



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO COMBONI MISSIONARIES

*To the Very Reverend Father Manuel Augusto Lopes Ferreira
Superior General of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus*

1. I joyfully address you on the occasion of the General Chapter, which is a privileged moment for deepening and growing in the life of this religious family, and I willingly take the opportunity to express my congratulations and best wishes for the demanding task to which you are called by the trust your confrères have placed in you. May the Lord assist you in carrying out your new task, for which I accompany you with my prayers.

I also greet the members of the General Council and those taking part in the Chapter. I deeply hope that the intense work of these days will produce abundant fruits of goodness in the Comboni community for the sake of the Church's missionary activity. I extend my affectionate greeting to all the Comboni Missionaries who work, often in difficult conditions, on four continents, and I encourage them to continue with generous fidelity in their commitment to the mission *ad gentes*.

The 15th General Chapter takes place between *two significant moments* in the life of your institute: the first is the beatification of your founder, Bishop Daniel Comboni, whom I had the joy of raising to the glory of the altars last year; the second is the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, whose preparation involves every member of the People of God. These two events encourage your religious congregation to deepen its own charism, to throw itself with renewed zeal into the work of evangelization, in view of the third Christian millennium.

2. As I joyfully praise the Lord for the good that you, the Comboni Missionaries, are doing in the world, I urge you to exercise *attentive discernment regarding the situation of the peoples* among whom you carry out your pastoral work. God calls you to bring comfort to peoples who are often marked by great poverty and prolonged, acute suffering, as for example in Sudan, Uganda, Congo-Kinshasa, in the Central African Republic and in various other parts of the world.

Continually ask yourselves about the difficult situations with which you come into contact and try to offer in suitable ways the witness of charity which the Spirit instils in your hearts (cf. Rom 5:5).

The life of Comboni Missionaries, strewn with joys and sorrows, lights and shadows, has also been marked and made fruitful in recent years by the Cross of Christ. How can we fail to remember here those confrères who crowned their missionary service with the supreme sacrifice of their life?

May their radical Gospel choice illumine your missionary commitment and be an encouragement for everyone to continue with renewed generosity in your particular mission in the Church.

3. To further this difficult mission, solid, good-quality *formation* is needed, both in the initial phase of the candidates' vocational growth and in the years that follow.

For this purpose it should be kept in mind that the number of nations providing young missionaries is increasing, and at the same time, the urgent need for this new generation to have suitable training should not be underestimated, so that they will be able to face the intercultural transitions typical of the Comboni mission. Their need for guidance in their first years of service in the missionary field should also be considered, with reliance on the support which comes from the example and witness of mature Comboni priests.

This shows the importance of a continual formation addressed to all the institute's members without distinction and which is increasingly experienced as a responsibility incumbent primarily on the individual religious and the local community.

4. Starting from the current situation of your institute, considered "in the pure ray of faith" according to the teaching of Bl. Daniel Comboni, it will be possible to propose *a few guidelines* to direct you on your way to the future with trust and ever lively apostolic zeal.

May you first of all know how to accept joyfully the continual encouragement to renewal and commitment which comes from true contact with the Lord Jesus, present and active in the mission through the Holy Spirit. Following a basic insight of Bishop Comboni, you will thus take to heart the deepening and the reaffirmation of your institute's *specific charism*. This will not fail to spur you to open your hearts with docility and gratitude to the grace of your specific mission in the Church, which is characterized as a vocation *ad gentes* and *ad vitam*.

Consecration to mission must then be expressed in an increasing *apostolic mobility*, which will permit you to respond promptly and adequately to current needs. This will enable you to be actively present in the new areopagi of evangelization, giving priority, even if this involves sacrifices, to an openness to situations which, in the realities of their extreme need, seem emblematic of our time.

5. After your blessed founder's example, it is urgently necessary to give a new impulse to missionary life. Above all it will be the apostolic fervour of the missionaries themselves that will support the Christian communities entrusted to them, particularly those recently founded. They must be encouraged by you to fulfil their universal missionary vocation as an essential part of their identity, involving themselves in that "organic pastoral solidarity" which I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (n. 131).

In the effort to renew your style of missionary service, it will be necessary to give priority to certain elements that are significant today, such as sensitivity to the inculturation of the Gospel, the space given to the co-responsibility of pastoral workers, the choice of simple and poor forms of presence among the people. Dialogue with Islam, the commitment to promote the dignity of women, family values and sensitivity to the themes of justice and peace deserve special attention.

6. The effort to renew the institute necessarily includes loving concern for the situation of every individual religious, so that his missionary consecration may be more and more a source of life-giving and sanctifying contact with Jesus, whose pierced Heart is a fount of consolation, peace and salvation for all mankind.

From this standpoint, it is decisive to deepen the *mystical roots of the Comboni vocation*. You can thus be nourished by your specific spirituality and can offer it as a precious gift to everyone you meet in your pastoral service. As I recalled on the occasion of the beatification of Daniel Comboni: "From contemplation of the Cross and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, your blessed founder was able to draw support and strength to face every trial.... His tireless missionary work was sustained by prayer, which he indicated as the first means of evangelization and missionary promotion" (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 27 March 1996, p. 2).

I hope that the guidelines drawn up by the General Chapter will direct the whole institute to continue with generosity and determination on the way marked out by the founder and followed with heroic courage by your many confrères. With these sentiments, as I invoke the heavenly protection of Mary, Queen of the Missions, and of Bl. Daniel Comboni, I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to the Chapter delegates and to the whole Comboni family.

From Castel Gandolfo, 25 September 1997.

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