courtyard to dry in the sun. There is rubbish everywhere and a strong smell of sewage. It is cleaning time. Some wash the floors while others clean the sheets spread out on the ground. They have to be quick, as water is available only three times a day for a period of fifteen minutes each. In that time, they have to shower, clean the toilets and do their washing. They should really be at

school but there is no use going as the teachers are refusing to work, having not received their pay for three months.

My heart is torn between different feelings

I stop outside every cell, as I have been doing for the last thirty years. They all come close to the bars. They all have a story to tell, especially when they find someone willing to listen to them with respect. I reach inside the bars and shake hands with them all. I call them by name, greet them and listen to them attentively. They are fed up being closed in twenty-four hours a day in cells measuring just a few square metres with nothing to do. They tell me they go out into the courtyard three times a week for half an hour.

They complain about the food. Some speak of recent visitors while others are sad that they have had no visits as their families live far away and have no money for the transport. They ask me questions. They want to know about their court cases. They report the attacks on them by the warders. I take note of everything they say. I take some photographs of the place and, especially, of the bruises caused, they say, by the warders. Some ask for help but I cannot provide everything. Often, I have to shrug my shoulders to show there is nothing I can do. I take from my satchel the dozens of reports I have already sent to the 'Court for Juveniles', reporting the situation but I have to admit the results are poor. They ask me to pray with them. I read a passage from the Gospel and speak of the love of God for each one of us. Those who wish freely add their reflections. To end, each prays for their family and friends and, most of all, to have a second chance. They all dream

of getting out of that hell as soon as possible.

I come in at 10:00 am and leave at 4:00 pm. I get in my car. It will take me at least two days to digest all I have heard and seen. My heart is torn by different feelings. The strongest is anger. I cannot be indifferent faced with all that is happening to the youth of Brazil. Throughout the country there are twenty-three thousand youth between twelve and eighteen years of age locked up in prisons for juvenile offenders which, with a few rare exceptions, are just great social 'coffins' in which all human dignity is buried. These boys, in spite of everything, are 'lucky' as they are still alive. In 2017, more than thirty thousand young people from fifteen to twenty-nine years of age were killed. Of these, almost four thousand were boys aged between sixteen and seventeen. Almost all the youth who were killed were poor, black and living in areas around cities that have been abandoned by State Institutions and are ruled by the drug trade.

What is happening is nothing less than the extermination of part of Brazil's impoverished youth. We must stop this bloodshed. Let us play our part by carrying out projects aimed at supporting vulnerable minors, defending and promoting their human rights, motivating them to become good citizens and even leaders.

Once I get home, I put my notes in order, insert the photos and prepare the latest report to present to the Authorities. During the coming days I will be on a pilgrimage to various Offices seeking legal assistance to investigate the violation of the rights of those young men. I try to make it possible for their voices to be heard in society, so that they can receive the help they need to change their lives.

To take care of them

There are many who criticise me, accusing me of defending 'bandits'. I often receive death threats but I am used to that by now. In Brazil, laws are being prepared to criminalise the defenders of human rights defenders, sponsored mostly by sections of the media. I have never approved of the crimes committed by such youth. It causes me great pain to see them involved in crime, especially when, by their violent acts, they offend the dignity of other people. But I refuse to believe that they are beyond redemption. The word 'lost' is not in my vocabulary. I believe in the dignity of every person and in their ability to change. Change is possible, especially when there are people ready to lend a hand.

A person cannot be defined merely by what they do. Each human being is worth much more than the crimes they may have committed. Each person has an intrinsic dignity that is waiting for the chance to emerge. I am certain that the most effective way to defeat violence is to guarantee fundamental human rights for all, especially the right to live together in a family, surrounded by a deep experience of love.

The youth I have seen in the prisons and those I meet in the shanty towns where I have chosen to live, have never had anyone to take care of them. Left to fend for themselves from their earliest years, almost all the time deprived of their rights, they do not know what it means to be loved, acknowledged or respected. Some of them do not consider themselves worthy of being loved.

Our missionary work in the prisons for juveniles must break this cycle of abandonment, indifference and margin-

alisation by means of a presence in their lives that allows the merciful love of God to shine through. In our pastoral work, actions speak louder than words. One of the things that surprises the youth is the way we look at them. Used as they are to being looked upon with contempt, they see in our gaze a look of love capable of going beyond appearances to their intrinsic worth as human persons made in the image and likeness of God. We never ask about the crimes they have committed. They have already been asked those questions when they were interrogated by the police, in court and in the prison itself. We are not interested in the past. What matters to us is that it is possible to build something starting here and now. But to set in motion this process of building up their lives, it is essential for them to meet people who will take care of them with love. Only this love can foster the autonomy, freedom and sense of responsibility that they so desperately need.

Father Saverio Paolillo mccj

13. Peru: Mission at the foot of the Volcano

A Comboni Missionary describes how his life became more meaningful when he was assigned as Parish Priest on the outskirts of a town in Peru at the foot of an active volcano.

Missionary work has filled my life with meaning, so much so, that I can say that I am truly fulfilled as a person and as a Christian. Here in the Alto Selva Alegre District in Peru, the Comboni Missionaries have had an uninterrupted presence for the last forty-seven years. Our Parish of the Good Shepherd is in the highest part of the city of Arequipa, where we are 2,500 metres above sea level, on the western slope of the Misti volcano.

The Comboni Mission involves living with the most marginalised of people – those whom so-called progress has left far behind. And so the happiest moments of my life have been spent in sharing the lives of the simplest people. It is they who, in reality, are full of the human and spiritual values that make them open to God. It is they who are most willing to accept the message of the Gospel.

It has been three years since I settled here as priest of this Parish, but already the names and faces of these men, women and children fill my heart.

Since the moment I arrived, I felt that Peru was the place the Lord wanted for me and where I had to stay. Here in

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this remote place far from the economic pulse, the heart of humanity beats more surely and the presence of God can be experienced with greater intensity.

First, it was the lay people and the warmth of their welcome that struck me. They have a great sense of God and they wait with eagerness for the *padrecitos* (the priests).

Secondly, it has been inspiring to see how they collaborate so effectively in a range of projects in the different villages, nurturing the seeds sown by previous Comboni Missionaries.

There are thirty-five thousand inhabitants in my Parish and there is a huge amount of work to do – though the people are open to God, the majority have not had much contact with the Church so there are many resources to create, infrastructure to develop and people to accompany, from children to the elderly.

Our Parish has two nurseries with two hundred and forty children as well as a soup kitchen.

Parish volunteers bring our senior citizens together, twice a week, in order to befriend those who are lonely and help others who have, in some instances, been entirely forsaken. Here they can share their faith and also receive medical attention. The Daughters of Camillus assist us in helping the sick, as they run our two Health Centres. It is the miracle of the solidarity of the Catholic Faithful (both inside Peru and beyond) that makes it possible for us to maintain these services that have become such a support for so many.

Pope Francis urges the Church to 'go out' in order to reach everyone. Without the committed work of hundreds of lay people who give of their lives to their Christian com-

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munities, this would be impossible. They too are sent by Jesus Christ to share the Mission. It is not just the job of priests and missionaries.

For many years, in fact, we have relied on the witness especially of Lay Missionaries who live the Comboni Charism. We are blessed with two lay people from Peru, a North American family of doctors with two daughters and a young German volunteer.

I, who consecrated my life to God to serve the Mission, have no doubt whatsoever that it has been worth the cost. There is no other vocational or professional path in which my talents would have been given so much scope and in which my values could have been put to work so effectively. I have no doubt that this was the greatest opportunity of my life. I took the risk of committing my life to Jesus and his missionary dream became mine.

Father Conrado Franco mccj

14. Peru: Paths of Hope

A small Comboni Missionary Community of Sisters live and work on the outskirts of the Peruvian Capital, Lima, among the poorest and neediest. Here, they share their experience.

Pamplona Alta, on the outskirts of Lima, is home to over 30,000 people. This shanty town was formed on the night of December 31st 1999, when thousands of people invaded the dusty hills of this region. They set up tents and small houses built out of wood and plastic sheeting. The shanty town lacks clean water, electricity and drainage and yet here, a small Comboni Missionary Community has decided to settle down. It's a community of four Sisters from different countries. Each day they climb the hills of Pamplona Alta to provide support to the local inhabitants.

The Sisters are particularly committed to creating 'Local Christian Communities' and training people to lead their communities both spiritually and socially. Sister Amine Abrahão is from Brazil and has spent more than twenty years in Peru. She told us that she and the other Sisters arrived in Pamplona Alta on February 23rd 2002 with the purpose of sharing the life and struggles of the poorest of the poor.

In Pamplona Alta each Local Christian Community's name is inspired by hope - Vista Alegre, Alborada, Paradise

- all names that evoke a beautiful land. Just like the people of Israel in the desert, these people are looking for "a new land flowing with milk and honey".

It's been tough, but nonetheless the Comboni Missionary Sisters have made some remarkable gains.

Four basic health clinics have been built as well as schools, among them the 'Faith and Joy College' with one thousand eight hundred pupils. Managed by Jesuit Missionaries, it is acknowledged as the best in the area.

Sister Amine says, "Everything is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and the result of the collaboration and organization of the local people. We train the community leaders of each area, so that they can take charge of their own future".

Each area is like a small community, with a public dining-hall, providing children with nutritionally balanced meals. There is also a public pharmacy. Educational programmes have also been set up with the goal of normalizing the concept of education and literacy for women. In all communities people can attend catechetical courses, and the celebration of God's Word and Eucharist take place once a month. This way 'faith and life' go together.

Sister Martha Duma from Ecuador says, "In my community, I organize Baptism and First Communion catechism for adults. I visit families and make sure that people with particular diseases can be hospitalized. We, in our community, also offer extra educational support to those with difficulty in learning".

The 'Women Entrepreneur' Project

The Comboni Sisters have initiated a project called 'Women Entrepreneurs'. This includes training courses in

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home economics, knitting, neighborhood pharmacy and natural medicine. "We want women to be protagonists, and not victims anymore – not victims of domestic violence nor of its consequences, one of which is that they are excluded from the economy", Sister Amine says. "Women are the heart of the world. That's why I encourage them not to be afraid of facing problems. I try to help them not to feel sad or overwhelmed. They can overcome any difficulty. They must trust God and they will be able to face any problem".

Sister Asmeret Aregay from Ethiopia, who has spent eight years in this Mission, points that, "the reason why we are here is because we believe this is a place where God dwells. In our pastoral work we hear His word through identifying with the suffering of our people. We live with them, we share their experiences". "Yes, here", adds Sister Amine, "We have a great chance to create an environment where we can behave like the first Christians".

The Comboni Missionary Community of Pamplona Alta

15. Comboni Missionaries and Advocacy with International Organizations

From St. Daniel Comboni's first trip to Africa, he was horrified by the human and social ravages wrought by the slave trade. Throughout his life Comboni fought against slavery by a variety of means, including freeing slaves whenever possible; whether by 'redeeming' them at slave markets or protecting run-away slaves in the Missions. He denounced slavery in letters and publications in order to stir up public opinion. He also sought the assistance of European governments and obtained support from various Authorities in Egypt and from Authorities of the Ottoman Empire such as the Sultan of Constantinople.

He encouraged and supported General Gordon, Romolo Gessi and others who sought to extirpate the gangs of slave raiders. Comboni also sought to foster the economic and social development of Africa. His Plan included several levels of education and skill-training for both men and women. Comboni needed to obtain financial support for his projects and he needed the cooperation of other missionary groups, especially those who had already established Missions on the coasts of Africa.

Today we would consider many of Comboni's activities to be 'advocacy' on behalf of Africa. Some may prefer the language of 'Mission Awareness' and 'Mission Promotion'.

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The reality is that these terms overlap. Even though Comboni's ultimate goal was to help establish the Reign of God in Africa, the 'Regeneration' of Africa as Comboni understood it included dimensions that those who were not committed Christians could understand and willingly support for humanitarian or even political reasons. Following *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the 1971 World Synod of Bishops entitled 'Justice in the World', the 'Rule of Life' of the Comboni Missionaries explicitly states that integral to preaching the Gospel is the liberating of every human person from sin, selfishness, violence and injustice as well as from need and oppressive structures.

In a variety of ways the Comboni Missionaries at the local have long been engaged in activities at the service of justice for the oppressed and relief for the suffering. Today, however, the forces that determine the well-being of local populations or determine their future are often global in nature or at least have a strong global component. The challenges facing the developing world today are enormous and take manifold forms. Indeed the problems facing the whole world require the commitment and sustained activity of large coalitions of groups and organizations of every kind, in a way that transcends boundaries and differences, in a pluralistic and diversified society.

As an example, global climate change that is already underway due to the irresponsible overuse of fossil fuels and other sources of 'greenhouse gases' (GHG) will have devastating effects on the world's poorest citizens. Severe weather - including more powerful storms, drought and flooding - will devastate food supplies, force massive migrations of peoples and very likely foment more wars

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over natural resources such as water and land. No nation acting alone can slow down global climate change.

Agencies of the United Nations organize the efforts to address the problem, but the cooperation of every nation in the world is required. Since this is a matter of life and death for countless millions of people, Missionaries need to play a role in making the situation known - refuting the deliberate misinformation disseminated by those with vested interests and encouraging cooperation in a common effort.

A global surfeit of weapons and the illegal, clandestine commerce in weapons, contributes greatly to violence and havoc in Africa and elsewhere. In April 2013, after decades of advocacy by an enormous coalition of civil society groups, the UN General Assembly approved the 'Arms Trade Treaty' that will put some limits on the scourge. This treaty, though imperfect, could save tens of thousands of lives. Once fifty nations have ratified the Treaty, it will go into effect.

Then countries will then need to incorporate the provisions of the Treaty into their laws, and will need to dedicate funding and personnel to implement it. This will not take place automatically. Missionaries, who know from experience the horror of the many deaths and mutilations caused by trafficked weapons, must advocate for the effective implementation of the Treaty.

Progress has been made in global efforts to eradicate AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, but advocacy is required to continue and strengthen the multinational funding and services that offer hope for present and future generations. Missionaries with first-hand knowledge of the adverse

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effects of these diseases must play a role promoting renewed efforts.

The Comboni Missionaries have made commitments to support the advocacy efforts of 'VIVAT International' (an NGO founded by seven Missionary Congregations to promote 'Justice and Peace' throughout the world) at the United Nations; the 'Africa Faith and Justice Network' in Washington DC; and the 'Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network' in Brussels. Much of the credibility of these Organizations is based on the presence of Members of Religious Congregations in very many countries around the world. By sending accurate information to these Organizations all of us can better assist the peoples whom we love and serve.

Father John Converset mccc



Upon his return to Khartoum in May 1873 as the newly-appointed Bishop of Central Africa, Daniel Comboni, declared in his first homily, "I make common cause with every one of you and the happiest of my days will be when I shall be able to give my life for you".

Bishop Daniel Comboni, Founder of the Comboni Missionaries and the Comboni Missionary Sisters, was canonised at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on October 5th 2003 by the late Pope John Paul II in recognition of his decisive role in bringing the Gospel to sub-Saharan Africa in the second half of the Nineteenth Century.

In 'A Sign for the Times' you will meet men and women who continue to follow in the footsteps of St. Daniel Comboni by bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the more unfortunate and disadvantaged of our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia and the Americas: from working in the midst of a civil war in South Sudan, to ministering among the indigenous peoples of Central Peru, to advocacy work at the United Nations in New York. All very different apostolates but with one common purpose: preaching the Gospel of Christ.

Cover photograph

Comboni Missionary, Father Pedro Pablo Hernández, holding bible classes in the Mission of Quillénso in Southern Ethiopia.