



ORIGIN OF THE COMBONIAN MISSION

A journey through our history
1853-1958

SUORE MISSINARIE COMBONIANE

ROMA – 2025

ORIGIN OF THE COMBONIAN MISSION

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1. The Untold Story of Comboni's Visionary Approach to Women in Mission

Episode 1 of Sr. Maria Vidale's reflections reveals Comboni's pioneering views on female evangelization in Africa

In a series of 13 episodes recorded shortly before her passing in October 2024, Sr. Maria Vidale, a Comboni Missionary Sister, shares groundbreaking insights from her over 20 years of historical research on the origins of the Comboni mission. From Verona, Italy to Cairo, Egypt, this first episode unveils the little-known story of how Comboni championed the role of women in the evangelization of Africa.

The year was 1853. In Verona, at the Mazza Institute, a sizable group of young African girls, rescued from slavery in Cairo, was eagerly awaited. Don Nicola Mazza had entrusted Fr. Jeremia da Livorno with redeeming these children, having understood that welcoming them could forge future apostles for Africa. Among them was nine-year-old Fortunata.

Comboni, then a student at the Institute, undoubtedly encountered these girls, whose arrival deeply resonated with Mazza's appreciation for women's evangelizing potential. As Mazza believed, no one could transmit the faith to a child more powerfully than a mother, through her very blood in the womb and milk in infancy.

Fast-forward to the 1860s. Now a priest, Comboni became the director of Mazza's African project. His ambitious plan was to establish the "Work of the Good Shepherd" in major European cities to support the formation of male and female missionaries. The goal: to bring the Gospel to Africa through Africans themselves.

Obstacles soon arose. The death of Mazza in 1865 and the resistance of his successor stalled the mission's handover to Verona's diocese. Undeterred, Comboni journeyed to Cairo in 1867 with a band of African women, including Fortunata, now trained as teachers. Together they founded schools at the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, pioneering Comboni's vision of Africans evangelizing Africa.

Defying conventions, Comboni assembled an international missionary team of priests, sisters, laity, and Africans to sustain this work. He advocated forming strongholds on African coasts to prepare local missionaries, sparing European struggles. But his progressive "Work of the Good Shepherd" met unexpected opposition, forcing recourse to new strategies.

This initial chapter of Sr. Maria Vidale's historical account powerfully testifies to Comboni's revolutionary vision: the centrality of women, especially African women, in spreading the faith in their homeland. His daring initiatives and resilience in the face of setbacks laid the groundwork for the transformative missionary presence of the Comboni Sisters that endures to this day. In upcoming episodes, we will dive deeper into this captivating and inspiring history.

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2. The Birth of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia: Comboni's Daring Vision Takes Shape

Episode 2 unveils the pioneering steps in establishing the female branch of Comboni's missionary institute

In late 1871 and early 1872, [What] decisive events unfolded that would lay the groundwork for the congregation known today as the Comboni Missionary Sisters. Comboni, working closely with the Bishop of Verona, took bold actions to establish a formation house for the Pie Madri della Nigrizia (Pious Mothers of Africa), while also securing the canonical erection of his missionary institute for Africa.

The story picks up on November 21, 1871, at a meeting of the Superior Council of the Opera del Buon Pastore (Work of the Good Shepherd) in Verona. Comboni reported on the progress of his missionary animation across Europe and the promising developments towards founding houses for male and female missionary formation.

A pivotal moment occurred when Comboni was asked what these sisters would be called. After a moment's reflection, he replied: "Pie Madri della Nigrizia" (Pious Mothers of Africa). This marked the birth of the congregation's name, even before their first member had arrived.

A few weeks later, on December 8, 1871, Bishop Luigi di Canossa issued the decree canonically establishing the Institute for the Missions of Africa, consecrated to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. This male branch was essential for requesting a mission territory, as the Church's life centers on the Eucharist, requiring the presence of priests.

Comboni then turned his efforts to ensuring there would actually be Pie Madri to carry out the mission. He identified Maria Caspi, their firstborn sister, whose story sheds light on Comboni's freedom of spirit. As an illegitimate child left at a foundling wheel, Maria would have been barred from entering religious life at that time. But for Comboni, the authenticity of her vocation mattered most. On December 31, 1871, he personally accompanied Maria to begin the congregation in Montorio Veronese.

Realizing Montorio's limitations for novice formation, Comboni soon purchased a house on via Santa Maria in Organo, conveniently close to the male institute and diocesan seminary, allowing professors to assist in training the sisters. On September 14, 1872, the aspirants were introduced into this mother house of the Pie Madri.

In early 1872, Comboni also recruited Maria Pia Galli, a former abbess, as the first novice mistress. While rigorous in formation, Comboni wanted to avoid excessive penances, knowing the future hardships awaiting in Africa.

Before departing for his mission, Comboni ensured the budding congregation was well-established. On May 26, 1872, he was appointed Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa, with Khartoum as his base for the vast, yet-undefined vicariate. The stage was set for the Pie Madri to play an integral role in Comboni's unfolding missionary vision.

The intrepid actions of Comboni in late 1871 and early 1872 catalyzed the birth of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, overcoming societal constraints to gather the first sisters.

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3. Holding the Fort: The Pie Madri's Steadfast Service in Comboni's Absence

Episode 3 highlights the sisters' dedicated formation and missionary outreach while Comboni establishes the African mission

In the mid-1870s, as Comboni journeyed to establish the Vicariate of Central Africa, the fledgling congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia persevered in their spiritual and practical formation in Verona. Their faithful service during this time laid a solid foundation for their future missionary witness.

With Comboni now in Africa, the Pie Madri continued their religious and missionary training under the guidance of Maria Pia Galli, their first novice mistress. The sisters dedicated themselves to prayer, study, and acquiring practical skills to prepare for the challenges that awaited them.

The novitiate's proximity to the male missionary institute and diocesan seminary proved a great asset. Professors readily collaborated in instructing the sisters, ensuring a well-rounded formation. This arrangement, wisely orchestrated by Comboni before his departure, provided stability in his absence.

As the congregation slowly grew, the sisters' zeal for mission was already evident. They actively supported Comboni's work through prayer and sacrifice, eagerly awaiting the day they could join him in the field. Their humble service in Verona during these years formed the bedrock of the missionary spirit that would define the Pie Madri.

Comboni, meanwhile, reached Cairo in early 1873 to assemble personnel for the daunting task of establishing the Vicariate of Central Africa. He carefully selected missionaries to accompany him to the seat of the vicariate in Khartoum, Sudan. The exact boundaries of this vast territory were yet to be defined, a challenge Comboni would tackle alongside his many other responsibilities.

Back in Verona, the Pie Madri received news of Comboni's progress with great interest and intercessory support. Each update from Africa stirred their missionary hearts and solidified their commitment to the cause for which their founder had dedicated his life.

As Comboni labored to plant the Church in the heart of Africa, the Pie Madri were quietly growing in number and virtue in Verona. Their faithful perseverance during this chapter, hidden from the public eye, was an essential component of Comboni's overall missionary vision and a sign of great hope for the future.

The steadfast dedication of the Pie Madri in Verona while Comboni toiled to establish the African mission demonstrates the vital role they played from the congregation's earliest days. Through prayer, study, and humble service, the sisters nurtured the missionary charism Comboni had entrusted to them, preparing for the day they would take their place on the front lines of evangelization. Their hidden years of formation were an indispensable link in the chain of events that would lead to the flourishing of Comboni's missionary dream.

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4. Milestones and Missions: The Pie Madri's Pioneering Journey to Africa

Episode 4 chronicles Comboni's episcopal consecration and the sisters' first steps on African soil

In the late 1870s, [What] the Pie Madri della Nigrizia reached significant milestones, including their foundational journey to Africa. Comboni's episcopal consecration and the sisters' courageous spirit propelled the mission forward despite challenges.

July 2, 1877 marked a pivotal moment as Daniele Comboni was appointed the first Bishop of Central Africa. His consecration in Rome on August 12 was a joyous occasion for the entire Institute. Comboni insisted that representatives from both the male and female houses be present, so Mother General Maria Bolezzoli and her assistant Teresa Grigolini joined the celebrations.

Back in Verona, the novitiate buzzed with excitement. Not only were new novices preparing for profession, but the first departure for Africa was imminent. Comboni chose five sisters for this historic mission: Teresa Grigolini (superior), Maria Caspi, Concetta Corsi, Giuseppa Scandola, and Vittoria Paganini.

The journey tested the young missionaries' mettle. From Berber, they witnessed harrowing scenes of famine and disease along the Nile. Comboni marveled that his sisters, far from cowering in fear, bolstered his own courage. Arriving in El Obeid in February 1879, the Pie Madri were warmly welcomed by the African teachers trained in Verona, who rejoiced at the familiar dialect and cordiality of the sisters.

Under Sr. Vittoria's leadership, the community at El Obeid flourished. Her gift for fostering communion bore fruit as Domitilla Bakhita and Fortunata Quasche, two African teachers, asked to join the congregation. The second novitiate of the Pie Madri opened there in 1879, with Sr. Vittoria serving as novice mistress.

Meanwhile, Comboni navigated the sudden withdrawal of the Sisters of St. Joseph from the Vicariate. He instructed Sr. Teresa and Sr. Giuseppa to return to Khartoum until reinforcements could arrive from Italy. Comboni's trust in the Pie Madri was evident. As he wrote to Cardinal Simeoni, "The Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, founded by me in Verona, possesses by God's grace all the apostolic spirit needed to work properly in the arduous missions of Central Africa."

Throughout 1879, new groups of sisters departed for Africa, a testament to the congregation's growth and missionary zeal. Despite the sorrow of Sr. Vittoria's cancer diagnosis, the Pie Madri pressed on, sustained by Comboni's vision and their own courageous faith.

The late 1870s saw the Pie Madri della Nigrizia come of age as a missionary congregation.

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5. Expansion and Trials: Comboni's Return to Africa and the Pie Madri's Pivotal Year

Episode 5 recounts the miraculous and sorrowful events of 1880 as the congregation grows and faces new challenges

In 1880, Daniele Comboni returned to Africa, ushering in a period of significant expansion and reorganization for the missions. The Pie Madri della Nigrizia experienced a decisive moment with the opening of three distinct novitiates, miraculous rescues during the journey, and their first loss.

Comboni's return to Africa in 1880 marked a new chapter for the Pie Madri. The congregation's growth necessitated the establishment of three separate novitiates: in Verona, El Obeid, and Cairo. The latter was specifically intended for Egyptian aspirants, reflecting Comboni's vision of a truly local Church.

The journey back to Africa was not without its trials. During the voyage, sisters Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini found themselves in peril, but were miraculously rescued in what was seen as a supernatural intervention. This event bolstered the missionaries' faith and sense of divine protection.

However, sorrow soon followed as Sr. Maria Bertuzzi, a young sister stationed in El Obeid, fell ill and passed away. Her death was a poignant reminder of the sacrifices inherent to the missionary vocation and the first loss for the fledgling congregation.

The situation of Virginia Mansour, a former Sister of St. Joseph, also came to a head. Tensions arose between differing visions of religious life and the importance placed on knowledge of Arabic in the mission. Mansour's story revealed the complex dynamics at play as the Pie Madri navigated their identity and role in Comboni's missionary enterprise.

Despite these challenges, the congregation continued to grow and adapt. The expansion of the novitiates and the arrival of new sisters testified to the vitality of Comboni's charism and the resilience of the Pie Madri in the face of adversity.

Comboni's guiding presence and the sisters' unwavering commitment sustained the mission through this pivotal year. The joys and sorrows of 1880 forged the Pie Madri in the crucible of the missionary vocation, preparing them for the even greater trials that lay ahead.

1880 marked a decisive year for the Pie Madri della Nigrizia. From the expansion of the novitiates to the miraculous events and sorrowful losses, the congregation experienced the heights and depths of the missionary call. Through it all, Comboni's vision and the sisters' faith sustained them, revealing the authentic spirit of the Pie Madri. As they navigated the complexities of religious life and mission, the sisters emerged with a deepened sense of their identity and purpose, ready to carry forward Comboni's legacy in the years to come.

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6. The Weight of the Cross: Comboni's Final Trials and Unwavering Faith

Episode 6 unveils the painful misunderstandings and looming threats that marked Comboni's last months, even as he forged ahead with the mission

In 1881, the final year of his life, Daniele Comboni faced heart-wrenching trials upon returning to Africa. Misunderstandings regarding Virginia Mansour and the emerging Mahdist revolt dealt heavy blows to the saint, yet failed to deter him from his unwavering commitment to the mission and the Pie Madri della Nigrizia.

Comboni's return to Khartoum in early 1881 was marked by the noticeable absence of the Sisters of St. Joseph, his valued collaborators. Their departure weighed heavily on him, compounded by lingering frustrations over the agreement with the Stimmantini Fathers that had curtailed his authority over the missionary institute.

In a pivotal moment, Comboni poured out his heart to Sr. Vittoria Paganini, superior of the Pie Madri in Khartoum. Her calm wisdom and assurance that the sisters would rise to the challenge given proper formation deeply consoled Comboni. He regained his characteristic enthusiasm, envisioning the Pie Madri not only equaling but surpassing the efforts of their predecessors.

However, a painful misunderstanding soon arose concerning Virginia Mansour, the former Sister of St. Joseph whose brother had been abruptly dismissed by Fr. Sembianti in Verona. Seeking to resolve the situation and retain Virginia's valuable Arabic skills, Comboni proposed she enter the novitiate in El Obeid under Sr. Teresa Grigolini's guidance.

Shockingly, this plan was grossly misconstrued by some as evidence of an inappropriate attachment. The insinuations dealt a crushing blow to Comboni, wounding him to the core. His anguished letters reveal the depth of his suffering and his horror at such a calumny against his consuming passion for Africa and for Christ.

Yet even as this trial unfolded, Comboni forged ahead, visiting the Nuba Mountains and laying foundations for new missions. His words to Sr. Caterina Chincarini – "I am dying, but my work will not die" – hinted at a premonition of his approaching death, even as they proclaimed his unshakable faith in God's providence.

Returning to Khartoum in late July, Comboni faced an additional threat: the rise of the Mahdi, a self-proclaimed prophet bent on expelling Turkish and Christian influence from Sudan. The massacre of 200 soldiers sent to capture him signaled the gravity of the looming crisis.

Comboni, though shaken and physically weakened, refused to despair. He drew strength from his missionary companions, especially Fr. Fraccaro, and from his unbreakable bond with the Pie Madri, who incarnated his vision and his hopes for Africa. In their fidelity and courage, Comboni found solace amidst the gathering shadows.

The final months of Daniele Comboni's life were a crucible of suffering and steadfast faith.

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7. Faith Amid the Flames: The Pie Madri's Trials in the Mahdist Uprising

Episode 7 chronicles the courageous witness of the sisters imprisoned in El Obeid and Delen during the turbulent early days of the Mahdist revolt

In late 1882, as the Mahdist uprising engulfed Sudan, the Pie Madri della Nigrizia in El Obeid and Delen faced harrowing trials of imprisonment, deprivation, and even martyrdom. Their steadfast faith amid suffering bore powerful witness to Christ and to Comboni's missionary charism.

The sudden death of Daniele Comboni in October 1881 had left the mission in a precarious state. His successor, Fr. Giovanni Losi, proved ill-equipped to navigate the brewing storm. Losi's refusal to move the sisters from El Obeid to the relative safety of Khartoum, despite Sr. Teresa Grigolini's pleas, would have dire consequences.

By September 1882, the Mahdi's forces had surrounded El Obeid. The mission personnel took refuge within the city walls, the sisters finding shelter in the cramped quarters of Maria Marsal, a former slave educated in Italy. As the city fell under siege, the missionaries braced for the trials to come.

In Delen, Fr. Luigi Bonomi also found himself in dire straits. Realizing the mission was lost, he set out with over a hundred catechumens, mostly former slaves, under the escort of local soldiers. In a crushing betrayal, the captain revealed himself a Mahdist supporter and marched the group to the rebel camp.

There, the captive missionaries were brought before the Mahdi. Fr. Bonomi spoke boldly, declaring their resolve to remain Christian even unto death. Imprisoned in squalid conditions, they prepared for martyrdom, spending the night in prayer and confession. As Fr. Giuseppe Ohrwalder later recalled, never had he experienced such peace as on that night, dreaming of paradise.

Back in El Obeid, the sisters faced their own calvary. On December 8th, the feast of the Immaculate Conception and the day for renewing their vows, Fr. Losi stunningly declared it best for the sisters to remain as laywomen, untethered from the congregation. Sr. Elisabetta Venturini's diary reveals their anguish and even rebellion at this incomprehensible decision.

As 1882 drew to a close, the imprisoned missionaries in both El Obeid and Delen clung to their faith amid deepening shadows. In Delen, the deprivations of captivity soon claimed the lives of Sr. Eulalia Pesavento, Br. Gabriel Mariani, and Sr. Amalia Andreis. Only the intervention of George Stambuli, a middleman between the Mahdi and the prisoners, secured slightly better conditions, a small but vital reprieve.

The Pie Madri, bereft of their vows but not their vocation, continued their valiant witness. Sustained by prayer and mutual encouragement, they embodied the spirit of Comboni, an unwavering light in the encroaching darkness. Their sacrifices sowed seeds of faith that would bear fruit long after the revolt's bitter days had passed.

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8. Through the Valley of the Shadow: The Pie Madri's Journey from Captivity to Freedom

Episode 8 traces the sisters' courageous endurance, daring escapes, and the mission's tireless efforts to secure their release amid the turmoil of the Mahdist regime

From 1883 to 1885, the imprisoned Pie Madri della Nigrizia faced unimaginable trials under the Mahdist regime in Sudan. Their steadfast faith, resilience in suffering, and the unwavering efforts of the mission to liberate them stand as a testament to the power of God's grace and the depth of their missionary vocation.

The fall of El Obeid in January 1883 marked a dark chapter for the Pie Madri imprisoned there. Subjected to threats and pressure to apostatize, the sisters clung to their faith even as their priestly confreres tragically succumbed. Brought before the Mahdi and offered enticements to convert, Sr. Teresa Grigolini boldly declared their resolve to remain Christian.

In Delen, the captive missionaries faced a harrowing journey to the Mahdist camp. There, Fr. Luigi Bonomi and his companions were imprisoned in squalid conditions. The deprivations soon claimed the lives of Sr. Eulalia Pesavento, Br. Gabriele Mariani, and Sr. Amalia Andreis, their sacrifices a poignant reminder of the cost of discipleship.

For the sisters in El Obeid, the trauma deepened when Sr. Concetta Corsi, fearing violation, pronounced the Islamic formula under duress. Sr. Teresa, torn between abandoning Concetta and remaining faithful, chose the path of charity, joining her in the Mahdi's enclosure. The other sisters, despite torture, refused to apostatize, their heroic witness recounted in Sr. Elisabetta Venturini's diary.

Amid these trials, Msgr. Francesco Sogaro, Comboni's successor, labored tirelessly to liberate the captives. Through clandestine channels and couriers, he sought to establish contact and arrange their rescue. In 1885, his efforts bore fruit with the dramatic liberation of Sr. Fortunata Quasche and Sr. Maria Caprini, though the others remained behind.

The mission's commitment to freeing the prisoners never wavered. Even as Msgr. Sogaro oversaw the foundation of the Figli del Sacro Cuore as a religious congregation, the plight of the Pie Madri remained close to his heart. Their resilience and the tireless efforts of their rescuers bore witness to the invincible power of faith and the unbreakable bonds of missionary kinship.

The saga of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia during the Mahdist uprising is a story of unshakable faith amid unspeakable trials. From the prisons of El Obeid to the searing sands of the desert, these valiant women bore witness to Christ through their suffering, their sacrifices, and their unwavering fidelity to their vocation. Sustained by grace and the tireless efforts of their missionary family, they emerged from the crucible of persecution as living testaments to the transformative power of the Gospel. Their legacy continues to inspire all who follow in the footsteps of St. Daniel Comboni, called to be bearers of light in the darkest valleys of the human experience.

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9. A Visionary Leader: Mother Costanza Caldara's Guiding Hand

Episode 10 delves into the life and legacy of the Pie Madri's second Superior General, a woman who expanded the congregation's missionary reach

Mother Costanza Caldara, the second Superior General of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, led the congregation through a period of significant growth and challenges in the early 20th century. Her vision, rooted in Comboni's charism, propelled the Pie Madri to new frontiers in Africa and Europe.

Twice in the congregation's early chronicles, it was prophesied that the young Costanza Caldara would one day become Superior General. Entering the institute during Comboni's lifetime, she embodied a direct link to the founder's spirit and missionary program.

Recognizing Costanza's potential, Mother Maria Bollezzoli wisely prepared her for future leadership. When Costanza returned from Egypt in 1887 to serve as novice mistress, Maria graciously welcomed her, delegating responsibilities and fostering her growth.

Elected Vicar General in 1898 and confirmed as Superior General after Maria's death, Costanza wasted no time in realizing Comboni's expansive missionary vision. She understood that the congregation must look beyond Central Africa, courageously opening new missions in East Africa and establishing a community in France.

Under her guidance, over 30 communities blossomed across Central Africa. Costanza also grasped the importance of securing the congregation's future through a stable patrimony. In 1905, she acquired a property in Bergamo, providing a home for the postulants and contributing to the institute's approval by the Holy See in 1906.

As the Comboni mission faced the challenges of division and linguistic disputes, Costanza stood firm. When Bishop Geiger pushed for German sisters in North Sudan, Costanza insisted that the Pie Madri, with their command of Arabic and English, were born for the whole of Sudan and must remain. Her tenacity, bolstered by the outbreak of World War I, ensured the congregation's continued presence.

Costanza's commitment to fostering missionary vocations, regardless of financial means, led to the purchase of the Cesiolo property in 1914. This acquisition, made possible by the administrative division funds, provided much-needed space for the growing congregation. Through more than three decades of leadership, Costanza navigated the Pie Madri through the trials of expansion, division, and war. Her unwavering fidelity to Comboni's vision and her strategic foresight laid the groundwork for the congregation's future flourishing.

Mother Costanza Caldara's life stands as a testament to the transformative power of visionary leadership. Steeped in Comboni's spirit, she guided the Pie Madri with courage, wisdom, and a steadfast commitment to the missionary call. From expanding the congregation's reach to securing its future, Costanza's decisions were always rooted in a deep trust in God's providence and a burning desire to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

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11. Navigating Wartime Challenges: Mother Costanza's Strategic Vision

Episode 11 reveals how Mother Costanza Caldara guided the Pie Madri through the trials of World War I, laying the groundwork for future growth

As World War I engulfed Europe, Mother Costanza Caldara, the Comboni Missionary Sisters' second Superior General, made pivotal decisions that ensured the congregation's survival and set the stage for its post-war expansion. Her strategic foresight and unwavering commitment to the missionary call led the Pie Madri to new frontiers.

In 1914, on the eve of Italy's entry into the Great War, Mother Costanza seized an opportunity to secure the congregation's future. Recalling Mother Maria Bollezzoli's anguish at being forced to turn away poor aspirants, Costanza resolved that no authentic missionary vocation should be hindered by lack of space or finances.

When the Comboni Fathers offered the Cesiolo property, originally intended for their own formation house, Mother Costanza recognized the moment. With the Bishop's approval, she invested the funds from the administrative division to acquire this expansive villa, a decision that would prove providential for the congregation's growth.

Later that year, another crucial juncture arose. Don Luigi Bonomi, a former Comboni missionary serving as a military chaplain in Asmara, Eritrea, requested sisters for the colonial hospital. Some questioned whether this deviated from the Pie Madri's Central African focus, but Costanza grasped the broader implications.

The financial constraints imposed by Bishop Geiger in Central Africa had crystallized a hard truth: to remain in their core mission, the sisters needed to expand beyond it. By accepting the Asmara mission and others like it, the congregation could sustain the formation of young sisters and care for the sick and elderly, vital for its long-term viability.

Among the sisters chosen for Asmara was Sr. Pia Marani, a Veronese who dreamed of serving in Central Africa. Initially disappointed by her assignment, Pia discovered the true meaning of mission in Asmara's peripheries. In the suffering and abandonment of the city's outcasts, she encountered Christ and embraced her missionary vocation anew, opening the enduring Casa Comboni.

As the war raged on and aspirants continued to knock at the door, Mother Costanza explored new foundations in Italy. Undaunted by travel's hardships, she journeyed to Africa in 1919, determined to plant the congregation's flag across the continent. From Gulu to Wau, Kitgum to Kayango, Costanza forged a network of communities that embodied Comboni's vision.

In this endeavor, she found an ally in the Countess Ledóchowska, foundress of the Sisters of St. Peter Claver and a great benefactor. The Countess' support proved invaluable, enabling the Pie Madri to bridge the gaps left by sparse agreements with the Vicariate.

Mother Costanza Caldara's leadership during World War I testifies to the power of a vision rooted in faith and shrewd practicality.

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12. A Decade of Milestones: From Comboni's Cause to a Passing of the Torch

Episode 12 chronicles the key events of 1923-1933, a period that saw the seeds of Comboni's sainthood sown and a new Superior General take the helm

The years 1923 to 1933 marked a pivotal chapter in the history of the Comboni Missionary Sisters. From the opening of St. Daniel Comboni's beatification cause to the leadership transition from Mother Costanza Caldara to Mother Pierina Stoppani, this decade witnessed defining moments that would shape the congregation's future trajectory.

In 1923, Verona quietly laid the groundwork for a momentous undertaking: the opening of Daniel Comboni's beatification cause. Professor Grancelli, a seminary professor, embarked on a profound historical study of Comboni's writings, culminating in a seminal biography that aimed to prove the founder's heroic virtue and missionary zeal. Though met with opposition from the Camillian Fathers, the cause moved forward, opening simultaneously in Verona and Khartoum in 1928.

Mother Costanza Caldara's testimony during the process was particularly poignant. Having known Comboni personally, she affirmed his sanctity without hesitation, a conviction rooted in her own encounters with Virginia Mansour, the woman at the center of the Camillians' allegations. Costanza's steadfast witness spoke volumes about Comboni's integrity.

Amid the cause's progress, the congregation marked milestones of its own. The year 1925 brought the definitive approval of the Constitutions and the celebration of the fifth General Chapter, which saw Mother Costanza reelected for the final time. In a bold move, she authorized the opening of a missionary community in France to accompany Bergamasque emigrants, a decision that foreshadowed future debates about the Pie Madri's scope beyond Central Africa.

The congregation's golden jubilee of first vows in 1926 was a bittersweet celebration, honoring co-foundresses Maria Bollezzoli and Teresa Grigolini. Though the latter had left the institute, Mother Costanza's diary reveals a poignant visit to "Signora Grigolini" on the eve of the anniversary, a testament to the enduring bonds of their shared history.

As the decade drew to a close, Mother Costanza prepared to pass the baton. The sixth General Chapter in 1931 elected Mother Pierina Stoppani, Costanza's trusted vicar and companion on her expansive African journeys, as the congregation's third Superior General. Pierina's youthful energy, radiant demeanor, and gift for listening augured a fruitful tenure.

Tragically, just a year into her mandate, Mother Pierina fell gravely ill while visiting Tong, South Sudan. Diagnosed with severe intestinal inflammation, she faced death with courage and clarity, offering her life as a missionary sacrifice. Her last words rang out as a clarion call: "It is good that God be known by all... I gladly offer my life so that the spirit of Monsignor Comboni may continue to live in our congregation."

The years 1923 to 1933 encapsulate the essence of the Comboni Missionary Sisters' story: a legacy of saintly heroism, courageous expansion, steadfast witness, and sacrificial love.

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13.Expanding Horizons: Mother Carla Troenzi's Visionary Leadership

Episode 13 highlights the remarkable tenure of the Pie Madri's fourth Superior General, who guided the congregation through a period of unprecedented growth and global outreach

Mother Carla Troenzi, the fourth Superior General of the Comboni Missionary Sisters, assumed leadership at a pivotal moment in the congregation's history. Her wisdom, missionary experience, and openness to the Spirit's promptings enabled the Pie Madri to extend their reach across continents, embodying the universality of Comboni's charism.

Carla Troenzi's path to leadership was marked by a deep commitment to the missionary vocation. Entering the congregation at age 25, she quickly distinguished herself through her prudence and good judgment. As one of the first sisters to complete nursing training in Rome, Carla's skills proved invaluable in the missions.

In 1918, when Mother Costanza Caldara opened the first community in Uganda, Sr. Carla was chosen to lead the pioneering group. Her gifts for leadership and her intimate knowledge of the African context made her the natural choice to serve as provincial superior as the Ugandan communities multiplied.

Elected Vicar General in 1931, Carla stood faithfully by Mother Pierina Stoppani's side. Though unable to dissuade Pierina from her fateful African journey in 1932, Carla's intuition proved tragically prescient. Pierina's sudden death on January 3, 1933, thrust Carla into the role of Superior General, a responsibility she shouldered with initial trepidation but growing confidence. Recognizing the congregation's need for wise, mission-driven leadership to navigate its rapid expansion, Mother Carla boldly extended the Pie Madri's presence beyond Central Africa. Under her guidance, new frontiers opened in the Middle East, with foundations in Transjordan and the Arabian Peninsula. Her vision also led the sisters to the Americas, first to minister among African Americans in the United States and later to Brazil.

While some questioned these choices as a departure from the congregation's founding charism, Mother Carla responded with the insight that Comboni's own mission had been shaped by obedience to Propaganda Fide. The same spirit of obedience now called the Pie Madri to new lands, in anticipation of the Second Vatican Council's broadened understanding of mission.

Mother Carla's legacy includes the launch of Raggio in 1934, the congregation's first historical source and means of communication among communities and with sisters' families. Her numerous visits to Africa and the opening of 175 new communities saw the Pie Madri grow to over 2,000 members, with hundreds of novices and an expanding network of novitiates.

After 25 years of selfless service, Mother Carla passed the torch to Teresa Costalunga in 1958. Though archival restrictions prevent a fuller account of her successors' tenures, the seeds she planted continued to bear fruit, confirming the enduring vitality of Comboni's missionary vision. Mother Carla Troenzi's generalate marks a watershed in the history of the Comboni Sisters.

ORIGIN OF THE COMBONIAN MISSION

A journey through our history: 1853-1958

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Foundation Period (1853-1872)

- 1853: African girls arrive at Mazza Institute, Verona
- 1867: Comboni establishes first schools in Cairo with African teachers
- 1871: Birth of "Pie Madri della Nigrizia" name
- 1872: First motherhouse established in Via Santa Maria in Organo

Early Development (1872-1881)

- 1877: Comboni appointed first Bishop of Central Africa
- 1879: First community established in El Obeid
- 1881: Comboni's death; mission faces transition period

Trials and Growth (1882-1885)

- 1882: Mahdist uprising challenges mission presence
- 1883: Sisters demonstrate steadfast faith during imprisonment
- 1885: Dramatic liberation of first sisters from captivity

Expansion Period (1885-1925)

- Formation houses established in multiple locations
- Mission extends beyond Central Africa
- Constitutions receive definitive approval
- Golden jubilee celebrations of first vows

Leadership and Development (1925-1958)

- Mother Costanza Caldara's visionary leadership
- Expansion to Middle East and Americas
- Growth to over 2,000 members
- Establishment of 175 new communities
- Launch of "Raggio" publication (1934)

Key Figures

- Daniel Comboni: Founder
- Maria Bollezzoli: First Superior General
- Costanza Caldara: Second Superior General (1898)
- Pierina Stoppani: Third Superior General
- Maria Vidale: Historical researcher

Legacy Highlights

- Pioneer in female evangelization in Africa
- Integration of African women in mission
- Resilience through persecution
- Global missionary presence
- Innovative educational approach
- Ongoing formation emphasis

