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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	pag. 7
Introduction: Remembering our Ancestors	9
1. The first Vatican Council-launches the Combonian Opera	25
2. The Pie Madri della Nigrizia	37
3. Maria Bollezzoli	65
4. In Africa with Daniel Comboni	81
5. The First Seed to Fall in the Ground	111
6. Towards a Definitive Organization of the Institutes in Verona	123
7. The Last Day of the Father	149
Epilogue: More Alive than ever in the Memory of those who Received the Inheritance	181
Chronology.....	187
Index of Names	197
Abbreviations	214
Bibliography and Sources	215
Illustrations	219

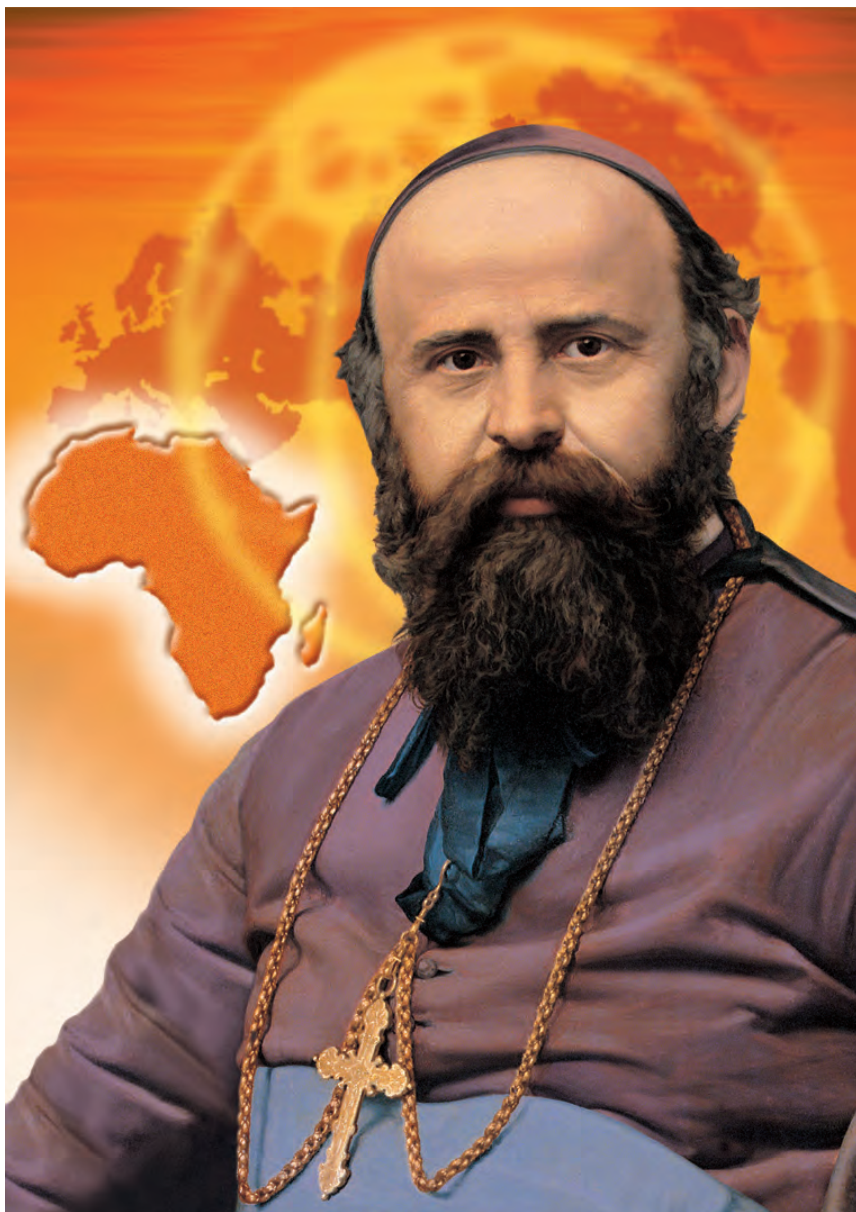
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**THE CONGREGATION
OF THE
PIE MADRI
DELLA NIGRIZIA**

**S / I
ORIGINS AND FOUNDATION
(1867-1881)**



St. Daniel Comboni (1831-1881)
Founder of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia

“Finally, the mission was missing the help of the women, a house of Religious Sisters that would instruct and form the African women and girls and the local missionaries; something indispensable in a far and dangerous mission”

(Daniel Comboni, 25th of February, 1872)

“May God raise up in the Church fervid and holy servants of the Gospel and generous Mothers of Nigrizia, who under the flag of the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa may assist and help to conquer souls for Christ and for the Holy Church”

(Daniel Comboni to Canossa, 1880)

Preface

We begin with this volume, a second series, indicated by the letter **S**, of the historical collection dedicated to the origins and the development of our Congregation. We don't intend, evidently, to repeat in great detail what has already been said in the previous volumes published or those which are about to be published. We shall simply review in a general way, the journey made as a Congregation in the light of the historical documents available, keeping in mind also the latest items which came to light during the recent canonization of the Founder.

When we pick up this volume, however, we need to remember that it is a work preceded by others whom we must remember, even if we don't continuously refer to them. For example, there are the various publications of the ***Plan for the Regeneration of Africa***, of Daniel Comboni. In addition, there are studies on the Foundation of the two Missionary Institutes, masculine and feminine, whose authors were Aldo Gilli (1979) and Elisa Pezzi (1981).

The content of this last study, which the author entitled, ***L'Istituto Pie Madri della Nigrizia: Storia dalle Origini alla Morte del Fondatore***, will not be repeated here. Nevertheless, the work of Sr. Elisea remains a valid source for the information it contains. Here, it will be supplemented by this later research. In this way, we will be able to highlight some particular aspects of our very rich history which, until now, we have not been able to consider in a worthy manner.

We have dedicated a lot of attention to the figure of our **Father Founder**, keeping in mind, at the same time, that our aim is not to present yet another biography. Rather, we have tried to explore the ground again in order to reach once more those holy roots which gave life to our Congregation and to focus on them. It has been a kind of ploughing the ground, in order to show the new buds on the branches of that great trunk; the promise and guarantee of a new season of rich fruits.

It could also be that, in looking back on the journey we have made, we may catch a glimpse or get an inkling once again of the necessity of altering the path so far followed: *“So the path so-far-followed must be altered, the old system must be changed and a new plan must be drawn up which will lead more effectively to the desired end”*... (W. 2752).

May the Lord of History, in that event, send us His Spirit and guide us towards new paths.

Rome, 1st January 2012

140th Anniversary of the birth of the Congregation

INTRODUCTION

Remembering previous events from the plan for the *Regeneration* of Africa to the institute of the missions for nigrizia

“It was on the 18th of September 1864, when leaving the Vatican where I had been to the beatification of M. Margherite Alacoque, that I had the inspiration of presenting the idea of the Plan to the Holy See, in order to return to the apostolate of Central Africa...”

In 1867 I opened the Institute for the Missions of Africa in Verona”... (W. 3302 – 03).

On the 1st of June 1867, Luigi di Canossa*, bishop of Verona, addressed to the Church of which he was the Bishop, a decree in Latin, signed by him. It was later translated and published in the *Annals of the Good Shepherd* as follows:

“We are truly so happy and full of consolation, thinking that finally, in our day, the moment long awaited for has arrived, in which the Good and Omnipotent Lord, desires to bring to the knowledge of Truth, that unhappy part of the world, Africa, which for many centuries... has been lying in the shadow of death... Now, as Europe, by divine disposition, has always spread the faith of Christ in other parts of the world,... it is necessary that the same Catholic Europe directs its efforts also to the regeneration of Africa...”

*Aware of the details of the **Plan for the regeneration of Africa by Africa itself**, proposed by the priest of this diocese, Daniel Comboni, Apostolic missionary of Central Africa ...; and seeing the need to establish in Europe some houses, **of both***

* In order not to place too many notes in the text, names marked with an asterix can be found in the index of proper names.

men and of women, [highlighting ours] from which, as from a new Cenacle, they go out and, reaching the shores of Africa, establish new houses where the inhabitants of the internal areas can gather in order to learn about the Christian religion and then return among their kin to spread this knowledge...; we feel that it is necessary that Europe ... offer all the help necessary to found and maintain these houses.

Therefore, having with divine assistance, founded already two of these houses, one for men and the other for women, in our city of Verona, and desiring and hoping ardently to found other houses, in the sure hope that the moment may be near when God is moved to pity for Africa and for all the unhappy family of Cam, we consider it opportune and necessary to add our approval of this Pious Work which the above mentioned priest, Daniel Comboni thought of, with this title: **Association of the Good Shepherd for the Regeneration of Africa ...**; It should have as its only aim that of moving the hearts of Catholics to offer prayer and to collect some offerings with which the **Preparatory Works** (that is, the foresaid Houses) established, or to be established, in favour of Africa, can be sustained and extended.

I judged this pious Association ¹ with its statutes, examined by me with great care and diligence, and discussed and researched in detail, and decided to approve it and confirm it with my ordinary authority, as in fact, I approve and confirm establishing it canonically in this Diocese with these letters ... to the greater glory of God and for the good of unfortunate Africa ...

Verona, Bishop's Residence
1st June 1867.

† LUIGI, Bishop ²

¹ It is interesting to see, in this regard, what Aldo Gilli has underlined about "The true meaning of the *Opera del Buon Pastore* (see, A GILLI – *L'Istituto Missionario Comboniano...*, pp. 71-78. According to the author, in fact, it is necessary "to grasp the historical significance of the ***Opera del Buon Pastore***, in order to understand the true historical significance of the founding of the Institute." (p. 71).

² ANNALI, 1(1872)11-14, see ACR, A/25/14/5: handwritten text in Latin signed by Comboni.

Not much more than a week later, on the 11th of June 1867, with justified satisfaction, Daniel Comboni was able to write to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide:

*“I have the pleasure of announcing to your Most Reverend Eminence that the most distinguished Monsignor Canossa has opened a seminary in Verona for our dear African Missions, which in better times will be called **The Institute of the Good Shepherd for the Regeneration of Africa**. He also opened a female Institute to train good women missionaries and they are given an education exclusively suited and most appropriate for the specific needs of the African apostolate ...*

The devout and able African missionary, Fr Alessandro Dalbosco, my former companion, has joined me, thanks to efforts of the bishop”... (W. 1416-17).*

Result of a providential encounter

It had not been easy for the author of the **Plan** to obtain this result communicated above to Cardinal Barnabò. Alone, perhaps he would not have achieved it, but the close relationship which he was able to develop in that period with Monsignor Pietro Castellacci*, the then Vice regent of the Vicariate of Rome, revealed itself to be decisive in the end, both for the origin and for the birth of the missionary decree of the Church of Verona.

Daniel Comboni had begun to call on the bishop regularly, starting from the Spring of 1866, after the Prefect of Propaganda Fide had asked him to remain in Rome for a period of time. The reason, the missionary wrote then to his friend, Fr. Francesco Bricolo, was that he had ‘to write a report’ (W. 1275) on all that he had observed during his recent journey to Africa with Ludovico da Cassoria*. ³

³ From the 12th of November 1865 till the 15th of March 1866, in the company of Ludovico da Casoria, Daniel Comboni had undertaken his third African journey which had as its main aim the elaboration of a project to divide the Vicariate of Central Africa between the Mazza Institute and the Franciscans.

In reality, that unplanned stay in Rome was due mostly to the fact that Cardinal Barnabo was waiting for a definitive response, from the Mazza Institute, regarding the apostolic project presented by Comboni himself on his return from Upper Egypt. In the meantime, Comboni had approached the Vice Regent of the Vicariate of Rome in order to obtain permission to carry out some pastoral activities in the diocese.

“[Monsignor Castellacci] *gave me permission to preach and to hear confessions here,*” he informed his Superior in Verona on the 10th of September 1866, “*and now he is my advisor and true friend who is familiar with all my circumstances*” (W. 1380).

Now, among the ‘*circumstances*’ which at that time were worrying Daniel Comboni, there was one which was particularly important for him: the foundation of a first, small feminine Institute either in Cairo or in Negadeh (Upper Egypt), where those three or four young African girls coming from the Mazza Institute, accompanied by some Sisters, could be sent.

According to him, this project, *which he had already talked about in Cairo and with Propaganda Fide, even with the Holy Father* (W. 1376), did not necessarily need to fail due to the withdrawal of the Veronese institute from the mission field. In order for it to continue, it would be sufficient, that the successor of Fr. Nicola Mazza* remain faithful to the commitment taken earlier in the month of October and not try to settle the young Africans elsewhere under the pretext, according to what Fr. Gioacchino Tomba had written to him on the 28th of July (see W. 1373 ff), that another good possibility had presented itself.

The new ‘*advisor and friend*’ of the missionary of Nigrizia had something interesting to propose to him also about the Sisters, or more precisely, a women’s congregation which would guarantee the formation, locally, of the young African women assigned for apostolate in their own countries of origin.

The suggestion of Monsignor Castellacci

Since Cardinal Barnabò had made it quite clear, writing to Fr. Gioacchino Tomba, that Propaganda Fide did not, in principle, deal with such affairs with private individuals,⁴ it was necessary to find a new source of support, a solid, respected institution, capable of offering an unquestionable guarantee of seriousness.

According to the Vice Regent, this was not so difficult and so he explained to his young collaborator a possible way to go forward:

“It was in 1876, Comboni later wrote, that providence showed me the true ground on which to plant solidly the structure of the work I had already conceived. Monsignor Canossa, Bishop of Verona, had several times contemplated the group of lucky African girls for whom Fr. Olivieri was asking him to give alms, and moved by compassion, he had several times urged and encouraged the illustrious Fr. Mazza, his friend, to receive these daughters of Central Africa in his female institute, to educate them in the faith so that they might in turn teach in their own land under the guidance of the missionaries. This is why, after careful consideration, I turned to this noble and most merciful Prelate. I presented him my plan and warmly entreated him to take the work I had conceived under his protection and become its guide and president, assuring him that until I died, I would be his right arm, indeed, the support of the whole work; and that as regards financial and material resources, I alone would provide them by means of the illustrious Patriarch St. Joseph.” (W.4086).

In reality, even if Daniel Comboni, on the 15th of April 1876, considered it not advisable to go into more detail, that ‘Providence’ which made him understand what might be the solution to his problem, had its source in Monsignor Pietro Castellacci. Knowledgeable about the **Plan** to which he himself had granted the ‘reimprimatur’ to the third edition in 1867, Monsignor Castellacci was convinced that the will of God was to proceed to implement it. Now, as a bishop, the Vice Regent of Rome found himself in an ideal position to intervene in this regard with the Bishop of Verona and his intention was to do so by widening the

⁴ AP LD, vol. 357(1866)330: Barnabò to Tomba, 13th of April 1866.

discussion to include also the new element of the proposal of a feminine foundation. On his part, in fact, Monsignor Castellacci was already able to indicate a sister whom he considered ready and able for this purpose.

Therefore, if Fr. Daniel agreed, he would have introduced him to **Sr. Teresa de Angelis**, of whom he was the spiritual director. At the same time, he would have begun the necessary correspondence with Luigi di Canossa, with the aim of preparing the ground, and then seeing together the feasibility of the modalities for the new foundation.

So, on the 6th of September 1866, while a letter informing the bishop about the real reasons for the prolonged stay of one of his priests, that is, Daniel Comboni ⁵, in Rome was on its way to Verona, Comboni himself was being introduced for the first time to Chiara Persi*, presented now as Sr. Teresa de Angelis who was in Rome at the Conservatory known as that of the *Viperesche* and entrusted to the new congregation of the *Angeline della Croce*.

⁵ “Castellacci appreciated Comboni and the work he had undertaken in Africa so much that, on hearing how he feared that his prolonged stay in Rome would upset his superior in Verona, Fr. Tomba, he decided spontaneously to write to Monsignor di Canossa, to assure him that Comboni was delayed in Rome due to necessity. *“As he has not been able until now to resolve the affairs which keep him here, Castellacci wrote to the bishop of Verona, “he came to ask me advice on what to do in such an emergency. Having considered his situation, I found it necessary to dispel from his mind every doubt and persuade him to remain in Rome (Castellacci to Canossa, Rome, 6.9.66). He continues to describe the three most urgent affairs of Comboni: 1) the foundation of a feminine Institute in Egypt with the young African girls in the Mazza Institute. Therefore, for this reason, he had to await Monsignor Ciurcia, the new Apostolic Delegate of Egypt who was due in Rome. 2) Discussions with the General Superior of the *Minimi*, about the foundation of a masculine Institute, also in Egypt, were still pending. 3) He was awaiting the arrival of the king of Bavaria to ask for assistance for the Mazza Institute”... [A. CAPOVILLA, Don Daniele Comboni e Monsignor Pietro Castellacci, in AC, 2(1976)119].*

***“Leave your institute...
and start my work”*** (W. 1395).

Some days later, after that memorable encounter with the ‘visionary’ who was under the spiritual direction of Monsignor Castellacci, Luigi di Canossa received a letter dated September 1866, without a signature and with the request of the ‘*seal of confession.*’ (W. 1395).

In this letter, Daniel Comboni, whose handwriting could not be mistaken, informed his bishop of all that had been communicated to him during those meetings, in the name of Jesus.

“Leave your Institute,” he had heard said, “and begin my work. I will show you my rule, but you must not let anyone know of it, because the proper time has not yet come. Now you must act prudently and energetically. Found a house of Missionaries for the Africans. You will give them the spirit of the Good Shepherd”...

“My son,” he was told again, “be careful not to refuse this grace which I have shown to you... it is up to you to respond, do not let problems deter you.... If God is with you, who will be against you?” (W. 1395).

Finally, there was an interesting fact, which, evidently, the young missionary did not intend to underestimate: *“Since Margherita, as Sr. Teresa is named in this letter, was still afraid that it was an illusion of Satan, she heard holy Mass and received Holy Communion to ask God to let her really know His will.”* (W. 1396).

**A diocesan Institute, at least for the moment,
with feminine collaboration**

“I recognized in the Reverend Daniel Comboni the man who had been shown to me as the instrument which God wished to use in order to gain many souls. Their salvation was the object of my continuous prayer”...

(Sr. Teresa de Angelis)

All the following correspondence addressed to Verona also by the same Sr. Teresa, although she did not put the date and did not sign except as *“the slave of the Africans”* reveal an inclination towards the gradual maturing of the new missionary project based on the *Plan*.

Daniel Comboni himself took two letters of Monsignor Castellacci, both dated the 20th of February 1867, when he went to Verona to take the African girls. In the first, the Vice Regent of Rome recommended *“with great interest to the apostolic zeal”* of the bishop of Verona *“the great and wonderful work of the regeneration of Central Africa proposed in that truly inspired Plan by the great, intelligent and zealous missionary, Fr. Daniel Comboni.”*⁶

In the second letter, reserved and therefore confidential, the writer expressed himself more explicitly. The *“Slave of the Africans”* was asking him to confirm all that she had already written to Luigi di Canossa. He specified to the Bishop of Verona that they were not asking to leave the diocese and go to Africa, but to *“take the initiative in this work of God and establish, help, protect and assist that Institute of the Missionaries for Central Africa which Fr. Daniel Comboni was about to establish [...] and as some other companions would join [...] recommend the missionary and his companions to Propaganda [Fide], which already desired this, so as to be able to gain the mission and therefore, as an institute approved for now by your Excellency in the diocese, be fully committed to providing for the missionary and for the new Institute, protection and whatever else might be required”*.

⁶ See, POSITIO, p. 268.

In addition, the Bishop of Verona was informed that since 1862, God had been asking his confidante to prepare a “*congregation or a community of women*” ready to “*take part in his work in feminine foundations for the mission.*” Now, there were such women and they were ready “*to follow the will of God*” awaiting only “*to obey such a proposal*”.⁷

Evidently, Daniel Comboni was aware of the contents of the letters which he himself had delivered, and he agreed with the content. Four years later, in fact, in his report on June 6th 1871 to the Society of Cologne, he reminded that, in order to avoid the risk of another failure, such as the one which had already taken place in the history of the Vicariate, it would be “*urgent and necessary*” not only “*to found a flourishing seminary in Europe where young priests could be prepared for the difficult and dangerous mission of Central Africa*”...

A Congregation of missionary Sisters, through which the mission could be given powerful and indispensable assistance in spreading the faith among families should have been founded even earlier [...].

For this, he pointed out, “*the institute of The Virgins of Charity was also founded in Verona, so that it might supply teachers for the institutes for girls in Africa.*”... (W. 2471-78).

The Angeline della Croce in Verona

On the 17th of April 1867, Daniel Comboni left Verona, accompanied by nine young African women from the Mazza Institute, to return to Rome. This was a departure which Luigi di Canossa himself had sought to delay as much as possible, very probably in order to give him a chance for an exchange of opinions with people whom he trusted on the future foundation which, practically, would be diocesan. In any case, it seemed that he had no longer any doubts about the missionary seminary. The same could not be said, however, about the future ‘foundress’ of the feminine Congregation. In reality, who was Sr. Teresa de Angelis?

⁷ See, AC, 2(1976)135-136.

How dependable could her visions and revelations be considered to be?

Since his return from France in November 1866, where he probably met with the Bishop of Poitiers, Monsignor Pie, Daniel Comboni knew that this latter feared *“that that young woman was sometimes possessed by the devil and that she sometimes conveyed his spirit to the Superior and to Monsignor Vice Regent.”* (W. 1452). For this reason, on his return to Rome, he considered it prudent, to study more closely the nature of these extraordinary phenomena with which Sr. Teresa seemed to be favoured.

We have not found, so far, any piece of writing by Daniel Comboni on how he proceeded to verify these things and on what his conclusions were.⁸ These, however, can be understood all the same by what happened after this. The fact that, between the 10th and 11th of May, he arrived in Verona with the two *Angeline della Croce* does not mean that his doubts had been dispelled. On the contrary, neither Sr. Teresa, nor her protector had been pleased about the ‘test’ to which she had been subjected, since on the 27th of April, Monsignor Castellacci had already written to the Bishop of Verona to complain about Comboni.⁹ Further, despite the assurances of Monsignor Canossa, who evidently considered it too early to take more radical decisions, Sr. Teresa de Angelis arrived in Verona with a letter which left no doubt about what had taken place between her and the future founder. Amongst other things, Monsignor Castellacci wrote:

“The person presenting herself to your Excellency is the ‘slave of the Africans’, accompanied by the Superior of my monastery [...]. Her identity should never be revealed to anyone, not even to Fr. Daniel, to whom your Excellency should never communicate anything indicating that you know who she is.

⁸ “Sr. Teresina Marini” – we can read, however, in the notes left by Sr. Ermenegilda Morelli*– *“heard from Monsignor that in an Italian city there was a woman believed to be a saint. A bishop wanted to verify this opinion and showing off his pectoral cross he told him, See, Fr. Daniel, if you do this well, this will be yours, almost promising him the Bishop’s Cross. Fr. Daniel replied, “The works of God are not based on falsehood.”* (APMR, VI/A/5/3-2722: Unpublished Notes, pp. 40–41).

⁹ See, A. CAPOVILLA, Ibid. p. 140.

Your Excellency may hear her freely, but all that she says must be kept confidential and considered as a secret of the sacrament of confession [...].

Therefore, I am entrusting these daughters, direct instruments of the work of God, not to Fr. Daniel, but to your Excellency, sure that, as a true father, in whose hands I entrust them, you will help them, assist them and protect them and it is with this assurance that they leave for Verona”...¹⁰

The Work could not be born divided

The result was that which we already know: Luigi di Canossa, we are informed in the article by A. Capovilla already quoted, *“welcomed the two sisters benevolently and offered them accommodation in two rooms of the Canossian Sisters in the parish of Saint Zeno, from where they later moved to their own house.”* (p. 144).

In the decree, however, which was pronounced twenty days later, the Bishop of Verona speaks only of one work, that of the **Good Shepherd**, approved by him in order to sustain the two houses, one for men and the other for women, founded in the city of Verona. Daniel Comboni himself, in his communication to Propaganda Fide, avoided any possible misunderstanding and he wrote as follows on June 11th 1867:

“The distinguished Monsignor Canossa has opened a seminary in Verona for our dear African missions [...]; He also opened a female Institute to train good women missionaries”... (W. 1416).

Four days later, in the company of Luigi di Canossa, Comboni also left for Rome, where the celebrations for the XVIII centenary of the martyrs, Saints Peter and Paul would be taking place. He left, entrusting to Providence the unfolding of events. In fact, it was providential that what then happened took place when neither of them were in Verona.

¹⁰ ACR, A/38/12: Castellacci to Canossa. Rome, 8th of May 1867. Typed copy in APMR, XIX/231/6-1207.

A ‘providential’ intervention from the police?

While Luigi di Canossa was meeting with the Prefect of Propaganda Fide and the Apostolic Delegate of Egypt, Monsignor Luigi Ciurcia* in Rome, in order to discuss the forthcoming Combonian foundations in Cairo, the *Angeline della Croce* in Verona, received two visits from the police. The city authorities, they said, wanted to verify if the two sisters from Rome were really intending to found a religious Congregation of women, as in this case they would be infringing the Italian law of June 19th 1866.

This intervention of the police, spontaneous or provoked as it may have been, gave Luigi di Canossa, who, during his trip to Rome had come to the decision to let the *Angeline della Croce* go and to rely instead on the Canossians, a plausible pretext for sending the two sisters back to Rome, withdrawing them once and for all from the missionary project. Therefore, he informed them that they should not insist on staying in Verona.

Even although it was not easy for the Vice Regent of Rome to accept such a conclusion, in the end, the decision was made on September 6th 1867 when he wrote to the Bishop of Verona:

“Therefore, it is to avoid any misunderstanding that I write to you openly declaring my wish to withdraw, [...] as I now do decisively and absolutely [...].

I withdraw therefore my mandate, and I do not wish that [the two sisters] suffer uselessly [...]; but I also wish to declare my wish to be compensated for all I have spent for this cause”...¹¹

In fact, the *Angeline della Croce*, with two Veronese postulants, left Verona a few days later.

¹¹ ACR, A/38/12: Castellacci to Canossa, 6th of September 1867. Typewritten copy in: APMR, XIX/321/9-1207.

“It is a special grace from God”

Daniel Comboni commented, writing to the bishop of Verona on the 15th of September 1867, *“that Monsignor, the Vice Regent has withdrawn: he would not have given anything, but at most, anticipated money to be reimbursed later from the Association’s income [...].*

In addition, it would have been damaging to Africa, because Monsignor Vice Regent is in fact contrary to calling on other Institutions in the future, to multiply the helpers of the Work for Africa and develop it. He holds it as an article of faith that the Institute inspired by Sr. Teresa is the only one in the world destined to save all souls [...]. No, God is the author of all the institutions approved by the Church; and they all, according to their own charism, contribute to founding, maintaining and bringing about God’s Kingdom on earth.

*The only obstacle that Monsignor Vice Regent can set in our way is the **title of Association of the Good Shepherd** alone, which I had called The Association of the **Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary**, and Monsignor made me change the name”... (W. 1431-33).*

“Little by little progress is being made [...]. I spare no efforts, nor journeys, nor my life to succeed in this enterprise: I will die with Africa on my lips”... (Daniel Comboni).

“The step I took to establish two Institutes in Cairo” he wrote the following week to Mitterutzner, “has been approved by the above mentioned Apostolic Delegate and by Propaganda. Little by little progress is being made. I am therefore trying in every way. If I do not succeed in anything, God will be satisfied with my good intentions. I will certainly not spare any efforts, nor journeys, nor my life to succeed in this enterprise. I will die with Africa on my lips. A cloud of crosses has fallen on my head: but I am more inspired than ever.”*

Giving an account to his friend of the recent events in Verona, he wrote further: *“After having made two inspections in my female institute, the Government gave me to understand that I should*

*move my sisters within twenty four hours, one is from Paris, the other from Rome. After consulting the bishop, I have sent them to Rome, postulants and all.*¹² *Fiat!*" (W. 1441).

A fierce war

In reality, the conclusion of the Roman episode was not so simple. *"In Rome,"* Daniel confessed to his bishop on the 4th of October 1867, *'The Beatine' have unleashed a fierce fight against me... underhand tricks, cheating, lies, suggestions of guilt... When truth and justice have been attacked, they have always triumphed. I have a steadfast trust in that God for whom I have exposed and expose still my life, act, suffer and will die [...].*

The spirit of pure humility, charity, reverence and moderation have governed my relations with the Vice Regent [...] with him I used the loyalty of a true friend, of one who is grateful to his benefactor. But I fear that the opinion of the venerable Fr. Fradin [ex spiritual director of Chiara Persi] and of the Bishop of Poitiers is true: that that young woman is sometimes possessed by the devil [...].

God's goodness will certainly deliver me from this trial that is so hard and so horrible. The Queen of Africa will help me.

Besides, courage, Monsignor; the rejections, the battles, the crosses, they all show that our Work is utterly God's. The mustard seed has been sown: and it has to sprout among troubles and thorns. It will grow among the buffering and the waves of persecution but it will always produce abundant fruit in the field of the Church because the Divine farmer will safeguard it and cover it with the shield of His protection [...].

It is urgent that I leave for Africa, and that your excellency spend some time deciding and arranging for the development of the Work. I kiss your sacred hand with all my heart."

Fr. Daniel Comboni (W. 1452-53).

¹² Despite the fact that they were both Veronese, it seems that the postulants, Giuditta Ferro and Giuseppa Fabbris did not intend to enter the Institute of the Missions for Nigrizia. Already on July 16th 1867, they were sent to Rome, probably in order to become *Angeline della Croce*" (See, A. CAPOVILLA, *idem*, p. 156).

From the Canossians of Verona to the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition

Left without those who could have been his sisters, Daniel Comboni started immediately to look for others who may be ready to collaborate in the forthcoming foundation of the Institutes in Cairo.

It was this that the Plan foresaw, and that is, that preparatory institutes, which should have surrounded all of Africa, would be sustained by *“the religious orders and the Catholic Institutes of men and women, as approved by the Church, or recognized or permitted by the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, with the permission of the latter and the mutual consent of the heads and Superiors General of those Orders and institutions.”* (W. 2766).

In the letter of October 4th 1867, in fact, Fr. Daniel expressed to the bishop his confidence: *“We have the four Camillians at our total disposal [...]. The superior of the Canossians sisters¹³ will do all she can to provide three Sisters [...]. With the missionaries, Sisters and African girls, there are two houses in Cairo. Since our work is already active in Egypt, we are in a safe harbour”*... (W. 1450).

Now, the good will of the Canossians Sisters could have been sincere, but time was passing and it had to be recognized that unfortunately, no one can improvise himself missionary for Africa in a few days. At that point in time, thanks be to God, the sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition* of Marseilles intervened. Daniel Comboni had known them for ten years. They had given hospitality to the African girls in 1867 as soon as they were able to leave the convent of the *Viperesche* and two Sisters had accepted to accompany the young African women to Marseilles where Stanislao Carcereri* was impatiently waiting with the other members of the expedition.

“We were able to obtain three sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition to accompany and care for the African girls in Cairo, where the said sisters have a house” (W. 1492) Fr. Daniel communicated on

¹³ Until the following 21st of November, it seemed that there was still hope of leaving with the Canossian Sisters of Verona (see, W. 1488).

the 29th of November, a moment before going on board to leave for Alexandria.

The three Sisters were Sr. Maria Bertholon of Lione, Sr. Elisabetha Cambefort of Montauban and Sr. Maddalena Carcassian of Erzerum (Armenia).

Obviously, the hope of the future Pro Vicar was that they would remain, as indeed they did, to participate also in the Foundation of the feminine Institute, the Sacred Heart of Mary. Seeing them at work, he found them so suited to the African mission that he even illuded himself with the hope that he could abandon the idea of "*founding a new Congregation of Sisters*" (W. 4466) given all the worries, burdens and uncertainties that such a venture would cause.

But, when in October 1868, the same Superior General of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition informed him that, not only could she not guarantee him more Sisters for Central Africa, but she also foresaw that they would not be able to continue their work in Old Cairo, Daniel Comboni found "*the courage to try to establish a new Congregation of Sisters.*"

"*I went to Verona*", he stated in the above mentioned letter to Mother Julien, "*and I began with two postulants.*" (W. 4468)

1.

The First Vatican Council relaunches the Work of Comboni on the occasion of the feast of Immaculate Conception

On the 8th of December 1869, feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pious IX officially opened the first Vatican Ecumenical Council in Rome. The news must have been a great encouragement to Daniel Comboni to continue on the path he had undertaken. That prophetic sign, the image of the Woman who, free from all shadow of sin, could place her feet on the head of a dangerous serpent without fearing its poisonous bite (Gen. 3,15), must have filled Daniel's heart with hope.

The year that had just passed, in fact, starting from the Autumn of 1868, had been a very difficult one. The impression which endured was that the forces of evil had been let loose against the Work which was still taking form. First there was the aftermath of the Castellacci episode, then, the beginning of the “*secret war*” (W. 1591) stirred up by the Brothers of the Holy Land; therefore, all the dust thrown up by “*the case of Zanoni*”¹⁴ which, as expressed in a letter addressed to cardinal Barnabò on the 25th of November 1868, had made Daniel Comboni come to the conclusion that:

*“I already see and understand that the Cross is such a friend to me that I have for some time chosen it as my eternal and inseparable bride. So the cross will be my beloved **bride** and my wise and prudent teacher, Mary will be my dearest **Mother** and Jesus my **all**. In their company, Most Eminent Prince, I fear neither the storms of Rome, nor the tempests of Egypt, nor the turmoil of Verona, nor the clouds*

¹⁴ Regarding the case of Zanoni, see also, A. GILLI, *Daniele Comboni e i Camilliani...* AC, 1(1977)136ff.

of Lyons and Paris. Slowly and surely, walking on thorny ground, I will succeed in establishing and giving life to the proposed work for the regeneration of Africa, which has been abandoned by many.” (W. 1710)

In reality, in Lyons, there would not have been only ‘clouds’. Very soon they would have been transformed, on the Combonian horizon, into a dangerous hurricane which could have turned everything upside down. Daniel Comboni would never forget, throughout his whole life, that fatal day in November on which, while in Paris, he found out that the *Opera del Buon Pastore* would have to be suspended on “higher orders”.¹⁵

About one month later, as if this were not already enough, he received the news of the death, on the 15th of December, of Fr. Alessandro Dal Bosco, Rector of the little missionary seminary in Verona. Having been informed already the previous day that his friend would probably not make it, Daniel could not stop himself from asking in anguish, the bishop of Verona:

“If Fr. Dal Bosco were to go to Paradise, which I feel is certain, what shall we do to arrange things for the little seminary in Verona? In brief, Monsignor, and my most venerable father, let us throw ourselves into the arms of Jesus who has great love and ingenuity and is well able to manage things”... (W. 1780).

And therefore, trusting “in that God who wants our work to be born at the foot of the Cross” (W. 1966), Daniel had left again for Egypt, the following February, infringing perhaps, once again, what “common sense required”¹⁶ and leaving temporarily “the pious and zealous Fr. Tommaso Toffaloni in charge of the little missionary seminary” (W. 2267) which remained open even though the admission of new aspirants had been suspended. (see W. 2264) On the other hand, he had no choice: only by proving to those to whom he had to give account that the institutes in Cairo were

¹⁵ Daniel Comboni, in April 1870, will recall everything, punctually, in his **Report** addressed to Cardinal Barnabò, author of the circular letter to the Italian bishops dated 29th of September 1868.

¹⁶ From a note of Monsignor Ciurcia on the origins of the Institutes in Cairo. See, AC, 1(1979)120, note 7.

a good beginning for the implementation of the **Plan**, could Daniel Comboni hope to be able to continue, with the blessing of the Church, the work of the regeneration of Africa with Africa.

The opinion of some missionary bishops

“Gentlemen, have confidence in the cause of Fr. Comboni, and especially in his person. Providence has assigned him one of the most difficult tasks to implement”... (Monsignor Leo Meurin)

As he left Italy at the beginning of 1869, Daniel Comboni was already aware that, before the end of the year, the Ecumenical Council which Pius IX had called in the month of June the previous year, would meet in Rome. Probably, the missionary of Nigrizia began to comprehend the great importance of that event as those bishops who were furthest away began their journey and some of them, passing through Egypt, asked him hospitality.

“NB” – he wrote in a postscript on June 10th 1869, *“I received as guests in our Institute two holy bishops from India, one a Capuchin, the other a Jesuit.”*¹⁷ *They were most satisfied with the progress of the Institutes. The Capuchin [...] spontaneously told me that he wants to speak to Barnabò [...] The other, the Jesuit, who is a Prussian, will speak to the Archbishop of Cologne and to the Association.”* (W. 1908)

The following 9th of July, he told the same thing to Fr. Giovanni Fochesato of the Mazza Institute, specifying however, that, in the meantime, the Combonian Institutes had become three:

- 1) One masculine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
- 2) One feminine of the Sacred Heart of Mary
- 3) The parish school, Holy Family

and that they were giving him *“great consolation”*. (W. 1926)

¹⁷ Monsignor Leo **Meurin** (1825-1895), a Jesuit originally from Breslavia had left for the mission in India in 1858. On the 4th of June 1867, he was nominated Apostolic Vicar of Bombay. For his intervention in favour of Comboni, see AC, 2(1978)11-12.

“Fr. Zanoni has been speaking against my Institutes in all of Verona and beyond,” he commented on July 30th with Fr. Gioacchino Tomba, *“He has lost his head and has written against me [...] to the Bishop of Verona, to the Propagation of the Faith, to the Archbishop and Apostolic Delegate in Egypt. I answered [...] with the facts. Such persecutions have made my Institutes progress by ten years”*... (W. 1931-32).

A report to take to Rome

The Apostolic Delegate of Egypt thought about it in the same way. Daniel Comboni wrote of him: *“seeing their fruits, he is very fond of all three Institutes and has defended them against the attacks and the wars waged against them by evil minded people who went as far as to persecute me at Propaganda Fide and even with the Pope”*... (W. 1928)

In favour of the Work of Comboni, Monsignor Ciurcia did even more: at different times, he himself encouraged Comboni to write a report about all that had really happened, intending to speak also confidentially with Cardinal Barnabò about it. Therefore, just as he was about to go to Rome to participate in the Council, he asked for another report on the Vicariate itself, so that he could talk about it knowledgably if the opportunity arose.

For all of this, the Apostolic Delegate also took with him, as he left for the Italian capital, the gratitude of Daniel Comboni who, the previous day, had written to Luigi di Canossa:

“Our venerable Apostolic Delegate is leaving for Rome tomorrow. He brings with him the hearts of all. But I am the one who feels his departure most, because I feel the deepest gratitude to him. If, with his love of truth and justice, this worthy and venerable Prelate had not combined great kindness and charity to us, our Institutes would have vanished into thin air. If they now exist and prosper, we must be indebted to the zeal and charity of Monsignor Ciurcia, who, heavily burdened by an important and difficult mission, since his position in Egypt is extremely sensitive, was and is a Father and a most circumspect protector”... (W. 1983)

With regard to my coming to Rome...

It is in the same above mentioned letter of the 26th of November 1869 that Daniel Comboni speaks explicitly for the first time about his possible journey to Rome during the Council. The principle aim, he explained to his Bishop of Verona, was “*business*” and to see how to plan “*fundraising in America*”.

However, as he could not leave Cairo without the permission of Propaganda Fide, he asked Luigi di Canossa to arrange this in time. While awaiting for permission, which arrived around the middle of January 1870, he tried to prepare an exhaustive ***Historical Report on the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa***, (W. 2027) as requested by Monsignor Ciurcia.

“The hour of wellbeing seems to have arrived also for this doubly unhappy nation. The pitiful cry of centuries of misfortune has already found a reply”...

(Daniel Comboni, 19th of September, 1869)

As can be verified, the “*Historical Report on the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa*,” presents itself as a notable piece of work which must have required the full dedication of its author, not only at an intellectual level, but also at a personal and, especially, emotional level. It was a report that brought to the surface again memories and emotions and which triggered at a certain point, in the same way that this had happened six years previously in the Basilica of Saint Peter’s in Rome, a brilliant idea.

- While in Rome, why not carry the voice of his Africa directly to the Fathers of the Council?
- Why not, as he had already written to Pius IX on the previous 19th of September, let the **cry** of his people, oppressed, persecuted, and too often reduced to being chained, resound in the Council so as to obtain a **response** in the name of the Church?

For Daniel Comboni, in fact, it was possible to give a response to that cry.

It would be sufficient to review the **way** of doing mission which had been adopted in the Vicariate, as he had recalled in the historical report. The fact that something had not worked, was not so decisive and, in any case, should be downplayed.

What had to be done, he wrote to Luigi di Canossa on the 15th of February 1870, was to discover the “**why**” of the failure of the German Franciscans and especially to ask oneself: **Which would be the best system in order to gain success?**

Therefore, he suggested to his Bishop:

“Since the discussion is now about matters of the Oriental Rite and thus concerns the Catholic Missions, would this not be the right moment for you to agree with Cardinal Barnabò and the delegates to speak in the Council on behalf of Central Africa [...]? Would it not be a matter of great importance to make proposals about, and to discuss the method of winning for the Church, the tenth part of Humanity, which all the efforts of eighteen centuries have been unable to win for Christ?”... (W. 2184)

The response of Cardinal Barnabò

Even if the **Historical Report** had been prepared for Monsignor Ciurcia, it was obvious that it was really destined for the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide who, in that story of the Vicariate had had, and would continue to have in the future, a significant role. To Alexander Barnabò then, Daniel Comboni had already written before he even reached Rome informing him of the latest events and underlining why he felt it was urgent to obtain consent, and also means, that would unblock the situation so that he could continue with new energy his work of evangelization.¹⁸

¹⁸ “*I take the liberty of informing you*”, he wrote on the 17th of February 1870, “*that Mr. Baker has reached Khartoum where he is organizing a major expedition to conquer on behalf of the Viceroy of Egypt the whole length of the white Nile to the sources of the Nile [...]. The expedition includes mechanical engineers, craftsmen, settlers, doctors and everything. In addition, there are protestant missionaries and Muftis to turn the natives into Muslims.*” (W. 2187-88)

When he was received in audience immediately after his arrival, the missionary perceived a favourable attitude towards him once again. This was confirmed by the Cardinal's request to him to add to the Historical Report an additional Report on "*the progress of his Work.*" (W. 2197)

Propaganda Fide could not have offered Daniel Comboni a better opportunity to take up again, practically from where it had been interrupted, his discussion on implementing the **Plan**. The *Report*, therefore, was the instrument which was offered to him in order to demonstrate the necessity of reviving, as soon as possible, *L'Opera del Buon Pastore*, thus permitting that "*the works begun in Egypt and Verona*" could continue to grow and prosper "*simultaneously so that they may gradually achieve their desired purpose*"... (W. 2216). It was not by chance then that the new report was entitled:

"REPORT
To the H. C. of Propaganda Fide
On the Work of the regeneration
of Africa by Africa itself"

If the aim of the Institutes in Cairo was to acclimatize the missionaries and prepare immediately the personnel assigned to Central Africa, the aim of the Institutes in Verona was to provide the missionaries. Two complementary objectives, or two dimensions of a single project.

The same *Report*, in fact, is subdivided in two separate chapters, the second of which is dedicated to "*Little Works in Verona*". It is worthwhile to quote here ample extracts from this second chapter, leaving this important piece of writing to speak for itself.

"So as to ensure that the Institutes in Egypt and their works to be founded in Africa might be under the seal of stability", one reads at the beginning, "His Most Reverend Excellency, Monsignor Canossa opened a small seminary in Verona to train priests and supply missionaries and lay brothers for the Institutes in Cairo and the missions in Central Africa. He gave them canonical status by means of the document in the Appendix, that is, the decree of June 1st 1867, appointing as its Director the pious and learned Fr. Alessandro Dalbosco, who in the past had been

my companion in Central Africa [...].

This Association had begun to develop quite well and was favoured by many bishops in Italy and abroad [...]. Circumstances which God allowed, somehow hampered this holy Work [...]. Mr. Meynis, Secretary of the Council in Lyons, not understanding, or appearing not to understand the Work, believed the Association of the Buon Pastore had the aim of collecting offerings for the Institutes in Egypt and was therefore harmful to the Propagation of the Faith [...]. Following this communication, your most Reverend Eminence, in your wisdom, decided to give the same interpretation to our Verona Association and in September 1868 you issued a circular to the Bishops of Italy, in which you forbade them from welcoming in their Dioceses my Association aimed at supporting the special Missions, except the Propagation of the Faith [...].

Ignoring this fact and encouraged by pontifical approval, I tried to found a Council of the Association of the Buon Pastore in Paris [...]. It so happened, however, that a few days before the first session of the Diocesan Council which had already been summoned to the apartments of Baron Havelt, I received from Verona the news of your Most Reverend Eminence's circular. Although this circular in no way concerned special Associations whose purpose is to provide local assistance to Dioceses in Italy, and therefore did not concern the Association of the Buon Pastore, which is aimed at helping the small seminary in Verona, I nevertheless decided, reading Your Eminence's heart, to suspend everything until further notice, in submission and respect for the Supreme head of the Missions. I took my embarrassed leave from the members of the new Council in Paris, telling them that since I had to leave for Egypt, I had decided to suspend the activities of the Association of the Buon Pastore in Paris ad tempus [...].

I then left France resigned to the dispositions of Providence, and full of confidence that the Lord would, in due course, start up this holy Work.

Bowing before Your Eminence's venerable intentions, we proceeded at a measured pace also in Italy. Monsignor Canossa deemed it prudent not to have new students in the small seminary, and the Work in Verona came to a standstill."

After having clarified, in this way, how things were, and with the courage which comes only from a clear and upright conscience,¹⁹ Daniel Comboni continued:

“We waited impatiently for the time of the Vatican Council to come before Your Eminence and ardently beg you to grant the shield of your protection to the entire Work.

A seminary in Europe to form missionaries for Africa is an absolute necessity. A well-organized pious Association is the most secure way to support it [...].

I therefore humbly implore the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide to second the most holy wishes of Monsignor, the Bishop of Verona, and freely and generously give its precious support to this Association, which is aimed at providing Apostles to unfortunate Africa ... ”. He then concluded:

“I have only one life to consecrate to the salvation of these souls: I wish I had a thousand lives to spend them all to such a purpose. I will therefore never cease until my dying breath to implore Your Eminence [...] to look mercifully upon the one hundred million souls who inhabit the vast regions of Central Africa” ... (W. 2257-2271)

Establish well for me the College in Verona

On the 12th of August 1870, during what was thought would be simply a summer break for the Council, Daniel Comboni returned with enthusiasm to Verona. In reality, there were considerable reasons to praise and thank God.

First of all, the *Postulatum*²⁰ in favour of the peoples of Central Africa had been placed on the forthcoming agenda of the work of the Council. Secondly, since this document had been much

¹⁹ *“I have only one thing no one can steal from me: my conscience”* Daniel Comboni had written some days earlier to his Bishop. *Rome knows that I speak in conscience.*” (W. 2195: Rome, 24th of March 1870).

²⁰ Regarding the history of the *Postulatum* see W. 2289–93: Comboni to Artini. Rome, 22nd of June 1870. For the text of the document and the accompanying letter, see W. 2294–2314; 2543-49.

appreciated by the missionary bishops, the idea of entrusting to Daniel Comboni that African missionary territory which he so much desired²¹ was talked about more and more and with growing conviction at Propaganda Fide. Thirdly, since Daniel Comboni was sustained by Luigi di Canossa, it was urgent to take up again the Veronese foundation and to guarantee it the solidity which could come if the Association of the Buon Pastore would function well.

“In the long and frequent conversations I had with His Eminence the Cardinal Prefect,” one can read, in fact, in a letter of Comboni addressed to Monsignor Ciurcia on the 18th of November 1870, *“I was warmly recommended to give a good impetus to the college for African Missions in Verona [...]. Our wittiest of Cardinals made my ears ring with these expressions several times:*

‘Either bring me a certificate that you will live for 35 years, or put the college in Verona on a firm footing. In either of these two cases, I will give you a mission in Central Africa’... (W. 2336)

Daniel Comboni did not allow such a thing to be repeated twice. Two months after his departure from Rome, on the 12th of October 1870, he wrote to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide:

“Following your wise counsel and your wishes, I have managed to establish the College of the African Missions in Verona in agreement with Monsignor Canossa.

For this purpose, I have taken a large house adjacent to the Episcopal Seminary, which will be totally paid for in under six months [...].

Thanks to the help of the most wise Rector of the Episcopal Seminary, [Fr. Pietro Dorigotti], God has granted me an excellent priest from Verona to head the above-mentioned college”... (W. 2331)

“The good priest who is proposed to direct this new cenacle of African apostles”, Comboni clarified the following 21st of November, *“the Reverend Fr. Antonio Squaranti of Verona, is equipped with sagacity, prudence, sound judgement, exemplary piety and all the qualities required for forming, under the auspices of the Bishop of Verona, good candidates for the arduous and laborious*

²¹ *“I am actively trying to get a [missionary] station”,* Comboni wrote to Fr. Artini on the 26th of June 1870 (W. 2293).

mission in central Africa. I hope the sacred Congregation will very shortly have good reasons to be satisfied.” (W. 2622)

Daniel Comboni does not make any mention, at this point in time, of a feminine Institute to be opened in Verona. This is not because he had abandoned the idea, but rather because it would simply have been premature. First of all, it was necessary to organize “*in Verona the Work of the Buon Pastore*” (W. 2371) for this reason, despite the fact that a restless Stanislao Carcereri was beginning to create problems for him in the Institutes of Cairo²², he decided to remain in Verona for as long as would be necessary.

To the two houses, one for men and the other for women, which were already foreseen in the Decree of Foundation of the Work, Daniel Comboni would dedicate himself, as indeed he did so, immediately afterwards.

²² See, W. 2340–2371: Comboni to Ciurcia. Verona, 18th of November 1870.

2.

The Pie Madri della Nigrizia

“In 1872 I founded in Verona the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, in which missionary sisters, who will educate the African girls in the Institutes of Africa countries are formed” ...

(Daniel Comboni)

On the 21st of November 1871, the Superior Council of the Work of the Good Shepherd, which had now become once again fully operative, gathered at the Bishop's house in Verona.

The aim of the meeting was *“to hear from the Director General of the Association, Fr. Daniel Comboni, the achievements of the Work over the past year and to decide on how to develop the Work further in order to meet the needs of the Missions for which it was founded.*

The Reverend Monsignor, resident Bishop of Verona, the first general Vice President, the distinguished Marquis Ottavio of Canossa, the Reverend Monsignor Stefano Crosati, Vicar General of the Diocese of Verona [...] Fr. Antonio Squaranti, Rector of the College for the Missions and finally, Daniel Comboni Apostolic Missionary and Superior of the Institutes of the Africans in Cairo, Director General of the Mission of Central Africa were all present.

After the meeting was declared open [...], The Director General [...] expressed his consolation about being able to communicate to the Superior Council the most pleasing results, through which it had been possible to maintain the three institutes in Cairo, buy a house for the men's college that was to be opened in Verona and still have a considerable sum of money left over. Entering more resolutely into the argument which was to be shared with the Council [...], he proposed expanding the mission to a more central part of Africa. He said that he had already written a proposal to Cardinal Barnabò, who had replied that he would first like to see a college opened in Verona ready to receive new individuals who would then maintain the mission. Now, as it seemed to him that the Work was able to satisfy the justified desire of the Cardinal,

he asked the opinion of the Council about what should be done both here in Verona and in Africa [...].

The Council, after a thorough reflection, agreed on the following:

1 - To open, as soon as possible, a men's college on the ground next to the Diocesan Seminary in order to form subjects for the mission.

2 - To buy a house in Montorio [...], in order to open a college where missionary women could be formed.²³

The Founder was so sure that in the meeting of the 21st of November these proposals would be accepted, that at least five months previously he was already talking about it as something certain. In his Report to the Society of Cologne, on June 6th 1871, when he mentions “*The Programme for the Regeneration of Africa*”, one can in fact read:

“For the success of this sublime and useful undertaking, it is necessary that both in Europe and on the African coasts, all those activities that can introduce the Catholic Apostolate into Central Africa should be organized [...].

Until now the holy undertaking includes the following [...]:

II. IN EUROPE

1. The college of the African Missions of Verona [...].

2. The Institute of women Missionaries in Verona. Its aim is to form pious and zealous sisters, destined to direct the female African Institutes in Central Africa“ ... (W. 2570-75).

²³ ACR, A/25/19: Minutes of the meeting of the Association of the *Buon Pastore*. Verona, 21st November, 1871.

Why Daniel Comboni wanted the Sisters: a need that came from afar

Right from 1857, when Daniel Comboni was leaving Verona to go to Africa for the first time, he knew that he had, above all, a particular task to accomplish: identify a secure place where *“the first group of African girls,”* who had arrived in Verona in 1851 and had received a good education in the Mazza* Institute, *“could return and recover and live”*.

According to the Plan which Mazza himself had elaborated about this matter, and as expressed in writing to Geremia di Livorno* on the 18th of December 1849, it would take *“at least 10 years”* until *“well grounded in religion,”*²⁴ the African girls would be ready for a return to Africa in order to form Christian families from the young people already baptized.

Unfortunately, the apostolic expedition which had permitted the young Daniel Comboni to receive his baptism in mission, did not have a happy outcome. He had, however, returned from that journey even more convinced of the importance of counting, in all phases of Evangelization, on the presence of women’s activity, if he were to found and nurture new communities which were truly Christian.

From the results *“of the expedition we made to Central Africa,”* he wrote to his friend Fr. Francesco Bricolo on the 2nd of January 1861, *“[...] one can clearly see how sublime and wise the great plan conceived by our most beloved and Reverend Superior has turned out to be”*... (W. 498)

A Plan based on reciprocity

Some years later, deeply convinced that, in her own environment, *“The Catholic woman is everything”* (W. 970) and that, therefore, *“the regeneration of the great African family depended almost entirely”* (W. 829) on the African woman, Daniel Comboni kept this in mind and mentioned it explicitly in his **Plan** of missionary action which was written in one long sitting in September

²⁴ N. MAZZA, Writings, p. 35-39.

1864, and later revised in the final edition in 1871. It was not a matter, evidently, of setting the woman against man, but of placing her on the same level, side by side, different but equal, as she had been conceived from the beginning, in the original plan of God himself, when he decided to give life to humanity, which would reflect, in its growth, the authentic image of the Mother and the Father.

Therefore, one does not find in the Plan of Comboni, separate chapters for the men and the women, as will be verified later, in the Rules which Comboni himself set down for his men and women missionaries.

“The project, therefore, that we would dare to submit,” one reads in the 1864 edition, “would be the creation of innumerable Institutes of both sexes to surround the whole of Africa. These would be carefully situated at the least possible distance from the interior of the Continent [...] and both Europeans and Africans could live and work in them”. (W. 821)

“From each of these institutes... men and women, destined gradually to move into Central Africa with the aim of initiating and consolidating the saving work of Christianity will be formed”... (W. 828)

In particular, then, regarding women, the author specified: *“The groups of young African women similarly formed by individuals most suited for the purpose will be composed of:*

1° Capable catechists, to whom will be given the most complete education possible in religion and Catholic morals, so that they may spread these principles and their practice in the degraded African female society on which, as is the case among us, depends almost entirely, the regeneration of the great family of Africans.

2° Capable women teachers and housewives who must promote the education of women in reading, writing, keeping accounts, spinning, sewing, weaving, caring for the sick and practicing all the domestic skills most useful in the countries of Central Africa”... (W. 829).

Finally, he added, *“From among the young African women who do not feel inclined to the married state, will similarly be chosen*

*the group of the **Virgins of Charity**, made up of those individuals who have most distinguished themselves by their holiness and in the practical teaching of the catechism, of languages and of feminine skills. This special section will constitute the elite of the women's group and it will be entrusted with the direction of the girls' schools, with carrying out the most important tasks of Christian charity and with exercising **the ministry of the Catholic woman** among the tribes of Africa. In this fashion, through the most important ministry of the indigenous Clergy and of the **Virgins of Charity**, assisted by the good work of the **catechists, teachers, craftsmen**, mentors, **women teachers** and housewives, many Catholic families will gradually be formed and flourishing Christian associations will be founded"...* (W. 833-34).

The decisive role of the missionary Sister in implementing the Plan

That first group of young African girls, for whom the priests of Fr. Mazza had to identify the most suitable place in Africa to found a Christian community with the contribution of African men and women destined to become “**subjects of evangelization**”, had been prepared in Verona, thanks to the collaboration of those generous ‘*women of the Gospel*’, the lay collaborators of Fr. Nicola Mazza who had accepted to become ‘*Mothers*’ and ‘*Aunts*’ in the feminine family groups created in the Institute.²⁵

According to the Plan of the Founder, as expressed by him in his letter, already cited, to Geremia da Livorno, other groups of young Africans would join each year so that, once the return to their land of origin began, the flow would be ongoing.

Instead, after the arrival of the second group in Verona, the group in which there was also Fortunata Quasce who later became a

²⁵ Comboni remembered that “*In his female Institute there were pious and good teachers who knew many languages and Arabic perfectly and who were involved in educating young African girls to train them for the Apostolate of Africa.*” (W. 2083)

Pia Madre della Nigrizia,²⁶ these groups were interrupted, due to the intervention of Luigi di Canossa who, in a memo written on June 10th 1899 records the following episode:

“In approximately 1869, more or less, one day the holy and well-deserving Fr. Nicola Mazza met me at Castel Vecchio when I was a canon and he told me: Give me some money. Some young Africans have come and I need more money. I, with my usual confidence in our friendship, replied: Here in my pocket I have nothing. I will give you something, but, let me tell you frankly what I think: You and the good Fr. Olivieri of Genoa will not achieve anything for Africa in this way.

He asked me why and I told him, “You bring young African boys and girls to Europe and after four or six winters they die and so you send to heaven some saved souls. But how does that help Africa?”

So then Fr. Mazza asked me: So what would you do? And I, who in reality had already thought about it, opened my left hand and said to him: Suppose that this hand is the Mediterranean. I would look along the African coast for a site, Egypt for example, where Europeans could easily get acclimatized, and where houses and colleges could be built, where young Africans could feel drawn and would have no need to change climate and food. There, in time, they could marry and Christian districts and towns could spring up and so forth. Fr. Nicola answered: “You know, that’s a good idea. And we greeted each other”...²⁷

It was necessary, in that case to entrust the African girls to “*sisters already established in Africa*”

Now, in a memo of 1866 sent by Daniel Comboni to Fr. Biaggio Verri* clearly trying to gain his support for his cause, which was clearly outlined in the ***Plan***, which had already been published a year and a half earlier, one has the impression of perceiving the echo of the Cannosian memo cited above.

²⁶ Number 9 of *Archivio Madri Nigrizia* is dedicated to **Fortunata Quasce**.

²⁷ ACR, A/25/28: Idea primitiva della Missione dell’Africa Centrale.

“The admirable Institution of Fr. Olivieri”, one reads, “aims at removing from barbarity a large number of young African girls in an attempt to save their souls by entrusting them to the guardianship of Sisters in Europe [...]. In order to do this, considerable sums of money are required to travel to Europe and to maintain the young women while there. Experience has demonstrated that, once the young women are brought to Europe, many die before being able to benefit their country because, obliged to remain far from their homeland, it is impossible for them to aid their sisters who live in barbaric conditions. It would seem clear then, that the wonderful Institute of Fr. Olivieri - as long as its programme to educate the young African women and instil in them, through the Sisters, the spirit of faith in Jesus Christ would be maintained - could be developed wonderfully and endure. Instead of bringing the young African women to Europe, they could be entrusted to Sisters already established in Africa so that they could be radically instructed in the faith and in domestic skills so as to be formed in such a way that they would be enabled to convert many of their own African companions. Therefore, moved on, always under the guidance of the Sisters, to countries in the interior of Africa, they would become Apostles of their Sisters. Adopting such a programme would have the following advantages:

- 1) the expenses for each young African woman would be reduced because the money required for the journey would be saved [...].*
- 3) Most of those redeemed would remain alive and well and able to operate [...].*
- 4) This great number of redeemed young African women could not only save themselves by living under the guidance of the Sisters in Africa, but they themselves, having all the advantages over the Europeans for **becoming Apostles of their own co-nationals**, could also become instruments who could save the souls of an infinite number of other women...”²⁸*

²⁸ ASFMR: Comboni to Verri. Cairo, February 1866.

Founder by the will of God

It seems evident, from all that he had prepared for the project in Negadeh ²⁹, that Daniel Comboni intended to ask the collaboration of Sisters already resident in Africa “*to direct the African girls so that they succeed in becoming Apostles of their nation on the basis of my **Plan***” (W. 2012). It would be better still, he had specified more than once, if those Sisters might have Arabic as their mother tongue. When, however, in 1866, Monsignor Castellacci had proposed to him the possibility of opening a Missionary Institute for men and for women in Verona, under the auspices of the bishop, he accepted the idea willingly in order to form personally ‘*good women missionaries*’, giving life to ‘*an Institution exclusively suited and most appropriate for the specific needs of the African apostolate*’. (W. 1416)

Obliged by circumstances to suspend, at least for the time being, the Veronese Foundation, but having already planned, in the Autumn of 1867, the return to Africa of no less than sixteen young African women, the Missionary of Nigrizia turned to the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, counting on the ‘*the ties of a most holy friendship*’ (W. 586) which had existed between himself and one of their superiors, Mother Emilie Julien for a long time.

Thanks to the Sisters of Marseilles, in fact, the Combonian Institutes of Cairo, one feminine and the other masculine, were able to come into being contemporaneously since three Sisters had been assigned to the direction of [the institute of] *The Sacred Heart of Mary*. Of each of these, Daniel Comboni himself, compiled a biography in the report which he sent to the Society of Cologne in 1868, specifying that Maddalena Caracassian, the youngest and most promising, was being instructed in “*the Abyssinian, Denka, Bari and Gallas tongues, etc, as well as in medicine and surgery, and, in brief, in all the appropriate subjects that will make her a woman according to the Gospel and according to the needs of our work for the regeneration of Africa.*” (W. 1815)

²⁹ At Negadeh, in Upper Egypt, Daniel Comboni had decided to begin implementing his Plan with a small feminine Institute, assigning three Sisters who could have been either those of St. Joseph of the Apparition or those of the Good Shepherd, and some “*young African women from Verona, who have already been thoroughly grounded in Arabic and in the feminine crafts ...*” (W. 1217: Comboni to Barnabò. Cairo, February 6th 1866)

Daniel Comboni declared himself satisfied, so much so, that he was no longer thinking about a new Congregation of Sisters. Unfortunately, however, as already mentioned above, the General Superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, informed him, only one year later, that not only would she not be able to assign others for the needs of Central Africa, but she also foresaw that she would not even be able to continue with the activity in Old Cairo.

“Shocked by this unexpected letter”, Comboni reminded her on the 30th of March 1877, “I visited many Congregations in France and Italy, but since I did not find any Sisters, I went to Verona where I had the courage to attempt to found a new Congregation of Sisters and I began with two postulants”... (W. 4468).

January 1st 1872: opening of the new feminine convent

The two postulants to whom Daniel Comboni was referring in the above mentioned letter were Maria Caspi and Maria Teresa Scandola, both Veronese.³⁰

Each of them, evidently, was committed to becoming a missionary for Africa even before the Congregation actually existed, thus permitting the Founder to assure the Supreme Council of the *Work of the Buon Pastore*, that there were indeed candidates and therefore it was possible to go ahead and buy the house in Veronese Montorio and also with the actual foundation of a feminine congregation, **“the twin”** of the masculine Institute in Verona.³¹

After the prophetic meeting of November 21st, in fact, all that had been approved by the Superior Council of the *Opera del Buon Pastore*, began to be implemented. That is:

³⁰ For the biographical data of the first Comboni Missionary Sisters, see AMN, 10(2005).

³¹ Costanza Caldara, the second Superior General of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, often referred to the two Institutes desired by Comboni as **“twin Congregations”** (APMR, VI/C2/8/1-2009: personal annotations, 5th booklet, September 26th 1901).

1) On the 8th of December 1871, Luigi di Canossa, the Bishop of Verona, issued a decree of the canonical erection of “*The **Institute of the Missions for Nigrizia***”³² so that, at a later stage, Pope Pius IX could be urged to “*consider the Institute worthy of being bestowed with [...] a special mission for Central Africa, erecting it as Apostolic Vicariate ...*”.³³

2) On the 1st of January 1872, the house of formation for women was also declared open after Daniel Comboni had received, the previous day in Montorio, the ‘*primogenita*’, Maria Caspi. That date is found registered only, at least until now, in the report of the “*general meeting held by the council of the Opera in the Bishop’s house on May 10th 1874*”³⁴, but it is interesting to keep in mind that Luigi di Canossa, writing to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide on the 1st of February 1872 in order to speak to him about the *Rules* brought to Rome by Daniel Comboni, before concluding the letter, asked Cardinal Barnabò:

“I kindly ask your Eminence to obtain permission from the Holy Father to celebrate the Holy Mass and to keep the Blessed Sacrament in the following two Institutes in Verona founded in order to prepare subjects of both sexes for the missions of Central Africa.

1°. In the internal chapel of the Institute for the Missions of Nigrizia in Verona which is consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

*2°. In the chapel of the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia erected in the parish of Montorio, Verona, which is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Mary”...*³⁵

³² See, ACR, A/25/20/2.

³³ APSOGG, vol. 999(1872)507: Canossa to Pius IX. Verona, February 1st 1872.

³⁴ See, ACR, A/25/20/2.

³⁵ AP SOGG, vol. 999(1872)509: Canossa to Barnabò, February 1st 1872.

According to the Annals of the *Buon Pastore*, the Institute was international from the beginning

Planned by Daniel Comboni already since February 1868 (see W. 1559), the Annals of the *Buon Pastore* began to be published in January 1872. The first volume presented, naturally, the *Opera*, the Central Council and the Programme of the Association.

“The religion of Christ”, one reads here, “source of wellbeing and the foundation of civilization for Peoples [...] has not yet been able to establish itself among the barbarous tribes of Central Africa [...]. It is necessary that Europe [...], after having been, thanks to the prodigious strength of the Gospel, saved from the shameful burden of paganism, spread in turn, with new energy its powerful action with the magnanimous aim of bringing to illumination and salvation this most unhappy and abandoned part of the world [...].

*In order to succeed in such a sublime and useful enterprise, it is necessary to organize in Europe all those Works which will be useful for establishing the Catholic apostolate in Africa through the system outlined in the **Plan for the regeneration of Africa**, which is based on the principle of “**regenerating Africa through Africa**.”*

These Works are summarized in the creation of the masculine and feminine Institutes for the formation of missionaries and artisans in Europe who are committed to establishing themselves in Africa. [...]

The pious **Association of the Good Shepherd** is established in Verona with the purpose of setting up in Europe and maintaining these Catholic institutions which aim at preparing personnel for the missions in Africa. The Association is called at the moment to maintain with its resources the following new institutes founded in Verona:

- I. **The Institute for the Missions of Nigrizia** set up in Verona, with the purpose of forming young priests, students of theology, catechists, artisans and assistant brothers for the African apostolate.
- II. **The Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia** founded in Montorio on the outskirts of Verona, with the aim of forming for the African apostolate fervent and able missionary wom-

en, committed to assisting with the important work of the Missions of *Nigrizia*” (p. 8).

*“The generous donations of two pious people”³⁶, one reads on page 18 of the same volume, “have enabled us to open in Montorio, four miles from the city of Verona, a house to form zealous missionary women for the African apostolate; women who will follow in the footsteps and fulfil the functions of the pious women of the Gospel. We have named this house, the **Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia**. It is governed by a wise and pious directress with many virtues and ample abilities of mind and heart, which are necessary for those who wants to live up to such a sublime and relevant mission.”*

“All our trust is in Him who [...] chooses the weakest means to do His work, because He wants to show that he is the author of all good works.”

(Daniel Comboni, May 21st 1871)

For the time being, the name of that ‘pious and wise directress’ whom Daniel Comboni himself went to collect in Padua in January 1872, is not mentioned. In a letter addressed to two ladies in Brescia, both named, Miss Girelli, he wrote only the following:

“The bursar [St. Joseph] in his bounty and wisdom (he has a good heart and his head is in the right place) has inspired the good nun from Padua, of whom you spoke, to consecrate her life to the holy work for Africa, so I went to fetch her and settled her with another postulant in the house of Montorio on the outskirts of Verona. It would therefore be good if the postulant I saw in Brescia could come immediately”... (W. 2796)

Those three postulants: Maria Caspi, who had been in Montorio since December 31st 1871, Maria Teresa Scandola, who entered soon afterwards on the 17th of January at the same time as the ‘directress’ and Angela Rossolani from Brescia who remained, however, only for one month (see, W. 2955) presented themselves as ‘very weak resources’ with which to begin a foundation which

³⁶ These were Luigia Zago and Isabella Zadrich (see W. 2628) known also as ‘*le Peccati*’ (W. 6695).

would become an international missionary congregation. Nevertheless, Daniel Comboni was fully confident in “*The One who chooses the weakest instruments to do his work.*” In the first two aspirants, whom he had accompanied personally, he had discerned the unmistakable signs of an evangelical call, and therefore it was important that he have them with him in Africa, despite the fact that they had only an elementary education and they spoke only their mother tongue.

These were weaknesses which could be remedied. The Formator, whom it seems was Pia Maria Galli,³⁷ would begin immediately.

First of all, however, she had to help the future missionaries to grow spiritually, helping them to fall head over heels in love with Christ for whom they would leave their homeland and their families, willing even, if necessary, to give their lives.

In order to help her in this difficult and delicate task, there were the *Rules*, or at least a draft of these, drawn up by the founder “*after prolonged studies, authoritative consultations and considerable experience and knowledge of the arduous work I have undertaken and is the object of my sleepless nights and deep sighs...*” (W. 2638)

In fact, the allocation of a mission territory in Central Africa, depended on those *Rules*, as well as the decree of canonical erection of the Missionary Institute of Luigi di Canossa (December 8th 1871).

“*I desire first and foremost to see the Rules and the Decree of erection of the new college for the Missions of Nigrizia which has been established in Verona*”. This was the request made by Cardinal Barnabò to Comboni previously on the 7th of September. He therefore specified: “*These need to precede other works done for the good of the people, for their conversion to which you intend to dedicate yourself*”...³⁸

³⁷ It has been impossible to find out exactly, despite all the research carried out, who Pia Galli really was. She was probably one of the Franciscans of the Third Order of the Heremitic Virgins of Padua. The reason why her name does not appear in the archives of the Congregation could be due to the fact that in 1866 the convent was suppressed by the Italian government, after which all the material in the Archives was transferred, partly to the Civic museum in Venice and partly to the state library in Padua. (see APMR, Reg. 59: Notes of Elisea Pezzi relative to research on Pia Galli, March 1978)

³⁸ AP LD vol. 366, f. 789: Barnabò to Comboni, Rome September 7th 1871.

The Rules of 1871-72 and the official announcement of the foundation of the Institute

“The rules of an Institute are always the fruit of long observation of experience. The norms set down by me are the essential summary of the form of conduct to be observed by the missionaries, while I am firmly determined to develop with practice and long experience the most fitting Rule for the Institute to be submitted to the Sacred Congregation for the approval of the Holy See”...

(Daniel Comboni 1870)

The future Pro Vicar for Central Africa, who hoped to be able to present the rules of 1871 to Propaganda Fide before Christmas (see W. 2622), had to remain instead in Verona for some weeks in order to review the text and give it a more juridical form. Therefore, they were new Rules, compiled also with the help of those of the PIME³⁹, that he was able to hand over to Cardinal Barnabo, together with other documents required, in the month of March 1872.

One of these other documents was the “*Report*” written on **March 2nd** about the Institutes in Verona and it contained **the official announcement** of the **foundation** of the Institute of the ***Pie Madri della Nigrizia***. It is worthwhile, therefore, to quote here some important paragraphs:

*“[...] two formation Institutes exist in Verona for both sexes, created on the basis of the **Plan for the Regeneration of Africa** exclusively to serve [...] the Apostolate of Central Africa. They are the following:*

- 1. The Institute of Missionaries for Africa.*
- 2-The Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia.*

These Institutes which operate under the governance [...] of the Bishop of Verona [...] have as their objective to form, by

³⁹ “I hope to be able to pay you my respects and bring you the Rules, which have been immensely useful to me” he wrote to the Director of PIME in Milan on the 3rd of February 1872. (W. 2829: Comboni to Marinoni*).

*means of a sound and solid education, truly apostolic men and virtuous women missionaries so that, after a noviciate lasting over **two years** in Verona **and three more years** in the Houses of Egypt, they may dedicate themselves entirely to the missions in Central Africa.*

*The essential norms these Institutes have set themselves [...], is to select good candidates and to train them in the **spirit of sacrifice** [...].*

*The Missionary Institute deeply inculcates and tries to imprint and plant firmly in the spirit of the candidates the true and precise nature of the missionary for Africa, who must be **a constant victim of sacrifice** destined to working, toiling and dying without perhaps ever seeing the fruit of his labours”... (W. 2884-86).*

One can see clearly at this point that, the new founder is simply re-writing a substantial part of the Chapter X of the Rule of 1871, which in turn, contains the echo of what could already be read in his Report to the Society of Cologne when he talks about the Rule for the missionaries of the Institutes in Cairo. (W. 2489)

This confirms, in case there is a need to, how much Daniel Comboni was convinced about what he had been writing ever since April 1870, and of how the rules that he was writing were a reflection of his life and were inspired by his experience. (see W. 2220)
Now, as he presents them to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide*, he specifies:

“What I say about the male Institute is to be equally practiced in the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia whose novices are educated in the same spirit.”

Handing over these *Rules* to his missionaries, it was the founder’s intention that they would assimilate that “*essential disposition*” of the true spirit of sacrifice “*by keeping their eyes firmly fixed on Jesus Christ, loving him tenderly and constantly striving to understand more clearly, the meaning of a God dying on the Cross for the salvation of souls*”.

“Educated according to these norms,” he added in his Report written on March 2nd 1872 (W. 2892), “our students cannot but become good instruments in God’s hands and his legitimate representatives in this difficult enterprise” of the regeneration of Nigrizia.

How things were proceeding in Montorio

From a letter of Daniel Comboni written from Rome, where he found himself in April 1872, still awaiting the decision of Propaganda Fide regarding the Vicariate of Central Africa, one can discern how, in the house for women missionaries in Montorio, the process of selection which would guarantee suitable candidates for the mission had already begun.

The founder, who was obviously following up the young aspirants personally, replied to the Camillian Father Germano Tomelleri, about his decision not to proceed with the admittance of the third group.

“As for Angela Rossolani,” he wrote on the 24th of April 1872, [...] she begs me with tears, to accept her on a permanent basis [...]. But since she was not only too old, but also not very fit, wanted to eat meat on Fridays and Saturdays and was extremely loquacious, and what is more, inept and incapable of becoming a religious, I ordered that she be sent home. She resisted for a month, but finally, to settle the matter, the Superior decided to read her my letters and she left.”... (W. 2955)

Regarding instead the formator, who had come from Padua, Comboni shared with Fr. Tomelleri, in the same letter mentioned above, that he was satisfied. Always generous when highlighting the giftedness of a person, he wrote:

“Considering how my superior has proved herself, the Bishop, Fr. Squaranti, myself and all who have known her, have come to realize that she is a great woman and I believe that she stands equal to both the Poor Clare, Oberbizer and the Canossian, Nespoli who, according to me, are the most capable superiors in Verona.”

In order to avoid misunderstandings, he immediately added. *“Let us hope that she lasts”*.

Unfortunately, she did not last long, as we shall see, but perhaps it was not entirely her fault. Before 1872 had ended, when Comboni, already the Apostolic Pro Vicar, was in Egypt to prepare his first expedition towards Central Africa, the founder wrote to the Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, evidently referring to the formator, as follows:

“I have no hopes whatsoever that the Pie Madri della Nigrizia present in Verona will be able to take responsibility for a small mission. Those would be better off in the cloister; but for Africa, we need soldiers, like Sr. Giuseppina and Sr. Maria Bertholon”... (W.3111)

However, at this point, it should be underlined that, only relative weight should be given to this affirmation of the Pro Vicar, given the context in which he was writing and which will become clear in the letter which he will write to Mother Julien herself on March 30th 1877.

The Aspirants are transferred to Verona

Daniel Comboni must have experienced his first doubts starting from a consideration of the type of candidates that were presenting themselves at Montorio. In fact, in his letter to Fr. Tomelleri on the 24th of April 1872, he wrote: *“As for the others who presented themselves, they were all poor servants who were trying to escape from hunger, and so I gave orders not to receive anyone. Therefore, there are only the two novices whom I left there [Maria Caspi and Maria Teresa Scandola] who are doing rather well and are happy.*

I will think about getting some foreign postulants who are well intentioned [...]. It is also necessary that I establish the Mother House in Verona, in the city, so that the Superior can examine the subjects”...

Some of the reasons that made it necessary to leave Montorio and ‘*establish the Mother House in Verona*’ are found in the report of *“the general meeting of the council of the Opera del*

Buon Pastore of May 10th 1874". In this report, Fr. Squaranti, the Rector of the Institute for the Missions of *Nigrizia* wrote:

"... that house was: too exposed to contact with strangers, too small [...] too far from Verona, too expensive to run, and the location did not facilitate the possibility of having daily Mass and arranging for other spiritual needs.

In addition, the distance created problems for aspirants and made it difficult for them to have opportunities to inform themselves and to conduct some necessary business. In fact, in a period of nine months, only two young women could be welcomed at the Institute⁴⁰. This is why Monsignor Comboni decided to transfer the Institute to Verona. The greatest difficulty was finding an appropriate place [...]. When the convent of Santa Maria in Organo was offered, one could not have desired for anything better than that, but the process of buying it was fraught with difficulties [...].

I cannot judge whether that purchase was advantageous or not. What I can say is that on the 14th of September, 1872, that little seed was transplanted in this new location"...⁴¹

On the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The transferral of the three aspirants, Caspi, Scandola and Caviola, from Montorio to Verona, took place on the 14th of September 1872, feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

The Annals of the *Buon Pastore* published this news in the following month of December, communicating that "*The Feminine Institute in Montorio has been transferred to Verona to a much more suitable place.*" (p. 3).

⁴⁰ In reality, if Angela Rossolani and Teresa Cavioli who entered in the month of July are also considered, they were four. Only two reached religious profession.

⁴¹ ACR, A/25/22.

The Founder, who had finally been confirmed by Pius IX as the Apostolic Pro Vicar for Central Africa⁴² on the 26th of May, was about to return to the mission. Evidently, he had not wanted to leave until he had settled definitively the house for the Feminine Institute, which was now relocated a short distance from the masculine Institute. It would therefore be easier **for Fr. Antonio Squaranti*** to exercise his double role as Rector of the missionary seminary and ecclesiastical Superior of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

In particular, Fr. Antonio would have been able to monitor more closely the work, as formator of future missionaries, of the ex-sister who had come from Padua and about whom some doubts were beginning to be raised. In a manuscript of Ermenegilda Morelli, we can read, "*Mother Pia Galli from Padua (a Franciscan of the Third Order), was good at giving religious instruction, but not at providing missionary formation. This was a cause of worry for the heart of the Servant of God, but necessity demanded this*"...⁴³

We still do not know from whom, or how, the first rumours which raised these concerns started. What remains documented is only what Daniel Comboni wrote on the 24th of June 1873, to the editor of the "*Voce Cattolica*" of Trent and that is, that the feminine Institute founded by him "*in Verona to form missionary women for Africa*" was getting on "*very well*" as Monsignor, that is, the Bishop of Verona, had written "*and that in a few years*" it would have produced for him "*good missionary women*". (W. 3220)

At this point, it is interesting to have a look again at the minutes of the meeting of the superior council of the Work of the *Buon Pastore* on May 10th, already quoted above. Stanislaio Carcereri, who had arrived from Africa as the Vicar of Daniel Comboni, had also attended this meeting. After having recorded the news about the transfer of the feminine Institute from Montorio to Verona, Fr. Antonio Squaranti had also said:

⁴² See, Annals 2(1872)14-15.

⁴³ APMR, VI/A/5/3-2722: Unedited Notes, p. 3 Cesiolo, 1941.

“There are now eight young women in the house being formed for the mission. To tell the truth, they have not yet reached that level of instruction and perfection required. That is also due to the poor level of their education when they entered and to the lack of teachers [...]. We are hopeful, however, to overcome that obstacle shortly.”

The Search for Another Formator

The information about the *Pie Madri* contained in the above report is very important. This is true especially of the last piece of information because, after a gap year, 1873, in which no aspirants were accepted, it is now reported that in the first half of 1874, four young women entered. In reality, the register of the State of Personnel documents the entrance of only Teresa Grigolini in January. Rosa Zabai entered later, in July. It is possible though, that some other aspirants were accepted. Daniel Comboni himself, who in July 1872 had allowed Maria Rosa Colpo, who was already living in *Santa Maria in Organo* with the *Astori** to enter, seems to confirm this in his report to Propaganda Fide where one can read:

*“In order to cover the needs of the two principal missions, 24 sisters of St. Joseph would be needed. According to me, these are the best missionaries and they are extremely useful to the foreign missions. But it is a Congregation which does not have many members. Knowing this for some years now, has given me all the more reason to found in Verona the Institute of the **Pie Madri della Nigrizia** and to provide it with some income so that it can prepare for me missionaries for Central Africa. It now has a school and educational programmes especially for the daughters of noble families fallen on bad times; and several novices there are preparing for the Apostolate of Nigrizia.”... (w. 3621).*

While the Pro Vicar was writing what we have read above, ‘*the obstacle*’ to which the Report of 10th of the previous May referred, was about to be removed, if we can speak in these terms of the postulant mistress, that is, Sr. Pia Galli. The choice of the ex-sister from Padua, in the end turned out not to be appropriate. Those

being formed, in fact, did not generally have good memories of the time they spent with her. Ermenegilda Morelli, on her first attempt to write the history of the Congregation (1941), was quite benevolent in her approach towards the first superior. Two years later, however, when she was asked to write a first biography of Giuseppa Scandola, she became more severe. In her unedited notes regarding *Mother Giuseppa Scandola and the Daughters of Comboni in Africa*⁴⁴, we can read:

“Mother Pia Galli was not endowed with the qualities required by our founder. They could see eye to eye about the conservation and development of the educational programmes as well as the religious formation of the postulants; but her direction was hard and bitter, more appropriate for a life of penance than for a life of apostolate. She had her own ideas about piety. The 6 or 7 postulants present in 1874 had to be at her disposition night and day. She made them do hard manual work and she also humiliated and mortified these daughters, giving them harsh penances.” (p. 16-17).

Fr. Antonio Squaranti observed this, and most probably tried to intervene. Unfortunately, his correspondence with Daniel Comboni during that period has never been found.⁴⁵ However, everything indicates that he must have expressed the conviction that it was impossible to continue in this way. From what Teresa Grigolini wrote, the straw that broke the camel’s back was the incident in which the formator struck the novice, Maria Teresa Scandola, when a heavy plank of wood slipped from her grip. This happened during the night while building a secret staircase *“which that poor Mother Superior wanted to use”* as an access point to her room without Fr. Squaranti knowing about it. Fr. Squaranti, however, learned about it and, Teresa Grigolini

⁴⁴ See, APMR, VI/SC/9/8-342.

⁴⁵ Unfortunately, *“the correspondence between Comboni and Squaranti is almost completely missing; it would undoubtedly have been the most precious source for documenting his constructive collaboration in the Combonian work, especially between 1872 and 1876 when he was rector in Verona [...] The documentation Comboni – Squaranti it seems, has gone missing and this cannot be remedied.”* [AC, 2(1987)150].

concludes, “*a short time later, that Superior was sent away from the Congregation.*”⁴⁶

The impatience of Stanislao Carcereri

The task of resolving the problem of the Superior of the Feminine Institute was entrusted by Daniel Comboni to his Vicar, Fr. Stanislao Carcereri, who in the Spring of 1874 had to go to Italy.⁴⁷ It is certain that he was in Verona by May, as the minutes of the Superior Council of the Work of the *Buon Pastore*, tell us that he was present at the meeting. After having listened to the report of Fr. Squaranti regarding the feminine Institute, Fr. Carcereri drew his conclusions quickly and the following day, he wrote to Fr. Bartolomeo Rolleri:

*“The Feminine Institute would deserve to be completely suppressed, because it is completely passive and there is no hope of any help for the missions [...]. I will seek a solution with the Sisters of St. Joseph...”*⁴⁸

Therefore, on the same day, without wasting time, he wrote to Mother Julien, proposing that the feminine Institute of Verona should become “*a novitiate of the Sisters of St. Joseph*” asking her to respond “*immediately to the following points: 1 – If the Superior would be willing to come to Verona; 2 - if she could bring with her a Sister qualified to teach in Italy; 3 – what would be her conditions for accepting the Institute with the postulants already present*”. Then he added that, in case she would not accept the proposal, the house “*will be rented or sold*” because it was “*a financial burden...*”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See, APMR, VI/G/4/4g/6-5554 memoir of the deceased Sr. Giuseppa Scandola, not dated. Although she had been removed from her responsibilities, Sr. Pia Galli was not sent away from the Mother House. There are documents which attest to her presence, probably in the community of the *Astori*, at least until 1878. (see, ACR, A/28/20/16-18: Luigi Comboni to Stampais, May 17th 1876; See, ACR A/28/20/1: Rossi, P. – Administrative Report, May 16th 1878 and November 16th 1878).

⁴⁷ See, M. GRANCELLI, p. 220.

⁴⁸ AP SOGG, vol. 1005, f.1455: Carcereri to Rolleri, May 11th 1874.

⁴⁹ AP SC Afr. C. Vol. 8, ff 248-249.

As feedback to what he was doing, Carcereri finally wrote to Rome, and also to Daniel Comboni, on July 3th 1874. Amongst other things, he wrote:

“The feminine institute in Verona is completely lacking vitality. The superior is, heart and soul, the twin of the famous [Caterina] Valerio. She does terrible things, including beating the novices. She is discontent with the Rector and in conflict with Fr. Mainardi*. After the business in Rome, I will also do something for this Institute, if God wishes. The bishop and his Council are not committing themselves, especially in view of the fact that it is a liability. Perhaps I will apply your idea of continuing with the Sisters of St. Joseph. But, I don’t have much time, and much time would be needed...”*⁵⁰

A Petition to *Propaganda Fide*

In the letter quoted above, Stanislao Carcereri does not say whether he had already removed the formator from her responsibilities before he left for Rome. This latter, in any case, was aware that he would be going to Rome to meet with the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, and therefore, also to talk about the situation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

We have to ask ourselves: was it at this point that Sr. Pia Galli felt that Cardinal Barnabò must, in some way, hear also her version regarding the foundation of the feminine Institute?

The letter, dated 18th of July 1874, which reached *Propaganda Fide*, was not signed. Nevertheless, due to its content, it was considered important and it was conserved. In it, we can read:

Most Reverend Eminence,
if prudence forbids me to reveal my name here [...], then charity and friendship persuade me, almost oblige me to quietly present this anonymous mediation in favour of weak young women whose inexperience, or better, feminine timidity, does not permit them to express their feelings and reassure

⁵⁰ AP SOGG, vol. 1005(1874)1460-61: Carcereri to Comboni, July 3rd 1874.

themselves about points which are of vital interest to them. And so, fully conscious of their need [...] I am bringing up this subject.

*In Verona, through the incomparable work of the Pro Vicar for Central Africa, Fr. Daniel Comboni, there is a pious house where some young women who intend to dedicate themselves to the missions of Central Africa are living. **They were received with the promise that in due time, a Congregation would be erected to which they would belong.** [highlighting ours]. This was what they desired and it was also the intention of Monsignor Comboni.*

At present it is common knowledge that the Vicar General of the above mentioned Comboni, Fr. Stanislao Carcereri, is in Rome in discussion with the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide about this same matter. Therefore, I find that this is the appropriate moment to draw to the attention of your Most Reverend Eminence what the young women, as I have mentioned, would not dare to say [...]: some because they are imprudent and are unable to foresee the future implications, and others because they are timid and reserved and would not dare to reveal their fears and concerns. Nevertheless, their relatives reflect on this and they would not like to find them one day unhappy and discontent.

It was therefore considered that erecting the said congregation, as indicated, of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia under the immediate jurisdiction of the male missionaries, on whom they would be exclusively dependent for all matters material and spiritual, it would be necessary that the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, guardian and promoter of the general and individual interests of the missions, would not agree to the erection unless it were based on some positive norms regarding treatment and regulations, etc., from which the male missionary could not deviate or withdraw. In this manner, these generous poor young women would be assured against any abuse of authority which could present itself now or in the future, taking into account their greater or lesser loyalty and integrity, and the different instincts of the individuals in charge; something which happens in every human, even if very holy, Institution. In which case, that is, in case of the contrary, if these good, but unhappy women, because of lack of caution, had entrusted themselves to man, remaining dependant on him, would have no one to defend them and no one to answer for them if they were to encounter vexation and neglect in their spiritual and temporal needs, as the Sisters of

*St. Joseph of the Apparition*⁵¹, who are already there, have, in the conventions stipulated with their legitimate and independent Superiors, and in the same way all the other religious at the service of the foreign missions.

How extensive these norms should be is not for me to define. The sacred congregation of Propaganda Fide in its wisdom and prudence will know better whether or not my first assumption, that is, not to agree on an arbitrary dominance on the feminine Institute, is necessary or desirable, if it achieves approval as such, from the missionaries. When I Insist on this, dare to say it and to recommend it, I am not moved by animosity or jealousy or other base feelings, but rather by my interest in the wellbeing of the Institute to which I profess my sincere attachment and veneration [...]. It is Christian love for those poor daughters, present and future, who, being inexperienced, place themselves at the mercy of others, aiming solely to bring wellbeing to their brothers and sisters in those faraway lands. Therefore, I consider them in need of special guardianship which is lacking now and would continue to be lacking in the event that they be subjected to the sole authority of the male missionaries. From my experience of the world as I know it, I am aware that such things as I have mentioned could actually become reality [...], no matter what might be said. Apart from this, these norms and cautions would be useful without doubt, to the promotion of the feminine Institute, because they would be a guarantee for those daughters, they would calm the relatives who are reluctant to allow their daughters to enter an Institution which is shaky and not properly founded. This is one of the reasons why many of them are firmly opposed to giving their daughters consent. The confessors do the same thing with penitent women [...].

I ask humble forgiveness then for my boldness which is born

⁵¹ In his position as Vicar, Stanislao Carcereri was entrusted by Daniel Comboni to revise the agreement with the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition. These sisters however, had not signed the text presented to them by Carcereri, but they had made some changes which Propaganda Fide had accepted [AC, 1(1987)12–19]. It is interesting to see too, regarding another incident provoked by Carcereri with the Sisters in the Spring of 1874, the letters which the Pro Vicar wrote to Sr. Veronica Pettinati (see W. 3643-45) and to Mother Eufrasia Maraval (W. 3646-52).

of pure intention and detachment. I feel sure that I have not pleaded uselessly for a just and legitimate cause. I therefore hope, that this will be recognized by your Most Reverend Eminence to whom I show reverence.

*Your most unworthy, humble, devoted and respectful servant,
P. M. G.”⁵²*

A Balanced Piece of Writing, Revealing and Foresighted

Until now, no one has been able to decipher those initials which, however, can be referred very well to Pia Maria Galli, because this is what she seemed to be called.⁵³ Stanislao Carcereri seemed to have realized this since he noted in the Camillian diary that she “*compromised herself by writing rash letters to Propaganda Fide*”. In fact, it was precisely for this that he “*settled the female Institute by removing the Superior placed there by Monsignor Comboni.*”⁵⁴

One has to recognize that, in any case, this was a lucid, realistic letter, written by someone well prepared, culturally, intellectually, and truly at the same level, if written by a woman, of the Abbess of the Poor Clares in Verona, as Daniel Comboni had already observed about Pia Galli and of the General Superior of the Canossian sisters. It was definitely from a person who was well informed about the situation and of how it could have developed if Stanislao Carcereri had been responsible for defining juridically the position of the future Comboni Missionary Sisters. The fact that, after more than two years, it was still not known when the Noviciate would begin officially, was certainly not reassuring for those who had the future of the young aspirants at heart.

⁵² AP SC AFR. C, vol. 8, ff. 274r-275v: Anonymous to Barnabò, Verona July 18th, 1874.

⁵³ See, ACR, A/20/16-18: Luigi Comboni to Stampais, May 17th 1876.

⁵⁴ Carcereri, S. *Cronaca dei CC. RR. Ministri dell’ Infermi Missionari Apostolici dell’Africa Centrale* In AC 1-2(1972)78

It is also interesting to observe how the contents of the letter is described as the fruit of an exchange of opinions with the relatives of the future Missionary sisters and with the person directing them spiritually. If one thinks of how Stanislao Carcereri behaved with the Sisters of Saint Joseph, and how he treated Pia Galli herself, one can understand the concern of this latter in view of the possibility that, in the future, in the mission, those young women who were timid and inexperienced, and with whom she felt an affective bond, could find themselves dependent for everything on the '*reverend missionaries*' who could also abuse their power and dominate in an arbitrary way the Feminine Institute.

Whatever the case may have been, that letter, written in detachment without '*animosity or jealousy*', had an effect. Pia Galli, if she was the person concerned, would not be part of the first important step, the beginning of the Noviciate, which started before the end of 1874. But she did at least see, even if only as an observer, the arrival of the new superior and the new beginning of the formative journey of the young women, who may have been inexperienced, but who were also courageous and determined to become true women of the Gospel, ready to give their own lives for a particularly arduous, delicate and difficult mission.

3.

Maria Bollezzoli

“Sr. Teresina Brauneis, Superior of the secular Ursulines, who died this winter, had told me some months beforehand that the Servant of God had more than once urged her to enter among the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, to direct them, but she had always refused. It was she however, who had indicated to him and to Fr. Antonio Squaranti, the teacher Maria Bollezzoli, as a suitable candidate for the direction of the Institute.”⁵⁵

The suggestion, it seems, had been followed up, even if Stanislao Carcereri had made a first attempt with the Canossian Sisters. *“Regarding the Feminine Institute here”,* he wrote, in fact to Fr. Barolomeo Rolleri on the 18th of August 1874, *“I am in dialogue about having two Canossian sisters to direct it. If I succeed, I will be extremely lucky.”⁵⁶*

Evidently, he did not succeed, because on the following 3rd of September, writing from Verona to Daniel Comboni, amongst other things, he wrote:

“4°. I have found an excellent woman who is already a qualified teacher of about 45 years old. She is a secular Ursuline called Maria Bollezzoli and the Bishop has placed her as Superior of the feminine Institute in place of that ‘crazy woman’ [...].

5°. Many young women are now asking to enter the Institute. These include a lady from Bogliacco who has a dowry of 10,000 francs.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ APMR, VI/A/5/3–2722 Notes of Sr. Ermenegilda Morelli on the Foundation of the Institute, p. 1.

⁵⁶ AP SOGG vol. 1005(1874)1459.

⁵⁷ AP SOGG vol. 1005(1874)1468–69: Carcereri to Comboni, September 3rd 1874.

According to the *Memoirs* of the Institute however, Fr. Carcereri should have said: “*We have found*”, because, before him, it was Fr. Antonio Squaranti who “*had gone to Bollezzoli to explore what plans there were for her.*”

Prudently, Fr. Antonio brought up the topic “*in a roundabout way*” speaking of Monsignor’s Comboni’s work for the mission in Central Africa and of the Institutes opened in Verona to prepare personnel [...].

Maria Bollezzoli did not understand or even suspect where these beautiful things that Squaranti was saying would end up. Finally, Father revealed the need that the Institute of Sisters had for a Superior [...]. Maria Bollezzoli listened with increasing wonder, and when she understood clearly [...] she humbly presented her objections.

[...]. Father did not lose hope and he did not resign himself either. On the contrary, he felt a greater esteem for her [...]. Finally he left, with the intention of returning to try to insist with her [...].

In fact, not long after that, Reverend Fr. Squaranti tried again and this time, he was not alone but in the company of the Reverend Fr. Stanislao Carcereri [...], who was passing through Verona at the time [...]. They found her less against the idea and less reluctant than the first time.

Various people who had the new Institute at heart [...], tried to persuade her to accept. Nevertheless, she also wanted to hear the opinion of someone whom she greatly esteemed and who knew her very well. This was Reverend Mother Serafina Oberbizer of the Poor Clares in Verona [...].

The decisive moment however, was her encounter with the Bishop of Verona who called her to his residence and convinced her to finally submit.

In fact, Maria Bollezzoli entered the Institute on September 6th 1874 and she remained.⁵⁸

Finally, a happy choice had been made. “*I believe that the Lord has blessed us in the new Superior*”, Fr. Squaranti would write

⁵⁸ Diary (*Cronaca*) p. 1. **Maria Bollezzoli**, as first General Superior of the female Combonian Congregation, has already been discussed in several biographies (see AMN, 10(2005)6–7, so we feel that there is no need to repeat here what is already written. We shall recall only, when appropriate, some meaningful details.

one month later to Squaranti when he was in Cairo – “*Things are taking a different direction from the past. The novices have taken to her well and they work and study in great harmony*”... ⁵⁹.

December 8th 1874: official beginning of the noviciate under the protection of Mary Immaculate

The news, which was very important for those who had been awaiting it now for the last three years, was given ample space and published through the *Annals of the Buon Pastore* ⁶⁰. The novices presented to receive the religious habit and the Rules, were eight: Maria Bollezzoli, Maria Caspi, Giuseppa Scandola, Teresa Caviola, Maria Rosa Colpo, Teresa Grigolini, Rosa Zabai. The eighth one has not yet been identified. Concetta Corsi had entered in Verona just about one month previous to this. But the Register of Personnel reports that she was admitted to the Noviciate only on the following 16th of June.

Maria Bollezzoli instead, even although she had entered only three months earlier, had decided to become a full member of the new Congregation ⁶¹ and therefore she joined that first group who would finally be able to begin the canonical period of the Noviciate.

“The Feminine Institute of Verona”, the Annals informed, “is equal to the male Institute [...], It is placed under the guardianship of Mary, the Most Immaculate Mother of Nigrizia. In order to better deserve her celestial patronage, the feast of the Immaculate Conception was chosen to celebrate a ceremony which would be both pleasing to her and profitable for the peoples of Nigrizia [...].

⁵⁹ AP SOGG vol. 1005(1874)1470–72: Carcereri to Comboni. Cairo, October 11th 1874.

⁶⁰ See, Annali, 10(1874)42-45.

⁶¹ Strangely enough, however, she who began the practice of the Register of Personnel in the Institute, “*in the name of the Most Holy Trinity*” did not include her own data, omitting any mention of herself.

“Functions such as these”, they commented, “are always moving for those whose minds understand and whose hearts can feel them. But these functions were made both splendid and solemn by the presence of two eminent people: that is, The Most Reverend Monsignor Luigi Marchese of Canossa our Reverend Bishop and the Most Reverend Monsignor, Stefano Crosatti, his Vicar General.

In the morning, they conducted the vestition ceremony, according to the method used in the other religious congregations, in the chapel of the Institute.

Then in the evening, the Bishop gave his solemn blessing with the Blessed Sacrament and [...] and he gave a short sermon to the novices of which we are giving a summary. Having praised highly the state of life which they had embraced, he numbered the dangers and the difficulties of the apostolic life, and he pointed out, therefore, the necessity of a solid formation. He said that the two virtues which they needed to cultivate were an angelic purity and charity that would urge them to heroism and sacrifice”... (p. 42-45).

Receiving the Rules

On the day of the vestition, the *Diary (Cronaca)* adds on page 1, that the Novices also received the Rules of the Feminine Institute, prepared by Fr. Antonio Squaranti⁶² and approved temporarily by the Bishop of Verona. On the first typewritten page, not numbered, of the document, of which a photocopy of the original is conserved in our Archive⁶³, it is written:

⁶² Since the text of the Rules of 1871-1872 had not been approved by the Holy See, and the harmful intervention of Stanislao Carcereri [see AC, 1(1987)24-29] had delayed “*sine fine*” the approval, the Bishop of Verona had evidently authorized a temporary Rule for the Pie Madri della Nigrizia.

⁶³ See APMR, VI/A/6/3-3001.

Constitutions and Rules of the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Verona

*Compiled by Fr. Antonio Squaranti, Superior
of the Institute, Corrected by Cardinal Luigi
di Canossa, Bishop of Verona
(The corrections are indicated in capital letters)*

8 December 1874

On the same page of the typewritten document, there is a handwritten note of Sr. Ermenegilda Morelli, which specifies: *“The spirit which dominated the Institute in 1899 was that of the Rules for the Masculine Institute of the Missions of Nigrizia – with the signature: Fr. Daniel Comboni, M. A.”*

The meaning of that note seems clear: even if the *letter* of the Rules adopted, temporarily, was not the original one, the spirit which had continued to be lived in the Feminine Institute was that of the Rules of 1871. It is worthwhile, therefore, quoting here at least the first two pages of *Introduction* where we can read:

“I- Origins of the Institute

The institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia was founded in Verona at the beginning of 1872 by Monsignor Daniel Comboni, Pro Vicar of Central Africa with the approval of Monsignor Luigi Marchese di Canossa, Bishop of Verona. There were two motivations which led to its foundation: 1° the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, who had been availed upon until now, were unable to provide sufficient personnel to meet the needs of his Missions in Africa. 2° He judged that Religious who were educated for that sole purpose and whom he could assign freely according to the needs of the mission, would be more beneficial.

II - Its Aim – Name - Spirit

- 1° The **aim** of the Institute is to nurture and form able missionary women to assist the male missionaries in the apostolate of Nigrizia⁶⁴ In order to achieve this aim better [...], they consecrate themselves entirely to the work of the regeneration of Central Africa.
- 2° The **name** which the **Pie Madri della Nigrizia** bear reminds them incessantly of the merit of their vocation, the qualities they must have and the virtues which they must acquire.
- 3° The **spirit** of the Institute is a spirit of abnegation, of hard work, sacrifice, charity and zeal for the wellbeing of the Africans. [...].

III – Its Organization and Government

[...]. The Institute is subject to the authority of the Bishop, pro tempore, of Verona, according to the norms of the canon law. It is directed by the Rector of the Male Institute for the Missions and it is governed internally by a superior who is assisted by a secretary, a novice mistress and a mistress of studies”.

The *Introduction*, partially quoted above, was followed by two chapters subdivided in various articles and finally, according to Elisea Pezzi*⁶⁵ a *Conclusion*, which in the photocopy in our Archive, is not included. At the end of the document, Luigi di Canossa signs his approval ‘*ad experimentum*’ on the 8th of December 1874.

⁶⁴ The aim presents itself here as rather limited, because no mention is made of the principal purpose for which Daniel Comboni wanted the Sisters, and that is, for the formation of “African teachers and indigenous female missionaries” (W. 2872, 2575).

⁶⁵ See, E. Pezzi, 1981, pp. 98-99.

The perplexities of the Founder

We do not know exactly how Daniel Comboni, who had been in Africa since the autumn of 1872, may have reacted to all the novelties that were coming about in the new Congregation of 'his' Sisters. Unfortunately, we have not found the letters which must have been exchanged between him and the new Superior, Maria Bollezzoli. In fact, it is difficult to think that the founder did not comment, in any way, on the news of the vestition of the first eight novices that had taken place and made no comment to Maria Bollezzoli about the Constitutions which had been given to them.

What we do know, at least for the moment, is that he was satisfied with the appointment of Sr. Emilienne Naubonnet as the provincial superior of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Khartoum. Sr. Emilienne had been the novice mistress of *almost all* (W. 3711) of the Arab sisters, among whom was also Virginia Mansur, whom the Pro Vicar appreciated very much, both for the preparation they had received and also for their great commitment to apostolic activities in the Vicariate.

This was how he wanted the missionary sisters, and we cannot rule out entirely the hypothesis that the Rules prepared for the Sisters in Verona raised within him some doubts.⁶⁶ The formator, since she came from the Ursulines, could no doubt guarantee the transmission of the spirit of Angela Merici whom he appreciated very much and sometimes suggested [as an example] to his missionaries⁶⁷, but she did not have the precious missionary experience of the French Sisters. Then why not, since it was just beginning, make proposals of collaboration to those who had already lived an apostolic experience which

⁶⁶ He would write to Fr. Sembianti on the 12th of February 1881, "*Change the organization in the Rules for the Sisters because*", he explained, "*the rules were made for the house and not for the work*" [of the mission]. (W. 6473).

⁶⁷ "*I pointed this out to him (Fr. Rolleri) and I sent him a copy of two passages of the Life of Sr. Angela Merici written by Girelli in 1871. Please read it, dear rector, because it is good for you, for me and for all the missionaries*" he wrote to Fr. Sembianti on the 13th of July 1881. (W. 6836-37, see W. 7153)

had been put to the test in Sudan, and count on the numerous vocations coming from Arab countries?⁶⁸

The letter which Daniel Comboni wrote to Propaganda Fide is also, without a doubt, meaningful:

“I need more sisters in order to develop this work [...] he began, speaking about the presence of women and he continued, “The Congregation of St. Joseph must supply me with a suitable number of healthy sisters, for here there is much work and toil; otherwise the few sisters it has already sent me will get too tired [...].”

*The Sisters of Saint Joseph granted to me by the Mother General are very few and insufficient for the needs of the mission. But this Institute has the Arab element indispensable for Africa and which is not present in my Institute of the **Pie Madri della Nigrizia**, founded and nurtured by me in Verona under the auspices of my dear Monsignor Canossa. Under certain conditions which I would demand, I would be prepared to merge this Institute (about which Monsignor Canossa has just given me excellent news) with that of the sisters of St. Joseph, also with a view to avoiding any conflicts that might occur through human weakness between two Institutes of Sisters working in a single mission.”* (W. 3884, 3887, 3892)

Less than one month later, the Founder wrote again about the same topic:

“In my last letter I mentioned to your Eminence an idea I had of making over to the sisters of St. Joseph, on certain conditions, the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia which I established in Verona with the consent of Monsignor Canossa and with great expense; but I shall never reach a final decision without first submitting the project to the lofty wisdom and judgement of your Most Reverend Eminence, with strong reasons either for or against it”... (W. 3902)

⁶⁸ On the 20th of May 1874, the General Superior of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition had given a negative reply about taking responsibility for the future Pie Madri della Nigrizia, explaining to Cardinal Franchi, “Fr. Stanislao has offered to us today that Institute which consists of eight postulants, but the conditions which he proposes are contrary to our Constitutions and we have refused.” (AP SC Afr. C., Vol. 8, f. 251).

Meanwhile in Verona, the family increases

The ‘*excellent information*’ received by the Bishop of Verona regarding the feminine Congregation, most probably consisted in, although we have no way of verifying this at the moment, the arrival of new aspirants whom Fr. Antonio Squaranti, given the responsibility entrusted to him by the Constitutions, considered well to accept. Less than a month after the first vestition ceremony, Angela Grego from Verona entered followed a few weeks later by Delfina Vercellino from Turin. Then on the 9th of March two sisters, Maria and Vittoria Paganini from Asiago entered. Maria Bollezzoli, herself a novice, felt the need of a secretary, and therefore, on the 19th of March, Teresa Grigolini was given this responsibility. The following month, the cousin of Teresa, that is Teresa Marini, entered, while in the month of June, Concetta Corsi, Angela Grego, Delfina Vercellino and Maria and Vittoria Paganini prepared for their vestition. The enthusiasm in the house at Santa Maria in Organo must have been considerable, especially after the news, towards the end of the year, that the Founder would be coming back to Europe, and so the feast would be complete.

“This business which is so important for the Vicariate will be a cause of great anxiety to me until it is decided.”

(Daniel Comboni)

More contained and anguished instead, were the feelings of Daniel Comboni. On the 10th of October, 1875, he wrote to Cardinal Franchi, *“Now I ask you for a grace; and I beg your Eminence to hear me, if this is God’s will. I pray to your bounty to deign to grant me the permission to go to Cairo and Europe for the following very serious reasons and for the good of the Vicariate in Central Africa [...].”*

In Verona, as I wrote to you, I have an Institute of Sisters for Africa, founded by Monsignor Canossa and by me, and there are many there who are already quite ready for Central Africa. But I cannot decide whether to make over the Verona Institute to the Sisters of St. Joseph or to have my sisters of Verona come separately to the Vicariate, until I have first spoken at length with the Bishop of Verona and finally submitted his decision to

your Eminence [...]. This business which is so important for the Vicariate will be a cause of great anxiety to me until it is decided"... (W. 3945-46)

The card which, on the 31st of December 1875, Daniel Comboni addressed to his cousin Faustina, who had left the Vicariate to return to Italy and begin her noviciate among the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, was very significant.

"I have received all your letters until the 26th of November, the day of your departure from Berber. Among all those who fought me in those terrible years, my dear Fr. Bortolo Roller was the most dogged and I forgive him with all my heart. Do not talk to him or to anyone about these storms. Despite all this fighting, I have the consolation of seeing the Vicariate going ahead well. I can say that it is a miracle of the Sacred Heart. I do not in the least fear hell; I know everything; and although the pitiless war has gone on a long time, yet with the grace of God I shall win, and God will be glorified. Saints and scoundrels have fought me. But the works of God have to be opposed. And I am happier than ever and as strong as death." (W. 4010-11)

We will not be Sisters of St. Joseph...

"After having seen... that the Sisters were more disposed to being daughters of the Institute in which they had been consecrated, and given the indecision of the bishop who does not like to exert pressure on people, I decided not to make any innovations for the present"... (W. 4472)

On the 26th of March 1876, Daniel Comboni finally reached Verona after more than three years of absence. At *Santa Maria in Organo*, he was awaited, with a certain trepidation, especially by Maria Bollezzoli who would be meeting him for the first time in her capacity as the person responsible for the formation of the future Comboni Missionary Sisters.

She certainly would have had many things to say to him and to ask him, but she would not have been blind to the fact, if she had not actually been informed about it, that the attention and the appreciation of the Pro Vicar seemed to be directed more towards the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition. Probably, Daniel Comboni was seeking in this way to present arguments capable of convincing the Superior of Verona of the necessity of a fusion between the two Institutes. Perhaps his approach was also due to the fact that Maria Bollezzoli, from what one can understand from a short letter written to Faustina Stampais written five days beforehand⁶⁹, was not enthusiastic about the French sisters.

Unfortunately, we are not in possession of any document which indicates the conclusions reached before the Founder left Verona again bound for Rome.

On his part, however, he seemed quite decided to proceed with the fusion of the two Institutes and this can be seen from what he wrote to Mother Emilie Julien on the 8th of April 1876:

“I have developed my plan to entrust the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia entirely to you and to establish it (the Congregation) in Verona”... (W. 4074)

A week later, however, in the *Report* addressed to Propaganda Fide, when he mentioned the ‘*three Congregations*’ from which, ‘*as from three cenacles*’ the workers of the Gospel went out ‘*to exercise their apostolate in the abandoned countries of Central Africa*’, the Pro Vicar indicated as the first cenacle, the Institute in Verona with its two colleges, one for men and the other for women.

“Since its foundation, the institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia”, he specified, “has accepted twelve novices⁷⁰ who, guided by the excellent superior who currently guides them, have gifts and qualities most suitable for the missions of Central Africa”... (W. 4115–16)

⁶⁹ See, AMN, 8(2004)74-75.

⁷⁰ The twelve novices, apart from Maria Bollezzoli were: Caspi, Scandola, Colpo, Grigolini, Zabai, Concetta Corsi, Grego, Santa Corsi, Vercellino, Maria and Victoria Paganini and Marini.

**June 10th 1876:
a definite sign of improvement**

“The Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia opened by me in Verona, and which has already welcomed 15 young women, will not fail to constantly provide subjects for the mission in Central Africa.”

(Daniel Comboni, 29th of June, 1876)

The Register of Personnel, which from the 10th of June 1876 makes a note of those who enter, reveals to us that the situation in the feminine Institute of Verona was finally unblocked. On her part, Maria Bollezzoli informed Faustina Stampais a few days beforehand so that she could get ready.

“Today is the first of June,” she wrote, “the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. How much we should hope from that heart which has loved us much! [...]. In a few days, I will have the joy of seeing you again. In the meantime, get ready to do the will of God”...⁷¹

The will of God, which Daniel Comboni had always sought to know, especially in important and delicate moments for the work entrusted to him, seemed to be that of “*not making any change*” regarding the sisters, thus permitting the Pie Madri della Nigrizia to remain and develop by themselves. Without a doubt, it is interesting to know which criteria he used to reach such a conclusion, which we find in the letter of march 30th 1877 addressed to the Superior General of the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

At a certain point he wrote: “*You ask me what my intentions are regarding the Sisters; if my sisters of Verona will replace the Sisters of St. Joseph in Central Africa and you invite me to speak frankly and be sincere [...].*”

It should first of all be noted that [...] the Vicariate of Central Africa is larger than all Europe and twelve times the size of France [...].

⁷¹ AMN, 8(2004)76.

The Sister of Charity in Central Africa does as much as three priests in Europe and this century of persecution of the Catholic Church [...], is the century of the Catholic woman.[...].

*For this reason, given the enormous size and importance of my Vicariate, given the mission of the Catholic woman in this century, **I am proud to have founded the new Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia in Verona**, which, among all the works I have founded, is of great importance and has produced healthy results.*

[...].

When you had the immense charity to grant me Sr. Giuseppina and the other Sisters for Central Africa, my first thought was to introduce your institute in Verona, giving it my convent and to suggest to my novices that they become religious of St. Joseph of the Apparition; to join mine with yours under the direction of one of the best superiors and to summon several of your Arab sisters from Syria [...].

I kept this plan secret for a year and then consulted Fr. Pasquale [Fiore] and Fr. Paolo [Rossi] ...

After being informed that there were twelve or thirteen novices in this new Congregation who were ready to make their vows, I ordered the superior, Fr. Antonio Squaranti not to have the novices make their vows until I arrived in Verona [...]. I also knew that the majority of my novices were very happy and were only waiting for the desired moment.

Afterwards, seeing that the number of the novices had increased to fifteen, I ordered Fr. Antonio not to accept anyone until my arrival in Verona, which caused Fr. Antonio disappointment and tears.

After considering everything [...], given that the Sisters were more disposed to being daughters of the Institute in which they had been consecrated, given the indecision of the bishop who does not like to exert pressure on people, I decided not to make any innovations for the present. I will always have the time to merge them when I see more clearly and am certain that the matter can be achieved with the full adherence of my candidates and the Congregation of St. Joseph"... (W. 4464-72).

The first Professions

“15th of October 1876; First religious profession in the presence of Monsignor Comboni”.

This very brief piece of news is found only on the first page of the *Diary (Cronaca)*⁷² which does not even list the names, or the number, of the first novices admitted to religious profession. The *Register of Personnel*, on the other hand, informs us, on page 10, that Teresa Grigolini professed “on the 15th of October 1876 and was elected Vicar”. This means, obviously, that the first to profess had been the superior, Maria Bollezzoli as the ‘*Memoirs*’ will later testify.

“The First Professions took place in the chapel of the Institute on the 15th of October 1876. One cannot express, neither the holy satisfaction which flowed from the heart of Monsignor Comboni on this occasion, nor that of the Sisters who, with souls overflowing with joy, were wedded to Jesus Christ.

They, and first among them, Maria Bollezzoli, thus headed the large group of Sisters at the service of Nigrizia”... (p. 16).

It was an extraordinary day, however, which had been prepared for since the previous month of June, when the Founder, while passing through Verona for some days, finally took the decision to respect the desire of ‘his’ sisters which was to continue to belong to the Institute of Verona. The result of that encounter was a deeper reciprocal relationship of trust and esteem between Daniel Comboni and Maria Bollezzoli. This latter, in fact, on the following 24th of July, confided to Faustina Stampais:

“What consoled me” after Fr. Antonio Squaranti’s⁷³ departure for Cairo, “was a letter from our beloved father, Monsignor, written in the most affectionate way, which I was happy to receive yesterday, the 23rd [...]. When you arrive, I will read it also

⁷² The *Annals of the Good Shepherd* in fact, did not publish anything for the simple reason that they had not been printed for many months. (W. 4602)

⁷³ On the 21st of July 1876, Fr. Antonio Squaranti, had been called to Rome by Daniel Comboni, who ten days later, sent him urgently to Cairo to see what was happening due to the Camillians.

to you because I had it read in the dining room to the joy of all the novices...”⁷⁴

Yearly vows, but a red cord

“Yes, I desire a little order in the Institute, but I desire it not for myself, but for the novices, so that they may dispose themselves well to their mission, so that they may be able to take themselves to those hot torrid regions stripped of themselves and ready to sacrifice their lives for the redemption of the poor Africans...”

(Maria Bollezzoli, 18th of August 1876)

The vows which the first two novices had pronounced on the 15th of October 1876, were only, by explicit will of the Founder⁷⁵, yearly vows. In recompense though, the Crucifix which the missionaries received was hung on a blood red cord, as prescribed also in the Rule of 1897, which had finally been approved by the Holy See.

The meaning of that cord was extremely clear, and Daniel Comboni had already summarized it in the famous Chapter 10 of the Rules of 1871. “*I desire missionaries and sisters who are truly holy*” he would repeatedly explain to those responsible for formation, “*without false piety, because in Africa one needs direct, but bold and generous souls who know how to suffer and die for Christ and for the Africans.*” (W. 6486)

Maria Bollezzoli had adapted herself from the beginning, ready to carry out her responsibility with the utmost faithfulness. In fact, Daniel Comboni was satisfied with her.

⁷⁴ AMN, 8(2004)78.

⁷⁵ “*My sisters pronounce vows for one year, which are then renewed annually. On the other hand, I do not want to have this Institute approved by Rome until it has experienced at least 10 years of mission in Central Africa.*” (W. 4473)

“My Mother Superior in Verona is preparing Sisters for the apostolate of Central Africa and always preaching to them thus: “You must be ready to die every day for Jesus and for Africa; you are destined for slaughter; I envy your fate, which I hope to share with you one day”... (W. 5734)

4.

In Africa with Bishop Daniel Comboni

“My work, which has emerged completely unharmed from this raging storm and from this huge conspiracy undertaken using diabolical measures from Africa to Cologne in order to defeat me and destroy me forever, will rise again stronger and more prosperous and will continue its course through the ages, enlightening with the light of the Gospel the vast Nigrizia, stopping only at the port of eternity with the glorious Church of Jesus Christ. May Jesus be praised!”

(Daniel Comboni, 8th of December 1876)

1877 marked a truly magical moment, one could say, for the very young congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. Already before the end of the previous year, in fact, the founder was aware of sufficient elements to believe that the obstacle of the very painful dispute with him provoked by the Camillians⁷⁶ had been overcome. Therefore, he was just waiting for an official word from Propaganda Fide to be able to take up again the work of his beloved mission.

As always, he would not have left again alone. According to him, the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia of Verona* were ready (W. 4378) and therefore, he had only to establish who from among the young sisters would join the new expedition.

The first result, still partial, of his choice became known to all on the 19th of March, the feast of St. Joseph, 1877, when the second religious profession took place and three more *Pie Madri*, Maria Caspi, Giuseppa Scandola and Rosa Zabai consecrated themselves forever to the cause of Nigrizia.

⁷⁶ See, *Positio*, pp. 647-693.

This time, the Founder had not been able to be present because he was in Rome, awaiting to receive the *official nomination as bishop*.

This event was now ‘*most certain*’, he confided to his friend Fr. Francesco Bricolo on March 23rd 1877. “*But it continued to be delayed because of the usual proverbial slow pace, not always appropriate, of Rome [...]. “However, I have been promised”, he added hopefully, “that all my affairs will be addressed at the General Congregation of April”... (W. 4459)*

Instead of April, he had to wait until the following July 2nd when finally the Plenary Congregation of Propaganda Fide pronounced itself in his favour. On July 13th, Cardinal Franchi himself wanted to give the long awaited news to Luigi di Canossa who immediately thanked him, also in name “*of Fr. Squaranti who*”, he added, “*united with all the male and female fledgling missionaries held a great feast for the promotion of their leader, and they animated each other to work all the harder under him for the greater glory of God.*”⁷⁷

Even the Superior and the vicar go to Rome

“Fr. Squaranti and the Superior and the Vicar of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia are here in Rome. My Cardinal was happy. Tomorrow, after the consecration, I will present all of them to the Pope.”

(Daniel Comboni, 11th of August 1877)

At the feast of his Episcopal ordination, not one of those who had waited, suffered and had been anxious could be missing. The celebration, which had been organized for the 12th of August in the Pontifical Urban College, and was presided over by the Prefect of Propaganda Fide himself, was attended by *many illustrious personalities, both religious and lay. Among these, many Prelates,*

⁷⁷ See, M. GRANCELLI, p. 311.

*Archbishops, Superior Generals of Religious Orders and His Excellency the Minister of Belgium to the Holy See stood out.*⁷⁸

“The day after his consecration”, Grancelli remembered, “Monsignor Comboni left for Verona and arrived on the 14th and was welcomed at the station by his father; all the members of the Institute and friends and acquaintances [...]. It is impossible to describe the hearty welcome which had been prepared for him”... (pp. 317-18)

Maria Bollezzoli also wrote down her impressions of her stay in Rome made possible for her and for Teresa Grigolini by the Episcopal consecration of the Founder. *“On that occasion”, we read in the Memoirs, “the two Pie Madri della Nigrizia were presented by the Founder himself to the Holy Father Pio IX, who praised their vocation and encouraged them to work for the conversion of Nigrizia. He comforted them with his blessing which he extended to the entire Institute. The Audience with the Vicar of Jesus Christ, the visit to the sacred monuments, which are numerous in Rome, impassioned all the more Maria Bollezzoli to live out the duties of her office and later, in conversation with the sisters, she liked to remember the beautiful impressions she had recorded.*

On return from Rome, the Memoirs concluded, she had to immediately make all the necessary preparations for the first expedition of the Sisters in Africa”... (pp. 16-17)

Two more religious professions followed by departure

Since Daniel Comboni intended to leave again with at least five of ‘his’ sisters, the preparations for the departure took place at the same time as the preparations for the religious profession, recorded in the Register of Personnel, of Concetta Corsi and Vittoria Paganini which took place on the 8th of December. Rosa Zabai, instead, who was already 34 years old and came from the same parish as Maria Bollezzoli, would remain in Verona to help.

⁷⁸ ANNALI, 17(1878)5-6.

On the 10th of December, everything was ready for the departure of the expedition which was composed of: five sisters, six brothers, three priests, one of whom was Fr. Antonio Squaranti himself, and the Apostolic Vicar who was finally returning to Africa as bishop. The official send off from the Church in Verona, during which the missionaries received the Crucifix, took place on December 10th in the parish of St. Thomas “*where his Eminence, the Cardinal di Canossa, cofounder with Comboni of these missions, desired to give splendour and brilliance to the sacred function [...]. At the end of the Mass, His Eminence began to sing the Veni Creator and all the people, who were deeply moved, joined in. Then his Eminence blessed the missionaries and hung the missionary Crucifix around their necks in order to remind them that they were called to carry to the People the name of Jesus*”...⁷⁹

The departure of the Bishop and the Sisters from Verona would take place two days later, that is, on the evening of the 12th of December. The first stage foreseen was Rome, the second Naples, where the entire group would board for Alexandria in Egypt.

Last farewell at the station of Verona

One can read further, in number 17 of the Annals, “*How many hearts were moved by that departure. How many tears of tenderness were shed. Particularly moving was the separation of Comboni from his elderly Father who accompanied him to the station. The son was asking his parent’s blessing, and the father was asking the blessing of the bishop [...] It was a very moving scene which caused the many onlookers to feel ecstatic. The father, in embracing his son [...] exclaimed, ‘My God, I have only one son and I give him to you with all my heart; and if I had many sons, I would consecrate them all to you for your glory and for the good of the souls redeemed by you.’ Meanwhile, the Bishop of Claudiopoli exclaimed, ‘My God, I am leaving my father whom I might never see again... but I would leave 100 fathers if I had them to serve you, my heavenly Father and to do your will.’ Saying*

⁷⁹ ANNALI, 17(1878)23-24.

this, he kissed his father and throwing himself onto the train, he allowed it to carry him where God willed” (pp. 23-24).

Daniel, although he could sense it, did not yet know how difficult that will would be...

At the school of the Father

With the departure from Verona on the evening of the 12th of December, the most important moment of their specific preparation had begun.

In the end, it was the Father who was their guide. He was totally available to share with the ‘novices’ the precious experience he had accumulated over many years of mission. His every gesture and word were lessons in history and geography and especially in human relationships. They were lessons that these ‘daughters’ would never forget. They were not speeches and conferences. Daniel Comboni started from life, from the realities they were living; Rome with all its history which was visited on the 13th, the visit, which in the end, never took place, to Pius IX, who would die a few days later, and which was replaced with a visit to Propaganda Fide instead; the journey from Rome to Naples on the 14th of December; the final departure the next day ‘on board the grand and majestic *Erebe*’...⁸⁰

From the diary ‘on board’

We can continue to read in the diary of Fr. Antonio Squaranti, *“In the dining room, we had already recited together the prayers pro itinerantibus et navigantibus and at the moment that the propeller began to work to turn the prow, we were on the deck. How beautiful it was to see our group gathered around in a circle with joyful faces, joking and making merry as if going to a feast! [...]. Joy was in the air, and it was as if each of us had not a thought in the world. Nevertheless, a shrewd observer of our faces with*

⁸⁰ A. SQUARANTI, Diario, p. 1.

expressions of gaiety would have also picked up our inner thoughts of sadness; the sadness of those who are about to abandon their country perhaps forever. How can one leave one's native land, where there are many memories and affections, relatives and friends, aware of the probability of never seeing them again without feeling in the depths of one's soul sadness and pain. (pp. 5-6)

Sr. Teresa Grigolini also wrote: *"We have been at sea for four and a half days and on the 19th evening, we happily docked in Alexandria. Having arrived at the close of the day, our Fathers thought it would be better to spend the night on board and to disembark the next morning. From the port of Alexandria, we went immediately to the station in order to travel to Cairo. It took us six hours by train. When we arrived [...] we found our missionaries who were waiting for us together with the Sisters of Marseilles"...*⁸¹

The importance of social relations

This stopover of the travellers in the Egyptian Capital, which was necessary in order to allow the leader to prepare for the new expedition towards Central Africa, lasted for about one month and Daniel Comboni could not have made better use of it.

Having returned as bishop, responsible for a Vicariate that extended over all of the Egyptian part of Sudan, and even beyond, he knew how important it would be to return to Khartoum with all the credentials necessary to be able to implement both the assignment entrusted to him by the Holy See and the Plan which he himself had proposed. Since he had to move in Muslim territory, and having decided to fight to the bitter end against the trafficking of slaves, he knew how important it would be to create alliances rather to create enemies.⁸² For this reason, as soon as he reached Cairo, he hurried to take all the steps necessary which would facilitate his personal policy which, it seems, was successful.

⁸¹ AMN, 12(2006)20: Grigolini to relatives. Cairo, December 1877.

⁸² Fr. Antonio Squaranti noted with admiration in his diary, *"I am of the opinion that if social relations were sufficient to make a mission successful, no mission in the world would be as successful as ours"* (p. 13).

In those days, Comboni wrote to Cardinal Franchi, *“I do not wish to conceal from you [...] the enthusiastic favours I received from all the general Consuls of Austria, France, England and Belgium and especially from the Ministers and the Pashas, and from His Highness the Prince, the heir of the Khedive and minister of the Interior of Egypt, who gave me two most powerful firmans [decrees] signed by him: one for His Excellency, Gordon Pasha, Governor General of the Egyptian properties in the Sudan [...] and the other for all the Pashas, Mudirs and governors between Cairo and the sources of the Nile, whom the Prince orders, in the name of the Khedive, to protect the Catholic missions and to assist me in all my desires and needs.*

But the most benevolent welcome I received was from His Highness the Khedive of Egypt, who was kind enough to converse with me for an hour and a half, during which time he asked me numerous questions about Central Africa, about many of the governors and about Gordon Pasha, telling me clearly that my opinion and advice would be precious to him...” (W. 5027-28)

Evangelization and civilization, without proselytizing

In the same letter of the 19th of January 1878 cited above, Daniel Comboni wrote further; *“the Khedive ended his words by thanking me for my sentiments and my zeal in striving for the good and civilization of Central Africa.”*

Ismail Pasha, as a good Muslim, could evidently not say any more than this to a Catholic bishop. Leopoldo of Belgium, instead, was more explicit, even if still reticent when, in relation to the African International Association founded by him for the abolition of slavery and the trafficking of Africans, *“he believed it useful to limiting himself to declaring that its scope was to evangelize and to civilize, and not to Catholicize, Central Africa”...* (W. 5021).

This was also obvious enough: Leopoldo of Belgium was a Sovereign and not an evangelizer. For the bishop, however, at least three things were clear and had to be kept in mind by the missionaries:

a) In Muslim territory only civilization could be talked about⁸³, in their case, therefore, schools and hospitals, since the Khedive was determined to bring Egypt and Sudan itself to such a level and to ensure that after the opening of the Suez Canal, it would not make a poor impression when confronted with Europe.

b) With the tribal leaders to be found in the areas which had not come under Arabic influence, it was possible to begin a dialogue, as had already come about with the Cogiur Kakum (see W. 3961), in view of a preparation for the proclamation of the Gospel.

c) With the members of the various Geographical Societies, who were generally Christians and were interested in opening communication up to the sources of the Nile, evangelization, as well as civilization could be talked about.

This last group, in fact, followed attentively the movements of Bishop Comboni, who evidently did not hide from them his plans. On the 29th of January 1878, for example, the lawyer, Federico Bonola, secretary of the Egyptian Geographical Society, wrote to Manfredi Camperio, founder and director of the *Esploratore*:

“This morning, Monsignor Comboni, bishop in Central Africa, left Cairo with fifteen missionaries for his headquarters in Cartum.

The illustrious prelate is taking with him also five sisters and ten workers, who will be distributed in the stations of Berber, Cartum and Obeyda and others, which in his untiring zeal, he intends to establish in the regions of the white Nile and the Lakes.

He will also re-establish the mission of Gebel Nuba which had begun well, but had had to be abandoned due to the violence and cruelty of the Egyptian government. Monsignor Comboni is not only a missionary inspired by religious zeal, he is a worthy man, a man of genius, who seeks and works for civilization and we wish him long lasting results. In all the missions he establishes a hospital, a technical school, an experimental agricultural plot of land. These are the true arms by which the primitive peoples of Africa will be redeemed.

[...].

⁸³ G. ROMANATO, in his *L’Africa Nera fra Cristianesimo e Islam*, reminds us that Mohammad Ali himself (d. 1849) the first Viceroy of Egypt, had no difficulty in allowing Catholic priests to enter Sudan. “*The only absolute limitation regarded the obligation not to proselytize amongst Muslims*” (p. 67).

Monsignor Comboni will travel the Nile to Corosco on the dhabia Alina, the same one which took Gessi and Matteucci. From there, he will travel by camel directly to Cartum, thus avoiding the long and troublesome river journey from Wadi Halfa to the capital of Sudan.

For those who are curious, I will add that the sisters are young, and two are very beautiful, and if beauty is an incentive for attracting others to new life and civilization, his sisters will work wonders”...⁸⁴

It was important to form an apostolic community of brothers and sisters

We do not know how much of this the Founder commented on, from the beginning, also with the young Sisters. In the very few pieces of writing that have come down to us from the Sisters and which have been preserved, and which are related to that period, only an interesting excursion to the Pyramids⁸⁵, which took place on the 31st of December 1877, and a pilgrimage, two days later to the ‘tree of Our Lady’, followed by a quick tour of *Guglia di Eliopoli*, the remains of what used to be a great city, are mentioned.

One thing, though, is clear in all the letters, including those of Daniel Comboni: the great attention he always had at all times during the journey to ensure that his ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ would truly feel like ‘brothers and sisters’, as did the disciples of Jesus, and as a consequence, would form a true *cenacle*, an apostolic community capable of witnessing those human relations which make the ‘*kingdom*’ already present in human history.

After the painful experience just lived, which, unfortunately, was only a prelude to what was still to come, Daniel eluded himself that he would be able “*with the grace of God to eradicate the weeds and form a mission of true instruments of God who would*

⁸⁴ From: *Positio*, pp. 575-577.

⁸⁵ See, AMN 7(2004)32 and 12(2006)21.

promote His glory."⁸⁶ Therefore, he felt reassured and deeply consoled to see *'the life of paradise'* lived by the female group.

He confided to Mrs. Stella Grigolini, the mother of Teresa, when he wrote to give her his condolences on the death of her husband, *"these five daughters live a heavenly life. I have not seen a single cloud. They love each other more than sisters would. They take turns helping each other. The pleasure of one is the pleasure of the other. Teresa's wishes are their wishes. Their interests are God's interests [...]. Teresa is a true daughter. She is my consolation and Fr. Squaranti's too; and all fired by the same spirit, we seek nothing more than to save souls and do our duty."* (W. 5077-78)

The first African community of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* at Berber

*"After sixty one days of travelling, 48
on the Nile and 13 through the desert, we
have all reached safe and well and happy,
the place designed for us by the Lord"...*

(Concetta Corsi, April 11th 1878)

The *place designed by the Lord* in this case was Berber. Situated on the banks of the Nile and with a river port, the city allowed easy access to Khartoum and for this reason, the Apostolic Vicar had thought he could leave there, temporarily, the five young missionary Sisters who had not been able to spend the acclimatization period in Cairo, which prudence and experience suggested necessary.

The journey from Cairo to Berber, as Concetta Corsi had informed Maria Bollezzoli, had required all of two months and it had been quite varied and eventful. The first stage, from Cairo to Aswan, passing through Minia, Assiut, Negadah and Luxor had been covered in 32 days on the Nile. From Awan, after a stopover of

⁸⁶ AP SC, Afr. C, vol. 8 ff. 734-737: Comboni to Franchi. Cairo, January 19th 1878. See, AC, 1(1997)37.

four days, they took the train to Scellal and had then reached Korosco by river. It took them a few days to obtain the camels necessary and then they began their journey through the desert of Atmur. On the 30th of March, they finally reached Berber.

From Verona, Maria Bollezzoli had been able, somehow, to follow everything, thanks to the letters which the young sisters sent in turn quite regularly. The first to write after their departure from Cairo, was Giuseppa Scandola who, on the 2nd of February 1878 informed *“we find ourselves in the middle of the Nile, with very little space, lacking in everything necessary, but nevertheless, we are happy, well and in perfect harmony”*...⁸⁷.

Nine days later, it was the turn of Teresa Grigolini, the sister responsible for the group, who mentioned the accident with the boat; *“we are all enjoying good health but [...] as you will have heard from the Reverend Father Squaranti, our dhahabia got punctured as the anchor was thrown in Minia [...].*

The governor of Minia declared that it would not be prudent to continue the journey in that boat, and that is why we have stopped here waiting for the Lord to provide for us again”...⁸⁸.

Just after arriving in Aswan, it was Concetta Corsi who wrote, commenting on the death of Teresa Grigolini's father:

“After a month of navigation, we happily arrived in Aswan, where we found your precious letters which we really appreciated. I would like to say many things about our journey until now but [...] I will only tell you that we are all well and that our journey would have been happy enough [...] had we not received the sad news of the irreparable loss that our good Mother experienced [...]. To tell the truth, we lived some very painful days. Nevertheless, that Lord who never abandons those who turn to him, especially in moments of affliction [...] brought calm after the storm and enabled our disconsolate Mother [...] to generously offer to the Almighty her anguish and her sorrow in such a way that all admired her”...⁸⁹

⁸⁷ ANNALI, 21(1880) 45–46: Scandola to Bollezzoli, February 2nd 1878.

⁸⁸ AMN, 12(2006)24: Grigolini to Bollezzoli, February 11th 1878.

⁸⁹ AMN, 10(2005)77: Corsi to Bollezzoli. Aswan, 24th of February 1878.

On the 15th of March, before leaving Aswan, it was Vittoria Paganini who sent a last greeting to the mother superior:

*“Thank you, dear mother, for the most affectionate letter; thank you so much for the noble and generous exhortations expressed in it. Oh, I will remember you always and I will make every effort that they might bear fruit in my soul. Dear Mother! How you could guess well the things that your daughters would experience during their journey on the Nile, on seeing the ancient Thebaid (Hermitage), on recalling the life lived here by many illustrious penitents. Those who conserve in their hearts a sense of piety and faith cannot be other than edified and deeply moved.”*⁹⁰

Another detachment more painful than the first

*“On the 4th, we split up, with much regret,
from our beloved superiors”...*

(Concetta Corsi)

The ‘*beloved superiors*’ were, evidently, Daniel Comboni and Antonio Squaranti. In Berber, where the bishop was returning for the first time after the last, difficult encounter with Stanislao Carcereri on the 1st of January 1876, the *Pie Madri* were able to enjoy the reassuring presence of the Father for some more days. After this, on the 4th of April, another farewell was necessary.

Concetta confessed, *“We can tell you, dear Mother, how much, even though we were prepared, we suffered because of the separation from our Fathers, after they had looked after us and were very paternal towards us all throughout the journey...”*⁹¹.

In fact, Teresa had written to Fr. Antonio Squaranti, *“know, dear Father, as much as we suffered when we experienced sep-*

⁹⁰ AMN, 7(2004)34: Paganini to Bollezzoli. Aswan, 5th of March 1878.

⁹¹ AMN, 10(2005)80: Corsi to Bollezzoli. Berber, 11th of April 1878.

aration from you, we were given equal strength by the Lord to bear up in peace.

After the last greetings given with our handkerchiefs from the veranda of Fr. Domenico Noja, we went to Church immediately and we lit two candles before the Blessed Sacrament and we prayed with fervour to the God of mercies to be gracious to them. We prayed also for ourselves and we persuaded ourselves that prayer uttered in faith soothes sorrow and fills one's heart with a sweetness that cannot be understood unless one has experienced it. Oh, how good is the Lord! He knows how to measure the Cross according to our strength. How sweet to sacrifice for His love!"...⁹².

Difficult to live in Berber exactly as in Verona

On the 16th of May 1878, Teresa wrote, "*Beloved Mother, in your last letter [...] you asked me regarding our style of life and how we distribute our time. You would be right to scold me for not having informed you about this already. But listen to me [...].*

Today, it is one month since we arrived in Berber. We spent the first week working nonstop to organize as best we could the caravan which left for Khartoum. We spent the following week cleaning [...] and making something new for the Church which, [...] to tell you the truth, [...] is no more than a barn. Therefore, during the day we did no more than recite the usual prayers in the morning and the evening and then we ate and worked continuously. After that we had 5 or 6 days of tranquillity but they did not last. Sr. Vittoria got a terribly strong fever and then Concetta followed her, and one by one, we were all obliged to take to our beds [...]. Thanks to Providence, however, we are all well enough now [...].

And you know, Mother, why I am writing to you all these details? I'd like to tell you, right from now, we have nothing stable,

⁹² AMN, 12(2006)25–26: Grigolini to Squaranti. Berber, 7th of April 1878.

*though we have done whatever we could. It is only since a few days ago that we have felt well and we have used these to finish our grey dresses, etc, which we put on for the first time the day before yesterday...*⁹³.

*Now, as soon as we can, Teresa promised, with the help of Providence we shall put things in order. I believe, however, that it will be impossible to live here exactly as we did in Verona because here it is excessively hot and at certain hours of the day [...] it is impossible to work"...*⁹⁴.

The interesting apostolic ‘method’ of Marietta Caspi

On the 27th of August, 1878, still from Berber, the ‘*primogenita*’ wrote, amongst other things, what follows, to Maria Bollezzoli.

“Now I want to tell you something about these ladies from Berber [...].

*When they come to visit us they leave their **marcubi** [sandals] outside the door and enter barefoot because, they say, this is a way of showing respect. Once they have entered, they remain standing. They kiss our Crucifix and then they sit down on the ground in such a ridiculous, and I would say immodest way, with their legs crossed. They are full of fancy goods, that is, a thousand sorts of ornaments. Their dress is very simple, because most of them just have a large white sheet or shawl called a **tob**, and they wear nothing else except a cloth across their hips. They wear two necklaces made with coins, one around their necks and the others around their heads and the money or trinkets dangle over their foreheads. Around their ankles, they wear*

⁹³ It is not clear why Teresa passed over the question of the grey dresses with an ‘etc’. The information given to us by M. Grancelli is interesting. He writes: “Comboni had thought of a light coloured habit for the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* since it would be very hot in Africa. According to what Fr. Luigi Bonomi told me, he had bought some material in France for this purpose. But then the black habit was adopted.” (p. 221). Evidently, that material had been taken to Berber where Daniel Comboni must have suggested that the young sisters should use it.

⁹⁴ AMN, 12(2006)29–30: Grigolini to Bollezzoli. Berber, May 16th 1878.

silver or metal bracelets, according to what they can afford.

*You will not believe, dear Mother, that I have made some friends. But it is true. And do you know how I made my friends? When these Berber ladies come to see me, sometimes I speak through gestures and sometimes I spit out a word of Arabic, then one in Italian and we start laughing and then we drink coffee. They like such ease and cheerfulness and they are always very happy and don't want to leave. When they come to visit and I am not there, they try to find me and start asking 'where is that Sister who laughs? And they are not happy until they see me. When we go out walking with the African girls, these friends look at me and smile and they greet me saying **Taibin**? How are you? And I exchange greetings with them. When the visit is over and they leave our house, they cover themselves completely with their sheet, even their faces and only their eyes remain uncovered"...⁹⁵.*

This is a letter which is of great interest, when we consider that Berber was a city with an entirely Muslim population and in the mosques, among other things, the man who would become the future *Mahdi* * had just recently been completing his religious studies and bringing to maturity his concept of *Mahdia*.

The request of Gordon Pasha regarding the Sisters

"Governor Gordon himself, impressed by the charity spread by the Pie Madri della Nigrizia continues to insist with Comboni because he wants to have them sent to Fashoda with the Denka and to Ladò in Gondocoro and elsewhere..."⁹⁶

In 1877, Charles G Gordon*, talented English army official was nominated by the Viceroy of Egypt, Ismail, Governor General of all of the Sudan, and he had the specific task of fighting slavery.

⁹⁵ AMN, 10(2005)20–22: Caspi to Bollezzoli. Berber, 27th of August 1878.

⁹⁶ AP SC Afr. C. Vol. 8, f. 717: Paolo Rossi to Simeoni. Verona 14th of November 1878. Typewritten copy in ACR A/1/8/1.

Daniel Comboni confided to Cardinal Franchi, *“the Vicariate’s position should, for this reason alone, be considered improved; as the latter is English and his religion is Protestant [the previous governor had been a Muslim] anyone can see that the exercise of apostolic activity will be far freer in the future, and therefore more effective”*.

He added, *“That is all the more to be hoped, both because he has always professed and he professes with me, an intimate and sincere friendship. In addition, his relations with my missionaries are also based on real esteem and friendship”*... (W. 4501-02).

In fact, the Apostolic Vicar, who had encountered the Colonel frequently during the period in which he held the position of Governor of Equatoria (1872-76), made a point of seeing him as quickly as possible.⁹⁷

On his part the Governor made no secret about preferring the Catholic missions to the protestant ones (W. 5204) so much so that he made the request to have some Sisters for the government hospitals in Sudan.

Daniel Comboni confirmed, when writing to Mitteruntzner on the 26th of September 1878, *“Gordon Pasha [...] favours me greatly and always comes to see me. He has decided to entrust the government hospital in Fashoda (capital of the Shilluk territory) to the Verona Sisters who are at present in Berber. Then, when the new sisters come, he will give them the hospital of Ladò (near to Gondokoro) [...]. He has understood that by letting the Sisters run the hospitals, three quarters of the soldiers who would otherwise die can survive [...].”*

The Verona Sisters will go from Berber to Farshoda next October. And a government steamer will go especially to Berber to take them to Farshoda. Next week, I shall send Fr. Squaranti there to prepare the houses provided by the government. Fashoda is exactly opposite the point in the Dinka tribe that Fr. Beltrame had chosen for the Mazza Institute. Thus, there and in Lado, we

⁹⁷ Fr. Antonio Squaranti wrote in his diary on the 2nd of March 1878, *“At two in the afternoon, Governor Gordon passed through Aswan on his way to Cairo. We paid a visit to him on board. He welcomed Monsignor with grace, and fearing that in Korosco a sufficient number of camels could not be found, he telegraphed the person responsible asking him to do everything he could to provide them.”* (pp. 25-26).

shall need the Dinka and Bari dictionaries and grammar books which you have so much merit for compiling [...]. Before the end of 1879 we will be established at the Nyanza lakes on the Equator”... (W. 5389-90).

Instead...

“Most eminent and reverend Prince,
By the last post, I received your esteemed letter of the 14th of August in which you command me to defer my expedition to the Nyanza lakes for the time being. You were good enough to present just and prudent reasons, and I comply with God’s will, of which I have clear knowledge through my Superior. I have discontinued preparation for the expedition in the assurance that God will provide for these poor souls in the best way possible.

As long ago as 1873, when I pushed the Vicariate’s activity towards Jebel Nuba [...] I have reflected, prepared studies, and followed all the phases of the various travellers who followed in the footsteps of Speke, Grant and Baker, and also learned about the different languages and peoples spread over the Equatoria region. But Fr. Squaranti and I are content in the knowledge that we are doing God’s will, which is so clear, and we continue with our work”... (W. 5392-93).

When Daniel Comboni found himself obliged to write the letter cited above to Cardinal Simeoni, who had once again intervened in a heavy handed way, obliging a change of plans and the abandonment of dreams held dear for years, Fr. Squaranti had been in Berber for about a week⁹⁸.

The bishop had thought of sending Fr. Antonio away from Khartoum while he was still on time “*as a precaution and to save his skin*” given that he had not been able “*to acclimatize in Cairo*” (W. 5406). The city, in fact, after a great famine which had

⁹⁸ We can read in the diary of Squaranti himself, “*On the 16th of September I left Khartoum by boat and I arrived in Berber on the 22nd*” (p. 35).

dried up the Sudan because of drought the previous year⁹⁹ and then the floods which had followed, had been struck by a terrible epidemic which in October 1878 had been raging for a month, striking all the members of the mission, except the leader, and causing death to more than half of the population.

Now, the measures taken for Fr. Antonio seemed to have been effective if Daniel Comboni, in the same letter of the 24th of October could add: *“the care of those excellent Pie Madri della Nigrizia, founded by me in Verona and directed in the noviciate for their apostolic life in Africa by Fr. Squaranti himself, strengthened him and put him on his feet again.”*

He also had *business to attend to* in Berber

It was not by chance, however, that the Bishop had sent his ‘right hand man’ to Berber instead of to any other place. Writing to the cleric Milone, on the same day, the 24th of October, Daniel Comboni explained:

“I am alone in ensuring the spiritual welfare of Khartoum. I have to be bishop, Parish Priest, Curate, Superior, administrator, doctor and nurse [...]. As for Fr. Antonio Squaranti, my general Administrator and my right hand in all the great work for the redemption of Africa, in view of the extraordinary epidemic and fevers in the Sudan due to the unusually abundant rains, I have sent him to Berber where he had some matters to deal with.” (W. 5429)

What the Founder does not specify, obviously, was that the matters concerned were ‘matters of the heart’ which had come to light in the life of the ‘*primogenita*’, Marietta Caspi¹⁰⁰ in Berber. As he would have reminded Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti at a later date, that sister, *“good, obedient and very gentle [...], if she had not been guarded with an iron hand, she would have fallen into*

⁹⁹ In fact, many appeals had been made by the bishop of Khartoum to “*Catholic charity for the frightful famine in Central Africa.*” (W. 5148) in order to subdue to some extent the very tragic effects.

¹⁰⁰ See, AMN, 10(2005)22-23.

the web of a scoundrel of a doctor”... (W. 6657). Thanks be to God, the combined action of the vigilant attention of the Father from afar, that of the Sisters near her and the fraternal help of Fr. Antonio who arrived on time, the situation returned to normal without even the shadow of evil happening. On the contrary, it would be a lesson of life for everyone.

The Death of Fr. Antonio

“Most Eminent and Reverend Prince,

I am writing few lines to you because I am worn out with fevers, troubles, efforts and a broken heart. The Work of God, by the adorable law of Providence, must come into being and prosper at the foot of Calvary [...].

Although I am physically exhausted, by the grace of the Heart of Jesus, my spirit is sound and thriving; and I am resolved, as I have been for 30 years (since 1849), to suffer all and give my life a thousand times for the Redemption of Central Africa”... (W. 5522-23)

Thus began the letter with which Daniel Comboni shared with Cardinal Simeoni all his torment at the very unexpected and painful event of the death of his ‘*pious and good Fr. Antonio Squaranti*’ who for seven years had been the Rector of the Institutes in Verona.

Comboni explained, “As soon as I became aware that the rainy season was ending, I sent him to Berber on a visit so as to remove him from the threat of the epidemic since it was his first year in Central Africa. But when he learned, after 40 days that he had been in Berber, that all the priests in Chartum were sick with fever, and many personnel from the mission had died, and I was the only priest still on my feet [...], in order to come to my help, he left Berber by boat, and reached Chartum fifteen days later more dead than alive because in the last four days of the journey he had been struck by illness and fever. The care that we had for him over the next twelve days was all in vain. Filled with charity and fully resigned, he went to his eternal rest, leaving me in great desolation”...

One can read in the *Annals of the Buon Pastore*, which dedicated twenty pages to the event¹⁰¹; That was really a GREAT MISFORTUNE, which “when the news of it arrived in Europe, grieved all and he was mourned all over the world”... (p. 44)

From Berber to Khartoum

“On the 7th of January [in reality it was the 7th of December] Monsignor came to Berber with a boat to collect us and take us to Khartoum”...

(Teresa Grigolini, 3rd of January 1879)

Now that he remained alone, but perhaps also because he wanted to give the sad news to ‘his’ Sisters personally, Daniel Comboni took advantage of the steam boat provided for him by the Governor to go to Berber and collect the young Sisters and accompany them to Khartoum.

“Since the Mother Superior of Kordofan died last August”, he had then explained on the following 2nd of January to Cardinal Simeoni, “and only three Sisters were left there, two of them have asked their Mother General for permission to leave for health reasons. For more than three months they have been in possession of the obedience to leave for Marseilles [...]. Only four sisters of St. Joseph will be left in the Vicariate, which is why, to meet the urgent needs of the of the two important missions in Khartoum and in the Kingdom of Kordofan, on the advice of the Superior in Khartoum, I have sent for the four sisters of St. Joseph [...]; and I have assigned to Kordofan the five Pie Madri della Nigrizia [...], who were in Berber and whom I brought here 20 days ago on the steamer given to me by Gordon Pasha. I shall send them to Kordofan as soon as I can get hold of some camels.” (W. 5526)

With the departure of the Sisters, the missionary station of Berber, which had been opened for the Camillian Fathers in April 1875, was practically closed. It would have been able to remain open if things had gone differently.

¹⁰¹ See, ANNALI, 18(1879)42-62.

“After the death and the serious illness of the missionaries, sisters and European lay coadjutor Brothers,” the bishop wrote to Propaganda Fide in Lyons on December 31st 1878, “I provisionally closed the two Berber Institutes [...] except for the chapel and a few rooms for the mission caravans arriving from Cairo [...] and one or two missionaries from Khartoum will go to Berber twice a year for the spiritual needs of the few believers in that city.” (W. 5502)

This decision, it seems, was taken on the advice of Fr. Antonio Squaranti, who during his stay in Berber, reflected on that house as *“useful only as an outstation, but not as a mission”*, because as it was a Muslim area through *“and through”*, it was *“extremely insensitive to the work of evangelization.”*

In fact, his opinion was to *“distance also the few Christians who had transferred there for fear that they too would be contaminated by Islam”*.¹⁰²

Another lesson on missionary life during the journey on the Nile

Given that, through the generosity of Gordon Pasha, he had a boat at his disposition, the Founder took advantage of it to visit all the villages of his Vicariate which were along the banks of the Nile. Not only did he feel the need of being present personally in those areas where drought and famine, floods and successive epidemics were raging, but he was also anxious to see the reactions of his ‘novice’ missionaries.

“From Berber to Chartum”, he referred later to Propaganda Fide, “I visited several villages with the Verona Sisters, as well as the cities of Shendi, Mothamma, etc. I found more than half of the population dead, the rest like walking skeletons, and naked women like corpses who were feeding themselves on grass and hay seed. I distributed grain and money, not without having baptized a number of children and babies of both sexes in articulo mortis”...

¹⁰² R. GAGLIARDI, Antonio Squaranti, p. 22.

This must have seemed like an apocalyptic vision especially for those who were seeing it for the first time and who knew that it might not be the last time. Nevertheless, with understanding and support from the bishop, the young Sisters coped well. Before concluding the letter, the Father could add the following: *“the five Veronese Pie Madri della Nigrizia, far from being daunted are, in fact, giving even me courage”*. (W. 5525; 5529)

Only God could measure, in fact, how much he needed such encouragement. On the same day that he wrote to Cardinal Simeoni, the explorer, Pellegrino Matteucci also wrote, from Zula (Abbyssinia) what follows:

“I have here in front of me a letter sent to me on the 28th of November by Daniel Comboni. In the letter, there is a tone of profound sadness. One can tell that it is written by a man who has an iron will, but who is close to being crushed under the weight of many misfortunes. He resists and fights, but in twenty years of Africa spent in fighting against overbearing difficulties, he has lost the sturdy and robust constitution which his young age would give him the right to possess”...¹⁰³.

Destination El Obeid

The five Comboni Missionary Sisters remained for one month in Khartoum. This gave time enough to send word to the French Sisters in El Obeid that they could withdraw now, taking advantage of the departure of Fr. Luigi Bonomi*, who had been recalled to Khartoum, in order to travel together.

“I will leave tomorrow for Khartoum with the Sisters of St. Joseph”, Fr. Luigi in fact wrote to a friend on the 15th of January 1879, *“who will be substituted by our Sisters from Verona, whom I hope to meet on the way.”¹⁰⁴*

¹⁰³ See, A. CAPOVILLA, 1930, p. 270.

¹⁰⁴ ANNALI, 18(1879)63.

It would seem, however, that they did not meet. Having left on the 14th of January from Khartoum, the bishop informed two days later, *“on a magnificent boat given to me free of charge by the remarkable kindness of H. E. Gordon Pasha, Governor General of the Sudan. They will sail up the white Nile as far as Duem, where they will proceed on camels obtained for me by the above mentioned Gordon Pasha, to the capital of Kordofan”...* (W. 5538)

It was at Duem, where the obligatory stopover was prolonged more than had been foreseen, that Teresa Grigolini wrote to Maria Bollezzoli:

*“We left Khartoum already 13 days ago and we still find ourselves only halfway to our destination, and we cannot proceed since we fear that the government will take the camels from the riders and send them to Darfur¹⁰⁵ as it did to several others during this bad year. For eight days now, we have been taking shelter in a reed hut, where the strong wind from the North has every opportunity of passing in and out as it pleases. If we were all in good health, it would be a blissful enjoyable experience, but unfortunately there is always one or the other of us who has fever and so we suffer a great deal. And since we are camped on the unhealthy banks of the White Nile, quinine, laxatives or any other kind of medicines are of no use to us. We have sent a telegram so that the Governor General of the Sudan might give strict orders to the Sheikh of Duem to provide the camels we need for the journey. But six days have passed, and so far, there is no response”...*¹⁰⁶.

The bishop had also sent a telegram with the aim of soliciting the camels necessary to permit the young Sisters to reach El Obeid.

He explained to Cardinal Simeoni, *“These are gruelling journeys.”*¹⁰⁷ *I heard today that they left Duem on the White Nile on the*

¹⁰⁵ In Khartoum, there was another route that crossed the desert and arrived at the Sultanates of Darfur, passing by El Obeid. However, this was not used by the missionaries.

¹⁰⁶ ANNALI, 18(1879)69 -70.

¹⁰⁷ Even if those journeys were very gruelling, especially for those making

29th of January last with 17 camels and are bound for Teiara. I therefore telegraphed the Pasha of Kordofan to send camels to that town to transport them to El Obeid, since from Duem to Teiara they could only find camels worn out by hunger, who haven't a breath of life in them." (W. 5576)

The Pie Madri della Nigrizia finally arrived in El Obeid on the 10th of February 1879, where they had been expected by the young Superior, Gian Battista Fracarro [Fraccaro] who had travelled with them from Rome to Berber.

Three days later, Teresa Grigolini was able to write to the Mother in Verona, *"We have finally arrived at our destination, but how many privations we had to bear in order to succeed. Two or three of us, sometimes all five, had fever. We found ourselves for 13 days in the desert with such a shortage of water which would make even the courageous afraid! Then, every now and again, thorns from the ground would attach to our clothes and even on camel back they would not only tear our clothes, but would prick our hands and faces as well. How much patience we needed to have! God was gracious to grant us enough. May he be praised and blessed forever."*

Before the end of her letter, however, the young and still inexperienced superior asked the Mother: *"Pray for me, because the weight on my shoulders of being superior is a very serious business unless God helps me. We of the masculine and feminine Institutes count more than fifty and in our house we cook for all. Pray, pray a lot for*

*Your most affectionate daughter
Sr. Teresa Grigolini"*¹⁰⁸.

them for the first time, they were not, however, dangerous, in the sense that it might be prudent to permit five Europeans to undertake them. There was in fact, a tribe, called the Ababda, which was entrusted exclusively by the Khedive to oversee these journeys in the desert. In exchange for benefits they received, these Bedouins were obliged to *"guide and protect the caravans, provide camels and guarantee security along the road."* (G. ROMANATO, p. 45).

¹⁰⁸ ANNALI, 18(1879)70-71.

Immediately there is an emergency situation

“On the 13th of January I received your esteemed letter N.1, in which you let me know that the Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph, after a decision by her Council, has decided not to send any more Sisters to my Vicariate, and instead, to recall those who are still there.” (W. 5669)

This kind of communication was certainly not the ideal for lifting the morale of who, only a few days earlier, had confessed that he *“crushed by sadness, difficulties and mortal anguish, exhausted by strong fever which had just subsided, could no longer sleep, eat or walk.”* (W. 5665)

Nevertheless, he replied to Cardinal Simeoni, who had communicated to him this above mentioned message:

“Although I am very upset by this decision, I am nonetheless far from feeling discouraged or dispirited, for I am certain that the Sweetest Heart of Jesus which beats for unhappy Africa will provide help otherwise”... (W. 5670).

To tell the truth, such news was somehow to be expected *“because of the long silence maintained during the past year by the Mother General”*, the letter continued, *“who every day became justifiably more and more upset by the death of the last two excellent Sisters”*¹⁰⁹ *and by the turn she saw things were taking, I clearly realized that it would end like this because recently, no Sister has offered herself for Central Africa.”...*

Immediately after this, with an extraordinary final praise for the work undertaken by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition in his Vicariate, but also with some explanations relevant to the matter at hand, Daniel Comboni was using the words ‘the

¹⁰⁹ The last two had been Arsenia La Floch, Superior in El Obeid and Enrichetta Ray, who had died in the months of August and September 1878. Daniel Comboni, however, still in the same letter cited above, wished to clarify, with *Propaganda Fide* that not all the nine sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition who had died in his vicariate, had been victims of the severity of the climate. (See W. 5673-75)

End' with regards to the dreams he had long cherished; that is, of seeing 'his; sisters' work alongside the French Sisters. In fact, only a short time after the *Pie Madri* had arrived in Berber, the Bishop was already taking for granted that collaboration, as can be seen from the letter which he wrote on the 17th of May to Jean Francois des Garets:

"I have temporarily settled in Berber five Sisters of the Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia [...].

They are the vanguard of the new Institution destined to exercise its apostolic activity in the many regions of Central Africa. May God alone be their inspiration and their guide! The Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia in Verona shares the apostolic efforts of the woman of the Gospel in the Vicariate of Central Africa with the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition of Marseilles whom I have designated for Khartoum and the kingdom of Kordofan, where they have worked for several years with admirable self-denial and dedication and made enormous sacrifices." (W. 5160-62)

The collaboration of the male and female missionaries belonging to the two different Institutes was, in the end, part of the **Plan**. Daniel Comboni had always desired "*ardently to procure true apostles for the vast mission*" entrusted to him, even if "*they belonged to other ecclesiastical or religious bodies*'.

Once again, instead, he would have to learn at his expense that "*priests and friars [and Sisters] find it hard to agree in the work of a single vineyard.*" (See, W. 3012-13)
Nevertheless, he would have liked to try...

The Pie Madri in Khartoum

“After all, the Lord will arrange things for the best for His glory and for the good of Nigrizia, which He certainly wants to save.” (W. 5682)

Teresa Grigolini had been only two months in Kordofan, where she and the sisters had been enthusiastically welcomed (See, W. 5681), when she received the news that at least two of the *Pie Madri* would have to pack their suitcases again and be ready to return to Khartoum. The explanation of this change of plan is found, as we shall see, in the letter which Daniel Combni would write to Cardinal Simeoni on May 26th 1879.

On the previous 10th of March, the bishop had left the capital of Sudan still feeling confident that everything would be resolved. A week beforehand, on the 3rd of March 1879, he had written two important letters. In the first, already quoted, after having commented with Cardinal Simeoni, the decision of the Sisters of St. Joseph to leave the Vicariate of Central Africa, at a certain point he added:

“1°. I am in absolute need of communicating with your Eminence and of opening my heart to you on many points which concern the good of this important mission.

2°. Following the death of my incomparable general Administrator, Fr. Antonio Squaranti, who was the right hand of my work both in the Vicariate and in Verona, I have become aware of many important matters to be settled and negotiated [...].

3°. My health, [is] undermined by the extraordinary efforts and anxieties and therefore I am taken to task by Gordon Pasha’s good English doctor [...] To recover I need rest and the help of the thermal waters in Europe” (W. 5678).

In the second letter, addressed to the new Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, the bishop wrote:

“His Eminence, the Cardinal Prefect, informs me that [...] you came to the decision not only not to send me any other Sisters,

but even to withdraw those who are currently associated in my work [...].

His Eminence tells me that I should come to an agreement with you about the Sisters being recalled [...]. But since hope is man's life [...] I shall therefore come personally to discuss with you whatever the Good Lord may dispose"... (W. 5688-91).

Instead, on the following 26th of May, from Verona, he is forced to communicate to *Propaganda Fide*:

"I am quite disappointed that the four sisters of St. Joseph who had stayed in Khartoum decided to leave the mission without allowing me the time to see to the needs of that important women's Institute: they would not wait even a week. But, in truth, they were exhausted, and had worked very hard and with great zeal. However, my excellent representative, Fr. Luigi Bonomi, was prompt in dispatching a telegram to Kordofan to have some of my Verona Sisters go down to Khartoum to take over the direction of the female establishment in Khartoum; and that excellent and able Superior, Sr. Teresa Grigolini, has already written to tell me that she is leaving in a few days for Khartoum." (W. 5724)

Thanks be to God, despite the critical situation created at that particular moment, the faith of the Founder was not shaken. The letter quoted above, ended prophetically:

"The institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia [...] has, by the grace of God, all the apostolic spirit it needs to operate properly in the arduous missions of Central Africa, and is developing in a way that will be sufficient for all the vitally important works that must be established and perfected in my Vicariate [...].

All the Crosses and adversities the Vicariate has been through recently have only served to strengthen the spirit of the faithful members of this great work and to place the Vicariate in the right conditions for it to prosper in the future, because God's works are always born and grow at the foot of Calvary and like Jesus Christ, they must tread the path of Passion and Death to reach the Resurrection"... (W. 5725-26).

It was like saying: let us close ranks and go ahead

Unfortunately, we have not been able to trace, until now, the letter of the 27th of April 1879, in which Teresa Grigolini reassures the Founder telling him that she would obey and that, together with Sr. Giuseppa Scandola, she would be transferred to Khartoum while awaiting the arrival of more personnel.

Evidently, it was not an easy obedience as is revealed in a piece of writing some months later by Fr. Bonomi addressed to the bishop who was far off.¹¹⁰ Even although they knew that in el Obeid, as in Khartoum they would be able to count on the unconditional help of the African teachers who had been prepared in Europe and whom Daniel Comboni had brought back to Africa, the five *Pie Madri* were nevertheless aware of their own limits and of the fact that they were too few to form two communities.

However, as they had been well trained at the school of the founder, they had rolled up their sleeves and sought to do everything possible. They did not draw back but gave of themselves with total generosity keeping their eyes fixed on the horizon which he continually pointed out to them. So, from El Obeid, Fr. Giovanni Battista Fraccaro could reassure the bishop who was absent:

“Here Monsignor [...] everything proceeds in order. This said, it is also true that we suffer a lot for many circumstances permitted by the Lord [...]. But what are these sufferings against the peace and tranquillity among ourselves which we enjoy ... !

*The sisters are well at the moment. They did have fever but now they have recovered. They are true Sisters of charity. Oh Monsignor! How comforting these good sisters are to me! They work miracles for the smooth running of the house and for everything else. They are untiring and even if they are **three**, they do the work of **ten**, so much so that sometimes I am obliged to scold them and forbid them from overworking and putting their health at risk”...¹¹¹.*

¹¹⁰ See, ACR, A/20/6/5: Bonomi to Comboni. Khartoum, November 5th 1879.

¹¹¹ ANNALI, 19(1879)44; 54.

Teresa Grigolini also then wrote: *“Presently, I am in Khartoum and I am happy. [...]”*

This year in Africa is not so bad as last year. The epidemics have stopped, the air is healthier and there is a great abundance of grain [...].

In the meanwhile, we Christians seek to keep before us the thought that our homeland, our true homeland, is not the earth, but heaven. Let us be quick to sow good works, sacrifices, acts of charity, and the day will come, perhaps quite soon, in which we will reap with joy. May we always be well prepared for the call of the Lord, reminding ourselves of the aim for which we were created and God will be with us always”...¹¹².

¹¹² AMN, 12(2006)64-65: Grigolini to an uncle. Khartoum, 8th of June 1879.

5.

The First seeds to fall into the Earth

On the 15th of May, 1879, after a quick stopover in Cairo, Daniel Comboni arrived in Verona for the last time. Maria Bollezzoli, evidently was quick to inform the Sisters abroad and so Sr. Vittoria Paganini, answered from El Obeid on the 20th of June 1879:

“I heard about the arrival of our excellent Monsignor in Verona. The great consolation I experienced at this news, together with all the sisters, cannot be described. We were very worried about his silence and we supposed the worst! Thanks be to God [...].

Now I hope that you will come soon to help us! How I long to see my dear sisters! They will be of great help and comfort to us [...]. Imagine that here we are almost fifty. In the feminine Institute we have 27 African girls, while in the boys’ Institute there are 22”...¹¹³.

The second group of *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* leave

*“Please request fervent prayers for this newly born Institute, which is destined to create in Central Africa all the feminine works of the Catholic apostolate in Central Africa [...] **God chose the weak things of this world to confound the strong**”... (W. 5752)*

¹¹³ AMN, 7(2004)52. The entire AMN no.7 is dedicated to **Vittoria Paganini**

Preparing a second group of Sisters to send to Africa had become a priority for Daniel Comboni, especially after he learned, while in Berber, that the decision taken by the Sisters of St. Joseph was irrevocable and they would therefore be leaving the Institutes of Cairo (See W. 5731).

On the 26th of May, 1879, eleven days after reaching Verona, he informed Cardinal Simeoni:

“Next week, five Pie Madri della Nigrizia will be leaving for Cairo and, in a short while, another five will be leaving for Egypt with me.” (W. 5725)

In reality, this seemed highly unlikely because in Verona, there was only one professed Sister ready to leave for Africa, that is, Amalia Andreis who had professed on the 4th of July the previous year. However, there were 9 young women in the noviciate, of whom four had been admitted to religious profession on the 27th of May 1879. Thus, the five who were supposed to leave the following week would be ready.

Instead of a week, however, almost a month passed, but then on the 1st of July 1879, the second group of *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* was ready to leave Verona.

The founder expressed his satisfaction: *“I have the consolation of informing you that here in Verona”,* he wrote on May 26th to Cardinal Simeoni, *“I found two flourishing Institutes for the Missions of Central Africa, truly inspired by the spirit of their apostolate where the students are all prepared for sacrifice and martyrdom, an essential condition if they are to consecrate themselves to the conversion of Africa and to further our most holy task.”* (W. 5723)

“My Mother Superior in Verona,” he insisted on June 19th, *“is preparing the sisters for the apostolate of Central Africa and always preaching to them thus: You must be ready to die every day for Jesus and for Africa; you are destined for slaughter [...].*

And my sisters form this Congregation, both those who are in Central Africa and those who are about to go and are here, feel they are going to Paradise for the joy of dying and suffering for Jesus Christ.” (W. 5734)

Towards Egypt

*“God is calling me to the vineyard
and I go more than willingly” ...*

(Amalia Andreis, 17th of May 1879)

On the first of July, 1879, Amalia Andreis Maria Bertuzzi, Eulalia Pesavento, Maria Caprini and Matilde Lombardi left Verona with Cairo as their destination. Travelling with them were also Fr. Giovanni Dichtl, Fr. Mattia Moron and the lay Brother, Giuseppe Avesani. The Founder, who for the time being was obliged to remain in Europe, had, however, preceded his missionaries to Rome in order to present them personally to Leo XIII and then to accompany them as far as Naples.

Thanks to the family of Sr. Amalia Andreis, who conserved all of her letters¹¹⁴, and to Daniel Comboni himself, who sent to Monsignor Giacomo Scurati a ‘*short article*’ for the *Catholic Observer* of the 18th and 19th of July 1879 (See W. 5736), this event is well-documented.

One can read in the letter: *“At the end of last June, the eminent Cardinal di Canossa, Bishop of Verona, visited the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia in Santa Maria in Organo, and after a warm and affectionate little talk, all aglow with charity, he blessed the Crucifixes which he presented to two male missionaries and five new Sisters, about to set out for the arduous and demanding missions in Central Africa. No words can describe the excitement and holy enthusiasm of those chosen virgins. Formed in Christ’s school, and taught sacrifice and the cross, they see the time has come to fulfil their heartfelt vows and give themselves up to the slow martyrdom of the thorny apostolate of Central Africa”...* (W. 5737).

On the same day, he wrote to Fr. Alessandro Bussinello, *“The new caravan [...] left Verona on the evening of the 1st of July. And on the morning of the 3rd it was courteously received in Propa-*

¹¹⁴ See, AMN, 4(2002). All of the fourth volume of AMN is dedicated to **Sr. Amalia Andreis**.

ganda by the Most eminent Cardinal Simeoni, General Prefect of Propaganda who [...] with words of encouragement and fatherly affection urged the missionaries and sisters to keep firm and steadfast in their arduous and sublime vocation of the apostolate of Central Africa [...].

However, the most moving spectacle was to take place in the Vatican, when I had the honour of presenting the five Pie Madri della Nigrizia to His Holiness Leo XIII. The Holy Father wanted to know all the details of this new foundation of Sacred Virgins consecrated to the apostolate of Central Africa, which I briefly explained to him, and he highly commended the sublime Institution as well as its aim, and the generosity of these women of the Gospel in sacrificing themselves for the salvation of the neediest and most abandoned souls in the world”... (W. 5744-45).

That had been a very special moment which the founder would never forget. More than one year later, in fact, he remembered the encounter between the Pope and his sisters as follows when he wrote in October 1880:

*“On Saturday, I returned from the Vatican full of enthusiasm because I sat with Pope Leo XIII for at least an hour and a half [...]. Pope Leo XIII is all on fire for Africa, and although a good sixteen months have passed since he received my last five sisters [...] nevertheless he told me that he is enthusiastic about them and their spirit of sacrifice together with such simplicity. He had asked Sr. Amalia Andreis **whether she was not afraid of death**, and, regarding her answer; that **she would die even immediately for love of Christ and the Africans**, he still remembers the impression this made on him and told me of his admiration”... (W. 6139)*

In the feminine Institute in Cairo

In the feminine Institute in Cairo, where the *Pie Madri* arrived on the evening of the 9th of July 1879, the Sisters of St. Joseph were no longer present, having withdrawn before this.

Sr. Amalia Andreis wrote to her relatives, *“At the station in Cairo, we found our brother missionaries who had come to collect us [...]. The Fathers had prepared supper for us and they were all very happy about our arrival.”*¹¹⁵

Located in the area of Ismailia, one of the most beautiful areas in Cairo, the buildings of the Combonian Institutes were still under construction in 1879, and, among other things, the chapel, dedicated to the Sacred Heart, which was supposed to be at the centre, and of which Daniel Comboni would lay the foundation stone in December 1880, was not yet built.

Sr. Amalia explained to her parents in the letter quoted above, *“We are outside of the city; still close, but isolated. There are many nice buildings and some woods and gardens”*...

In these letters to her family, Amalia does not say much about the aim of the Institute of the Sacred Heart of Mary or about which activities the Sisters undertook. It was certainly work, however, which was less demanding than it would have been at the beginning, as Daniel Comboni had explained previously to a priest in Trento:

He wrote, *“I will now considerably deplete the Cairo Institutes because I myself have brought 30 of their members who are ready for the apostolate, to the centre, and another 20 will be taken there in a second expedition next August. So two small establishments in Cairo are always necessary to acclimatise the missionaries and sisters and test their vocation further and they also constitute a kind of procurators office of the Vicariate for relations with Europe and a source of provision for the mission”*... (W. 3233).

¹¹⁵ AMN 4(2002)2.5

The arrival of a third group of Pie Madri

On November 12th 1879, Sr. Amalia Andreis, as Superior, received in the Feminine Institute in Cairo, the third group of *Pie Madri* whom, Daniel Comboni, faithful to his programme, had sent from Verona. These were, Maria Rosa Colpo, Caterina Chincarini, Elisabetta Venturini, Fortunata Zanolli and Elisa Suppi. Two of these, Sr. Fortunata and Sr. Elisa, were awaited so that they could complete the new big caravan, of which Fr. Gennaro Martini had been placed in charge, and which was bound for Central Africa.

One can read in No. 19 of the *Annals of the Buon Pastore*, “We are happy to announce to our benevolent Associates, that last Saturday, the 22nd of November, our excellent missionary, Fr. Gennaro Martini, left by boat from Suez with a caravan of fifteen people of both sexes belonging to our Institutes of Verona and Grand Cairo [...].

Here are the names of the members of the apostolic caravan:

Members of the Masculine Institute in Verona.

1. R. Father Vittorio Fuchs from the Diocese of Breslavia
2. R. Father Arturo Bouchard from the Archdiocese of Quebec
3. R. Father Sebastiano Rechenmacher from the Diocese of Trent
4. Brother Jules Simon from the Archdiocese of Rennes
5. Brother Angelo Composta from Negrar, Verona
6. Brother Pietro Marconi from Bergamo
7. Brother Lorenzo Coatti from Prun, Verona
8. Brother Giuseppe Avesani from Verona
9. Brother Giuseppe Beber from Verona.

Members of the Institute of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia in Verona.

10. Sr. Eulalia Pesavento from Montorio, Verona
11. Sr. Maria Bertuzzi from Malcesine near Verona
12. Sr. Matilde Lombardi, also from Malcesine
13. Sr. Maria Caprini from Negrar, Verona
14. Sr. Fortunata Zanolli from San Zeno, Verona
15. Sr. Elisa Suppi, from Lonigo, Vicenza” (pp. 66-67).

Five days later, from Cairo, Sr. Amalia Andreis informed the Founder about their departure.

She wrote, “Your daughters left for Upper Egypt on the 21st. I believe they could not have been happier and more joyful. The word obedience fills their hearts with the courage to face fearlessly the long and arduous journey”...¹¹⁶

Thanks to the new route, which from Suez took one directly, by sea, to Suakin, and then to Berber, the caravan happily reached Khartoum in only forty two days instead of the sixty nine days it had taken the previous group. The newly arrived Sisters, who were, understandably, anxiously awaited by the others, were granted a month of rest and then, three of them, Maria Bertuzzi, Matilde Lombardi and Elisa Suppi, set off on their journey again for their final destination, El Obeid. They were accompanied by the Superior of that station, Fr. Gian Battista Fraccaro.

Teresa Grigolini, Giuseppa Scandola, Vittoria Paganini, Eulalia Pesavento, Maria Caprini and Fortunata Zanolli remained in Khartoum, at least for the time being.

The beautiful surprise of finding a feminine noviciate in Cairo

“Moreover, I have consoling news from the Vicariate, where an enviable peace reigns, and while there is much work, all the Veronese missionaries and Sisters are well. I hope in the Heart of Jesus, that after having suffered much he will give us great consolation.”

(Daniel Comboni, 26th of August, 1879)

Unfortunately, this was not true of all. Sr. Vittoria Paganini, in fact, had been accompanied back to Cairo as she had cancer. The same could be said about the ‘*enviable peace*’ which the missionaries and Sisters present in the Vicariate finally enjoyed. Perhaps for this reason, that is, that this peace might once again be disturbed, Fr. Luigi Bononi, who was substituting the bishop in Khartoum during his absence, must have observed, with understandable worry, those who had newly arrived. Thanks be to God, he felt satisfied.

¹¹⁶ ANNALI, 26(1881)56; See, AMN, 4(2002)33-34.

“On the whole, I am happy about the good spirit among them” he wrote to the bishop on the 5th of January 1880, *“especially Fr. Arturo [Bouchard]... I also hear excellent news from the Superior about the Sisters, both about their spirit and their instruction. Unfortunately, however, she does not have much praise for Domitilla who wishes to become a Sister, but I fear she may not manage”...¹¹⁷.*

The mention of Domitilla, who wanted to become a Sister but would not manage,¹¹⁸, told the three newly arrived that, on reaching El Obeid, they would be able to see personally the second noviciate of the Comboni Sisters established in Africa on the joint decision, it would seem, of Daniel Comboni, Teresa Grigolini and Vittoria Paganini.

The novices, at the beginning of 1880, were at least two: Domitilla Bhakita and Fortunata Quasce, both Sudanese by birth, but educated in the Mazza Institute in Verona. After being brought to Africa by Daniel Comboni in 1867, they were then chosen by him, together with Faustina Stampais,¹¹⁹ for the foundation of the feminine apostolate in Kordofan in June 1873. They remained in El Obeid after the departure of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition and then they immediately joined up with the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* who arrived from Verona and who could, amongst other things, share with them their memories and the nostalgia they felt for their ‘families’ who were far away.

It was at the beginning of the second half of 1879, it would seem, that the two African teachers, Domitilla and Fortunata had been officially accepted among the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. They had, therefore, been able to begin their noviciate under the direction of Sr. Vittoria Paganini, who was sorely missed after her unexpected departure, on the 22nd of November 1879, due to illness.

Sr. Marietta Caspi, Sr Concetta Corsi, and the two novices had remained alone in the Sisters community in El Obeid. Therefore, at the beginning of 1880, there was quite an air of expectancy

¹¹⁷ ACR, A/20/6/8: Bonomi to Comboni. Khartoum, 5th of January 1880.

¹¹⁸ See AMN, 9(2005)149-156. Number 9 of AMN is entirely dedicated to **Fortunata Quasce**.

¹¹⁹ Number 8 of AMN is dedicated to **Faustina Stampais**.

for the arrival of the Superior who had promised to return from Khartoum accompanied by new Sisters.

On the 8th of February, in fact, the little group, formed by three Sisters, two priests and three lay people, arrived in view of the mission. It was a joyful encounter, which unfortunately would last only ten days. Due to typhoid fever, which had struck her in the last two days of the journey, the first tomb of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* on African soil was dug in the desert of El Obeid for the young Sr. Maria Bertuzzi who was just twenty years old.¹²⁰

Two crosses in the space of three months

“I am constantly afflicted by crosses.” (W. 5953) the founder confided to the bishop of Verona when he had come to know about the death of Sr. Maria. Unfortunately, this death would soon be followed by another. Marietta Caspi, the *primogenita*, also died in El Obeid only three months later. It was a ‘*new trial*’ for the mission, Maria Bollezzoli commented when writing for the *Annals of the Buon Pastore*, “*a new baptism of tears [...], a new victim required for the redemption of Nigrizia.*”¹²¹

The untiring activity of the Founder to guarantee a constant flow of feminine vocations

On his return to Verona for the last time, in the Spring of 1879, the Founder was no doubt very worried about the withdrawal of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition from the Vicariate of Central Africa. His only hope, for the moment, was centred, therefore, on the new Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, which he had desired to found, as he had pointed out two years earlier in a report addressed to the Holy Childhood, in order to educate and prepare “*for the apostolate of the Catholic woman missionary, candidates [who would] introduce all the Catholic feminine skills into the scorching regions of the African interior.*” (W. 4520)

¹²⁰ See, AMN, 10(2005)129-136.

¹²¹ ANNALI, 22(1880)62; See, AMN, 10(2005)11-35.

Therefore, he tried now to invest as much as possible in recruiting young candidates and on giving them a high standard of preparation. Therefore, it is not by chance, it seems, that he still wanted, among other things, to dedicate ample space in number 21 of the Annals of the *Buon Pastore*, to the Feminine Institute. In doing this, he evidently intended to involve not only the female readers of the magazine, but also the relatives, and especially the spiritual directors, of the young people who showed a tendency towards consecrated life.

In fact, one reads in the above mentioned magazine, “We consider it opportune for our benevolent readers who are not yet aware of it, to announce here that His Excellency Monsignor Daniel Comboni, Bishop and Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa [...] has also founded, here in Verona, an Institute or Congregation of Sisters called the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. Young people who respond to the divine call and desire to sacrifice themselves for the conversion of the poor Africans join it. After having been formed under wise direction in the Mother House, they are sent to those remote areas to assist the male missionaries [...]. Their principle task is to instruct in the Christian doctrine and in feminine skills the young African women, who after having been ransomed with money from barbarous human traffickers, gather in the various mission stations. They also hurry to the sick beds of the ill in order to gain them for God and for paradise. Their spirit of sacrifice, which is expressed in their bearing joyfully the profound sacrifices which are part and parcel of the long and arduous journeys across the burning deserts and the discomforts of a deadly climate, is admirable. It is also edifying to see, through their letters, how their intimate union with God, their abandonment of themselves, their trust in Divine Providence and their readiness to tire and to suffer for the good of the mission, still continue to grow and to be strengthened”. (pp. 44-45)

As further evidence of all that is affirmed, the editor completed the same number of the Annals with the publication of quite many letters of the *first Pie Madri della Nigrizia* who had already left for Africa. It did not conceal the fact that one of them, the young **Maria Bertuzzi** had already died (see, pp. 55-58). For, in fact, the future young candidates needed to keep also this in mind: that in Central Africa, one could die prematurely. At the same time, they needed to be fully aware that, in the Lord’s vineyard, the

seed fallen into the soil does not create an empty space among the workers of the Gospel. On the contrary, it will be a guarantee of a flourishing springtime, followed by abundant fruits.

“God will send me good and pious Sisters”...

“Many souls are preparing to join the faithful, especially in Kordofan and Jebel Nuba: But we need good and devout Sisters. God will send them”, (W. 5720) Daniel Comboni reassured from Cairo, before leaving for Europe.

He had never doubted that God would help him, even if he usually *‘gave him a hand’* when he felt it was necessary. Therefore, throughout his last, forced and long stay in Europe, despite the precarious condition of his health, the Founder never stopped dedicating himself to an intense missionary animation, in which vocational promotion received a lot of attention.

In fact, during this last stay in Verona, he accepted no less than twenty two young women into the Congregation. In the same period, the new vestitions were fourteen and the first professions sixteen. Then there were also new aspirants asking to enter.

It was extremely necessary, at this point, to establish a solid base for the Missionary Institute in Verona. After the departure of Fr. Antonio Squaranti, and his death which had cancelled all possibility of a return, the person who was truly suitable to substitute him in the important and delicate role he had undertaken, had still not been found. It was for this reason, and that is, *“to rebuild the Verona Institute on very firm foundations, especially by giving it an excellent Superior”* (W. 6101) that the Founder had returned to his homeland once again, fully aware that he would not be able to leave again without first realizing all that he had promised to do...¹²²

¹²² *“It was not the physical illnesses,” Fr. Giovanni Dichtl remembers, “which Monsignor Comboni was suffering from in January 1879 that were the cause (as the missionaries still believe) of his sudden and secret return to Europe, but rather moral illnesses and the Institute of Verona. After huge efforts and sufferings, he managed to raise the morale and the general situation of the Institute of Verona by placing in charge Fr. Sembianti, under whose direction the Institute made much progress.”... (AP CV vol. 43 Collegi d’Italia, f. 1298: Dichtl to Simeoni. Graz, 29th of June 1884).*

6.

Towards a Definitive Organization of the Institutes of Verona

The search for a new Rector

Immediately after his arrival in Verona on the 15th of May 1879, Daniel Comboni had had to recognize that Fr. Paolo Rossi* whom he had left *'provisionally in charge'*¹²³ in the African Institute in Verona, had proved not be a suitable person to take up this responsibility.

Therefore, as a first choice, since Fr. Rollerer had not accepted the invitation of Luigi di Canossa to substitute Fr. Paolo, the Founder had thought of the Parish Priest of St. George in Braida, Francesco Sogaro*, who was a clear admirer, as well as a benefactor, of the missionary undertaking.

In fact, Teresa Grigolini wrote to Daniel Comboni, *"Fr. Luigi [Bonomi] gave me some news, on your request, about the Institutes. The best news for me, however, was to know that Fr. Sogaro will be the Rector of the Missionaries."*¹²⁴

For unknown reasons, however, not only did the name of Fr. Sogaro have to be put aside, at least for the time being, but the Provost General of the Company of Jesus had replied that he would be unable to immediately satisfy the request for three of his religious to assume the direction of the Missionary Institute in Verona.

¹²³ See, W. 5975: Comboni to Sembianti. Verona, 15th of May 1880. See' *Il rettorato di Don Paolo Rossi e la sua infelice Conclusione*' in A.Gilli, 1979, pp. 188-201.

¹²⁴ AMN, 12(2006)66: Grigolini to Comboni. Khartoum, 30th of June 1879.

It must have been at that point that Luigi di Canossa, Bishop of Verona, and therefore ultimately responsible for the African Institute, communicated to Daniel Comboni about his intention to turn to the Stigmatine Fathers, reassuring him as follows:

*“Don’t worry about these Institutes [...] this morning, while praying, a thought flashed through my mind about two Stigmatines [...]; They have good and clever members. They have the first fruits of the Spirit. If the Jesuits are really unable to assume [the responsibility] they [The Stigmatines] would be a treasure. Do not fear. Saint Joseph, head of the house, will provide a leader for the Institutes. Keep in good spirits, let us pray and hope.”*¹²⁵

From Pejo in Trento, where the Founder had gone for treatment with thermal waters, he answered with some relief, but still feeling worried:

“... I am very comforted by your Fatherly suggestion of asking two Stigmatine Fathers to stand in at least until the Jesuits can come. In brief, with tears in my eyes, I beg you to come to my rescue; and God will bless your Eminence and the Diocese of Verona. There are some excellent subjects in the female and male Institutes there [...]. I want to form true apostles, and spurning every criticism, in this very important matter I am Jesuit and Stigmatine through and through” (W. 5754-55).

Everything seemed set, but....

Fr. Pietro Vignola, Superior of the Apostolic Missionaries, known as Stigmatine Fathers, had responded to the formal request of the Bishop of Verona, which had been sent to him on the 1st of October 1879, mentioning the name of Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti. This latter, however, was undecided and was hesitant in responding.

In the end, the Bishop of Verona, wrote directly to the interested party explaining to him,

¹²⁵ ACR, A/38/13/1: Canossa to Comboni. Monteforte, 18th of July 1879.

“Most Reverend Father,

[...]. I am in need of finding a solution to a matter which is pending, and therefore, I am writing to disturb you. In agreement with the Most Reverend Father Vignola, the Superior, we had earmarked you to become a truly suitable Superior for this seminary for the Missions of Africa... Therefore, we had begun to write those terms and conditions which we believed necessary [...].

But now, all of a sudden, the above mentioned Father has come to me, telling me that a difficulty has arisen unexpectedly, so much so that it is impossible to reach a conclusion. I was dumbfounded and seeing that he was sworn to the utmost secrecy, I did not breathe a word since he was distressed so much so that I considered any word at all an indiscretion.

*I waited for some days, but then, as I saw him no more, even after having told him to come to me to conclude the business, once the obstacle had been overcome, I decided to write to you yourself, not in order to know what the difficulty is, as I do not like to enter into other people’s business, but only to find out if the difficulty can be overcome [...] I hope that can happen as soon as possible.”*¹²⁶ [It has to be said though, that the business was not ‘someone else’s’, but it concerned the intervention of Fr. Griefff regarding Virginia Mansur.]

A conditional agreement

After three days, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti responded to this official request of the Bishop of Verona as follows:

“In response to the most gracious letter Your Eminence, of the 4th of December with which you have honoured me, I can say nothing more than that there is no obstacle, which can hinder or suspend the provident care of your Eminence for the seminary for the African Missions. This does not mean, however, that no obstacle exists [...]. My Reverend Superior, is, without a doubt, in the process of clarifying the issue and I believe that he would do that willingly if he were to be given a cue from you.

¹²⁶ ACR, A/38/45/1: Canossa to Sembianti, 4th of December, 1879

As for me [...], I have to confess, Eminent Prince, that I was highly astonished to learn from my Superior that you would have appointed me Rector of that seminary, and no matter how much I reflect on it, I am unable to recover from that astonishment which just increases when I see your Eminence's and my Superior's insistence [...].

I believe I am still in time to offer, if I may, some advice [...] and it is that you should reflect further before making a final decision on the matter [...].

I will not refuse the will of my Superiors, and trembling and wary of myself, but trusting, as your Eminence wrote to me, in God, I would consent to obedience, even at risk of it turning out to be a failure, which would not be attributed, at least in front of God, to me.”¹²⁷

The next day, as he was in Verona, Sembianti himself informed his Superior:

*“I am available and ready to obey, but think well, Reverend Father about the demands of this post and of His Eminence, who, according to what he has written to me, wishes to have a Superior **truly suitable** for that seminary; a man with a **head, a spirit and a heart**”...¹²⁸.*

I have no words to express my thanks

Evidently, having been informed of the outcome of the bargaining, Daniel Comboni was also swift to encourage the future Rector of his Institutes, writing to him,

“Words fail to thank Jesus, Mary and Joseph for the most remarkable grace they have granted, in choosing your Institute to co-operate so effectively and powerfully in the Apostolate of Central Africa. I shall never be able to give the Very Reverend Provost, Fr. Pietro Vignola, worthy heir of the Bertoni spirit, which is none other than the spirit of Jesus Christ, the thanks

¹²⁷ ACR, A/28/22/1: Sembianti to Canossa. Bassano, 7th of December 1879.

¹²⁸ ACR, A/28/22/1v (minute): Sembianti to Vignola. Verona, 8th of December, 1879.

he deserves for giving me you to assist me in the arduous and difficult task assigned to me by the Holy See”... (W. 5866)

At this point of the letter, the Founder, almost as if he had a feeling about what may happen in the future, took pains to underline one particular point which the new rector would always have to bear in mind:

“The first mission house of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa is the African Institute of Verona, which, by the will of God, you are chosen to run and to direct to enable it to accomplish its mission. Be sure, dear Father, that God will lavish upon you all the graces necessary for the Institute to achieve its aims [...].

I too in my littleness will give you all my support to make it easier and successful”... (W. 5867-68)

However, not all those in Verona would work in this direction.

The interference of the Vice Rector

Fr. Nicola Grieff*, who was originally from Luxembourg and a member of the Institute since only two years after having been received by Fr. Paolo Rossi in 1877, had returned to Verona in May 1879 because he was not considered mature enough yet, by Daniel Comboni, for Central Africa. (See W. 5985)

Despite this, since he said that he was capable of teaching Arabic, Fr. Paolo Rossi had asked him to do just this, both for the seminarians and the novices, entrusting him at the same time with the position of Vice Rector. Therefore, there was no one better than he who could evaluate just how precarious the situation of Fr. Paolo Rossi had become within the Institute during that period.

Some months later, in fact, that is, in the month of August 1879, [Fr. Rossi], who was too young to have been left in charge, was unable to manage the discomfort which arose from a particular situation which had been created and he had left Verona, leaving his post vacant. This was, evidently, a temptation for Nicola Grieff who began to cultivate the secret hope that he would be

called to fill this place, despite the fact that the Founder, who was present in Verona, had asked Fr. Lorenzo Mainardi* to *assume the responsibility temporarily*. However, this was a dream which Fr. Grief, who was not so responsible, (see W. 6540) was not easily willing to renounce.

Then, in the month of October, Daniel Comboni wrote to Propaganda Fide “*he had known for certain that I was negotiating with the Superior General of the Bertoni Fathers to have Fr. Sembianti for Rector of my Institutes, so in order to discourage him from accepting the position, he went secretly... to see both the General and Fr. Sembianti to blacken the image of the Arabs*¹²⁹ *and especially to tell them of my supposed partiality to Virginia. As a result, the Bertoni fathers went to seek advice from Cardinal di Canossa*”... (W. 7181).

Cardinal di Canossa, after having listened to them, without consulting the Founder, decided that Fr. Sembianti had to accept, but gave him the right to set certain conditions before taking up the post.

The contract presented by the future Rector

Daniel Comboni, who came to know about all this only at a later stage, did not understand why there was such a delay in the proceedings. Concerned as he was about his already lengthy absence from the Vicariate, his proposal had been that the new Rector should assume this post by the month of January 1880 (See, W. 5891). Instead, Giuseppe Sembianti asked that before [he assumed the post], the contract, in which the conditions laid down by him for “*assuming the duties of Rector of the Institutes of the Missions of Africa in Verona*” (W. 5914) appeared clearly, be approved.

One has the impression, when re-reading today that text of the 16th of February 1880 (See, W. 5914-16), that the conditions con-

¹²⁹ In the month of December 1879, Virginia Mansur*, her brother Giorgio and her cousin Alessandro, had arrived in Verona to teach Arabic in the Combonian Institutes.

tained in it were quite severe for the Founder, who, practically, was asked only to provide for “*the maintenance of the masculine and feminine Institutes*”. All the rest, it seems, would be the competence of the Rector. This same Rector, asked that, even before he entered, someone else would leave, as can be seen in the third article of the contract according to which “*only the mission or service staff or those deemed necessary by the Rector will have lodgings in the male and female Institutes*”. The father of Daniel Comboni had been lodging in the male Institute since 1876.

It was not difficult, for who had to agree to these demands, to understand who was being referred to. Daniel Comboni himself recalled at a later stage, that Fr. Sembianti “*before he even saw Virginia, before he examined her gifts, before he was Rector of my Institutes, wanted her to be removed from the community of my Sisters and he did not take up his office until seventeen days after Virginia had been living in the little house outside of the community*”... (W. 7139).

Now, Virigina Mansur, welcomed initially by the Founder himself only as a French and Arabic teacher, had been in Verona since December 1879. Giuseppe Sembianti, who was living at that time in Bassano del Grappa, did not know her personally. But he could have known that, “*at the height of the Camillian crisis, Fr. Carcereri wrote to his Provincial from Berber on the 27th of September 1875: “Fr. Giuseppe [Franceschini] privately confirmed for me what I already more or less knew, that is, for some time now [...] the one who dominates and gives orders in the Vicariate is a young nun of more or less twenty years of age.”*¹³⁰

Was the strategy then to make Fr. Sembianti fear that, if he accepted the position, he would find himself depending on Virginia if she remained in the Institute in Verona?

Whatever the case may have been, the position taken by the Rector to be, indicated on which side Giuseppe Sembianti had decided to stand in the controversy, Comboni versus the Camil-

¹³⁰ L. BANO, *Missionari del Comboni*, vol. 1, pp. 16-16a. On his part, Daniel Comboni had already made Cardinal Franchi aware of, in a letter of his dated July 20th, the motivations which had caused this gossip (See, W. 4302-4330): Comboni to Canossa. Rome, March 17th 1880.

lians, which, all said and done, had nothing to do with him, but which would nevertheless influence him considerably until the end, in his relationship with the founder and with the Sisters who were faithful to him.

The position of Maria Bollezzoli

On the 19th of March 1880, we can read in the Diary (*Cronaca*), “*The Reverend Father, Giuseppe Sembianti*” has “*become our Director.*”

Two days beforehand, Daniel Comboni had written from Rome, “*I am very pleased that the good Fr. Sembianti is definitively moving in to the African Institute on the beautiful day of St. Joseph; and this morning when I heard Fr. Eusebio preaching for the Pope, I arranged for the Holy Father to impart his Apostolic blessing to him on that day*” (W. 5947).

According to the *Rules* approved by Luigi di Canossa in 1874 for the Sisters, the new Rector had to “*monitor the discipline of the religious; correct, provoke and inflict punishment on those who were unworthy; give them all the information they may need; enlighten through his counsel the Superior; carry out the vestition ceremonies of the Religious; receive their vows and the oath*¹³¹ *at the time of their departure for Africa, and provide for the needs of the Institute.*

He also had to accept, in agreement with the Superior, the aspirants into the Institute, admit them to vestition and to vows and declare them suitable for Africa.” (From the Various Offices of the Community, 2)

According to the same Rules, the Superior who is mentioned above, could only govern ‘*internally*’ the Feminine Institute with the help of “*a secretary, a novice mistress, and a mistress of studies*” (Introduction, III).

¹³¹ “*The vows which the religious profess are the three usual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and they add the promise to serve solely the mission of Nigrizia*” (Regole, 1874, art.V). See, W. 5824: Oath of the Lay Brothers.

Chosen “*from among the professed sisters of the Institute*”, her mandate lasted for ‘*three years*’. Her nomination was “*reserved to the Bishop, as was her re-confirmation, or her dismissal during the three year period.*” (from the Various Offices of the Community, 5)

It was **Maria Bollezzoli**, who had been reconfirmed in her responsibility over the years, who was present in the house at *Santa Maria in Organo* to receive the new Rector and be presented to him as the Superior.

In addition, there were also seven professed Sisters: Rosa Zabai, Teresa Marini, Santa Corsi, Rosa Matilde Corsi, Faustina Stampais, Bartolomea Benamati and Marietta Casella.

There were also five novices, Elvira Briccio, Augusta Fae, Ginevra Tormene, Rosalia Conte e Francesca Dalmasso and six postulants: Carolina Rinaldi, Giovanna Granelli, Giuditta Prada, Rosa Tommasi, Anna Capraro and Giuditta Burlon. In reality, this last group could have been seven, if the position of Virginia Mansur had been defined on her arrival.

Instead, as he then later explained to Cardinal Simeoni, (See, W. 7011-12) the Founder had preferred to wait before deciding whether she should do the noviciate in Verona or in El Obeid where a second noviciate had been opened some months earlier.

In the end, influenced by the necessity of teaching Arabic to the novices in Verona, he decided it would be better to keep Virginia in Italy, without foreseeing the unexpected condition of Fr. Sembianti, who instead wanted to distance her from the community. So, perhaps in order to gain time, confident that, knowing her personally, the new Rector would have understood that he had been conditioned by the ‘*secret scheming*’ (See, W. 5948) of others, Daniel Comboni had asked Virginia to transfer to a separate annexe with her sister who had since arrived in Verona to become a Catholic, a brother and a cousin, and to go to the community only for five hours a week to teach Arabic.

We do not know if, apart from those five hours, Maria Bollezzoli had the opportunity to meet the young Lebanese woman. What remains documented is her reply to the Founder when she was asked if she was favourable or not about accepting Virginia Mansur among the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. That letter is dated, June 28th 1880 and we can read in it:

“Your Most Reverend Excellency,

With great pleasure, I have understood that Virginia continues to insist entering our Institute definitively [...].

To the question that your Excellency then asks me, that is, what is my honest opinion about admitting or not Virginia to our Institute, I respond firmly and decisively and, according to conscience, positively. In the eight months that I have had her here with me in the Institute, I have not only found her to be of good conduct, and well founded in her religion and faith, but I have also become convinced that she is gifted with a great spirit of charity, abnegation, sacrifice, obedience, and she is dependent on all as if she were the last of the house. I have admired her great patience with her schismatic sister who is sick and whom she has assisted day and night to the detriment of her own health, and this with the holy aim of getting her to become a Catholic [...]. In addition to this, she is assiduous and zealous in teaching Arabic to our novices and professed sisters, and I was assured by Moro Bakit – Miniscalchi of the great progress they have made as a result of her teaching.

*For these reasons I would be very happy if Virginia were to take our Habit and become a member of our Institute. This, all the more because she herself told me that, before leaving the Institute of St. Joseph, she completed two three year periods in vows, therefore she is not bound to that Congregation, as she said, except by a debt of gratitude.*¹³²

From what we can understand from the few other letters which have been conserved, Maria Bollezzoli maintained that opinion about Virginia at least until the month of February 1881, when Fr. Sembianti intervened about her brother George, who was also in Verona because he had been convinced by Virginia to become a Catholic. At this point, there was a head on conflict between Virginia Mansur and the Rector, obliging the Superior to intervene and mediate; something which could not have been easy...

¹³² AP SC, Afr. C.vol. 9, ff. 184-185v: Bollezzoli to Comboni, June 28th 1880.

The problem of the Rules returns

“The rules of an Institute which must form apostles for infidel nations, if they are to be lasting, must limit themselves to general principles. If they were too detailed, very soon, either necessity or such vagueness would threaten their foundation and they could become a harsh burden and a heavy weight for those who have to observe them.” (Rules, 1871)

If the problem of the *Rules* had been resolved for the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, at least provisionally, in 1874, with the text approved by the Bishop of Verona, the same could not be said for the masculine Institute. The *Positio* allows us to revise the history of the Rules:

“In September 1872, the Servant of God, after having been elected Apostolic Pro Vicar, had to leave for the mission [...] and therefore, he entrusted to those responsible for the Institute in Verona, the question of the Rules. The new draft of the Rules, which had to be composed taking into consideration the observations of the Consultant, [Fr. Isidoro da Boscomare] was still not ready in April 1874, when Carcereri arrived in Rome, sent from the mission by Monsignor Comboni with the task among other things, of completing the approval. Then Carcereri hurriedly composed a new text of Rules, which was judged by the Roman Dicastery to have been significantly modified with respect to those of 1872. Therefore, they had to be re-examined, and there were questions addressed to Monsignor Canossa and, on the basis of his observations, another new revision was ordered by the consultant who suggested some new changes (May 1875). Cardinal Franchi, having reviewed the text, returned it (on January 19th 1876) so that a new draft could be presented. However, it would seem that Monsignor Canossa did not draw up or have anyone else draw up a new draft. In fact, when the Servant of God returned to Italy from the mission for the last time (1879), already in the grip of fever, everything had still to be redone.”... (pp. 325-326)

Obviously worried, the Founder immediately contacted the newly nominated Rector, so on the 3rd of February 1880, he could assure Propaganda Fide that, *“together with Fr. Giuseppe Sem-*

bianti,” he himself “was reviewing the Rules and making all the changes suggested by the practical experience of the last few years, he explained, together with the wise criticism of the venerable consultant of Propaganda, Fr. Isidoro da Boscomare”... (W. 5913).

Daniel Comboni had those Rules, fruit of his long and arduous African experience, and now edited, so much at heart that, on the 17th of December 1880, as soon as he arrived in Cairo, he reminded Fr. Sembianti:

“So too... it is my absolute wish that the Rules of both the male and female Institutes be compiled as soon as possible [...].

So, take heart, and, [get] to work [...]. It would be better if you were to work on it immediately and quickly, because later you will have less time since it is certain that God will send us many candidates of both sexes.” (W. 6174-75)

On the 12th of February 1881, Daniel Comboni, from Khartoum, insisted once more with Giuseppe Sembianti:

*“I beg you to be kind enough to take as long as necessary to draft the Rules of both the African Institutes of Verona and then submit them to the judgement of Fr. Vignola [general Superior of the Stigmatine Fathers] and send them on to me [...] I have no time to compile Rules; while instead, considering those of Verona, at a quick glance I see the modifications to be made, **attenta experientia Africana**. For the rest, most, and indeed all, save a few small things, it should be the one that is observed in Verona and in Africa. So, therefore, take up the Cross and draft the Rules and Constitutions.*

Then, in the Rule for the women, completely change the organization (in Verona, to get the work going, rules were made for one house) and establish the Superior General with two Assistants, Provincials and Superiors from the various houses in Europe, Africa, Asia, [obviously the Founder was already thinking of a feminine noviciate in Syria] a Superior and a general Bursar of the Mother House, etc.

When you have more or less completed it, and have submitted it to the loftiest judgement [...] as well as that of the missionaries, I hope the result will be a true work of God”... (W. 6472-73).

**“Subjects must be fired with love
which has its source in God,
and with love of Christ”...**

In other words, they had to be Rules which formed missionary men and women, **‘holy and capable’** because, *“the one without the other are of very little value to a person who wants to undertake a missionary career. The missionary man or woman cannot go to heaven alone. They must go to heaven in the company of the souls they have helped to save. So, in the first place, holiness: completely free from sin and offence against God, and humble. But this is not enough: love too is necessary to make these men and women do good work.*

A mission as arduous and difficult as ours cannot survive with just a patina, with people putting on airs of holiness, but full of egoism and self-centredness, caring very little about the conversion of souls. They must be fired with love which has its source in God, and with the love of Christ. Once we really love Christ, then privation, suffering and martyrdom become sweet.”
(W. 6655-56)

Unfortunately, the Founder would die without seeing those Rules which he had so much desired...

According to Ermenegilda Morelli, Fr. Sembianti, *“did not support the Founder’s wish that he review the Constitutions and send them to him in Africa, perhaps because he differed with him on some important points”...*¹³³. The new text of the Rules, in fact, would be ready and shown to the Missionaries and the Sisters only after 1888, as we shall see in due time. It was a text, however, so lacking in the spirit of the Founder, that it was rejected by the sisters who had *‘made their vows in the hands of Comboni’*¹³⁴, in whose Rule, they sustained, some prescriptions were not there, or had never been presented to them.

¹³³ APMR, VI, A/7/33-1334: *Spirito dell’Istituto delle Pie Madri della Nigri-
zia*, unedited, 1944.

¹³⁴ See, AMN, 10(2005)197: Caprini to Corbelli, January 1980.

Sestri Levante: an attempt to extend the Institute beyond Verona

Not long after Daniel Comboni had returned to Italy in 1879, he received a letter from Sestri Levante in which Fr. Geremia Properzi, a young priest with a degree in theology, showed his interest for the Missions of Central Africa. There followed, for a time, a regular correspondence between the two, which, at a certain point, Fr. Geremia mentioned that another priest known to him, Fr. Angelo Tagliaferro, owned an old Dominican convent in Sestri which was now uninhabited and available for some pious purpose. Immediately interested, the Founder got in touch with Tagliaferro himself who then answered him on the 19th of August 1879 expressing clearly his intention to continue the discussion. (See, W. 6822)

Daniel Comboni had not been able to go immediately to Sestri to see for himself whether it would be appropriate or not to continue the discussion started, but he intended to do so at the first possible opportunity. In fact, in April 1880, he went to that city for a first inspection:

“I went to Sestri three times to examine everything,” he informed Fr. Sembianti later, “and took advice on those three occasions (before proposing the matter to the Cardinal) from Marquis Negrotto of Genoa, and from the brother of Monsignor Negrotto [...] who is an engineer and knows the premises in Sestri. As well as these two Marquises [...] I consulted the Mayor of Sestri, the Archpriest of Sestri and a rich landowner of Sestri who is a relative of the Superior of the Presentation [convent] in Sestri. They all said it was a magnificent deal but did not believe that Tagliaferro was generous enough to put it into effect”... (W. 6823).

The possibility of *killing two birds with one stone*

While keeping in mind the warning, the Founder wanted first of all to verify whether *“it really were possible to establish an Institute of Sisters in Sestri and what decided me on it”*, he said in the same, above mentioned, letter of the 11th of July 1881, *“was the very grave reason of the state of health of Sr.*

Metilde who would have been unable to live in Verona, as Dr. Baschera said, but would survive in Cairo. But I who know Cairo better than Dr. Baschera, judged it right to prepare her to bear Cairo gradually by sending her to Sestri, thus killing two birds with one stone”... (W. 6824).

In fact, after having personally visited the old convent, Daniel Comboni envisaged the possibility of having an affiliated branch of the masculine and feminine Institutes in Verona, by opening a formation centre, as well as a holiday centre, that is, a place for spiritual and physical renewal for the veterans who would eventually have to leave the mission temporarily in order to take care of their health. So, on the 23rd of September 1880, he wrote to Luigi di Canossa as follows:

“an establishment of ours in Sestri, as an affiliate of our Institutes in Verona, is a matter of great importance and of real benefit to the mission.” (W. 6117)

Everything arranged for a ‘donation’

In a case such as that of Sestri, however, Daniel Comboni had no intention of deciding alone, all the more so because, at that point, the new Rector of the Institutes in Verona had already assumed his post. So, for this reason, he returned to Sestri Levante, *“with the Most venerable Rector and the Mother superior from Verona to decide on the new affiliate branch, which, God willing, would be opened for the Missions of Central Africa.” (W. 6113).* Virginia Mansur, her sister and Sisters Matilde Corsi, Marietta Casella and Bartolomea Benamati had been living there since April.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ *“I beg you to send Virginia with her sister”* he had written to Sembianti on the 23rd of April 1880. But the following day he added, *“Having thought about everything, I judge it appropriate that you should add to the two Arab women, the three sisters” (W. 5959-60).* While the two sisters would be there as guests of the Presentation Sisters for a holiday, the presence of the Sisters would be an attempt to open a community in a wing of the old convent.

This return, which had been foreseen, took place in the following month of September.

"We have made all the arrangements for the convent in Sestri" Comboni wrote to Canossa on the 23rd of September 1880, "with the owner, myself, Sembianti and the Mother superior. The papers will be examined by Brasca and Th. Ravignani. They were drawn up properly and also have the signature of the priest - brother of the owner, Fr. Angelo Tagliaferro whom, I hope will end up leaving not only the donated convent, but also all the rest"... (W. 6117).

In the same letter, one can also read that *'the diocesan bishop'* expressed himself as being *'extremely happy'*.

The Bishop of Verona was also happy, but he still remained doubtful, and on the 27th of September 1880, he wrote to the *'donor'*:

*"Immediately on his return from Sestri, the very reverend Rector of the African Institutes came to me [...] to give me an account of all that has taken place between yourself and His excellency Monsignor Comboni. You will understand, Most reverend Sir how much I admired and how content I was about the generous deed you have done for the good of the eminently humanitarian and religious work of the regeneration of Nigrizia... As I read that act, it came to my mind that your holy intentions would be much more assured if the deed were made legal as this is so necessary these days. I see that this is how it should be, but this will be confirmed once I receive your opinion. You may give to these observations of mine the weight that, in your wisdom and prudence, you consider necessary."*¹³⁶

Unfortunately, it was not a 'generous act'

In the light of what then followed, Fr. Angelo Tagliaferro showed that he was not that generous benefactor he had seemed to be at the beginning. Perhaps, if the Founder himself had been able to follow things up personally for a few more months, the epilogue might have been different.

¹³⁶ AP SC Various Colleges (Italy) f. 1317.

But the bishop of Sudan was in a hurry to return to his See.

When he passed through Sestri for the last time on the 22nd of November 1880, when Virginia Mansur and her sister were no longer there, the little community of the sisters seemed to be already established in the old convent with Sr. Matilde Corsi, who had arrived the previous month, as Superior. So, something was actually happening, but not as much, perhaps, as should have or could have been done. Therefore, Daniel Comboni left with a certain degree of worry, which he decided to share with Fr. Sembianti a few days after he reached Egypt.

“Therefore, just as I commend myself to God, so you should put total trust in the Heart of Jesus which will direct you well, both in Sestri and in Verona. To teach only catechism does not seem to me to be sufficient work for Sestri [...] but all you can do will be acceptable to God.” (W. 6165)

Since, however, the letters of Sembianti to Comboni which have come down to us until now are very few,¹³⁷ it is not so easy to faithfully reconstruct now the whole affair and to understand fully, why, at the end of the day, such an important project was not successful. From the replies of the Founder to the Rector in Verona, it can be deduced however, that:

a) Once Monsignor Comboni was far away, Fr. Tagliaferro began to demand, in his own way, that ‘terms and conditions’¹³⁸ present in the act of ‘donation’ be respected. In Verona, however, there was no willingness to invest much money with the risk of losing it all without first defining the legal validity of the donation and modifying also the conditions (See, W. 6169-70);

¹³⁷ Fr. Giovanni Dichtl, wrote to Fr. Sembianti on the 29th of November 1881, *“I keep all of your letters (to Monsignor), so tell me if I have to burn them or send them to you – I saved them from the consular seals ”...* (AP SC Afr. Cent. Vol. 9, f. 315).

¹³⁸ The said donation, one reads in the document, is made on the following terms and conditions: that Monsignor Comboni [...] or his delegate must open in the building an Institute or college of young men and women who, under the direction of the missionaries and the sisters, will be educated and then go to Central Africa as priests, catechists, artisans and Sisters.” [AP SC Collegi vari (Italia), f. 1318]. See, GILLI, A, p. 296.

b) Until such times as Fr. Tagliaferro would meet with Luigi di Canossa personally to revise and make legal the new act of donation, it would be necessary to ‘*steer a middle course*’ so that such an important undertaking could be accomplished.

“I will keep up his morale with letters, but do not be discouraged,” Comboni wrote to Fr. Sembianti on the 17th of December 1880, *“and prepare a good female teacher with a diploma. God’s works are never established without serious difficulties because, were everything to go smoothly, we would always have as our enemy the devil [...]. It is in the great interest of the Work to have the two houses in Sestri [...]. How would I have managed had I feared the devil who uses both the good and the bad, to found and to achieve the African Mission [...]. Let them say what they like in Verona”...* (W. 6171).

It is this last sentence which helps us to understand that, if the foundation in Sestri could not, in the end be realized, it was not only because of the misunderstandings which came about, in the end, with the donor, who probably used the name of Comboni himself as a means to his own ends,¹³⁹ but it was also due to the opposition of some of those in Verona who cannot be better identified. On his part, the Founder, even though disappointed, did not want to insist:

“We will withdraw the Sestri house in accordance with His Eminence’s wishes”, he replied to Sembianti on the 13th of July 1881 (W. 6846). And to Sr. Matilde Corsi, who had written to the founder to express her ‘*regret about that withdrawal*’, he said:

“But it is the disposition of God, and the Rector could not do otherwise in view of that miserable usurer [...]. He wrote to me that the convent is always there and available to me. But I answered him reproving him for deceiving me and for wanting to deceive the world [...]. Certainly, if he does not give me the convent and garden, with all the legal forms, with nothing owing and without wanting to be their administrator himself, I will never engage in relations with him. Courage, we will found other Institutes”... (W. 7068).

¹³⁹ *“As regards Sestri, I gave no positive order to build: I merely expressed that if I had the money, I would make that expense: no more. Instead, Fr. Angelo said and wrote several times: if I run up expenses and they are not approved, I will pay”...* (W. 6646: Comboni to Sembianti. El Obeid, April 17th 1881)

The hour of darkness

*"I am hanging on the Cross,
but the Lord has been there too"...*

(Daniel Comboni, June 11th 1880)

For Daniel Comboni, the '*episode of Sestri*' was closed, for better or worse, with the withdrawal of the community on the 4th of July 1881. On his part, even though he was disappointed, he would have thought no more about it.

But, as he had written to Sr. Matilde Corsi, ex Superior of Sestri who was also saddened by the failure of the enterprise, the reason for which he had considered the *enterprise in Sestri*, still existed and therefore, he would continue to make further attempts to open, in different cities and countries new centres of formation in favour of the African Mission.

The founder was taken by surprise, however, by the harsh letter he received at the beginning of July 1881 from the Bishop of Verona. In this letter, to his surprise, he was scolded for having always acted on his own, and in the case of Sestri, of having made '*important contracts*' without consulting anyone and therefore, risking to '*waste money given for the mission*'.

Further, and this was the more serious issue, Luigi di Canossa was asking him '*who*' had '*urged him [...] for ulterior motives to get involved in this affair of Sestri*' because, according to him, it had to be Virginia...

"I just don't know what kind of world we live in today" Daniel Comboni commented as he wrote to Giuseppe Sembianti, *"Here I am exposed to death so as to serve Jesus in the midst of suffering and crosses, happy to die to save the poor Africans and in fidelity to my arduous, difficult and holy vocation, and then I am supposed to be guided by ulterior considerations unworthy of an Apostle of Africa, etc, just to obtain a convent at Sestri? I have neither the breath nor the energy to write any more. I am simply amazed at being treated like this and to hear how I am thought of in Verona by my greatest benefactor. No, it is not Jesus Christ who has led His Eminence to feel this way about me"...* (W. 6814).

Feeling himself called into question, Giuseppe Sembianti answered him as follows:

*“In your last letter you blame others for the distress and bitterness with which His Eminence wrote to you: whom you can blame for this idea, I would be unable to guess [...]. **I will tell you only that I did not suggest to His Eminence** the sentiments which I express to your Most Reverend Excellency **about you and Virginia**. Indeed, to put it frankly, to read such feelings copied down, as Your Excellency does, **I was disgusted**. Fr. Luciano, whom I could not but allow to read the whole letter, will testify to this.”* (W. 7073)

So, who could it have been?

According to Daniel Comboni, such a negative attitude towards him by the bishop of Verona, could only have originated with the arrival in Italy in May 1879 of Fr. Bartolomeo Rolleri*. (See, W. 6097)

He was, Comboni wrote some time later to Propaganda fide, *“the cause of all my woes”*, because, *“he provoked and kept alive disagreements among my missionaries in the Vicariate.”* (W. 6092)

From what happens afterwards, one can surmise that Fr. Rolleri probably continued to do the same thing in Verona, where Fr. Grieff was already present and would be joined shortly later by Fr. Stanislao Carcereri...

In Verona, in the second half of 1879, in fact, as we have already mentioned, it was necessary to come to a conclusion about the definitive nomination of the Rector for the African Institutes. At the same time, the founder was worried about how to teach Arabic language in both houses, and for this reason he accepted the proposal of Virginia Mansur to take care of this along with her cousin, Alessandro.

Without being able to foresee that it would happen, the arrival of the Arabs in Verona was manipulated by who had a personal interest in the choice of the new superior. Therefore, the slanderous action of Rolleri was compounded by that of Nicola Grieff with his *‘perfidious insinuations’* (W. 6119), which were damaging first and foremost to Virginia, but also to Comboni.

At first, some measures were taken to ensure the complete freedom of action of the new Rector with the Institutes, later, in May 1880, Luigi di Canossa acted secretly¹⁴⁰, asking Propaganda Fide to intervene in order to “*free the mission*” once and for all “*of a certain Virginia, who had been ‘dismissed’*”, which is not precise, *by the Sisters of Saint Joseph.*” (W. 6994)

Daniel Comboni was in Ischl, waiting to be received by the Austrian Emperor when he received this letter which was dated the 3rd of August 1880 and which did not regard only Virginia, but also himself. The Bishop of Verona, in fact, had not limited himself to the letter of May 15th, but about one month later he had sent another, the content of which was accepted by *Propaganda Fide* due to the authority of the author. It contained, Aldo Gilli tells us, “*new, more serious allegations against Monsignor Comboni,*” the meaning of which were “*summarized in the following note written at the end of the letter by someone at Propaganda Fide [...]: ‘Monsignor Comboni is incapable of directing the Institute’*”¹⁴¹.

Resignation presented, but not accepted

As a consequence of that second letter, Cardinal Simeoni felt obliged to express his feelings to the interested person, and, judging from the following response which is dated the 27th of August 1880, he must have done it in very strong terms.

“*Most Eminent and Reverend Prince,*

I received your venerable

*letter of the 3rd of this month about two weeks ago [...]; I well understood **the full import and meaning of the letter**, and I have seriously considered whether, given my weakness, and indeed, nothingness, I can still be really of use to the African apostolate, [...] or whether I am more likely to do it harm; the more so because now I have really become more sensitive to the*

¹⁴⁰ “*I would be grateful to Your eminence for not letting Monsignor Comboni know,*” one reads in the letter, “*that I have anything to do with this business [...]. On the other hand, he is so docile that I feel that one private letter from Your eminence would suffice*”... (AP SC Afr. C. Vol. 8, f. 1059: Canossa to Simeoni. Verona, May 15th 1880.

¹⁴¹ A GILLI, 1979, p. 323.

blows of adversity and far less able to carry crosses, because of so many difficulties, privations, illnesses, fevers; because of so much heartbreak, struggle and opposition, all borne for many years but particularly during the recent and terrible period of the famine and plague.

However, since we must always trust in God and in his grace alone [...] and since the works of God are always born at the foot of the Cross, and must always be marked by his Cross's adorable seal, I have decided to abandon myself in the arms of divine Providence, the source of charity for the poor and the protector of justice and innocence. Consequently, I put myself in the hands of my Superiors"... (W. 6084-85).

The same Superiors, as we can see in what follows, have a rethink and they do not accept that resignation presented with such clarity and honesty.

On the contrary, not only was Virginia Mansur, at least for the time being, seen in a better light,¹⁴² but the Bishop of the Sudan was summoned to Rome by Propaganda Fide which, as he explains himself to Fr. Francesco Giulianelli, *"has given me a lot of work on some new African Vicariates that are being founded beyond the Equator. But I have nearly come to the end of my work and can do no more. I worked night and day without visiting anyone except in the Church or the convent where I said Mass in the mornings."* (W. 6132)

Daniel Comboni, in fact, was in a hurry. His heart and his mind were already in Africa, where he felt it was urgent that he return forever.

Therefore as soon as he reached Verona, he dedicated himself entirely with all the strength he had left to preparing his last expedition to Africa.

¹⁴² On the 11th of September 1880, Luigi di Canossa, after having listened to Maria Bollezzoli, wrote once again to Propaganda Fide: *"the Arab, Virginia, has been fully justified on all points. Now she is ready to send her sister away [...], She would come here to Verona, to enter the noviciate and is determined to make her profession and to give herself over to obedience and to work for the mission."* (ACR, A/17/14/266)

The Founder takes his leave

“I am impatient to fly to my destination, although I am worn out and exhausted”... (W.6115).

When he arrived in Verona at the beginning of November, after having granted himself a ‘*short rest*’ in Rome with a visit to the Holy Father and another to Cardinal Massaia, Daniel Comboni dedicated himself heart and soul to preparing what would be his final departure.

First of all it was necessary to establish the names of those who would go with him.

In the house at *Santa Maria in Organo*, there were at that time, apart from the Superior, 7 professed sisters, 6 novices, and 8 postulants, among whom was Virginia Mansur who had returned from Sestri Levante. The Founder decided to take with him at least five new missionary women, two of whom, however, were still novices. He felt he could overcome this problem by admitting to their first profession, on November 14th after only one year of noviciate, the two young women from Piemonte, Francesca Dalmasso and Rosalia Conte. Therefore, since the group, including the men, was now complete and it was too big, he decided to divide it in two in this way:

- Bartolomeo Roller, Giuseppe Frontini, Faustina Stampais and Bartolomea Benamati would leave on the 17th of November from Trieste.
- Daniel Comboni, together with two catechists, Domenico Donazzoni and Battista Felici, and three Sisters: Maria Casella, Rosalia Conte and Francesca Dalmasso would leave together on the 27th from Naples.

This, at least, was what Fr. Sembianti and Mother Bollezzoli herself believed.

In reality, and we can intuit many things from this, only Faustina Stampais was aware, probably, that at Trieste, they would be joined by a young woman from Vienna, Anna Kubitschek.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ “In your letter you mention a certain Anna, won over in Trieste,” we read in a letter of Mother Bollezzoli addressed to Faustina. “Is she black or white? Religious or secular?” [AMN, 8(2004)95].

Daniel Comboni, who personally accompanied her to the port, (See W. 6147) had got to know her in Vienna, where the Ursulines in that city had presented her to him as a solid missionary vocation. For reasons which have not been documented, the Founder preferred to avoid her passing through Verona. It would be better to get her to go directly to Cairo, where a feminine international noviciate could be opened. Verona, from what he could see, was not yet ready for this.

Regarding Virginia Mansur, instead, the Founder could not foresee what would happen later and he considered it more advantageous for the Institute for Virginia to remain in Verona as an Arabic and French teacher. While still convinced that the difficulties which Sembianti, who was not yet persuaded of the necessity to study Arabic,¹⁴⁴ had brought up, would be smoothed over once they knew each other better, he still sought out the opinion of the Superior of Sestri, where Virginia had been until the middle of November 1880, before deciding what to do. In the end, as he had been completely calmed not only by the opinion of Sr. Matilde Corsi¹⁴⁵, but also, and especially by the opinion of Maria Bollezzoli,¹⁴⁶ he decided that the young Syrian woman, instead of returning to Africa with him, would remain in Verona for her noviciate and become, in the end, a *Pia Madre della Nigrizia*.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Sembianti, it would seem, had written to Fr. Luigi Bonomi to find out if Arabic was really so important in the mission that it had to be studied in Verona. (see, GILLI, A. p. 328).

¹⁴⁵ *"In the four months that Virginia was with me in Sestri"* Sr. Matilde had said, *"I found her always obedient in everything. I found in the excellent Virginia a burning zeal and a true attachment to the mission of Africa. Her only remaining desire is to sacrifice the rest of her life for the salvation of the poor Africans"*... [AMN, 10(2005)142-43].

¹⁴⁶ See, AP SC, Afr. C, vol. 9 ff. 184-85v: Bollezzoli to Comboni. Verona, 28th of June 1880.

¹⁴⁷ See, W. 7197: Comboni to Simeoni. Khartoum, September 1881. Even if she was admitted to the postulancy by the Founder himself, Virginia Mansur will not, however, go on to the noviciate. In the register of the *Consulte* held in the Mother House in 1881, we can read: *"28th of August 1881. Today at 3 o'clock, we met [...] for the first time with the Most Reverend Superior, Fr. Sembianti, the Assistant Superior and the Secretary and the two Counsellors [...]. After having prayed [...] the Reverend Superior read that article of the Constitutions which speaks about the qualities required for the admission of candidates. After consultation, it was im-*

In view of all this, it is incomprehensible how anyone could doubt, in good faith, that in the heart of Daniel Comboni there was a '*passion*' other than his '*passion for Africa*'. Otherwise, if there had even been a '*spark*' of passion for Virginia, as he says himself very objectively the following year, "*I would not have brought her to Verona, I would not have entrusted her to the very Sisters I founded to make them holy.*" (W. 6983)

"*Although I am certain that I will soon succumb to so many crosses, which in conscience, I feel I do not deserve,*" he had written twenty days previously on the 9th of July 1881, "*still may my Jesus, the true vindicator of innocence and protector of the afflicted, be ever blessed. Africa will be converted; and if I am not to have consolation on earth, I will have it in heaven*"... (W. 6815).

partially concluded that Miss Virginia Mansur is not a suitable candidate for these Sisters due to her bizarre temperament and her lack of spirit of observance"... (APMR, VI/A/5/1-2979).

7.

The Last ‘Day’ of the Father

*“I fear nothing in the entire universe. We are talking about the interests of Jesus and of the Church and we will be able to become significant foundation stones of the great edifice of the African Church which is the most arduous work, but also the most glorious and humanitarian **hic et nunc** of the Catholic Church.”*

(Daniel Comboni, 17th of December 1880)

On the 22nd of November 1880, Daniel Comboni left Verona for the last time. It is interesting to recall, for those who would like to see a ‘sign’, how the last days that he spent in Italy were characterized by particularly bad weather.

“On the 20th and the 21st”, Maria Bollezzoli wrote prophetically to Faustina Stampais on November 26th, “there was horrible weather here; fiat and always fiat. The good Lord, who knows how to bring all to a good end, knows how to arrange and allow the lesser evil.” She therefore informed, “His Excellency [Comboni] arrived safe and well on the 20th evening [from Trieste]. He said, our travellers will encounter a bit of a storm, but it will not be too strong. May the will of the Lord be done.”

The letter continued, *“On the 22nd at 6pm he left Verona for Cairo in the company of the two sisters from Piemonte, and of Sr. Carlotta and Sr. Giuditta assigned to Sestri. I think he went via Torino.”*¹⁴⁸

Although it may seem incredible, this is all that we know about the Father’s last departure from Verona. It was a ‘different’ departure, which one could say came about all too suddenly,

¹⁴⁸ AMN, 8(2004)95.

without a ‘farewell’ or commemoration which the Diary (*Cronaca*) or the *Annals* might have recorded.

Less than two months later, however, Number 24 of the *Annals* published a circular letter by the Bishop of Verona which, commenting on the recent encyclical letter of Leo XIII on Missionary Works, at a certain point underlined:

“If there is a diocese that distinguishes itself in generosity towards these pious works, it is definitely ours [Verona]. In fact, the Pious Work of the Propagation of the Faith present in Lyons, is one of the most abundant sources for the life and the extension of the very important mission founded in Central Africa by the untiring Monsignor Comboni. Who among us does not know that the Illustrious and Reverend Monsignor Comboni is Veronese, and that most of those men and women facing together with him the heat, the laborious desert crossings, the immense deserts and privations and dangers and sufferings of every kind in every place and in every way, sweating in that vineyard, full of thorns and tribulations, offering their lives as a holocaust to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the sole purpose of saving from eternal death and bringing to true life Unhappy Nigrizia, are also Veronese?” (p. 30).

The last greeting and blessing in Sestri

In the community of Sestri, where there were the two novices and from where the very young Sr. Maria Casella, just turned 18 years old, would leave with him, Daniel Comboni was eagerly awaited. Sr. Marietta could not forget the last evening, when Comboni himself animated the recreation speaking about the mission. Sr. Matilde would have liked him to continue beyond the time scheduled, but instead he replied to her, *“It is not necessary. Kneel down and I will give you my blessing.”*¹⁴⁹

The next day, the little group set out on their journey to Rome where, according to Sr. Maria Casella, they would remain for three days.

¹⁴⁹ See APMR, F/1/3-232.

In her account, we can read further, *“His Holiness Leo XIII was sick and so [Monsignor] was received in a private audience [...]. Then, when we left for Naples, like a good Father he took care of assuring for us a good lunch before we boarded. The sea was stormy. Knowing that we suffered from sea sickness, he always took care to send us a waiter, sparing nothing to assure that we had all that we needed. When we disembarked in Alexandria in Egypt, he took care of all the luggage, leaving us only with our hand luggage. He accompanied us to the Sisters of Saint Vincent to have a rest and at thee in the afternoon he came to collect us to take us to the station so that we could continue our journey to Cairo. During the journey, he took care of our health like a good Father and we arrived at around 10pm. After having refreshed ourselves he came to wish us goodnight and to give us his blessing, instilling in us courage to face all that we might meet in these countries”...*

The third female noviciate in Cairo

Since, in reality, he felt very unwell,¹⁵⁰ Daniel Comboni felt that he had no time to lose. The agenda of his last stopover in Cairo was, in fact, very full. Nevertheless, even if his most important appointment was, without a doubt, the one he had asked of the Khedive Tawfiq*, his first preoccupation and his priority once he arrived in Cairo was that of opening another noviciate in the feminine Institute. The finality was clear: As he could no longer count on the Sisters of St. Joseph he had to assure, as quickly as possible, the collaboration of local missionaries of his own, especially those who spoke Arabic.

That he had thought about this before leaving Verona is confirmed by the fact that he took with him an aspirant, that is, Anna Kubitschek. Naturally, as the formator, he would have sent from

¹⁵⁰ *“I am still worn out by the journey,” he confided to Fr. Sembianti on the 6th of December 1880, “I have been horribly tired for so many days, especially due to the pace of work in Roma and Naples, and I paid the sea the usual tribute.” (W. 6161). On the same day, he explained to Monsignor Des Garets, “Worse fevers afflicted me in Verona, I still feel the consequences of the terrible sufferings of 1878-79, and I do not sleep more than 3 hours in 24, but in spite of this I feel great vigour and, having organized my Institutes in Verona, I feel obliged to resume my work in Central Africa.” (W. 6164)*

the Sudan a new superior who already had missionary experience. It was sufficient for now that Amalia Andreis might agree to remain in Cairo for some more months with those newly arrived.

From what we can understand, the Founder wanted first to start a dialogue, as he usually did, with the community of the Institute of the Sacred heart of Mary in order to take together the last decision about who would leave with him for the Centre and who would remain.

The result was not exactly what he had hoped for, precisely because he wanted to respect, especially, the desire of Amalia Andreis to leave for the mission. In the end, an agreement was reached and the community of the new formation house was composed of Sr. Faustina Stampais, Superior and Formator, Sr. Bartolomea Benamati and Sr. Maria Casella, newly professed and starting her period of acclimatization and of perfecting her Arabic, together with Anna Kubitscheck as a postulant.

At this point, the Superiors in Verona were also informed of how things had gone. In his first letter, dated December 10th, Daniel Comboni informed Fr. Sembianti of how, more or less, that dialogue had gone and why the two Sisters from Piemonte (W. 6167) would be continuing their journey towards Central Africa. Only one week later, however, on the 17th of December 1880, explicit mention is made of “*an angel of a postulant who had been recommended by the Ursulines of Vienna*” (W. 6174). In the meantime, however, Fr. Giulianelli himself, at that time the Superior of the Institutes in Cairo, had turned to the Rector in Verona asking him to send to Cairo everything necessary for the vestition of Anna Kubitscheck whom the Founded had decided to admit to the Noviciate before leaving again.

At this request, Fr. Sembianti had provided everything and had communicated cordially, “*Today we are sending you the Ritual for the vestition of the Sisters. Later on we will send also the one used for profession.*”¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ ACR, A/28/24/3: Sembianti to Giulianelli. Verona, 12th of January 1881. Two months later, Fr. Sembianti himself would write further: “*I am glad to hear about the new postulant* [Maria Concetta Agata Massaud, Egyptian]. May the Lord be thanked. (ACR, A/28/24/20: to Giulianelli. Verona, 22nd of March 1881.

Maria Bollezzoli, instead, wrote to encourage Faustina in her new responsibility.

“I well understand the hesitation you must be experiencing”, she wrote to her at the beginning of January, “knowing how you would always prefer to live in subordination to others and now see yourself all of a sudden put before others. [...]. Take courage. I will not use up words to recommend you those entrusted to your care, because you know your duty well enough. I hope that they will take you well and I ask you to keep me informed about this and I also hope that you will ask my help in anything that you think I could do to help you.”...¹⁵²

Meeting with Tawfiq Pasha

Before leaving Cairo with the caravan, it was very important for the Bishop of Sudan to obtain an audience with the Khedive. The mission of Central Africa, in fact, was situated in a territory which depended on him politically, since the Sudan at that time was part of the Turkish Empire and had been placed under the jurisdiction of the Viceroy of Egypt.

Thanks also to the diplomatic skills of Daniel Comboni, the meeting, which took place on the 11th of December 1880, was a success and had concluded with the exchange of gifts. It was not by chance that the khedive was offered by its author, the *‘Quadro Storico delle Scoperte Africane’*¹⁵³; a gift which was much appreciated and which led to, after the visits to various ministers, to the authorization of two important *‘firmans’* or travel permits, in favour of the Catholic mission and valid also for the customs:

¹⁵² AMN, 8(2004)98: Bollezzoli to Stampais, 8th of January 1881.

¹⁵³ W. 6179: Comboni to Sembianti. Cairo, December 17th 1880. The strategic importance of such a gift is evident from the beginning of this piece of writing, in which the author underlines the dimension of civilization – faith and civilization – in his work of evangelization in Africa. The Viceroy of Egypt, a Muslim, would never have given his approval and his protection to a Catholic mission if this had not favoured, with its presence and its activities, also a more rapid westernization of the country, avoiding proselytism, at least in those territories which had already been Islamized. (See, G. ROMANATO, 2003, p. 67).

- the first so that it could be presented to Rauf Pascia*, Governor General of the Sudan, so that he could protect the mission and assist the bishop in any way that he could (W. 6194);
- the second, along the same lines, *“for all the Governors of the Egyptian Monarchy, which extends as far as Lake Nyanza, and to its borders with the empire of Waday”*... (W. 6195).

Thus, strengthened in his position, the bishop could now dedicate himself more peacefully to the immediate preparations for his departure...

We will leave from Suez and there will be sixteen of us... (See, W. 6179)

Even although he was feeling ‘*so tired out*’ to the point of ‘*not being able to breathe anymore*,’ (W. 6203), the Founder wanted to be personally involved, as he had always been, in the preparations for the departure. Four other priests, five brothers, if we count among these his Portuguese assistant, and six sisters, Amalia Andreis, Maria Rosa Colpo, Caterina Chincarini, Elisabetta Venturini, Rosalia Conte and Francesca Dalmasso, would go with him. The caravan would leave Cairo on the 29th of December and go towards Suez, where they would embark for Suakin two days later. From Verona, Maria Bollezzoli accompanied them ‘*in her heart*’:

“She expressed her wish for them as follows: *“May the Angel who once accompanied the young Tobit until he reached his destination safe and well and then brought him back to his beloved family, also conduct your caravan to where the numerous crowd of unhappy slaves stretches out their thin arms imploring help, and may God instil in all of you great courage so that you may be able to eradicate from unhappy Nigrizia the power of Hell.”*¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ AP SC, Afr. C., vol. 9, ff. 228-228v: Bollezzoli to Comboni. Verona 16th of December 1880.

The journey was a happy one, even though it was not always smooth.

Sr. Amalia wrote to her family, *"As you already know, I left Cairo on the 29th of December. From Cairo to Suez it takes about 8 hours by train [...]. We stopped in Suez until the 31st.*¹⁵⁵ *That day we boarded an Egyptian steam boat after lunch [...]. The sea was quite calm [...].*

The approach to Suakin is very dangerous because of the rocks, but thanks be to God we arrived safely towards midday on the 5th [of January]...

*I believe we will be departing from here on the 10th [...]. We shall mount camels and head into the great desert."*¹⁵⁶

Two 'miracles' of the Founder in the desert

The stretch of desert which Sr. Amalia mentions, with a caravan trail from Suakin to Berber, was that called the Bisciarini, from the name of the tribe responsible before the government for the security of travellers and the goods they are carrying with them. On that occasion, there were twenty camel dealers escorting the Bishop's caravan.

In another letter of Sr. Amalia, we can read, *"Except for the last days, we travelled through bare rocky mountains, crossing rocks and also sometimes some plains [...]. One evening, we passed a mountain gorge and if it had not been for Our Lady who guided us by the light of the night stars, we would have fallen from the camels and broken our necks [...]. Thanks be to God everything went well."*¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ One can read in the report of Fr. Giovanni Dichtl, *"Monsignor stayed in the small guest house of the Reverend Fathers of Holy Land, and the Sisters were warmly received by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd who serve in the hospital and in the school for girls."* [Annals, 25(1881)70].

¹⁵⁶ AMN, 4(2002)53-54 Andreis to an uncle. Suakin, January 7th, 1881.

¹⁵⁷ AMN,4(2002)55-56, Idem, Khartoum, 30th of January 1881.

However, according to the witness of two other travellers, if everything had gone well, it was also due to the constant and vigilant presence of the Founder.

Sr. Caterina Chincarini later testified, *“On the desert crossing which I made with Monsignor Comboni from Suakin to Berber, by chance I was given a skittish camel, which despite the remarks made by Monsignor, the camel dealers did not want to change. While we were in a very rocky area, my camel swerved badly and threw me off. Without knowing how, I found myself in the arms of Monsignor who, fearing this might happen, had been walking on foot alongside my camel. He caught me immediately thus avoiding that I knock my head against the rocks.”*¹⁵⁸

Then Sr. Elisabetta Venturini also recalls, *“I made the journey through the desert with Monsignor Comboni. He was always kind and caring towards all of us [...]. When I fell from the camel and was in grave danger because of an internal haemorrhage caused by the fall [...], probably one [of his] blessings was the main remedy”*...¹⁵⁹.

Introducing his Sisters to public relations

On the 22nd of January 1881, after ‘only’ twelve days of desert crossing, the Combonian caravan reached Berber, a completely Muslim city but nevertheless, with a mission station belonging to the Vicariate of Central Africa.

As always, the Founder took advantage of the short stopover to teach those newly arrived about the ‘*public relations*’ between Muslim and Christian authorities which were so important for the future of the mission. It is interesting that, even although he expressed great respect for the local traditions, he did not renounce showing, in practical ways, the different treatment received by women in European civilization and in the heart

¹⁵⁸ APMR, VI/Pp/5/1–1395: Witness for the cause of beatification. Verona, 21st of November 1929.

¹⁵⁹ APMR, VI/Pp/2/5–1383, p. 57. See AMN, 10(2005)39.

of the Catholic Church. For this reason, when it was time to go to visit Mohammad Chalifat, the great Sheikh of all the Atmur, he told the sisters to prepare themselves and come with him.

Later, Sr. Amalia Andreis would write that during the stop-over in Berber, *“we went to visit a chief in that city who was a descendant of royals and is now chief of the desert territories. He is a very rich man who has about 200 women. We went with His Excellency, two Fathers and some lay people. We entered a small courtyard which was shaded by a most beautiful tree. The owner of the house, dressed in Arab style came immediately. [...] We exchanged greetings [...]. He immediately led us inside, and we climbed a little stair which was wet and we found ourselves in a porch which had a mud floor which was equally wet and here we entered a large room which had a high ceiling and six windows [...]. This also had a mud floor which was wet. This was to make it cool [...]. You have to know that the Arabs sit on the ground. If they are rich they have carpets and divans. These are high and when they sit down, they take off their shoes and sit on their heels.*

The divan that this gentleman had was so high one had to jump to reach it. The Fathers sat in Arab style and I climbed up with a little jump. During the visits, it is not polite to leave before being served some refreshments. During this visit, there were six servants. Four stayed at the door, while two came with well used towels and poured out a glass of sweet water for us. They gave us something to wipe our mouths. They did the same with the coffee which they brought us a little later. They also gave each of us a gift of mint herbs and a rose.”...¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ AMN, 4(2002)57-58: Andreis to her Uncle Carlo. Khartoum, February 20th 1881. “Mohammad-Chalifat”, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl pointed out in his Report which we have already cited, *“is a good old man and he was very pleased when Monsignor presented to him his personnel. He immediately brought the most exquisite refreshments to the hall and he offered to Monsignor and all the guests beautiful flowers.”* [Annals, 26(1881)47].

Towards Khartoum

It is also interesting to see how the letter written on the 20th of February 1881 by Sr. Amalia, a witness of the esteem which the Viceroy of Egypt had for Daniel Comboni, continues.

“On the 24th [of January] we left for Khartoum on a government steam boat which the Governor of Khartoum had sent on the orders of the Viceroy of Egypt. The waters of the Nile are low at the moment and if it hadn’t been for us, the government would not have risked the steam boat. This is the kind of permission that Monsignor Comboni is able to attain. I cannot describe to you how beautiful and delightful the passage on the Nile was [...] one long journey from Berber to Khartoum [...].

The Nile is wide in some places and narrow in others [...]. Sometimes it is divided by islands. At the entrance to Khartoum, it divides into the White River and the Blue river, one to the right, the other to the left. The White Nile is bigger than the other. We will cross it by boat when we will go to Obeid (the Kingdom of Kordofan).

On the 28th of January, after lunch we prepared everything for our arrival in Khartoum [...]. I can hardly describe the enthusiasm of those awaiting our arrival ...”.

“We arrived well and found everyone there well”, the Founder confirmed the following day. Then he added, “Sr. Vittoria is beside herself with joy”. (W. 6425)

“I am developing my earlier idea of founding an Institute of Sisters in Syria” ...

The encounter with Sr. Vittoria Paganini, who had had to leave the noviciate of El Obeid at the end of 1879 because she was seriously ill, had reminded the bishop how important and urgent it was to think again about the preparation of the Sisters.

Sr. Vittoria, thanks to an operation considered a miracle of our Lady of the Sacred Heart,¹⁶¹ had recovered so well that Teresa Grigolini had transferred to El Obeid the provincial House,

¹⁶¹ See, AMN,7(2004)55ff.

leaving her as Superior in Khartoum. It was to her then that Daniel Comboni asked an account of the activities of the women.

Now, if the Superior was able to tell him that, in certain respects, the work was going very well, she could not also hide from him that the same could not be said about the school.

That was a ministry which Sr. Vittoria knew very well ¹⁶², and therefore, her analysis was surely objective: without well prepared teachers, like the Sisters of St. Joseph, the scholastic activities could not function well. This did not mean that they should be discouraged, but it did mean that it was necessary to provide the training as soon as possible.

After that conversation, the Founder understood that he had by his side an ally who could become precious. “A superior woman” (W. 7069), he would comment later, aware of her own limitations and those of others, but equally willing to overcome them, without uselessly giving up. With Sr. Vittoria by his side, the Founder found new hope that they would be able to go far.

In fact, he wrote to Fr. Sembianti on the 29th of January 1881, “*With the exception of the inconvenience that there are no female schools, and that no sister knows an iota of Arabic, I found the mission in a very good state, great self-denial, a spirit of sacrifice and enormous courage [...]. Central Africa is far better than it was believed to be and better than it was reported to Propaganda [...]. I keep going because I trust only in God and in you who are preparing good sisters for me [...].*”

I am developing my earlier idea of founding an Institute of Sisters in Syria”... (W. 6425-27).

¹⁶² Vittoria Paganini, before entering *the Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, had been employed as an inspector of the girls’ schools in Asiago(VI) and the surrounding area.

A pastoral visit to the Vicariate

“I would like to examine everything with my own eyes, with total thoroughness and tranquillity, and especially with conscience, because one cannot hoodwink Domine Deo”... (W. 6436)

On the 29th of March 1881 Daniel Comboni left the capital of Sudan for what would be his last pastoral visit in the Vicariate. He had already sent ahead, three weeks earlier, a group of missionary men and women, with 19 young Christians, all of them destined for Kordofan. The bishop, on his part, needed to dedicate some more time to Khartoum before remaining absent for a number of months. In fact, he was worried about the state of abandonment of those families which used to receive regular visits from the Sisters. In a letter addressed to the Rector of Verona, he expressed this worry:

“With Regard to the Sisters, since we are lacking the Arab element, we are more behind then ever [...]. For example, here in Khartoum, in the Eastern families and in those of Syria and Egypt, the sister was everything. The Sisters knew their problems and settled them, especially those of the women and they attracted the little girls to school. But now, neither Sr. Vittoria, nor the others, know them at all, and the others are not aware of their problems. So I had, and still have to visit all of them and try to solve their problems....

Then here, as to peace, obedience and dependence, I am and we are much better than before [...]. So, courage, let us forge ahead, and the time will come for ours too when they acquire the ability of the French [Sisters]. But for goodness sake, take few servants, and accept many educated women [...] serious women, good and with common sense... in brief, true women!!!

[...] Pray to the Lord that I can instruct our Sisters well and teach them to be missionaries, as I did with the Sisters of St. Joseph.”... (W. 6454 –56; 6481)

From what we can read further in the above mentioned letter, the first to be ‘instructed’ by him was the Superior herself because she seemed ‘a little harsh’.

“I warned her she should make charity prevail and that infidels and souls are not converted without charity, however holy a Sister may be; and she promised to correct herself. Then the others are docile, obedient and hardworking, but lack instruction. Sr. Vittoria [...] is the only one of the former Sisters who has some idea of the world and how to deal with it and also with outsiders, which is essential for a missionary woman, otherwise, no one will be converted”... (W. 6479).

On the departure of the Founder, seven sisters remained in Khartoum. They were Vittoria Paganini, Giuseppa Scandola, Matilde Lombardi, Fortunata Zanolli, Elisa Suppi, Francesca Dalmasso e Rosalia Conte. The last two whom the bishop had initially thought of entrusting to the care of Sr. Amalia Andreis, had their destinations changed as the Bishop explained in his letter to Fr. Sembianti in his letter of the 5th of March 1881.

First stage in El Obeid

“I am extremely pleased with the spirit of God that reigns among our Sisters, and with the eminent virtues of our Provincial Superior in Central Africa, Sr. Teresa Grigolini. She is a real saint, able and like an angel. Pray for her and for the 4 houses of Sisters we have in the Vicariate” ... (W. 6673).

In the provincial residence of El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan, Sr. Teresa Grigolini was awaiting the arrival of the bishop with a certain apprehension. The young but resourceful superior, in fact, had decided alone, in the previous month of December, to open a new feminine community in Delen, on the Nuba Mountains.¹⁶³

From Suakin, however, the bishop had already informed her, that in doing this, she had overstepped the limits of her au-

¹⁶³ See, AMN, 10(2005)161 f.

thority. She had excused herself in a letter to him, but without showing any remorse. On the contrary, she had told him, “*When Your Excellence will have considered all the circumstances, you will not be unhappy and you will not reprimand me for having taken this step.*”¹⁶⁴

She was right. The Bishop himself, a few days after his arrival in Kordofan, confirmed the opening of the new community of Sisters and he assigned another two sisters: Amalia Andreis and Caterina Chincarini. Thus, the communities of *Pie Madri* opened by him in Africa, were now five in number: one in Cairo, one in Khartoum and three in Kordofan with a total of eighteen Sisters and two novices. There was one novice in El Obeid and the other was in Cairo. The near future, they could hope, looked promising...

How the Founder saw and wanted his Sisters to be

“These Sisters who are here and who know how to suffer for Christ, are my strength after the Heart of Jesus”... (W. 6696).

In El Obeid, where he arrived on the 5th of April, 1881, Daniel Comboni dedicated most of the time set aside for the pastoral visit, also because the relative closeness of Malbes allowed him to keep in contact quite easily.

Sr. Teresa Grigolini, therefore, in her capacity as Provincial Superior, must have accompanied him more than once during his journeys in that area of the Vicariate, especially when future activities or the establishment of new foundations had to be planned.

All of this would have facilitated many conversations between the two of them, conversations in which the young women missionaries would often have been the subject. An echo of this can be clearly perceived in the letter of the 20th of April of that

¹⁶⁴ See, AMN, 12(2006)91: Grigolini to Comboni. El Obeid, 2nd of February, 1881.

same year which the Bishop of Sudan addressed to the Rector in Verona.

The great appreciation for Sr. Teresa and her sisters expressed in the letter was aimed at demonstrating to Giuseppe Sembali the way he had, preferably, to act in the important task of the formation of the missionary women. In this letter, amongst other things, one can read:

*“A model of the true missionary of Central Africa (and she really is like, or better than, Sr. Giuseppina Tabraui, who taught Virginia with Mother Emilienne [...] and the best of the Sisters of St. Joseph) is Sr. Teresa Grigolini, who (I am giving you my considered opinion, which is shared by the others and with Sr. Vittoria) is the **first and most** complete and perfect example in the Congregation of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia (leaving aside the eminent **holiness**, I mean the holiness of Sr. Maria Giuseppa Scandola which shines so brightly in a person of heroic humility, etc): with her outstanding mind, capacities, charity and piety; with the qualities of a Daughter of St. Vincent de Paul, she combines the sublime interior life of a Sacramentine and a Daughter of the Visitation.*

*In addition, she has iron health and a surprising vitality, and she also manages quite well in Arabic. This is the type I need. Here in Khartoum, she has brought to Christ and to the sacraments a number of souls that I would never have thought possible. When the time comes for me to establish a house in Syria, I am certain that Sr. Grigolini will succeed in six months, and you will know her in Verona and know the real mettle of a sister of Central Africa. But to succeed in this, that is, that each, or the majority of the Sisters become authentic missionaries in Central Africa, I agree with Sr. Grigolini. She has no idea how much I esteem her and indeed I fight with her. But I do hold the same opinion that the novices must be educated, as is presently being done by our Mother in Verona, under **Stigmatine inspiration**. Why? Because when they are sent to Africa so humble, compliant, plain and simple, as were the ones sent to Sudan, they adapt to practical life as one would desire.*

As regards religious education, therefore, please continue as you have been doing and as you mean to do. I say this because I know your spirit and your intentions very well indeed: holy and capable. Saintliness without capability, or capability without

saintliness are of very little value to a person who wants to undertake a missionary career. The missionary man or woman cannot go to heaven alone; alone they go to hell. They must go to heaven in the company of the souls they have helped to save. So, in the first place, holiness; completely free from sin and offence against God, and humble. But this is not enough: love too is necessary to make these men and women do good work.

A mission as arduous and difficult as ours cannot survive with just a patina, with people putting on airs of holiness, but full of egoism and self-centredness, caring very little about the salvation of souls. They must be fired with love which has its source in God, and with the love of Christ. Once one really loves Christ, then privation, suffering and martyrdom become sweet [...].

For the rest, my dear Rector, do not let any difficulties get you down: the works of God have always cost blood, sorrows and death [...] But I am certain that [...] they will be convinced that the Institute in Verona has in fact achieved something in the most difficult of all the works of the Catholic Apostolate, that our work is indeed under a divine blessing and that this work of ours is truly God's work. So you must act well and justly in Verona; and I shall cut the horns, resist and cut the legs off all the monsters of the abyss who are trying from all sides and with incredible cunning to annihilate or cripple it. Christ is more subtle and skilful than the Devil. [...].

Forgive me if I chattered too much, without wanting to. I can't sleep. Farewell.

† Bishop Daniel" (W. 6653-64)

In the community of Malbes

“In the Vicariate, I found much more good than the slanderers have been talking about in Egypt, Rome, France and Verona...” (W. 6676).

On the 24th of April, 1881, Daniel Comboni went to stay in the agricultural colony in Malbes for about twenty days. From there, in the shade of the great Baobab tree, which still exists today, on the very day of his arrival he wrote a letter to his father which began as follows:

“My dearest Father,

I am writing from a new little Christian community which we have founded in the Kingdom of Kordofan in a place where there are several wells, called Malbes. Here we have created a small Christian community which will grow little by little, since we have settled there, young married couples after they received Christian education in our establishments in El Obeid, assigning to each one a plot of land, on the produce of which they must live, as they do, and buying each couple a donkey¹⁶⁵. This Christian community is under the guidance of the young African Fr. Antonio Dobale whom you know from Verona and Limone, and I often send two Sisters here for a change of air, it being healthier (but hot). Now that the little girls are growing up, I must think of establishing a house for sisters”...* (W. 6674)

The two Sisters who had started going to Malbes the previous year were Sr. Elisa Suppi and Sr. Concetta Corsi. After Sr. Elisa Suppi became so seriously ill that she had to be transferred to Khartoum, in November 1880, it was Maria Rosa Colpo who

¹⁶⁵ As correctly underlined also by G. Romanato, the foundation of the agricultural colony in Malbes represented the ‘third stage’ of the Combonian missionary method, “consisting of the attempt to introduce the Catholic family model, favouring where possible, marriages between educated Africans from the missions” (See, G. Romanato, 2003, p. 316). Daniel Comboni found his inspiration for this model in “the wise system of the famous Reductions of Paraguay conceived of by the outstanding piety and deep wisdom of the Reverend Jesuit Fathers” (W. 3920)

accompanied Concetta and who opened with her, on the bishop's decision, a stable community.

Unfortunately, this important undertaking had to be interrupted almost immediately due to the death of Fr. Antonio Dobale first¹⁶⁶ and of Sr. Maria Rosa soon afterwards. Naturally, on the day that Comboni had written to his father, he could not have foreseen this. On the contrary, in his Plan of apostolic work, other new foundations were foreseen, among them Golfan in the Nuba Mountains around Delen, which was considered imminent.

On the other hand, he had been very satisfied and consoled about what he had seen during his visit. Results were clear. The church of El Obeid, fruit of the considerable efforts of Fr. Vincenzo Marzano and all the members of the mission, religious and lay, presented itself as one of the marvels of Sudan. The work of the missionary men and women was truly extraordinary and worthy of praise.¹⁶⁷ The fight against slavery was supported even by the government itself, which had "*nominated an officer with one hundred soldiers to supervise Jebel Nuba*" (W. 6733).

Thanks to all of this, and animated by even better prospects, despite the exhaustion which threatened him more every day, the bishop was set on going towards Delen with a new contingent of missionaries and sisters...

¹⁶⁶ See, AMN, 10(2005)39-61.

¹⁶⁷ On the 20th of May 1881, he wrote to Propaganda Fide, "*It is of great comfort to me to see all my missionaries... always happy and content and ready for more and more sufferings and death. They speak of hunger, thirst, illnesses and death as though they were lovely things. I am convinced that with regard to self-denial and a spirit of sacrifice, no mission has missionaries as dependable as mine, whether lay or religious*"... (W. 6751).

On the Nuba Mountains with a local chief

*“His Excellency, Monsignor Comboni [...] will leave in due time for Gebel Nuba. Poor Monsignor! It is difficult to describe the efforts he has to make when travelling. Imagine having to sit for five or six hours on the back of a camel. And he is heavy and getting old. Nevertheless, he can’t wait for the time to come when he can set off on a journey to visit even the furthest outstations. **To tell you the truth, I know Monsignor well, and the charity that burns in his heart is much more than he shows externally.***

***His heart is of a true Apostle** and it seems as if the Lord created him especially for Africa. He adapts himself to poverty and discomfort more than any other missionary. If he were here, you would see him stretched out on the ground on a mat with such indifference that I believe he wouldn’t even be aware of it. More than once, I saw him with tears in his eyes as he spoke and thought about the misery of these poor souls. Because of the intense heat, he sleeps very little at night so much so that during the day he suffers from extreme fatigue and sometimes he can hardly celebrate the Mass. When we tell him that we love the Africans, he cries with consolation. Then, when he sees them with heavy water jars on their heads [...] he feels so much compassion for them that I believe he suffers more from seeing them than they do from the carrying. Let us pray to the Lord that he may keep him with us for a long time to come, because, we will never be able find another Comboni, even though he is not well thought of by some in Verona.”....¹⁶⁸*

The hope of the young Provincial Superior, Teresa Grigolini, regarding the condition of the Bishop’s health, only lasted, unfortunately, for the first month of his stay in Delen.

Having arrived on the Nuba Mountains on the 28th of May, “with Fr. Luigi [Bonomi], Fr. Vincenzo [Marzano], Sr. Amalia and

¹⁶⁸ AMN, 12(2006)95-96: Grigolini to her brother. El Obeid, 12th of May, 1881.

Sr. Caterina” (W.6776), the founder felt ‘happy’ with his missionaries and with the courageous Sisters of ‘his’ congregation (see W. 6774). Despite the fact he did not even have strength to write, his plan of action was intense and exhilarating.

“After a few days, he immediately wrote to Fr. Sembianti, “accompanied by the priests, Fr. Luigi, Fr. Losi, Fr. Leone and Fr. Vincenzo and several lay people, I shall be leaving for Golfan and will tour these mountains (accompanied also by the Pontiff king, Cogiur Kakum) [a very interesting detail] and we will explore everything, especially Carco [...] and Golfan, a sort of general quarters of slave trade, and we will decide on where to found the central mission station among the Nuba Peoples.”¹⁶⁹

The new station which should have opened on the Mountains of Golfan had not, evidently, been chosen by chance. Daniel Comboni intended to ‘make common cause’ with “*The Nuban peoples ruined by slavery, decimated in nine out of ten over many years; [...]. The Arab Nomads, the Baggara, have almost destroyed them, aided by the former governors of Kordofan*”, he reported to the Cleric, Mitterruntzner on the 4th of June 1881, “*But since I explained things clearly to the Government, the Governor General, Rauf Pasha, supporting the noble intentions of the present Khedive of Egypt, charged me to examine the difficulties and the horrors on the spot and to suggest the effective means for the total abolition of the slave trade in these mountains*”... (W. 6784).

As evangelizer and pastor, the Bishop of Sudan could not be other than happy about the results obtained so far. “*a magnificent job*” (W. 6831). Things being as they were, the future of the mission presented itself full of promise. Instead...

¹⁶⁹ W. 6777: Comboni to Sembianti. Delen, 29th of May 1881. See, on this exploratory journey, the report of Fr. Vincenzo Marzano in *Annals*, 26(1881)26-35.

A flash of lighting in a clear sky

“God’s works must be born and grow at the foot of Calvary, the Cross is the mark of the work’s holiness [...] and it is necessary to pass through martyrdom, bloodshed and the Cross; and I, a physical wreck, confident in the Heart of Jesus, am sounder and more steadfast than ever, come what may; in my war cry, with which I founded and began the work for the redemption of Africa [...] yes, the heavens may fall, but as long as the Heart of Jesus helps me with His grace, I shall stand firm and unshakable in my place, and I shall die on the battlefield” ... (W. 5281-82).

On the 22nd of June 1881, as a first sign of the great storm that was about to overwhelm him, Daniel Comboni received a letter from his father which brought him *“the very greatest anxiety and pain”* (W. 6790).

Alerted, in Verona, at first by a lay brother, Giacomo Cavallini, who had confided to him some not very edifying events which took place in Africa with Virginia Mansur, Luigi Comboni had believed that he was glimpsing a truth, which for him was traumatizing, after he had already received a short note from Maria Bollezzoli in the previous month of April.¹⁷⁰

Still unbelieving before such a misunderstanding, the Founder confided in the Rector of Verona, his worry about the situation in which Virginia now found herself, and especially for what Luigi Comboni could be feeling.

“My greatest worry of all is my father”, he wrote in a letter on the 24th of June 1881, *“for whom I was always a great comfort, and who now, because of others, will perhaps end his holy life with a broken heart, and fearing for his son” ... (W. 6796).*

¹⁷⁰ See, AMN, 5(2003)55; Bollezzoli to Luigi Comboni, 25th of April, 1881.

The African Institutes in Verona endangered

As if this first blow had not been enough, on the following 8th of July, as soon as he returned to El Obeid from Delen, Daniel Comboni found in his correspondence a letter from Luigi di Canossa. It was a very harsh letter, which, according to the recipient, was based on the wrong premises regarding the house in Sestri and it reached very serious conclusions:

“You think of your own diocese and I will think of mine”, the Bishop of Verona wrote to him very directly. And then he added, *“Who urged you to enter for ulterior motives into this unhappy business at Sestri? Allow me to say it: Virginia”* (W. 6813).

“I just don’t know what kind of world we are living in today,” an astonished Comboni commented to Fr. Sembianti. *“Here am I exposed to death [...] in fidelity to my arduous, difficult and holy vocation, and then I am supposed to allow myself to be guided by ulterior considerations unworthy of an Apostle of Africa [...]?”*

Although I am certain that I will soon succumb to so many crosses, which, in conscience, I feel I do not deserve, still may my Jesus, the true vindicator of innocence and protector of the afflicted be ever blessed.”... (W. 6815)

Two days later on the 11th of July 1881, still very worried about the direction which events seemed to be taking, and after having spoken at length with Teresa Grigolini, he took up the argument again with the Rector of the Missionary Institutes.

Without *“our Cardinal Bishop of Verona,”* he recognized, *“this holy work [...] would not even have existed.”*

For this reason, and especially because the *‘two African Institutes’*, indispensable for the work of the regeneration of Africa, still existed in Verona, a breakdown in relationships was unthinkable. If Luigi di Canossa had been induced to read the events of Sestri and Virginia herself in the wrong way, it would be necessary that he now listen to what Daniel Comboni had to say.

By this time, however, he was convinced that *“the virtues and the talent of Virginia”* could not be recognized in Verona, where the young Syrian woman was out of place... (see, W. 6816-29).

**With regard to Virginia,
perhaps we have all exaggerated**

“In the course of my hard and wearisome enterprise it has seemed to me more than a hundred times that I have been abandoned by God, the Pope, the Superiors and by all men (just one person ... did not abandon me when she could speak to me, and encouraged me to place all my trust in God, the only protector of innocence, justice and God’s work, and that was V. M.)” (W. 6885).

By confiding this way in Fr. Sembianti, perhaps Daniel Comboni was trying to provide some clues which would permit the Rector to understand why he could not abandon Virginia precisely in the moment that she had fallen into disgrace in Verona. Shortly before, however, he had also said:

“Allow me to speak clearly now. As regards Virginia, I confess that I sin by having excessive esteem for her and giving her too much support: and you and His Eminence have too adverse and contrary views on Virginia and at the root of this were the sinister impressions first sown in your hearts by the perfidious Grieff [and] by the stolid farmer Giacomo [...]. For me, Virginia is too worthy of esteem; for you she is too despicable; exaggerations on both sides.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ W. 6867: Comboni to Sembianti. El Obeid, 16th of July 1881.

It is interesting at this point to re read what Costanza Caldara wrote in a letter in 1923, which she intended to address to Propaganda Fide, in an attempt to prevent a publication by the Camillian Fathers which tended to discredit the memory of the Founder. “Certainly, it is not given to me to know up to what point certain actions of our sorely missed Founder can be affirmed or denied. Much less can they be interpreted in such a way that would damage the esteem and the veneration in which I hold him. That said, I cannot also deny that “the necessity of gaining personnel to begin and establish his work in Central Africa, and the uncountable and extraordinary difficulties he had to struggle with, could sometimes make him act with indiscrete zeal and a lack of prudence ...” (APMR, F/1/14-3396). So, according to our second Superior General, who knew the Founder personally, he could sometimes be imprudent in his zeal, but nothing more than that.

After such an introduction, and repeating once again that distancing Virginia from the work would be “*a great misfortune for the mission*” (W. 6871), he encouraged Giuseppe Sembianti to ‘go ahead’ and to do all that His Eminence would order him; not without, however, having told him *frankly* that he was *still a child* in virtue.

“Yet I am the head and Founder of this most difficult work of the apostolate, he reminded him, which must prepare saintly workers to convert Africa, and God has wanted you to be the first instrument to form them, and little by little, you must learn what is required and become thoroughly acquainted with the anatomy of the human spirit, in order to form holy apostles”... (W. 6877)

The last return to Khartoum

*“May the Lord be always with you; I hope He will always be with me, because **I have always served Him and I serve Him still**, and I will always serve Him, until death, in the midst of great crosses, and with the sacrifice of my life”...*

(To his father: July 18th 1881).

At the end of July 1881, Daniel Comboni left Kordofan in the company of Fr. G. Battista Fraccaro, in order to ‘save’ him, but also because he intended to elect him as his Vicar General, and returned to the Bishop’s See.

Before leaving, however, he had had some long conversations with the Provincial Superior, who had also accompanied him during the ‘*exploration of all Bachit’s territory*’* (W. 6922) and to whom he had expressed his pleasure at the faithfulness, generosity and courage of the Sisters (See W. 6809; 6820; 6888; 6918) and for whom he had also outlined an interesting plan of future action which should have begun in the following month of November (See, W. 6922; 6970; 7040-41; 7069; 7117).

Unfortunately, Daniel Comboni would not live until November 1881. Having arrived in Khartoum exhausted, he had to take to bed, getting up only for some hours each day to dispatch the most urgent mail. This would certainly not make him feel any better.

His father, in fact, had written again, blurting out a serious insinuation regarding Virginia Mansur (See, W. 6935). In addition, Fr. Sembianti had also told him that if Virginia would insist on being admitted to the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*, she would remain in Verona (See, W. 6931) and would not return to Africa again. This was a condition that Virginia would never accept, even at the cost of leaving the Institute...

Promote the Good of the Institutes of Verona: God will see to the rest

The Founder felt very bitter. It was a serious matter to lose a candidate whom he considered particularly valid for the mission like this, without even being consulted beforehand. Nevertheless, writing to the Rector of Verona on the 13th of August 1881, he told him: *"I console myself with the thought that, freed from the troubles of Sestri and Virginia, you will be left in peace to direct and promote the good of the holy Work and God will see to the rest."*... (W. 6931)

He felt relieved, however, to know that 'the case of Virginia' in the end, had been referred to the Holy See. *"I am quite content"* (W. 6968), he confided to Fr. Sembianti on the following 27th of August. He told him that he felt certain that Cardinal Simeoni would have written to him, Comboni, to hear his side of the story. So, finally, the matter would be *"pondered and examined with greater care and attention than in Verona."*

Therefore, he concluded: *"I can truly say that I am beginning to breathe more easily, because I am sure that Virginia's affairs and her indistinct future will take a turn that will be in accordance with God's will, for her greatest good and for her vocation."* Then he added, *"Please keep aside the letters which I am going to write to Virginia."* (W. 6966-68)

Therefore, from the 3rd of September 1881, Daniel Comboni started to write his own version of the facts regarding Virginia Mansur for *Propaganda Fide*.

On his part, he was sincerely convinced that this last great effort would contribute to finally calming everyone down, so that once they all agreed in Verona and Khartoum, they could return to giving the best of themselves for the Beloved Nigrizia. He could not imagine that, instead, this was the exact opposite of what was hoped for in Verona.

The arrival of Sister Death

“Always pray to Jesus and to His Sacred Heart for me, as I hang on the Cross, so that I may always love more and more the Cross and the thorns that will convert Nigrizia”...

(27th of September 1881)

On the 22nd of September, the shadow of Sister Death had returned to darken the skies of the Vicariate. *“The day before yesterday I received the news of the death of the most devout Fr. Mattia Moron [...] We celebrated the Office and a Requiem Mass for the repose of his soul”.*

Then he added: *“ Before the catafalque had been removed, I received the news of the death of Fr. Antonio Dobale [...] struck down in El Obeid by a virulent typhoid fever [...].*

In midmorning, when the catafalque was still in its position, a telegram from Kordofan informed me that in Malbes, Sister Maria Colpo of the Pie Madri della Nigrizia, had died an edifying and enviable death.”... (W. 7145-47)

It was too much! Overcome by a sad foreboding, he confided then to a colleague, *“Well, this morning I gave orders for the catafalque to be left in the church, since I expect more kisses from our loving Jesus...”* (W. 7171)

In fact, at 7am on the 2nd of October, “*Paolo Scandi of Rome died a most edifying death*”... (W. 7222).

But it was not yet over. The following day, the 3rd of October, Fr. G. Battista Fraccaro, who had just been designated the “*future Vicar General [...] had to take to bed with a fever.*” (W. 7224). he would die some days later on the 9th of October.

The last *Te Deum*

With the death of Fr. Fraccaro, one can read in the biography of F. S. Geyer,¹⁷² “*Monsignor and the missionary, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl* were the only ones left on their feet in the Masculine Institute.*” (p. 88). Despite this, on the 4th of October, the bishop wanted to preside at the celebration of a solemn Mass on the occasion of the feast day of Francesco Giuseppe, Emperor of Austria.

“*As he sang the *Te Deum*”, the young author underlined, “his voice was remarkably sweet and changed, something which instilled fear in everyone.”*

In fact, that very night, “*Monsignor suffered a violent fever, which calmed towards morning [...] they write that he was resigned, and abandoned like a good child and he seemed so strong that no one could fear for him. He would walk in the garden [...].*

On the night between the 9th and 10th, Fr. Dichtl kept watch over Monsignor; as usual he was insomniac during the night. On the morning of the 10th, Fr. Fraccaro was buried. Towards midday,

¹⁷² See, F. S. GEYER, *Monsignor Daniele Comboni – Vescovo di Claudiopoli e Vicario Apostolico dell’Africa Centrale*. Rome 2000.

The particular value of this biography lies in the fact that it was written immediately after the death of Daniel Comboni, on the explicit request of “*The Rector of the Institutes in Verona, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti, just twenty days after the death of the Servant of God [...] For this task of writing the biography, he chose the Combonian cleric, Francesco Saverio Geyer, who was in his last year of theology in Verona. He considered it opportune to submit the work of the young biographer to the consultancy of the expert, Professor Mitterrutzner of Bressanone.*” (POSITIO, pp. 1027-28).

One has to add, however, that Giuseppe Sembianti himself was already publishing at the time the first biographical notes on the Founder which were quite precise regarding dates in the ANNALS, 27(1882)16-60.

he left the house for the last time and went to visit the Sisters and he comforted them” ... (p. 88-89).

Sr. Elisa Suppi had never forgotten this. She told Sr. Ermenegilda Morelli, *“I was the cook. Monsignor came with difficulty to the kitchen where he sat on a stone bench. He was breathless and his speech was hesitating because of his fever. I took him a little coffee. The Sisters gathered around him and he consoled us on the loss of Fr. Francesco. But he was filled with anguish.”*

Morelli herself continues, *“On his return to the house, he had to go to bed. He felt that his death was imminent [...] At five in the afternoon, he seemed to be getting slightly better. [...] but it was only for a brief instant, and he was overcome again by delirium during which he signalled on the fan which he was holding in his hand, the positions of the various stations, as if on a map and he said, “You see, my daughters, here is Kordofan, here is Delen, here is Lado; it is there that we have to go” ...*¹⁷³.

“He died in my arms”

*“One could see how much he was suffering. Nevertheless, he encouraged them to have **courage for the present moment**, and he added, very moved, ‘and **especially for the future**’ ...*¹⁷⁴.

We can read further in the following page of the *Annals* mentioned above, *“Resigned and totally abandoned in God, he retained, also in his delirium, that sweetness and friendliness which made him dear even to his enemies. Only in those moments when he was in himself, while glancing lovingly at his sons and daughters who, deeply sorrowful, assisted him, a few tears would gather in his eyes; tears which spoke of how much it cost him to leave us, how much he loved us, and how much he had at heart the work of his apostolate”...*

¹⁷³ APMR, VI/A/5-2722, pp. 46-47.

¹⁷⁴ ANNALI, 27(1882)55.

In his biography, Fr. Geyer reports further, *“In the evening, he had a few lucid moments and he humbly asked the last Sacraments [...]. Holy oil and the Papal blessing were administered [...]. Shortly afterwards, he coughed blood¹⁷⁵ and this allowed him to breathe more easily. Six minutes later, at around 10pm, the great Bishop Comboni gently breathed his last...”* (p. 89)

An irreparable loss

“The next day, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl wrote to Mitterrutzner, “He died in my arms, I whispered to him the last words of love. I dried his last tears!”¹⁷⁶

Therefore, Daniel Comboni died with tears in his eyes, weighed down by an unbearable sorrow and anguish. Everything had started on the 4th of October, when the Bishop found himself with an incomprehensible telegram, sent from Verona and then sent on to him from Cairo, in his hands. (See, W. 7241). Since, however, he had understood that it was something which regarded *Propaganda Fide*, he was awaiting further clarification. This clarification, unfortunately, arrived in a second telegram, sent by Sembianti which read as follows: *“Your letter is incomprehensible Rome will do nothing. Resolve immediately otherwise serious damage.”¹⁷⁷*

In other words, he was being told from Verona that the question of Virginia was not to be taken to Rome, just the contrary. But he had already written to Rome. It was therefore urgent to withdraw everything in order not to damage the Institutes in Verona. It was already the 9th of October and the Founder, even though he felt very ill, wanted at all costs to remedy the

¹⁷⁵ According E. Morelli, *“The white cassock, marked by the last drops of blood which flowed from that heart alight with love for God and for souls, and crushed under the weight of sorrow, was religiously conserved by our great Mother Francesca Dalmasso, who was present at his death, for the rest of her life.”* (APMR, VI/A/5-2722, p. 54). On her part, Francesca Dalmasso never tells this story, even though, in a letter to Costanza Caldara, she mentions *“the kaftan which I have the good fortune to possess, the one in which Monsignor died”* (POSITIO, pp. 1092-93).

¹⁷⁶ See, L. BANO, p. 19.

¹⁷⁷ ACR, A/28/24/48: Sembianti to Giulianelli. Verona, 8th of October 1881

situation. At this point, however, faithful Fr. Giovanni Dichtl intervened, managing to calm things through a solemn pledge which he kept on the following 13th of November. On that day, in fact, he wrote to Cardinal Simeoni to tell him:

“Most eminent Prince,

Your Most Reverend Eminence will have heard [...] of the irreparable loss of our dearly beloved Father, Apostolic Vicar, Monsignor Daniel Comboni; [...].

[After having given all the news regarding the mission, Fr. Giovanni added at the end]:

*On this occasion, I would like also to say something else for the peace of mind of Your Most Reverend Eminence. I know all about the case which the deceased Bishop had, and which came about through a misunderstanding caused by a letter of the Rector of Verona, Fr. Sembianti, and **I also** concluded that the Eminent Cardinal di Canossa had started a case in Rome against Monsignor Comboni. However, **this was not true**, and once this error came to light he was very sorry. He came to know about it in those days of **his** own illness and the deaths of others very dear to him. It was the discovery of this error which was, in part the cause of his death and his long delirium was mostly centred on this subject. None of the other missionaries, except myself, know **everything** about this affair. On the 9th of October, after lunch, Monsignor assured me that he would withdraw the case and he wanted to do it immediately. I forbade him due to his weakness and I promised him that **I** would do it for him with the next post on the 11th of October.*

On the 10th of October, approximately six or seven hours before his death, he had a moment of lucidity and he made me promise faithfulness to the mission and he wished to confess. But as soon as we began, he lost his concentration and it did not return until he was so weak that he could not speak [...].

*Now I believe that I have carried out my duties”.....*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ AP SC Afr. Centr., vol. 9, ff. 257-258: Dichtl to Simeoni. Khartoum, 13th of November 1881.

The echoes of this very sad event

We read further in the Annals, *“As soon as the death of Monsignor was announced, the crying and wailing of the African boys and girls in the house announced the sad news to the wider public. Immediately, the courtyard filled with people of every race who came to cry and wail around the deceased. All the Europeans, and principally the consul of Austria, protector of the mission came, crying heartfelt tears of sorrow. From ten o’clock in the evening until eleven o’clock the next morning there was continuous weeping and wailing [...]. During the night, friends and benefactors of the deceased prepared the coffin in which his body was placed. At eight o’clock in the morning, the funeral, which was attended by all the dignitaries in the city, starting from the Governor and the Austrian Consul in uniform, took place. A company of soldiers accompanied Monsignor together with a great crowd of people of every race and religion.*

After the Mass and the funeral rites, the body was carried to its last resting place and [...] and he was interred at the South East end of the garden, in the same place that Reverend Father Massimiliano Ryllo had been laid to rest”... (pp. 57-59)

Having just recalled how difficult and painful, even just before his death, the relationship between the Founder and his collaborators in Verona had been, it is interesting to cite here the comment which the same issue of the Annals mentioned above published, in order to announce his death to Europe and to the world.

“Monsignor Daniel Comboni is dead! That great soul, ardent with pure charity which embraced Africa with great affection in order to bring her to God; that very dear soul, charitable and generous who won the hearts of all those he met, has flown to heaven!

Africa weeps her Apostle; the Africans their Saviour; the Missionaries and the Pie Madri della Nigrizia their Father and leader; we, our Founder; the Church, her bishop, her Missionary.

Experts in languages, nature, geography, lovers of true civilization are all mourning their great loss and they lament his departure"... (p. 4).

One week later, addressing her missionaries, Maria Bollezzoli echoed [these sentiments]. *"Dearest Daughters, the sad news of the death our great Head and leader was like a bolt of lightning for me; [...] a terrible event! That merciless scythe which struck down such a precious life was very cruel"....*¹⁷⁹

She then wrote personally to Faustina Stampais who belonged to the same family as the deceased:

"My dearest daughter in Jesus Christ, well justified is your sorrow, great, beyond all belief is your loss [...]. Yes, my dear, that Father who enjoyed the admiration of all those who were fortunate to know him, is now in heaven. The earth was no longer worthy to retain him. However, he has left his heroic virtues as an inheritance to his sons and daughters, in whom he must continue to live forever, because there will always be new apostles who, moved by his example will walk in his footsteps and they will hurry to catechize the poor sons of Cam [...].

*Your Sisters remember you always and they pray for you, for strength and courage"...*¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ APMR, VI/B/1/2 -888: Bollezzoli to the Congregation. Verona, 18th of October, 1881.

¹⁸⁰ AMN, 8(2004)108: Bollezzoli to Stampais. Verona, 4th of November, 1881.

EPILOGUE

Living more than Ever in the Memory of those who Received his Inheritance

“Dearest...,

*you are right to cry*¹⁸¹ *since the life that has expired was precious; but take courage and do not fear. Our beloved father is not dead. He lives that glorious and eternal life which will never end and which is free from all troubles. [...]. Now, he is held in the embrace of that greatest good for whom he sacrificed himself. From there, he looks on his sons and daughters and protects them. He looks at them and smiles at them. He looks at them and is well pleased with the works they are doing”...*

(Maria Bollezzoli, 18th of October 1881)

It seemed almost as if the Mother knew that her daughters in far off Africa had not broken under the violent blow they had received.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ “We are all steeped in profound desolation”. Teresa Grigolini wrote from El Obeid on the 15th of October 1881. “A second telegram announces to us the death of our illustrious Father, Monsignor Comboni, of the Reverend Father Gio. Battista Fraccaro and of the craftsman Paolo Descandi [...]. At present, our mission is in the hands of no one! [...] Oh! Poor Monsignor for whom I, and all of us, cry and are inconsolable”... [AMN, 12(2006)106]. She wrote in turn to Amalia Andreis, “Yesterday we also received the sad and devastating news of the loss of our beloved Father and Leader. What a wound to the heart, what emptiness and desolation!” [AMN,4(2002)83].

¹⁸² “After having allowed myself to give in to nature and having cried for our **great loss**”, Vittoria Paganini, who had been present at the death of the Founder, confided, “I overcame myself and said, *Fiat*, with a heart that was bleeding still. [...] the bleakness and the emptiness which these last deaths left us, **especially that of our poor Monsignor and Beloved Father and generous leader, is indescribable!**” [AMN,7(2004)83: Paganini to Giulianelli. Khartoum, 25th of October,1881.

Sr. Amalia Andreis wrote, *“The mission is the work of God and he will protect it and conserve it. The Lord entrusted his mission to Monsignor Daniel Comboni: we hope and pray that he may leave it to his beloved sons and daughters; and through his divine help and heavenly consolation, which God will not fail to provide, they may continue the glorious work of the apostolate of Central Africa.*

We are few, it is true, to be thinking of the extension of the Vicariate, but we should not get discouraged or get lost in useless thoughts. Instead, we should work as best as we can for the greater glory of God. The Lord is the owner of the vineyard and he will recompense his workers in accordance with their efforts and troubles, and not according to the produce, because whether it may be much or little, it is all his pure grace.”...¹⁸³

Teresa Grigolini, in writing to her uncle, confirmed this. *“Great is our sorrow at such a loss, but on the other hand, it was the Lord who wanted this and we have to be content about it. In the meantime, the mission goes ahead in the same way”...¹⁸⁴.*

Faithful to the Oath Taken

On the other hand, those who had survived that terrible period had sworn to the dying Founder, and several of the sons and daughters who had remained by his side on the night of the 10th of October until his death, gave witness to this.¹⁸⁵ The editor of the Annals himself was quite explicit when he treated this topic:

One can read on page 10 of issue number 27, *“At the announcement of the death of Monsignor Daniel Comboni, all of us experienced great discouragement and sorrow. Those who were more acquainted with how the arduous work was sustained could have been assailed by immediate doubts at two levels. First of all, now that Monsignor Comboni had died, could his mission continue, or would it collapse; secondly, would the missionaries and the Sisters persevere in the place assigned to them, or would they abandon it.*

¹⁸³ AMN, 4(2002)85: Andreis to her father. Delen, 3rd of December, 1881.

¹⁸⁴ AMN, 12(2006)112.

¹⁸⁵ See, L. BANO, p. 19; AMN, 7(2004)88-89.

We confess that, in all truth, neither one or the other of these doubts occurred to us and later events demonstrated that the event [his death] did not shake our faith and determination. [...]

No, there was no place for this among us, and no such fear even came to our minds. It would have been a great insult to our dear ones in Africa whose character and courage, thoughts and feelings, we well know [...]. One can read these in the extracts of letters written after the death of beloved Monsignor...”.

Therefore, after having quoted some extracts from the letters which had arrived from the Missionaries and the Sisters, of which, however, he omits the names, the editor concludes:

“So, we pray to the Eternal One, that the Holy Father, through the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, [...] may console the Missionaries and the Sisters by giving them, as soon as possible, a new Father and leader who may guide them to new glorious conquests”... (p. 10-15).

Giuseppe Sembianti, who was in Rome on the day on which the news of the death of the Bishop of Khartoum arrived, had written, in fact, to Fr. Giulianelli:

*“I think it would be good, in order to alleviate, as soon as possible, the sorrow of those in Khartoum, Obeid and Nuba, to send a telegram to them saying that His Eminence, Simeoni **has the mission at heart** and is **ready to help them in any way**. I was given to understand this much from His eminence himself in these days”...¹⁸⁶.*

One week later, he went on to say to the Administrator in Cairo, *“I repeat that Propaganda is very interested in the mission, I say this also to the lay people and the Sisters and so they should keep their spirits up and hope in the Lord”...¹⁸⁷.*

¹⁸⁶ ACR, A/28/24/49: Sembianti to Giulianelli. Rome, 15th of October 1881.

¹⁸⁷ ACR, A/28/24/50: Sembianti to Giulianelli. Verona, 22nd of October 1881.

An uncertain future

“... but in the midst of the most difficult trials, remain firm, like a rock in the midst of the waves”...

(Maria Bollezzoli)

Was it, then, while waiting for the nomination of the new leader that, Giuseppe Sembianti had suspended in the feminine Congregation too, both the acceptance and the profession of new candidates?

Maria Bollezzoli, writing to Faustina Stampais, seemed worried:

“Regarding acceptance and promotion”, she confided, “I have spoken with the Most Reverend Father Rector and he feels that we should wait until he knows about the last will of our sorely missed Monsignor; which, to tell you the truth, he does not yet know, and I cannot understand this. FIAT. Here too we also have aspirants [in Verona, after the last departure of the Founder, five more young women had entered and there were some candidates to be admitted], but things are suspended until further clarifications. Let us be patient and do the most holy will of God.

Keep up your spirits, in the certainty that whatever happens, it is by the most wise will of our loving heavenly Father, who loves us with a love that is pure and true [...]. Remain always well-disposed and don’t ever give up...”

About the disposition which she had appreciated in Faustina, the Mother had written at an earlier point in the same letter which began as follows:

“Dearest Daughter in Jesus Christ,

Your beautiful feelings of strength and of a growing attachment to the mission, despite many calamities and disasters are dearer to me than you can imagine. Well done, dearest daughter. Do not ever be afraid. In the midst of the most difficult trials, try to remain firm like a rock in the midst of the waves. It is in the storm that one knows the strength of the navigator, in the heart of the fight that one knows the generosity of the soldier, and it is amidst the obstacles

and the adversities that the true vocation and true love for God is proved [...]. Let calamities, disasters, illnesses, deaths and privations of every kind come in great number. The pure love of God overcomes and is victorious over everything. It is superior to everything, like the flame which, despite the strong gust of wind, grows ever stronger. Remain always firm, and you will have special blessings from God.”...¹⁸⁸

Thus, Maria Bollezzoli encouraged the daughters of Combini, while at the same time preparing herself to receive, within the agreed limits, but in complete faithfulness, the heavy and difficult inheritance of the Founder.

¹⁸⁸ AMN, 8(2004)109-110.

CHRONOLOGY*

1864, 15-18 September: Daniel Comboni writes the **Plan** for the '*Regeneration of Africa*'

1867, 1st of June: Luigi di Canossa the Bishop of Verona, issues the Diocesan decree, "*Magne Sane Perfundimur Gaudio*" of the foundation of the ***Opera del Buon Pastore***.

1868, November: Luigi di Canossa, having received a letter from *Propaganda Fide*, considers it his duty to suspend the *Opera del Buon Pastore*.

1870

April, the "Report on the new *Work of the Regeneration of Africa by Africa Itself* is" presented to *Propaganda Fide*. Cardinal Barnabo understands.

August, 12: Comboni leaves Rome to go to Verona to reorganize the details of his Missionary Institutes which will soon be opened.

1871

November, 21: reunion of the Superior Council for the *Opera del Buon Pastore*. Daniel Comboni proposes the foundation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. He also prepares a draft of the "*Regole dell'Istituto delle Missioni per la Nigrizia*."

December, 8: Luigi di Canossa issues the decree of the canonical erection of the Institute of the Missions for Nigrizia.

31: Maria Caspi, first postulant, enters in Montorio, Verona.

*In this volume, we have limited ourselves to the essential dates, since a detailed chronology of our history is found in: AMN, 17(2010).

1872

January

1st: Official foundation in Montorio, Verona, of the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*

17: Maria Teresa Scandola enters, preceded by Pia Galli, a “good nun from Padua” (W. 2796) who will be the first formator.

April

24: The Founder is satisfied with the superior of Montorio. At the same time, he also decides to “allow foreign postulants to come”. (W. 2954-56)

May

26: Daniel Comboni is nominated Pro Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa.

September

14: Transfer of the aspirants from Montorio to the centre of Verona. Maria Rosa Colpo, who was already with the *Astori* nuns in the house in *Santa Maria in Organo*, joins them.

17: Departure of the Pro Vicar and the other missionaries for Central Africa.

20: Fr. Antonio Squaranti, already Rector of the masculine Institute, assumes the direction also of the feminine Institute.

1873

January

26: Daniel Comboni leaves Cairo, taking with him, for the first time, the Women of the Gospel, to central Africa. Among these are, Fortunata Quasce and Faustina Stampais, future *Pie Madre della Nigrizia*.

June

24: In writing to the editor of the *Voce Cattolica* of Trent, the

founder assures that the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* “is going on very well” (W. 3220).

August

2: Comboni asks Fr. Francesco Bricolo to send him “good teachers with a religious vocation to send to Verona” (W. 3333).

1874

May

10: general meeting of the Council of the *Opera del Buon Pastore*, with the participation of Stanislao Carcereri. Fr. Antonio Squaranti also presents the situation of the feminine congregation, in which there are **eight aspirants**.

There is a negative reaction on the part of Carcereri.

During the same meeting the need of replacing Sr. Pia Galli is discussed.

August

18: Fr. Antonio Squaranti and Fr. Stanislao Carcereri contact Maria Bollezzoli in order to ask her to collaborate with the feminine Institute.

September

3: Carcereri informs Comboni that the bishop has managed to convince the future superior of the feminine Institute...

6 Maria Bollezzoli presents herself at *Santa Maria in Organo*, and she remains.

October

Fr. Antonio Squaranti begins to draft the new Rules for the feminine Institute.

December

8: The religious vestition ceremony, presided over by the bishop, of the first eight missionary novices.

1875

March

19: the novice, Teresa Grigolini is elected as general Secretary.

August

21: Daniel Comboni talks with Cardinal Franchi about the possibility of a fusion between the *Pie Madri* and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

1876

March

26: Daniel Comboni arrives in Verona to decide how to proceed with the feminine Congregation.

April

8: the founder proposes to Mother Julien to assume the Institute of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

June

10: Faustina Stampais enters the *Pie Madri*, a sign that the situation has been resolved.

October

15: Religious profession of Maria Bollezzoli and Teresa Grigolini. The founder is present and then from there he travels to Venice. Teresa Grigolini is nominated the Vicar General.

1877

March

12: Luigi di Canossa is elected Cardinal by Pius IX.

19: Religious Profession of Maria Caspi, Giuseppa Scandola and Rosa Zabai.

July

2: *Propaganda Fide* decides to nominate Daniel Comboni bishop.

August

12: Episcopal consecration of Daniel Comboni in Rome, in the chapel of *Propaganda Fide*. Maria Bollezzoli and Teresa Grigolini are also present and will later be received in audience by Pius IX.

December

8: Religious profession of Concetta Corsi and Vittoria Paganini.

10: Sending ceremony of those leaving for the Mission in the Church of *San Tommaso*.

12: Departure from Verona of the first group of *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* ...

13: In Rome, the group leaving is received in audience by the prefect of *Propaganda Fide*.

15: Departure from Naples for Alexandria.

1878

January

30: the journey from Cairo towards Khartoum begins

31: The Girls Boarding School of Laura Astori in Verona is closed.

March

30: The first community of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Africa is opened in Berber (Sudan).

July

4: Religious Profession of Teresa Marini and Amalia Andreis.

20: Sr. Amalia is nominated Vicar General.

November

16: Fr. Antonio Squaranti dies in Khartoum.

December

8: The five *Pie Madri* leave Berber accompanied by Daniel Comboni. They reach Khartoum on the 14th of December.

January

14: the *Pie Madri* leave Khartoum and set off towards Kordofan, while the Sisters of St. Joseph withdraw from El Obeid.

February

10: The five *Pie Madri* reach El Obeid. The community is opened.

April

14: The Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition withdraw from the Vicariate and later also from Cairo.

27: Teresa Grigolini and Giuseppa Scandola return to Khartoum. The second community in Africa is opened.

May

15: Daniel Comboni arrives in Verona for the last time.

27: Religious Profession of Maria Bertuzzi, Maria Caprini, Eulalia Pesavento and Matilde Lombardi.

July

1: Departure of the second group of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* for Egypt. On their arrival, another community is established in Cairo in the Institute of the Sacred Heart of Mary. It is the third community in Africa.

August

7: Domitilla Bakhita and Fortunata Quasce are received into the Congregation. In El Obeid, a second feminine Combonian noviciate is opened with Vittoria Paganini.

September

10: Virginia Mansur arrives in Verona to teach Arabic.

October

5: Religious Profession of Maria Rosa Colpo, Santa Corsi, Rosa Matilde Corsi and Caterina Chincarini.

November

3: Religious profession of Fortunata Zanolli, Elisa Suppi and Elisabetta Venturini.

4: Departure from Verona of the third group of *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

22: Vittoria Paganini, gravely ill, leaves El Obeid for Khartoum. From Suez, on the same day, an expedition guided by Fr. Gennaro Martini also leaves.

1880

January

2: Eulalia Pesavento, Maria Bertuzzi, Matilde Lombardi, Maria Caprini, Fortunata Zanolli and Elisa Suppi arrive in Khartoum.

25: Religious Profession of Faustina Stampais, Bartolomea Benamati and Marietta Casella.

February

8: Maria Bertuzzi, Matilde Lombardi and Elisa Suppi reach El Obeid.

16: In Verona, the contract is signed between Daniel Comboni and the Stigmatine Fathers.

18: Maria Bertuzzi dies in El Obeid a few days after her arrival.

March

19: Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti assumes his position as Rector in Verona.

April

26: Matilde Corsi, Bartolomea Benamati, Marietta Casella, Virginia and Katura Mansur leave for Sestri Levante.

27: Teresa Grigolini transfers the Provincial House to El Obeid.

May

16: Sr. Marietta Caspi dies in El Obeid.

September

The *Pie Madri* begin to be present also in Malbes.

November

14: Religious Profession of Francesca Dalmasso and Rosalia Conte.

From Sestri, Virginia Mansur returns to Verona as a postulant.

17: Faustina Stampais, Bartolomea Benamati and Anna Kubitscheck board in Trieste.

18: Eulalia Pesavento and Maria Caprini arrive in El Obeid with Fr. Antonio Dobale.

Some days later, Matilde Lombardi and Elisa Suppi return to Khartoum.

22: Daniel Comboni leaves Verona for Naples, via Sestri and Rome.

25: Anna Kubitscheck enters as a postulant in Cairo. Faustina Stampais will be responsible of the 3rd feminine Combonian noviciate.

27: Marietta Casella, Francesca Dalmasso and Rosalia Conte, leave from Naples for Africa, accompanied by Monsignor Daniel Comboni.

December

8: Opening of the fourth community of the *Pie Madri della Nigritia* in Africa, in Delen

29: The Founder leaves Cairo for Khartoum for the last time.

Maria Rosa Colpo, Amalia Andreis, Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini, Francesca Dalmasso and Rosalia Conte are also part of the expedition.

31: Departure from Suez on the Egyptian ship, Nagila.

1881

January

28: Bishop Comboni reaches Khartoum with his last expedition.

March

7: Luigi Bonomi, Amalia Andreis, Maria Rosa Colpo, Caterina Chincarini and Elisabetta Venturini leave Khartoum for Kordofan.

April

5: Daniel Comboni arrives in El Obeid for his last pastoral visit.

July

4: Fr. Sembianti withdraws the personnel from Sestri Levante.

30: The bishop leaves El Obeid, accompanied by G. Battista Fraccaro, for Khartoum, where he arrives on the 9th of August.

September

17: Maria Rosa Colpo dies in Malbes. The community is suspended.

October

10: † Daniel Comboni dies in Khartoum

12: Luigi di Canossa goes personally to the Mother House to break the news.

18: circular letter of Maria Bollezzoli on the death of the founder.

30: Fr. Giovanni Losi is nominated interim superior of Central Africa.

Index of names

Apparition, Sisters of St. Joseph: This is a French Congregation founded in 1832 by Emilia de Vialar for the education of young people, free education for the poor and assistance to the sick, the old and the imprisoned. The sisters also had as their finality, the conversion and the human promotion of non-Christians in the missions, with particular emphasis on the schismatic. Daniel Comboni knew them for the first time in 1857 in Jerusalem, during his journey to Palestine. Being a sincere admirer of Mother Emilie Julien, second Superior General, he turned to them in November 1867, in order to obtain at least three of her sisters to accompany the African girls to Cairo in order to found the Feminine Institute. After this, from 1873 till 1879, they were present also in the Vicariate of Central Africa, from where they unfortunately withdrew one year after the death of M. Julien.

Astori, Laura M. Maddalena (d. 1876): She was of Venetian origin and was the Superior of the Institute of the Benedictine Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Mary. She arrived in Verona in 1846 to open in Cantarane Street a school for poor girls. In 1865, she had transferred the boarding school to Santa Maria in Organo, buying the building in her own name due to the imminent laws of 1866 regarding the suppression of religious orders. When Daniel Comboni, in 1872 decided to buy the convent, he accepted the clause of maintaining Laura Astori and her companions until their death.

Baker, Samuel (1821-1893): He was a famous English explorer whose name is linked to the discovery of the sources of the Nile and the Egyptian conquest of the Equatorial regions of Sudan. In 1869, the Khedive Ismail entrusted to him the command of a military expedition to subdue the region of the Upper Nile and to repress the trafficking of Africans. He later conferred on him the title of Pasha and the rank of General in the Turkish army. Baker was also the Governor of Equatoria for four years. Daniel Comboni, who probably must have met him personally during his stay at Santa Croce, mentions him afterwards in his “*Quadro Storico delle Scoperte Africane*” (W. 6284).

Bonomi, Fr. Luigi (1841-1927): He was ordained in Verona in 1864 and was the curate in Montorio when he entered the missionary Institute of Comboni. After arriving in Cairo in September 1874, he left immediately for the centre. After the withdrawal of the Camillian Fathers from the Vicariate of Central Africa, he remained faithful to Comboni, who indicated him as his representative during his last visit to Europe. "*Fr. Luigi Bonomi is a true gentleman,*" the bishop wrote of him, "*he is rough and rustic in treating outsiders and our people, if you like: but he has the self-denial of a Trappist, and is a true missionary*"... (W. 6459). Taken prisoner during the Mahdia, while he was superior in Delen, he was helped by Licurgo Santoni to escape from El Obeid in 1885. Three years later, Monsignor Sogaro, on the request of the Holy See, sent him to Eritrea, as chaplain to the Italian troops. He died in Asmara, where he is still remembered with great veneration. He also called the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* to Eritrea.

Bouchard, Fr. Arturo (1845-1896): He was originally from Quebec, Canada and had first been a novice of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and then a student of theology with the Mill Hill Missionaries. At the end of September 1877, he was received in Verona where he was ordained by Cardinal di Canossa on the 11th of August 1878. He left for Cairo in February of 1879, and reached the Centre in November of the same year. In 1881, he was nominated superior and parish priest in Khartoum, where he administered the last sacraments to Comboni when he was dying. After the death of the bishop, Fr. Bouchard asked and obtained permission to return to Verona, from where he left for North America in order to look for funds for the African mission. He returned to Sudan in 1884, but no longer at the service of the mission. The following year, in fact, he left the Institute and returned definitively to Canada, where he died on the 12th of September 1896. He left many letters which his friend collected in a volume entitles, "*Le R. P. Bouchard*", Quebec, 1897, 232 pp.

Caenda, Bachit (d. 1897): He belonged to the great tribe of Jebel Nuba. In 1838, he was kidnapped by the Baggara and was later taken, when he was about 12 years old, to Verona by count Francesco Miniscalchi who had him baptized and then had him complete his education in the College of *Propaganda Fide* in Rome.

Daniel Comboni knew him while he was still a student in the Mazza institute in 1848. *“This African, who belonged to the family of the celebrated and most scholarly orientalist, Count Miniscalchi in Verona, was the perfect model of a true catholic and frequently spoke to me of his land, Jebel Nuba, saying that there were mountains and meadows there, a good climate and many inhabitants. For more than twenty years, I used to think about Nuba, saying at least 100 times to the good African Bachit Caenda, ‘I hope that God will grant me the grace to bring the Catholic faith to your land and win the tribe of the Nuba for our Saviour, Jesus Christ.’”* (W. 3959, see also W.4098). It was Bachit himself, among others, who taught Comboni the first rudiments of the Nuban language. (See *Verona Fedele*, 22nd of September, 1897)

Canossa, Luigi (1809-1900): Born in Verona, Luigi di Canossa entered the Company of Jesus in Modena, where he was ordained a priest in 1841. After having abandoned the Company of Jesus, he returned to Verona on the advice of doctors and was elected a canon in the cathedral in 1857. Indicated as the successor of Bishop Riccabona, who had been transferred to Trent in 1861, Luigi di Canossa was consecrated bishop of Verona on the 23rd of January 1862 and was later created Cardinal on the 12th of March 1877. He was very sensitive to the question of the missions and as early as 1860, he had suggested to Fr. Nicola Mazza a ‘Plan’ for preparing ‘on African shores’ young African men and women ready to return then to their own countries as missionaries. He was responsible for the foundation of the institution of the *Pia Associazione del Buon Pastore* (1867) and the subsequent foundation of the Missionary Institute. He had to suspend this work, but took it up again in November 1870 when he assumed the mandate of being *the head and president of the whole work* (W. 4087). When the Sons of the Sacred heart and the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* passed to the jurisdiction of *Propaganda Fide*, he was indicated as their Cardinal Protector and he retained this role until his death.

Canossians, Daughters of Charity: This female religious congregation was founded in Verona in 1808 by Maddalena di Canossa, an aunt of the bishop, Luigi. The finality of the foundation was the education of girls, the formation of elementary teachers, works of charity and parish work. When the proposal was made to them to accompany Daniel Comboni to Africa, they

did not feel ready for this. But not long afterwards, they opened a missionary noviciate.

Carcereri, Stanislao (1840-1899): He was originally from Cerro near to Verona and at the age of 11, he entered the Order of St. Camillo de Lellis. In 1862, with a licence in philosophy, he was entrusted with the office of provincial secretary in *Lombardo – Veneto*. Some years later, he was transferred to Marzana on the outskirts of Verona as superior. *“The idea of joining the Catholic missions had already come to him in 1857. After the first sign of the suppression of Religious Orders in Italy, at the beginning of 1867 [...] he applied to the seminaries of Milan and Lyons and received a favourable reply should the suppression of his Order actually come about.”* (W.1790-92) Some of his confreres found themselves in the same situation. Among them were Zanoni, Tezza and Franceschini. Having met with them during Lent of 1867, Comboni hurried to ‘gain’ them to his cause, and thus they became part of the expedition of 1867.

Stanislao Carcereri was superior in the Institutes of Cairo from 1867 till 1871. From 1872 till 1877, he worked in the Sudan, where he held the office of Vicar General until 1874. For all that happened after this, from the controversy to the separation, one can refer to the writings of Comboni and also to: AC, 2(1976)8-27: *Daniele Comboni e i Camilliani*.

Casoria da, Ludovico = Arcangelo Palmentieri (1814-1885): He was a friar minor of the Franciscans who opened an Institute near Naples in 1852 to take in African boys freed from slavery. Daniel Comboni got to know him personally on his re-entry to Italy after his first missionary expedition. In 1865, the discussions began regarding the division of the Vicariate of Central Africa. Authorized by Cardinal Barnabo, Daniel Comboni met with the Superior General of the Franciscans who had directed him to Casoria in Naples. Together they left for Egypt in October 1865, via Vienna and Trieste, despite the fact that Casoria was contrary to the division of the Vicariate. For the details regarding this journey and the events resulting from it, see: AC, 1(1973) 7ff: *Daniele Comboni e Padre Ludovico da Casoria* and also the letters of Comboni himself which are found in his *Writings*.

Castellacci, Monsignor Pietro de Villanova (1815-1881): He was born in Bracciano and consecrated bishop in 1854. Later, in

1855, he was nominated Titular Archbishop of Petra and then, Vice Director of the Vicariate of Rome (1862). He renounced this office in September 1868, reserving the benefits of Canon of the Lateran. He died in Rome on the 17th of September 1881 after a long and painful illness (see, POSITIO, p. 249).

Ciurcia, Luigi (1818-1886) he was born in Ragusa and belonged to the Order of the *Minori Osservanti* and was made Bishop of Alessio and Scutari in 1853. In 1866, he was appointed by the Holy See, Apostolic Delegate in Egypt, and so the Combonian Institutes of Cairo, which he welcomed with great affection, came to find themselves under his jurisdiction. In this position, he was also the Apostolic Administrator of the Vicariate of Central Africa during the period in which the mission had been suspended. The letter in which Comboni describes at length his relationship with Monsignor Ciurcia is the one written on April 15th 1881, addressed to Cardinal Simeoni. His letter of the following 22nd of May is also important as in the letter Comboni asks Cardinal Simeoni to appoint a successor to Monsignor Ciurcia as soon as possible, and preferably not someone belonging to a Religious congregation.

Dal Bosco, Alessandro (1830-1868): A pupil of the Mazza institute, he was ordained priest in 1855 and then included in the expedition of 1857 and was assigned to remain in Khartoum as the procurator of the Mazza personnel of Santa Croce. After returning to Italy with Fr. Beltrame in 1860, he was Vice Rector of the Mazza Institute for some time. In 1867, Luigi di Canossa invited him to assume the post of Rector of the new missionary Institute desired by Comboni. Unfortunately, he died only a year later of a tropical disease. The best profile of Fr. Dal Bosco can be found in Comboni's report to the Society of Cologne written on June 6th 1871. (See, W. 2140; 2567-68)

Dichtl, Fr. Giovanni (1857-1889): He was originally from Stiria and entered in Graz on the 30th of September 1876. He left while still a deacon in 1879, as secretary of Daniel Comboni who ordained him in Cairo on the 5th of December 1880. Assigned to Khartoum, he remained always faithful to his bishop, despite the insinuations of Fr. Roller. After the death of Comboni, whom he assisted until his last breath, Fr. Giovanni Dichtl continued to take care of all his correspondence, especially the correspondence

in Arabic. In 1882, when Fr. Hanriot left Khartoum for the first time with all the personnel, Fr. Giovanni remained alone, until his health was seriously undermined by too much work and Fr. Sogaro decided to call him back to Europe in May 1883.

He remained in Verona for two years as an Arabic teacher and then he was transferred to Stiria where he recovered well. He wrote, amongst other things, a volume of 452 pages on Sudan in German. He was recalled to Africa in 1885 to collaborate in the liberation of the prisoners but he had to return quickly due to his failing health. He spent his last year of life as chaplain of the Servants of the Sacred Heart of Himmelhof close to Vienna where he died a holy death. His necrology was prepared by Canon Mitterrutzner and published by *Nigrizia* in the month of March 1889.

Dobale, Fr. Antonio (d. 1881): He was a native of the African tribe of the Galla who had been rescued by Daniel Comboni in 1861 in India and taken to Europe. He was educated first in the Mazza Institute and then in the College of *Propaganda Fide* in Rome. He was ordained a priest in 1878 on the request of Daniel Comboni (See, W. 5086), who reckoned his presence in the Vicariate of Central Africa as '*most useful*.' On the 6th of April 1881, in fact, Fr. Antonio found himself in Malbes as Parish Priest where, unfortunately, he died on the 16th of September of the same year. (See, W. 7146)

Fraccaro, Fr. G. Battista (1845-1881): He was born in the province of Vicenza, although he came from the diocese of Padua. He entered the Combonian Institute in 1877 and left for Africa with the first *Pie Madri* in December of the same year. According to Daniel Comboni, who wanted him as his Vicar General, he was "*a devout, prudent, just and upright man, as was seen during the four years that he was superior in Kordofan and as I know that he always has been, both in Verona where he was twice acting Rector, and in his diocese of Padua where he served for seven years as a parish priest, as confirmed by the information received from the bishop of Padua*" (W. 7142). He died in Khartoum, struck down by fever, on the 9th of October 1881.

Geremia, da Livorno – Geremia Partucci: He was a Franciscan from Livorno who in the first half of 1800 worked for the liberation of young slaves in Alexandria in Egypt. In this sense, he

collaborated very much with Fr. Nicola Mazza introducing “a number of Africans of both sexes into the two Verona Institutes to teach them the faith and Christian civilization” (W. 2045) Daniel Comboni wrote to the Society of Cologne in 1866, “I will just mention that Fr. Geremia of Livorno (the same father who brought us from his expedition to central Africa in 1853, 22 young African girls, 7 boys and 11 Egyptian children to be educated in Verona), has rented a house in Old Cairo. [...] It is quite a big house and Fr. Ludovico [da Casoria] wishes to use it as a school under the direction of the African craftsmen educated in Naples.”

Giulianelli, Fr. Francesco (1831-1898): He was originally from Rome and was given ‘on loan’ to Comboni from the PIME. On the 6th of September 1881, he was nominated Administrator of the mission of central Africa and of the dependant houses in Egypt. He was very systematic and diligent and left registers which are a model of precision and clarity. There are about 147 letters addressed to *Propaganda Fide*, to Comboni, Sembianti and other missionaries. He had a lot to do with intervening in the precarious situation which was created in the Sudan due to pressure from the Mahdist movement. However, Francesco Sogaro, who did not like Giulianelli much, let him leave in 1884 when he was recalled to Rome by his Institute he died in Shensi in China on the 18th of December 1898 while he was procurator of the PIME missions there.

Gordon, Charles G. (1833-1885): He was a brilliant English army official who undertook special missions in Bessarabia, in the Caucasus and also in China. After having served as the English consul in Galatz, he was sent for service in Egypt. In 1873, the Khedive nominated him Governor of Equatoria until 1876 when Gordon himself resigned. On the 5th of May 1875, Daniel Comboni wrote, “The new governor seems to me equal to his difficult and great task [...]. I spoke to him about slavery, and on this point, he professes the most human sentiments”. (W. 3568) In 1877, Gordon was nominated Governor General of all of the Sudan, with the particular task of suppressing slavery. Comboni wrote further, “Gordon Pasha is the terror of slavery [...]. He favours me greatly and always comes to see me. He has decided to entrust the government hospital in Fashoda [...] to the Verona Sisters”... (W. 5389). It was Gordon who placed at the disposition of the Sisters, who had to travel from Khartoum to El Obeid,

both the steamboat and the camels necessary for the journey.
(See W. 5538)

Gordon renounced his position in 1880, but he had to return to the Sudan in 1884 in order to evacuate the Egyptian troops after the defeat suffered by General Hicks at the hands of the Mahdi. He was once again nominated Governor General, but with no clarity on what his role should be. He found it impossible to defend Khartoum against the attack of the Mahdist troops in January 1885. He was killed on the 26th of January 1885, leaving a diary about the siege of Khartoum.

Grieff, Fr. Nicola: Originally from Luxembourg, he entered in Verona in 1877. In 1878, Daniel Comboni wrote, *"It was under Fr. Paolo Rossi that Grieff, still immature, was admitted to the priesthood and sent to Egypt. When I returned to Cairo from Central Africa, I found Grieff there and later sent him back to Verona, not deeming him suitable for the mission in Central Africa."* (W. 5985)

Nevertheless, Grieff somehow found himself with the role of Vice Rector of the Institute, which he eventually left in 1880. Comboni defined him *'a real scoundrel'* because of his *'perfidious insinuations'* regarding Virginia Mansur (W. 6119). Grieff *"longed to become the Rector of my institutes, as Fr. Sembianti was to discover when he asked me to let him leave the Institute"* (W. 7181). To this end, he even offered money to Fr. Paolo Rossi (See W. 6540). On the 28th of August, 1880, Comboni wrote to Fr. Giulianelli, *"We are at last rid of Fr. Grieff [...]. After consulting the eminent Cardinal di Canossa and the most prudent General of the Stigmatine fathers, I gave Grieff his letters of dismissal and on Wednesday morning he left for his diocese of Luxembourg."* (W. 6103)

Mahdi = The well Guided by God: This was the title attributed to Muhammad Ahmad (1843-1885). He was of Sudanese origin and his family, said to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, came from Dongola. After having studied the Qur'an and having been given the title of *Sayh*, he opened a school to spread his thought about the Mahdia, that is, a programme of return to primitive Islam. In 1881, after having experienced a revelation in a dream, he assumed the title of the Mahdi and convoked the faithful Sudanese in order to begin a 'holy war'. From Kordofan, the capital of which was conquered in January 1883, the move-

ment extended to Khartoum, which fell in January 1885. All the missionary stations opened by Daniel Comboni were swept away, while the missionaries and the Sisters, except those of Khartoum who withdrew on time, were taken prisoner.

Mainardi, Fr. Lorenzo: He was an ex Jesuit, originally from the diocese of Parma and he became the first Rector of the Institutes in Verona, including the house for the Sisters. Later, he substituted Fr. Paolo Rossi for some time as 'temporary director', from August 1879 (see, W. 5790;6807). He became aware of the plots of Grieff, Giacomo and Stefano against Virginia Mansur and the Arabic teachers, but he was not able to expose them on time (See W. 7179). Fr. Sembiani always held him in great esteem.

Mansur, Virginia: She was born in Kasbaia, Lebanon in 1854. Still a child, she was entrusted to the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition. At the age of 15 years, she wished to be taken by them to Marseilles in order to avoid a marriage imposed on her by her family. In 1873, after having made her religious profession as a sister of St. Joseph, she left first for Egypt and then for the Sudan where she remained until 1879. At that point she left the French Congregation and asked to enter the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*.

In the writings of Daniel Comboni, the events of the life of Sr. Anna, as she was called in religion, are well documented, especially for the period starting in March 1881. Fr. Leonzio Bano, in the first volume of his, *Missionari del Comboni*, presents a profile (p. 15-21). The appendix of volume A/2 of *Archivio Madri Nigrizia* (biographies) shall be dedicated to her.

Marinoni, Giuseppe (1810-1891): He was the first superior of the seminary of the PIME and he remained in office until death. Daniel Comboni turned to him when *Propaganda Fide* asked him to revise the first *Rules* (See, W. 2829). As it was his wish that the new Rector, Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti should also know him, and perhaps consult him, he accompanied him to Milan before leaving Verona for the last time. (See W. 5902)

Matteucci, Pellegrino (1850-1881): He held a degree in medicine, but he loved to travel. So, he took up the invitation of Romolo Gessi to accompany him on his journey to Caffa travelling along the Blue Nile. A year later in 1878, he was called by the Milanese

Society of Commercial Explorers in Africa to lead an expedition which the same society was sending to *Scioa* [Ethiopia] with the intention of integrating, from the commercial point of view, the work which was being undertaken for scientific purposes by the Geographical Society. When that journey had to be interrupted, Matteucci and Gessi were given hospitality in Khartoum by the Catholic Mission. Daniel Comboni wrote about him, “*Matteucci is a very capable young man and full of high promise*” (W. 5140). He explained, “*Since this distinguished explorer has visited a very interesting part of the eastern side of the Vicariate, he has been able to form an idea of the immense work we have done [...]. Dr. Matteucci has published stupendous articles on our missions which he visited and some of these were also published in The Osservatore Romano.*” (W. 5190). In December of 1879, Matteucci asked Comboni to accept him as a doctor, but the project could not be realized because the Bishop of Sudan was delayed in Italy. The young explorer died in London in 1881 two months before Daniel Comboni, due to African fevers.

Mazza, Fr. Nicola (1790-1865): Fr. Nicola Mazza was born into a well to do family in Verona and belonged to a generation which was one of the most significant for Veronese Catholicism at the beginning of the 19th century. After the education he received in his family from a private tutor, he entered the diocesan seminary for the two year course on humanities and rhetoric. However, his education did not limit itself to what the seminary offered. In 1814, after having concluded his theological studies, he was ordained a priest and he set out to become a professor in the seminary. Particularly meaningful for young Nicola was the encounter he had with Gaspare Bertoni, the founder of the Stigmatine Fathers who called for a reform of the clergy which would go beyond the limits of the figure of the priest in the old regime. As he was very sensitive to the problem of poverty and particularly to abandoned young people, he began, in 1829, “*The Institutes of charity run by Charity*”, which aimed at providing education for girls primarily but also for boys who had potential, but did not have money for education. Daniel Comboni was one of these boys. Nicola Mazza was also particularly sensitive to the mission and he presented to *Propaganda Fide* in 1845, his first missionary disciple, Angelo Vinco.

In due time, and especially in view of the young African girls welcomed and prepared in the feminine Institute, he would also

present a plan to 'save Africa with Africa'. Apart from what can already be found in the Writings of Daniel Comboni, the recent biography of Rino Cona, *'Nicola Mazza: Un Prete per la Chiesa e la Societa'*. Editrice Mazziana, Verona 2006, is also extremely interesting and exhaustive.

Miterrutzner, Giovanni Crisostomo (1818-1903). He was a Canon Regular of the Lateran and professor in the secondary school in Bressanone. A distinguished Orientalist, he published the Denka grammar in 1866 and the following year, the Bari Grammar, achievements which led to his nomination as honorary President of the Institute of Africa in Paris. He was a great benefactor of the African Mission and he was one of the most active members of the *Marien Verein*. According to Grancelli, the merit for dissuading Cardinal Barnabo from suppressing the Mission of Central Africa in 1885, was due to him. Daniel Comboni got to know him in Verona when he accompanied some young African boys to the Mazza Institute. From then onwards, they became friends, so much so that Comboni called him "*father, counsellor, friend, teacher and everything*" (W. 1250) even after the death of Comboni, he never withdrew his support for the mission.

Morelli, Sr. Ermenegilda (1880-1978): She entered the Congregation in 1899, after having completed her studies with the *Dorotee Sisters* in Vicenza. Sent to Sudan as a teacher in 1903, she was able to talk personally with some of the survivors of the Mahdia. Encouraged by Costanza Caldara, she began, in 1941 while she was in Cesiole, to write something about our history (See, APMR, VI/A/5-2722).

Two years later, on the 13th of February 1943, she took up again the same notes in order to rewrite them as a biography of Sr. Giuseppa Scandola. (APMR, VI/SC/9/8-342).

One year later, she dedicated herself to a "*Study in search of the Spirit of the Institute*" (APMR, VI/A/7/32-2706).

We owe also to her an interesting memo, addressed to Sr. Teresa Costalunga on the 20th of July 1968 (APMR, reg. No. 2723).

For her necrology see *Raggio*, 6(1978) 27-28.

Oberbizer, Serafina (1822-1879). She was born in Rovereto and educated by the English Ladies of Bressanone. In 1843, she entered the Monastery of *Santa Chiara* in Verona. In 1846, the external students who attended the school were entrusted to her.

In 1854, despite her young age, she was elected Abbess through the Bishop, Benedetto Riccabona. Gradually, she returned the monastery to its primitive style, creating rules for each office of the nuns. Reconfirmed as the Abbess in 1857, she joined the initiative of the work of *Perpetual Adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament*. When she was gravely ill, she received a visit from Fr. Daniel Comboni on the 25th of November 1871.

Olivieri, Fr. Nicolò (1792-1864): He was a Genovese priest who dedicated himself entirely to liberating slaves in the Egyptian markets. He rescued both boys and girls in Egypt and brought them to Europe, placing them in religious institutions so that they could be educated. His activity enthused and moved many Catholics and so he received great sums of money which allowed him to organize in 1838 the *Pia Opera del Riscatto* of African children, which, after his death, was continued by Fr. Biaggio Verri. Together, the two of them brought from Africa about 1.200 children. Daniel Comboni, after the death of Olivieri, had suggested that the work continue, but the young Africans, once rescued, should no longer be brought to Europe, but entrusted to the Institutes for the regeneration of Nigrizia (See, W. 1104).

Persi, Chiara: She was born in Rome in 1840. There she had known the Daughters of the Cross and at the age of 20 she entered their noviciate which was in the diocese of Poitiers in France. Since the beginning of her formation, the young woman demonstrated uncommon spiritual phenomena, which were immediately accepted as 'revelations' by the novice mistress, but not by the local bishop, Monsignor Pie.

After her religious profession, Sr. Apollonia was assigned to the community in Rome, where she was reunited with her novice mistress who had also been assigned there on the request of Monsignor Castellacci, in order to run a boarding school for young Roman girls from noble families which had fallen into poverty. This was the *Conservatorio della SS Concezione*, better known in Rome as the *Conservatorio delle Viperesche*. It was here that she met for the first time with Daniel Comboni, recognizing in him the missionary whom she had been shown as the instrument whom God wanted to use for the salvation of many souls. After this meeting, the young Sister was able to convince her Superior that the '*Little Brother*', as she used to call Jesus during her apparitions, wanted her as the foundress of a new

feminine missionary Institute. Supported in this by Monsignor Castellacci, both of them left the French Congregation to start another, called the *Angeline della Croce*, in which Chiara Persi took the name of **Sr. Teresa de Angelis**. After the events which took place in Verona, and with the return of the two Sisters to Rome, the community of the *Angeline della Croce* was dissolved. After an Apostolic Visit, provoked by the Viperesche who had been expelled from the Conservatory when it had been entrusted to the French Sisters, Chiara

Persi had to answer directly to the Holy Office [of the Vatican], which condemned her, returned her to her lay status and then returned her to her paternal home.

Rolleri, Bartolomeo (1839-1902): Originally from the diocese of Piacenza, he entered in Verona in 1868 and left for Cairo the following February. In March 1873, Daniel Comboni entrusted to him the direction of the Institutes in Cairo. Until the month of February 1875, Rolleri still spoke of Comboni as '*his beloved Pro Vicar*'. Comboni himself confirmed on the 27th of August 1880, that "*from 1868 till 1875 he was one of my consolations*" (W. 6094). However, starting from October 1875, for reasons which remain obscure to the founder, his attitude changed so much that Comboni even wrote to Faustina Stampais, "*Among those who have fought against me in these terrible years the most ferocious was my dear Fr. Bortolo Rolleri, whom I forgive with all my heart.*" (31st of December, 1875).

Clearly aligned in favour of the Camillians, Rolleri continued to oppose Comboni until the end, accusing him of '*passion*' towards a '*sister by the name of Anna*'. In 1880, he stayed for some months in Verona where he won the esteem and friendship of Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti. Assigned to Khartoum in December 1880, he was unable to remain and so returned to Cairo where he was superior and administrator until 1885. He left the Institute in 1888 and entered the Congregation of the *Scalabriniani*. Comboni wrote more than forty letters to him, but he did not keep even one of them. Fr. L. Bano, in the fourth volume of his *Missionari del Comboni* dedicates sixteen pages to him with many interesting and meaningful texts.

Rossi, Fr. Paolo: He was born in 1850 and he entered the Missionary Institute from the seminary in Verona in 1873 leaving for Africa in the following year. He remained in Khartoum until

1876 and among other things, he was the secretary of Daniel Comboni. He returned to Verona with the Founder in 1876 and was appointed by him, the following year, as temporary director of the Institute since Fr. Antonio Squaranti would be leaving with the bishop for the mission in December 1877.

This assignment received, revealed itself, no doubt also due to the circumstances, to be more difficult than could have been foreseen, and at a certain point, the very young rector could not handle the situation. On his arrival in Verona in May 1879, the founder had to recognize that it was necessary to make other arrangements for the definitive substitution of Fr. Antonio Squaranti who had died in Khartoum in the month of November 1878. This was a decision which was not taken well by his ex- secretary who decided to leave the Institute in August 1879. The 'defection' of Fr. Paolo Rossi caused 'great suffering' (See W. 5883) to Daniel Comboni.

For the details of the events in which the young Rector was caught up, see A.GILLI, *L'Istituto Missionario Comboniano: dalla fondazione alla Morte di Daniele Comboni*, pp. 188-201.

Sembianti, Fr. Giuseppe (1836-1914). He was originally from Vervo' in Trent. He entered the Congregation of the Stigmatine Fathers in 1862 and was ordained a priest on the 15th of August 1865. Ten years later, he was elected as a general assistant and director of the Stigmatines until he transferred in 1877 as the superior of the new house in Bassano del Grappa in Vicenza.

On the 4th of December 1879, Luigi di Canossa invited him to assume the position of the rector of the Missionary Institutes. He accepted the post, with some conditions and began his service in March 1880. For five years, Fr. Sembianti was both Rector of the seminary of the African Missions and also of the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. With this latter he continued until 1897, while from 1885 he would be the procurator for the newly conceived Congregation of the Sons of the Sacred Heart which he will enter only at a later stage. He transferred to the house in Brescia in 1895 and remained there until his death on June 24th 1914. [See, *La Nigrizia*, 7(1914)116].

Sogaro, Fr. Francesco (1836–1914): He was a Stigmatine Father originally from the diocese of Vicenza. He was parish priest of St. George's in Verona when, on the 22nd of September 1882, he was nominated by Rome as successor of Daniel Comboni for the

Vicariate of Central Africa. He left Italy as soon as possible and reached Egypt on the 19th of January 1883, on the exact day of the fall of El Obeid. Two month later, however, the new Apostolic Vicar managed to reach Khartoum, but he did not manage to arrange his residency due to the Mahdia. In fact, it was from Cairo that he followed all the stages of the war, working hard for the liberation of the prisoners and opening the agricultural colony in Gesira for refugees from the Sudan. In 1894, he submitted his resignation and he was substituted by Monsignor Roveggio.

Squaranti, Fr. Antonio (1837–1878). He was born in Corbiolo in Verona and entered the diocesan seminary and was ordained a priest in 1863. He was committed to pastoral ministry in the parish of *San Paolo in Campo Marzio* when in 1871, on the suggestion of the Rector of the seminary, Monsignor Dorigotti, he was invited by Daniel Comboni to direct his missionary Institute and also to hold responsibilities towards the Congregation of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*. After six years as Rector, the Apostolic Vicar of Central Africa wanted him by his side in the Vicariate. Therefore, Antonio Squaranti was included in the list of those leaving in December 1877. The *Diary* which he keeps about this last period of his life is interesting. He died of yellow fever in November 1878 and after his death, his diary was conserved by the *Pie Madri*. It was Costanza Caldara, who, when she was Superior General, would hand it over to Fr. Capovilla on the 10th of December 1925. [See, AC, 2(1978) 149-168].

Tawfiq Pascia (1852-1892). He was the first son of Ismail, the Khedive of Egypt. After the forced abdication of his father, the young prince took the throne in June 1879. The difficult position in which the great, but not forward looking, policies had placed Egypt made Tawfiq's government difficult right from the start. He found himself trying to administrate a country which was on the verge of collapse. Since the creditors of the state were, for the most part, English and French, the re-establishment of financial control by these two countries, provided a pretext for the nationalist movement of *Arabi Pascia*, whom the new Khedive did not have the shrewdness or the energy to suppress from the beginning. This resulted in the bombardment of Alexandria by the English fleet, followed by the intervention of the troops to put down the revolt, while Tawfiq fled abandoning Cairo. Having returned to his homeland after the defeat and the arrest of Arabi

(September 1882), the Khedive remained absolutely dependant on England, represented locally by Lord Cromer, until the end. Daniel Comboni, on his return to Cairo at the end of 1880, expressed himself very satisfied by the welcome he received from Tawfiq (See W. 6501) whom he already knew and who had provided for him two important 'firmans' (decrees of protection) valid also for the Sudan.

Tomba, Fr. Gioacchino (1819-1899): He was originally from Vestenavecchia but transferred to Verona when he was twelve in order to continue his schooling first of all at the Stigmatine Fathers. Two years later, instead, he entered the College of Mazza and the diocesan seminary school and was ordained in 1844. After having completed his studies at the University of Padua, Gioacchino Tomba remained there for some years as Rector, from 1848, of All Saints College. In 1852, Fr. Nicola Mazza entrusted to him the students of St. Carlo in Verona, including the University students. In 1863, we find Fr. Gioacchino Rector of the feminine college in Cantarane Street, where, the following year, Fr. Mazza, now more than seventy years old, also moved with the Rector, Tomba. On the death of the Founder, on the 2nd of August 1865, Fr. Gioacchino was nominated as his successor.

Valerio, Sr. Rosa Caterina: She was born in Verona and became an enclosed professed Tertiary of St. Francis. She then became Directress of the Institution of Gemona (Udine) which had been founded by the Princess of Beaufremont. *"Begged by a most devout benefactor, I took the girl from Marseilles to Cairo so that she could enter the convent of the good Franciscan Tertiaries where she said she had been accepted, and where, for reasons unknown to me, she did not enter but was given hospitality by my Sisters of St. Joseph. She left after three months to direct the female school in Old Cairo, in a house annexed to the Franciscan Latin Parish, with the help of my African women teachers and my cousin Faustina"* ... (W. 4216). Other news relative to the ex Sr. Caterina and her involvement with the Camillian Fathers can be found in the letter written by Comboni to Cardinal Franchi on the 29th of June 1875. See also, AMN, 8(2004)22ff.

Verri, Fr. Biaggio (1819-1884): He was a Franciscan who belonged to the same religious family as Ludovico da Casoria, to whom he provided pupils for the Institute in Naples. He was also a friend

and heir of Fr. Olivieri in the work of ransoming slaves. Daniel Comboni wrote an interesting letter to Olivieri from the Mazza Institute on the 20th of May 1864. After the Treaty of Paris, with the consequent abolition of slavery, Fr. Verri had some troubles from some members of the English Consulate of Alexandria (see, W.858). Despite this, Comboni had proposed to Verri to accompany him to the coast of Mozambique where children who had been sold into slavery were numerous. In 1866, Daniel Comboni thought of involving Fr. Biaggio Verri in the implementation of his Plan (see, W. 1356-62), but in December 1872, he had changed his mind because the African girls educated in Europe had “*thousands of demands*” (W. 3108) and they were of no use to the mission” (See, W. 3175-76).

ABBREVIATIONS

AC	=	<i>Archivio Comboniano</i>
ACR	=	Archivio Missionari Comboniani – Roma
AFMR	=	Archivio Frati Minori Roma
AMN	=	<i>Archivio Madri Nigrizia</i>
ANNALI	=	<i>Annali della Associazione del Buon Pastore</i>
AP LD	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide – <i>Lettere e Decreti</i>
APMR	=	Archivio Pie Madri – Roma
AP SC	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide, <i>Scritture Congressi</i>
AP SOCG	=	Archivio Propaganda Fide, <i>Scritture Originali riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali</i>
ASFMR	=	Archivio storico Frati Minori – Roma
CRONACA	=	<i>Cronaca</i> dell'Istituto delle Pie Madri della Nigrizia: 1871-1930.
MEMORIE	=	<i>Memorie dell'Istituto Pie Madri della Nigrizia</i>
PIME	=	Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere
POSITIO	=	S. C. pro Causis Sanctorum [...] <i>Danielis Comboni. Positio super virtutibus ex officio cincinnata</i> . Roma, MCMLXXXVIII.
S	=	Daniele Comboni. <i>Gli Scritti</i> . Roma, 1991. W Writings , MCCJ, London, 2005
STATO PERSONALE	=	Registro dello “ <i>Stato Personale dell'Istituto delle Pie Madri della Nigrizia in Verona</i> ”.

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----- *Faustina Stampais.... In: AMN, 8(2004).*

----- *Fortunata Quascè: la prima Pia Madre della Nigrizia. In: AMN, 9(2005).*

Illustrations



Monsignor Luigi di Canossa (1809 – 1900)
Bishop of Verona



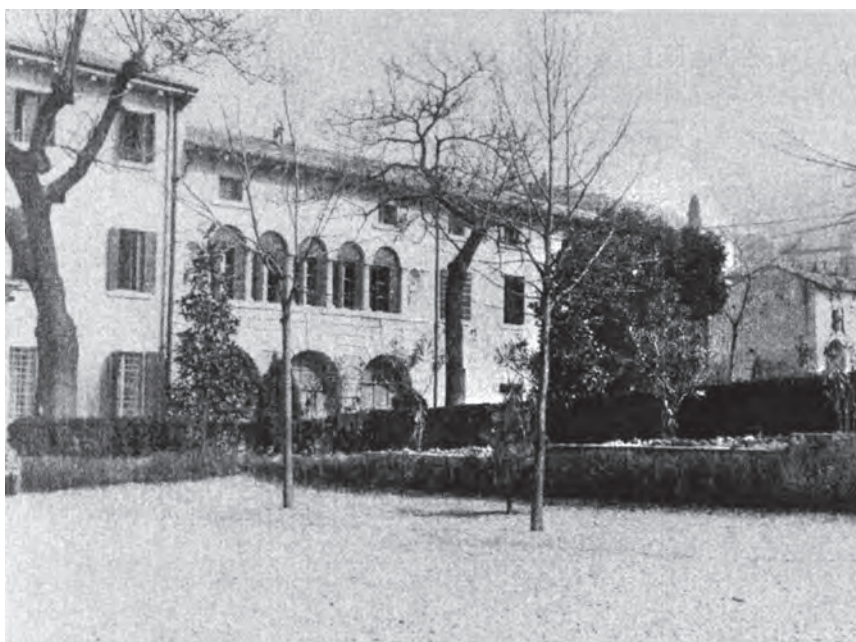
Fr. Antonio Squaranti
(1837 – 1878)



Fr. Giuseppe Sembianti
(1836 – 1914)



The Mother House of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia* in Verona



Villa Zago in Montorio on the outskirts of Verona



The Internal courtyard of the Mother House



Mother Maria Bollezzoli
(1828 – 1901)
First Superior General of the *Pie Madri della Nigrizia*

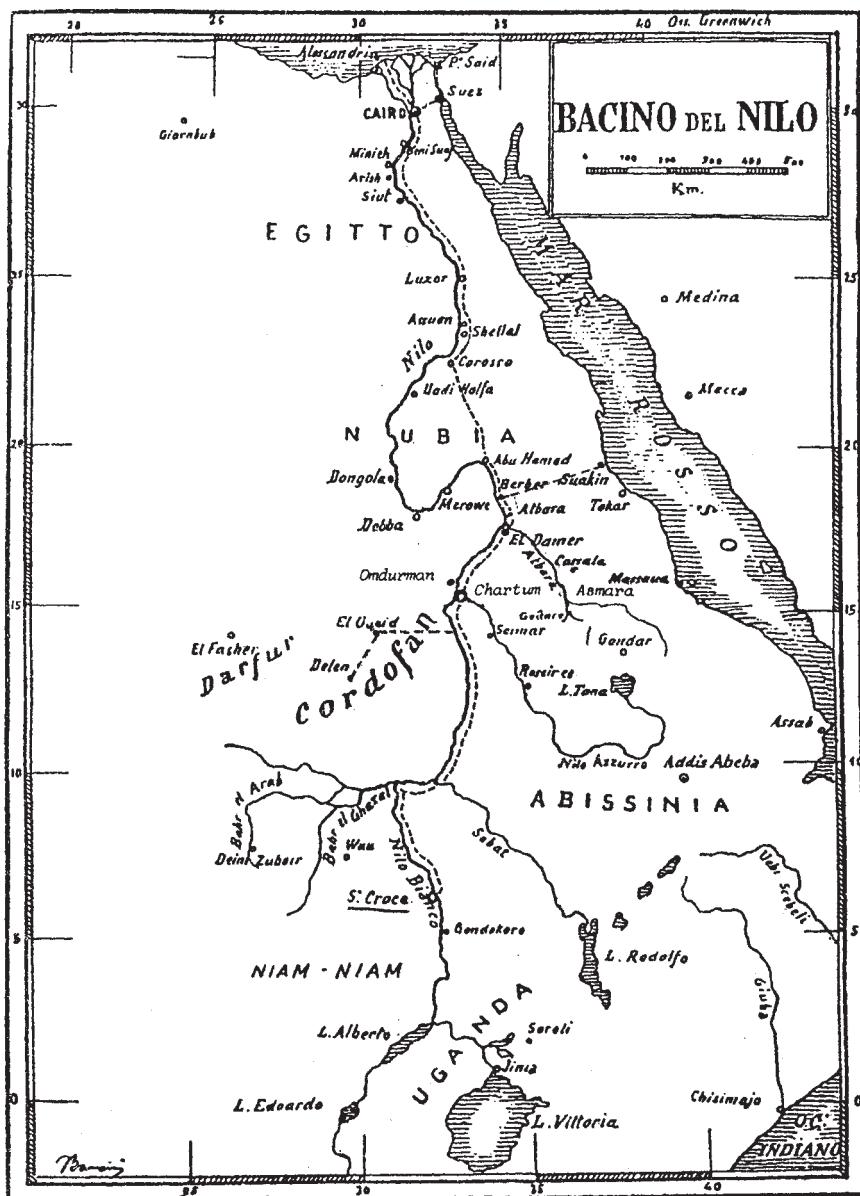


Episcopal Stem of
Saint Daniel Comboni

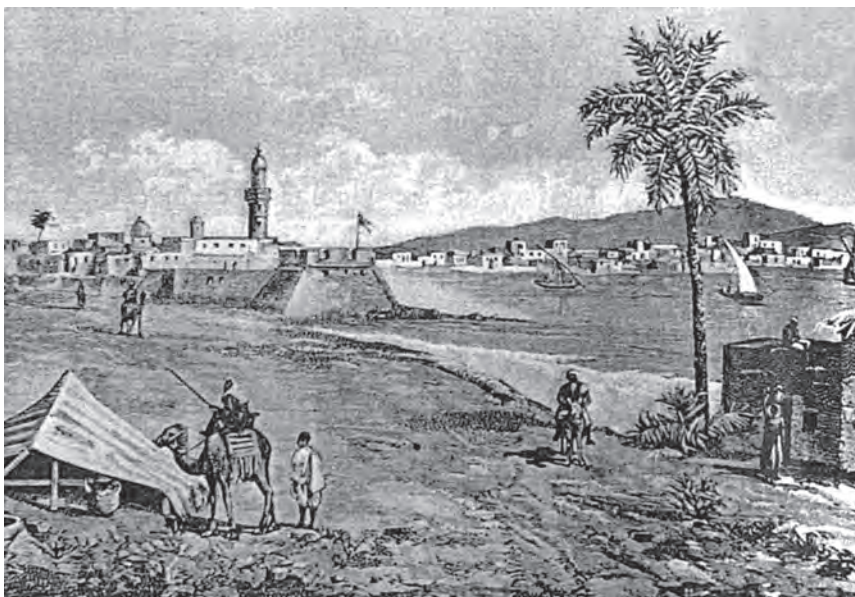


+ Daniel Comboni Episcopus
et Vic. Apost. Africae etis

† Bishop Daniel Comboni
12th of August 1877



The route followed by the first group of the *Pie Madri* with Daniel Comboni



Berber (Sudan) in 1878 - The first group of the *Pie Madri* who left for Africa reached Berber on March 30th



From Left, Standing:
Concetta Corsi, Vittoria Paganini, Maria Giuseppa Scandola
Sitting: Teresa Grigolini and Maria Caspi

The first to fall...



Sr. Maria Bertuzzi
El Obeid, 18th of February 1880



Sr. Marietta Caspi
El Obeid, May 16th 1880



Sr. Maria Rosa Colpo
Malbes, 21st of September 1881



View of Khartoum at the time of Comboni



The garden of the mission where Daniel Comboni was buried

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