

Comboni - Consecration for the mission

The gift of consecration to God for the mission, with its nuptial aspect, takes up, in one who accepts it and lives it, dimensions of maternity, paternity, brotherhood, sisterhood, deep personal intimacy with God and sharing of life, both material and spiritual, with the brothers and sisters we are sent to.

Radically unique, the gift of consecration to God for the mission, with its nuptial aspect, takes up, in one who accepts it and lives it, dimensions of maternity, paternity, brotherhood, sisterhood, deep personal intimacy with God and sharing of life, both material and spiritual, with the brothers and sisters we are sent to.

Given the vastness of the topic, we choose to dwell on what is at present more appropriate and requiring to be stressed (and perhaps to be renewed), in the hope that, beginning from these simple points, the personal and community reflection may be continued and enriched by further ideas, knowledge and especially life experience.

Comboni – Consecration: essence and artificial dilemmas

It is not possible to truly understand either Daniel Comboni or his mission, or the work he has founded, or his the charism of whom he made us heirs (namely, our identity), without this spiritual dimension, this keyword: "consecration," and its meaning and implications on the practical side (see W 442, 1034).

We feel much more necessary and important to reflect on this consideration as we are confronted by the tendency of some people to separate consecration and mission, to want to consider mission above all or simply as a response to the needs of the world (peace, justice, dignity, fight against poverty and hunger, and so on), which are instead concrete and unavoidable expressions of mission. They would, though, separate it from the concept of consecration, as if the latter belonged to a tradition and a juridical institution of the Church, tied up with historical circumstances, but by now very much outdated, and not to the very root and constitutive aspect of mission (it considers mission in a philanthropic and social aspect rather than in its evangelising aspect of society).

Such interpretation seems to go through recurrent phases and exaggerations. After the Second Vatican Council, at the time of the special General Chapter that was to formulate the new Rule of Life, it has been a motivation for research and pronouncements in the line of questions such as: "For us Comboni Missionaries, what comes first, mission or consecration?", with the subtle "temptation" of privileging the mission, by detaching it from the "religious aspect" of consecration, the latter seen as an extra gift, at times cumbersome, but not essentially linked to the mission itself.

This tendency is coming back today through those who underline the dichotomy between mission and consecration, considering the latter as fitting to a peculiar type of religious life and almost an additional obligation attached to mission, if not an extra weight and an hindrance to it.

It is encouraging the fact that such a tendency gives rise, as a reaction, to a deeper search that helps us to perceive, contemplate, taste and live in more conscious manner a reality and values which, perhaps for a long time, we have taken for granted or dragged along out of traditional habit. It is dangerous to let ourselves be attracted only by forms of mission that are apparently more fascinating and satisfying our subtle and unconscious desire to "fulfil ourselves" and to appear as the protagonists who have kept abreast of things.

Similarly, it would be going against the revamping vitality of the Spirit and the Comboni perception if we were to close ourselves within forms of religious-missionary life that are devoid of attention to the persons and to the situations among whom we live, with our indifference to the signs of the time, the cultural diversities, the historical events and changes, etc.

An honest examination, backed by the testimony and the words of Comboni, verifies that it is not a matter of dichotomy or of a dilemma (consecration/mission), but of an intrinsic unity and of a reciprocal contribution. In reality, if mission emerges as a response to the needs of the world (of the individuals and

peoples of the world), it is because in the light of faith, in the deep relationship with God's love for each one of us and for humanity, we are prompted to give such a response in His name and with His help, to stake our entire life on it, as Christ himself has done and, like him, Daniel Comboni.

Comboni does not write dissertations on consecrated life, but he lives it and feels it to be a "natural" foundation (in fact a human-divine foundation) of his vocation and of those who will desire to be part of his undertakings.

Comboni does not theorise about holiness: he lives it and recognises its concrete aspects in those who live it.

The deep relationship that he notices between consecration and holiness establishes, in his perception, the connection between consecration and mission, so that it is necessary to be both holy and capable. And it is charity, that is the love of God conveyed to our hearts, that makes us so. Without "charity," which is rooted in God, the "capacity" becomes only concern with efficiency, productivity, organisation and protagonism. Mission requires another type of "capacity": the gift to transmit not only by words, but by witness the Gospel's message and real life, fostering communion, liberation, transformation of consciences, denunciation in order to renew a mentality and structures of sin...

Holiness and ability have as a common matrix God's charity.

Foundation and meaning

At the origin of mission, namely at the foundation of one's life, Comboni sees consecration as the concrete expression of "a life of the spirit and of faith" (W 2698, 2887), gushed forth as an obvious realisation of "a strong sense of God and an active interest in His glory and the good of souls" (W 2234). From this it springs up the interior impulse that moves him to operate "solely for his God, for the most abandoned souls of the earth, for eternity, moved by the pure sight of his God" (W 2698, 2702). Anyone not having such higher motivation and not operating in such direction "would lack the attitude in his ministry, and end up by finding himself in a kind of void and intolerable isolation" (W 2698, Rules 1871, chap. X).

We can see identified in such a statement the cause of certain psychological crisis from which vocational crisis develop. If the heart is not full of love for God and the people, it cannot be filled by anything else, not even by the effort to follow noble ideals or humanitarian and sociological ideologies. Only in God "our heart can find what it needs to be abundantly sustained and nurtured..." (W 2702).

In this motivations' radicalism, Comboni goes even further, saying: "furthermore, his mind does not seek in God the reasons of the Mission he has received from him, but works trusting on his word and on that of his Representatives, as a docile instrument of his adorable will, and in every event repeats with deep conviction and great happiness: 'servi inutiles sumus; quod debuimus facere fecimus' (Lc 17)" (W 2702). Which means that to place oneself at the service of mission is to place oneself unconditionally into God's hand, to become instruments of his love for the brothers and sisters whom He places on our journey and binds to our life. Instruments of that love that the missionaries discover and daily draw from contemplating and entering into the God's very Heart, made visible in the pierced Heart of Christ and wholly offered to the Father for His sons and daughters.

Comboni's writings are literally steeped in this way of understanding missionary life and with this deep conviction. His entire life is the best and unquestionable witness of this. It is not the spiritual rhetoric of a way of speaking tied to his time, nor the surge of abstract enthusiasm or the result of devotional practices and clerical norms that "cage" the new and daring journeys of the mission in the narrow passages of rules made up on paper by some canon law's experts without having had any "field" experience.

On the contrary, his writings are fundamentally connected to his life experience, full of conflicts and of very harsh trials and crosses. In them we can feel the essence of his soul and of his action, opening up the horizon of the life he offers to those who will follow him in the harsh undertaking of the African mission.

As Fr. Arnaldo Baritussio observes: "The confirmation that this consecration has the hallmark of a religious consecration, though Comboni does not refer to it as such, comes from the way he understands being together and doing mission".

Formation – The making of God's love one's own

Happy to have been "seized" by a love so immense as to appear unbelievable (see Comboni's reflections on "a God who died for us" (S 2720), and comforted by his experience of blessedness in the Spirit in the midst of the most absurd and painful situations, Comboni gives very clear directives for the formation of the Institute's members: "It is necessary to inflame the candidates with God's love and the strength of the love of Christ" (S 6656), to consequently base on this "Trinitarian" foundation the understanding, the quality and the ability to succeed in mission, as far as salvation is concerned.

"It is necessary to inflame them with charity that has its source from God and the love of Christ; when one truly loves Christ, then privations, sufferings and martyrdom become sweet." (S 6656).

Writing to Sembianti about the candidates in formation, Comboni says: "We have to dress them all in God's charity and in Christ's Spirit" (S 2374). The same he says when writing to Elisabeth Girelli concerning the personnel, men and women, of his Institute.

By making God's love poured in Jesus Christ one's own, it allows to turn egocentric people into persons who no longer place themselves at the centre of things, but opt for others, especially for the poorest, oppressed and "most in need". In the joy and wonder of having being chosen by God for His mission, the missionaries "will be blessed to offer themselves" to carry out God's plan, whatever the cost.

It is a question of a faith-relationship, not in the abstract, but of a relationship of heart to heart with a living God, who is in constant relationship with us. It is not a "thought out" God, but a God who lives in us, who gives Himself to us in the Word and in the Eucharist, who continually makes Himself present in the individual, community and people's history and in His creatures (including the whole of creation) and especially in His Saints. A God who takes us up in His life, draws us into His salvific event, makes us His Word and His Eucharist (sacrificed victim, broken bread, nourishment for all).

Centred in Christ's Heart

Comboni can see, and invites us to see, the highest revelation of such a God in the figure of Christ hanging on the cross, in His Heart open and wounded by His "excessive" love towards humanity, more than for the sudden recognition of death on the part of the centurion.

"On the cross, in the Transfixion, Christ achieves the peak of His consecration, where he appears chaste, poor and obedient without veils. ... To be a consecrated person means to be called to enter in Christ's consecration" to carry on His mission towards the brothers and sisters in greatest need, to the point of giving oneself completely, as He did.

This is the reason why we have to "keep our eyes constantly fixed on Christ crucified" (S 27220-21) in order to allow ourselves to be transformed by Him according to the measure of His love. For him the total dedication to the missionary cause is born and sustained "by keeping our eyes always fixed on Jesus Christ, loving Him tenderly, and endeavouring to understand ever deeper what is the meaning of a God who died on the Cross for the salvation of souls. If with living faith they contemplate and relish the mystery of so much love, they will be blessed to lose everything and to die for Him and with Him" (S 2720-21).

All the love the Father wishes to pour out onto the world, on this humanity wounded and oppressed by sin in order to redeem it and give it back life and freedom, has a face and a name: Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, his Christ, our Saviour.

Consecrated life has its foundation not on the fulfilment of an order or on some particular word of Christ, but on Christ himself, from his first coming into the world (at the virginal conception in Mary's womb). Jesus, the Word of the Father, is the consecrated one, wholly chaste, poor and obedient: He is the model and origin of every consecrated life and, at the same time, the missionary of the Father. In a way, therefore, the realisation of consecrated life "precedes" the Gospel's "historical" announcement. It helps one to better understand how inseparable are the authentic concepts of consecration and mission: the one implies the other and sheds light on the other. The Apostolic Exhortation on "Consecrated Life," issued after Vatican Council II (25 March 1996), clearly says that "mission is inherent in the very heart of every type of consecrated life" (no. 25). To accept and

welcome the call to missionary consecrated life is to be understood as a call "to become" ever more like Christ who was chaste, poor and obedient, word of the Father, fulfilled in the Spirit of love and moved by the Spirit to carry out, to the end, the Father's mission for the salvation of all.

Our earnest, total and nuptial belonging to God characterises, therefore, our identity and flows inevitably into mission.

In Comboni it is very clear the "nuptial" aspect both with regard to the "cross" (not morosely loved as a material instrument of torture, but as a sign of salvation and symbol of the infinite love of God in Christ) and with regard to Nigrizia, the people to whom God's love has sent him. A nuptial aspect that has all the characteristics of an all-absorbing and unifying passion and of a tenderness and indissoluble commitment till martyrdom.

Vows: a challenge for our time

By deepening and recovering such a "nuptial" aspect it makes us be on the same wave-length as Comboni, not only in our radically and irrevocably living out our missionary vocation, in offering new insight and encouragement for our life of prayer, contemplation and action and in inspiring new understanding about the vows that characterise it, about the community communion that distinguish it, about the total and unconditional commitment to the good of individuals, peoples and "Nigrizia" situations, but it is also a prophetic witnessing and a challenge encouraging men and women of our time to recapture the meaning and the courage of fidelity. Our generation, indeed, shrinks back from unbreakable bonds, regards as signs of an achieved freedom the fragility and fickleness of marriage relationships and even for choices of a more generous type it shelters itself behind the cliché "ad tempus".

To love and to give oneself "in a nuptial way" in the line of the Comboni understanding helps us to discover again the true value of a person (temporal and eternal), his/her priority in relation to things, projects and programmes, to recapture the meaning of the uniqueness of a person and of our own life, its infinitude even in the earthly experience's constraint, the confluence of everything in the unum necessarium that deserves our "forever" and renders "eternal" the passing of the present. Freed from the fragmentariness of events and sensations, we find again our interior and existential unity. In Comboni, "the pure love of God," "Africa my beloved," "Africa and the Africans that have taken possession of my heart," "the cross chosen as my indivisible and eternal spouse" are the only treasure of that heart "set aside by Christ," "forever".

The soul of mission

The vows, lived in this way, are essential to the mission rather than an "obstacle" to it. Chastity expresses the absolute love of God (in its nuptial aspect, indissolubility, uniqueness, totality, irrevocability, radical quality) and reproduces the Trinitarian dynamic about the mission of the Son for the salvation of the world.

Every service to our brothers and sisters, each missionary action, even the smallest and apparently insignificant, takes on, on account of it, the infinite and eternal value of the love by which it is moved. From it comes its short or long term efficacy, visible or otherwise. This does not exempt (rather it requires it, because love is not sloppiness, but wisdom) from searching for the ways, types and kinds of intervention best suited and aimed at the real good of those who receive the evangelising news (see the guidelines and initiatives for the "new" mission).

Poverty, on the pattern of God's humility and the relinquishing of His attributes endured for the love of our salvation, is to be lived as "identification with the poor-sharing-humility". Mission demands the leaving of everything, getting close to "the poorest and most abandoned," "making common cause with them," never pursuing oneself in anything or acting for one's good name or striving for the success of one's projects according to personal criteria for the sole reason that these are one's own projects. It is not really possible "to make common cause with the least," even if one lived more miserably than the poor themselves, as long as he/she lives for the idol of his/her own "image" (where the most important aim is "the realisation of oneself") and is affected by protagonism, the subtle surrogate of one's will to rule.

"The missionary, totally void of himself, works solely for his God, for the souls the most abandoned of the earth, for eternity" (S 702 – 2890).

Obedience is fidelity to God patterned on that of the Son, to the very self-immolation for the realisation of His project of love. It implies that we all get involved in a free and earnest search for God's will (which cannot be counterfeited by the authoritarianism or denied by individualism; it requires dialogue and co-responsibility).

In the true Comboni understanding, obedience dictates the way to be followed by the Institute as a family ("little cenacle of apostles," S 2648), demands love and obedience to the Church and fidelity to the undertaken common enterprise ("nothing without the Church, because without it all our efforts amount to nothing," S 959).

Every missionary must be willing to work like the "stone hidden under the ground to be part of the foundations of a new and huge building" (S 2701).

A mission sprung forth from the Heart

Initiated by the Holy Spirit in the intimacy of the Heart of Christ pierced on the cross, Comboni sees in it, and in the cross itself, the perennial symbol of the love that saves and incessantly gushes forth from the Father's heart. From there it spreads that "divine Flame" that marks Comboni forever, reveals to him the plan of salvation that God, through him, wants to take to the peoples of Africa and drives and urges him by the strength of that charity "to embrace in his arms and to bestow a kiss of peace and of love to those unhappy brothers and sisters of his" (S 2742-43).

From that interior and transforming encounter, Comboni is led to see himself and the work of the regeneration of Nigrizia in such a different light as to be compelled to appeal to the heart of the whole Church. From that heartbeat of the Heart of Christ, which the Spirit makes pulsate in Comboni's heart, springs forth the idea of the Plan, which is not so much a written manifesto, but rather the revelation of the love Christ has for the Africans. Christ's passion that becomes implanted in Comboni's heart, wants to become a concrete reality and it does so through Comboni's heart and the heart of those who will follow him.

That charismatic moment, so important in his life and so deeply ecclesial, plots in an unmistakable way also our path of consecration for the mission. From this the necessity to rediscover the relevance of the Plan in the mysticism of the mission that inspires it, in its main outlines, in the prophetic intuitions it proposes and that are essentially valid and capable of creating new ways of evangelisation.

Among the suggestions that emerge from the Plan, we can mention the need to make a critical and courageous reading of the signs of the times, taking up positions that even go hazardously against the tide (as Comboni did in his intuition and announcing that it was "the hour of Africa" in a time of very high contempt for Nigrizia). Comboni's way of reading the signs of the times makes use of the means of human research available to him, but it also reads history in the perspective of God ("the Catholic light"), which is superior to that of the philanthropist and is not conditioned by economic or political interests. Comboni announces the hour of God, denounces injustice, poverty and the dereliction of the peoples to whom he intends to take freedom and salvation, offers a strategy that he recognises valid and evaluates the subjects-objects of the mission: "To save Africa with the Africans" (S 2568-69); encourages the whole Church (hierarchy and faithful) to take part and to become responsible in the implementation of the plan for the redemption-regeneration of Africa. He shows an incredible trust in the Africans, in their capacity to become, with God's grace, living and active members of the Church, and also an equally great trust in women, as missionary personnel as well as local agents in the missions (catechists, teachers, etc.).

His significantly new and prophetic attitude about Africa, opens for his collaborators and future missionaries the chapter of the preparation of the local clergy and laypeople, of collaboration on an equal footing or dependently from the local hierarchy, of the ability to work together, of opening venues for peoples' autonomy, mature and responsible citizenship, ecumenism (S 3049), inter-religious dialogue, peaceful and respectful ability to cooperate – also at the programming and decision

making level, – with missionary women and more generally with the feminine personnel, in Church and in society. The missionary women have the duty to develop their own style of formation and to take up their own responsibilities and, especially, the commitment to cooperate towards the promotion of women in the family and society.

Towards the new challenges

Comboni's gift and way of confronting the challenges of his time is an invitation to us all to open our eyes and to face up to the new challenges of our time: we only mention the religious pluralism, the community and ecclesial internationality, the inculturation of the Gospel and of the Church, the reality of a secularised world, globalisation, communication through all the modern mass-media, the culture of money and omnipresence of powerful multinational companies, the market and economic rules, the arms sale, wars, the migration and immigration phenomena, the loss of the human community's basic values...

The Comboni perspective invites us (re-directs us) to start afresh from the same loving adherence of the Founder to the mystery of the Heart of Christ and of the cross, which, if we rediscover its deepest meaning, brings salvation. Unfortunately, contemporary mentality, even the religious one, easily shuns from the cross or presents it in an abridged manner, instead of letting it guide us in providing adequate and well-thought-out answers to the challenges of mission, framing them in a wider and higher vision and on a faith-based awareness that the true protagonist of the mission is the Lord. "Since the work that I am doing is entirely God's work, it is particularly with Him that we have to deal for all large or small affairs concerning mission: it is, therefore, very important that among the members in the mission piety and the spirit of prayer reign supreme" (S 3615).

That kind of prayer, which has brought Comboni to contemplate and to "enter" into the mystery of "a God who died for us", got him to consider the final breath of the Crucified and the blood and water that flowed from His Heart not as events of the past, entirely over and done with in his Resurrection and relegated to the sphere of memories. On the contrary, they are realities that are being perpetuated and constantly come true in those who accept them and share in the commitment, sacrifice and love, which, through immolation, regenerate and give life.

The fire of the Spirit ("the divine Flame of charity") is presently at work in the ecclesial manifestation of the Founder's holiness (his canonisation). In the reality of the Mystical Body and of the communion of saints, the Love that saves is flowing from the Heart of Christ to that of Comboni and from his to ours. In Christ he lives, he is present, today, he keeps working and is now living and present in our consecrated missionary life. His desire to have a thousand lives to give for Nigrizia is neither a dream nor, even less, an illusion: it is and it may still be a tangible reality.

Questions for our reflection

- What does consecration mean to me and how do I perceive it and live it in its relationship to mission?

- How is this relationship understood at community's and at the Institute's level?

- Holiness: is it "too big" a word or an outdated concept?

- The mission that flows from the Heart of Christ and embraces the mystery of the cross is it perhaps incompatible with the requirements of justice, liberation, human rights' promotion...? Or incompatible with my personal realization?

- Am I aware that there are living witnesses to the Comboni charism in our present time, even if not ostentatious, and do I make an effort to follow their example, or do I just prefer to criticise "what is wrong" (in the community, Institute, Church...)? Do I pray for those people or situations that I believe in need to be "reformed"?

Sr. M. Irene Bersani, smc