

MISSIONARY INSTITUTES IN EUROPE: WHAT FUTURE?

Introduction

The title we have adopted may lead some readers to a hasty conclusion, even before reading the text: that we are concerned about the survival of missionary institutes due to the lack of missionary vocations in Europe. We say straight away that this is not our starting point, even if, as we shall see, the question of the general lack of missionary vocations in Europe cannot be avoided when we talk about missionary institutes in this continent.

Our point of departure is another: the perception of an uprooting of missionary Institutes from the local Churches of Europe. On the one hand, it seems that the Churches of Europe no longer recognise missionary institutes as their actualised missionary expressions and, on the other hand, it seems that missionary institutes have moved away from the sensitivity and life of the European Churches. Obviously, we are only talking about missionary institutes in Europe and we are not referring to their situation in Africa (or America and Asia), for example, where their apostolic fruitfulness is evident and their insertion in the local Churches is easier and less problematic.

This our starting point may not be shared and/or it may be rejected. But it is from this observation that we start. Faced with an evident lack of apostolic fruitfulness and creativity (which goes far beyond the question of vocations), we think that we cannot avoid the question of the rootedness, or lack thereof, of missionary institutes in the local Churches that have seen them born.

We write in first person plural, because we want to capture the benevolence of the reader and involve him/her in the writing of the narrative, perhaps building their own, adopting the one proposed here or integrating it with different points of view.

Charismatic exhaustion

To begin with, let's elaborate a little on our starting point.

The missionary institutes in Europe seem to have reached a situation of apostolic exhaustion. Vocations are an expression of the rooting of a charism in the local Church. But they are not the only one... The missionary institutes in Europe, in fact, also seem uncertain about the identity of their charism in the context of the local European Churches. In the last two decades they have espoused the pressing causes of the European moment (lobbying for justice and peace, migrants, the fight against the exploitation of people, the production of weapons, environmental protection and ecology...) but they have not succeeded in establishing themselves as subjects of evangelization of the continent, offering the local Churches initiatives and paths of Christian presence and proclamation, initiation and ecclesial accompaniment of people and groups. This reference of ours to the apostolic exhaustion of missionary institutes in Europe is linked to a loss of the charismatic thrust which, according to certain historical analyses, characterises the life of the institutes after a certain time of their foundation. Some analyses speak of a hundred years and conclude that this would be the situation of the institutes in Europe.

Missionary animation and vocations promotion have remained the main scope of the presence and activities of missionaries (including Combonis) in Europe over the last twenty years, carried out with a considerable number of people and a great variety of initiatives. But the growing feeling, in this period, is that these activities are losing ground and the model of presence that they embody is no longer rooted in the reality of the Church. On the one hand, there is a clear contrast between committed means and apostolic and charismatic fruits obtained; on the other hand, especially with regard to vocational promotion, it seems evident that the model followed has lost its motivation. The course of these years has shown that the young candidates are not only few but that these few are unable to feel motivated for a path of formation that leads to consecration for the mission, and they easily abandon the path undertaken.

There will be no lack of those who ask for proof of what is stated above. But, as far as we are concerned, no other proof is needed for what is evident. Therefore, this situation is the starting point that we adopt when we speak of apostolic and charismatic exhaustion. It is our wish, however, that

the text, with the dose of provocation that it has, may help to deepen the question and to encourage reflection on the part of those who wish to understand what is happening to the missionary institutes in the Churches of Europe.

I believe that, with the reader, we have a common perspective: this reflection, although urgent and necessary, is not the thing on which the future of missionary institutes in Europe depends. This future depends on God and on the history that God is writing in the Churches of the continent, in the life of the institutes themselves and on how we respond to it; therefore, in this attempt at interpretation, we entrust ourselves to God with the trust that the great founding missionaries had. For Saint Daniel Comboni, as we Comboni missionaries well know, the difficulties, the crosses, were a clear sign of a hidden action of God, of His hour, because "the works of God are born and grow at the foot of the Cross"⁽¹⁾, in the midst of difficulties. In this way we invoke his trust in God and his "courage for the present and specially for the future"⁽²⁾."

Time of return

In many respects, for missionary institutes in Europe, more than the time of departure (exit), it is the time of return. In fact, a large part of the current resources, people and means, of missionary institutes in Europe goes to welcoming missionaries who return to their countries and Churches of origin, for reasons of age and/or health. This welcome is admirable and should be recognised and appreciated as a positive and very beautiful response by the Institutes to the challenge of their own ageing.

In the last two decades, the uprooting of missionary institutes in Europe has been accentuated by two factors: the inadequacy of the integration structures inherited from the past (empty seminaries, big houses...) and the ageing of members. While the first factor has been answered (transformation and sale of buildings), there has been no way to stem the second.

In fact, the ageing of the members of missionary institutes in Europe has precipitated inexorably. If we look at the Comboni Missionaries throughout in Europe, we can say that the current situation of the Italian and German-speaking provinces is emblematic of what will happen to the others, subject to the necessary differences in proportion. A look at the Italian province, for example, reveals that the 254 Italian Comboni missionaries currently present in their province of origin have an average age of 75.78, distributed as follows: 30, over 90; 89, between 80 and 89; 59, between 70 and 79; 46, between 60 and 69; 21, between 50 and 59; 5, between 40 and 49; 4, between 30 and 39 and none under 30⁽³⁾. Ageing is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, the institute gets older and on the other hand, there are fewer members of age to be able to carry out an apostolic turning point and give substance to new charismatic initiatives.

This time of return may also be the time for a new start, if human and material resources are not exhausted in the reception but are also directed towards the search for new initiatives to take root in the local Churches, with a view to renewed charismatic and apostolic fruitfulness. Some Comboni provinces in Europe, however, such as Spain and Portugal, seem to enjoy a better situation than the

¹ Daniele Comboni, *Writings* 6085, 6337, 6956, 7225.

² *Annals of the Good Shepherd* 27, January 1882.

³ The situation in the other provinces is as follows. Poland: there are 7 Polish Combonis, with an average age of 41.85 years. Portugal: There are 45 Combonis, with an average age of 68.6, distributed as follows: 8 under 50, 6 from 50 to 59, 10 from 60 to 69, 11 from 70 to 79, 8 from 80 to 89, 2 over 90. In the German-speaking province (Germany, Austria, South Tyrol) there are 45 Combonis with an average age of 74.75, distributed as follows: 20 over 80, 14 from 70 to 80, 6 from 60 to 70, 3 from 50 to 60, 2 under 50. In the English province (London Province) there are 22 Combonis with an average age of 70; the 12 missionaries from other provinces have an average age of 65, while the 10 original LP members have an average age of 75. Spain: the Combonis are 43, with an average age of 66.67 years old, distributed as follows: 5 over 80 years old; 17 between 70 and 79 years old; 10 between 60 and 69; 7, between 50 and 59; 4 under 50. As far as the Italian province is concerned, it should be remembered that the Italian Combonis, 511 in total at the date we are writing, half of whom are working in other provinces, have a younger average age and are a hope for the province at the time of rotation if they do not return old.

Italian and German Provinces because, although they have fewer members (45 in Portugal and 43 in Spain), they have a more significant number of missionaries in the 30 to 60 age bracket and live in a still favourable ecclesial context. Portugal, for example, still has 8 people under 50, out of a total of 45, while Italy has only 9 out of a total of 254. The average age of Comboni missionaries in Portugal (69.2 for brothers and 68.3 for priests) is also lower - although not by much - than in Italy (75.78 for brothers and priests). And the 43 Comboni missionaries present in Spain have an average age of 66.7 years, and among these, 4 are less than 50 years old. We must note, however, that the fact that the provinces of Portugal and Spain have had an average number of younger confreres in the recent past has not, so far, made it easier for them to search for new paths of insertion.

A challenging context

The European social and ecclesial context in which we find ourselves, i.e. the possible scenario for this desirable turning point, is particular: on the one hand, it offers new possibilities inherent in the crisis, on the other hand, it redraws the framework of insertion in a new way. In this sense, there are four processes under way, which characterise the context in which missionary institutes live in Europe.

The first process is ambivalent: the unstoppable process of secularisation that is deconstructing European society and enclosing the religious dimension in the individual sphere; the widening of the "liquid society"⁽⁴⁾ which marks the post-Christian environment that is spreading in Europe, especially among young people - a process of which we all seem to be aware, but to which there is no response as far as evangelization is concerned⁽⁵⁾. The initiative of the new evangelization [the idea of the new evangelization was launched by John Paul II⁽⁶⁾, thinking above all of the evangelization of Europe], with the creation of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization⁽⁷⁾, did not take off as a response to the challenge: the Council left out missionary institutes, its initiatives soon lost vigour, reducing itself to a bureaucratic shore for a new group of curial officials.

With the pontificate of Pope Francis, the Department for the Service of Integral Human Development⁽⁸⁾ took the lead. In the midst of the pandemic, this Department managed to get the Pope to approve an intense agenda of activities and meetings, passing it as a timely response to the challenge of evangelization. This time, the missionary institutes seem to be able to link up with these initiatives, given the dimensions of the mission they have highlighted in Europe [as demonstrated by the initiative launched by the Comboni family in Italy, in October 2020⁽⁹⁾, inspired by the three most recent documents of Pope Francis: *Laudato Si'*, *Querida Amazonia* and *Fratelli Tutti*. Curiously, the *Evangelii Gaudium* is left out, not mentioned, in an initiative presented as a "construction site for the new mission" in the missionary month. And, presenting the purpose of this initiative, there is no talk of an evangelization that assumes an integral ecology, but of promoting "an ecological, social, cultural and economic conversion" in the "hope that from this construction site a popular movement can be born"⁽¹⁰⁾].

The other initiative, also launched by John Paul II, thinking about the evangelization of young people (the World Youth Days) and involving parishes, movements, new communities, has failed to interest missionary institutes in Europe. These, in general, have kept themselves on the margins of these initiatives and have not invested in their realisation nor capitalised on the dynamism that they have generated among the young Christians of the continent.

⁴ The expressions "solid modernity" and "liquid modernity" are by Zigmunt Baumann (1925-2017).

⁵ Brother Enzo Biemmi, *Evangelization at the test of secularization*, Rome, Conference of 19 October 2020.

⁶ John Paul II, Homily in Mogila, 9 June 1979.

⁷ Instituted by Benedict XVI on 21 September 2010.

⁸ Created by Pope Francis on 1 January 2017, unifying various existing pontifical councils and offices.

⁹ Nigrizia, *Dossier Cantiere Casa Comune*, October 2020, pp. 41-55.

¹⁰ Giovanni Zavatta, *Casa Comune, il cantiere dei comboniani per una nuova missione*, in *Osservatore Romano*, 28 October 2020. And the Comboni.org website, post 29 October 2020. Nigrizia, pp. 43 and 46.

The second process in the European context is negative: the economic crisis that began in 2008 has triggered a time bomb in the question of resources and sustainability of missionary institutes and their missionary initiatives, with the beginning of a very significant decrease in material support from individual and institutional benefactors in Europe.

The third process, clearly positive, is the pontificate of Pope Francis, who offered missionary institutes a favourable, renewed and attractive magisterium on the relevance of the missionary charism, with his proposal for a missionary configuration of the whole Church ⁽¹¹⁾. The action and the magisterium of Francis have a double value: of de-construction of a model of Church and mission in crisis and of proposing an alternative model ⁽¹²⁾. And, even if the present pontiff appears more effective in his work as a "de-constructor" (looking at the reactions of the media) than as an effective "proposer" ⁽¹³⁾, his action and his magisterium constitute a promise for everyone in the Church, especially for missionary institutes. Naturally, it is up to them to explore and appropriate, according to their charism and possibilities, the Pope's missionary proposal and narrative.

The fourth process, difficult (yet) to characterise, is the pandemic that has struck Europe, as on other continents. With different ways, times and rhythms, the pandemic turned everyone's life upside down and put the future on hold. In particular, it undermined the paradigm of insertion of missionary institutes in the Churches of Europe, an insertion that relied on the mobility of missionaries and the convocation of people and the collection of aid. Institutes, like the churches on the continent, are somehow paralysed; they have proved to be rather incapable of going beyond what everyone says and proclaim that Word of Life which helps to find meaning in what we live and to give answers to the uncertainties within us. This word is the Gospel of the Kingdom and its witness and proclamation have always been, since the apostle Paul, called evangelization.

The pandemic is still going on and, of course, it is difficult to predict, as we write, how things will go and what the present storm will leave on the shores of the life of the Church and missionary institutes ⁽¹⁴⁾. But many agree in prophesying that things will not go back to the way they were before and that the change of epoch, which we already have experienced since the beginning of the 21st century, will be definitively marked by this pandemic and by the spiritual, cultural and political awakenings it will cause and leave us with. This does not mean that things will be made easier for Christianity in Europe and that the pandemic will give a boost to the evangelization of the continent, as could have been hoped for at first: on the contrary, "there are also authors who agree that with the pandemic secularization in Europe has advanced by ten years" ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Considering the origins

Pope Francis, on various occasions, has invited us to look at history to shed light on the present. I would like to take up his latest reminder ⁽¹⁶⁾: "Only from the historical truth of the facts can the permanent and lasting effort to understand each other and to attempt a new synthesis for the good of all be born".

Born in the nineteenth century, particularly in the Churches of Central Europe (Northern Italy, France, Austria and Germany...), with a diversified canonical framework (Society of Apostolic Life and Religious Congregations of simple vows...), the Missionary Institutes ad Gentes have operated on three fundamental postulates: 1st, the urgency of Christian proclamation and the need for Baptism, in

¹¹ A trio of documents gives substance to this vision of the Pope: *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013; *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015; *Fratelli Tutti*, 3 October 2020.

¹² To go into "what is not and what is" the mission, according to Francis, see: *Message of the Pope to the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 21 May 2020; *Without Him we can do nothing, how we can be missionaries today in the world*, text of an interview with the journalist Gianni Valente, published as a volume by Libreria Editrice Vaticana and Editrice San Paolo, Rome 2019.

¹³ Massimo Franco, *L'Enigma Bergoglio, la parabola di un papato*, Solferino, Milan 2020.

¹⁴ Brother Enzo Biemmi, *La Missione alla prova di due sfide: la secolarizzazione e la pandemia*, Rome 19 October 2020.

¹⁵ Manuel João Pereira Correia, *corrispondenza particolare*, Castel D'Azzano, 2020.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n° 226, Rome 2020.

obedience to Christ's missionary mandate; 2nd, the initiation and accompaniment of Christian communities, the local Churches, in the various continents; 3rd, action in favour of human development and the social, political and economic transformation of peoples.

Behind the flourishing of missionary institutes, we find a multiplicity of factors, already studied by Church historians ⁽¹⁷⁾.

First factor, the wide missionary movement of the nineteenth century, which embodied the most significant openness of the Church of the time. It was not a flight forward, but a real "going to the peripheries", an "experiencing the dynamism of an outgoing Church", to use the words that Pope Francis uses today ⁽¹⁸⁾. The missionary founders - and those who followed them on the adventure of going further and seeking a new relationship with peoples, their cultures and religions - refused to remain prisoners of the tensions of the Church of their time and geographical space and launched themselves into innovative missionary initiatives. In their love for and adherence to the Church, they sensed that times were changing, but the new paths for the new ecclesial exit were not known, they had to discover them in order to give them historical concreteness. In other words, to break through to found something new...

Second factor, the spiritual and material support of the renewal groups in the nineteenth century Church. The nineteenth century saw the flourishing in Europe of a galaxy of groups and movements of prayer and Christian life, from which the founders drew inspiration and spiritual nourishment, finding ways to fit into this fabric of local Churches irrigated by the strong yeast of renewal.

Third factor, the idealism of a social transformation inspired by the Gospel. In the nineteenth century, Catholics would start from their Christian experience, liturgy and sacramental life, to bring the Gospel to society and to trigger the social and cultural transformation inspired by it. Today, the perspective is different, and we start from reality to arrive at the Gospel, to be lowered into it as yeast. But the challenge is the same and in the nineteenth century it was a winning prospect, if we look at the optimism that drove many Catholics in Europe to become passionate about social transformation inspired by the Gospel and to bring the Gospel of the Kingdom to Africa and Asia. Some thinkers place in this vision the roots of Christianity marked by a strong social dimension which characterised the Church of Europe (France, Northern Italy, Germany, Austria...) from the end of the 19th century to the 1970s ⁽¹⁹⁾ and which had in Catholic Action (with its method of seeing, judging and acting proposed by Joseph-Leon Cardijn) its most structured expression.

Fourth factor, the alliance between clergy (many protagonists of missionary initiatives came from the diocesan clergy) and laity (artisans and so called "office masters"...), an alliance where the laity were sometimes the most numerous in missionary expeditions, at a time and in a Church that had not yet arrived at ministerial theology and the definition of the mission of the laity.

Fifth factor, last in this order, but perhaps first for its novelty and importance: the alliance with women and the involvement of women in missionary initiatives and in the promotion of missionary initiatives of the Church and nascent institutes. For the first time, in the nineteenth century, we find women at the forefront of Christian mission in the world and in the missionary animation of the Church ⁽²⁰⁾.

Fundamental contribution

¹⁷ See, for example, Umberto dell'Orto e Saverio Xeres, *Manual of the History of the Church*, Vol. 4, Epoca Contemporanea, Brescia 2017, p. 63. And *Daniele Comboni and the Regeneration of Africa*, by Fidel González Fernández, Rome, 2003.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, numbers 20-24.

¹⁹ Christoph Theobald, *Il Vangelo della nuova fratellanza*, interview granted to Lorenzo Fazzini, *Avvenire* of 27 April 2016.

²⁰ The *Work of Propagation of the Faith* has, at its origin, a woman: Paulina Jericot (1799-1862). Daniele Comboni started a women's missionary institute, the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia (1872), and brought missionary women to Central Africa.

The brevity of this essay does not allow us to dwell on other factors, of the social, political and cultural context, which influenced the missionary rebirth of the nineteenth century in Europe. Let us just remember that the condition of the Church in European society at the time was very difficult (the consequences of the French Revolution, the struggles for the unification of Italy, the fall of Rome and the end of the papal state, European liberalism, etc.), a situation which may recall the present one, in particular the drift of secularisation, economic liberalism and globalisation.

We also remember that missionary institutes had their time of expansion and fruitful activity especially from the second half of the nineteenth century until the Second Vatican Council, and even afterwards, until the eighties of the last century. During this period, one hundred years, they made a fundamental contribution to the rootedness of the Catholic Church among the peoples of the various continents, especially in Africa and Asia, a contribution that Church historians recognise.

We can conclude this historical view by saying that missionary institutes, free from old canonical frameworks and the weight of traditions that weighed down the missionary action of the great religious orders, have represented new approaches and missionary methodologies and have given a considerable boost to the missionary action of the Catholic Church, to the point of becoming the most significant manifestation of its openness to the world, from the nineteenth century until Vatican II, pushing towards the constitution of local Churches and the human promotion and liberation of peoples.

The upheaval

The end of the 20th century and the transition to the 21st accentuated a turnaround in the situation of missionary institutes in Europe, highlighting the crisis of their insertion into the local Churches where they were born. The fundamental factors that heralded a new situation can also be reduced here to four.

The first factor, which we have already mentioned, is the ageing of the members of the institutes and the accentuated, first, and then, total lack of missionary vocations, both female and male, in Europe. The European Comboni Provinces arrived at the end of the second decade of this century without any candidates in the various stages of formation. Faced with this surprising lack of vocations, we have all heard the response we usually give ourselves: "we have no vocations, because there are no vocations in Europe". But this response contains only half the truth: there are no vocations in Europe for missionary institutes, for us, but there are vocations for new communities and movements; there are no old numbers, but there are encouraging numbers for movements, dioceses, institutes that have embarked on a journey of searching for new ways of charismatic rooting in the European ecclesial and social fabric.

The second factor is the advent of a new ecclesial conscience which (for various reasons that have to do with ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue) no longer considers baptism or the entry into the Church of persons and peoples to be urgent. The need for baptism and the Church for salvation has faded and they are no longer a decisive part of the motivation for evangelization. The models of ecclesiology which affirmed themselves after the Second Vatican Council have not succeeded in ensuring the support offered to the Christian mission by the institutional model which prevailed in theology from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, i.e. from Vatican I to Vatican II, and which gave "strong support to the missionary effort with which the Church goes towards those who are not its members" ⁽²¹⁾. In contrast to institutional ecclesiology, which dominated in the nineteenth century, the communal ecclesiology which developed after Vatican II "lacks in giving Christians a very clear sense of their identity or mission" ⁽²²⁾. And post-conciliar sacramental ecclesiology is a model of church that "gives ample space to the action of divine grace beyond the confines of the institutional church."

²¹ Avery Dules, *Modelli di Chiesa*, page 50-51, Messagero Editions, Padua, 2005. The first *Models of the Church* edition is from 1974.

²² Avery Dules, *Modelli di Chiesa*, page 73 and 89.

Thirdly, the emergence of civil society and its humanitarian dynamism, which have given rise to new forms of intervention in favour of human development and social transformation. On the various continents, including Africa, an infinite number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have emerged to respond to the challenges of development and new humanitarian causes. This phenomenon has made the commitment of the Churches redundant and greatly reduced the space and opportunities for the involvement of missionary institutes in the social field: on their own initiative, or forced by government policies, missionary institutes have begun abandoning many of the structures of their commitment (hospitals, schools...) in the promotion of health and education.

The fourth factor, also mentioned above, is the lack of rootedness of the institutes in the Churches of Europe. Ironically, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, missionary institutes found themselves at the antipodes of the situation that saw them born, lacking, that is, the support of the local Churches and the main groups and communities of ecclesial renewal. European Christians and the people in general appreciate our social protagonism and our prophetic dimension [social ministry, with the term used today ⁽²³⁾], they give us (still) their money to support our initiatives but they no longer follow us, nor do they see us as the incarnation of the Christian and missionary commitment that must be lived and emulated today in Europe.

How are we here?

We have arrived here, by two ways. On the one hand, local Churches and renewal movements have recalled the mission to themselves, in line with the vision of Vatican II which sees the local Churches as the subject and protagonists of the Christian mission in the world. On the other hand, missionary institutes have lost their ability to take root in the local Churches, groups and movements, attracted by their own missionary visions and practices, in line with the social and political sensitivity of the moment, but far from the path of the local Churches.

The reception of Vatican II in the 1970s favoured an exchange of spirituality and apostolic experiences between the various missionary institutes and between them and the new ecclesial movements (Focolare, Neocatechumenal, Charismatic Renewal, Communion and Liberation...). This exchange fostered a mutual enrichment of personalities and testimonies (Roger Schutz in Taizé, Abbé Pierre in France, Mani Tese in Italy...) which inspired the imagination of Christians in those years.

The knowledge of one's own history and the deepening of one's own charism ⁽²⁴⁾ gave confidence for this exposure to the charisms of others. But there was a risk that exposure to the charism of others would make one drift, rather than enrich. As for us, this happened with the Neocatechumenal movement and a significant group of Combonis who, in the 70s and 80s of the last century, left the Institute to follow the Catechumenal Way.

In the XIII General Chapter of the Comboni missionaries, in 1985, the decision was taken to put an end to this mutual charismatic exchange and attendance ⁽²⁵⁾. On the one hand, the identity of the Comboni missionary charism was saved, but on the other hand, it was deprived of the wealth of others and a more solitary missionary path was taken. To tell the truth, the spiritual frequentation has continued (especially with the Focolare and Communion and Liberation...), but in an individual and "underground" form. At the time, we seemed to be strong enough to go on alone, confident of our charism and its relevance; today we see the limits, if not of the path we have taken, of the situation in which we have come to find ourselves.

Two other elements have contributed to getting us where we are, and they must be recalled, even if only briefly.

First, the sense of formal belonging to the Institute and the growing lack of a strong shared mission consciousness. In many ways, a sense of formal belonging has grown that tends to see the Institute

²³ Edited by Fernando Zolli and Daniele Moschetti, *Noi siamo missione: Testimoni di ministerialità sociale nella Famiglia Comboniana*, published by the Commission Ministerialità della Famiglia Comboniana, Rome, June 2020.

²⁴ In those years, the Combonian missionaries have reorganised the *General Archives* and the *Studium Combonianum* to inspire their renewal in the missionary life of the Founder and the history of the Institute.

²⁵ Fidel González, *I Capitoli Generali dell'Istituto Missionario Comboniano*, Rome 1998, p. 425.

as a means of realising a vocation understood as a personal project. The emphasis of the missionary vocation has shifted to the person, his personal gifts and charisms, with the consequent reduction of the consciousness of a common mission, carried out in fraternity and in the sharing of views and means.

Secondly, the ambiguities of the choices made in view of a renewed insertion in Europe. The options made (parishes, commitments with migrants, justice and peace...), despite their value of presence and witness, have not established themselves as striking forms of charismatic rootedness, capable of obtaining ecclesial recognition and charismatic attraction. This search has not produced, for example, a significant missionary movement in the Churches of Europe, supported by missionary institutes; each Institute has adapted itself, with dynamics of immediate survival.

Among us Comboni missionaries, this search for new forms of insertion in the local Churches has led to the taking up of parishes: think of Castel Volturno in Naples; Santa Lucia, in Palermo; Camarate e Apelação, in Lisbon, Portugal; Palas del Rey y Granada, in Spain; Roehampton Road, in London. [These initiatives and presences, accumulated by the involvement with migrants, take place in the context of parishes, with the exception of the presence in Rome with ACSE ⁽²⁶⁾. In the DSP (Deutschsprachige provinz) the Comboni missionaries had an experience of insertion, in the east of Germany, in Hahle, for 10 years without a parish and 3 years with the parish. The experience has come to an end and today the province is responsible for a parish in Gratz; instead, the way has been opened for a commitment of the Comboni missionaries in the parishes as paid collaborators. It should be remembered that a profound process of parish restructuring is currently underway in the Church in Germany. In Italy, CIMI has been looking for an initiative of involvement with migrants carried out by an inter-congregational community ⁽²⁷⁾, without the commitment of the parish, but the Combonis have not been involved so far]. The assumption of parishes, however, does not seem to have revealed itself as a form of insertion that releases the evangelizing dynamism of the charism. Seen and accepted as the only possible form of insertion (especially by some local bishops), we have not been able to make a breakthrough and make it an emblematic form of insertion that reveals the vitality of the Comboni charism in a local Church in Europe. The search for this turning point continues (in the gatherings of Comboni missionaries engaged in parishes in Europe) and should be encouraged in order to restore charismatic justice to this form of insertion.

A look at the numbers, even if this does not explain how we got here, can give a more precise idea of the situation. In 1996, the Combonian Missionaries reached the highest number, 1839; since then they have begun a process of decrease which brought them to 1510 at the end of 2020. The Combonis who juridically belonged to the European provinces and worked in the continent in 1996 were 461; at the end of 2020 they are 412. The number of their presences in the continent has held, but the situation has been reversed, as far as age is concerned: while in 1996 the majority was still in an active age group, in 2020 the majority is in the 70 to 90 age group.

A charism in history ⁽²⁸⁾

A reflection on the Comboni charism in history reveals to us that ours is a charism born in the crisis ⁽²⁹⁾ and that in difficulties it shows its vitality. The painful events of our history have led us to new configurations of the charism: The premature death of the Founder led us to the transformation into

²⁶ Comboni Association for the Service of Migrants and Refugees, begun by Fr. Renato Bresciani in 1964. The General Chapter of 1969, in which Fr. Renato was present, took the decision of a commitment for migrants and the date of 1969 remains as the official date of the foundation of ACSE.

²⁷ Intercongregational Community of Modica, organized by the Conference of Italian Missionary Institutes, in collaboration with Caritas, in the Diocese of Noto, Sicily, as a response to the migrants' emergency. The idea, born after the CIMI 2013 Conference, in Treviso, took shape on 17th March 2016, with the community formed by an African missionary (White Father), a Consolata missionary and a Saverian missionary.

²⁸ J.J.V. da Cruz, *Between Fidelity and alienation: the Combonian Charism in History*. In Comboni Archive 46, 2008, p. 111 and following.

²⁹ David Glenday, *Dialogando con San Daniele in tempo di crisi*, Rome, 7 October 2020.

a religious congregation; this transformation later on led to the configuration of the two congregations; from the massive expulsion from Sudan (1964) we arrived at the opening to a wider and more inclusive Africa of peoples and cultures; from Africa, as the primary mission of the Institute, we opened up to America and then Asia; from the rediscovery of the Founder and the renewal of the Vatican II we arrived at the reunified congregation and regained unity and apostolic vitality.

The brevity of this article does not allow us to explore this dynamism of our history to strengthen the hope for a new charismatic configuration for the Institute in Europe. However, we can consider the possibility of a new configuration of the charism, starting precisely from Europe, where the Institute was born and from the intercultural context in which it finds itself (with its growth and rootedness in the local Churches of Africa, America and Asia). The attentive reader will have already perceived it in the references to movements and new communities. We recall, with regard to this future and without pretension of answering, the question of an author at the beginning of the 21st century ⁽³⁰⁾: "Can a religious institute evolve in a way, without trauma and lacerations, towards the ecclesiological form of the present ecclesial movements?"

Faced with the current difficulties, we can close ourselves up in the model of religious configuration that we know and that has brought us to where we are now... or, without denying our consecration, open ourselves to the dynamism that characterizes the new forms of fraternity and ministry for the mission. Such a reflection would take us far beyond the possibilities of this brief research, but it remains a path to explore and a horizon to consider.

Proposals for a new path

At this point, however, it will be the case, perhaps, to offer, at least for discussion and bearing in mind the near future, some proposals for a possible path that seeks a new rootedness of the Combonis in Europe and a renewal of their charism and apostolic fruitfulness.

First proposal: to carry out, in each province, an assembly-debate on the future of the Institute in its local Church and country, open to anyone who wants to participate and feel the problem. The assembly is to be done in the context of one's own province, in order to keep the reflection adherent to the life of the local Church and society, leading us to reflect on the quality of our witness and current insertion and opening ourselves to the search for new forms of rootedness in the local Church and society. A possible assembly, at the level of the Provinces of Europe, may take place later on, in order to continue the reflection on a common platform, that is, to identify possible points of contact and differences.

Second proposal: to promote the sense of belonging, to the Institute and to the local Church, of the members of the Institute, seeking a statute of double canonical membership of the diocesan presbytery, for members who are priests, in every local Church in which we are present. This would favour the growth of mutual knowledge and apostolic communion with the local Church, as well as the involvement of the missionaries in the evangelisation initiatives of the local Church, bringing the particularity of their charism.

Third proposal: in the search for a renewed spirituality and missionary vision, open up to sharing charismatic experiences, with the religious institutes traditionally linked to us (such as the Jesuits...), as well as with the new communities and movements. Faced with the secularization of the continent, a mutual pooling and enrichment of spiritualities can only enrich the response capacity of each charism, as happened in the immediate post-Vatican II Council period. This search for charismatic sharing must be done with a critical spirit, in the sense that movements can also find themselves in a situation of loss of charismatic drive, such as missionary institutes. Some studies alert us to what is happening with the passing of time and the disappearance of charismatic founders, and the change in socio-cultural conditions that have seen them born, bearing in mind that new communities and movements tend not to accompany cultural evolution. This situation can compromise the apostolic

³⁰ Antonio Maria Sicari, *The Ancient Charisms in the Church*. Per una Nuova collocazione, Jaca Book, Milan 2002, p. 7.

vitality of institutes and movements, and for this reason, some speak of the need for periodic conversion (of "re-foundation"), that is, at times of strong socio-cultural change ⁽³¹⁾.

Fourth proposal: to study the creation, in each province, of a welcoming community (on the model of the centres of spirituality and Christian initiation of the movements, Focolare, Taizé, Community of Emmanuel, Schoenstatt...) that can welcome, for periods of variable duration, young people and adults interested in knowledge of and initiation into missionary service in the Church and the Comboni missionary charism. This implies an in-depth reflection on the possible paths of initiation to offer: from initiation into Christian life (lectio divina, personal and liturgical prayer, sacramental life, fraternal life and Christian commitment), to initiation into missionary service in the Church today (in its various dimensions) and the Comboni missionary charism (in its various forms). To prepare people capable of offering these paths, and to look for people, within the local Churches, who can help to support such an initiative (synergy with other missionary institutes).

Fifth proposal: to build a renewed formation path, based on a mystagogical line ⁽³²⁾ of initiation into Christian life, fraternal life for mission, shared mission and the various dimensions of mission today, as a form of initiation into the Comboni charism and the Christian mission of people and young people attracted by our charism. In this vision, vocation promoters and formators assume themselves as initiators of others to Christian life and missionary commitment in the Church and the Institute; and missionary communities as fraternities that live, witness and proclaim the Gospel, according to their charism and spiritual tradition, and in harmony with the churches of their time and place.

Sixth proposal: to set up a study group, at the level of the Institutes of the Comboni Family, to interest members in the question of the future in Europe and our rootedness in the local European Churches. We make this proposal with a feeling of uncertainty about its opportunity and viability, thinking about the experience and the path taken by the Gert (European Theological Reflection Group). The Gert has proceeded on a theological, theoretical and ideological path, and has run aground on the question of evangelization in Europe. In spite of the value of the reflection promoted, it has not managed to interest the members of our European provinces in new paths of insertion in the local Churches. Not even the interesting initiative of the Limone Sul Garda Symposia ⁽³³⁾ has come to anything new in the area of the charismatic rootedness of our institutes in the Churches of Europe, in addition to the accompaniment of reflection on current experiences.

Other elements to be included

Trying to move our reflection towards a conclusion, we see that there are still other elements to include, even just by mentioning them.

First, the question of missionary spirituality and the quality of the witness, personal and community, that members of missionary institutes give in the Churches of Europe. Some of us think that the cause of the present charismatic and apostolic exhaustion is the lack of spirituality and the weakness of witness. We agree that, while it is difficult to verify and measure these two aspects of our life, it is possible, however, to affirm that these two dimensions are at the root of every apostolic fruitfulness and every ecclesial rootedness, as the history of missionary institutes shows (an aspect we have already dwelt on).

Daniel Comboni sought, for the missionaries of his Institutes, a high, robust spirituality, worthy of the difficulties of the African mission; he found it in the contemplation of the pierced Heart of Christ

³¹ Manuel João Pereira Correia, corrispondenza particolare, Castel D'Azzano, 2020.

³² Enzo Biemmi, *Una nuova spiritualità: divineri and mystagogues*, Rome, October 2020. The term dowser church (as a community capable of intercepting and responding to the spiritual thirst of the time) was coined by Christoph Theobald in the booklet *Fraternità*, published by Edizioni Qqajon, of the Community of Bose, in 2016.

³³ Preceded by an exploratory symposium, held in July 2006, the Symposia of Limone Sul Garda began in 2007, 9-12 July. The Gert gathered the experience of the symposiums in the *Quaderni di Limone*. Particularly interesting for the issue we are dealing with are: n. 1, Comboni and Europe, July 2007; n. 5, The Comboni Mission in the Churches of Europe, which government structure?; and n. 6, The Comboni Mission in Europe, Which ministries?

and in the mysticism of the cenacle of apostles and proposed it to his missionaries as an inexhaustible source of personal and apostolic fruitfulness. Comboni institutes were born out of this strand of nineteenth century spirituality and for decades, until the first part of the twentieth century, they fed their fraternal and apostolic life to this spiritual torrent. Then, there was a growing estrangement from this spirituality, which we cannot explain here, but only indicate as fact. In this respect, we have gone with the whole Church, which after the Council has moved away from this spirituality and religious sensitivity. A natural shift, in the light of the new sensitivities of the second half of the twentieth century, but nevertheless surprising, especially since it was a very widespread spirituality, which has made a fruitful mark on the life and mission of the Church for over a century.

In this sense, with many in the Church, we must ask ourselves what the future of the spirituality of the Sacred Heart is ⁽³⁴⁾. And we must also ask ourselves whether our future and our roots in the local Churches of Europe do not depend precisely on our spirituality - of the pierced Heart - duly integrated into today's sensibilities. Perhaps we have discarded it too quickly, considering it inadequate to constitute the spiritual humus of a new charismatic season. Let us remember that in Europe we have at least one situation in which the spirituality of the Heart of Christ has proved fruitful apostolically: we are referring to the movement and the *Communauté de l'Emmanuel*, born in France, which found and nourishes its charismatic and apostolic fruitfulness precisely in Paray-Le-Monial.

Our Institute has just taken the initiative to propose the Comboni Cross as a reminder of our spirituality; it will be necessary to continue to seek in this direction the integration between the spirituality that gave birth to us and those that we live today in the Church (assuming that we live one); to seek, however, the spiritual humus without which there can be no fruitful charismatic and apostolic rootedness or enthusiasm for the future.

The second element to be considered is the current intercultural context of missionary institutes, in the case of Comboni's very evident and accentuated by the passage of the century. Today the Institute is multicultural, it has opened up to a variety of souls (first Latin American, now African and Asian) which have greatly enriched it. The roots of the Comboni Institute in the Churches of Europe cannot be separated from this context, nor can it be thought of without this reference which leads one to question the role and contribution of non-European Comboni's to the life of the Institute in the old continent. And to ask oneself how to prepare Comboni missionaries from other continents for evangelization in Europe, admitting that it is no longer sufficient to assign them to maintain in European circumscriptions the models of presence inherited from the past [just as it is no longer sufficient to do what the European bishops have done to ensure priests to the communities of the continent; that is, to have recourse to the clergy of other Churches and continents, in order to keep alive a model of ordained ministry and Church presence which, according to observers, should be reviewed]. The opening, now underway, of the European Provinces to interculturality should be accompanied by reflection on evangelization and the rootedness of missionary institutes in the Churches of Europe, so as to identify criteria and profiles for their assignment on this continent (and avoid the difficulties and failures that have occurred in some attempts made in the recent past).

Conclusion

We have tried, in these pages, to trace a short path (... at this point, already a bit long!), understandable and open, which could be of help for a possible discussion on the proposed question: the rootedness, or lack of rootedness, of the missionary institutes in the local Churches of Europe (at a propitious time for reflection, as is the preparation of the 19th General Chapter). Re-reading the text, I realise that it could be accused of being generic, unilateral and/or excessively negative, and certainly also limited with regard to the situation of the other missionary institutes, on which we have not yet gathered sufficient data.

There is, however, in these lines, an element of provocation aimed at encouraging discussion. We do not ignore the beautiful things in our history in Europe and certainly do not want to "put out the

³⁴ Charles André Bernard, *La Spiritualità del Cuore di Cristo*, Edizioni San Paolo, Milan 2015, p. 134.

spluttering flame" (³⁵). We want, instead, to revive it, to blow on the fire of charism, hidden and buried under the ashes of our recent history and the snowfalls that are falling on European Christianity, between crises and skidding of various kinds.

In the celebration of the feast of our Holy Founder, someone (³⁶) reminded us that "the most necessary thing in the life of the Church is to keep the fire alive, not to worship the ashes... It is beautiful to feel the fatherhood of a Christian like Daniel Comboni, who had a burning heart and was in no way a prisoner of ashes, who was able to prophetically light the fire of the Gospel by crossing borders, comfort zones, misunderstandings, limiting visions, giving concrete form to an innovative missionary vision. What does it mean today to celebrate his memory? How do we place ourselves today in the road he inaugurated? The temptation to worship the ashes, to walk only the roads already marked or to open only the doors already open is a temptation of all time, more insidious than we think. (...) So we ask ourselves: what is it to remain faithful? Surely it is the ability to believe in the power of fire, especially when it seems powerless and fragile to win... The ashes tend only to immobilize us in a resigned and conformist image. On the contrary, the Spirit, the Spirit that descends upon us, is dynamism, it is a call to go beyond, it is a concrete manifestation of the love that God reserves for the forgotten, for those who are so often discarded. The Spirit descends upon us in order to make us courageous frequenters of the future."

Manuel Augusto Lopes Ferreira, mccj

³⁵ Isaiah 42, 3 and Matthew 12, 20.

³⁶ Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Homily in memory of Saint Daniele Comboni, Rome 10 October 2020.