

## CARRIED BY THE WORD IN MISSION

Dear Confreres,

I was asked to prepare a text on the Word following the proposal made by the General Council in their Letter “The Word of God in our Missionary Being and Acting” (January, 2012). This “aid” ought not to derive from “ideas” but rather from what we live out in our daily missionary lives and should, therefore, be based upon personal experience. I accepted this task with some embarrassment. I do not think my experience differs much from yours. On the contrary, that of many other confreres is doubtless much richer and more effective.

At any rate, after some uncertainty, I accepted the task gladly, both because it made me reflect upon my life and because it is an opportunity to put into practice the Chapter invitation to engage in the “sharing of the interior life” (CA 2009, n. 26).

I wish to start with two personal circumstances. The first is that of “illness” (Lateral Amyotrophic Sclerosis, LAS) which places me on a special “rostrum” and gives me a different outlook on life. From the “mount” of illness the horizon broadens before us and the future comes closer (bringing with it both a degree of fear and some fascination!). At the same time we look back over our shoulders at the journey already completed, to contemplate the pathway of life winding down to the valley. This gives us a new vision and allows us to come in contact with the deepest feelings we carry within ourselves.

The second reference point is the “desire” that has always accompanied me to be a “bearer of the Word”. This desire, regrettably, has often remained just that, a desire, but it has also been a light, a guide and a motivation that gave meaning to my missionary life. I wish to draw from this desire because I see in it the expression of what is most true in us, beyond our successes and failures.

I am sorry if these two points of reference make this sharing of mine too personal. However, the thought that what I say may possibly be the occasion which brings out your own personal experience and allows “community sharing” to take place, both uplifts and encourages me. For this reason I have set out seven points from which some may be chosen as the themes of sharing in the community. It should be a way of praising God for the way the Word leads us in our lives, making us feel loved, forgiven, nourished and sustained by this Word that we carry with us. Furthermore, it should help us to become aware that we are “bearers” of the Word to which we have been “entrusted” (Acts 20, 32). As “Servants of the Word”, therefore, we come to see ourselves as its first “beneficiaries”. Lady Word becomes our Servant, bending the knee before us to wash the feet of her apostles!

### 1. THE WORD OF PASSION

My first enthusiastic and passionate contact with the Word happened during my scholasticate in Rome in the seventies. I still remember those years with gratitude and joy. They were inspiring years in the wake of the Council and our 1969 Chapter. Enthusiasm for the discovery of the Word had fascinated us all. Fr. Fernando Colombo, then General Secretary for Formation, motivated us in this adventure and invited some of us to collaborate with him in preparing Biblical reflections to be offered to the Institute.

Enthusiasm for the Biblical world brought us to journey into new and exciting worlds such as that of the Hebrew and Rabbinical traditions. Soon our ‘falling in love’ with philosophy (which Mgr. Vittorino Girardi had passed on to me) gave way to the charms of Biblical research and specialisation. In particular, it was in Fr. Enzo Bellucco that we found reciprocal motivation in this passion. Encouraged by Fr. Colombo, we would conduct a monthly retreat in a religious community. Today I smile as I think of our beginner’s audacity, full of inexperience and youthful enthusiasm. I feel sorry for those poor Sisters, many of whom were elderly (the majority), whose patience we sorely tried! But the younger ones who sat in the front seemed hungry for what we shared with them as they filled up their copybooks with notes, making our ardour even more fervent!

We were “in love” with the Word, won over by its freshness. I still see myself today in that experience of Jeremiah: “*When your words came I devoured them; your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your name, Lord God of Sabaoth*” (Jeremiah 15, 16).

I have relived that same experience again in the eyes and faces of many young people, especially Postulants and Novices (Alas! Not so much among the scholastics), preaching retreats or spiritual exercises within and outside the Institute. The sight of those well-worn Bibles in their hands with parts underlined, sweated over, stuffed with so many pages and notes that they were almost impossible to close, because they were normally in the open position, filled me with enthusiasm! I thought of the many intimate exchanges, the passionate kisses, the moments of doubt or of heroism, of joy or of sadness, of generosity and of fear of which those Bibles were mute witnesses! The power the Word had over those hearts made them give up all that was dearest in the world and all the projects and dreams caressed, perhaps, during those years. There was something tremendous and mysteriously fascinating in that Word, apparently so fragile and humble, that was capable of winning those hearts, of filling them with enthusiasm and of dragging them into an adventure of uncertain circumstances and unpredictable results! At times it seemed impossible to resist. How often those lips would repeat the words of Jeremiah: “*You have seduced me, Lord, and I have let myself be seduced*” (Jeremiah 20, 7).

It is a pity that that soiled Bible, the witness of a story of passion, has since been abandoned and forgotten – by some of us – who knows where, or perhaps kept just a souvenir along with all the others in the attic. That “marriage witness” of the years of fire, of great joys and youthful dreams has perhaps been replaced by a “new” Bible, more beautiful to behold or to put on show, with its quality binding, on our desk or as an icon in the ‘prayer corner’ we have assigned to it. Maybe we use it from time to time as a resource (preparing the odd sermon), turning the pages carefully so as not to spoil them and putting it back on its shelf after use. Yes, we bring it with us to retreats but we have to admit that we are no longer on the same familiar terms with ‘her’. Its place has been taken by the daily missal, so much handier and more convenient. We realise to our shame that we find it hard to drift through her. That Word which we espoused with such passion now runs the risk of slowly becoming unknown to us with whom we live together like strangers.

## 2. THE WORD CELEBRATED AND SHARED

Going back once again to the experience of the scholasticate, I would like to point out that the contact with the Word which struck me most was that lived in the Eucharist. I can never thank God enough for the experience of the Eucharist celebrated calmly, unhurriedly, in the evening. That hour (a full sixty minutes) that crowned our day never seemed long to me (perhaps I exaggerate). This was not because the formators were particularly “eloquent”. Two of them died recently: Fr. Mario Casella and Fr. Francesco De Bertolis. The “Word” was not their speciality but the “beauty” of their life witness was indeed most eloquent.

Celebrated at the end of the day, seated around the lectern and the altar, the daily Eucharist was the best and most relaxing event of the day. Listening and sharing the Word, breaking the same Bread in fraternity communicated to us a sense of peace, serenity and deep joy which was the reward of the day. The Word celebrated and shared was engraved on our hearts.

As a young, newly-ordained priest, appointed to work at the Postulancy in Coimbra (Portugal), I recall that I was (almost) scandalised to see that the Eucharist lasted just half an hour. My first “struggle” as a young formator was to increase it to at least forty five minutes.

I believe that a lively and joyful “Community life” (without, of course, being too dogmatic) is born around the Eucharist celebrated as a special moment of fraternity.

I am not particularly good at remembering the past, so I will refer more to my recent years spent in the community of the Provincial House at Lomé-Cacaveli (Togo). One of the nicest times we had as a community was that of celebrating the Eucharist on Monday evenings, the community day. Life-sharing, directed and enlightened by the Word, strengthened our relationships despite our marked differences derived from culture, character, sensitivity and age. The oldest recently went to Heaven: Bro. Silvano Salandini. I must tell you (without being judgemental) that some Masses celebrated in a

hurry (like the Hebrew Pasch) and at very inconvenient times (like early risers) leave my heart somewhat cold and bored. Perhaps paying more attention to discerning the most opportune hour and being more generous in allocating time to the Eucharist, might be the “secret” key to opening the “walled garden” of the Spouse (Song of Songs 4, 12) so that we can enter together with the Spouse to eat and drink with him and become inebriated with his treasures (Song of Songs 5, 1).

The dual table of the Word and of the Eucharist are the two arms of the “Mother” or of the “Bride” who gathers us around herself, makes us feel “at home” and causes “family feeling” and brotherhood to grow: *“By the labour of your hands you shall eat; you will be blessed and prosper. Your wife, like a fruitful vine in the heart of your house; your children, like olive shoots around your table”* (Psalm 128, 2-3).

### 3. THE WORD INCARNATE

My first experience of mission in Africa (Togo-Ghana-Benin), after seven years as a formator, was especially deep and inspiring, as I suppose it must have been for most of us. It was so despite the initial difficulties inherent in our mission as “bearers of the Word” – the effort to insert oneself into a new culture (I read and classified everything I found on the Ewe culture) and learning the local language (besides French which I did not speak well).

The first months were especially euphoric. Fr. Antonio Oliveira, a fellow national with whom I had worked in Portugal, welcomed me to the mission of Afanya (Togo). The kindness and the welcome afforded by the people and the love I felt for them (with a fair amount of ingenuous philanthropy) made me smile and feel at ease among them. Here, too – I know you will forgive me – I felt discomfort and pain seeing the business-like (if not downright brusque and inconsiderate) manner with which the people were treated and which hardly honoured or prepared the way for the Word. With the passage of time I understood that this was a “defence mechanism”, a strategy to deal with the floods of needs and sufferings of the poor, faced with which one felt helpless. It often happened that, behind some seemingly rough characters, there lay hidden a great love, capable of sacrificing itself for the people.

My enthusiastic “first love” was not without its dark areas. My first appointment was to Liati (Ghana). I soon had to face up to the real problems of missionary life that were not just physical, like my illness (I had to go home within little more than a year). I arrived in Liati at an especially crucial and difficult time when tensions were deep and serious caused when a confrere had to be removed from the mission. It was my “Baptism of fire”.

Difficulties in the apostolate followed. Liati was made up of about 30 communities scattered among a Protestant and animist majority. The communities were rather small, often with very little means and insufficient personnel. When I used to go to visit some of the more “derailed” communities, I would feel the full weight of the duty of “bearing the Word”. My smile (thanks be to God I never lost it) often masked the suffering inside me.

Sometimes, as I drove the old Land Rover, which often made matters worse by leaving me stranded on the road to those communities, my heart would sink and shed tears at the thought of having to face alone a little group of almost amorphous Christians or catechumens with a catechist of meagre talents who barely understood English. I often felt like crying out like Elijah or Jeremiah or others: *“Enough! I can do no more!”* Faced with that poor “remnant of Yahweh”, I, poor fellow that I was, stuttering as I spoke the local language or my poor English, would feel all the burden of the celebration fall upon my weak shoulders.

Many times Our Lord had to repeatedly shout in my ears the words he spoke to Joshua: *“Have I not told you; be strong and stand firm? Be fearless then, be confident, for go where you will, Yahweh your God is with you”* (Joshua 1, 9). And how many times did I see with wonder how that Word would take possession of me and the assembly, warming our hearts and ending with the joy of the feast. The feast continued afterwards with a good plate of rice and some chicken, on good days, or around a large calabash of palm wine happily shared.

The Word had worked a miracle. But first it asked me to “offer” myself, body and soul, like the five barley loaves for the multiplication of the bread. The Word loves and wants to “become incarnate”.

One might even say that when it did this in the docile flesh and the welcoming heart of the Logos, it began to like it.

The experience of “incarnation” opened my eyes to see and appreciate the beauty and the heroic deeds of the Word incarnate in so many confreres, perhaps still struggling with the stony ground, the weeds and the thorns. How well I remember with friendship and gratitude Fr. Eugenio Petrogalli who, with his enthusiasm and apostolic zeal, initiated me into missionary work at Lati. I do not wish to make a list but I would like just to mention another example: Fr. Fabio Gilli who continues to enlighten many of us with the Word that emerges from his mouth after going through the crucible of the experience of blindness.

I do not think we honour the Word when we just see the limits and defects of people: our confreres and folks. Among the stones and weeds there are also golden ears of corn that wave in the breeze. All of us carry within ourselves areas of goodness, welcome and fecundity where the Word has worked the miracle of ripening.

#### 4. THE WORD CRUCIFIED

Making the Word incarnate involves taking risks for the Word and for ourselves. Our humanity weeps under the “yoke” of this Word even if, with God’s grace, it ought to be “easy and light” (Mt 11, 30). Sometimes our human and psychological make-up cannot meet the demands of the vocation to bear the Word and, perhaps, presumption or negligence has led us to trust too much in our own strength and to give little importance to our weaknesses. The fact is that the Word becomes “mortified” in the weakness of the flesh and the distraction of the spirit. It becomes “weakened” in our breathless words or even “chained up” by our counter-witness (2 Tim 2, 9).

In recent years, the pastors of the Church have been “made a spectacle before the world” (1 Cor 4, 9), a sad spectacle of weakness and poverty that saddens us all. The Word appears to be crucified in the victims we have offended. In showing care for them we are called to heal the wounds inflicted on the Word itself by the seductive and poisonous word that, ever since the beginning, wages war against the Word (Genesis 3, 1-5). In the wounds of these victims are hidden the wounds of our Lord, the Logos crucified and we kiss them.

It occurs to me that even the wounds inflicted by sin on the heart of the “bearer of the Word” are to be respected. When they are recognised with humility and repentance they, too, are taken up by the Crucified One. They too are to be kissed and treated with compassion.

As Provincial I have sometimes had to look at these wounds in spite of myself. We are tempted to “cover our faces” (Isaiah 53, 3). After all, each one carries within himself his own weaknesses. Those of others remind us of our own. Having the courage to “touch” those wounds makes us humble and compassionate and helps us, too, since it is only by “pardoning” others that we can pardon ourselves and heal our memories.

Becoming close to others makes us see not only their suffering and weakness but also their desire for redemption, the sincere wish to let themselves be moulded by the Word, to let themselves be “re-made” in the hands of the potter (Jeremiah 18,6). This may also be an occasion for blooming anew, perhaps less apparent since the branches show the wounds inflicted by the storm; but the fruits are riper and sweeter. I cherish my memories of friendship and esteem for some confreres who, with determination, set out on the road of liberation, facing the desert of purification or the sorrowful road of Calvary.

All in all, all is grace, even mistakes and weaknesses. In a recent message written some weeks before his return to the Father, Fr. Francesco De Bertolis told me: *“Reading what you wrote reminds me of the few years I spent with you in Rome – years among the best of my life – including the mistakes – mistakes “learned” in life are worth much more than those never made”*. I keep this message as a final pearl of human and Christian wisdom.

Who are we to judge? The heart of man is a mystery of light and shade. The Word took his risks trusting in us, while recognising our weaknesses. He ‘bet’ on us and was sometimes ‘lucky’, sometimes less so. We, too, “people of the Word”, have taken our risks. Nobody promised that everything would

go smoothly or that we would find the ideal conditions to grow as persons; or that we would find welcoming communities who would support us in times of weakness; or that we would be able to deal with all the situations of stress that the service of the Word would bring us.

However, one way or another, the Word finally leads us to that “summit” where it was raised up and “put on show” in the person of Christ the Logos – there where nobody, neither Peter nor ourselves and not even Jesus would want to go. The Word ends up crucified in us. This can happen in many ways, often in sickness and old age. My two crutches, my faithful “companions” for some months now, sometimes remind me of the two beams of the cross! This is the road trodden by the Master so what can the disciple expect?

I still remember the vivid impression our confrere Fr. Ivo do Vale made on me when I paid him my last visit at Viseu hospital (Portugal) in the summer of 2009. His was a life of passion for the Word which found much “grace” on his lips and now it was transfigured by cancer. Nonetheless, in that body without “grace” the Word shone, in a new world, in all its Beauty, in his peaceful smile, in the words of trust and the attitude of abandonment of Fr. Ivo. But we all know many examples of this kind. It does us good to visit them in our houses for the elderly and sick confreres. There another face of the Word is revealed, the second-last one and it is important to know how to recognise it and welcome it.

## 5. THE WORD IN BLOOM

Let us be frank: if the Word took a chance with us and we wagered our lives betting on the Word, it is because, deep down, we had a real hope that both of us would have gained by it. I think that the vast majority of us can say with me that we are happy to be Comboni Missionaries and that no sadness is great enough to suppress our deep joy and serenity (Psalm 16). If we had had a hundred lives we would have given them all for the Mission of the Word. The investment has turned out to be very profitable.

The life of every Comboni has never been lacking in joys, as well as the sufferings of a ministry connected to our situation of being “hidden stones”, as Comboni himself reminds us in the well-known Chapter X of the Rules of 1871. I do not believe that the wish of many confreres, many of whom are elderly and worn out, to “return to the mission” is a search for “sacrifice” or simply missionary zeal. It is because Our Lord has given us many consolations together with the ‘sowing in tears’ (Psalm 126, 6).

What a joy it is to see how the communities begun at Adidogome-Lomé (Togo) twenty years ago by a small group of young people, under the shade of the palm trees, have become flourishing communities and even new parishes. A bit of healthy “triumphalism” does us good. It is necessary to let the Word celebrate its successes and show its vitality. Some would seem to want to clip the enthusiastic wings of these new-born communities as if the Word should stay underground for ever without growing into a leaf-covered tree as it is called to do (Mt 13, 31-32).

How could we not be glad to see the people, individually or in groups, visiting our chapel at Cacaveli-Lomé, from dawn to dusk, to share their joys and sorrows with the humble and faithful Word-Presence in the tabernacle? Or how could one fail to be moved by the crowds of penitents who, from early Saturday afternoon to late in the evening, took their place in the queue to seek out, in the sacrament of reconciliation, the Merciful Word who pardons and consoles?

And how could one not find joy in seeing the growing number of confreres from other continents and other cultures grasping the baton and continuing to run with fresh energy the “race of the Word”? Our dream, unfinished in our lives, continues in theirs.

## 6. THE WORD THAT CARRIES US

Today, gazing back towards the valley, we can better see the various twists and turns along the path of our lives, despite the passing of years. We begin to realise that we have been led by the hand (Hosea 11, 3-4). We discover that we “bearers of the Word” have, instead, been “carried by the Word”.

The Word is our Mother, our companion, before being “seed” that we scatter. The more we reflect upon our experience, the more we discover how the Hand of God has led us throughout our lives and

along our vocational pathway. Then we know that those words spoken to Jeremiah were aimed at us as well: *“Before I formed you in your mother’s womb, I called you”* (Jeremiah 1, 3).

Shortly before my ordination my father told me: “My son, before you were conceived your mother and I prayed to God offering him our first child, if it was a boy. The Lord heard our prayer! I did not tell you before now so as not to condition your choice of vocation”.

How could I not see the “finger” of God, for example, in my primary teacher who presented me to the Comboni Missionary vocations promoter who visited my forgotten village without succeeding in convincing a single boy to go to the seminary, despite his enthusiasm and likeable character? Her words were spoken on behalf of the Word who, that day, cast his nets in my heart.

Another example is that of the two English girls with whom I worked in a London restaurant during the 1977 summer holidays. When they heard I was a seminarian they encouraged me to continue. Their simple and sincere words gave new strength to the Word I carried within me. I was afraid to say my definitive “yes” with final vows. Whatever those girls “saw” in me reawakened my fascination with the Word. That day, in that restaurant, I pronounced my final “yes” to the Word that, in my heart, promised to give meaning to my life. A meaning that those many work colleagues had not yet found.

How many times did the Word surprise me in the smile of a child, the wisdom-filled words of an old animist, in the kind gesture of someone unknown? It came to me in the friendly gestures and the words of encouragement of the confrere with whom I lived. It moved my heart with the trusting, simple witness of the poor. It edified me with acts of generosity on the part of some Christians involved in the Christian community.

The Word really has taken care of us!

## 7. THE WORD OF REPOSE

The first Word allowing his entry into the “world to come” that a missionary expects to hear is: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Because you have been faithful in small things ...enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt 25, 21). Hoping that the Word which judges is the one we proclaimed as the Word of Mercy.

The Word does not hand us over to the Judge but places us lovingly in the hands of God. The Word brings us “the promise of reaching the place of rest” (Heb 4, 1). “We must, therefore, do everything we can to reach this place of rest” (Heb 4, 11). The Word, before ever being the object of our actions, is a Word which seeks and offers repose, the first fruits of that final “repose” of Love which will finally satisfy all the searching and thirsting of the human heart (Psalms 127; 131).

One of my most beautiful experiences of peace and serenity during recent years has been the practice of Lectio Divina. The Word gives real spiritual and psychological repose. For some years now, to crown the Lectio of the Gospel of the day, I have been reading part of the Song of Songs (which I subdivided into 30 parts, one for each day of the month. I take it as the fourth section of the Lectio, “contemplation”. The “Contemplation” of the Song of Songs and the cultivation of the “communion of saints” (especially reciting the Rosary) have been my greatest “spiritual” joys in recent years. The Song is the Word in dance and rhythm, beauty and fascination, joy and emotion, love and passion. To allow oneself to be carried away by the contemplation of this Word is like being taken up in an inebriating dance that lightens the feet and fills the heart with the joy of living.

Repose in the Word renews its bearer to wake them every morning (Isaiah 50, 4), infecting them with the urgency of the mission incarnate in Jesus (Mark 1, 35-39). The Word never rests (and neither can its bearer, therefore) until the Today of the Sabbath of the Lord comes.

Concluding with the Word of repose, I realise that I have, instead, made you tired with my too many words. Forgive me! I foresaw this and I have divided this sharing into seven points (7 to reach the place of repose!). In this way, some may take it in small doses, perhaps selecting one point or even simply abandoning this “volume”.

However, with your permission I would like to express one “last wish” on this anniversary day of the birth of Comboni: that the Dream nesting in the heart of Comboni through the Word that emerged

from the Heart of Christ may come alive also in us and burn with all its fascinating splendour to set fire to many other hearts!

Rome, 15 March, 2012.

*Fr. Manuel João P. Correia*

## **PROPOSAL FOR COMMUNITY SHARING**

### **1. A WORD OF PASSION**

Share our relationship with the Word: our first experience of being “seduced” by the Word, the role it had in our lives, our weaknesses in its regard.

### **2. A WORD CELEBRATED AND SHARED**

Share our experiences regarding the celebration and sharing of the Word in our communities.

### **3. A WORD INCARNATE**

Share events or concrete circumstances of our personal experience regarding the implications of being “bearers of the Word”.

### **4. A CRUCIFIED WORD**

Share our feelings and attitudes when faced with personal and collective counter-witness.

### **5. A WORD IN BLOOM**

Share concrete experiences of the power and fecundity of the Word of God in our apostolate.

### **6. A WORD THAT CARRIES US**

Share personal experiences of the continual and hidden presence of God who guides and leads our history.

### **7. A WORD OF REPOSE**

Share our experience of prayer with the Word of God: consolation, encouragement, apostolic motivation.