

DIVISION (1923)

REUNIFICATION AND THE RULE OF LIFE (1979)

COMBONI A SAINT (2003)

- In the Comboni Institute there have been four closely connected events: the division (1923), the reunification and the new Rule of Life (1979) and the canonisation of Comboni (2003).

- One may well ask: what brought about the division? How did reunification come about?

- These few short pages may help to understand both events as to their motives, leadership, developments and repercussions.

1923: the wound of division

In 1923 the Comboni Institute was canonically divided into two separate and autonomous Congregations. The date is something of a watershed – a line drawn between two eras – in the journey towards reunification that culminated in 1979.¹

What happened in 1923 had precedents that may partly explain but never justify the division. Right from the beginnings of the mission of Central Africa, before, during and after Mons. Comboni, missionaries coming from central Europe (Austria, Germany, Slovenia, etc.) were consistent numerically, economically and methodologically and the two groups of missionaries, the Italians and the Austro-Germans, did not always succeed in achieving harmony and integration, either in Verona or in Egypt and Sudan.

Precedents of a sorrowful event

According to the Austrian Fr. J. Dichtl, Comboni's secretary, the Founder himself would have liked to have opened another house away from Verona. It was in 1895, in Brixen-Bressanone, a historic and artistic city in northern Italy, that a house was opened, the first outside Verona, the city where Comboni had founded (1867) his Institute, which in 1885 was transformed into a religious Congregation (FSCJ).

¹ No global, historical study of the division-reunification has as yet been made; we only have partial studies.

The choice of Brixen – an important episcopal see in South Tyrol – was the result of serious clashes, imperial, episcopal, Vatican, Combonian... The *Missionshaus* in Austro-Hungarian territory, greatly desired by the Emperor in Vienna, Protector of the African Mission, was opened as a residence and house of formation for German-speaking missionaries.² The opening of Brixen had considerable symbolic and historical importance: it signified a challenge to unity and inter-culturality. The question dragged on until 1919 and resulted in what happened in 1923.³

The first Superior of Brixen was Fr. Franz Heymans, a Dutchman, accompanied by the German Brothers Klemens Schrör and Christian Platz, and some novices. On the day he arrived, Fr. Heymans went straight to the nearby monastery of Novacella (*Neustift*) to greet the great friend and benefactor of Comboni, the Augustinian Canon J. C. Mitterrutzner. The community had modest beginnings, living in an old country house. Two years later, in July 1897, came the great powerhouse of Brixen, the German Fr. Francisco Xaver Geyer, a man of extraordinary missionary, intellectual and administrative stature, a man with a rich experience of life in the mission in Egypt and Sudan: a passionate admirer of Comboni whose first biography he wrote in 1882, a great friend of Mitterrutzner and an effective motivator in the fields of fund-raising and vocations promotion.

Fr. Geyer, seeing that the house was too small, in two years had a new building put up big enough for 60/70 aspirants. For educational, vocational and economic reasons, in 1898 he launched the monthly magazine *Stern der Neger* (Star of the Blacks) to provide information on the African mission; in 1900, he founded the missionary calendar *Werk des Erlösers* (Holy Redeemer Guild), to keep in touch with friends and benefactors.

In 1903, at the age of 44, Fr. Geyer was appointed Bishop Vicar Apostolic of Khartoum, the third successor of Comboni in that see, after F. Sogaro and A. Roveggio. Mons. Geyer was a leader and was an important reference point

² See: ALDO GILLI, *Historia del Instituto misionero comboniano...*, Madrid 1984, pp. 135.

³ See: REINHOLD BAUMANN, *Geschichte der Deutschsprachigen Comboni-Missionare*, Ellwangen 2009, pp. 448.

for some positions and choices of the German group, to such an extent that the superiors in Verona seemed to consider Brixen and Khartoum as rivals.

Tensions between the two groups

In 1913, after some tensions between Fr. F. Vianello, Superior General in Verona, and Mons. Geyer, Bishop of Khartoum, the Vicariate was divided into two parts: the north being entrusted to the Germans and the south to the Italians, in the hope of having more internal harmony.

The tensions concerned the differences between formation received in Brixen and that in Verona and the method of missionary apostolate; there were Italian anti-Austrian movements (*Risorgimento*) and, in Austria, analogous ill feelings towards Italians. Tensions worsened between Italians and Austrians during the First World War (1914-18). The victory of the Italians created wounds and resentment that made relations even worse due to the border changes: Trent and Bolzano came under Italy, the Brenner Pass became the new frontier between Italy and Austria, the diocese of Brixen lost its territory north of the Brenner... Many Trentines, Tyrolese and Austrians had to change their passports and 'become Italians'.

The 1919 General Chapter decided to create a German Province

With these premisses, the Institute came to its third General Chapter (Verona, 22-9/1-10, 1919), during which Fr. Paolo Meroni⁴ was elected Superior General with his Assistants: A. Vignato and F. Vianello (Italians), F. Heymans (Dutch) and Jakob Lehr (German). On 29 September, the word *Province*⁵ was pronounced: "Fr. Wilfling proposes to the Chapter that the German-speaking houses become a Province: the Chapter approves and the President (Fr. Meroni) assures that it will discuss the theme when the 'political circumstances'⁶ are clarified". The implications of the word '*Province*' were not discussed but it was clear that a change in the

⁴ Fr. Meroni (1873-1939), a scholar of Islam, was a missionary in Khartoum with Geyer. As General Superior (1919-31), promoted the expansion of the Comboni Missionaries in Italy, he started the *Piccolo Missionario* and *Bollettino*, and introduced the cause of the canonization of Comboni (1927).

⁵ Cfr. *Libro Capitolare I - 1899-1940*, in ACR C/271/1, p. 80.

⁶ The "political circumstance" referred to Germans interned in Egypt, as in wartime.

government structure and more autonomy were needed, without compromising the unity of the Institute.

Two years later, in the autumn of 1921, Fr. Meroni, following the Chapter's mandate, enquired of each German Comboni if the time had come to create an Austria-Germany Province: of 29 votes, 20 were in favour. However, a few months later, at the Council meeting on 29 December, 1921, Fr. Meroni expressed unexpected conclusions: there was to be no Austria-Germany Province but the novitiate and scholasticate in Brixen were to be closed so as to give the same formation to all at Venegono Superiore (Varese) and in Verona.

Fathers Heymans and Lehr protested against this decision which went against the view of the Chapter. In spite of everything, quite a few Germans were willing to obey the Fr. General and were not yet thinking of an eventual separation from the Institute. However, the break was coming: faced with the prospect of total absorption, some of those in charge (Frs. J. Lehr, A. Ipfelkofer, J. Klassert, D. Kauczor and others) were considering and promoting a form of separation. "Like the branch of a Benedictine abbey which, once mature, becomes an independent abbey", suggested Fr. Kauczor, a missionary from Slovenia working in Khartoum and who would soon go to South Africa. Mons. Geyer took no part in the process of division, being the first to leave the Vicariate.

The Decree of Propaganda Fide: 27 July, 1923

Fr. Meroni prepared his file and decided to submit the question to the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide*, in Rome, where he spent most of 1922. He came into conflict with Card. Van Rossum, a Dutch Redemptorist who was against Fr. Meroni's solution: right to the end, the Cardinal was against the division, and he refused to sign the official decree of separation. In fact, it bears the signature of a different ecclesiastic.

Fr. Meroni sought the support of other cardinal and Vatican officials and the decision was taken on 27 November, 1922, in the plenary Congregation of *Propaganda*, which decreed the division of the Institute into two independent Congregations. Before carrying out the division, the two parties had to agree on certain points, including the division of economic goods,

under the supervision of *Propaganda*. It appointed as its executive delegate Fr. F. Maroto, a Spaniard who was the procurator of the Claretians in Rome. The decision of the Congregation of *Propaganda* was approved by Pope Pius XI.

‘With reluctance’, on 27 July 1923, *Propaganda* published the decree “*Sodales Instituti Veronensis*”⁷ on the division of the Institute of the FSCJ into two independent Congregations, both of Pontifical right and under *Propaganda Fide*: the FSCJ for the Italians, with its headquarters in Verona, and the MFSC (Missionary Sons of the Sacred Heart) for the Austrians and Germans, with the option of choosing either Congregation.⁸ *Propaganda* appointed Fr. Lehr Superior General of the MFSC, with responsibility for preparing a Chapter (1926). The Pope created the new Apostolic Prefecture of Lydenburg (South Africa), entrusted to the MFSC.

In 1923, the FSCJ numbered 150 religious (Priests, Brothers and Scholastics) in Italy, Egypt, Sudan and Uganda; with 50 novices in Venegono Superiore and 60 aspirants. The MFSC numbered 54 religious: 26 Priests, 22 Brothers and 6 Scholastics, 15 novices and 38 aspirants, at Brixen, Graz and Ellwangen. Of the 54, there were 14 Germans in Egypt waiting for a ship to take them to South Africa where they finally arrived on 11 February, 1924.

Consideration of the events of 1923

1. *Absence of Comboni* – In the whole debate and in the documents relating to the division of 1923, it is surprising to note the complete absence of the name of Comboni. Some believe that the division halted the expansion of the Combonians in central Europe during the twenties, unlike that of the SVD, OMI, SCJ, CICM, MAfr, SdB...).

2. *Fr. Meroni promoter of the division* – At the end of 1921, the proposal of Fr. Meroni to suspend the novitiate-scholasticate in Brixen provoked protests by the Germans who, faced with certain absorption, began to think of separation. In his messages to the FSCJ (October and December 1923), Fr. Meroni – in good faith – said clearly that *it was he who proposed*

⁷ Cfr. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, anno XV, vol. XV, September 1923, n. 9, pp. 467-468.

⁸ The Austrian Fr. Artur Nebel opted for the Italian side, together with a few others.

separation as the only way out: “We are convinced that it was all the work of the Lord”⁹. On his part, Fr. Lehr invited the 54 MFSC to thank God with a *Te Deum* for the “happy solution to our problem”.

3. *It was more a “division” than a “separation”* – In the past, the event of 1923 was called “separation” (*Trennung*); today instead one speaks of “division” (*Teilung*), because this term denotes equality. The word *separation* could be taken to mean the self-distancing of one part and an eventual home-coming; however, the reunification of 1979 was much more than a *re-encounter* of two Institutes which, on equal terms, decided to begin a new journey together. This is why the new name (MCCJ) and the new Rule of Life are so important.

4. *Fidelity, a condition for fecundity* – The division was a deep wound, comment our Superior Generals emeriti Fr. F. Pierli and Fr. T. Agostoni. Fidelity to the Founder and to the principal options of the General Chapters constitutes a guarantee of fecundity. For this reason, they believe that, to ignore or act contrary to important Chapter decisions, amounts to exposing ourselves to dangerous adventures. This is what happened to the Comboni after 1919.

Seeking paths of reunification

John XXIII told Fr. Gaetano Briani, the FSCJ General, to speak with Cardinal Arcadio Larraona about the cause of Comboni¹⁰. In a meeting with representatives of both Institutes (1961)¹¹ Larraona, knowing our history, recommended two steps as necessary also in view of the canonisation of Comboni: *first of all, the reunification* of the two Congregations; second, a serious study of the Founder, according to scientific criteria. The creation in Rome (1961) of “*Studium Combonianum*” and the publication of “*Archivio Comboniano*” were in obedience to these directives.

When, especially in the nineteen fifties, the Comboni Family began to rediscover and reclaim the figure of Comboni as its common Founder, the

⁹ Cfr. *La voce della Congregazione. Raccolta delle lettere circolari...*, pp. 43-48.

¹⁰ Arcadio Larraona, Spanish Claretian, a jurist familiar with Fr. Maroto, Cardinal (1959), Prefect for the Causes of Saints.

¹¹ Frs. G. Battelli, Vicar of the FSCJ, and A. Fink (MFSC), Superior in Rome.

journey towards reunification became more determined and focussed. Reunification and the canonisation of the Founder were two inseparable values: without reunification, it would have been impossible to proceed with the canonisation.

During the Council, Fr. Briani had various contacts with the MFSC Bishops A. Reiterer and A. Kühner, of Lydenburg (South Africa) and Tarma (Peru) respectively, with whom he arranged to send the first FSCJ to their dioceses.

1967-1979: Five General Chapters firmly set on reunification

The 1967 (MFCJ) and 1969 (FSCJ) General Chapters provided important orientations for reunification. The same origin, the same charism and the same missionary finality pointed towards the definitive step. At the end of the 1969 Chapter, the two General Councils set up a joint commission, *The Reunion Study Commission* (RSC), in order to study the problems and make concrete proposals for reunification. The commission was composed of five members from each side who, over ten sessions of work, presented important solutions to their respective Councils. The RSC accompanied especially the progressive reunion of the two Institutes in Spain.

The process reached its climax between 1975 and 1979. The (1973) MFSC and the 1975 (FSCJ) General Chapters exchanged proposals on the canonical form of reunification. The MFSC suggested a model which the FSCJ studied closely in Rome, proposing, in turn, a reunification based on a "*Special Canonical Ordinance*". The MFSC warmly welcomed the proposal as a platform for final discussion and invited the FSCJ to come to Germany.

At the Mother House of the Sisters of Saint Anne (*Annaschwesternmutterhaus*) in Ellwangen, the joint extraordinary sitting of the two General Chapters took place (1-2 September, 1975) during which it was decided to: - 1. *Carry out the reunification* with the following stages: -2. *Hold a referendum* for all the members of both Institutes (1976)¹² -3. *Draw up draft Constitutions* (1977-1978), -4. *To celebrate a Joint General Chapter* (1979). The afternoon session closed with a historic vote in favour of reunification: all 55 FSCJ

¹² Votes in favour: 86% MFSC and 95.7% FSCJ, with 75% the minimum required by *Propaganda Fide*.

present voted in favour; 17 of the 18 MFSC present also voted in favour with one abstention.

On the afternoon of 2 September, 1975, on the hill of Josefstal (Ellwangen), in a festive atmosphere, a 'casket' called "separation" (*Trennung*) was symbolically buried and the strong oak tree of reunion (*Wiedervereinigung*) was planted. The two Superiors General, J. Kloze and T. Agostoni, were the first to cover the casket with earth and plant the oak tree. I still have a vivid memory of another image of that splendid afternoon. There was one old and radiant confrere who was applauded by all present: ninety six-year-old Brother Augusto Cagol, a German from Westphalia who had entered Bressanone in 1900 and had been taken by Mons. Geyer to Khartoum as his secretary. That Brother had always been openly in favour of the reunification. On that afternoon he saw reunification already very close but he died in 1977 (aged 98).

In conclusion, the General and Special Joint Chapter commenced with the Decree of Reunification issued by *Propaganda Fide*, on 22 June, 1979, the feast of the Sacred Heart. The Chapter prepared the new *Rule of Life* (Constitutions and General Directory), approved the name of the Institute as *Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus* (MCCJ) and elected a single Superior and General Council¹³. At last, after 56 years of separation, the long-desired unity had been reached. Regarding the Holy See, reunification opened the path to the beatification of Blessed Comboni (1996) and his canonisation (2003).

The Province of Spain welcomed reunification with enthusiasm and even before it happened, while the Comboni MFSC group in Peru offered some resistance until a single Peruvian province was created. Today, in Peru, there are MCCJ of 14 nationalities; various Peruvians work *ad gentes* in other countries and continents and one of them was recently appointed Bishop of Tarma.

¹³ Between 1979 and 1980, with the permission of the Holy See, five priests MFSC opted to be incardinated in the dioceses. Only one left, as he did not agree with the way the reunification took place.

Andrés Riedl and Enrico Farè: pioneers in Spain, passionate promoters of reunification

During the journey of the two Institutes towards reunification, some of their leaders and promoters were outstanding within their communities. Among these, Fathers Andrés Riedl (MFSC, Austrian) and Enrico Farè (FSCJ, Italian), were pioneers of their respective Comboni foundations in Spain in the sixties¹⁴.

Andrés was 20 years old and in Brixen when, in 1923, he was very struck by the division of the two Institutes¹⁵. He was unaware of the reasons behind it but saw the division as an affront to charity and asked himself: “What have the *Superiors done*?!” While he was a missionary in Peru, starting in 1938, he had heard Fr. L. Ipfelkofer, one of the leaders of the MFSC who was in Khartoum at the time of the division, declare before his death: “It was a great mistake. It has to be remedied”. Fr. Riedl received this testimony as a lifelong task. At the 1955 Chapter he proposed that the MFSC begin a foundation in Spain for the formation of priests for Latin America.

In 1960, Fr. Riedl and other MFSC opened a minor seminary at Saldaña in Spain and, about 60 Km away, a house and land at Palencia for the future novitiate. Just a few years previously, in 1954, the FSCJ had opened the houses of San Sebastián (the magazine *Aguiluchos*), Corella (Navarra) as a college-seminary and Madrid (headquarters). The result was the simultaneous presence of two groups of Combonians in the same country, just a few hundred Km from each other, without being aware of it, without knowing each other and with no common plan. But Providence was preparing future meetings!

In late 1959, there arrived (coming from Italy, Sudan and Mexico) the greatest strategist of the Comboni presence and expansion in Spain: Fr. Farè, who launched the magazine *Mundo Negro* in Madrid (1960), with a plan for vocations promotion and houses of formation on a national level. It is

¹⁴ See: GONZÁLEZ NÚÑEZ JUAN, *Misioneros Combonianos en España. 50 años de historia*, ed. Mundo Negro, Madrid 2004, pp. 286.

¹⁵ See: BALLAN ROMEO, *Taita Andrés. Misionero comboniano tirolés en Alemania, España y Perú*, Madrid 2013, pp. 495.

understandable that the Spanish Combonis look upon Frs. Riedl and Farè as “*co-founders*” of the Province of Spain... Great was their passion for Christ, for Comboni and for reunification: they enthused the confreres and sought to convince them, they anticipated the next steps to be taken, lessened the difficulties, circulated messages and, above all, transmitted these values to the youth in formation. Both leaders could count on the active collaboration of their respective groups.

Contacts were shy at first with personal initiatives and then grew in frequency and cordiality, with exchanges of visits between Corella, Moncada, Palencia, Saldaña and Madrid. In this way many prejudices faded and reciprocal esteem and collaboration grew. The young Spaniards did not think much of an inherited division, imported from Germany and Italy; they saw it as a scandalous obstacle, considering themselves “*Spanish Combonis*” and this sufficed to work together and avoid confusion in the vocations and economic field. “Reunification will come from Spain”, the Superiors began to remark in Ellwangen and Rome.

At the 1967 and 1969 Chapters, Riedl and Farè tried to direct their respective groups towards unity. In Spain, further decisive steps were taken: the unification of the novitiate in Palencia and the scholasticate in Moncada (Valencia), with an exchange of formators and students; unanimous votes for unity, the creation of the united Province of Spain (before 1979). Riedl was convinced that, if the presence of the two Institutes in Spain did nothing else but help reunification, the foundation would have fulfilled its purpose.

Like the smell of incense

The last contribution of Fr. Andrés to unification had two aspects: continuous prayer of intercession and a network of fraternal personal relations. At that time I was in Madrid and he often said to me, with tears in his eyes, that he saw no future for the MFSC without unification: “It is a question of life or death for us”; and he would add hopefully: “If we unite, we shall live and we shall receive special blessings from the Sacred Heart”.

He used to pray for reunification as he raised the Body and Blood of Christ at the elevation of the Mass. He loved to contemplate Christ on the cross: *he has made of them one people, destroying the wall of separation that existed*

between them, that is the animosity, to make in himself, of the two, one new man (cf. Eph. 2, 13-18). The contribution of *Taita Andrés* had acquired the perfumed quality of incense and of sacrifice, going through long periods of interior purification. He would rejoice at each step forward towards reunification: he did see it reach an advanced stage but not completed. Like Moses, he lived the experience of “Mount Nebo” (cf. Deut 34, 1-5), in the house of Brixen where he died (January, 1974), at the age of 71 years.

Final considerations

1. *The “contagious plague” of nationalism* – The division showed clearly the fatal consequences of all sorts of counter positions based on racial prejudice, nationalism, superiority or inferiority complexes... All these sentiments contaminate relations and prejudice faith and mission. With good reason, Benedict XV, in the missionary Encyclical *Maximum Illud* (30 November, 1919), urgently drew the attention of missionaries to nationalism, “the most contagious plague in the life of an apostle” (*apostolatus pestis teterrima*). Comboni affirmed that “The work must be Catholic, not Spanish, French, German or Italian”¹⁶. Following his example, only twelve years after it was founded, the Comboni Institute already had members from twelve nationalities and three continents.
2. *Reunification, the task of many* – The entire process of division-reunification clearly shows that, while the first was the work of a small group of Superiors in Verona, the reunification was the result of a long journey that involved many Combonians of the two groups: individuals, groups, institutions, Chapters...
3. *Rule of Life* – A most revealing fruit of the reunification is our Rule of Life, with the new name of MCCJ, which we value as a gift of the Heart of Jesus and of Comboni. Each one of us has made his own journey of assimilation of the RL and continues to follow it as a source of inspiration on the journey of continual identification with Christ in missionary service.
4. *Dynamic unity* – Unity is not a static value, a legal act tied to the past; it is a plant that, to grow and develop, needs to be nourished every day,

¹⁶ Cfr. D. COMBONI, *Writings*, no. 944.

with love and with fresh motivation. It is a never-ending task, open to ever greater challenges. Only in this way, once division is overcome by dynamic unity, can the cry of St. Augustine be heard: “O happy fault!” with the song of his master St. Ambrose: “Happy its destruction if reconstruction makes the building more beautiful!”

Romeo Ballan, mccj

Note: This text is a reduced version for Familia Comboniana; it is possible to ask the author for the complete text (available in Spanish or in English) at his address: ballanromeo@gmail.com.

Questions to aid a reflection

1. The division of the Institute was caused by nationalism and racial prejudices that undermined interpersonal relations. Now that the Institute is multicultural, when do we challenge our cultural prejudices?
2. In which moments of community life does the lack of dialogue become harmful for the community and the mission?
3. Unity is a dynamic reality, “always open to new challenges”. On which shared and non-negotiable values is our community founded? How and in whose name do we overcome inevitable inter-communitarian conflicts?
4. Comboni and passion for the mission were the two forces for the unification of the Institute. To what degree does the sense of belonging motivate our daily choices?