



Mission News

No. 255 Spring 2022

Comboni Missionaries

"Ultimately the well-being of Earth and the well-being of the human must coincide, since a disturbed planet is not conducive to human well-being in any of its concerns – spiritual, economic, emotional or cultural."

(Fr. Thomas Berry – 1985)

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Sr. Isabelle plays the drum during a Palm Sunday celebration in Mexico.

I will Sing to the Lord, for he has Triumphed

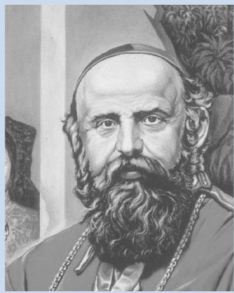
Comboni Sister Isabelle Kahambu Valinande was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where she was one of eight children. She had not really given any thought to religious life, not like her older sister Fabiola, who gave it serious consideration. However, Fabiola's life would take a more traditional route, but she encouraged Isabelle to discern a life as a religious sister and introduced her to the Comboni Sisters. Over time Isabelle felt drawn to the Comboni Missionaries because of their work in the area of peace and justice, evangelization and youth ministry.

After several years of formation in the DRC and Kenya, Isabelle made her first vows as a Comboni Sister and was sent to Mexico for nine years. She is now more recently in Texas where the Comboni Sisters are opening a new community to focus on youth ministry.

Sr. Isabelle recalls quite clearly her parish ministry experience in Costa Chica, which is in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico. There was a

lack of pastoral agents and too few priests, so Sr. Isabelle and the other sisters would often lend a hand and go into the numerous smaller communities which were often not attended to on a regular basis. She would visit these communities and get to know the local people and their daily reality. Sr. Isabelle would then gather together with the community and lead a celebration of the Word and help with faith formation. Sr. Isabelle was always moved by the presence of faith in the lives of the people as they journeyed together through the liturgical year.

Sr. Isabelle, like other missionaries, walk with the people they have been sent to serve and accompany them through the joys and challenges of life. They try to bring the Gospel alongside these moments and the faith to see that we do not journey alone, but share too in an eternal life given to us at Easter. As the Easter Vigil responsorial psalm reminds us: I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed.



Saint Daniel Comboni
1831-1881
First Bishop of
Central Africa
and Founder of the
Comboni Missionaries

**Serving in 42 countries
worldwide.**

In Africa:

Benin, Central African Rep.,
Chad, Dem. Rep. Congo,
Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia,
Ghana, Kenya, Malawi,
Mozambique, South Africa,
South Sudan, Sudan, s Togo,
Uganda, Zambia.

In the Americas:

Brazil, Canada, Chile,
Columbia, Cost Rica,
Ecuador, El Salvador,
Guatemala, Mexico,
Peru, United States.

In Asia:

Macau, The Philippines,
Taiwan.

In Europe:

Austria, England, France,
Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland,
Portugal, Scotland, Spain.

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From The Editor's Desk

I remember when I was a Comboni lay missionary in Kenya in the mid -1990's and was assigned to Kariobangi Parish, which was then on the outskirts of the capital city Nairobi. The pastor at the time was an Italian Comboni Fr. Mario Porto, who had been in Kenya for many years, but also had experiences in England as well. I admired Fr. Mario for the way he lived out his ministry, particularly the amount of time he spent listening and talking with people, whether it was one on one, with a married couple or even individual families. I would always witness people coming by to talk to him or he would be going to visit them. Sure, some people were looking for financial help, but most people wanted someone to listen to them and offer some spiritual guidance and accompaniment; perhaps someone to connect their story with the Gospel.

On pages 3-4 of this issue of Mission News, we present an interview with Mon. Eugenio Arrelano Fernandez, a Comboni missionary who has just retired as the bishop of Esmeraldas, in Ecuador. Mon. Eugenio ministered in a very similar way to Fr. Mario. He spent time with people and that was a priority for him above

other demands. Mons. Eugenio states that missionaries need to accompany the people in their daily lives and be present with them through the ups and the downs of life. He thought that missionaries should live in the communities they serve so that people get to know them outside of the church buildings.

Both Fr. Mario and Mons Eugenio are good models for missionary practice today. Whether it is with the new Kenyan Comboni lay missionaries (page 2), or through parish ministry in South Africa (page 5) or the formation of future Comboni priests in Africa (page 6), the message is that missionaries need to walk with the people and be present with them listening in faith and sharing in the life we celebrate at Easter. It is something Pope Francis highlighted when he said ministers should have the smell of the sheep, as a way of saying that they are very close to the people they serve. On behalf of the Comboni missionaries, I wish you nothing but the peace and renewed life that comes to us through Jesus at Easter.



Four new Comboni Lay Missionaries

In December 2021, four Kenyans completed a long formation process and were commissioned as Comboni lay missionaries. They will join now a wider international family of Comboni lay missionaries around the world.

At the same time the Comboni Missionaries in Kenya understood the need to establish a lay missionary commitment in Kenya in which Kenyan and other international members of the lay missionary movement can engage in missionary service. The missionary congregation decided to build a house for the lay missionaries in Kitelakapel, in West Pokot County. The mission will be within the Catholic Parish of Kacheliba.

Great strides have already been made in construction. Not only have the plans been developed and the bricks manufactured, but the construction of the house has also begun. In addition, a well has been drilled

to ensure the continued availability of water for the residence. Soon two Kenyan lay missionaries will be heading to Kitelakapel to do missionary work once all the construction has been completed. In addition, the first international lay missionary member, Linda, will join the community from Italy. There is excitement to welcome Linda and officially begin their missionary work as an international community. *(Comboni Missionaries)*



Comboni lay missionaries Beatrice, Margaret, Josephin & Martin.

(Mons. Eugenio Arrelano Fernandez was born in Spain in 1944. He is the first Spanish Comboni Missionary to be consecrated a bishop, and has served 26 years in the Diocese of Esmeraldas, which is on the coast of Ecuador. This past July 2021, Pope Francis accepted his resignation due to age. Here are excerpts of an interview by Enrique Bayo – Mundo Negro)

Ecuador was your first missionary love?

Mons. Eugenio: Yes, I arrived to Ecuador in 1978. Although I left Ecuador to serve six years in Spain and another six years as a formator of Comboni seminarians in Paris, my missionary life has been centered here. When I was made bishop in 1995, I already knew the land with its challenges and hopes. I was not arriving to a strange Church, as Esmeraldas was a part of me.

How would you describe Esmeraldas and its people?

Mons. Eugenio: You immediately fall in love with Esmeraldas because the people are loving, they make themselves lovable. Some say that Esmeraldas is a corner of Africa in the middle of Latin America, and although immigration has mixed people a lot, black culture prevails. There is a very beautiful human community, a spontaneous and wonderful unscheduled solidarity. The positive meaning of life is also natural. The people of Esmeraldas know how to be grateful, they live a culture of gratitude. They always thank God, and whoever is grateful to God is also grateful to others. They smile continuously, which is why I usually say that the face of this town is illuminated by the smile. They smile not because there are no problems, that there are, and many, but because they know that there is a God who is good and who is with them. Esmeraldas is also a poor town because its people have been denied opportunities and the governments of the day have always forgotten about it.



Offering a word of hope and solidarity to the people.

What has been the response of the Church?

Mons. Eugenio: The Church wants to create for the poor the opportunities that life has denied them. We are committed to serious educational processes and we fight with the governments of the moment to be heard because education is for them the only way out of poverty. We have invested much in this area. As a Church we have made a clear choice for the family. In the 27 parishes of the vicariate we have initiatives to strengthen family ties.

And confronting the poverty?

Mons. Eugenio: The pastoral care of charity is very strong and in serious situations such as the pandemic we have mobilized from Caritas to bring food to the poor and medicine to the sick. We are in solidarity while stimulating collective charity. I usually tell priests to invent channels to stimulate solidarity and to speak in homilies of specific situations, to talk about the lady to be operated on or of the old man living alone.

Another aspect is Justice and Peace. For years we have been denouncing the large scale cutting of trees, the abuses of mining, and though sometimes I have the impression that we are preaching in the desert, I know that we contribute in this field. The Constitution of Ecuador is beautiful, because it talks about the rights of nature, the protection of forests ... That is why, when community leaders come together to protest the excesses of mining or the pollution of the rivers, I tell them “What they are going to demand is compliance with the Constitution, not to be told that they are rebels that the authority must punish.”

When I visited Esmeraldas in 2002, I enjoyed to see you dedicating hours and hours being close to the people and listening to them. Are you still doing that?

Mons. Eugenio: I couldn't work any other way. I give time for them to come and other times I go. You need to learn
continues



Leading an open-air liturgical celebration.

to waste time talking to people, sit and laugh with them, eat together. They do not know the voice of the pastor only in the cathedral, they know it in everyday life. They must feel that you are theirs, and for this you have to leave important things second. I always say that our prayer as missionaries is not difficult, because we are pressured by reality. We are in contact with very big problems that we cannot solve, and this inability leads you to intercessory prayer. Our prayer is full of names and faces. One sees prayer differently, it is no longer a matter of sensitivity or devotion, it is about solidarity, it is about a moment where they are yours and you are theirs.

What is the situation regarding pastoral agents in Esmeraldas?

Mons. Eugenio: We are in a very interesting situation. I have had to live a very beautiful moment in this Church: the passage from missionaries to local clergy. Missionaries are spiritually rich people, mature, well prepared and with material possibilities, but they leave and give way to young people who only have good will and a lot of enthusiasm, everything else must be sought as a bishop. Despite so many limitations, this local Church is consolidating little by little, with all its defects but with its own identity. In this sense, we keep in mind Comboni's motto of "Save Africa with Africa," and we have a minor seminary in Esmeraldas and two major seminaries in Quito, where there is adequate teaching staff. One is a Redemptoris Mater seminary, linked to the Neocatechumenal Way, but under the jurisdiction of the archdiocese, from which about twenty priests were just ordained and another 18 seminarians were recently welcomed. I said to myself: "I look for vocations wherever they are," so I spoke with Kiko Arguello and with other people and now we have good priests who love the poor and meet the ecclesial needs of Esmeraldas. We also have about 90 religious from many congregations. They work in education, in the liturgy and in catechesis, but above all in the pastoral care of the poor neighborhoods. The best response to sects is a nun who walks the streets. The sects occupy empty spaces, at least in Esmeraldas, and the presence of the religious fills that hole, which makes people return to the Church.

Which missionary methodology seduces you the most?

Mons. Eugenio: I would like to have priests who are not passing through the communities, but who stay in them. The time has come to share the life of the people. You never become enculturated if you always go from one place to another, if you don't stay to sleep and live with people. I do not like the priest that is itching to go here and there and thinks that he belongs to everyone when, in reality, it does not belong to anyone. I dream of missionaries who do not have a stable house, but who rent a house in the neighborhoods. This freedom that comes from not having possessions is wonderful, although some look at me with the face of saying: "Father, be realistic."

What will you do now that your service in Esmeraldas ends?

Mons. Eugenio: My project is not to return to Europe for my old age. I already spoke with Father General to reintegrate myself into the Comboni congregation, which is the rock from which they carved me, and to join the Comboni community of Tumaco, in Colombia as one more missionary. Staying in Esmeraldas does not seem to be the best place for me, even if it costs me dearly. I have to leave the field open to the new bishop. I was there too many years and I would only become a point of reference if I stay. *(Mundo Negro)*



Mons. Eugenio (in white) helps bring a boat ashore in Esmeraldas.



Walking in procession through the streets of the city.

I leave the inner compound of the Oliver Tambo airport in Johannesburg and my colleague awaits me there, the Kenyan priest Fr. Robert Ndungu, who has come to pick me up and with whom I will live in my new missionary destination in South Africa. Fr. Robert is not allowed to enter the terminal, so he waits outside, along with a large group of people eager to offer transportation to new arrivals, or to escort them to the car with their luggage. One of the porters insists on taking my bags. I resist and he exclaims loudly: “Here in South Africa the coronavirus is over.” Quickly, Fr. Robert reacts and answers: “No, it’s not because of you. This traveler comes from a place where there are many contagions.” And the willing porter immediately drops the luggage and leaves.

About 65 kilometers separate us from our destination, the Silverton neighborhood in Pretoria, where we arrive in less than an hour. Brother Erick Stoferle, German and in charge of maintaining the community house, is waiting for us there. He is the third member of the community. Fr. Robert is in charge of the parish of Saint Augustine, attached to our house and to the editorial offices of the magazine *Worldwide*, the Comboni missionary publication in South Africa to which I must dedicate my energies from now on as director.

After a few days of voluntary quarantine, out of respect above all for the people who receive me, I was able to go outside and participate in Sunday mass. The parish of San Augustine is small, but the faithful come from a wide variety of countries; the congregation is an example of diversity where the Church is home to all and a symbol of coexistence in post-Mandela South Africa.

“41 fever, go home.... No, just kidding, only 36, go ahead,” Abigaël laughs. She is a member of the Covid-19 prevention

committee. Those who arrive to participate in the Sunday celebration line up at the entrance. Everything is well organized. The committee managers are waiting to welcome everyone individually and take their temperature and collect personal data. Afterwards, each one disinfects their hands with the usual hydroalcoholic gel. Inside, wide distances are maintained between the faithful.

Many hypotheses have been used to interpret the relatively low rate of contagion of the coronavirus on the continent, although South Africa is not the best example. Despite everything, the levels are much lower than in Europe, although I did not go into the reasons that the experts have stated to explain the lower spread of the virus in these lands. Apart from the confidence in the generous Providence towards the continent, I have not studied the phenomenon in detail, but as soon as one arrives in the country one becomes aware of something that surely reduces transmission: the open air. Much of life is done outdoors and ventilation is usually taken care of indoors.

In highly populated places, like the neighborhood of Mamelodi, where the Comboni Missionaries are in the parish of San Daniel Comboni, people live life mainly outside. In the church, where I presided over the celebration the following Sunday, all protocols are very rigorously maintained, and volunteers stop by several times during mass to offer you a “dose” of gel. The virus has, yes, removed part of the joy and spontaneity of the songs and dances that Sunday celebrations are accustomed to. Care, respect and discipline are the values that the faithful now demonstrate in the fight against the transmission of the virus. Africa and its people continue to give us lessons in humanity.

(Comboni Fr. Rafael Armada – Mundo Negro)



A scene repeated around the world: a covid-19 screening before entering the church.

Missionary Prayer Intention Spring 2022



That the splendour of the Risen Christ may light up our “common home,” move us to protect and care for it and always seek the good of all.
LORD HEAR US.

Mission News Comboni Missionaries

148 Madison Avenue South
Kitchener, Ontario N2G 3M6
CANADA

PHONE: 519.744.4680

FAX: 519.744.4840

cmoffice@combonimissionaries.ca

www.combonimissionaries.org



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Vocations



The missionary community at Comboni House.

Our community at Comboni House in the city of Kisangani, Democratic Republic of the Congo, is really particular. We are 39 people: four formators and 35 young students of philosophy, all Congolese and all candidates for missionary priesthood. In the city of Butembo there is another formation house with 11 young people who have applied as religious brothers. It is not all, our Comboni province of Congo also has 22 novices, 24 theology students and four missionary brothers in temporary vows. In addition, in 2020 we had six diaconal and seven priestly ordinations. In total, more than a hundred young people, not counting those who aspire to the postulancy and many other applicants who continue to knock on our door.

This moment of vocational grace that the Catholic Church of the Democratic Republic of Congo is experiencing should not be seen as an example of opportunism or escape on the part of young people to find a better life, as some people sometimes comment. I do not mean to say that there are not young people who come to our seminaries to find better study conditions, but the origin of these vocations is found in families and in parish life. In our country there are many homes where the Word of God is read, the rosary is prayed and Mass is attended every day. In addition, most families have many children. There are many parishes that have vocational groups and an hour of Eucharistic adoration for vocations.

Returning to my community, I can only express my joy. We are a diverse team.

Sitting at the Same Table

Fathers Anatole and Henri are Congolese and very young, with five and three years of priestly ordination, respectively. In fact, I was the teacher of Fr. Anatole when he was in this house, and now he is my community superior. The other two formators are Fr. Lorenzo, 82 years old, and me, 73 years old. Despite the age difference, we understand each other very well and share everything. Anatole and Henri bring the strength of youth, and Lorenzo and I the accumulated experience of the mission.

We get up at 5am in the morning and, after a time of personal prayer, we celebrate the Eucharist at 6. After breakfast and organizing the house, the young people go to the Edith Stein Philosophical Centre, where Brother Jean Marie, who was also my postulant, is the rector. The afternoons are study time, personalized accompaniment and, once a week, catechetical formation.

Every day, except Mondays, we eat together. We also share the playful and festive moments. On Sundays all the young people do apostolic work: to the parishes of the city, to the prison, to the hospital or to the Saint Laurent Centre for street children, which is not very far from our community.

The boys live the reality of their time. A good percentage of them are transparent and clear and allow themselves to be helped, while others have a harder time. We introduce them to Jesus Christ and the non-negotiable values that we have to assume as missionaries and as religious, and in this way we walk the path together.

(Comboni Fr. Jose Arieira – Mundo Negro)

The world is our mission.