



A Question of Heart

«They will look on the one
whom they have pierced».
(Jn 19,37)

Dear Confreres,
best wishes of peace in the Risen Lord!

The month of June offers us the opportunity to celebrate, in the space of one week, the *157th Anniversary of the birth of the Institute* (on 1st June 1867 the Work of the Good Shepherd for the Regeneration of Africa was founded in Verona, which marked the official beginning of the missionary service of the Comboni Missionaries) and the *Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (7th June 2024).

These are two dates which, with different purposes and intensity, invite us to remember – making them increasingly present today – two important facts that intersect and recall each other, to the point where the second becomes an integral part of the first.

The first fact – God has always made himself known as ‘He who loves’ and binds himself faithfully to humanity. But it is only in Jesus Christ that he fully manifests himself as ‘Love’, going so far as to give his own Son, who, extolling the goodness of the Father who is revealed in him, repeats to us that he has come to comfort the tired and the oppressed - because he is “meek and humble of heart” – to the point of dying for them, revealing the Father’s Plan of salvation.

The second fact – Eighteen and a half centuries after the definitive revelation of ‘God as Love’, a man named Daniel Comboni, feels so taken by this Love – that he contemplates being definitively ‘consumed’ by the Son of God who dies on a cross – to adhere to the ‘majuscule’ *Plan* of salvation of the heavenly Father, with all his will and with stable, solid and lasting fidelity. And, inspired by the Spirit, he conceives a ‘minuscule’ *Plan* for the regeneration of Africa, which is nothing less than an attempt to ‘give flesh’ to God’s great salvific project. Today, 160 years after that inspiration from above received by Daniel, we are now 1,488 Comboni missionaries, who continue to feel called to share Daniel’s charism, in the belief that, in so doing, we play an active part in the great mission of making known to the whole world the ‘God of Love’, who made himself a ‘Pierced Heart’ for all humanity.

“Heart indicates the place where the mystery of man transcends into the mystery of God... Heart evokes the pierced heart, the anguished, squeezed, dead heart. Saying heart means saying love, that elusive and disinterested love, the love that wins in uselessness, the love that triumphs in weakness, the love that, when killed, gives life. Saying heart means saying the love that is God” (Karl Rahner).



Towards this Heart, we are invited to turn the gaze of our faith because it is the only Heart capable of changing humanity, of giving rise to new hope. Comboni reminds us of this: «This divine Heart, which tolerated being torn apart by an enemy spear in order to pour out from that sacred opening the Sacraments from which the Church was formed, has not ceased to love humankind, but continues to live on our altars as a prisoner of love and a victim of propitiation for the whole world" (*Writings* 3324).

In this Heart, we Comboni Missionaries find ourselves, our destiny and our own way of life, which is given to us as a burden or grace together, and assigned to us as our mission. A mission that is a service of charity. A charity that acts, which is industrious and practical, not abstract, which continually pushes us towards service to others. A charity imbued with hope, in a time like ours so full of serious upheavals that cause feelings of exasperation and despair in all humanity.

Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*: “The yearning for authentic charity, or for charity in the truth, is placed in the heart and mind of every man by God. Without truth, charity is emptied of meaning and lapses into unpleasant sentimentality; love becomes an empty shell, to be filled arbitrarily. It is the fatal risk of love in a culture without truth. It is prey to the emotions and contingent opinions of the subjects, a word that is abused and distorted to the point of meaning the opposite. The truth frees charity from the constraints of an emotionalism that deprives it of relational and social contents, and of a fideism that deprives it of human and universal scope” (*CV, Introduction*).

The Truth is Christ himself. “May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will, with all the saints, have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until, knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God” (*Eph 3:18-19*). A generative and responsible charity will result, to build a ‘history’ of solidarity, building a fraternal community. For this reason, charity is the ‘daily place’ in which life grows as a spiritual sacrifice.

This is the solidarity that we want to express by praying for all the populations in the world who suffer from wars and disasters and for our confreres involved in many difficult situations.

May the two anniversaries become for all of us a reminder to live our evangelising mission with passion, convinced more than ever that only the announcement of a God of Love, of a God with a Pierced Heart, can save the world.

Rome, 29 May 2024



The General Council