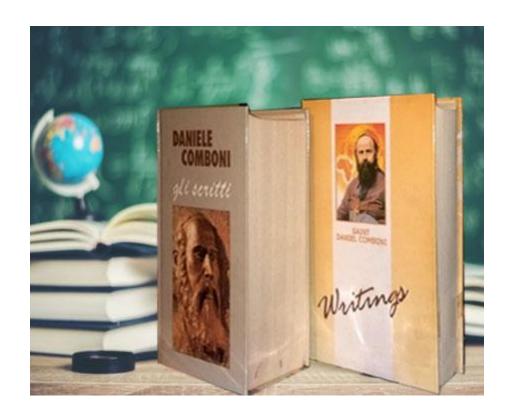
INSIDE COMBONI'S WRITINGS



By
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A PRICELESS TREASURE

The collection of letters written by Saint Daniel Comboni in his lifetime constitutes a unique opening into his heroic missionary heart and single-minded commitment to Africa.

Sometimes in 1983, working in the library in Kampala, Uganda, I noticed several new volumes just arrived, which were only xeroxed but well bound: it was the first attempt to publish the writings of Saint Daniel Comboni which had been collected from the different places where they were kept.

Eventually, in 1991, they were printed in a single volume of more than two thousand pages. The Italian originals were later translated into the other four official languages of the congregation: English, Spanish, Portuguese and German. In this way, the priceless treasure is now available to all. Those who have completed the not easy task of going through the whole thick volume have given witness to the powerful effect that the systematic exposure to Comboni's Writings has on the reader.

Comboni wrote copiously during his lifetime. To take a simple example: in a letter dated May 21, 1871, he stated that he had already written 1345 letters since the beginning of January. From this immense body of work, 1200 documents are known to be preserved today in archives, libraries or private collections. The whole letters are only 842, some very long, including reports to superiors or to humanitarian societies.

Comboni was a man of action and certainly never envisaged the possibility of his letters being published. This is why such writings are so revealing, in a direct and genuine way, of his true personality. In them we see the man, in his total involvement with the African problem, his emotional temperament and the attention he dedicated to the reality of the mission.

Even though his vision of humanity was optimistic, he never failed to enter into lively polemics, especially when it came to defending his missionaries and their activity. His expressions of love and faith in God are spontaneous and illustrate the consistence and passion with which he lived his vocation for Africa.

Here we have a sample: "After all this, I have only one thing to add. It is necessary to suffer many things for the love of Christ, to fight with the powerful, with the Turks, with atheists and Freemasons, with barbarians, with the elements, with priests, with friars, with the world and with Hell. But the one who trust in himself, trusts in the greatest ass of this world".

"All our trust is in the One who died for the Africans and who chooses the weakest instrument to achieve his works; for he wants to show that he is the author of good, and as for us, alone, we can only do evil. Since it is he who has called us to this work, with his grace we shall triumph over Pashas, Freemasons, atheistic governments, over the distorted thoughts of the good, the cunning of the wicked, and the snares of the world and of Hell" (2459).

We will keep dipping into this treasure in the coming chapters.

Inside Comboni's Writings

LETTERS FROM A JOURNEY

In 1857 young Comboni set out for the first time for Africa. Here is a sample of the long letters to his parents which he wrote during that journey.

With the courage of an apostle, Daniel Comboni was able to face the painful separation from his parents Luigi and Domenica who remained behind, poor and alone as he decided to leave for Africa on September 6, 1857, as a member of the Mazza Institute expedition.

The expedition had to make a halt in Egypt and Comboni took advantage of this period to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The expedition left Cairo and, after a long journey up the Nile, Comboni reaches (February 14) Holy Cross mission station in the heart of Africa. From the boat on the Nile, again as in Palestine, he wrote extensively to his parents.

From the Holy Land: "Finally (on horseback) we reached Bethlehem late in the evening. My God! Was that the place Jesus Christ chose to be born in? That very evening I wanted to go down to the blessed Grotto which saw the Creator of the world being born. I entered it and although birth is more joyful than death, I was nonetheless more moved than on Calvary... The grotto of Bethlehem where Jesus Christ was born is about 10 paces long and half of it is as wide as the corridor where you live; the other half is like your kitchen".

"I celebrated the Mass there the following night; and I was so pleased to remain till morning in the blessed grotto, which forms the delight of Heaven. Oh, in this grotto, in the silence of the night I had the joy of praying...I sat there and I kissed the spot where Jesus was born a thousand times. I kissed nearly the whole Grotto and I could nor tear myself away because it truly evoked in me that blessed moment in which the mystery of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ took place in this Grotto" (111-113)

From the boat "Stella Matutina", on the river Nile: "We had several chances to become acquainted and observe this people of the Shilluks. They are tall and strong-limbed, and I saw many who were enormous. The men, like all the African black people we visited, are completely naked... The whimsy of the Shilluks is particularly noticeable in the way they dress their hair. They cut it in thousands of different ways. I would not be able to describe to you in detail all the oddities of this kind of adornment, of which they are proud" (272)

"The river banks are overflowing with crocodiles and hippopotamuses. The Dinkas, like all the black people in Africa, wear ivory bracelets around their arms and wrists...Seeing these men holding their spears, carelessly leaning their bodies on their shields it seemed a picture of an idle, lazy life; and as long as they have *merissa* (local beer) to make themselves drunk, milk to nourish them and women to deal with, they want nothing else. But the light of the Gospel will shine before their eyes, penetrating their minds and hearts, and with divine grace, they will change their thoughts, their councils and their customs" (278-279).

THE FRIENDSHIP OF TWO GIFTED YOUTHS

Daniel Comboni was 34 and in the prime of his life and Blessed Marie Deluil-Martiny only 24. The Sacred Heart of Jesus became their "center of communication".

Blessed Marie Deluil-Martiny was born in 1841 in France. She was an exceptionally clever and enterprising young woman. When Comboni met her, she had started the Society of the Guard of Honor of the Sacred Heart and Daniel Comboni not only enrolled but planned to spread the Society in Africa. She died prematurely as a martyr in 1884, killed by young anarchic whom she had recruited as the gardener in order to help.

She preceded Comboni in holiness. She was declared a Blessed by John Paul II in 1989. They both died young, he was 50 and she was only 43. Here we have one of the first letters Daniel Comboni wrote her. Their correspondence, as their tender friendship, lasted for years.

"July 5, 1865: My dear Sister in Jesus Christ, I must tell you the joy it gave me to find in you a worthy Sister who bestowed upon me the high honor of promoting the glory of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the countries of Central Africa and also the joy that I feel in corresponding by letter with you regarding the interest of the glory of the Sacred Heart who is the center of communication between us, who must be burning for the salvation of these souls".

"Providence seems to have chosen me for the most difficult and dangerous apostolate to the Africans. I shall try to respond to this high mission with every possible effort. I am prepared to sacrifice my life for the salvation of Africa...

"The Work I am about to found, and that I hope to start already this year with the erection of two great Apostolic Vicariates in Central Africa, which the Holy See will open following my Plan for the Regeneration of Africa and that I will consecrate to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, links up closely with the Society of the Guard of Honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of which you are the fervent instigator".

"You see, dear Sister, what an intimate union there must be between you and me. It is for this reason that I shall keep you informed of all the progress made by this great Work which must also be yours, as yours is mine... I shall always remain, your humble friend and brother, Daniel Comboni, Apostolic Missionary"(1148-1150).

Friendship in Comboni has a divine source in the Heart of Jesus "center of communication": this expression appears here for the first time and in other few significant times in his writings. It is not the result of arid speculations but the spontaneous fruit of the warmth of his sensitive heart.

The encounter in the Heart of Jesus, "center of communication", not only makes possible deep friendship, as commitment of faithfulness to the Lord and to each other, but also as commitment to mission, to apostolate.

We could use the expression of Aelred of Rievaulx, the mystical medieval writer, who wrote a treaty on Spiritual Friendship and states: "Friendship has its beginning in Christ and has its apex in Christ".

THE VISION OF A MAN IN LOVE

In 1864, while praying at the tomb of Saint Peter in Rome, Daniel Comboni conceived the "Plan for the Regeneration of Africa", a genial intuition which contributed to his life-long dream coming true.

Comboni was only 33 years of age when he experienced the illumination that gave a new impetus to the commitment and work of a lifetime: to save Africa by means of the Africans themselves.

Pride of place, in the volume of the Writings, is occupied by the text of the Plan which he wrote without hesitation, in a continuous session of more than sixty hours, and which he presented for approval to Propaganda Fide and to Pope Pious IX.

He had it translated into the main European languages and travelled himself extensively around Europe to advertise his Plan. Here below we have some short but relevant passages of the beginning of it.

PLAN FOR THE REGENERATION OF AFRICA BY AFRICA

"Even today a mysterious darkness still covers those distant expanses which go make up the immensity of Africa. It is undoubtedly true that civil governments and private institutions have directed their energies to dispel, even for a moment, that oppressive gloom with the merest glimmer of the civilization of which Europe is so proud. Yet all the efforts of so many selfless men, their very great sacrifices, have been brought to nothing before the insuperable barrier by which nature seems to have striven to separate those inhospitable lands from the culture of the rest of the world"...

"The Catholic, who is used to judging things in a supernatural light, looked upon Africa not through the pitiable lens of human interest, but in the pure light of faith, there he saw an infinite multitude of brothers who belonged to the same family as himself, with a common Father in heaven. They were bent low and groaning beneath the yoke of Satan, and they were placed on the threshold of a most terrible precipice".

"Then he was carried away under the impetus of that love set alight by the divine flame on Calvary hill, when it came forth from the side of the Crucified One to embrace the whole human family; he felt his heart beat faster, and a divine power seemed to drive him towards those unknown lands. There he would enclose in his arms in an embrace of peace and of love those unfortunate brothers of his" (2741-2742)

"On this important subject we said to ourselves: "Would the conquest of the tribes of unhappy Africa not be better effected by placing our center of operations in a place where Africans can live without changing and European can live without succumbing?" Our thought has become set on this great idea; and the regeneration of Africa by Africa seems to us the only program to be followed in bringing about so dazzling a conquest... On this goal every thought of our life will be centered and for it we would be happy to pour out the last drop of our blood" (2753)

The Plan was a clarion call for the whole Catholic Church to become united in the enterprise of the conversion of Black Africa (Nigrizia) and made of Saint Daniel Comboni one of the Fathers of the African Church.

Inside Comboni's Writings

WOMEN OF THE GOSPEL

Protagonists of that heroic time of Mission together with Bishop Comboni are the women religious. Of this he was a conscious and happy witness and promoter.

The XIX century is the time of the great expansion of Christianity to the ends of the world. It is in this period, after the French Revolution, that

women religious were allowed to active life in the social and humanitarian fields and in the missions. They responded with exceptional generosity: innumerable new congregations of sisters in apostolic life were born and the expansion of Christianity grew like a bush fire.

Of this Bishop Comboni was aware as he wrote to Mother Emilie Julien, Superior of the Sisters of Charity: "The Sister of Charity in Central Africa does as much as three priests in Europe and this century of the persecution of the Catholic Church which has been deprived of the help of so many ecclesiastics and religious is the century of Catholic women who are used by God's providence as true priests, religious and apostles of the Church, auxiliaries of the Holy See, the arm of the Gospel ministry, pillars of the Foreign Apostolic Missions, civilizers of the primitive people. It is good that you, the Mother General of a Congregation of Missionary Sisters, be convinced of this" (4465).

But the best, more original statement Comboni wrote about the Sisters of Saint Joseph whom he had witnessed in action in the missions: "These sisters are the true image of the ancient women of the Gospel, who, with the same facility with which they teach the alphabet to the orphans in Europe, cross deserts on camels, sleep in the open air under a tree, scold immoral men for their vices, claim justice from pagan courts for the oppressed, do not fear hyenas and a lion's roaring, disastrous journeys and even death to win souls for the Church. They respond with miraculous weakness, their own force, to the Heart of Jesus who came to bring fire to the world" (3553).

To these generous and gallant words about women missionaries he added in other circumstances this beautiful sentence: "The sisters are the shield, strength and guarantee of the ministry of the missionary priest".

Comboni is the founder of the Pious Mothers of the Africans and he doesn't spare appreciation of his spiritual daughters as we read: "A model of true sister of Central Africa is Sister Teresa Grigolini, who is the prime and most complete and perfect example of the Congregation of the Pious Mothers of the Africans with her outstanding mind, capacity, charity and piety" (6653).

And this is what he wrote about the young woman who was the first to respond to his call: "The holiest sister we have is the sacristan in Khartoum, Sister Maria Giuseppa (Scandola)" (6473). The future witness of these two religious women revealed the heroic consistence of their dedication which lasted well beyond the premature death of Bishop Comboni.

Sister Teresa Grigolini was the angel of the missionaries during the long captivity under the Mahadi, to the point of accepting to sacrifice her vows and marry a fellow prisoner in order to protect the others. As for venerable Sister Giuseppa Scandola, the supreme sacrifice she did of her life in order to save the life of Father Giuseppe Beduschi is the conclusion of an exemplary journey soon to be recognized and honored by the universal Church.

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THE PROFILE OF A MISSIONARY

Bishop Comboni's words of appreciation for one of his missionaries show us how the Saint was boosting the morale of his group which was so diverse for formation, age and nationality.

This is how Bishop Comboni writes of one of his missionaries: "After I called Fr. Bonomi, Superior of Delen mission in the Nuba mountains, back to Khartoum to be my Vicar General, Fr. Giovanni Losi continued alone the difficult and important study of the Nuba language so that when, last May, I reached that mission station together with other missionaries and sisters, our Fr. Giovanni had composed and put together a dictionary in Nubian, Arabic and Italian of more than 3500 words, a Catholic catechism in the same language and translated in that language the main prayers of our holy faith.

Although it is difficult to make oneself understood by those people, yet he has converted some to the faith, baptized many dying children, and with the sublime eloquence of an irreproachable behavior, truly befitting a Christian and a priest, caused Catholicism to be loved and esteemed. What is wonderful and very uplifting, he has built a beautiful grass-thatched mud church where I baptized some adults and conferred Confirmation on about forty Christians on the feast of Corpus Christi.

In his free moments, he is always praying in the Church; he prays the Breviary almost all the time on his knees; there he spends most of the night. On Sundays and days of obligation, there he preaches in Arabic twice a day. It is as if he doesn't feel the needs of life; for him the poorest food is always too much; he sleeps either on the ground or on a mat on the *angareb*, always with his clothes on.

While he was burning with a very high fever, I begged him to accept at least a pillow: he refused it. Very often he fasts: he is young, slender and full of life when it is question of praying, talking of the things of God, saving souls. He has a zeal for souls that keeps him energetic even in the midst of privations and the greatest sacrifices".

In one word, Don Giovanni Losi is a pearl of a Gospel worker, he is the angel of that important mission and the constructive feelings I experienced in the 46 days I passed visiting and exploring that important tribe has cheered my heart up. Don Giovanni is loved and revered by those people as their true father. They always run to him and I hope he will be the first and most valid instrument for bringing those abandoned souls to the faith.

Don Losi, surrounded as he is by rough and naked people,... keeps all the fervor of his devotion and spirit of piety like the most committed of Jesuit novices; he is always warm and full of love for the things of God, the Church, the Saints" (6908-6912).

Bishop Comboni cared for his missionaries and dedicated his best efforts to the molding into a team the heterogeneous elements he accepted. He had written in this regard: "That the grace of God was active in our institute and that his blessing was on us appeared to me most clearly by the fact that in my missionaries I recognized persons of great conscience, stable character, faithfulness to their vocation, perseverance, true charity towards the neighbors and self denial" (2508).

A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE NUBA PEOPLE

The Nuba people of the Sudan was the object of Comboni' dreams as a missionary to Africa. Only later in life he managed to visit them and establish missions among them.

"The only thing that matters to me and this has been the only true passion of my entire life, and it will always be until my death, and nothing will make me ashamed of it- the only thing that matters to me is that Africa should hear the Gospel": with these passionate words Comboni wrote about his missionary vocation, in 1881, the year of his death.

Comboni had a strong, first-hand experience of Africa, but then during most of his life he had to spend his energies in organizing his missions from a distance... His love for Africa becomes concrete in his relation with the Nuba people of the Sudan: they embody the Africans whom he loved and wanted to bring to Christ by giving them the Gospel and with it life and freedom from slavery. The Nuba are a population of South West of Kordofan, they inhabit the Nuba Mountains.

Comboni writes: "Since 1848, at the age of 17, in Verona, I had made acquaintance with the good African youth Backit Kaenda of the noble family of count Maniscalchi. He belonged to the tribe of Gebel Nuba and was well known to the people of Propaganda. For long years I cultivated deep friendship and intimate relationship with this fervent African catholic...A thousand times I told the good Backit that I would not be happy until I had planted the cross of Jesus Christ in his motherland.

This dream remained a rather academic one during the early years of my ministry, when our apostolic activity was directed to the area of the White Nile. But when I reached Kordofan, I was confronted everyday with news coming from the country of the Nuba. I received report about the skill and the faithfulness of the Nuba workers...At this juncture the desire to study the Nuba and to offer them the light of the Gospel was rekindled in my heart more than ever...

One day a Nuba chief from Dilling, a certain Said Aga, came to El Obeid. He was introduced to me at the mission in the morning of 16 July 1874. The

day is consecrated to our Lady of Mount Carmel. We were just coming out of the church after our usual hour of adoration to the Blessed Sacrament.

I welcomed the Nuba chief with great respect and I showed him around the workshops and the little school for boys and girls. In the church, I plaid the harmonium for him and I showed him the main altar with all its cloths, the statue of our Lady, etc...

Seeing how happy and pleased Said Aga was, I revealed to him my desire to make acquaintance with the great chief of all the Nuba and let him understand that I was not far from establishing a mission among the Nuba (4098-4100).

After Said Aga, the very paramount chief Kojur Kakum visited the Catholic mission in El Obeid and in1875 Bishop Comboni sent missionaries to establish mission stations among the Nuba, but it will be only six years later, in 1881, that Comboni himself reached the Nuba area in what will be his last safari.

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THE LAST SAFARI

Three months before dying, Comboni succeeded in visiting the green hills of his beloved Nuba people. The journey filled him with joy and yet will contribute to take him to his grave before time.

This is how he writes to his old father about the safari among the Nuba people that will be his last: "I have accomplished a tiring but important exploration over more than fifty mountains, sometimes on horseback sometimes on foot, sleeping on mats, eating without salt and under the strain

of many and most painful privations, but all the same dear to me because whenever one works for the Lord everything becomes sweet.

We had climbed on foot mount Carchendi under a very scorching, suffocating sun. I had left my horse with the six Turkish guards in the plain. I was accompanied by three other missionary priests and a layman. They made us lie on some knotty poles in the shadow, surrounded by a crowd of blacks both little and grown up and of women young and old all in the fashion of our forefathers Adam and Eve, before they made the imbecility of committing original sin.

We reached four in the afternoon without anybody thinking of making us taste anything, though we had gone without food since the previous evening. My companions, hunger barking in their bellies, came forward and asked the chief for something to eat.

In that very moment, an old, huge cock, shaking its wings, crew as if wanting to salute us. In fifteen minutes that unfortunate bird was already killed, plucked, placed on the flame of an open fire, laid in front of us as it was, salt-less and without any dressing, shared in shreds among us, swallowed and laid to rest in our stomach.

Then we set off but in middle mountain the rain caught up with us and we took refuge in a hut belonging to a local inhabitant who also gave us a kind of watery *polenta*, salt-less and without sauce which we ate cheerfully reminiscing the *risotto* of the Grigolini family we enjoyed at La Mariona when you yourself were there one time with the parish priests of San Martino and Montorio, etc...

I have made a plan for the government of Sudan in order to eradicate the slave trade in these Nuba mountains that every year are depleted of their inhabitants. Chiefs, kojurs and sultans of these places came at my feet to beg me to free them from the scourge, for, from 1838 when my African friend Backit Maniscalchi was captured up to the present time, this population has been reduced and almost wiped out...

I have only laid the facts on the table and exposed how the facts stand against hundreds of worthless rich who made themselves powerful with the blood of the blacks, by the most horrible crimes, selling and forcing into prostitution thousands of honest girls who lost their virtue and their lives and I have let the government take the necessary measures..." (6893-6900).

Bishop Comboni never recovered completely from the exhaustion and sickness of the last safari and died three months afterwards. The Nuba people have become unfortunately famous for the persecution they have been submitted some years ago by the government of the Sudan led by the mass murderer president Omar Bashir, now deposed and imprisoned by the rebellion of the people of the Sudan.

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STANDING UP FOR THE OPPRESSED

Bishop Comboni was in agony over one of his spiritual daughters unjustly accused. The way he stood by her shows his extraordinary, heroic courage, forgetful of self.

In the final months of his life, Comboni was the subject of false accusations in Verona. These were linked to his stout defense of a Syrian, Virginia Mansur, who was a postulant with the sisters. This woman had already worked as a missionary under Bishop Comboni as a member of another religious congregation, but then she had asked to join Comboni's Institute when her own order withdrew from the Sudan.

She had been sent to Verona where she taught Arabic. Because her own competence and because of her long missionary experience, she became the object of intense jealousie. From the Sudan, Comboni defended her and this provoked such opposition and calumnies towards him that together with his extreme exhaustion, they contributed to his untimely death.

This is how he writes about Virginia to his close collaborator, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti: "See that we do not lose Virginia who can do for Africa as much as ten of our sisters...If Virginia and I have suffered because of calumny (and I boast of this because I am not guilty —and neither is Virginia — not even of a wart of what we have been accused by some brigands and crazy

holy people)...this doesn't make her less an instrument of God for Africa in God's own way...

We must therefore keep Virginia into account because she has been the most faithful of all the sisters and the missionaries for me and for the missions. And for me who have been betrayed by many and by those who appeared to be the most faithful, this is a title of profound respect and veneration for Virginia. I wish I had a hundred Virginia and I'm interested in keeping her and put up with her shortcomings, because she has done and she will do her duty".

When I came across Comboni's following sentence for the first time I could not believe my eyes so incredible a statement it is! Now, I consider that that sentence alone makes Comboni a person of exceptional, outstanding greatness:

"The day I forget Virginia will be the day I have lost every zeal and affection for Africa. But given that this will hardly happen since it was God himself who called me to care for Africa, I will thus always have the highest esteem of Virginia, because she has outstanding qualities and more gifts and courage than all our sisters that we have in the Sudan including the Superiors...Here in Africa would like very much to have her... But at present it is good that she stays in Verona...

(Here he corrects the impression that one may get that he is despising his own daughters, making a digression and speaking of their zeal in assisting Gessi Pasha in his death bed and saying that they are angels).

Courage, therefore, and go ahead and with Virginia's help our Congregation will receive a great advantage. I myself state this now that I am already more and more in danger of dying, and I say it in conscience, even if I were in the actual point of death, and let object to it whoever wants to, who doesn't know the missions and what a true sister of charity in Central Africa is" (6535, 6536, 6537).

COMBONI AND HIS FATHER

The love of Bishop Comboni for his father, also his only family member, is witnessed by the many, long and tender letters he kept writing to him throughout his life.

Saint Daniel Comboni's father was called Luigi and was a tenant for the owner of a lemon orchard in the village of Limone. Altough living in an age when simple workers of the land were universally illiterate, Luigi knew how to read and also wrote with a certain propriety.

He remained a widower early in life when his wife Domenica Pace died while the young priest Comboni was in his first mission in Africa, in 1858. Luigi outlived his son bishop by thirteen years, dying very old in 1894.

This is how Bishop Comboni wrote to his father less than a month before his untimely death, when he was already sick and exhausted, yet he makes his letter witty and lighthearted in order not to alarm the old man:

"Dearest dad, tonight at 3 a.m. I have celebrated mass in my room (since I can hardly sleep); in the morning I have the strength neither to celebrate or to attend mass; I therefore say it after midnight when I can find breath, in my quarters, and I have celebrated it for you, to mark your 78th year since you came into the world to con it and to be a nonsense to the others.

I have prayed so that God may make a saint of you and give you many spiritual graces to insure the big business of your soul. I did not make any prayer for God to prolong your years since this is too earthly and worldly although I wish you could live up to a hundred years provided this contributes to add to your grace and merits...

It is two weeks since Don Vincenzo Marzano left together with my footman Domenico. The poor man was crying and he went to the Sisters and the Superior to say: for God's sake, I entrust Monsigneur to you; poor man, he has nobody to care for him, etc...

To tell you the plain truth, after Domenico's departure, I have chosen as man-servant Giovanni, a tall guy from Tuscany whom you have seen in Verona...This good man is a hundred times more valuable than Domenico...But I have dispatched Domenico to Europe with all kindness and grace...Your most affectionate son, bishop Daniel. P.S. Domenico who left believes that I am heart-broken because of his departure. (7034-7038).

Bishop Comboni was deeply wounded when a calumny about his behavior reached his father and he confided his suffering to his close collaborator, Fr. Giuseppe Sembiante: "This is really the deepest point of my great sorrow. Let them inveigh against me, let them denounce me to the Pope...But to upset and afflict a holy old man who not only gave me my physical life but more still the life of my spirit, this is too much...

May God's will be done...and my father, dying with a heart wounded with a wound caused by calumnies, suspicions and lies, will win a new crown in heaven, where I hope that we will soon be together...

Fr. Sembiante, I recommend to your care my father Luigi Comboni, who does not deserve to end his days in sorrow because of a son (and all the accusations are false) who has always given and must always give him every spiritual consolation (6938, 6939,6940).

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COMBONI AND MANY CROSSED

Throughout his life Saint Daniel Comboni experienced many sufferings of all kinds. He came to the conviction that the works of God are born at the foot of the Cross.

This is how he writes on the last days of his life: "The day before yesterday I received the news of the death of the most pious Don Mattia Moron, whom I had ordained *titulo Missionis* (in view of the missions) and who had caught a

beginning of pneumonia in Cairo. We have celebrated the office and the Mass for the repose of his soul.

We had not yet managed to remove the catafalque, when the news of the death of Don Antonio Dubale, student of Propaganda Fide College, struck in El Obeid by an extremely burning typhoid fever. Yesterday morning, therefore, we have celebrated the office and the Mass of the Dead for his soul.

In the middle of the morning, while the catafalque was still up, a telegram from Kordofan brought me the announcement that at Malbes Sr. Maria Colpo of the Pious Mothers of the Africans, was dying: a typhoid fever with dysentery was robbing her from the crowd of African women whom she was training in Christian piety and fervor.

And so, this morning we have celebrated on her behalf the now usual funeral service and I gave order to leave untouched in the middle of the church the catafalque. We have here a lay brother, a very able black-smith and teacher of this skill to our young African boys, who is down with typhus and not yet out of danger...

All in all, it is the cross that we have to carry and a very heavy one. A comforting thing is for us that big crosses are the true support and consolidation of God's work (7146-7149).

Sufferings, sickness, contradictions were not a novelty in Bishop Comboni's life. Since the beginning, he had faced trials and contradictions courageously, recognizing God's hand even in the pain and anguish caused by the extreme difficulty of his mission. He had even described in glowing terms his love for the cross of Jesus, surrendering to the mysticism of the Cross:

"I feel so full of strength and of courage and of trust in God and in the Blessed Virgin Mary that I am certain of overcoming everything and of being ready for other, heavier crosses in the future. I already see and understand that the "Cross" is such a friend to me and is always so nearby that I have for some time chosen her for my eternal and indivisible Bride. So, the Cross will be my beloved "bride" and my prudent teacher, Mary will be my dearest "Mother" and Jesus my "all".

In their company, I fear neither the storms of Rome, nor the turmoil of Verona, nor the clouds of Lyons and Paris. Slowly and surely, walking of

thorny ground, I will succeed in establishing and giving life to the proposed Work for the regeneration of Africa, which has been abandoned by everybody, and which is the hardest and most challenging work of the Catholic apostolate" (1709-1710).

Inside Comboni's Writings

THE LAST LETTER

Bishop Comboni is dying prematurely in Khartoum. The hand that has written thousands of letters is now tired. His last sentences are an act of trust in God.

How Bishop Comboni was in the last trying months of his life is described by himself in the following passage:

"I have no strength to write. The heat, lack of appetite and sleep, the long journeys I have made in the past three months on horseback, on camels and on dromedaries, all this has reduced me to extreme weakness. We have suffered appallingly from thirst in Kordofan and I still need from 40 to 50 francs to buy dirty, brackish water. They even give me as Bishop, water to wash with, but I have to make it last three or four times.

The room in which I am writing this letter is a little straw hut, where, to shelter from the rain, I have to keep my umbrella open. I am sitting on a trunk and next to a simple missionary bed. My light comes in through a few permanently open holes that serve as windows.

We, we are very happy, and I more than anyone...Here I have my missionaries and four sisters of my congregation who are not in the least frightened of the lions and hyenas that surround us. The people with whom

we find ourselves are completely primitive. But we are confident: our Lady of the Sacred Heart will do what we desire for them" (6773-6775).

These are the last sentences of the last letter that he wrote to Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti on October 4, 1881:

"Let everything that God wishes come about: God never abandons the one who trusts in him. He is the protector of innocence and the vindicator of righteousness. I am happy in the cross which, when born willingly out of the love for God, gives birth to victory and eternal life. Yours most affectionately, Bishop Daniel Comboni" (7246).

It is very touching to consider that only six days later Bishop Comboni was on his death bed. It makes you shiver looking at his stable handwriting in the original Italian text and admire the complete surrender of his will to God's will, his unshakable trust in the face of so many trials and especially the calumny that cut right through his noble heart.

We are lucky that this last letter exists and we can read it after so many years. It is a precious legacy, a challenging real fact in which we can always look like in a mirror in order to draw inspiration for our fidelity.

Saint Daniel Comboni died at 10 p.m., October 10, 1881. He was not yet 51. His body was buried in the garden of Khartoum mission. Two years later, during the Mahadi rebellion, his tomb was profaned and his remains scattered. When the missionaries came back, almost twenty years later, they found only some fragments of his bones.

They gathered them and took them first to Assuan and then to Verona, the motherhouse of the congregation, from where he had set out for Africa. The little that remains of Comboni is now there. His spirit and his heritage have remained in Africa.