

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

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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...”

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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

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.

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A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE NUBA PEOPLE

The Nuba people of the Sudan was the object of Comboni's 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

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).

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. Although 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...

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

