



1864 - 2014

*Letter for the 150th Anniversary
of the Plan*



**THE PLAN IN THE HISTORY OF
THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF COMBONI
DURING THE PAST 150 YEARS**

“From 1857, finding myself on the Mission of the Kich on the White Nile here in Central Africa, I experienced all the trials of this difficult apostolate and since I had been on the point of dying eleven times because of the climate and the enormous efforts, I was forced to return to Europe where, after a few years, having recovered, I thought of the way to return to this battlefield to sacrifice my life for the salvation of Africans. It was 18th September 1864 when, leaving the Vatican where I had been to the Beatification of Mary Margaret Alacoque, I had the idea of presenting the idea of the Plan to the Holy See, in order to return to the apostolate of Central Africa. It was the Sacred Heart of Jesus which enabled me to overcome the mountain of difficulties in implementing my Plan for the Regeneration of Africa through Africa herself.” (Writings 3302).

**To the members of the Comboni Institutes
and all who draw their inspiration
from the charism of St. Daniel Comboni**

1. Cordial greetings

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

With this message we wish to celebrate the 150 years of the *Plan for the regeneration of Africa*, that Plan in view of which Daniel Comboni saw it was necessary to found in Verona the

Institute of the Missions for Africa with a variety of members, men and women, religious and lay.

Born from the *Plan* and for the *Plan*, we cannot forget that this is the bond left to us by our Founding Father, a precious legacy which, still today, the Comboni Family intends to receive and preserve with deep gratitude, responsibility and commitment.

We who are responsible for the Institutes founded by him – Comboni Missionary Sisters and Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus – and for the other missionary expressions that draw their inspiration from his charism – Secular Comboni Missionary Women and Comboni Lay Missionaries –, also aware of the many other persons and groups of laity who, in growing numbers and different forms, live with us the Comboni missionary passion, wish to write this letter to share a brief reflection on the Plan that still accompanies our missionary life and challenges us to become a response to the various missionary situations that we live today in those places where we are present.

In this letter we also wish to express our desire to show the relevance today and the validity of the insights which St. Daniel Comboni put together in the pages of the Plan, recognising that it has been a real and effective means in the missionary work carried out by so many Confreres and Sisters during the past 150 years, first in Africa and then in other parts of the world.

We also wish, if it is possible, that this reflection may become a way of **celebrating** this anniversary, allowing ourselves to be affected by the urgent needs of the mission which, notwithstanding the considerable efforts to bring the Gospel to those who are far away, continue to challenge us.

We wish to **hear** again, by means of the thoughts impressed upon the Plan, the cry of St. Daniel Comboni who calls us to

consecrate our lives to those who are, in the world of today, the poorest and most abandoned, who have the right to receive the proclamation of the Word.

We also believe that this is an opportunity to **give thanks** to God for the gift of the Spirit who worked in the heart of our Founder and in the lives of many of us who succeeded in carrying out the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa by the joyful giving of their lives in the mission and for the mission.

We hope that these few lines may be an invitation to continue to live our consecration with the same passion that moved St. Daniel Comboni right from the time of its first edition.

2. The Plan – A life rather than a document

One of the first impressions we get when reading the Plan is certainly that of finding ourselves with a text that exudes life, intense passion and a tremendous desire to find the most suitable ways to respond to the need that men and women of every age have of encountering God.

The Plan, therefore, is not merely a document of precise rules, all planned and calculated. Its pages create an atmosphere that expresses the dream, the desire and the urgency of bringing life and the intuitions of one who believes in the possibility of doing what many consider impossible. One perceives the determination not to abandon the mission, especially at the moment when the difficulties are increasing and the future is uncertain. It is a text that gives off the fragrance of faith, encouraging one to keep going, convinced that one is working for something willed by God.

The Plan speaks of a project that accompanies life and leads one to concentrating all one's energy on a single undertaking, something one takes on wholeheartedly and which leaves no room for anything but the mission. It is an idea that abides

with all its power more in the heart than in the head. In this sense, it is a way of transforming into a work of love that which is understood in the heart.

The Plan, in fact, was not born in Comboni's head, nor was it the result of speculation; it was born rather from the desire to become an instrument of God to manifest the love to which all his sons and daughters have the right. If we remember what Comboni wrote in his letter dated 31 July, 1873, to Mgr. De Girardin, we can easily see that the Plan was first and foremost a lived experience and then a written proposal.

3. A missionary response born of reality

Let us listen again to what Comboni says: "*I experienced all the trials of this difficult apostolate... I thought of the way to return to this battlefield to sacrifice my life for the salvation of Africans*" (Writings 3302). The Plan is not just a personal strategy but the reading and assimilation of a reality whose challenges compel St. Daniel to become creative and able to give substance to a work with a successful outcome for the mission.

It was born, therefore, from the ability to read and understand the reality in which one is present and to interact with it. It was a reality marked by slavery, by criteria of profit and exploitation, by the impossibility, for the Africans, of living according to their dignity. It was a reality in which the values of the Kingdom were ignored or denied. In this context, the Plan reveals itself as a humble and, at the same time, intelligent work.

Seeing our missionary presences and the situations in which we work, how often are we compelled to admit that the situation, even today, is not much different? Today, in fact, we often are witnesses to the violence, the violation of human

rights, the discrimination and slavery suffered by so many of our brothers and sisters.

4. Great insight

As we read the Plan, it is easy to find in it a multiplicity of ideas, projects and means to be used which rotate around a single insight. It is a task to which all those who find themselves challenged by the mission are called to contribute, thus making the mission itself a task of the Church.

“The Work must be catholic, not just Spanish, French, German or Italian. All Catholics must help the poor Africans, because one nation alone would not succeed in succouring the whole African race. Catholic institutions, such as that of the venerable Olivieri, the Mazza Institute, the work of Fr Lodovico or the Society of Lyons, etc. have doubtless done a great deal of good for individual Africans. Yet, up till now, a beginning has still to be made on planting Catholicism in Africa and ensuring that it lasts. By our plan we hope to be able to open a way for the Catholic faith among all the tribes in the whole territory occupied by Africans. To attain this end, it seems to me that all the initiatives already existing will have to be brought together, and that their supporters will have to keep their eyes fixed firmly on the noble aim and so set aside all their own individual interests” (Writings 944).

This is a matter of a work which leaves no room for personal glory or wanting to do everything alone. The Plan is a work of collaboration which involves all who respond with a generous heart and conveys the meaning that the mission is a gift received and offered freely with joy.

Comboni was thinking of a “great missionary movement” involving everyone and everything in the mission for Africa,

counting on finding “approval, support and help in the hearts of the Catholics of the entire world”. For this reason, he travelled far and wide throughout Europe, even considering going to America to seek collaborators, funds, spiritual sustenance.

It was from this impetus that the Comboni Institutes were born and, later, the Secular Comboni Missionary Women and the Comboni Lay Missionaries. The work, however, is even broader and never ceases to inspire both those who have embraced a form of consecrated life and those who, as baptised people, find they are called to mission. All are challenged to discover how to unite purposes and resources to collaborate and give continuous energy to the mission.

5. Inspired by an encounter

“I believe this plan is the work of God, because the thought of it burst upon me on 15th September while I was doing the triduum to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque; and on 18th September, the day this Servant of God was beatified, Cardinal Barnabò finished reading my Plan. I worked on it for nearly 60 continuous hours” (Writings 926).

The Plan, therefore, is the result of a long journey of research, enquiry, consultation and experience that meant paying a personal price for it, but this is not all.

There is another factor that must not be forgotten, that it is the fruit of the experience of the encounter with the Lord and of hours spent in prayer and seeking the will of God in all of this adventure.

Comboni never doubted that the Plan was a gift from God, a grace mediated by Mary, the power of the Spirit who proved generous in his inspirations. In this sense, the Plan is a concrete way of saying that the missionary work is not a

human affair. The Mission is the work of God and, like all his works, requires a great faith which may come about only in the silence of prayer, in the encounter that permits the will of God to be heard.

6. An experienced lived by the sons and daughters of Comboni

6.1 A glance at the past to better plan the future

They are not few in number, those sons and daughters, beginning with the first 22 who, on 29 November, 1867, led by Daniel Comboni, left from Marseilles for Egypt. They comprised sixteen “African girls” – nine of whom came from the Mazza Institute in Verona – three Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition and three religious Camillian men.

The first stage of the journey was at Cairo where the actualisation of the Plan commenced, giving rise to the first of those “*Preparatory Institutes*” that were supposed to “*surround Africa*”.

Two years later, in 1869 and still in Cairo, Daniel Comboni entrusted the administration of a third institute, “*The Holy Family*”, to four African women instructors, one of whom was the young Dinka Domitilla Bakhita. It was a public parish school for girls, open to girls of all rites and religions, including Islam.

It was an important moment. The main purpose of the Plan – *regenerate Africa with Africa* – was beginning to become a reality. It was a reality that, four years later, Comboni reinforced when he included the young African women teachers in the expedition which, in 1873, he himself led first from Cairo to Khartoum and then from Khartoum to El-Obeid, where he entrusted the founding of the “*Female Work*” of Kordofan to Domitilla Bakhita, Fortunata Quascè and Faustina Stampais.

Then, in 1881, Bishop Daniel sent as parish priest of the promising community of Malbes, in Kordofan, Fr. Antonio Dobale, of the Galla tribe, one of the eleven “African children” whom the Mazza Institute received in 1860 and whom, in 1878, *Propaganda Fide* had ordained a priest for Central Africa.

At that moment, Daniel Comboni expressed his confidence in his missionaries: Priests, Sisters (Pie Madri della Nigrizia) and lay men and women. The trust was well deserved as was shown at the tragic event in that autumn of 1881, the unexpected death of the Founder.

At that time there emerged among the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, the figure of Mother Maria Bollezzoli who, in a letter dated 18 October 1881, firmly urged the Sisters to follow steadily in the footsteps of the Founder: “*Do not turn back but walk confidently in the footsteps left for you by your benevolent Father*”. She continued to follow the inspiration of the Plan, forming in that period hundreds of Sisters who left for the mission in Africa.

The emergence of the Mahdi, when the men and women missionaries had to face prison, martyrdom and forced exodus, was a deep experience that left its mark and put fidelity to the Plan of Comboni to the test.

Those who succeeded to take refuge in Egypt with Mgr. Sogaro also had to face the difficult moment of “passage” consisting in the transformation of the original Institute into a men’s religious congregation (1885).

When the first *Sons of the Sacred Heart* arrived in Egypt, it became clear that there had been a change in the scale of values indicated by the Founder. Before the demands of the mission, there came now the religious spirit – emphasised so much during the novitiate by the Jesuit Fathers – that was meant to inspire and guide the life of the community.

A painful and troublesome tension between institution and charism was being created. In those times of change, those who suffered most from this and had to bear its consequences were the lay people and the “African girls” who found themselves somewhat excluded by the institution. Nor was this the only time when fidelity to the charism seemed to be lacking. We cannot, in fact, but register the sorrowful episode of the division of the Combonians into two separate Institutes.

6.2 From the Plan to Africa and the World

We continue to turn our gaze on history. Even if it could not be said that fidelity to the Plan was so evident among the new recruits who continued to reach Egypt during the whole period of the Diaspora, neither could it be said that love for the mission and passion for Africa was in any way diminished.

In fact, the end of the Mahdi revolt found them all – *Sons of the Sacred Heart and Pie Madri della Nigrizia* – ready to return. All the more so since the Sudan had been entrusted, as a mission territory, to the young male congregation (1894).

It is enough to skip through the pages of the magazine *Nigrizia* to see, for instance, how much the Vicars Apostolic Antonio Maria Roveggio and Francesco Saverio Geyer expended themselves. The famous steamer of the mission, again set to work, even though with a different name, immediately recommenced, along the Nile, the exploration which the Mahdi had caused to be abandoned. As early as 1902, the mission station of Lul was opened a short distance from Gondokoro, among the Shilluk.

Costanza Caldara (Superior General of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia from 1901 to 1931) was aware of what was required by the opening of the new mission stations; Francesca Dalmasso and Maria Bonetti, in 1900, were the first in the ranks of the Sisters ready to return to Sudan and, if necessary, to proceed beyond. During the following years, nine

communities were opened in other countries of Europe and the Middle East; starting in the fifties of last century, the Comboni Missionaries and the Comboni Sisters extended their presence to the Americas.

Of the “African girls” whom Daniel Comboni had been following with so much care so that they could “*succeed in becoming apostles of their nation on the basis of my Plan*” (Writings 2012), no further mention was unfortunately made. This helps us to understand how an aspect of the insight of Comboni, at a certain point, was abandoned. To a certain extent it is still so. Even today, we find it hard to leave behind a form of institutional protagonism and value the catholicity of the Plan as desired and foreseen by Daniel Comboni.

The Plan, however, had not been entirely forgotten. Towards 1938, while in various Prefectures and Vicariates of Central Africa entrusted to the *Sons of the Sacred Heart* seminaries that received young African men were being multiplied, a group of Ugandan girls expressed their desire to consecrate themselves to God in that young, local Church.

Thanks to the sensitivity of the Comboni men and women who accompanied these groups – and also others that appeared over the years – we are glad to see today that several of these groups have become autonomous local Institutes, some with a strong missionary spirit shown by their having communities in other continents, thus giving concrete expression to the dream of Comboni.

This means that, even without an explicit declaration of intent, there was, among the sons and daughters of Comboni, a spirituality that sustained fidelity to the spirit of the Plan. The Special General Chapters of the Institutes and the celebrations of the foundation centenaries were meaningful moments during which there was deep reflection on charismatic identity, on spirituality and on the Plan of Comboni.

These events gave impetus to research and direct knowledge of the writings of Comboni and of the history of the Institutes. Then, in the light of the documents of Vatican II and of the expansion of the Institutes outside the African continent, a more studied reflection on the identity of the charism in fidelity to the Plan, which involved all the members, was begun.

In the course of the years, the work “together” as “men and women”, as male and female religious and missionaries, brought joy, mutual help and growth but also fatigue, misunderstandings and even some divisions and hurts. With the new awareness that the women have of themselves and of their role in the Church and in society, the Pie Madri della Nigrizia have, too, reassessed the profile that Comboni had intended for them in his Plan: *“I was the first to involve the omnipotent ministry of the woman of the Gospel and of the Sister of charity, who is the shield, strength and guarantee of the Missionary’s ministry”* (Writings 5284).

Proceeding on our historical journey, we find that, during the fifties of last century, through the insight of a Comboni Missionary, the Institute of the Secular Comboni Missionary Women was initiated with the purpose of missionary cooperation or, in other words, to bring about initiatives and involve everyone in the mission. This insight was confirmed by Vatican II which brought a new understanding of the laity, of their specific vocation to the mission and their right to participate fully in it.

This is demonstrated by the most recent expression, chronologically speaking, that is, the birth of the Comboni Lay Missionaries and the formation of groups of lay men and women who, drawing their inspiration from the Comboni charism, view themselves as enrichment for the entire Comboni Family and for the missionary Church.

The most evident fruit which the spirit of the Plan has continued to bear is the abundance of religious and lay vocations to the mission in countries once considered “mission territory”. Here we are in the presence of a great gift which we must protect, aware of the fact that it challenges us to embrace without reserve and with enthusiasm the interculturality of the mission today.

As is plain for all to see, it is a long, varied and sometimes tiring journey within the Comboni Family, a journey that still today merits and demands our attention. It is a question of increasing the awareness and firm purpose of everyone to work and to be missionary men and women within the perspective of the Plan in its most intimate liveliness and originality.

6.3 Vitality and relevance of the Plan

Everyone agrees that today the Church is living through a particular moment regarding its missionary awareness. Pope Francis, right from the start of his pontificate, imparting a particular tone to his ministry as Bishop of Rome, emphasised the urgency, the importance and the necessity for every Christian to live out the missionary vocation. His invitation to go out, to go to the existential peripheries and the encounter with our poorest brothers and sisters is awakening in the whole Church a new spirit that makes us aware of the treasure we have in the Gospel and the importance of communicating it to experience deep joy.

In this context of a new sending and of clarity concerning the necessity of assuming the missionary dimension of our Baptism, we are confronted with the sort of language and proposal that cause the mission to be seen as a task that belongs to everyone, insofar as we recognise ourselves as disciples of Jesus and associated with his mission.

This commitment – we are told – cannot be the responsibility of just a small group or of some people who feel they are called to give their lives for the mission; it is, instead, a commitment and task of the whole Church. In this the great relevance and vitality of the Plan is certainly evident.

6.4 Starting again together, as the Comboni Family and in the spirit of the Plan

From the year 1996, and more so from the year 2003, Comboni the Saint again brings himself before us more alive and present than ever with his charism, gathering us together to celebrate him. Events such as the beatification and canonisation were privileged moments for an encounter of story-telling, acquaintances and celebration that brought about reconciliation and the renewal of forces around a common father. With joy we were able to see that, to celebrate such important, if not unique moments in Comboni history, we were again united: *Pie Madri della Nigrizia, Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, Secular Comboni Missionary Women, Comboni Lay Missionaries* and other groups of *Lay Men and Women*. United, yet distinct, each with their own Constitutions and specific project of apostolic work.

The event of the anniversary we are celebrating this year urges us to make a memorial of past experience for a re-launching that includes the provocations and questions that our situation and those of missionary life present. Comboni left us a manner of ministry deeply rooted in his mystical experience and his passion for people and the mission. This experience and passion of his are inseparably present in the various aspects – spiritual, mystical, prophetic and methodological – of the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa.

The rapid changes in the world of today and the challenges of the Churches and peoples with whom we live, make us feel the urgent need to deepen, by means of systematic reflection,

our Comboni ministeriality lived out as a **call** profoundly rooted in God, as **participation** in the maternity/paternity of God who generates life in complete and gratuitous giving, **brotherhood** with Jesus, among ourselves and with the people we serve along the dusty road of their journey, the **incarnation** of our spirituality, **presence** in history alongside the poor and the excluded, **journeying** with the people so that all may have life and have it in abundance, **awareness** of the temporariness of our presence and service, believing in the people, their ability to regenerate themselves and in the methodology of decreasing so that others may increase.

It is, therefore, important that we assume *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC)* and *dialogue and reconciliation* as overlapping values that permeate all the ministries. It is equally important for us to review our methodology in the ministries: *making common cause*, being *hidden stones* so that others may grow, inculturation and insertion, the commitment to networking/collaborating (with the local Churches, the Comboni Family, other Institutes and various organisations), open to what is new that is present in the mind of society and its expressions.

In the choice of our ministries, it is necessary that we allow ourselves to be questioned by the emerging challenges, especially by the **human trafficking** of women and children, by **immigration** and **refugees**, the situation of peoples of **African ancestry, indigenous and nomadic pastoral peoples**, to give a meaningful response in our time.

Reflection upon mission in dialogue is of special importance for each one of us since the world is moving towards religious and cultural pluralism, challenging our convictions and methodology.

Our charismatic heredity shapes our pastoral approach in the various ministries and opens our minds and hearts to the essential dimension of **dialogue**, calling us “*to be a sign of the*

love of God in the world, a love without exclusion or preference". We are, therefore, called to become a *prophetic sign* in dialogue and service, a bridge between peoples, by means of our daily experience of mission, living side by side with peoples of various cultures and faiths.

This dialogue manifests itself in simple daily gestures and in **the encounter with other churches and Christian communities**, to become a sign and proclamation of Christ, the source of unity; **with non-Christian religions**, especially with **traditional religions and Islam**, to become a prophetic sign in the common search for God; **with cultures**, to transform humanity by means of a common commitment for a more just world.

The spirituality inherited from the Plan, "*feeling one's heart beat in unison with the Heart of Christ*", moves us to bring the "*kiss of peace*" to every geographical and existential periphery because Comboni's Africa has become the criterion to find where the "*poorest and most abandoned*" are in the world and where "*the footprints of our benevolent Father*" are to be seen, and to continue being faithful to his Plan in this moment of history, after 150 years.

7. Conclusion

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We have, therefore, many reasons to celebrate this event, many reasons to be proud of it while, at the same time, being challenged by it and many reasons for reflection.

With St. Paul, that great missionary apostle, we say: "*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word*" (2 Ts 2, 16-17).

We are many who have been moved by the gift Jesus made to his Church and to each one of us, in St. Daniel Comboni and in the fruit of his creativity – the Plan for the regeneration of Africa. We shall work with our eyes fixed on the same goal upon which Comboni fixed his eyes and his heart, even though we will not all do the same work or in the same manner.

Mutual acceptance, respecting and valuing the diversity of services and roles will strengthen communion and allow us to be witnesses, in the missionary world, of a *diversity* that has been finally recognized and reconciled.

We wish, in fact, that there may be, in the Comboni Family of today, room for diversity recognised in equality of the styles of life; we wish to learn how to recognise the talents of each group to help them bear fruit for the Kingdom, working as a team.

In this, may all our brothers and sisters, saints and martyrs, starting from the prisoners of the Mahdi, help us. Above all, may our Father, St. Daniel Comboni, who wanted us to be "*holy and capable*", help us. May he make us capable of new and truly evangelical relations and of living equality in diversity, making common cause with the poor and the excluded, without depriving them of their right to make their own choices in life and in their own paths of faith.

It is only by doing this that we will be able to respond effectively to the challenges emerging from the world.

Rome, 15 September, 2014

150th Anniversary

of the Plan for the Regeneration of Africa

The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus

The Comboni Missionary Sisters

The Secular Comboni Missionary Women

The Comboni Lay Missionaries



Rome, 15th September 2014

The Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus
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