

Hearts Without Borders: The Intercultural Sensitivity of Comboni Missionary Sisters

Here is a story that begins on an Ethiopian bus, and then crosses continents, generations, and cultures

"I was traveling by bus from Addis Ababa... Sitting next to me, there was a young Muslim man named Mohamed, and it was the time of Ramadan. He offered me breakfast, some bread and a Coca-Cola they were selling on the bus. And he prolonged his fast. It touched me deeply, truly, because in that simplicity I saw an act of generosity and welcome toward me, a stranger."

This is how Laura Diaz, a Spanish Comboni Missionary Sister in Ethiopia, recounts a seemingly ordinary encounter that reveals something extraordinary: the ability to recognize God's presence through the generosity of the other, even when that other belongs to a different faith.

The Living Legacy of Daniel Comboni

Today, as we remember the death of Saint Daniel Comboni, which occurred on October 10, 1881, in Khartoum, Sudan, we celebrate not only the living memory of the Founder, but above all the vitality of a Charism that continues to incarnate itself in ever-new ways. Comboni dreamed of "saving Africa with Africa," but his spiritual daughters have understood something even deeper: allowing themselves to be saved by the encounter with the other.

What Sr Laura shared is part of an analysis carried out among 154 testimonies from the Comboni Missionary Sisters. These were collected in five linguistic traditions, and reveal a specific intercultural sensitivity that constitutes an original contribution to the universal mission of the Church. It's not simply a matter of "adapting" to other cultures to evangelize better, but of "recognizing" in the intercultural encounter a privileged place of divine revelation.

When Catechists Evangelize the Missionary

"The catechists truly taught me how to transmit the Word of God to their brothers and sisters," recounts Luzy, a French missionary in Chad. "They showed me how one must know the manner of giving oneself, diminish oneself and be simple, yet, at the same time, authentic. The catechists truly changed my way of seeing mission. I learned so much from them. **They evangelized me.**"

This phrase—"they evangelized me"—constitutes a small missiological revolution. The missionary "sent" to evangelize acknowledges having been evangelized by those to whom she was sent. This is not an accident but a structural characteristic of Comboni intercultural sensitivity: mission is always a two-way road.

Cultural Kenosis: Emptying Oneself to Welcome

"One of the great challenges I experienced in mission was realizing that what you are, the culture you have, is not absolute—it's relative," testifies Prado Fernández, a Spanish missionary. "What you know, what you've learned, what you understand about life, all of this is cultural and relative. And other cultures have other ways of looking at life that can enrich yours."

This cultural emptying—which the missionaries call cultural *kenosis*, taking up the Pauline term for Christ's self-emptying—doesn't mean losing one's identity, but relativizing it to open oneself to the enrichment that comes from encountering others.

"It's part of *kenosis* to accept poverty and walk with the people," Laura from Ethiopia explains. "This is our poverty: not being able to understand everything." The inability to understand everything is no longer a defect to hide, but a method: the vulnerability that allows one to "walk with the people" from a position of shared humility.

International Communities as Prophecy

"We live in a fragmented world with so many conflicts," goes on Laura, "and we live together in international communities where we seek to be witnesses of the Gospel in our daily life, people of different nationalities and ethnic groups."

Comboni international communities are not simply a pastoral strategy but a form of life that is itself evangelization. Intercultural common life becomes primary evangelization: not what is said, but what is lived together.

The Feminine Specificity of Encounter

The testimonies reveal a distinctively feminine approach to interculturality, characterized by:

- A **manner of care** rather than conquest
- **Sensitivity to vulnerability** as a place of revelation
- **Patient temporality** that privileges listening over proclamation
- An **aesthetic dimension** that recognizes beauty in difference

"I learned to see beauty in simplicity and the resilience of vulnerable communities" says Maria Gorret, a Ugandan missionary. This is not just intellectual understanding or ethical solidarity, but perception of beauty in what the dominant culture considers simple or marginal.

Legacy for Today

In a world that builds walls, Comboni Women cultivate hearts without borders. In a time that fears the stranger, they learn to recognize in the other the richness they need for their own growth. In an era that seeks identity certainties, they embrace cultural *kenosis* as a path toward a fuller humanity.

As Lilia Navarrete, a Mexican missionary serving in Italy, says: "Even we who come from other countries, those who are considered immigrants, don't always come to ask. Sometimes we also have so much to give. And we can't only receive, but we have a cultural and human richness that we can share. **All of us, growing and enriching each other together.**"

This "all together" is perhaps the most precious legacy that Comboni's daughters offer to the contemporary world: the living demonstration that diversity is not a threat to be tolerated but a richness to be cultivated. A story that, 144 years after the Founder's death, continues to be (re)written every day—increasingly plural, in diversity and through encounter.

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