

SUPREME WITNESS



**Comboni Missionaries
killed in the line of duty
in Africa and Latin America**

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Comboni Missionaries killed in the line of duty
in Africa and Latin America • 2019

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Introduction

Sanguis martyrurum, semen christianorum

The blood of Martyrs is the seed of the Church

Tertullian of Carthage (155-240 AD)

If Saint Daniel Comboni (1831-1881), Bishop of Khartoum and Founder of the Comboni Missionaries and the Comboni Missionary Sisters, had lived a little longer he would have witnessed the tremendous trials to which his followers in Sudan were subjected during the 'Mahdist War'. In March 1882 the Sudanese religious leader Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah proclaimed himself the 'Mahdi' ('Guide') of Islam and led an armed rebellion against the forces of the Turco-Egyptian Government in Sudan. It was the start of an 'Islamic Revolution' that would last until September 1898 with the defeat of the Mahdist Army at the Battle of Omdurman by an Anglo-Egyptian Expeditionary Force led by General Herbert Kitchener.

These years marked a most difficult period in the history of the Church in Sudan and in the lives of some of the first Comboni Missionary Priests, Brothers and Sisters. The three Missions founded by Bishop Daniel Comboni in Sudan, Khartoum, El Obeid and Delen, were all destroyed and fourteen of his Missionaries taken prisoner by the

Mahdi. The terrible suffering which these Missionaries of Comboni, so deeply signed by the Cross, endured for the sake of remaining faithful to their missionary vocation was truly exemplary. Father Leon Hanriot, who managed with the other Missionaries of Comboni in Khartoum to escape to Cairo before the advancing Mahdist rebels, gave them the title, "Apostles and Confessors of the Faith" and deservedly so.

Under the Mahdiya

At the beginning of May 1882 the town of Delen was cut off by Mahdist forces and the model village of Malbes founded by Bishop Comboni was devastated and abandoned. The Mission of Delen was over-run by Mahdist rebels on September 15th 1882. Father Luigi Bonomi, Father Josef Ohrwalder, Brother Gabriele Mariani, Brother Giuseppe Regnotto, Sister Amalia Andreis, Sister Maria Caprini and Sister Eulalia Pesavento were all taken captive. The ill-treatment, physical violence and hunger in captivity took their toll, and three of the seven Missionaries captured in Delen were dead within weeks of their being taken prisoner. Sister Eulalia Pesavento died on October 27th 1882 at just twenty-six, Brother Gabriele Mariani on October 31st 1882 at twenty-nine and Sister Amalia Andreis on November 11th at thirty years of age.

The Mahdists had laid siege to El Obeid on September 9th 1882, and the Missionaries there took refuge in the 'Mudiria' (*Fort*) along with the other inhabitants of the town. The conditions in the fort became increasingly dire and Father Giovanni Losi died from scurvy at forty-four years of age on December 27th 1882. The garrison and the

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townspeople were starved into submission after a siege lasting four months. When El Obeid fell into the hands of the rebels on January 19th 1883, Father Paolo Rosignoli, Brother Isidoro Locatelli, Sister Teresa Grigolini, Sister Concetta Corsi, Sister Fortunata Quascé, Sister Elisabetta Venturini and Sister Caterina Chincarini, were all taken captive. For the eleven Missionaries of Comboni in captivity, this was the beginning of a long and slow martyrdom under the tyranny of the Mahdi that was destined to go on for years. Isolated from one another, these were years filled with deprivation, humiliation and suffering of every kind for the Faith. The fierce pressure on the Missionaries to convert to Islam was relentless, and was often accompanied by extreme violence (*on one occasion Father Bonomi was bound, tied to the tail of a camel and dragged through the streets of El Obeid for refusing to renounce the Faith*). The summary executions for failing to renounce their Faith and embrace Islam, although often threatened, were never actually carried out as the Mahdi preferred to keep the prisoners as hostages to serve as potential 'bargaining chips' in any future negotiations with the Anglo-Egyptian Government in Cairo.

Escape from torment

Father Luigi Bonomi was the first to escape at the end of June 1885 and then, at the end of October of the same year, Sister Maria Caprini and Sister Fortunata Quascé managed to flee their captors and travel to Egypt. Brother Isidoro Locatelli escaped and arrived in the Government-held port city of Sawakin in North-eastern Sudan on March 24th 1887. Sister Concetta Corsi died of typhus on the

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morning of October 3rd 1891 in Omdurman at forty-one years of age while still a prisoner of the Madhi. On December 8th 1891 Father Josef Ohrwalder, Sister Caterina Chincarini and Sister Elizabetta Venturini reached Egypt, physically and mentally exhausted, but finally free after ten years of harsh imprisonment. Father Paolo Rosignoli was liberated in October 1894 after twelve years of being held prisoner through the sustained efforts of the successor of Comboni, Bishop Francesco Sogaro. After the fall of Omdurman in 1898, Sister Teresa Grigolini and Brother Giuseppe Regnatto, the last of the Missionaries of Comboni to be held in captivity, were freed by the Anglo-Egyptian Expeditionary Force led by General Kitchener.

Ready to die

The Cross is part and parcel of every Christian vocation. For each Christian, the sharing in the Cross of Christ takes on a different form. For some, the identification with Christ's sufferings reaches the point of giving their lives as in the case of those Comboni Missionaries who wished to remain faithful to their missionary vocation 'until death' as taught by their Father and Founder, St. Daniel Comboni.

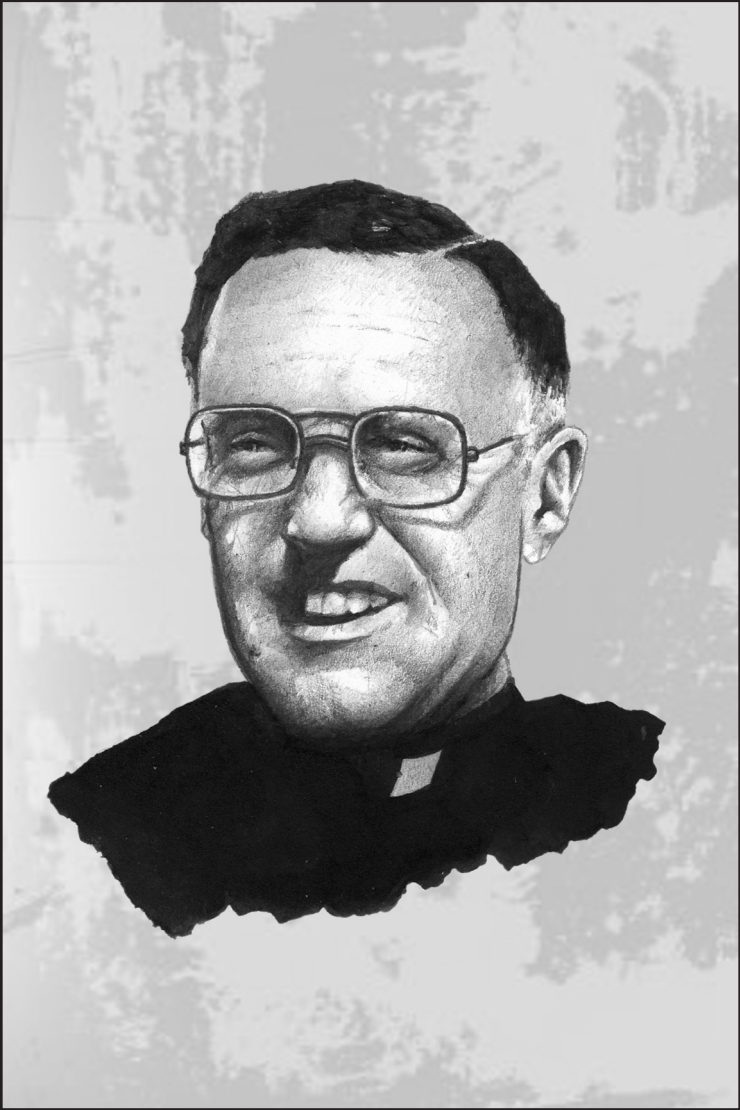
The following is an account of the lives of twenty-five Comboni Missionary Priests, Brothers and Sisters who died in the service of the Gospel in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Brazil and México. These were men and women who were killed while giving expression to the love taught by Jesus Christ and practiced in His name: preaching the truths and values of the Gospel; teaching the Faith; visiting and caring for the sick; comforting the afflicted;

and promoting the integral development of every human person regardless of race, culture, language or religion. In front of their murderers they did not protest or fight back and, given the opportunity, they forgave their killers, reminiscent of the words of the Lord himself on the Cross on Calvary, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Remembering the martyrs past and present

The redemptive work of Christ is manifested in the lives of such men and women who gave their lives in the service of God and of their neighbour in Africa and Latin America. A constant refrain of Pope Francis, often noting that there are more martyrs dying violent deaths in modern times than in the early centuries of the Church, is to entreat the People of God to keep alive the memory of those who have been martyred for the Faith. Contemplating the martyrs of the past and present is, for the Holy Father, a sure way to leading a 'full Christian life', by welcoming in the silence of our own ordinary lives the 'martyrdom' of putting our faith into practice day in and day out.

Father Martin Devenish mccj
Provincial Superior



1. Uganda: Father Luciano Fulvi

- A Life dedicated to the Youth

In June 2003, Father Luciano celebrated his Golden Jubilee of Ordination in his home town of Uzzano in Northern Italy. On the souvenir card for the occasion were the words, "Thank you Lord for having loved me, for loving me still and for allowing me to walk with you in the mystery of your love. With immense gratitude I thank all those who have accompanied me down the years". Yet, before leaving again for the Missions in September 2003, Father Luciano had a sense of foreboding. He told his sister, Daniela, herself a Comboni Missionary Sister, "You should know - I will die there in Africa but do not be afraid on my account. I am not afraid".

Father Luciano was born in Uzzano on May 15th 1928. After primary school he went to the local Diocesan Seminary in Pescia. While there, he realised he was being called to be a missionary. In one of his letters he wrote, "Already, I felt the desire in me to become a missionary. This desire had become stronger and stronger but the Rector was against it and would not let me leave the Seminary, as I was still too young". His family, too, disagreed, but Luciano had made up his mind. In another letter he wrote, "God wants me to be a missionary and I will follow Him no matter what the cost. Day and night I can think of nothing else but of joining the Comboni Missionaries. Despite this, I am still afraid and I sometimes

feel this call is not from God, but rather mere ambition on my part and then I start doubting. It seems to me that I will have to leave my family, my mother and everything else familiar to me; but the very idea of being a deserter and a traitor makes me tremble in fear. In addition to which, the missionary life is hard: full of sacrifices and the danger of death. Even though I would love to be a martyr, such thoughts worry me and make me afraid I may give up the call”.

Realizing his dream

In October 1946 Luciano entered the Novitiate of the Comboni Missionaries in Florence and after two years took his First Vows, “moved by the desire to serve my God faithfully and to consecrate myself entirely to the Missions”. On May 30th 1953 he was ordained a priest in Milan by Cardinal (*later Blessed*) Ildefonso Schuster. The newly-ordained priest was then sent to England to study English and obtain the necessary qualifications to allow him teach in Uganda, to where he had been assigned. However, his Superiors appointed him to a teaching position at their Junior Seminary at Stillington in North Yorkshire to train future missionaries from Britain and Ireland. It was three years before he was at last allowed to leave for Uganda. Although his official role was one of a teacher and school chaplain in the Secondary School of the Mission of Nyapea (*in North-western Uganda*), Father Luciano spent all his spare time in direct pastoral work among the local people. He was helped by a bright and cheerful disposition – gifted as he was with a wonderful sense of humour and an ability to make friends with anyone.

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After eight years working in Nyapea, Father Luciano returned to England, where he worked initially as Spiritual Director at the Junior Seminary (1965-1974) which in the intervening years had transferred to Mirfield in West Yorkshire; then as Vocations Promoter and Superior in Ardrossan in Ayrshire (1974-1980); Vocations Promoter and Superior in Glasgow (1980-1982); Superior in Mirfield (1982-1985); and Vocations Promoter in Glasgow (1985-1990).

Return to Africa

It was not until 1990, after twenty-five years of service to the future missionaries of England and Scotland, that he was appointed once more to Uganda, where he would again work with young people at Ombaci College as Chaplain and Vocations Promoter (1990-1995). The following year he had a multiple heart by-pass operation, but in spite of this major health set-back, he agreed to go to the capital, Kampala to become the Vocations Promoter of the Comboni Missionaries in Uganda. Responsibilities continued to increase. In January 2002 he was appointed Superior of the Mission in Layibi, Chaplain of St. Joseph's College Layibi and Youth Chaplain of the Archdiocese of Gulu in Northern Uganda.

Foreboding sadly realized

Two years later, on the night of March 30th 2004, a night like any other with its tropical heat and the constant buzz of mosquitoes, Father Luciano said goodnight to his Confrères at around 9:30 p.m. and went to his room. His murderers were waiting for him. In all probability, they

came through the neighbouring eucalyptus grove, scaled the wall and entered the grounds of the Mission. There were bruises on his face and arms showing that he had struggled to defend himself, but the tragedy must have taken only a few seconds as the Confrères in the nearby television room heard nothing. Going to their rooms, the Confrères saw that the door of Father Luciano's room was ajar, but thought nothing of this because it was often left open due to the difficulties he had sleeping with the stifling heat. The light was not on and so they thought he was already asleep, and they retired for the night. It was only in the morning, when Father Luciano did not come for Mass, that Brother Joseph Dalle Mulle entered his room and made the shocking discovery.

Father Luciano was on the floor: his throat cut and lying face down in a pool of blood. The police were called and within a matter of days had arrested six individuals for the appalling crime: five were young men between twenty and thirty years of age and the sixth a former soldier in his early fifties. From the police investigation it would appear that three of the gang including the former soldier had entered the room of Father Luciano and lay in wait for him, while the others remained around the compound of the Mission to raise the alarm if necessary. The real motive for the murder, apart from apparent robbery, was never discovered. The Missionaries involved in the case were of the firm belief that the assailants were in fact only 'hired killers' and that those behind the violent death of Father Luciano were being protected by the Authorities in Gulu.

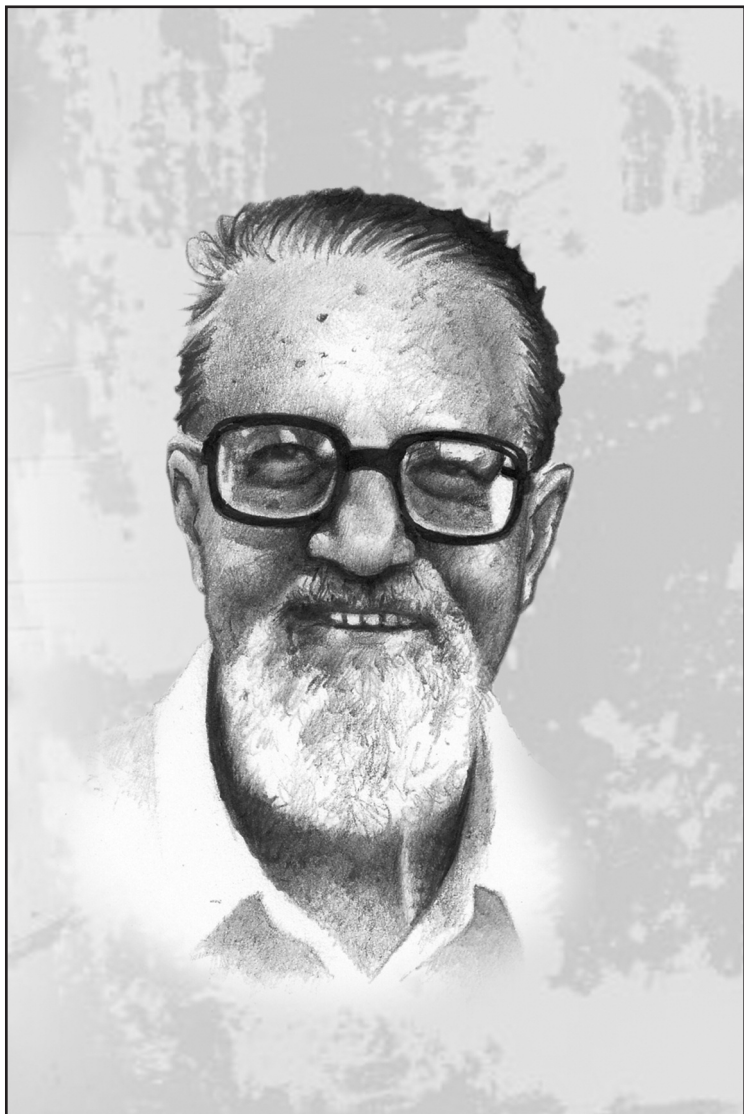
The six suspects were subsequently transferred to Luzira Maximum Security Prison in Kampala, and two years later

were tried in the High Court there on a charge of capital murder. The three assailants who entered the room were sentenced to death by hanging for the killing of Father Luciano, while their three accomplices were acquitted on the grounds that they were not directly involved in the murder. The death sentences were subsequently commuted to life imprisonment.

A fitting tribute

The Funeral Mass of Father Luciano took place at Gulu Cathedral in a very emotionally-charged ceremony presided over by the Papal Nuncio to Uganda, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, with the participation of thousands of young people from all over the Archdiocese. During his homily the Archbishop repeatedly asked the Congregation: "Why? ... Why? ... Why?" before reminding his listeners that "the blood of the innocent bears fruit in time". Sister Daniela, Father Luciano's younger sister, commented: "Luciano went to Africa to bring the Gospel, to help the people who loved him so much. He knew the dangers, but went willingly and with enthusiasm. It is only right that he should repose in the land he loved so well". Father Luciano is buried in the cemetery adjacent to the Cathedral where many Comboni Missionaries and Comboni Missionary Sisters are laid to rest. A monument was erected to his memory in his home town of Uzzano.

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2. Uganda: Father Mario Mantovani

- A real 'Gentle Man'

Father Mario spent forty-six years of his missionary life in Karamoja, in the North-east of the country. The Karimojong people called him by his nickname 'Apalongor', which means 'the owner of the ash-grey coloured bull'. The Karimojong, semi-nomadic cattle-herders and shepherds, give everyone a nickname taken from the names used to describe their cattle. Father Mario knew the local language extremely well and over the years had written two grammars (*the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases and words in a language*) and published a study on the construction of Ngakarimojong verbs.

Father Mario was born at Orzinuovi, in the Province of Brescia in the North of Italy, on December 18th 1919. He entered the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries at eleven years of age and entered the Novitiate in 1938. Two years later he made his First Vows and was ordained a priest in 1946. After eleven years of service in Italy, Father Mario left for Uganda. His first and only appointment was to the region of Karamoja, recognized by the Confrères as one of the 'most difficult' Mission territories ever evangelised by the Comboni Missionaries.

In a letter, written from the Mission of Nabilatuk in Southern Karamoja, Father Mario explained his work: "I have chosen twenty-five Catechists, each based about ten

kilometres from the other. I have given each of them five assistants whose duty is to assist both Christian adults and children alike, and catechize the local villages of around fifty to sixty people each”.

A plea for help

From a Mission near the town of Kotido he wrote: “Here in Losilang there has been no rain and the harvest has been very poor. However, it is worse to notice the air of political rivalry between those who command and those who would like to do so. We Missionaries are misunderstood by the Authorities because they think we are in favour of the Opposition. Instead, we keep completely out of politics. We are in the hands of the Lord and we go forward with faith. If you can, or when you can, please remember my forty-three Catechists, that is, send me something to give them, and also for the people who have no food. I have found many lepers in the District. We ought to help them as well”.

Father Mario was especially concerned with the victims of leprosy and never worried about being in contact with them. He would go into their huts, dress their wounds, and bring them food, blankets, soap and snuffing tobacco (*or rather, in keeping with local customs, he would snuff tobacco in their company!*). In this way he removed all barriers between himself and those afflicted by leprosy, mixing as easily with them as he did with everybody else. The slight build, the gentle demeanour, the disarming smile, the kind word,

Father Mario was also a man of prayer, always available and very understanding. Everyone felt comfortable in his

company. Once he wrote: "The risen Christ is our only hope and therefore, even here in Karamoja, even if our life is always in danger, I have erased the word pessimism from my vocabulary. The Lord loves us and showed this by the mystery of His blood shed for all without exception. We have to follow the example of Christ and be available for everyone".

Warriors armed with guns

The difficulties of working among the peoples of Karamoja never discouraged Father Mario. He was always a source of encouragement and of hope to the younger Comboni Missionaries in Karamoja. Father Mario accepted what would turn out to be his last assignment in 2002 to the Mission of Kapedo in the very North of Karamoja which was about three hours' drive from centre of the Diocese in Kotido. At over eighty years of age, that Mission seemed to him to be rather isolated, and he expressed a preference to remain closer to Kotido. Yet, as he was needed in Kapedo, Father Mario humbly and bravely accepted this latest challenge in his long missionary life.

After arriving in the Mission of Kapedo Father Mario began to suffer recurrent bouts of malaria and so decided to seek medical attention from the Sisters in the Mission Health Centre in Kanawat near Kotido. After three weeks receiving treatment in Kanawat, Father Mario felt well enough to return home and so he sent a radio message to Kapedo asking the Brother there, Godfrey Kiryowa, to come and collect him so that he could celebrate the Feast of the Assumption for the Faithful around the Mission.

Brother Godfrey went to collect Father Mario on August

13th 2003. The following morning they left Kanawat on the journey home, and after about an hour's drive in 'no man's land' between the Dodoth and the Jie, they came across a group of well-armed Dodoth warriors. The Dodoth tribe are traditionally in conflict over grazing-rights for their cattle with the neighbouring Jie tribe who live in and around Kotido. There had apparently been a cattle raid the night before and the Dodoth had lost a large number of livestock at the hands of the Jie. It would appear the Dodoth warriors, angered by the loss of their cattle, shot at the car as it passed by on the road. Brother Godfrey was hit in the head and died instantly. A young man who was in the car with the two Missionaries managed to control the vehicle until it stopped. He then smashed the car's window and succeeded in escaping, leaving Father Mario behind. Father Mario also apparently managed to get out of the vehicle and went to hide himself in the surrounding bush.

Alarm raised

On the evening of the same day, Father Christopher Aleti, in the Mission of Kanawat, sent a radio message to the Comboni Missionaries in Kapedo to inquire whether the two Confrères had arrived safely. When he was told that they had not yet arrived, he went and informed the local police, but was told that it would not be prudent to go and search for them at night. The following day, the Feast of the Assumption, on August 15th 2003 Father Aleti accompanied by police and soldiers set off early in the morning and followed the road taken by Brother Godfrey and Father Mario. Along the road, near the mountain of Lobel, they

found the car abandoned with the remains of Brother Godfrey still inside and immediately arranged for the body to be taken back to the Mission of Kanawat. There was, however, no trace of Father Mario. Father Christopher, with an escort of soldiers, set off on foot to search for him. From the place of the ambush they followed footprints, which appeared to be those of Father Mario, in the hope of finding him still alive. Instead the tracks led them to a local homestead and to the hut of one of the armed warriors who had apparently stolen the shoes of Father Mario and then put them on himself. After returning to the scene of the ambush with the suspect, the group discovered the body of Father Mario with several bullet wounds to the head, chest and legs. He had been executed in the place where the warriors had found him. The individual was arrested on suspicion of being involved in the murder of Father Mario and taken to the Police Station in Kotido. A couple of days later, and in rather mysterious circumstances, he himself was shot dead by the police whilst, allegedly, trying to escape.

The funeral

The funeral of 'Apalongor' took place in the early afternoon of August 16th 2003 in the Mission of Kanawat amidst prayers, hymns and the wailing of many hundreds of the grief-stricken Faithful. Bishop Denis Kiwanuka of the Diocese of Kotido noted during his homily in the Requiem Mass that Father Mario had made Karamoja his true home and the Karimojong the very reason for his life, and as a result was revered by the people he served down the years. A fellow Comboni Missionary commented at the

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time: "Karimojong culture believes in sacrifices, so much so that, before setting off on a cattle raid, the warriors offer a head of cattle in sacrifice. In the light of faith and of the Gospel, it will now be the sacrifice of Father Mario who will earn for the Karimojong not herds of cattle, but their allegiance to Christ and to the Church".

With the killings of Father Mario Mantovani and of Brother Godfrey Kiryowa, the number of Comboni Missionaries who have shed their blood in Uganda over the last fifty years has risen to thirteen. In keeping with his wishes, Father Mario was interred in a simple grave, by the Church in Kanawat.

3. Uganda: Brother Godfrey Kiryowa

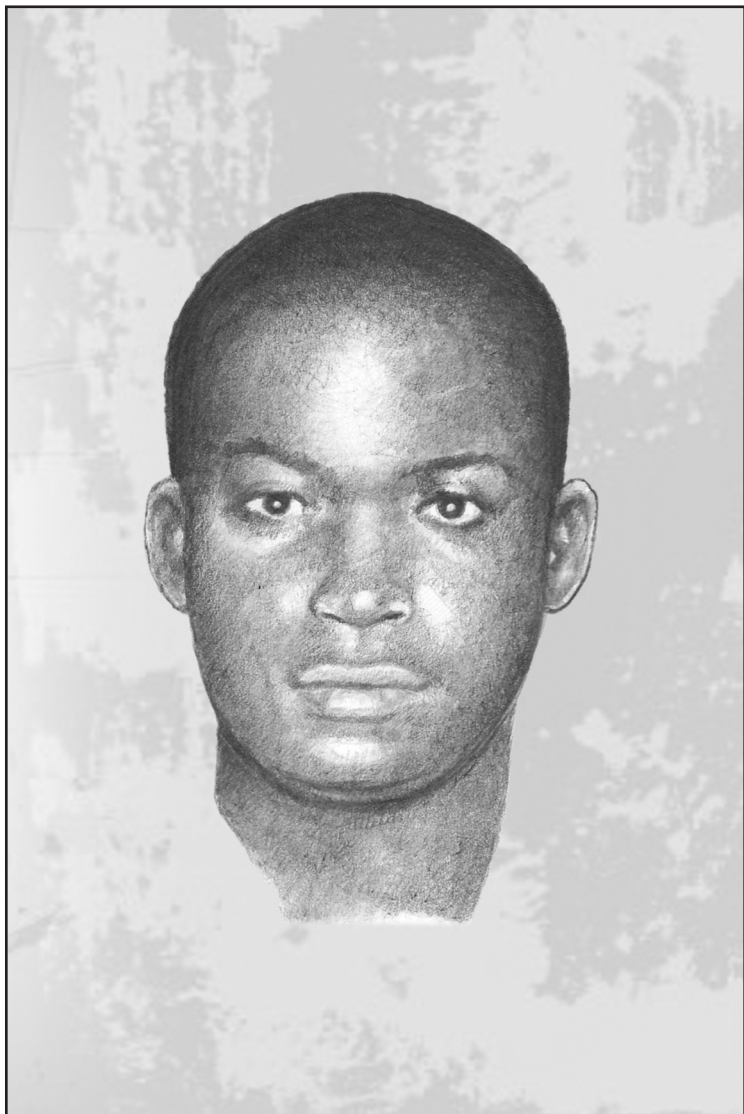
- A Shooting on the Road

Tension and insecurity in the region of Karamoja, North-eastern Uganda, was rife. Well-armed warriors were taking advantage of the lack of security personnel on the ground to wreak havoc by raiding cattle belonging to neighbouring ethnic groups. It was in the late afternoon of Friday 15th August 2003 when the shocking news reached the Mission of Kapedo.

On the night of August 13th 2003 there had been a cattle raid by the Jie, an ethnic group living in and around Kotido, against kraals of the Dodoth ethnic group who live to the north of Kotido, around Kaabong and Kapedo. Several people were killed and many hundreds of animals were stolen. A group of young Dodoth warriors apparently decided to take revenge.

On the morning of August 14th 2003 Brother Godfrey Kiryowa was travelling home with Father Mario Manovani from Kotido to the Mission of Kapedo, about seventy miles north. They set out from the Mission of Kanawat near Kotido at 9:00 a.m. in the morning and about an hour later reached the Loyoro-Kaabong crossroads near a mountain named 'Lobel'. Brother Godfrey was driving slowly because the road was in such a poor state of repair. By the side of the road, the grass was tall. The silence was broken by a sudden volley of shots from an AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifle. A hail of bullets struck the car.

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Brother Godfrey was hit and died instantly. Father Mario managed to get out of the vehicle, but was shot dead a short distance away. Brother Godfrey was only thirty years of age and was the first Ugandan Comboni Missionary Brother killed in Africa. Father Mario Mantovani was eighty-four years old.

Brother Godfrey Kiryowa was born on December 20th 1973 into a family originally from Tanzania at Kwawangabi in the Parish of Kasaala, about forty miles north of Kampala. He entered the Comboni Postulancy in Layibi on the outskirts of Gulu where he trained for three years in 'Building Construction and Design'. He then went to Namugongo from 2000 to 2002 for his Novitiate, and he took his First Vows there as a Brother (*a non-ordained Member of the Order*) on May 5th 2002. After that he was assigned to the Mission of Kapedo in Northern Karamoja.

The challenge of Karamoja

The semi-arid region of Karamoja is among the least developed and most insecure areas of the country. It is a place of low agricultural productivity, serious food insecurity and high levels of extreme poverty. When Brother Godfrey arrived in Karamoja he was truly shocked to see the levels of poverty and deprivation there coming, as he did, from a far more fertile region in the centre of the country. In the Mission of Kapedo he joined Father Mario Mantovani, whom he already knew, and set to work. The Brother made himself available for the various chores needed in running the Mission: maintaining the water pump, the electricity generator and the buildings; going for provisions and fuel to Kotido, and further afield to Mbale and Kampala for

spare parts and supplies; and being the driver for his elderly Confère.

Brother Godfrey tried to understand what really lay behind all the cattle raiding in Karamoja. He noted that some people justified such criminal behaviour with phrases such as: "When you have nothing, you have to go on a raid. It is people who have no work who raid"; "No cows, no dowry, no marriage"; or "People are not educated so they depend on raiding for survival". Yet Brother Godfrey was not naïve and soon realized that business interests often lay behind the phenomenon of cattle rustling and the seemingly endless amounts of guns and bullets readily available to the cattle raiders. The growth in cattle raiding on a commercial scale had greatly facilitated the supply of vast numbers of cattle for slaughter to the urban populations in the South of the country. The extent of such raiding, Brother Godfrey argued, was far more than was needed for the supposed survival of individual families or providing for marriage dowries in Karamoja.

The work of the Mission was paramount

Brother Godfrey constantly asked himself what he could do to remedy matters but he was determined that he would not change his own routine just because of cattle raiding. One day raiders started to fire at his vehicle as he was driving on the road from Loyoro to Kapedo. On that occasion, there happened to be some soldiers in the back of the pick-up who had asked him for a lift along the way, and they returned fire. The warriors thought better of the encounter and beat a hasty retreat. He later told friends that although he had been 'frightened to death' by the

episode nothing was going to put him off driving on those roads if it was necessary for his work in maintaining the Mission. Notwithstanding such experiences, he remained always smiling, good humoured and courageous.

Sadly, Brother Godfrey never got the opportunity to put his analysis or his courage to further use. The ambush that took place on August 14th as he was driving Father Mario home to the Mission of Kapedo proved fatal for both of them. The reasons for their untimely end are still contested. Some claim that there was no connection between the killing of the two Missionaries and the cattle raid by the Jie which had taken place in the area the night before. The man caught in possession of Father Mantovani's shoes and wrist-watch was later killed in mysterious circumstances at Kotido Police Station. Some alleged this was to prevent him from revealing the names of his accomplices. All that is known is that the body of Brother Godfrey was found the following day, on the morning of the Feast of the Assumption, and that the body of Father Mario was found a short distance away at around 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon of the same day.

Evangelical witness

When the news of Brother Godfrey's death reached Kasaala, the local Bishop Cyprian Lwanga was celebrating the Solemnity there as the Parish Church was dedicated to the 'Assumption of Our Blessed Lady'. The Bishop personally informed Brother Godfrey's father, who was a Catechist of the Parish and a man of deep faith, of his terrible loss. The father reacted with great composure and, understanding the difficulty of the situation, said that the

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family were willing to have Godfrey buried in Karamoja if moving the body would endanger the lives of other Missionaries.

On Saturday 16th August 2003 Bishop Denis Kiwanuka of the Diocese of Kotido, with the participation of a number of Comboni Missionaries, other Religious and Members of the Local Clergy, celebrated the Funeral Mass of Father Mario Mantovani and Brother Godfrey Kiryowa in the Mission of Kanawat. Father Mario was then buried next to the Church in Kanawat while Brother Godfrey's remains were taken to his home Parish in Kasaala. The following day many fellow students from Brother Godfrey's days at Secondary and Technical School took part in the Funeral Rites there. He was buried next to the two Missionaries of Africa (*White Fathers*) who had founded the Parish in Kasaala and had worked there for many years.

The evident faith and great serenity of Brother Godfrey's elderly father, who publicly forgave his son's killers at the graveside, was a great sign of evangelical witness: showing the power of the Gospel to transform the human heart and to give meaning even to the tragic death of a young and precious son.

4. Uganda: Father Raffaele Di Bari

- A Voice for the People

"In my many years in Africa", wrote Father Raffaele, "the greatest mission I received from Our Lord has been that of being a voice for these people, condemning before all the world the atrocities the rebels commit on an almost daily basis, especially against women and against children who, because of this war, are abducted, drugged and transformed into murdering child soldiers". Speaking of such child soldiers he said, "These little ones are terrorised and traumatised; real martyrs in a dreadful war that continues to be part and parcel of life in Northern Uganda. This is all due to the appalling deeds of the guerrillas of the *Lord's Resistance Army*. I cannot remain silent before these atrocities".

Born for Africa

When Father Raffaele took his First Vows in 1948, at nineteen years of age, he wrote, "I know that the priestly, religious and missionary vocation is the greatest grace the good Lord could possibly give me. I ask to be admitted to Religious Life for my own sanctification and for the salvation of many souls, even if, for just one of them, I have to give the last drop of my blood". Little could he have imagined the dramatic events in which those prophetic words would be lived out. Father Raffaele di Bari was born in Barletta, a town in Southern Italy, on January 12th 1929.

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At the age of eleven, he joined the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Troia and continued his training in Sulmona, all in the South of Italy. Raffaele was, by all accounts, a lively lad and with a very cheerful disposition. He entered the Novitiate in Florence when he was seventeen on September 14th 1946, and was ordained a priest for the Comboni Missionaries in Milan on May 26th 1956 by Cardinal (*later Pope and Saint*) Giovanni Battista Montini.

Three years later he left for Uganda. He was first appointed to the Mission of Morulem in the North-east of the country which had a leprosy centre where people came for treatment from villages for many miles around. For the rest of his life, Father Raffaele had great compassion for those who were suffering, attributed he always maintained, to these two years he spent with the victims of leprosy in Morulem. In 1962, Father Raffaele moved to Kalongo where a large mission hospital was under construction, but two years later he was at the Mission of Opit. Although his first concern was the instruction of catechumens and the training of catechists, being the man of action that he was, he initiated many development projects: setting up grinding mills, opening dispensaries and building schools.

Meanwhile, the country was going through dark times, especially during the dictatorship of Idi Amin. Father Raffaele never abandoned his post, making every effort to save human lives and to ensure the survival of the Missions themselves. In 1978, for health reasons, however, he was obliged to return to Italy, but not for long. He simply could not reconcile himself to the orders of his Superiors that he remain in Italy. So, in November 1979, he wrote to them

in stark terms: "The very thought and the fear of not being able to return to the Missions has destroyed my peace of mind and I am close to entering a deep crisis. The letters I receive from Uganda tell me many Parishes have been left without priests. The priests that are there are waiting for someone to take their place. The idea of staying in Italy makes me feel like a deserter and I therefore ask you to let me go back to Uganda".

Back to Africa

The following year, in June 1980, he received permission and left immediately for Uganda. He was appointed to the Mission of Atanga. There he worked for nine years in evangelization and on development projects. Those were difficult times as Uganda was the scene of war, violence and famine. Father Raffaele knew that concrete action was urgently needed. He motivated the most willing and able of the youth to organise themselves to cultivate rice and sunflowers. This would ensure a good supply of food. Being full of initiative, he would not rest until he had ensured a decent life for his people. "The land of Uganda is fertile", he would often say, "just cultivate it properly and there will be food for all". Fortunately his message was understood and followed by many. He wrote to a friend, "This year I distributed hundreds of hoes and some ploughs. Providentially, the rains were plentiful and people are selling the yield of an exceptional harvest: maize, ground nuts, sesame, sweet potatoes, millet, sunflowers and cassava as well as bananas and mangoes. Before this there was terrible hunger. Let's hope it's finally over".

Parish Priest of Pajule

In 1989, Father Raffaele was asked to go to the Mission of Pajule. After his arrival there the rebels attacked the Mission, shooting indiscriminately. The house was ransacked. The rebels belonged to the *National Salvation Army* which, in 1994, became the *Lord's Resistance Army*, founded by Joseph Kony, for the declared purpose of taking power in the country and governing according to the 'Ten Commandments'. The *Lord's Resistance Army* unleashed a series of violent guerrilla attacks, causing death, violence and destruction. They distinguished themselves by the fact that they kidnapped and enrolled children into their ranks.

In 1996, Father Raffaele wrote to friends in the following terms: "These few lines come to you from this corner of Northern Uganda on the edge of the forest of Opit. For eleven years now, the people have been living in the midst of a guerrilla war of terror waged by murderous criminals and bandits. It is now normal to live in a state of tension and fear. In solidarity with the people, I too am easily disturbed, sometimes shocked, traumatised and angry at all that is happening. It is strange but the children do not know what it is like to live in peace and plenty; they think the whole world is at war like here in this country. At present, here at our Mission, we have a huge number of refugees and homeless people, who have had to flee from their villages. Everybody has a tragic story to tell of parents and babies killed, children kidnapped and taken to Sudan, huts and houses burned to the ground and countless disfigurements caused by landmines. I do not think I am careless or reckless to live in such a high-risk area as this, among people who are so poor and subject to all sorts of

calamities. Extreme caution is needed but one must go out of one's way and take calculated risks. It is really in solidarity with these people that I feel fulfilled, for here I am demonstrating coherence with my faith".

Death on the Road

On September 29th 2000 the Mission of Pajule suffered another rebel attack. Father Raffaele escaped by nothing short of a miracle. He was advised to evacuate the Mission but said that he could not even think of it. He just had to stay on. Only two days later death met him on the road. An AK47 Kalashnikov and a bazooka ended his life. This is what it took to stop Father Raffaele who had spent forty years of his life on African soil. It was half past ten on a hot October morning. Father Raffaele was driving along the road from Pajule to Achiolibur to celebrate Mass in a Chapel there when the car was suddenly struck by a hail of Kalashnikov bullets from several directions, followed by a round from a bazooka. The round struck the vehicle on the driver's side and the priest was killed on the spot.

The driverless car came to a halt by the side of the road and a Sister, with some of the passengers, managed to escape. Rebels of the *Lord's Resistance Army* surrounded the car and those who had not escaped became their prisoners. They searched the vehicle for anything they could lay their hands on and their leader gave orders for the car to be set alight with the aid of a hand grenade. The grenade exploded but the car did not catch fire. The rebel commander then ordered that grass be taken from the roof of a nearby hut, be placed under the vehicle and set on fire. This time, the flames suddenly took hold and enveloped the lifeless

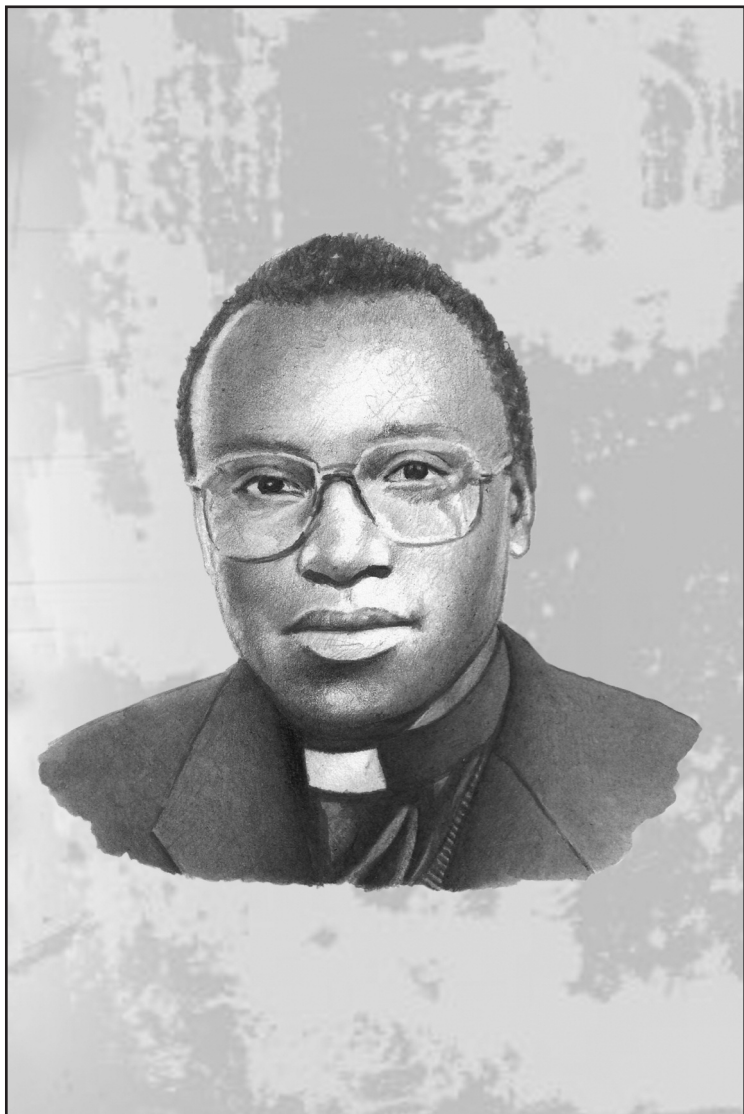
body of Father Raffaele that was still in the driver's seat. The assassins then made off with their captives.

News of the attack on Father Raffaele's car soon reached the Mission. Two of his fellow Missionaries immediately went to the scene of the ambush where they found the vehicle smouldering by the side of the road. With the help of the Faithful they managed to open the door only to see the body of Father Raffaele still burning. They had to wait a few hours before being able to remove what was left of the burnt body. They wrapped the charred remains in a sheet and headed back to Pajule. Local people expressed their sorrow with cries and lamentations.

The funeral of Father Raffaele took place the following afternoon on October 2nd 2000 in Pajule. The grave was dug in a corner of the Mission. It was afterwards enclosed by a fence and soon became a place of pilgrimage for local people. Some days after the killing, a cross was erected on the spot where the ambush had taken place, in order to become, as one of the Missionaries wrote at the time 'a sign of peace and forgiveness for all, and a memorial to all the dead, the wounded and the abducted of this absurd war'.

A scrap of paper was later found in Father Raffaele's room which bore the following words: "I would like to travel without fearing an ambush. Spend a night free of gunfire. See the people go to the fields without being afraid. See the kidnapped children returned to their parents. See a teacher teaching in his classroom and not under a tree. See the local people taking in hand their own development. See the sick being properly cared for. See people gathered in Church for Mass without being terrified of rebel attacks and praising God with songs of joy".

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5. Uganda: Father William Nyadru

- A Victim of Sacrificial Killing

He was found lying face down in the grass. His arms and hands were crossed to support his head. He had been shot through the back with two bullets. Beneath him, the ground was still moist with his blood. There were no witnesses. Father William was only thirty-one years of age. A Confrère remembered the words he had spoken on the day of his Final Vows three years before, "Lord, here I am with your grace to do your will for ever. May my life be a joyous witness of your love among the poor".

William Nyadru was born at Pakele in North-western Uganda on March 28th 1960, the eldest of four children. At twelve years of age he expressed the desire to become a priest and entered the Diocesan Junior Seminary in Pokea. After A-Levels he was admitted to the Major Seminary in Alokolum to study philosophy as a candidate for the Diocese of Arua.

The transition to Missionary

It was in Alokolum that he became increasingly attracted to the idea of becoming a missionary priest and decided he would join the Comboni Missionaries. But it was not easy. The Rector and Staff did not want him to leave. William later wrote, "I asked my Superiors in the Major Seminary to let me become a Comboni Missionary, but they tried to discourage me, saying that there was a great need for priests

in my home Diocese". Deciding whether to give William permission to join the Comboni Missionaries was very hard for his Bishop, Angelo Tarantino, who was himself a Comboni Missionary, but who wanted to keep this gifted young man for the Diocese. William eventually obtained permission, however, thanks to his persistence and determination. During the years of initial formation, first in the Postulancy in Gulu and later in the Novitiate in Namugongo, William was greatly admired by all those who came into contact with him, for his sharp intellect and wit, his openness and obliging nature, and his pleasant company.

Journalistic promise

After his First Vows in Namugongo, William went to study theology at the Gregorian University in Rome from 1984 to 1987. From there, at the request of his Superiors, he went to take a Master's Degree in Journalism at City University in London. On August 20th 1988 he was ordained a priest in an open-air Mass in his home Mission of Moyo in North-western Uganda. A few months later he was assigned to the Mission of Morulem in Eastern Karamoja to gain some pastoral experience before being appointed editor of *Leadership Magazine*, a monthly magazine founded and run by the Comboni Missionaries in Uganda. In a letter dated January 26th 1989, he wrote, "I have just arrived at the Mission of Morulem among the Labwor and have already started learning their language, Lebthur. It is a relatively easy language to learn, similar to Acholi. However, Lebthur has some significant variations from Acholi due to the linguistic and cultural impact of the

neighbouring ethnic groups - the Langi, the Teso and the Karimojong. I have just started to get to know the people and the Parish. I am excited about the 'Small Christian Communities' established in the Mission. I believe the meaning of my missionary presence among the Labwor is to share with them our experience of the Lord and to be a link between the Church in the Diocese of Arua and the Church in Karamoja. The presence of a African Comboni Missionary among them is thought-provoking because to date they are only used to white Comboni Missionaries".

The last journey to Moroto

It was early morning on Friday 25th October 1991, when Father William said to one of his Confrères that he intended to go to Moroto to collect the tithe forms which were ready at the Diocesan Printing Press and needed for distribution to people at Church on the following Sunday. Moroto was about a hundred miles away. The road from the Morulem to Moroto branches in two: with one way going through Matany, and the other through Lopei and then joining the Kotido-Moroto road. The way through Matany became impassable in the rainy season while the road through Lopei, although longer, always remained in fairly good condition whatever the weather.

It was not the first time William had gone to Moroto by motorcycle. It is just a few hours' away and one can leave Morulem in the morning and be back by the afternoon. For years nothing had ever happened along that road. No one had ever been robbed. So Father William set off from Morulem without any apprehension, expecting to be back home in the early afternoon. However, by evening, he had

not returned. The Confrères began to worry. Before the advent of mobile phones almost all the Missions in Uganda had a radio transmitter that was used for communicating. At the usual 8:30 p.m. 'radio call', the Confrères in Morulem called the Missions of Matany, Kangole and Moroto enquiring as to the whereabouts of Father William. They all said they had not seen him. It was night-time and some parts of the road were flooded by the recent heavy rains. It was agreed that early the next morning three search parties of Missionaries would set out from Morulem, Matany and Moroto to look for him.

At 1:00 p.m. the group travelling from Moroto to Morulem through Lopei found tyre marks on the road where a motorcycle had evidently stopped abruptly. On the right side of the road the tall grass had been trampled upon. About fifty yards from the side of the road, the Missionaries found the motorcycle of Father William in a clearing, undamaged and with the key still in the ignition. The engine started at once. A few yards away, they found his helmet. A few moments later one of the party, Sister Sylvia Pisetta cried out, "William! William!". Fifty yards further on, about one hundred yards from the road, they found the body of Father William lying in the grass. He had been stripped naked, except for his underwear. His arms and hands were crossed supporting his head which was face down. One foot was crossed over the other. It appeared that Father William had been forced to take that position by three individuals who had then stood over him as was apparent from the clearly visible sets of footprints around the body.

The Missionaries laid the body of Father William on a

stretcher and carried him to St. Kizito Mission Hospital in Matany where many of the Staff commented on the serenity of his countenance. One of the doctors there confirmed that the heart of Father William had been pierced by two bullets which had entered through his back as he was lying on the ground. He had evidently been shot at very close range as there were scorch marks on the skin where the bullets had entered. The body was taken to the Church in the Mission of Morulem. The Local Bishop, Denis Kiwanuka, celebrated the Funeral Mass the following day with many of the Faithful present despite the recent heavy rainfall. Father William was then taken to the Mission of Moyo in North-western Uganda where he was laid to rest in the cemetery there with fellow Comboni Missionaries.

A sacrificial killing?

The footprints around the body of Father William indicated that the killers were three in number. Why did they force the Father to lie prostrate on the ground? Karimojong warriors traditionally 'shoot to kill' without compelling the intended victim to lie down or to take a particular posture. One theory was that the killers were former soldiers, given the tendency of such individuals in Uganda's recent past to humiliate civilians who fell into their hands by forcing them to kneel or bow down before them.

A Comboni Missionary, who had worked in Karamoja for many years, commented: "We cannot exclude the possibility of a ritual execution in the case of Father William. This was the explanation put forward by a number of the Faithful around Matany. A few weeks before, a local witch-doctor had apparently decreed to a group of warriors that

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the sacrifice of a person travelling by motorcycle was required to ensure the success of the cattle raid they were planning against the neighbouring Matheniko ethnic group. Several details support such a theory: the killing took place in the bush far from any homestead or village, the victim was stripped naked and forced to lie face down on the ground and the motorcycle and helmet were left untouched close by. The police and the army did not attempt to investigate the murder so perhaps we will never know the truth".

6. Uganda: Father Egidio Ferracin

- "As I have loved you ..."

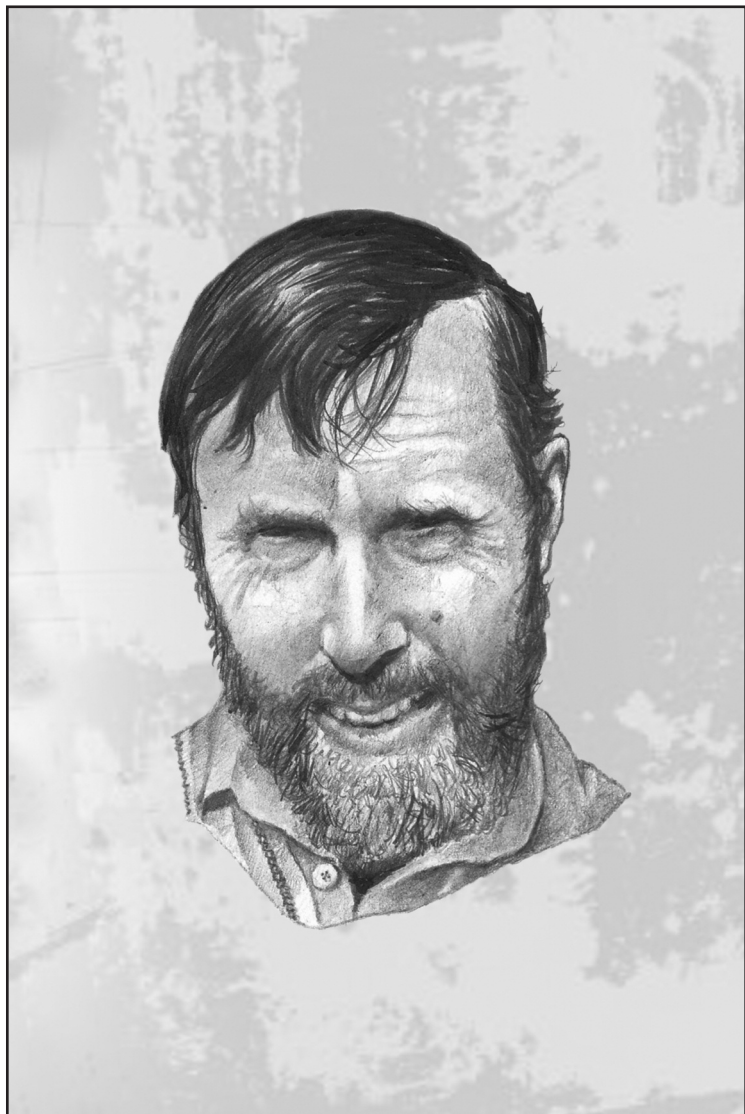
His attackers seized him roughly, bound him hand and foot and then, raining down blows and insults, dragged him into the bush. Forty yards in, they tied him to a tree, stabbed him a number of times and finished him off with a rifle volley. Father Egidio Ferracin was dead, murdered at fifty years of age, after more than twenty years working as a missionary in his beloved Uganda.

The Little Seminarian

Egidio's love of Africa began when he was a young child in Malo, in the Province of Vicenza in Northern Italy. His small town looked out over the plains to the city of Padua. Often Missionaries would preach in the Parish Church of Malo, speaking of the faraway continent of Africa. Lively and intelligent, little Egidio was fascinated by the stories he heard. He begged his mother and father to let him enter the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Padua. His insistence won through, and after finishing primary school at the early age of ten, Egidio was allowed to join the Seminary by his parents.

But Egidio's enthusiasm did not mean that life in the Junior Seminary was easy for him and his capacity for being distracted easily certainly did not help matters! Even though he found things difficult, he would often say to the Fathers running the Seminary and to his companions, "I

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feel a great desire to dedicate myself to God and give my life for Africa". When Egidio completed his secondary school education, he was more determined than ever to become a missionary and on September 24th 1955 he entered the Novitiate of the Comboni Missionaries in Florence. Egidio was often corrected by the Novice-Master for his behaviour but he was never abashed. "If God has made me like this", he would respond, "What can I do about it?". On September 9th 1957, the Feast of St. Peter Claver, Egidio consecrated himself to God for the Missions by taking his First Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

He then went to Verona for his philosophical and theological studies. "I find studying very hard", he wrote, "but I want to prepare for the Missions as best I can". A classmate said of him at the time, "Egidio was very distracted. He even seemed to be doing it on purpose". But in spite of his academic struggles, no one doubted his dedication, and on September 9th 1963 Egidio took Final Vows. "This was a very important step for me", he wrote at the time, "and I beg the Lord to give me the strength to give my life willingly for the Missions". Nine months later, on June 28th 1964, Egidio was ordained a priest in the Cathedral of Verona. Father Egidio was assigned to Uganda and arrived there in early August 1965. His first appointment was to the Mission of Aboke, followed by time in the Missions of Dokolo, Alenga, Alito, Amolotar, Minakulu and a final return to Alenga in March 1986. These were steps along a journey filled with joy and enthusiasm, despite the turmoil of the country to which he had been sent.

The travails of the 'Pearl of Africa'

Father Egidio witnessed at first hand the intense political rivalry in Ugandan politics. Coming to Uganda just three years after independence, he shared the pains of a country struggling to establish peace and democracy. He wrote home, "Our work has become more difficult in recent years. Once it was the climate that decimated the Missionaries and caused their worst sufferings, but now it is politics that makes our work so difficult. I know the Lord will not abandon us though, and the people appreciate our apostolate".

Father Egidio faced all the troubles bravely and entered unreservedly into the sorrows as well as the joys of the people he served. People along the roads would greet him as he passed, knowing he would almost certainly stop for a friendly chat. Victims of leprosy, in particular, knew Father Egidio well and were very fond of him. And all the while, the political situation in Uganda worsened.

Those were terrible years. President Idi Amin had declared war on Tanzania in 1978 and invaded the country. The Tanzanian army repelled the invasion and entered Uganda with the purpose of removing Amin from power. On April 11th 1979, Kampala, the capital of Uganda, fell to Tanzanian troops. What followed was terror and chaos: an unending litany of revenge killings, violence and robbery as marauding soldiers of the Amin regime fled north towards Sudan and Congo. Many Missions and Churches were attacked and looted.

On December 10th 1980 elections were held (*the validity of which were questionable*) and the 'Uganda People's Congress Party (UPC)', led by Milton Obote, who had

been living in exile in Tanzania, took power. Now it was enough merely to belong to a certain tribe to merit imprisonment or disappearance and execution. In the North, former soldiers of Idi Amin were attacking and destroying wherever they went. In June 1981, Father Egidio was transferred to the Mission of Minakulu. He wrote, "My work consists in getting these people to accept the idea of forgiveness as something sacred, but this is extremely difficult with people who instead see revenge as sacred".

On July 27th 1985 the Acholi Generals Tito and Basilio Okello deposed President Obote. All the Opposition, with the exception of Yoweri Museveni leader of the *National Resistance Army*, joined the new government. Just before Christmas in 1985 a peace accord was signed in Nairobi between Tito Okello and Yoweri Museveni but only a month later Museveni reneged on the agreement and occupied Kampala. The soldiers of Tito and Basilio Okello took to the bush and waged a guerrilla campaign against the new regime. In March the following year, Bishop Cesare Asili of the Diocese of Lira decided to re-open the Mission of Alenga that had been closed for security reasons. In the midst of all this turmoil, Father Egidio was one of those asked to go there to restore a degree of peace, stability and optimism. Amazingly he seemed to have succeeded. He wrote from Alenga, "Here there are many wounds to be healed and this calls for much patience and compassion, but I can already see the fruits of my labours and I know all will be well in the end".

Approaching Martyrdom

It was a beautiful morning in Alenga, on August 4th 1987,

but for the occasional sound of automatic gunfire. Although he was concerned about the possibility of being attacked on the way by robbers, who liked to take advantage of the prevailing anarchy, Father Egidio decided nevertheless to set out on a pre-arranged trip to visit the outlying chapels of the Mission around the shores of Lake Kioga. He reached Alwala School near the Masindi Port, without incident. There he celebrated Mass and prayed at length with the people. Soon after midday, taking the road along the Lake, Father Egidio set out for the Chapel at Kwiibale, with the intention of travelling on to the Chapel at Akòkoro. He had planned to meet the catechumens preparing for baptism at Kwiibale and inform the people that he would be coming to celebrate Mass there on the following Sunday.

About five miles before Kwiibale, along a section of thickly-wooded forest, armed bandits had stopped and robbed a group of people walking along the road. The group included three girls whom the thugs were intent on abducting and taking away with them. The terrorised girls were shrieking and protesting. It was at this moment that Father Egidio passed by on his motorcycle. He stopped, dismounted and tried to reason with the brigands, but to no avail. They began to threaten him and pointed their rifles at his face. Father Egidio calmly insisted that they release the girls. Instead of agreeing to do so, the bandits seized him and took him into the forest. A short while later shots rang out and then all was silence again. In the meantime, the girls and the other victims managed to flee their tormentors.

The Confrères in the Mission were not unduly concerned when Father Egidio failed to return home that

evening as he would often extend his trips by a day or two, as circumstances dictated. However, the following day, with still no sign of Father Egidio, they began to be concerned for his safety. They knew he was often distracted and forgetful, but it was unlikely that he would stay away so long in such dangerous times, without informing his Community.

So one of the Fathers set out by motorcycle to follow the road Father Egidio would have taken, carefully looking for any sign of him near the road as his motorcycle might have broken down, forcing him to seek shelter in one of the local homesteads. He enquired from the people he met along the way if they had seen Father Egidio. No-one had seen or heard anything of him.

When the Father returned to the Mission, he heard the reassuring news that before leaving Alenga Father Egidio had spoken with a local teacher about going to Kigumba, a Mission fifty miles further west, a spot beyond Lake Kioga on the road to Kampala. Everyone was relieved at this explanation. Yet it was not until four days later, on Saturday 8th August, that the Missionaries in Alenga heard that Father Egidio had never in fact reached Kigumba. This was terrible news. Father Egidio had simply disappeared and no-one seemed to know what had happened to him. To make matters worse, cattle raiders had arrived from Karamoja and were spreading terror in the surrounding villages with the result that no-one dared to travel on the roads.

The awful discovery

It was not until a week later, when the threat of the Karimojong raiders had passed, that two Comboni

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Missionaries from the neighbouring Mission of Aduku, together with a group of Christians, made their way along the road from Akòkoro to Alwala, searching every bush and ditch as they went. At last in a deserted spot in the forest between Kwiibale and Alwala they discovered the motor-cycle of Father Egidio in long grass by the roadside. The mirrors, the lights and the battery were missing but there were no signs of an accident. Searching the area, they found the scattered contents of the Father Egidio's portable 'Mass Kit'. A further search revealed his body tied to a tree. One of the Missionaries who found Father Egidio commented that he looked like an image of Jesus on the cross with his head leaning to one side.

A few days later the Funeral Mass took place in the presence of the Local Bishop, Ceasar Asili; many Comboni Missionaries; Local Priests; and Members of the Faithful who had come to know and love Father Egidio over the years. The Italian Embassy in Kampala arranged for his remains to be returned to Italy and he was buried with his late parents in the cemetery of his home Parish Church in Malo.

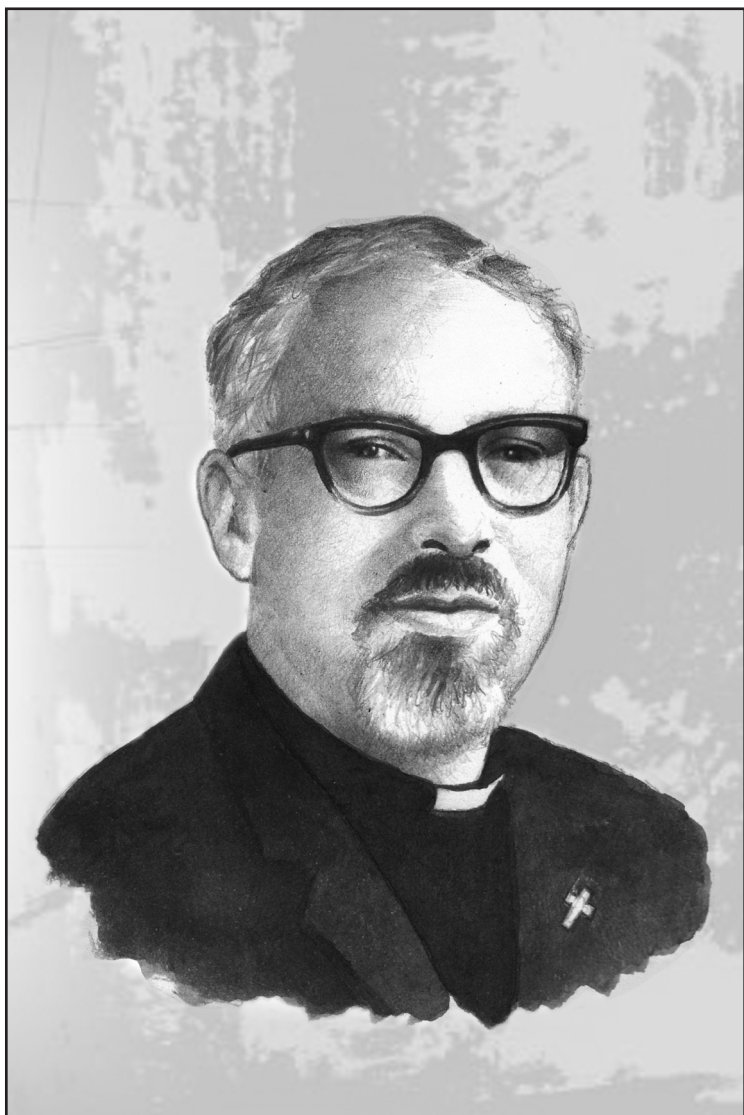
In the small chapel of the Mission in Alenga, on the very evening of the funeral, one of the Confrères was looking at the empty chair where Father Egidio would sit and pray. Taking Father Egidio's breviary in his hands, a small prayer card fell to the floor. It was a card commemorating Father Egidio's First Mass on Monday 29th June 1964 showing Christ dead on the cross with his head leaning on his right shoulder. Egidio suffered a similar fate to his Master: brutally tortured, tied to a tree and dying with his head in exactly the same position.

7. Uganda: Father Egidio Biscaro

- An Adventure that deserves to be Lived

It was a hot sunny morning on Monday 29th January 1990 in the Mission of Pajule in the North of Uganda. A woman was in need of urgent medical attention and had to be taken without delay to the nearest hospital in Kitgum. Father Egidio knew that the road to Kitgum was dangerous. A week previously, former soldiers of Idi Amin had raided the villages nearby, bringing mayhem and terror in their wake. Only the day before, twenty-three people had been slaughtered in an ambush of a bus along that very road. But Father Egidio, together with Father Aldo Pieragostini, decided to set off nonetheless and drive the woman to hospital as they feared she would otherwise not survive. It was 8:45 a.m. and everything happened in a flash. Only six miles down the road, their car was hit by a spray of bullets, fired by people hidden in the grass, and came to a standstill. The patient, a mother of three by the name of Irene Akello, was hit in the chest and died almost immediately. Father Egidio was shot in his right leg, his shoulder and forehead. The other Comboni Missionary, Father Aldo, received multiple wounds including a bullet to the face that lodged in his jaw. Father Egidio slowly turned his eyes towards his Confrère and whispered, "I forgive my killers; I offer my life for peace in Uganda". He then closed his eyes and passed away. The bandits swiftly reached the vehicle, but merely glancing at its occupants, they exchanged a few

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words between themselves and left the scene of their heinous crime. Silence returned to the savannah.

Missionary Life: an adventure that deserves to be lived

Father Egidio Biscaro was born in Foresto di Cona, in the Province of Venice, on September 22nd 1928. The family had a small farm holding and Egidio learned from his father to cultivate the land from an early age, his hands becoming accustomed to hard work. His mother died when he was still young. He would later claim, however, that she had lived long enough to teach him to be generous which was a characteristic that would accompany Egidio throughout his entire life.

Late one afternoon, a Comboni Missionary arrived in his local Parish of Vaiano di Merlino, and started to talk about missionary life to the young men from the surrounding countryside who had gathered at the Church. "The Missions do not need only Priests, but also Lay Brothers who are able to help in the construction of churches, schools, hospitals, workshops ... and in everything else that is needed for the development of Africa and the African Church. So young men who know how to work the land can be very helpful in a Mission ...". Egidio was struck by those words and thought at the time, "Although I do not have the formal education to become a Priest, I could become a Lay Brother. That is still a beautiful vocation". He then approached the Missionary and told him what he had been thinking. They remained in touch and wrote frequently to one other, until finally, during the Second World War, Egidio, accompanied by his father, arrived at the Comboni Postulancy for Lay Brothers at

Thiene. The students of this seminary cum technical school had the opportunity to combine a technical education in carpentry, mechanics or agriculture with studies for the Religious Life. Egidio was seen by the Fathers in charge to be particularly talented in repairing engines and machinery, and therefore trained as a motor mechanic. On July 16th 1947 he entered the Novitiate at Venegono and two years later he made his First Vows.

After spending some time in London learning English and undertaking a course in motor vehicle technology, he finally left for Africa at twenty-three years of age. His first destination was the Mission of Gulu in Northern Uganda among the Acholi ethnic group. He wrote to his family, "I am in the most beautiful Mission in the world. The life of a missionary is an adventure that deserves to be lived. I hope that other young people of our Parish will soon join me to experience what it means to work for the Lord and for the peoples of Africa".

After three years of work in Gulu, he moved to the Mission of Layibi where the workshop needed a qualified mechanic. From 1958 to 1960 he was again in London at 'Paddington Technical College' in Bayswater. After graduating, he returned to Layibi as an instructor in the Mission Technical School, and in 1964 was given the responsibility of running it. Later he was appointed the Director of the Technical School in the Mission of Ombaci near Arua in North-western Uganda.

A Calling to the Priesthood

Brother Egidio had been greatly inspired by the deliberations of Second Vatican Council, which took place in

Rome from 1962 to 1965, and particularly their pronouncements on the type of ministry and service required for the modern world. On New Year's Day 1970 he summoned up the courage to write to the Superior-General of the Comboni Missionaries with a bold proposal, "Following the Vatican Council, the recent General Chapter of our Congregation reflected a great deal about rendering a more qualified 'service' to the 'People of God'. I understand that a vocation as a Brother is a complete one in itself, but I am convinced that my apostolate would be a more perfect witness of the gift of oneself to God if I could offer spiritual as well as practical support. I am happy and content to be a Missionary Brother, but I am not afraid to say that I would be happier and more satisfied still if I were a Missionary Priest, in order to be able to bring the 'Word of God' more fully to my work".

He didn't have to wait long for a positive answer from Rome. In 1971 Brother Biscaro was admitted to the Beda College in Rome which specialises in preparing late vocations for the priesthood. Attending theological studies was not easy for a man of forty-one years of age, but his enthusiasm made all the difference. He was ordained a priest in Milan on April 6th 1974. A few months later he was back in Uganda, working in the Mission of Alito, then in the Mission of Aber, and finally in the Mission of Pajule.

A troubled Nation

In the early 1960's Uganda had gained independence from Britain, and Milton Obote of the 'Uganda People's Congress Party (UPC)' was elected Prime Minister, although the results of the election were disputed. Three

years later, with the aid of his army commander, General Idi Amin, Obote deposed the sitting President, Sir Edward Muteesa, suspended the Constitution, the Judiciary and all political parties, and jailed all his political opponents without trial. He then declared himself President of the country. Conflict with his army chief arose, however, and on January 25th 1971 Obote was himself overthrown in a successful military coup led by Idi Amin. For the following eight years the country was ruled over by a regime which was noted for the sheer scale of its brutality and Amin came to be known as the 'Butcher of Uganda'. It is believed that over three hundred thousand people were killed and countless others tortured during his ruthless dictatorship. Tribalism, a long-standing problem in Uganda, was brought to its extreme by Amin's persecution of the Acholi, Lango and Karimojong ethnic groups in Northern Uganda. He also brought the country's economy to its knees after expelling all Asians, the backbone of the nation's commercial life, from Uganda in 1972.

After the fall of Idi Amin with the invasion of Tanzanian troops in 1979, many Missions in the North of Uganda were attacked and laid waste by former soldiers of the regime making their way to Congo and Sudan, with a number of Missionaries killed and others seriously injured. Travelling was dangerous, but Father Egidio could not sit back and watch. He continued to visit his Christians. One day he was riding his motorcycle when somebody fired at him. He promptly jumped off the motorcycle, threw himself on the grass so managing to save himself. After that experience he abandoned the motorcycle and travelled by car. A few weeks later, he suffered other

attack. On his way to Lira, renegade soldiers fired at him, but he managed to escape the ambush unharmed and finally reached the Mission in Ngeta.

A difficult choice made easy

Given the perilous situation, the Superiors of the Comboni Missionaries in Rome told the Confrères in Northern Uganda that if they did not feel at peace staying on in the country, they were completely free to return home to Europe or the Americas. Not a single Comboni Missionary left their post. No-one wanted to abandon the local people in their time of need. "Once we, Missionaries, were killed by illness and disease", wrote one Comboni Missionary, "now we get killed by bullets, but we do not give up. We do not leave our people alone in a moment of such desperation". And they continued their work, living in such life-threatening conditions, driven on by their love of God and their devotion to the people they were called to serve. Simply, they remained loyal to their Missionary Consecration and to serving people regardless of ethnicity, culture, language or religion.

A gift to Africa from God

Though Yoweri Museveni came to power in January 1986, instability continued, above all in the North of the country. Former soldiers attacked villages and plundered markets. Father Egidio was at the Mission of Pajule, when on that fateful morning of Monday 29th January 1990 he decided, together with his Confrère, to accompany that gravely-ill woman to the Kitgum Hospital. "I hope we won't meet thugs along the road", Father Egidio said to his

companion as they were getting into their vehicle, "If we do, we immediately give them everything we have". Less than half an hour later, both the desperately ill woman and Father Egidio were dead.

A local man, alarmed by the shooting, informed the military detachment in Pajule. Soldiers arrived to find the Land Rover perched on the side of the road, with the driver and the female passenger dead and the other Missionary badly injured but still breathing. The soldiers transported the three victims of the attack to the Kitgum General Hospital. Father Egidio's body lay in state at the Church in the Mission of Kitgum until the afternoon of January 30th 1990. A large crowd attended the Funeral Mass, in spite of the danger of the guerrillas and armed thieves who had been operating to such brutal effect in the area. Father Egidio was buried in the cemetery of Kitgum Mission, near the statue of the Virgin Mary. The Local Bishop said at the Mass, "Many people bless this missionary because they realise that he really cared for them. His life was well spent, and it is right and proper that now Father Egidio rests among us as a gift to Africa from God".

8. Uganda: Father Osmund Bilbao

- Traditional Enemies united in Grief

The inscription on the headstone raised by the local Madi people in the Mission of Moyo in North-western Uganda, reads: "To Father Osmund Bilbao, who gave his life for those he loved. He was a friend and servant of the Madi and these people swear to keep alive the memory of his wonderful example of love and service".

It was eleven o'clock on the morning of Tuesday 20th April 1982. Father Osmund, along with Father Torquato Paolucci, had just left the 'Marianum Printing Press' in the town of Kisubi laden with books for the Mission of Moyo and were heading home by car to the house of the Comboni Missionaries in Kampala. At a certain point Father Osmund realised that their car was being followed by three armed men in a white sport-utility vehicle. The road from Kampala to Entebbe was notorious at the time for robberies and car hijackings, and so Father Osmund accelerated in an attempt to shake off the vehicle behind. The other car was unfortunately much faster, and as the thugs overtook Father Osmund and Father Torquato on the road, they opened fire. Father Osmund was struck by a bullet and killed outright. As a result the car swerved and ended up crashing into a tree by the side of the road. Although Father Torquato was uninjured in the attack he was covered by the blood of his slain Confrère and, as the robbers rifled the vehicle to



steal anything they could lay their hands on, he pretended to be dead thereby saving his own life. After the thugs had made their escape local people arrived at the scene and called the police. The police arranged for an ambulance to take the body of Father Osmund to the house of the Comboni Missionaries in Mbuya, a suburb of Kampala.

A fitting tribute

A Mass for Father Bilbao was celebrated that same evening in the Chapel of the Community there presided over by fellow Comboni Missionary, Bishop Angelo Tarantino of Arua Diocese. The Diocese of Arua included the Missions of Metu and Moyo where Father Osmund had worked in Uganda.

Two days later, at noon, a Funeral Mass was celebrated in the Parish Church of Mbuya. The Cardinal Archbishop of Kampala, Emmanuel Nsubuga, presided over the ceremony, which was attended by eleven local bishops who were in Kampala for a Meeting of the 'Ugandan Episcopal Conference', fifty religious and diocesan priests, many Religious Sisters and a huge crowd of the Faithful including many members of the Madi Community living in and around Kampala. Three government ministers, from North-western Uganda, who knew Father Osmund personally from his ministry as a priest in the Missions of Metu and Moyo also attended the ceremony. The huge crowd, the lamentations that were performed according to African tradition, the outpouring of grief, and the copious tears demonstrated just how loved and esteemed Father Osmund was.

Educating an industrious people

Father Osmund Garamendi Bilbao was born in St. Julian de Musques, near the city of Bilbao in Northern Spain on November 7th 1944. After attending the local Diocesan Seminary, he asked to join the Comboni Missionaries. He was ordained a priest in Moncada on April 6th 1969. A few months later he left for the Missions in Uganda. Speaking about his experience as a Missionary Priest in Uganda, Father Osmund wrote, "I work in the North-west of the country, on the border with Sudan, in the Mission of Metu which serves the Madi ethnic group with a population of about twenty thousand people whose main source of income is from tilling the land. Members of this tribe are often referred to as the 'Germans of Africa' due to their striking work ethic and I can tell you they are very proud of their reputation. They are noble, sincere and hard-working people. As Missionaries, our main work focuses on the religious, social and economic formation of local communities. Educating people into a communitarian sense of life is not always an easy task, nevertheless over the past five years, this has been our goal. We hope to imbue this spirit into local Madi culture. Today, the presence of seven local priests, one of whom is a bishop, and fifty Religious, would seem to illustrate that the Church in the area has succeeded in creating such a sense of community and service".

The value of the presence of Missionaries

After spending a brief period of time in Spain, Father Osmund returned to Uganda in 1977 and was assigned to the Procure in Mbuya. Father Osmund wrote at the time,

"My feelings for this land and its peoples have played a decisive role in my decision to return to Africa. I was not able to resist the temptation. I am aware that we Missionaries take risks ... but 'risk' after all is the common denominator of every choice we make. We must accept it with realism and trust in ourselves, our abilities but above all in the One who has promised to remain always with us".

Father Bilbao returned to Uganda while the country was going through the most tragic moment of its history. The situation was chaotic and Comboni Missionary Priests, Brothers and Sisters felt that they represented a reason for hope for the people of Uganda who were experiencing a moment of great despair and suffering. Father Bilbao was one of this courageous group of Missionaries who wanted to stay on in the country, not because they felt safe there or were not aware of risks, but because they wanted to share in the plight of the local people they were called to serve.

In early 1980 Father Osmund was sent to the Mission of Moyo, not far from the Mission of Metu (*where he had worked from 1969 until 1977*), which had unfortunately become a 'theatre of war'. The region was fought over by Idi Amin's former soldiers, who had settled in the thickly-forested area to the north, and the regular troops of the newly-installed Government of Milton Obote. For two years Father Osmund helped protect many desperate people who were victims of violence from both sides of the conflict. Though he was repeatedly advised to leave the Mission to avoid being killed, Father Osmund always refused, "If I leave, who will defend these people? I just can't leave!". He was convinced that the presence of the

Missionaries contributed to avoiding even greater bloodshed. In October 1980, violent clashes, which resulted in a large number of victims, took place in Moyo. Father Osmund, commenting on the situation, said, "During the recent wars in Uganda, I have come to realize just how important the presence of Missionaries is to people who wonder why we do not leave the country to get to where we can be safe. Local people really care and worry about us, but are very grateful we have stayed".

The local population had become the hapless victims of ferocious rebels on the one side and undisciplined government troops on the other. Father Osmund faced the situation with resoluteness and determination. Everyone – the poor, the vulnerable, former soldiers, the Civil and Military Authorities – experienced his friendship, his hospitality and his assistance along with his firmness in denouncing all forms of violence. Even representatives of the United Nations were amazed by the great respect given by local people to Father Osmund. One of his Confrères at the Mission wrote, "I can testify that there were no major massacres in Moyo thanks to the tireless efforts of Father Bilbao". He remained deeply hurt, nonetheless, by the ongoing tragedy of the attacks, the killings and the anguish of those affected by the wanton violence, and for which in his preaching he constantly entreated people to pray for an end to all hatred and revenge.

One of Us

The news of Father Osmund's death spread throughout the villages of Madi. So many people had known him. A group of Parishioners from Moyo, drove more than four hundred

Supreme Witness

miles by truck to Kampala to carry the body of their 'Father' home in order to bury it in the Mission. They were deeply saddened when they were told that, at the request of his Family, his body was to be taken to Spain for burial. In their disappointment they wrote, "Father Osmund's remains belong to the country and to the people for whom he has given his life. Even if he is not to be laid to rest in Moyo, his memory will abide in the minds and hearts of the Madi for generations". In fact, the Madi raised a magnificent headstone in his memory in the cemetery in front of the Church in Moyo. A Minister in the Government of Uganda, bidding farewell to the slain Missionary, said, "Father Osmund was one of us because one not only belongs to the place he was born, but he also belongs to the place where he lived, died and where he was loved".

Cardinal Nsubuga, Primate of Uganda, commented at the Funeral Mass in Mbuya, "Father Osmund's death has wrought a miracle of uniting in grief enemy tribes that are separated by ancient hatreds. The Missionary's blood, and the blood of other Martyrs, is not shed in vain".



9. Uganda: Sister Liliana Rivetta

- *"I have not risked my life for nothing"*

Sister Liliana Rivetta was born on November 15th 1943 in Gavardo, in the Province of Brescia, Northern Italy. Times were hard in the post-war years in Italy. Although she did well at her lessons, Liliana was a somewhat disinterested pupil and left school at the age of fourteen to go and work for a dressmaker in the nearby town of Brescia. She had to travel an hour's journey each way, but she was happy to be able to help her family financially. When she was sixteen, she asked her parents to allow her become a Religious Sister. The answer was a resounding 'No'. On March 26th 1965, when she was twenty-two years of age, Liliana chose a moment when her parents were away and, accompanied by her sister Aldina, she took the train to Verona and joined the Comboni Missionary Sisters founded there by Bishop (*later Saint*) Daniel Comboni. She had already come to know the Sisters through a mutual friend and often visited them. On discovering Liliana had left to become a Religious Sister, her mother and father no longer wished to have any contact with her. Liliana dearly loved her parents and suffered greatly because of this estrangement. She left for London where she did her Novitiate of two years and then took her First Vows as a Comboni Missionary Sister on September 29th 1967. At times Liliana admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the fact that God had called her to the Religious and Missionary Life,

"The missionary vocation is so great that I cannot understand how Our Lord could call me to it. With this great responsibility (we may call it that) which I have on my shoulders, I ask you to pray for me that I may respond fully and yield a hundredfold according to the talents that Our Blessed Lord has given me".

Assigned to Uganda with a dream

After her First Vows, Liliana began to prepare herself for work in the Missions. After completing a Montessori Course, with a view to teaching pre-school children, she was assigned to Uganda and was fascinated by the thought of teaching there, "I have learned to play the piano so that I can attract African children. I believe they love music. Between one song and another I will be able to speak to them of Jesus. My family will be a large one and I must learn their languages so as to make them really mine". She knew this was something of a dream, but she already felt that Africa was in her blood.

On September 12th 1969, the *SS Asia* set sail from Venice with Sister Liliana and one hundred and twenty other passengers on board, bound for Mombasa in Kenya, where it entered the port on the morning of Wednesday 8th October 1969. Liliana continued her journey by train from Mombasa to Lira, a town in the North of Uganda. It was a remarkable journey following the winding path of the railway through the Tsavo Park, the Great Rift Valley, the tea plantations in the Tororo Hills of Uganda and finally the wetlands of the Nile around Soroti. As the train chugged along at a steady thirty miles per hour, Liliana admired the scenery and the abundant wildlife: the ele-

phants, gazelles, ostriches, lions, cheetahs, zebras and giraffes, and the pink flamingos on Lake Naivasha and Lake Nakuru. Wherever the train halted, groups of children would run along by the track, greeting the passengers, waving their arms and asking for food, money or whatever people had to give. For Liliana those children seemed the most beautiful children in the world. African children seemed to speak in torrents of words gushing from their mouths, like water from a fountain. All these scenes were impressed on Liliana's memory forever.

The District of Lira

Liliana gradually grew accustomed to the climate, the environment and the people of Lira. During the dry season, the hot sun beat down mercilessly. All the grass dried up, becoming a yellowish straw-like colour, and died scorched by the hot wind. When the rainy season came, all would suddenly change. With the rains, the stunted straw-like grass was transformed into luxurious tall growth. The rains brought new life everywhere they fell. Adults and children alike welcomed the rain; their faces turned upwards to receive it, like dry fields thirsting for water. Rain is considered a blessing in Africa. The first time Liliana saw a tropical storm, she was terrified by the amount of water that fell, and wondered how anything could survive such a downpour: the local huts of dry grass and mud, the fields of cassava, millet and sorghum, or the gravel roads. In fact the rickety bridges across the local rivers in the District were often washed away by the force of such water and the wetlands around Lira became lakes passable only by canoe.

The Mission among the Lango people

The land inhabited by the Lango ethnic group has been generously blessed by nature. If the rains do not fail, there are plenty of beans, cereals, vegetables and all sorts of tropical fruits. Mangoes hang down from the trees within easy reach. Citric fruits abound, oranges, mandarins and lemons, although they have a colour of their own, a greenish yellow colour unlike those seen in the shops of Europe. The Mission was like a 'Garden of Eden' with fruits and flowers of every kind: bougainvillea, hibiscus, and frangipanis adorned the entrance to the Convent of the Sisters. The wetlands were covered with lotus flowers. Together with the green vegetation and abundant growth, however, the rain also brought mosquito larvae to life after they had been dormant during the dry season. To avoid getting malaria, it was necessary to take chloroquine tablets and sleep under a mosquito net. At first, Liliana would scream at the sight of a caterpillar, a scorpion, a cockroach or a spider; yet she soon learned to live together with these and the countless other creatures, great and small, of Northern Uganda. She even managed to eat the flying white ants that would swarm around immediately after the rains started and which are a much sought-after delicacy in the locality.

The children of St. Kizito Nursery School became an integral part of Sister Liliana's life. As she would go to the local villages to visit their families, they would follow her along the paths that were like shady tunnels through the long grass that met above their heads. The children who had never seen a white woman before would keep repeating with a mixture of trepidation and amazement, "*Muzungu, muzungu*" meaning 'European'. Along the way

she would meet women with a wonderful combination of balance and strength as they carried large pots of water on their heads, with a ring made of grass as a protective cushion, and their babies on their backs. They walked with long steps, majestically, she thought, like royalty.

After three years running the Nursery School in the Mission of Lira, it was time for Liliana to return to Italy to prepare for her Final Vows which she took on July 2nd 1974. She stayed another three years in Italy working on the 'home front' while undertaking further training as a primary school teacher.

A difficult assignment in Kenya

In January 1977 she left once again for Africa, this time bound for Kenya. Her destination was to the Parish Primary School in Kariobangi, one of the many shantytowns scattered around Nairobi. The crowds of human beings coming and going from the cardboard shelters with their roofs of plastic sheeting among the open sewers and mountains of rubbish made a deep and lasting impression on Liliana. She did not know where to start. In that part of the city, countless poor children searched among the heaps of rubbish for scraps of food in order to survive. With the help of 'Caritas International', Sister Liliana began a soup kitchen near the Primary School to feed local children, and the number receiving a nourishing daily meal soon ran into the hundreds. Liliana was literally besieged by children whose odour of destitution and rubbish soon became her own. Yet she was heartbroken at the sight of so many hungry children, and in her heart of hearts longed for a world away from crowded humanity.

Sister Liliana was relieved, therefore, when a year later she was again assigned to Uganda. This time to the Mission in Amudat in the South of Karamoja, on the border with Kenya, among the Pokot ethnic group. Being free to spend time with the local people without the pressure of school responsibilities made Liliana very happy indeed but this was not to last long. The headmistress of the Girls' Primary School in the Mission fell seriously ill, and the School was desperately in need of a new head. Sister Liliana reluctantly obliged. It was the beginning of 1979.

The final journey

This year was to see the start of a terrible time for Karamoja. The region was in the grip of armed conflict, with the abundance of weaponry left by the former soldiers of Idi Amin, between the different ethnic groups. Sister Liliana personally saw thirteen people shot dead around the Mission of Amudat. There was the worst drought in living memory which saw the death of all the livestock and widespread famine among the local people. The children were starving and Sister Liliana gathered eight hundred of them into the Mission compound. When supplies were running low and she feared having nothing to give them to eat, the tears would begin to flow and she would go to Church, praying to God to urgently send some food for her hungry children. At the time, she wrote to one of her friends in Italy, "I would be prepared to pay the price in person to alleviate the suffering of these people".

It was early on the morning of Monday 10th August 1981, with armed robbers and cattle raiders on the roads, that Sister Liliana drove to Moroto, the regional capital of

Karamoja, to buy food, stationery, uniforms and medicine for the School. The trip would be her last. On the way back to Amudat, she was driving the vehicle with another Sister, Rosaria Marrone, in the passenger seat. She was very happy, as she had filled the vehicle with all the items needed at the school. Shots from an AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifle rang out. The first struck her in the shoulder but the second pierced her heart. The vehicle came to a halt in the grass by the side of the road. The attackers approached, and on seeing the Sister dead at the wheel, one of the band apologised to Sister Rosaria, saying, "Oh, we didn't mean to kill a Sister, we didn't mean to kill a Sister" and they immediately departed without even bothering to look further inside the vehicle.

Sister Rosaria removed Liliana's veil and used it to cover her lifeless face. She moved Liliana's body to the passenger seat and set out for the nearby Mission of Nabilatuk. Liliana was only thirty-seven years of age. "I have not risked my life for nothing", she had written tellingly to a friend only a few days before.

A time for forgiveness

The following day, a Funeral Mass was celebrated for Sister Liliana in the Mission of Amudat with many Missionaries and a large number of the Faithful present and, at the request of her parents, her body was taken to Italy for burial. At the spot where Liliana gave her life on the road between the Missions of Lorengedwat and Nabilatuk, a large cross was erected by the Faithful, and to this day is referred to 'Lomusalaba', the 'place of the Cross'.

The greatest miracle to happen subsequently was that

COMBONI MISSIONARIES

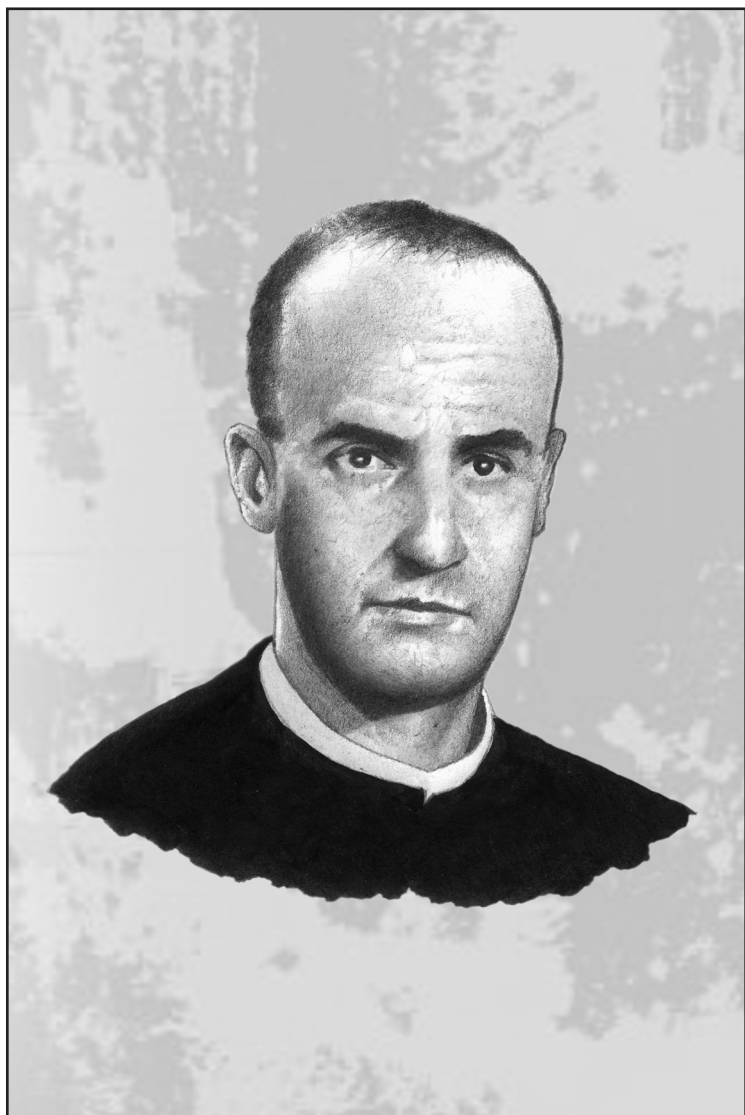
the Pokot people forgave Sister Liliana's murderers who were from the rival Pian ethnic group. One of the Pokot elders said at her funeral, "Now we know for certain that, with Liliana interceding for us before Him, God will protect us". Her parents, who had only been reconciled to Liliana's decision to enter Religious Life and become a Missionary on her last visit home, dedicated their remaining years to supporting the work of the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Karamoja, and in particular to the running of the Girls' Primary School in Amudat.

10. Uganda: Father Silvio Serri

- A Man of his Word

When he was a child, one of Silvio Serri's favourite books was, somewhat unusually for a child raised in Sardinia, "The Twenty-Two Martyrs of Uganda" by Archbishop Henri Streicher. He read it over and over again – always dreaming of working one day in that far distant land. In 1958 Silvio was ordained a priest by the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal (*later Pope and Saint*) Giovanni Battista Montini, but he had to wait another four years before he was able at last to leave for the Missions in Uganda. His long dreamed of adventure had begun. It is said that it was in his native Sardinia that he learnt those qualities that would serve him so well in his work as a Missionary – he was a kind and gentle soul who possessed an extraordinary ability to get on with everyone he came across. Yet he was a resilient individual who was renowned for always keeping to his word and hence his nickname among the Logbara people: 'The Man of his Word'.

Four years after his Ordination, Father Silvio left for Uganda and arrived in joyful times – only two months' previously the country had gained its independence from Britain and he was able to witness at first hand the great enthusiasm of Ugandans for their new-found freedom. He was assigned to the Mission of Obongi in North-western Uganda among the Logbara ethnic group. After learning the local language, he busied himself with forming



Catechists and preparing the ever-larger groups of catechumens who came to the Mission for baptism, together with building chapels and primary schools around the Mission. All was going well. At the end of a tiring day he would famously relax by listening to records of classic music, which he cheerfully recommended to other Missionaries as the 'best medicine of all'.

Darker times ahead

Six years later in 1968 when he returned to Sardinia for a period of leave, his mother fell ill and died. A few months after his mother's death, Father Silvio went back to Uganda and only returned home in 1975, just in time to administer the 'Last Rites' to his dying father. Darker times in Uganda also lay ahead. The brutal regime of Idi Amin was overthrown in April 1979. His soldiers, desperate but well-armed, were forced to escape before the advancing troops from neighbouring Tanzania. They terrorised much of the country as they made their way to the North-west of Uganda towards Congo and Sudan. On Holy Thursday some of these soldiers showed up at the Mission of Obongi and, pointing a rifle at Father Silvio's chest, demanded his vehicle and food for the journey. "Here are the keys of the car, and have what is in the pantry", replied the Missionary with Franciscan simplicity.

Some of the local Christians, however, decided to pursue the soldiers in order to retrieve Father Silvio's car. The vehicle was essential for the work of the Mission. It was not only used to transport food and water, but was the only reliable means to take sick people to the nearest hospital, seventy miles away, in Arua. They were not going to give up

on the only car in the Mission as easily as that! After an extensive search, the vehicle was found just across the border in Southern Sudan. It was taken to the Mission of the Comboni Missionaries in Yei, and was then returned to Obongi.

In spite of this success, however, Father Silvio's Superiors thought it would be best for him to leave the more isolated Mission of Obongi and move twenty-five miles east to the Mission of Otumbari. The situation in Obongi had become too dangerous. But Father Silvio protested, "Why are you forcing me to betray my Christians here?". He did move to Otumbari but continued to visit Obongi on a weekly basis in order to celebrate Sunday Mass, distribute medicines and to reassure everyone that he would soon be back in their midst.

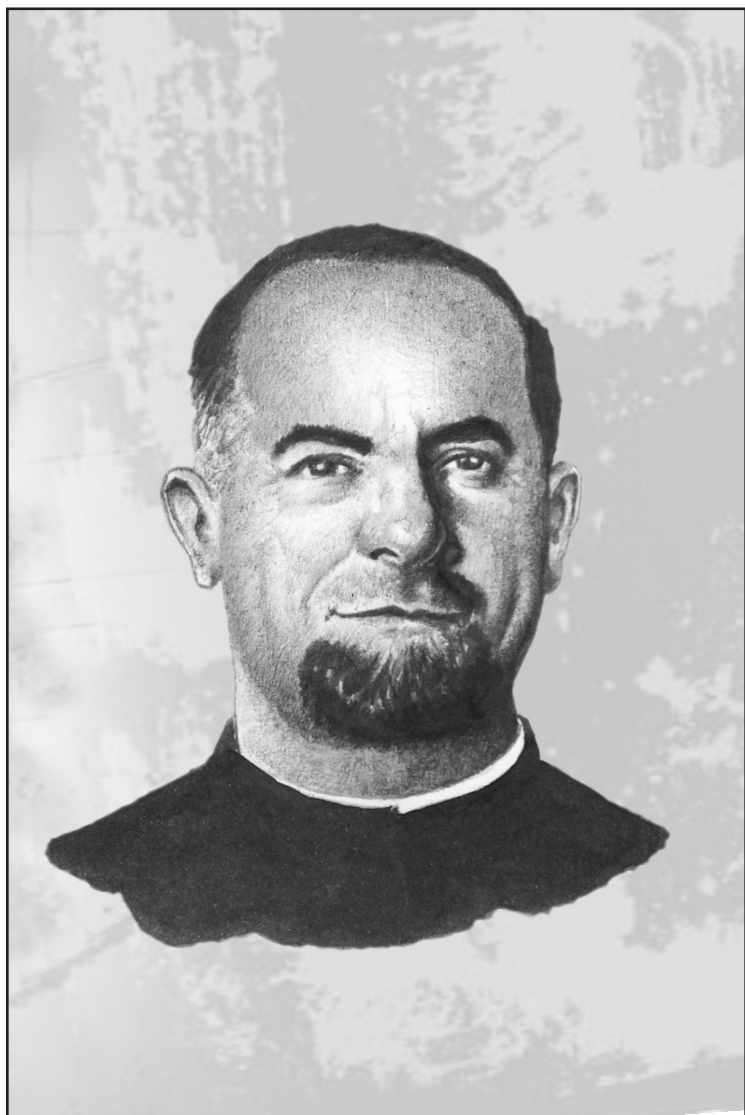
The fateful return to his beloved Mission

Father Silvio was aware that returning on a permanent basis to the Mission at Obongi was fraught with danger, but in conscience decided that he just had to be in the place where his people needed him most. He therefore went back to Obongi to stay. Some weeks later, on September 11th 1979, Father Silvio drove down the narrow road leading to the River Nile in order to collect water for the Mission, as he did every evening. He returned to the Mission at around 6:30 p.m., half an hour before dark. A man armed with a rifle was waiting for him at the house of the Fathers. Father Silvio stopped and got out of the vehicle. From the tattered uniform he realized that the individual was one of Idi Amin's former soldiers. "Give me the keys of the car", the man said. "Here they are", replied

Father Silvio, handing them over to him immediately. "Now give me a can of petrol", the man ordered. "Come with me and I will give it to you", the Missionary answered. And they went to the garage, collected the can of petrol and loaded it into the boot of the car.

At this point, a boy close by, seeing that the soldier wanted to steal the vehicle, went to raise the alarm by ringing the church bell. A crowd of people arrived at the Mission. Everything happened in an instant. As he saw the people approaching, the former soldier pointed his weapon at Father Silvio and fired several shots at close range. Father Silvio was hit in the arm and in the stomach, but a bullet had also pierced his heart. The people watched helplessly as the murderer jumped into the car and drove off at speed. Only then did they see that Father Silvio had fallen to the ground. He was still alive when he was taken inside the Fathers' house, but died moments later. He was only forty-six years old.

The body of Father Silvio was taken to the Mission of Ombaci near Arua, the regional capital of West Nile. He was buried the next day in the cemetery there, mourned by many of those who had known him over the years. The local people had nicknamed Father Silvio "The Man of his Word" because he would always accomplish what he had decided to do and he always kept his word. One of the mourners at the Funeral Mass noted that Father Silvio was fond of repeating to the Christians in Obongi: "I will stay with you, whatever happens" and the man had kept his word.



11. Uganda: Father Silvio Dal Maso

- Living through three Wars

Father Silvio Dal Maso had been shot dead by a single bullet. The holes made by the bullet that had passed through his neck were visible on both sides. He had no other wounds. Not far from him was the lifeless body of his fellow Comboni Missionary, Father Antonio Fiorante. Father Silvio was sixty-four years old when he was killed. He had served in Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda. His missionary work was interrupted by three different wars. His life was marked by a love of simplicity and an extraordinary resilience in situations that would have led others to have given up long before.

Father Silvio was ordained a priest on April 16th 1939 and six months later was assigned by the Italian Authorities as a Chaplain in Ethiopia as part of his compulsory Military Service. The city of Gondar was his first destination. The city is nestled among hills and rising above these are the walls of the famous castle built by the Portuguese in the 16th Century. Its fertile land produces teff, durra, chickpeas, carrots, chilli and coffee. When Father Silvio arrived in Ethiopia, however, Gondar and other towns and villages of the country were occupied by Italian troops. Father Silvio wrote to a friend, "I do not like this combination of the 'sword' and the 'cross'. It does not reflect the spirit of the Gospel ... I do not know how it will all end up". While serving in Gondar, he was on friendly

terms with the local Christian Community and taught catechism to children and young adults preparing to receive the Sacraments. Later, after completing his Military Service, Father Silvio was sent to the Community of the Comboni Missionaries in Asmara. Although he would have preferred the rigours of life in a rural Mission, he worked hard to create an atmosphere around the Community in which the Gospel could be received. A newspaper in Asmara at the time attributed to him the merit of having founded a 'Sports Association' at the Genius Village of Asmara. There, many people would come together for sporting activities, and he had the opportunity of explaining the Faith to them. When the Italian troops were defeated, Father Silvio and the other Comboni Missionaries in Ethiopia and Eritrea were confined in a prison camp. "Have no fear", he wrote to his Superiors in Verona, "One can do plenty of good here too. In fact I would say that there is more need for priests here than anywhere else". This sentence summarized his programme of ministry among his fellow prisoners.

At the end of the Second World War, all the Italian Missionaries were expelled from Ethiopia and Eritrea, and forced to interrupt the work they had carried out in that land over many years. After a short holiday in Italy, Father Silvio was sent to Wau, in the heart of Southern Sudan, in 1947. It was in precisely that year when a Comboni Missionary Bishop, Edward Mason, was appointed to the Local Diocese, and the Bishop decided to send Father Silvio to the Dinka area. Father Silvio was delighted, "I have always dreamed of that land", he wrote, "I have read the reports of our first Missionaries there, Father Olivetti and Father Nebel. That is the right place for me".

Serving among the Dinka people of Sudan

The Dinka ethnic group inhabit a vast region in Southern Sudan that forms a seasonal wetland when the Nile River floods its banks with the onset of the rainy season around the beginning of May every year. Sorghum is the staple crop and planting begins with the arrival of the rains. August is the month of abundance for the Dinka people. Crops are harvested and the tributaries of the Nile are teeming with fish. The thatched-roof huts, made out of tree poles and mud, where the Dinka people live, are built on high ground to avoid the floods. This was the environment where Father Silvio lived for many years in the Missions of Mayen, Abyei, Thiet, Warap and Kuajok. The Dinka are a proud people and Father Silvio learned their language, traditions and culture. He used to visit their villages where he would stop to talk with people, and often remained talking with the elderly for hours under the shade of a tree. He travelled by foot throughout the region for fifteen days at a time, bringing with him only the essentials: a portable altar for the celebration of Mass, some medicines for the sick, snuffing tobacco for the elderly and some drinking water, food and a change of clothes.

After gaining Independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan experienced difficult times. The Government in Khartoum, consisting predominantly of Muslim Arabs, began to restrict the activity of Christian Missionaries. Their schools and clinics were nationalized, they were prevented from opening new Missions and then they were forbidden to teach the Faith or to baptize children. The Christians in the South of the country rebelled

against the Government in Khartoum and a bloody civil war ensued until Southern Sudan gained its Independence from the North on July 9th 2011. In 1964, after sixteen years working in Sudan, Father Silvio was expelled from the country as, according to the Sudanese Authorities, there was no longer any reason for him to remain on. He was escorted to the airport in Juba by two policemen and summarily sent on his way to Italy; once again a war had interrupted his missionary work.

Assigned to Uganda

Starting over again at the age of fifty-three is not easy, but Father Silvio was ready to do it for love of the Missions. He was sent to work among the Alur ethnic group in North-western Uganda. Learning the language was facilitated by the affinity between the Alur language and the Dinka language he had learned in Sudan. He began his pastoral work as a Curate in the Missions of War and Zeu, but in 1972 found himself working in the Mission of Pakwach. Pakwach is on the banks of the River Nile and is the gateway to the Ugandan region of West Nile. It is acknowledged as an 'inferno' of stifling heat, high humidity, ever-present mosquitoes and many species of venomous snakes. As ever, Father Silvio was not deterred. Encouraged by his long experience among the Dinka people, he undertook long safaris visiting the local Christians of the area, village by village, homestead by homestead and family by family. Although the heat, the mosquitoes and the bats would prevent him from sleeping well for days on end, he never complained. He was renowned for constantly urging his Christians to keep

helping those less fortunate than themselves, and there was always, he would insist, someone less fortunate than them.

The terrible night of Martyrdom

Uganda had meanwhile fallen into the abyss. Idi Amin had come to power in 1971, and widespread torture and killing were the order of the day. People lived in terror of being arrested and simply disappearing without trace. When, eight years later, the Tanzanian Army invaded Uganda with the aim of deposing Amin's brutal dictatorship, soldiers of the regime fled north towards Sudan and Zaire, leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake. Such former soldiers of Amin had been in the area around Pakwach for several days when on the morning of Thursday 3rd May 1979, they arrived at the Mission to demand petrol, food and money. The two Missionaries appear to have given them everything that they had at their disposal. There were, however, no eye witnesses as to what happened next. All we know is that the lifeless bodies of Father Silvio and Father Antonio were found next morning in the Fathers' house by the Local Sisters working in the Mission. Father Silvio was found sitting on the floor leaning against the wall, in a pool of blood, with his head up and his hands and feet tied with rope. He was wearing a t-shirt. The simplicity of his life and his total gift of self to the people to whom he was sent could not have been expressed more eloquently. Father Silvio and Father Antonio were buried together in the cemetery of the neighbouring Mission of Angal.

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12. Uganda: Father Antonio Fiorante

- A Heart filled with Joy

Antonio was a young boy of twelve years of age, living in the beautiful green hills and mountains of Civitanova del Sannio of Central Italy, when he decided he would be a missionary priest in Africa. His dream came true when he was ordained a priest on June 3rd 1950 in Milan Cathedral by Cardinal (*later Blessed*) Ildefonso Schuster, and three years' later finally left for Africa. He had been assigned to Southern Sudan, and he reached there in January 1954.

When Father Antonio arrived in the heartland of the Dinka, a proud ethnic group who inhabit a wetland, infested by mosquitoes and malaria, he had nothing but enthusiasm for his Mission. One can sense this from the first letter he wrote back home, "Africa scares only those who have never seen it. Those who know the Continent are fascinated by it, they love it and never want to leave". For him, it was a great adventure: "We left the Port of Naples at midnight on December 27th 1953, on a ship of the Esperia Company, and we set sail for Alexandria in Egypt. From there we took a train to Cairo, and then another train to Shellal, where a boat was waiting for us. We sailed down the Nile through Egypt for three days. Then, we crossed the desert by train, seeing nothing but sand for three hundred miles. We arrived in Khartoum twelve hours after the scheduled time. After a brief stop in Khartoum, we boarded a small plane to Wau, the capital of Wau State in

Southern Sudan. From there we reached the Mission of Mboro by car. We are here at last – in the heart of Africa. Now, my first duty is to learn the local language and culture. Mboro is a Mission with about five thousand Catholics, scattered through the surrounding swamps and hills for a radius of about a hundred miles”.

“A Missionary is always happy”

Father Antonio was a very cheerful and optimistic individual. His love for the elderly and for the sick was immediately obvious and much appreciated. His determination to learn local languages was also admired and enabled him to further work in the Missions of Kayango, Gordhiim and Mbili. Not only did he become fluent in Dinka, but he could converse easily in Jur and Ndogo. In a letter to a priest friend he wrote, “We are constantly on the move. Difficulties make life adventurous. In spite of the many hardships, a missionary is always happy wherever he is. Why? Because the heart of one who does good for others is always filled with joy”.

Expulsion from the Mission he loved

Yet harder times were ahead which would demand much more than a cheerful heart! With the outbreak of the first civil war in Sudan between the Islamic North and the partly-Christian and partly-Animist South, a conflict had begun that would continue for seventeen years, from 1956 until the signing of the ‘Addis Ababa Agreement’ in 1972. The cost, in terms of lives lost, is estimated at over five hundred thousand, of whom only a minority of victims were armed combatants. More than two million people were

displaced from their homes. Sudan, in the words of one Missionary, became "a bottomless pit of misery and despair". The Comboni Missionaries were seen by the Authorities in the North as 'inconvenient witnesses' to the cycle of relentless violence and destruction being wreaked on the people of the South. At first the Government in Khartoum curtailed the movements of Missionaries and they were confined to the compound of their Mission, this was followed by a ban on them working in the clinics and schools they had founded and were running, and then came the gradual refusal to renew their residence permits. In November 1962, Father Antonio became the first Comboni Missionary to be forced to leave his beloved Mission and return to Italy. The official reason given was that his residence permit was not being renewed, and so he could not lawfully remain in the country, but everyone knew what the Authorities in the North were really aiming for: the expulsion of all Missionaries working in the South. Within little more than a year, the Government would issue a decree expelling from the country the more than two hundred Comboni Missionary Fathers, Brothers and Sisters remaining in Southern Sudan.

"Let me go somewhere else"

But Father Antonio did not wait around. By the time his Confrères and the Sisters been expelled from South Sudan, he had already been assigned to another Mission. He had written to the Superiors in Verona, "I am too young to play the role of a retired returnee. I cannot stay idle at home when I can work for the Kingdom of God in the Missions. Send me wherever you deem more necessary". In 1963,

Father Antonio was already in the Mission of Ombaci in North-western Uganda. After learning the local language, he was posted to the Mission of Angal. After two years in Angal his Superiors asked him to move to Parombo, near Lake Albert, to open a new Mission there. His answer was always 'Yes', and that 'Yes' was always accompanied by an enormous smile. This did not mean however, that Father Antonio found things easy. In 1966, he wrote to a Confrère, "I am tired, but far from running out of energy. I am working hard to found the new Mission. From the rising of the sun until 8:30 a.m. I serve as a priest. Then from 8:30 a.m. till sunset I become a 'worker-priest'. You should see how dirty and exhausted I am at the end of the day! After supper, I still have a few hours to recharge my 'batteries' in front of the Lord in the chapel. In the morning, I am a 'young fellow' again wanting to change the world. We must finish the Church as soon as possible. Then we will think of the Presbytery. After that we will begin with the building of chapels in the outlying areas of the Mission. You know better than I that the beginnings of any work are always difficult. However, difficulties do not scare us, do they?"

All this manual labour was accompanied by great pastoral success. It was a period when people were literally flocking to the Missions. Children and young people wanted education and the sick needed medical care. Dispensaries and schools were built around churches and chapels. All these activities, however, did not distract the Missionaries from the work of preaching the Good News and explaining the Faith. Catechumenates were packed, and the Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, Holy Communion and Confirmation were administered.

Achieving development with words and deeds

Father Antonio was also passionately devoted to the social and economic well-being of the people in his care as well. He was a champion of what, in later decades, would be termed, 'integral human development'. In his hectic schedule, he could always find time for 'bread and butter' issues. One of his great achievements was the founding of the 'Fishermen's Cooperative' in the fishing village of Panyimur. He would say, "Our evangelising action must be carried out in words and deeds. The Church today cannot limit herself to proclaiming the Good News, but must be promoting the life of the people". Great was his joy when the fishermen were able to provide themselves with larger, safer boats and eventually with a truck to transport their dried, smoked or salted fish to the markets of Kampala and to those of the nearby Congo. By combining their efforts the fishermen were able to guarantee a larger and more regular income with which to provide for themselves and their families.

Father Antonio was to remain in the Mission of Parombo until 1975 when, after a period of home leave, he was posted to the Mission of Pakwach. On his return to Uganda he wrote to his family, "Here I am in Africa again for the fourth time. I feel fantastic and have no regrets. It was good to be with you. Yet, only now do I really feel at home. As I crossed the bridge over the Nile at Pakwach, I felt as if I had returned to my motherland. Seeing once again the places where I have worked for so many years, I felt like I was born there. When people came to greet me, it felt as if I were surrounded by joyful relatives who were greeting a member of their own family. I am really happy

to be here again". Although the Missionaries working in Pakwach had to leave the place at regular intervals to recover from recurrent bouts of tropical illnesses, Father Antonio never complained and wrote in a letter to a friend, "When one works for the Lord, life is always beautiful. I am working as hard here in Pakwach as I did in Parombo but my heart is always full of joy".

On February 17th 1979, Father Antonio, together with almost all the Missionaries present in the country, was in Kampala for the national celebrations of the 'Centenary of the Arrival of the First Catholic Missionaries in Uganda' on the shores of Lake Victoria on February 17th 1879. In his heart and in the hearts of all the Faithful, there was great rejoicing, but because of the political situation, there was also a deep sense of foreboding. Idi Amin had declared war on Tanzania on October 30th 1978 and sent troops to invade and annex part of the Kagera Region of Tanzania, which he claimed belonged to Uganda. Aided by Ugandan nationalists in the form of the 'Uganda Liberation Front', Tanzanian troops eventually over-powered the Ugandan Army. As the Tanzanian-led forces neared Kampala, the capital of Uganda, on April 13th 1979, Amin fled the city. Escaping first to Libya, he finally settled in Saudi Arabia. Former soldiers of the regime terrorized much of the country as they made good their escape, robbing and looting on the way, through the North of Uganda and on to Congo and Sudan.

Martyred

The cycle of wanton violence sadly also hit the Mission of Pakwach. On May 3rd 1979, at around four o'clock in the

afternoon, some former soldiers of Amin arrived at the Mission and demanded a supply of petrol, food and money. Father Silvio Dal Maso, Father Antonio's Confrère, informed them that there was no petrol left, but the soldiers wanted to check the store for themselves. They found a barrel of diesel and rolled it towards the main road.

What happened later was narrated by Sister Paula, a Member of the Sisters of Mary Immaculate, who was living in their Convent in the Mission at the time: "About 9:00 p.m., we heard some dogs barking and the sound of people speaking loudly in the Fathers' house. Terrorised by fear, we locked ourselves in our house. The following morning, as usual, we went to the Church for morning Mass but we saw that it was still locked. We, therefore, decided to go to the house of the Fathers. The main door was open as were all the doors inside. The house had been completely ransacked. When I entered the room of Father Antonio, I found his body together with that of Father Silvio on the floor, bound with rope and with a single gunshot wound to the head".

The news of the murders spread fast, and people began to congregate in the Mission. The Sisters of Mary Immaculate decided to transport the bodies of the two Missionaries to the neighbouring Mission of Angal. Clothed in liturgical vestments, the bodies of the two martyrs were placed in front of the altar of the Church, and after the Funeral Mass were interred together in the same grave in the cemetery of Angal.

Father Antonio was only fifty-three years old. The news of his untimely death reached Civitanova del Sannio on May 12th 1979. The whole town was deeply shocked and

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saddened. His fellow citizens had loved their 'Missionary' and had supported his apostolic work in Sudan and Uganda over the years. Though aware that their hero had always shunned publicity, they decided to erect a monument in his memory in the yard of a local primary school named after him. The plaque on the marble column that supports a bronze bust of Father Antonio reads, "Before medicines and bread, he offered kindness, friendship and a wonderful smile".

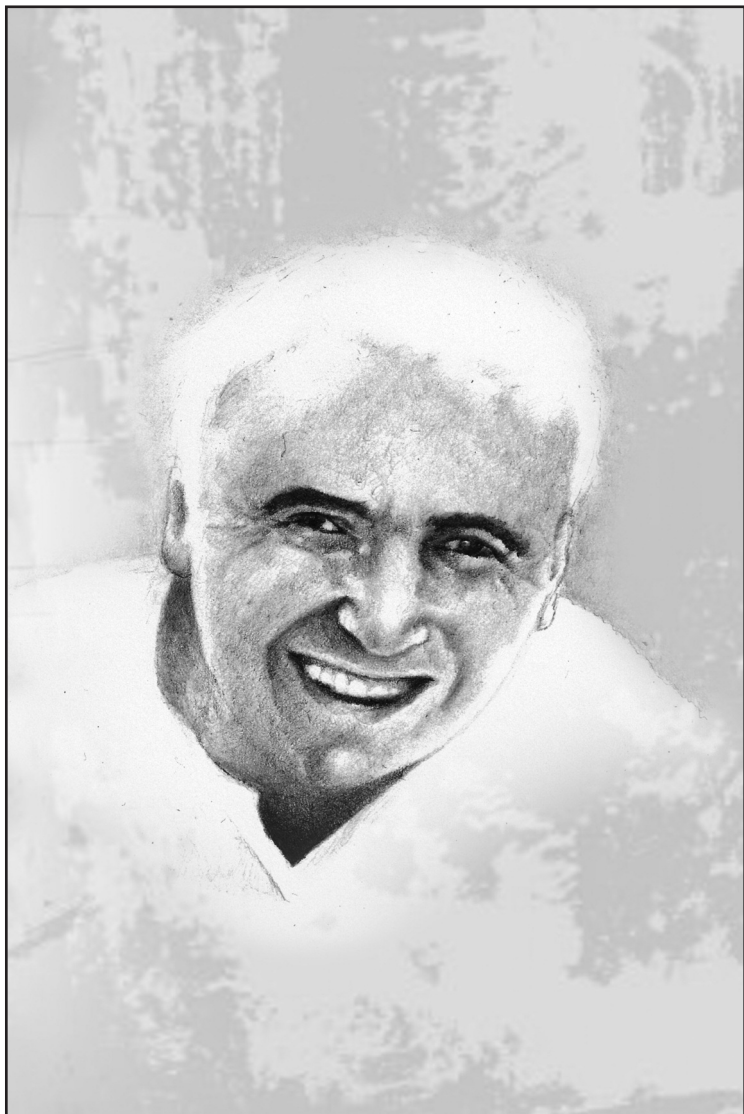
13. Uganda: Father Giuseppe Santi

- Life is so beautiful

It was Holy Saturday, at about four o'clock in the afternoon of April 14th 1979, and Father Giuseppe was making preparations for the Easter Vigil at his Mission in Aloï, twenty-five miles from Lira town in Northern Uganda. Two young men suddenly appeared at the door of the sacristy. They had fled from Patongo, a village in the neighbouring District of East Acholi, where the soldiers of Idi Amin were conducting a reign of terror. They begged Father Giuseppe to take them by car to the town of Lira where they believed the Tanzanian Army had already arrived. The two young men had fled by motorbike but it had broken down. If captured, they would surely be killed. Father Santi thought for a moment: it didn't seem right to skip the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday Night but these young men were on the run and he had to get them to safety. He decided that the liturgy could wait while he helped them to escape. He immediately set off with them but was never seen again.

Developing a sense of responsibility among the Laity

Father Giuseppe had first come to Uganda twenty-eight years previously on September 1st 1951. He was assigned to the Missions among the Acholi ethnic group in the North of the country. He dreamed of going to work in the open countryside among the rural population, but was



instead appointed to the Cathedral Parish in Gulu town. Without delay, he threw himself into the work of instructing the catechumens, with visits to the many chapels around the town. During his *safaris* he would visit people house by house. He wanted to get to know everyone personally, to speak with them, understand their problems and try to help them. He clearly understood his mission, which he saw as being there for people and having a robust commitment to them. He wrote in one of his many letters, "I have a very efficient Parish Council of twenty people, chosen by the Parishioners; they meet every month and discuss various matters (liturgy, schools, recreation, the youth, ...). The administration of the Parish is also in their hands. I do nothing without their approval. In this way, their sense of responsibility as members of the laity in the Church grows". And, in another letter, he writes, "It is not just a matter of baptising and hearing confessions, but of imparting the best Christian formation possible. I attend especially to the formation of the laity, who find it hard to see themselves as the Church. I have been doing this for years but it can be difficult to get the message across".

Despite developing problems with his kidneys, for which he later underwent an operation, he refused to slacken the pace of his work. After sunset, when it was impossible to visit his Parishioners, Father Giuseppe would go to pray: that was how he rested and the time when he reviewed his day and brought all before the Lord. The Confrères appreciated Father Giuseppe for his good nature, his serenity and his industriousness. As a result, in 1956 he was elected Provincial Superior of all the

Comboni Missionaries in Uganda who at that time numbered one hundred and thirty-seven: one Bishop, ninety-two Priests and forty-five Brothers. Three years later in 1959, he went to Italy for the Chapter and the election of the new Superior-General, Father Gaetano Briani. Although Father Giuseppe was tasked with co-ordinating the Seminaries of the Comboni Missionaries in Italy, he could still hear the voice of Africa calling and returned there a year later.

The development of work by 'Catholic Action'

Father Giuseppe returned to work in Gulu where he was placed in charge of 'Catholic Action', a lay movement of Catholics which was organised in groups along Parish lines and dedicated to prayer, social activities and charitable work. Apart from attending prayer meetings and assisting with the liturgy, Members became the 'right hand man' of the Missionary in undertaking works of charity especially among the sick and the elderly. In their free time, they would bring food to the needy, visit the sick and accompany them to the local Health Clinic, build huts for those who were unable to do so by themselves, and so on. Father Giuseppe organised the first Diocesan Meeting of 'Catholic Action' in the Diocese of Gulu, and buoyed by that success, began organizing yearly Meetings of 'Catholic Action' for the Dioceses of Northern Uganda in the Seminary of Aboke near Lira. Members of 'Catholic Action', accompanied by their Priests, would arrive by pick-up, bus or lorry, from even the remotest Missions and for the five-day Meeting the Seminary was transformed with strikingly colourful decorations, folk costumes, traditional music

and dancing, story-telling, competitions, games and the like. After working in Gulu for a number of years, Father Giuseppe went on to minister with his usual enthusiasm in the Missions of Awach, Aber and Lira before being assigned to the Mission in Aloi.

The worsening political and security situation

Meanwhile, things were changing for the worse in Uganda. On January 25th 1971, President Milton Obote was overthrown in a successful military coup led by the army commander, Idi Amin. The expulsion *en masse* the following year of the Asian Community, the mainstay of the country's commercial life, brought about widespread economic collapse, with the wholesale closure of factories, shops and offices. The dictator's powerbase lay with the army, but with income from the export of coffee, tea, sugar and tobacco drying up, Amin found it increasingly difficult to pay their salaries. In order to pacify the army through the 'spoils of war', and thereby help foil any coup attempt against himself, Amin sent troops to invade and annex part of the Kagera Region of neighbouring Tanzania, which he claimed belonged to Uganda. In the campaign the area was pillaged and thousands of innocent civilians massacred. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania ordered a counter-offensive and a few months later the territory was re-taken and the Tanzanian Army invaded Uganda in an effort to liberate the country from the murderous dictatorship of Idi Amin. Amin fled to Libya before the advancing Tanzanians, while his troops made good their escape, robbing and killing as they went, through the North of the country and on to exile in Congo and Sudan.

A Common Grave

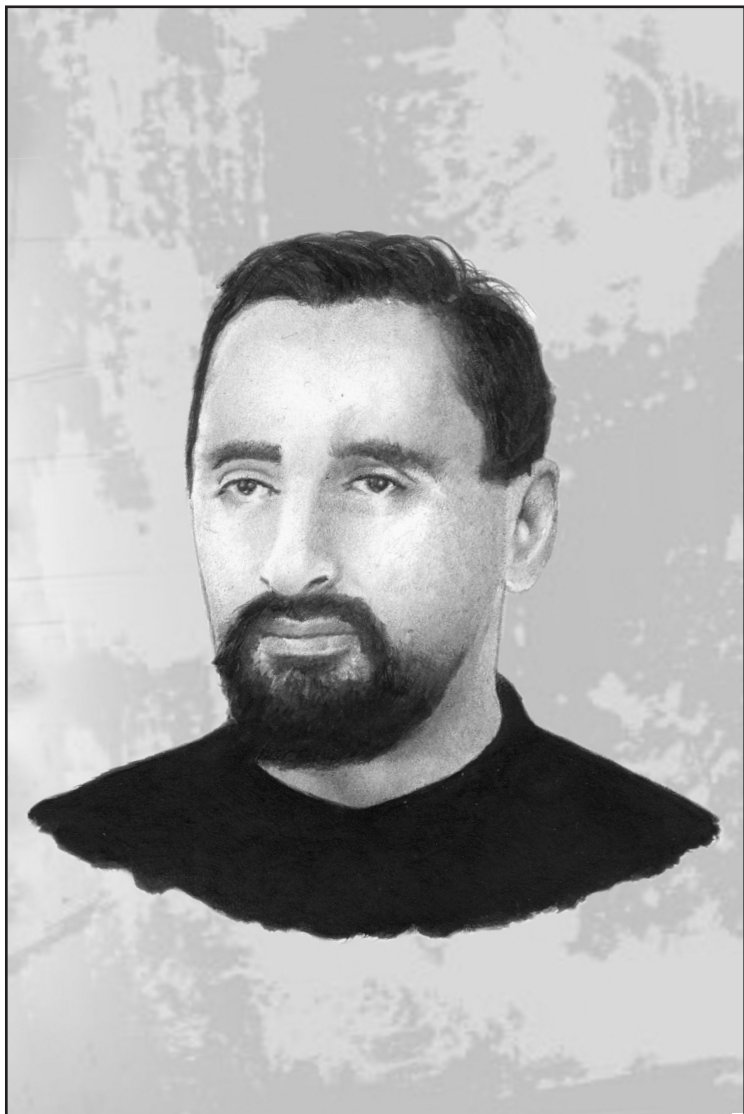
Late into the evening the Confrères and the Christians in the Mission of Aloï waited anxiously with no news of the whereabouts of Father Giuseppe. Around the Mission of Ngeta, on the outskirts of Lira, there were reports of a violent clash near the barracks in the town and one of the victims was said to be a white man. The Missionaries were deeply concerned it was one of their number but it was impossible to venture into the town as Amin's soldiers were shooting people at will. Local Priests and Sisters had to take refuge with the Bishop of Lira, Cesare Asili, in the Cathedral. A further report arrived in the Mission of Ngeta with the news that someone has recognised Father Giuseppe among a group of dead bodies dumped near the Army Barracks.

It was only three days later on the morning of Easter Tuesday, when many of the soldiers of Amin had left the area, that it was possible for the Missionaries to go into Lira. The bodies of Father Giuseppe and six other people were discovered, just outside the barracks, thrown into a hole in the ground. The Missionary had been cut down by a burst of automatic fire. His body was quickly brought to the Cathedral where, due to the insecurity, a short Funeral Service was performed. He was buried in the Cathedral Cemetery, beside the grave of a Local Priest, Father Anania Oryang, who had been killed by soldiers in his Parish two weeks before. During the burial of Father Giuseppe, a lorry laden with soldiers arrived and stopped close by, with the result that everyone fled from the cemetery. It was only after the soldiers had left that the burial could be completed. Father Santi was fifty-nine years old. A few weeks pre-

Supreme Witness

viously, Father Giuseppe had written to a friend, "Our duty is to work. We must spend our lives doing good for others, without worrying for whom we do it, and without seeking thanks or looking for results. That way, life is so beautiful".

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14. Congo: Brother Carlo Mosca

- Back from the Land of the Dead

The assassination of four Comboni Missionaries around Rungu in the Eastern Province of Congo by Simba Rebels in November and December 1964 was but a part of the tragic political turmoil and appalling violence that followed the granting of Independence to the country by Belgium in 1960. Though it must be recognised that such chaos was due to the colonial exploitation and commercial extraction that the Congo had suffered over the previous eighty years or so, together with the interventions in Africa by the West and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The country's tragic colonial history and its legacy

The Belgian Congo, a country the size of Western Europe, achieved independence from Belgium under the name 'Republic of the Congo (*République du Congo*)' on June 30th 1960. King Leopold II of Belgium (1865-1909) had formally acquired rights to the territory, centred on the Congo Basin, at the Berlin Conference of European Powers in 1885 and promptly declared the land his private property, naming it the 'Congo Free State'. From that date millions of people died in the territory as a consequence of epidemic disease, famine and the many well-documented atrocities associated with the forced labour policies used by the Authorities to collect natural rubber for export. The severing of the hands of people who refused to participate

in rubber collection achieved particular international notoriety, and caused outrage when it was made known to the public in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the United States and elsewhere. An international campaign against the 'Congo Free State' began in 1890 under the leadership of the British activist E. D. Morel, and Belgium was eventually forced under international pressure to formally annex the territory to form the 'Belgian Congo' in 1908.

In the run-up to Independence, democratic elections were held throughout the country and Patrice Lumumba was elected the first Prime Minister, while Joseph Kasavubu became the first President. A conflict, known as the 'Congo Crisis', soon arose over the administration of this vast territory which was extremely rich in natural resources. The Province of Katanga, with large copper deposits, and the diamond-rich Province of South Kasai, situated in the South-West of the country attempted to secede and rebelled against the Government in Léopoldville (*now known as 'Kinshasa'*). When Prime Minister Lumumba turned to the Soviet Union for assistance in the crisis, the Army Chief of Staff, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, supported by Belgium and the United States, arranged for his removal from office by President Kasavubu on September 5th 1960 and ultimately his execution by Belgian-led Katangese troops on January 17th 1961. Mobutu continued to lead the country's armed forces until he took power directly in a second coup d'état on November 25th 1965, and remained in office until May 1997.

The secessionist movements in Katanga and South Kasai were suppressed but peace did not return to Congo for long. On August 2nd 1963, on his return from training in

China, Pierre Mulele, the former Education Minister of Patrice Lumumba, launched a new rebellion against the Government in Léopoldville in his native Province of Kwilu. In a matter of months, with some support from the local population which felt poorly treated and exploited by the Government, so-called 'Simba Rebels' led by Gaston Soumialot, Christophe Gbenye and Laurent Kabila had conquered nearly half of the country. Recruiting young men and teenagers, armed mainly with machetes, spears and arrows, and often under the influence of '*bangi*' (marijuana), the rebels believed their '*dawa*' (magic potions and amulets) would leave them impervious to enemy fire. Their aim was to overthrow the 'imperialist' Government of Léopoldville and everywhere they went they targeted expatriates whom they regarded as enemy collaborators. On August 5th 1964, the rebels captured Stanleyville (*now known as 'Kisangani'*), proclaimed the 'People's Republic of Congo' and took hundreds of European, American and Asian expatriates living in Eastern Congo hostage. The Congolese Army, assisted by Belgian troops and with the aid of battle-hardened French and South African mercenaries, launched the 'Ommegang Offensive' on November 3rd 1964, and crushed the rebellion within a matter of months, although not without significant loss of life.

Brother Carlo Mosca was the only survivor of the massacre of the four Comboni Missionaries in Rungu. This is his story: "The Simba Rebels wore animal skins on their heads, banana leaves crossed over their chests and strips of red cloth on their arms. It was their way of identifying themselves. They came to the Mission in Rungu on the afternoon of October 29th 1964. The group of

Missionaries in the Mission at the time comprised Father Piazza, Father Zuccali, Father Migotti and myself from Italy, with three Holy Ghost Fathers and four Religious Sisters all from Belgium. After ransacking the Mission, we were all confined to the house of the Fathers under the watch of armed guards and told not to venture outside. If we did, we were told in no uncertain terms, we would be shot on sight. Three days later, on November 1st 1964, another group of rebels arrived bringing with them Léopold Matabo, the Mayor of Stanleyville. We were ordered out of the house and forced to go to the nearby river to witness his public execution. The rebels began arguing amongst themselves as to how the man should be killed but while this was going on, some of the rebels started torturing and mutilating him. One of the Belgian Sisters fainted at the gruesome sight of the man being dismembered before her very eyes. Glaring at the commotion in the group, the rebel commander reproached us saying that we were not even courageous enough to witness a man being killed.

Locals risked their lives to bring us food

On Tuesday 3rd November 1964, rebel leaders arrived from Stanleyville, shouting that they were going to kill the Belgians among us that very day, and then all the Italians the following day. On Wednesday 4th November, at nine o'clock in the evening, all eleven of us were loaded onto a Jeep and taken to Rungu Police Station, a couple of miles from the Mission. After we had been interrogated and ill-treated, we were held in small cells for three nights and two days. We were then taken back to the Mission and locked

in a large hall. Even though we were prisoners, we were free to move around and talk among ourselves. On November 25th 1964 news came that Belgian Paratroopers had reached the neighbouring city of Paulis (*now known as 'Isiro'*). The rebels panicked and fled. We managed to escape and hid in the forest. Risking their lives, local Christians secretly brought us food.

However, the paratroopers came no further than Paulis, giving the rebels time to re-group and return to Rungu. On finding that we had escaped, they threatened the local inhabitants saying they would kill everyone in Rungu if we were not handed over. In order to avoid a massacre of innocent people, we decided to surrender. It was December 1st 1964, at about four o'clock in the afternoon. We left our refuge in the forest without Father Zuccali, who had gone to see a sick Belgian farmer in another part of the area. As soon as they saw us coming, the rebels began to shout at us and threaten us with their weapons. One of them fired a volley of bullets into the air from a machine-gun. They then took us to a hut. We heard the sound of a Jeep and a rebel commander suddenly entered the hut, firing his pistol in the air. He told us our time had come as the next day we were going to be killed. It was ten o'clock in the evening.

Prepared to face our death

The commander went out, but returned soon after and ordered the five Priests and myself to climb aboard a lorry. We were taken towards the river, little more than a mile away, where the lorry stopped just before the bridge. I was the first to alight. They ordered me to sit on the ground

with my back to them. Then someone else barked an order, "Let me see your face!". Before I could turn my head I heard an explosion and what seemed a blow to my left shoulder. My arm was driven backwards and I fell over as if I were dead. I could feel the blood coming from a wound to my shoulder but my mind was very clear. I saw the other five Missionaries being shot: the three Belgian Holy Ghost Fathers, and my Confrères Father Piazza and Father Migotti. I can still hear the last words of Father Migotti who, with his usual serenity, asked in Lingala, "*Wapi?*" (*'Where shall I sit?'*).

Having carried out the executions, they dragged us by the feet to the centre of the bridge and threw us into the river. I was the last to be thrown over: I distinctly heard the five splashes of the bodies of the other Missionaries in the water. The bridge was about ten metres high and the river was only about a metre deep. I remember thinking, "What if I bang my head on one of the pillars of the bridge or against a rock? I will surely drown". I was thrown from the bridge and hit the water feet first. I felt my feet hitting the water and then the rocks. Struggling to avoid being swept away by the current, I clung on for dear life to one of the pillars as I waited until the rebels went away. I spent some time wondering where to go, then I climbed up the bank and headed for the forest. In the dark of the night I walked through the long grass along the bank of the river without really knowing where I was going. At last I came across a hut. I approached and called out. A man came out and I told him how my companions had been shot and that I needed help. He told me to go away, for fear the rebels might kill him and all his family. With my wound bleed-

ing, I again set out for the bridge, hearing sounds of shooting and shouting in the distance. Vast dark clouds made the night even blacker and brought very heavy tropical rain, which helped to keep me awake. I decided to follow the river, but the undergrowth was becoming more and more dense and I was getting weak. I stopped, sat down and fell asleep leaning against a tree. I cannot say how long I slept but I awoke to find the first rays of sunlight were beginning to penetrate the thick forest. I stood up, knowing I had to keep moving. After some hours I came across an abandoned hut. Entering, I saw a fire burning and some clean water. There was also some cassava and some fruit of which I managed to eat a little, swallowing slowly. My wound was becoming infected and I knew that I could not stay there. I continued wandering in the forest.

The world of the dead

At a certain point I could see a road but also some rebels in the distance, so I returned to the forest. I walked for goodness knows how long until I chanced upon another hut. As I approached it, a man came out who, on seeing the condition I was in, began to shout and ran away. Exhausted, I sat on the ground. Soon afterwards the man came back accompanied by rebels. I recognised them and they recognised me. They could not believe their eyes. Helping me up, they took me to their camp. On seeing me, the rebel commander asked if I had come back from the world of the dead. I told him I had never gone there. Looking at me with some trepidation, the commander called a soldier and ordered him to treat my wound and give me something to eat. The following day I was trans-

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ferred to another rebel camp and finally to Mungbere where I met a group of about seventy other Missionary Priests and Sisters being held captive there. On the evening of December 29th 1964, they told us we would be shot at 8:00 a.m. the following morning. Early the next day, as we were preparing for our execution, pandemonium broke out in the camp. It was all so sudden and quite frightening. There were gunshots, explosions and screams from all directions. We could not understand what was happening. Then, from the window we could see foreign mercenaries and government soldiers from Léopoldville arrive in jeeps and trucks. The rebels had fled to the forest. We were released, and our nightmare was finally over. A few days later, I left for Rome". The bodies of Father Lorenzo Piazza, Father Evaristo Migotti and the three Belgian Holy Ghost Missionaries were never found.

15. Congo: Father Evaristo Migotti

- *"I am ready"*

A few old houses, some stony alleyways and, around the small village, vast fields as far as the eye could see. It was there in Tomba di Mereto that, on October 26th 1922, Evaristo was born. His childhood was spent entirely within the confines of those few small streets. He was still very young when he entered the local Diocesan Seminary at Castellerio in the Province of Udine in the North of Italy. He would be known all his life as serious in his studies and constant in his prayers. The Rector of the Seminary wrote to his Parish Priest, "He is very shy but has more than his share of goodness, intelligence, simplicity and firmness of character, and we therefore have reason to hope for great things from him".

The missionary calling

Whilst at the Seminary Evaristo decided that he really wanted to be a missionary. He spoke of this desire to the Rector of the Seminary but was told to wait. In 1942, after completing High School, he decided the time had come to take the long-awaited step. In his application to enter the Comboni Missionaries, he wrote, "Since I am convinced that the Lord is calling me to sacrifice my life to proclaim his Kingdom to the many people who do not know Him, I am ready to for any sacrifice whatsoever".

On June 6th 1948, he was ordained a priest in Verona



and sent to teach at Comboni College in Asmara (now the capital of Eritrea). Father Evaristo did not, however, confine himself just to teaching, but learned two local languages, Tigrinya and Ge'ez saying, "It is only by knowing their language that I can approach people". But teaching was not for him. He wanted to undertake the pastoral ministry that he had always dreamt of. After five years, the Superiors in Verona accepted his request and, in late 1953, he was assigned to the Mission of Mupoi in Southern Sudan. For ten years, he carried out ministry in the Missions of Rimenze, Naandi, Maringindo and Ezo. Those were years of intense and dedicated apostolate. He travelled all over the savannah, visiting villages and ministering to the sick. "The Christian Communities respond well to the proclamation of the Gospel", he wrote to a friend.

At the same time, the activities of the Missionaries in Southern Sudan were becoming more and more restricted. The partly-Christian and partly-Animist South had rebelled against the attempts of the Arab-led Government in the North to Islamise the whole country. The Authorities in Khartoum, accusing the Missionaries of supporting the rebellion, forbid them from baptising children, building chapels or repairing those already built, providing medicine to the sick or giving sustenance to the hungry. Father Evaristo was accused of having repaired two mud and grass-thatched chapels without permission from the Authorities and asked to appear in Court to answer the charges against him on November 15th 1962. He spent a month under house arrest at the Mission of Tombora whilst waiting to be sentenced. On January 12th 1963, a few days before sentence was due to be handed down, the

Authorities decreed his expulsion along with that of a number of other Comboni Missionaries. It was a hard blow for him.

Returning to Africa

Father Evaristo found it very difficult to settle back to life in Italy and insisted on returning to Africa. The Comboni Missionaries had opened a presence in Congo in the Diocese of Niangara (*now known as 'Isiro-Niangara'*) near the border with Southern Sudan. The reports from the country were not encouraging. In the aftermath of Independence, a series of rebellions against the Government had brought the Congo to its knees. Father Evaristo was well aware of the dangers. Nevertheless, he still wanted to go there and in February 1964 he left for the Mission of Rungu in the Eastern Province of Congo. In his first letter to his mother in Tomba di Mereto from Rungu he wrote, "I have been put in charge of the Parish Office, the accounts, the Catechumens and the primary schools. The work is well under way and there are two of us here working in the seventy villages around the Mission".

Father Evaristo had a natural gift that he would soon put to good use: that of water divining or dowsing. He succeeded in identifying underground streams of water. In a further letter home he wrote,

"I have just returned from a trip to Ndedu, where I went to help them find water. I showed them four or five places where they can find water at a depth of thirteen or fourteen yards". In one of his last letters he wrote, "The situation is becoming dangerous. It is saddening to see a country so rich in natural resources economically bankrupt. It is a

country of bitter tribal conflict". In August, the Simba Rebels left Maniema, the Capital of Kindu Province, and moved eastwards where, meeting no resistance, they captured the towns of Stanleyville ('Kisangani'), Paulis ('Isiro'), Buta and Watsa with the whole of the Eastern Province of the country.

The brutal end of a life of willing sacrifice

The rebels arrived at the Mission of Rungu on the afternoon of October 29th 1964. They were about about a hundred in number, well-armed and evidently under the influence of drugs. As the days passed, the attitude towards the Missionaries became increasingly hostile. There were reports that Belgian troops were on their way to the Region. The rebels became very nervous and began to harass the Missionaries and subject them to prolonged bouts of interrogation and ill-treatment. Belgian paratroopers did in fact reach Paulis, on November 25th 1964, causing panic among the Simba Rebels who fled Rungu. With the rebels gone, the Missionaries and Religious decided to take refuge in the forest. The Belgian troops, however, stopped in Paulis without advancing any further. This allowed the Simba Rebels to re-group and return to Rungu, where they threatened severe reprisals against the local population if the Missionaries were not handed over. In the circumstances the Missionaries decided to give themselves up. They were placed in a hut under close guard. Towards evening, the rebel commander entered the hut and ordered the six priests outside. The Missionaries then knew it was the end for them. The rebels ordered them to remove their shoes and forced them onto a lorry with

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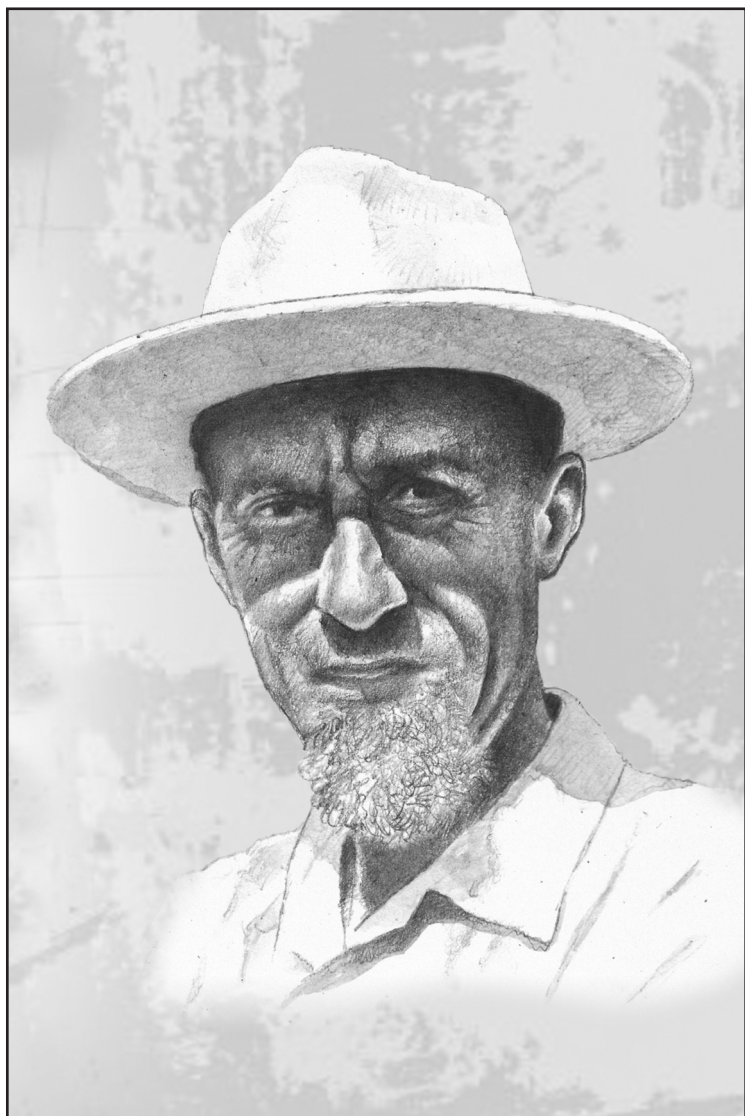
which they took them little more than a mile away to the Rungu River, a tributary of the Bomokandi River. It was about 10:00 p.m. on a dark, moonless night. The prisoners were made to alight from the lorry and sit on the ground. One by one they were then shot in the back at close range with Father Evaristo the last to die. He was forty-two years of age and had been in the country only nine months. The rebels then took their bodies and threw them over the bridge into the waters of the river below.

16. Congo: Father Lorenzo Piazza

- *"Experiencing the Joy of my Vocation"*

Looking out over the sea, Lorenzo often dreamt of sailing far away, to explore new lands and meet new peoples. One day he said to his father, a captain in the merchant navy, "Take me with you. I am grown up now (*he was just seven years of age!*) and I am not afraid of the sea". Lorenzo was born in Varazze in the Province of Savona in North-western Italy on August 14th 1915. He decided to become a priest and completed all his studies up to First Year Theology at the Diocesan Seminary in Savona. Increasingly fascinated by the biographies of some great missionaries, he asked to join the Comboni Missionaries and, on October 29th 1939, he entered their Novitiate in Venegono. He was ordained a priest in Verona on June 9th 1948 and was sent to the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Crema where he was much appreciated as a very gifted teacher.

Father Lorenzo left for Africa in 1955, but his departure was a sorrowful one, as he left his mother alone at home. His only other brother had died in the war and his father had died some years before. He was assigned to the Mission of Mupoi in Southern Sudan. To some friends he wrote, "When we arrived in Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan, I immediately boarded the steamer 'Fatima' which, under the command of a Missionary Brother of ours, was due to sail south towards Wau. The trip by boat took eight



days. In some places, with its broad majestic course, the Nile gives the impression of being like the sea; elsewhere, it is just like a Venetian canal, but with banks, which lead onwards to an untamed wilderness. Lake No is a mosaic of small islands, where the tall grass conceals groups of sleek hippos, ready to dive underwater at the least sound of machinery; reappearing shortly afterwards among frothy fountains of water. Lake Ambadi has an underwater network of grasses and plants, with lotus flowers emerging here and there, where our helmsman is obliged to steer a skilful and cautious path. I pass the time looking at the endless varieties of birds as we pass through hordes of crocodiles. After sailing for eight days, we tied up at Meshra-el-Req, a port on the River Jur. From there we continued by motor-car. We had to cover about one hundred miles, with six people aboard, on roads that cut through swamps, over the savannah and through the forest. On our way we were captivated by giraffes, antelopes, gazelles and ostriches. After many hours, we reached Wau, the Capital of Bahr-el-Ghazal. There we stopped for a few days after which we took a different vehicle and set out again on our journey. This time it was only a matter of three hours before we finally reached our destination at Mupoi”.

The formidable task in a deteriorating situation

Father Lorenzo immediately understood the extent of the work that awaited him. The Mission of Mupoi was founded in 1905 and had grown enormously. The Missionaries there were administering eight rural hospitals, six orphanages and three leprosariums. There were also seventy-six primary, secondary and technical schools with around

three thousand pupils, as well as two hundred and forty-two schools for catechism with seven thousand pupils. There was also a monthly magazine entitled '*Ruru Gene*' ('The Straight Road') with a printing run of nearly three thousand copies. After some years in the Mission, Lorenzo wrote to a friend, "My life is one of experiencing every day the joy of my vocation".

At that time, however, dark clouds were gathering on the horizon for Missionaries in Southern Sudan. The 'Anyanya Movement' of Black, mainly Christian, Southerners were intensifying their guerrilla war against the Arab, and predominantly Muslim, North. The Missionaries were accused by the Islamic Government in Khartoum of siding with the rebels in the conflict. Father Lorenzo commented wryly in one of his letters, "We Missionaries are believed for what we do rather than for what we say and the people really appreciate our presence among them". In 1963, together with some other Comboni Missionaries, he was expelled from the country. A year later, on February 27th 1964, the Authorities in Khartoum would expel the remaining two hundred or so Comboni Missionaries from Southern Sudan. The expulsions would leave just one local bishop and twenty-eight local priests to minister to all the Faithful there.

It was hard for Father Lorenzo to forget Africa and he kept asking his Superiors to let him return there. The opportunity arose when it was decided to open a presence in Congo near the border with Southern Sudan at the end of 1963. Even though his mother had asked him to stay a little longer with her, in February 1964 he left for the Mission of Rungu in the Diocese of Niangara (*now known*

as 'Isiro-Niangara') in the North-East of the country. The Simba Rebellion had just begun. Although the rebel movement started in Kwilu in the Region of Bandundu, it would be in the Eastern Province of Congo that the revolt would claim the most of its victims. Father Lorenzo had only been in the country for eleven months when his life was abruptly cut short. He was shot and his body thrown into the Rungu River, never to be seen again. He was forty-nine years old.

Offered in sacrifice – a fitting tribute

A few months later, a Belgian Sister wrote a letter to Father Lorenzo's mother in Varazze. In it she wrote: "Due to the work of Father Lorenzo and his Companions, Father Antonio, Father Evaristo and Brother Carlo, our Mission in Rungu had made more progress in one year than in many years previous. These holy Missionaries really changed the face of the Mission. Father Lorenzo, especially, had great influence in the local schools. The male and female teachers were very fond of him and the school children adored him. The Sisters experienced his great paternal kindness and concern. From August 20th 1964, when the rebels first came to Rungu, he would come to visit us every day to hear how we were getting on and to comfort us in our difficulties. Despite all the troubles the rebels were giving him, he thought first of us. All of us, Fathers and Sisters, had to flee to the forest where we felt safer. On Sunday 29th November 1964 Father Lorenzo said Mass for us. I believe he felt that he was going to die. The following day before leaving the forest I made my confession to him: he spoke to me about trust, in words I will never

forget. The following day we had to give ourselves up. As I followed him along the path that led to the Mission, I reminded him of what he had said about trust. He gazed at me with a profound expression on his face without saying a word. I am sure he had already offered himself in sacrifice. Later, when we were still under guard at the Mission, he came to us in tears saying, "The rebels have come between me and my mother" for he had found a photograph of you with him torn in two, right down the middle. I was the last of our group to speak to him before we were separated: he was serene, not resigned, but 'offering himself in sacrifice', submitting himself to the will of God. Dear Mother, I am sure you are weeping as you read this letter ... just as I am weeping as I write it, but I believe you will be glad to have a memento of your dear son. I pray to him as a saint, I speak to him and ask his advice. That is how close he is to us. I am sure that you, too, feel he is close to you. He loved you greatly and always spoke of you with great tenderness and affection".

17. Congo. Father Antonio Zuccali

- His Last Smile

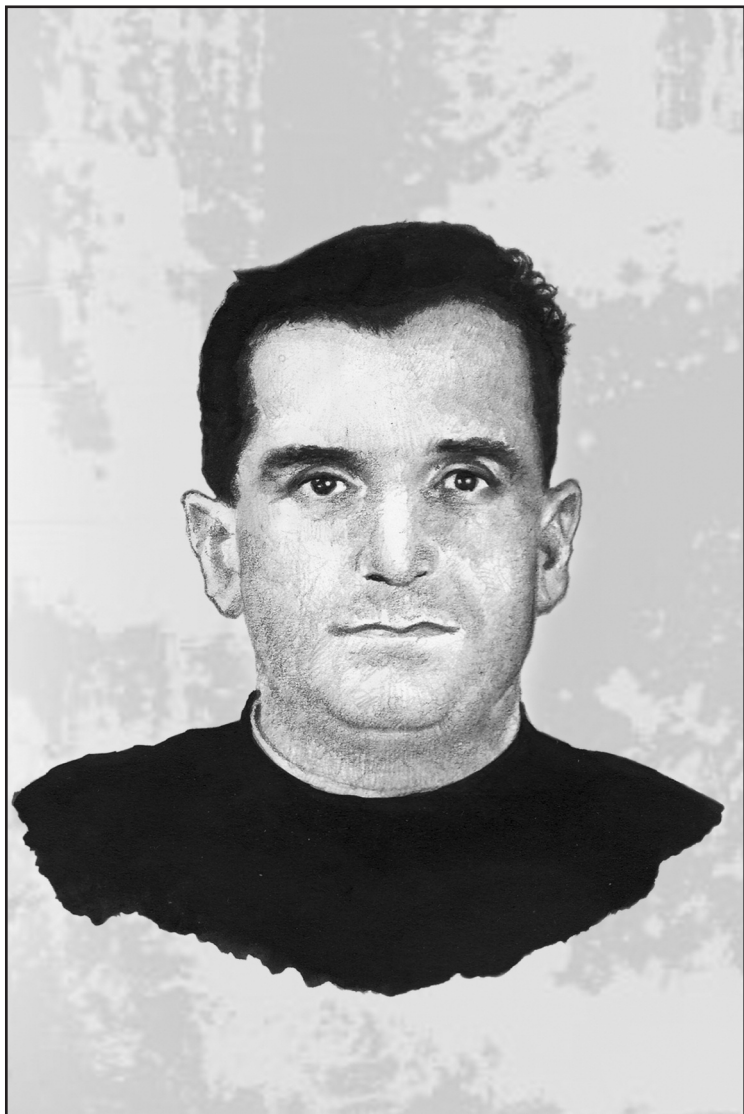
He was never very strong, his health was poor and he was often sickly. Nevertheless, from his earliest years he was extremely lively and he could often be seen playing in the streets of San Gallo, a small village four miles to the north of San Giovanni Bianco in the Province of Bergamo. It was there that Antonio was born on July 11th 1922. It was a large family and his parents were very devout, so it was no surprise that Antonio, once he had finished primary school, entered the local Diocesan Seminary in Clusone.

The missionary vocation realized

On completing his secondary education, Antonio felt a growing desire to follow a missionary vocation rather than the secular priesthood in and around Bergamo. He confided in several people, but they all advised him to forget that 'strange idea'. Yet he could not, and although the decision was not an easy one, he eventually informed the Rector of the Seminary and his parents. It had become his heart's desire and there was nothing left to discuss with anyone.

Antonio entered the Novitiate of the Comboni Missionaries on September 21st 1943, and two years later he took his First Vows in Verona where he continued his studies of theology until he was ordained a priest on May 1st 1947. For four years he worked in the General Administration of the Order in the Motherhouse in Verona

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and, in April 1951, he left for Juba in Southern Sudan. His first appointment was to the Mission of Isoke where he stayed until 1959. He wrote to a friend, "I have now been in Sudan for three months, in a Mission with about sixteen thousand Christians out of a population of eighty thousand inhabitants. We have a large number of catechumens and we run twenty primary schools. The missionary life is not just sunshine, mosquitoes, malaria, thirst and traveling by motor cycle. There is also an immense and advancing movement of the grace of God that enables one to overcome all obstacles. We Missionaries are just poor instruments, often unsuitable, but every day we witness the marvels God is doing. The satisfaction of being a Missionary is so great that it overcomes every difficulty".

Increasing difficulties following Independence

Those years were particularly difficult for Sudan. With Britain and Egypt recognizing the Independence of the country on January 1st 1956, the National Unionist Party (NUP) under Prime Minister Isma'il al-Azhari came to power through its dominance of the first Parliament. After declaring Arabic the official language of the country, the Government in Khartoum reneged on promises to the South to create a federal system of administration in the country, and this led to a mutiny by Southern Army Officers that would spark seventeen years of bloody civil war from 1956 until 1972. The Authorities in Khartoum accused Missionaries in the South of siding with the rebels and assisting their cause, and so began to place ever-tighter restrictions on their work and ministry. At first the movements of Missionaries were curtailed and they were con-

fined to the compound of their respective Missions, following which their schools and clinics were nationalized and they were prohibited from working in them, and then they were forbidden to teach catechetics or to baptise children. At the same time the Authorities were refusing to renew the residence permits of Missionaries living in Southern Sudan, particularly of those who left the country for any reason, or to grant new residence permits to Missionaries seeking to enter the South. The aim was evidently to reduce the number of Missionaries present in the country by stealth.

'Come to visit my Mission'

Missionaries knew that if, for whatever reason, they had to leave Sudan, they would not be allowed to return and so many decided to remain at their posts and to 'hold on to the end'. Though tired and worn out, Father Antonio continued his missionary work. However, one day he was shocked by news from home telling him that his father was very sick and wanted to see him before he died. He wrote to his brother, "I had a sleepless night after I read your letter informing me of our father's serious condition. I know how much you would like me to come home but I have to remain here". He enclosed a letter to his father saying, "Dear Father, before you pass away I want to thank you, with all the love of a son, for all you have done for me in your life: you gave me life, brought me up, educated me in the Faith and you gave me constant good example which helped me to become a priest; for allowing me to join the Comboni Missionaries; and for all your prayers for me and for your support during all these years. As I write, I have to

keep the letter at a distance because of my tears. You know how much I would like to be present, how much I am pained at not being able to see you and with what torment I spend my days. You and I have sacrificed these things for love of God". The letter ends, "When you go to heaven, you must come to visit my Mission. Of all your children, I am the most needy, what with the storm clouds darkening over all our Missions in Sudan, anything can happen".

Faith and hope in God

In May 1959, Father Antonio was transferred to the Mission of Torit. The situation was becoming more and more difficult. He wrote to a friend, "We believe that, sooner or later, the Government will expel all of us". The following year Father Antonio was asked to go to the Mission of Kworijik. It was a difficult change for him, as he was to write, "I am alone, in a difficult Mission where I do not know the language. I had to obey the call of God, contrary to my own wishes. All I have left is my faith and hope in God". At Kworijik there was a leprosy centre with seven hundred victims of leprosy. Father Antonio always had a soft spot for victims of leprosy and derived great spiritual benefit from ministering to them, "I believe my work among the lepers is a very special grace from God. Humanly speaking, it is difficult to be with these people, but I have got used to them and take no notice. They trust Missionaries. They know we love them and are not afraid of contracting their disease".

Father Antonio continued his work despite the loneliness, the fatigue, and the ever more stringent restrictions placed upon his ministry by the Authorities. In late 1962

his name appeared on a list of Missionaries who were to leave the country forthwith and he was obliged to leave the land of Sudan. Within little more than a year, the more than two hundred Comboni Missionary Fathers, Brothers and Sisters remaining in Southern Sudan were forced to follow suit.

A new challenge in the Congo

Father Antonio returned to Italy and, after a period of rest at home, begged his Superiors to allow him to return to Africa where he had left his heart. His wishes were granted and he was asked to join the first group of Comboni Missionaries who were assigned to establish a presence in Congo, close to the borders with Southern Sudan. The group of eight Missionaries, six Priests and two Brothers, left for Rungu in the North-East of the country on December 8th 1963. In his first letter home Father Antonio wrote, "The Mission has ninety villages and more than seventy thousand inhabitants of whom only five thousand are Christian. The Belgian Missionaries have, however, left us a legacy of four thousand Catechumens". Father Zuccali immediately set about learning the local language and within the first few months had already travelled hundreds of kilometres around the Mission by foot in order to get to know the local people, their customs, their traditions and their way of life.

The country was, however, in the midst of a bloody civil war. On August 2nd 1963, on his return to Congo from exile in China, Pierre Mulele, the former Education Minister of Patrice Lumumba, had launched a rebellion against the 'imperialist' Government in Léopoldville (*now*

known as 'Kinshasa'). Within a matter of months, the so-called 'Simba Rebels' had conquered nearly half of the country. Everywhere they went they targeted expatriates whom they regarded as enemy collaborators, and many including nearly one hundred Catholic Missionaries lost their lives. On August 5th 1964, the rebels captured Stanleyville (*now known as 'Kisangani')*, proclaimed the 'People's Republic of Congo' and took hundreds of expatriates living in Eastern Congo prisoner.

His presence betrayed to the rebels

The rebels attacked the Mission of Rungu on October 29th 1964 and held the eleven Missionaries they found there captive. Nearly a month later on November 25th 1964 the rebels fled the Mission upon receiving the news that Belgian paratroopers had reached the neighbouring city of Paulis (*now known as 'Isiro')* with the aim of crushing their revolt. The Missionaries took refuge in the relative safety of the nearby forest. Belgian troops, however, never advanced beyond Paulis which allowed the rebels re-group and return to continue their murderous campaign of terror in Rungu. When the rebels discovered that their prey had escaped, they threatened to kill all the local inhabitants, if the Missionaries were not returned. In order to avoid a bloodbath, the Missionaries decided to return to the Mission and surrender to the rebels. It was the first day of December 1964.

Father Antonio was not with the group of Missionaries when they decided to surrender to the rebels as he had gone earlier in the day to assist a young Belgian farmer who was reportedly very sick. The following morning,

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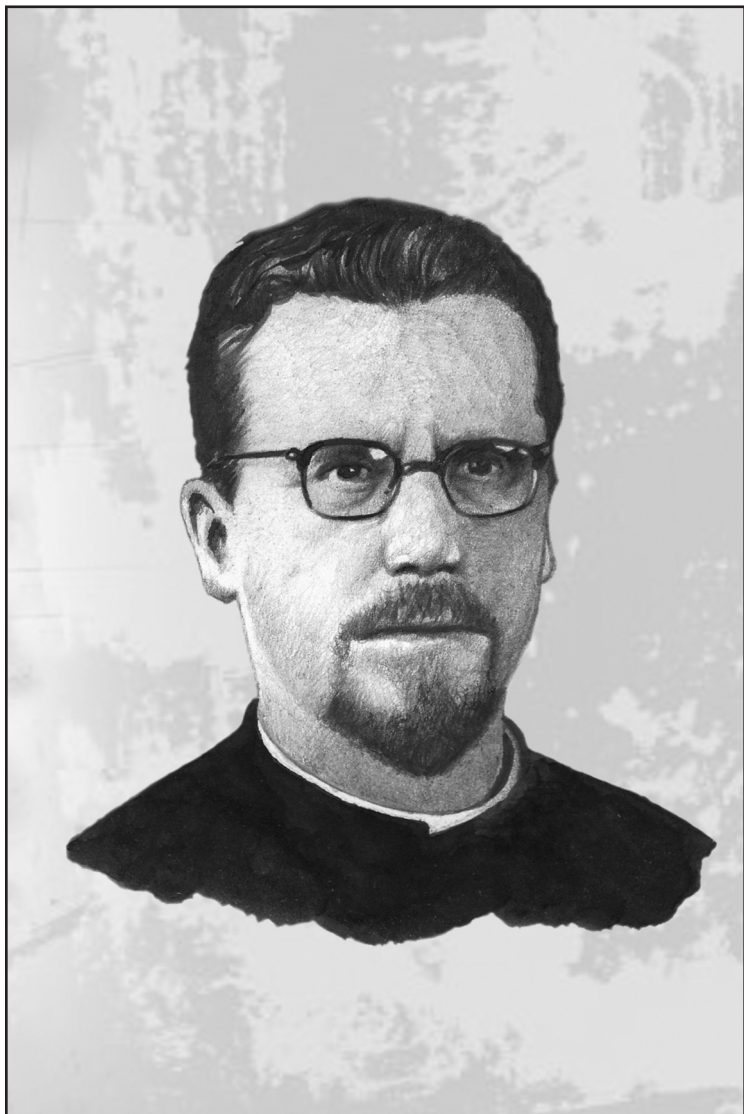
Father Antonio decided to go to a local village with the young Belgian to look for medicine. Unfortunately, someone betrayed their presence to the rebels who arrived with their guns at the ready. The wife of a school teacher, risking her own life, tried to save them but to no avail. Father Antonio just had time to hear the confession of the Belgian, to give the woman his blessing and smile at the rebels. A volley of shots brought him tumbling to the ground. His body, together with that of the young Belgian, was thrown into the Rungu River, and their bodies never found. Father Antonio was forty-two years old, and had been in the Congo for less than a year.

18. Congo: Father Remo Armani

- "We will stay at our Post"

When Father Remo was a Curate in Carisolo, a small town in the Province of Trento in Northern Italy, what he liked the most was to be with the people. And so every evening he would go to a local bar where he would play cards. He was remembered for his friendliness, openness and kindly way of speaking. Life was hard in Carisolo during the war years and the conflict seemed to be edging ever closer to the valleys of Trento, but with his cheerful and lively personality he succeeded in giving the Parishioners a ray of hope in otherwise bleak circumstances. But more dramatic conflict awaited him when, after seven years as a priest of the Diocese of Trento, he decided to become a missionary. This decision would take him to the heart of two of the most violent conflicts in recent African history, but Father Armani was not a man to desert his post.

Remo was born on October 7th 1917. He soon learned how to work hard in the fields like all his family. Love for the land was something that stayed with Remo all his life. After finishing primary school he asked his parents to let him enter the Diocesan Seminary in Trento. He was ordained a priest in Trento Cathedral on June 29th 1941. His Bishop, Carlo De Ferrari, appointed him first as Curate to Grigno and then to Carisolo, and as Parish Priest to Campi di Riva. Father Remo's decision to become a missionary in 1948 caused his parents some concern, but



they eventually agreed. Little did they know what lay ahead.

The early missionary years

He joined the Novitiate of the Comboni Missionaries in Gozzano in August 1948 and took his First Vows on June 4th 1950. That same year, before the end of November, he was already in the Mission of Yubu among the Azande people in Southern Sudan. Two years later he went to Naandi and then to Tombora, but only in preparation for the opening of a new Mission in Rimenze. Noticing the vast quantity of sand along the river bank near Rimenze, Father Remo decided it was an ideal place for brick making. The bricks were used to build two school blocks each able to accommodate two hundred and fifty children. They were the first brick-built classroom blocks in the whole area. To a Confrère, he wrote, "I am still amazed at how we managed to set up the two schools in such conditions. It was all achieved thanks to the efforts of the people around the Mission".

Unfortunately things were changing in Southern Sudan and not for the better. Sudan had become independent and attempts by the Arab-led Government in Khartoum to Islamise the whole country led to a rebellion in the Christian and Animist South. The Government responded by trying to violently suppress the insurgency through the indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of many innocent civilians and by adopting a 'scorched-earth' policy. This resulted in the wholesale destruction of villages and towns and laying waste to the surrounding countryside. Missionaries, as witnesses to such wanton destruction first

hand, were naturally looked upon with grave misgiving and alarm by the Authorities in Khartoum. Restrictions were first placed on their movements, then on their pastoral ministry and then on their work in health-care, education and development. Father Armani returned to the Mission of Tombora in late 1959 uncowed by the difficulties and determined to persevere whatever. Notwithstanding a Government edict prohibiting the baptism of infants and children, even in cases where the baptism was expressly requested by the parents, Father Remo continued to baptise in secret under the cover of darkness. One evening he was discovered in the act, immediately arrested and imprisoned. The Authorities ordered his expulsion on the grounds that, "The reasons for his entry into Sudan no longer exist", and he was deported from the country just before Christmas in 1962.

The plea to return to Africa

Not one to waste time, he threw himself into ministry and mission promotion in the many Parishes in the Region of Trento in Northern Italy, but he continued to entreat his Superiors to allow him return to Africa. If he could not go to Sudan, then maybe somewhere else? Things began to move. It was decided to open a Comboni Missionary presence in Congo in the Diocese of Niangara (*now known as 'Isiro-Niangara'*) near the border with Southern Sudan. On December 8th 1963, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Father Remo with seven other Comboni Missionaries, five Priests and two Brothers, left for Congo and travelled to the North-east of the country. The Bishop of Niangara, François Oddo de Wilde, assigned them the

running of the three Missions of Rungu, Ndedu and Tora. Other Confrères were meant to join them the following month, but sadly it did not turn out that way.

The downward spiral into confusion and chaos

It was a particularly difficult time for the country. Followers of the former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, ousted from power in 1960 by President Joseph Kasa-Vubu and the Army Chief Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, had launched the 'Simba Rebellion' in the East of the country against the 'imperialist' Government in Léopoldville (*now known as 'Kinshasa'*). The rebels were initially successful and within a matter of weeks had captured much of Eastern Congo. After the regional capital, Stanleyville (*now known as 'Kisangani'*), fell into their hands on August 5th 1964 they proclaimed the 'People's Republic of Congo' and carried out a reign of terror in the areas under their control. Tens of thousands of Congolese were executed with extreme cruelty by the rebels in systematic purges. Civil servants, provincial and local police, school teachers, and others believed to have been Westernized were deliberately targeted. Mass killings and chaos were the order of the day.

In a letter written on September 2nd 1964, from his Mission in Ndedu, Father Remo wrote: "There is total confusion. The rebels have occupied the whole of the North-East of the country which includes our Province. Massacres have begun. The rebels came to the Mission and threatened us. We will have to see whether government troops will attempt to re-take the positions or whether the party leaders will come to an agreement. The schools are closed and the Catechumens are all at home; it is not possible to go

around visiting the Christians". In another letter he wrote, "The Belgian Missionaries at a nearby Mission have been badly beaten and their Mission ransacked. I fear the worst is still to come. The rebels have set up a new government in the occupied Provinces. Every day we hear news of destruction and massacres. No matter what, we will stay at our post; the Lord knows we are here and the local people love us".

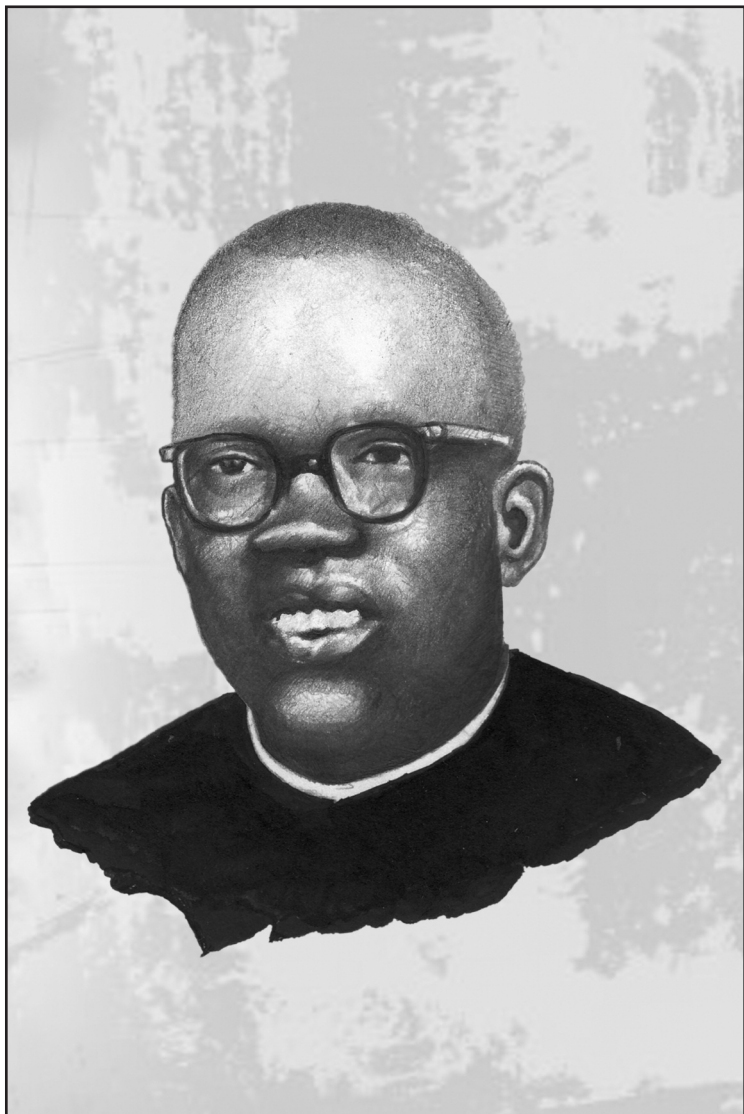
The final journey

At the end of October Father Remo had to go to Paulis (*now known as 'Isiro'*) on behalf of the Mission. He went to the District Administration in Dungu, thirty miles from Ndedu, to request the necessary permission from the rebel authorities to be able to travel to Paulis. He was issued with the required travel permit and given a military escort for his safe passage there. Father Armani concluded his business in Paulis on November 6th 1964 and was planning to return to Ndedu early the next morning when he was taken hostage by rebels and confined under guard with other Missionaries and Europeans in a Convent of Sisters in the town.

News of the advance of the Congolese Army, assisted by Belgian troops and by French and South African mercenaries, spread rapidly. The already appalling violence escalated further and large numbers of people suspected of being loyal to the Government in Léopoldville were murdered by the rebels. On Monday 23rd November 1964, Belgian paratroopers reached Stanleyville, and in a final radio communique over 'Radio Stanleyville', one of the rebel leaders gave the order for all hostages to be killed. By the follow-

Supreme Witness

ing day all the hostages in Paulis had been murdered. Father Remo and the other Missionaries were ready to die. They knew their hour had come. There was no panic. They had prayed together. The hostages were ordered to kneel down and then their hands were tied behind their backs. A rebel Colonel ordered for them all to be executed. Father Remo was killed with a single bullet to the head from a pistol and died on the spot. He was buried in the Cemetery of the Mission in Paulis. He was just forty-seven years of age.



19. South Sudan: Father Barnaba Deng

- *"I am ready"*

On September 3rd 1965, Hassar Dafalla, Commissary of the Province of Bahr-el-Ghazal in Southern Sudan, sent the following letter to Bishop Ireneus Dud of the Diocese of Wau: "I very much regret the death of Father Barnaba Deng, which occurred on the evening of August 23rd, at a point three miles north of the army barracks on the Aweil Road. The official record that I received from the security forces involved in the case shows that suspicious behaviour on the part of the priest was mainly responsible for his death. He was met by a military patrol at 6:30 p.m. while parking a car at the side of the road, in an area which everybody knew was quite notorious and, ignoring the curfew, had aroused the suspicion of a passing army patrol. When the man in charge of the detachment stopped the car to make inquiries, Father Barnaba, who was dressed in shorts and a shirt, stepped out from the car and attempted to run away. Failing to obey the army order to stop, he was shot dead". The letter continued, "It may be relevant here to mention that our intelligence records on Father Barnaba note that he was observed many times collecting monetary donations for the 'Anyanya Movement' (*Black African, mainly Christian, Southerners who had rebelled against the Arab, and predominantly Muslim, North*) and it was suspected that he was supplying them with food and ammunition in the vehicle of the Mission, in addition to typing their

leaflets and correspondence. His activities were mainly centred on Odwel near Aweil. The circumstances of his case which is under review have also cast a heavy shadow of doubt over his relations with the outlaws". The letter concluded, "I feel it my duty to bring to the attention of Your Lordship that this is the second occasion of a corroborated association between the 'Anyanya' rebels and the Catholic Church. The first occasion was after the demise of Father Archangel Ali, which took place on July 21st (*Soldiers of the Khartoum Government had killed Father Archangel, the first Priest of the Ndogo tribe, on July 21st 1965*). Among his possessions was a photograph of the priest himself in the company of rebels which give a clear indication as to his connection with their activities". The real story was, of course, entirely different.

Promises broken: a 'scorched earth' policy

After achieving Independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, the Arab-led Government in Khartoum, reneging on promises to the Black African South, sought to proclaim an Islamic Republic. Declaring Arabic the official language of the country, they abolished Sunday as a day of rest replacing it with Friday and nationalised all the mission schools. This led to a rebellion in the partly-Christian and partly-Animist South. The Authorities in Khartoum responded by trying to violently suppress the insurgency through the indiscriminate killing of many innocent civilians and by adopting a 'scorched-earth' policy which resulted in the wholesale destruction of towns and villages. The 'Anyanya Movement' was established as a loosely-knit guerrilla group with its core membership drawn

from veterans of the mutiny in Torit by Southern Army Officers in 1955. The Government in Khartoum did not want eye-witnesses to the cycle of relentless violence and destruction being wreaked on the people of the South. On February 27th 1964 they expelled the remaining two hundred or so Comboni Missionaries from Southern Sudan. This, then, is the true story of Father Barnaba Deng.

“We shall see each other only in heaven”

Barnaba Deng was born in Atokuel, a small village in the Mission of Kwajok in the Province of Bahr el Ghazal, towards the end of 1935. He belonged to the Rek who are a sub-group of the Dinka ethnic group. Aluel, the mother of Barnaba, was the second wife of a certain ‘Akec’ and following his death was not, contrary to the traditional custom, inherited by a brother or blood relation of the late husband. She remained single and brought up her family alone. Aluel succeeded in sending little Barnaba to the Mission Primary School in Gogrial. She did not object when he told her that he was frequenting the Catechumenate there. The boy was baptised on June 1st 1947 in Kwajok. Two years later, having finished his primary schooling in the Mission of Mbili, Barnaba asked his mother’s permission to enter the local Diocesan Minor Seminary. She was not a Christian and, although understanding little about what the boy had requested, she gave her consent. Barnaba was received into Bussere Minor Seminary on the February 25th 1949. Having completed his secondary education, he left for Lacor Major Seminary in Gulu (*Northern Uganda*). When St. Paul’s

COMBONI MISSIONARIES

Major Seminary for the training of local priests for Southern Sudan was opened in Tore River (*twenty-five miles from the city of Yei towards the border with the Congo*) in 1956, Barnaba left Uganda and spent a year there before he expressed a desire to enter the Comboni Missionaries. In 1957, Barnaba was sent to Italy to join the Comboni Missionary Novitiate in Gozzano in the Province of Novara in North-western Italy. After taking his First Vows there two years later, he went to the Scholasticate of the Comboni Missionaries in Venegono near Varese to continue his theological studies. He was ordained a priest in Milan on April 7th 1962 by Cardinal (*later Pope and Saint*) Giovanni Battista Montini.

The return home

A few months later, Barnaba was back in South Sudan, first in the Mission of Dem Zubeir, and then in November 1963, he was transferred to the town of Aweil, where he was in charge of three Missions: Aweil, Nyamlel and Gordhiim. Bidding farewell to the last of his European Confrères to leave, in late February 1964, he spoke these prophetic words, "Fathers, pray for us. We shall see each other again only in heaven". Father Barnaba immediately threw himself into pastoral work, and month after month went around visiting the scores of Christian Communities entrusted to his care in the three Missions. As he was often going from village to village with clothes and food for needy local people, it was not long before he was accused by the Authorities of furnishing supplies to the 'Anyanya' rebels. His name soon appeared amongst those who had to be eliminated.

Flight to relative safety

Another Dinka, by the name of Santino Deng, now enters the story. Santino Deng had deserted the rebel cause and defected to the side of the Government in Khartoum. As a trusted informer he was tasked with identifying members of the 'Anyanya Movement' among his people to the Authorities. One morning, news reached Father Barnaba that Santino Deng had come to Aweil with a contingent of soldiers. He called Cyril, a young man employed to undertake domestic duties in the Mission, and together they went to the market square to see what was afoot. Among the people gathered there, they heard disquieting news. "There is an order to arrest you and Acuil Mayuen (*a local Dinka Merchant*)", he was told, "and the soldiers have been ordered to arrest you and kill you". Father Barnaba went immediately to pass the news to Acuil Mayuen and then lost no time in making good his escape. Returning to the Mission, he hurriedly loaded some things into the car, and made off for the near-by forest. At the end of the road, he abandoned his car and proceeded on foot to a place of safety.

Cyril was sent back to ascertain from a safe distance what was happening at the Mission. In the yard of the Mission he found the vehicles of the soldiers parked with the headlights on. The soldiers then went to the Presbytery, and after breaking down the front door they searched every corner of the house. Seized by fear, Cyril fled the scene and spent the night out in the open with some local women, who had also fled on hearing the sound of gunfire near their houses. At sunrise, Cyril went back to the Mission, saw what the soldiers had done dur-

ing the night and returned to the forest where he reported all he had seen to Father Barnaba. "They have forced open all the doors except that of the office which they did not succeed in opening", he reported. Father Barnaba gave him the keys to the office and some instructions, "Go and bring me the typewriter, and the money in the top drawer of the desk. But, on all accounts, be careful not to be seen". The young man returned some hours later with the typewriter and the money. Father Barnaba gave him some money to go to the market and buy food for the ten women and children who had, in the meantime, sought refuge in the same part of forest after fleeing Aweil and the wrath of the soldiers hunting down suspected guerrillas.

As evening fell, Father Barnaba realized that the group could not remain there for much longer for fear of being discovered and so he proposed that they all go to his native village. Everyone, including Cyril, decided to follow him. By shunning the usual paths and roads leading to the village of Kwajok, and by walking from dawn to dusk, the group arrived safely at the homestead of Father Barnaba's mother on the evening of the fifth day. She could not believe her eyes at their arrival. After preparing a meal of beans and maize meal for them, the mother of Father Barnaba wished them all good night with the words, "Thanks be to God, at least here we are at peace and you are all safe". The following morning, Father Barnaba informed his mother that he had to go to report to the Bishop what had happened at the Mission in Aweil. His mother objected, saying that it was too dangerous and that he should wait a while longer before setting out for Wau. But Father Barnaba insisted, saying that Cyril would

accompany him, and in the end his mother relented and wished him a safe journey.

"The one we were looking for"

As they approached Wau, Father Barnaba gave a written message to Cyril and asked him to take it to a priest in the town. An hour later, a car came, driven by the priest who had received the message and he took Father Barnaba to his Parish. There was little traffic in the town. People were avoiding travelling on the roads because the scene of the massacre, that had taken place the previous month there, was still vividly etched on their minds. Father Barnaba then met with Bishop Dud who, on hearing the report, decided that the only thing to do in the circumstances was to arrange for Father Barnaba's 'safe-conduct' to Khartoum. The Bishop went in person to the Local Authorities and succeed in obtaining the required travel papers for Father Barnaba. However the Father never made it to Khartoum.

All was very quiet the following afternoon, and Father Barnaba went out by car. "I would like to go and anoint a sick person that I know", he said to the priest. As was by now his custom, he took Cyril with him and drove in the direction of Aweil. Close to the airstrip before Khor Grinti, he noticed a military convoy on the road. He turned back and parked the car off the road and waited for the convoy to pass by. Cyril counted them. Five vehicles passed, and the sixth seemed about to pass too, but then it stopped. On board was Santino Deng, the renegade Dinka, who had recognised Father Barnaba along the road and ordered the driver of his vehicle to stop. Approaching Father Barnaba, who had by this time got out of his car, Santino pointed to

him and said to the soldiers, "Look, there's the one we were looking for in Aweil!". Whereupon the soldiers grabbed Father Barnaba who made no attempt to resist. The Father asked only to be allowed to take his cassock from the car and to pray for a moment. He put the cassock on, made the sign of the cross, and recollected himself in prayer while the soldiers released the safety catch on their rifles. Looking at Santino, Father Barnaba said, "If you wish, I am ready". A soldier broke away from the others and from very close range fired at his head. The Father fell backwards. The same soldier finished him off with volley of bullets to the chest. It was 4:30 p.m. on the afternoon of August 23rd 1965. Father Barnaba was only twenty-nine years of age.

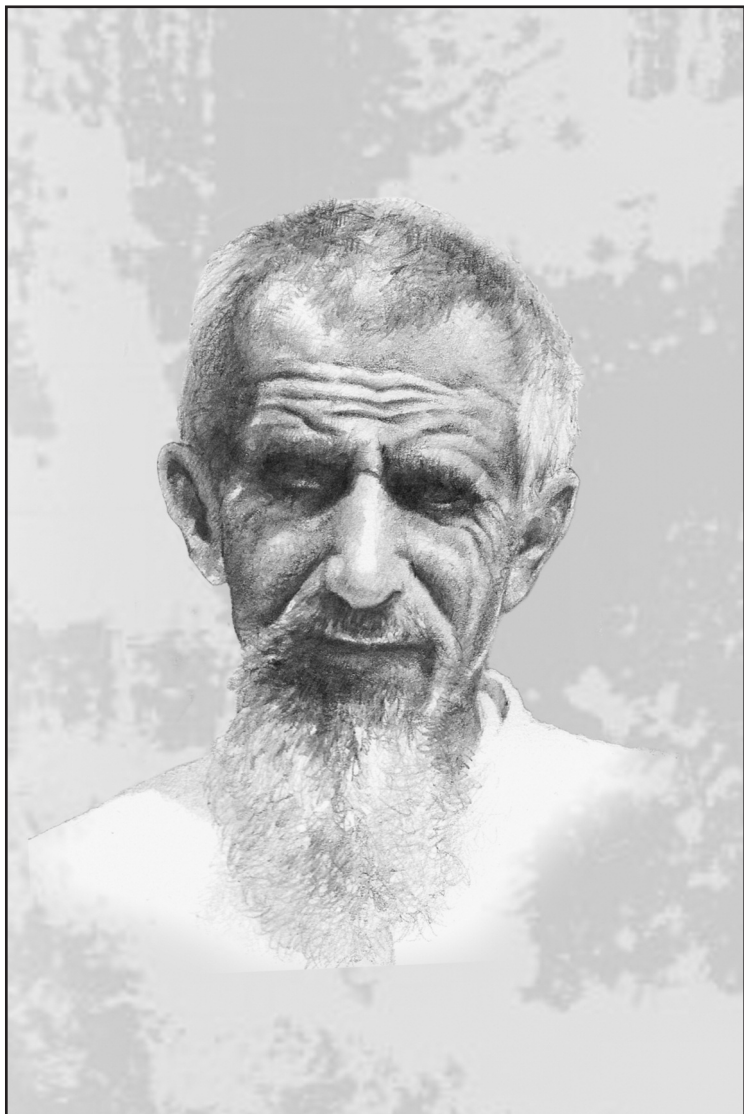
Santino Deng left the scene, but five soldiers remained to guard the body. Cyril, terrified at all he had seen, ran to carry the news to the Parish. He came back with one of the priests who asked for permission to remove the body. The soldiers refused. The priest went back to the Parish and returned with another priest to recover the car Father Barnaba had been driving, which was still parked by the roadside. After some hours, the soldiers buried Father Barnaba in a shallow grave close to the spot where he had been killed. His body was recovered the following day. Acuil Mayuen, the Dinka Merchant who had been placed on the same 'hit list' as Father Barnaba, was killed in similar circumstances a year later by soldiers.

20. South Sudan: Father Angelo Arpe

- Eyes full of kindness and forgiveness

Our story begins in the 1890s, when Angelo was still a child growing up in Monterosso al Mare, in the Province of La Spezia on the North-western coast of Italy, full of life and passionate about the sea. "I was so nimble as a child", he recalled, "I could catch a fish with just my hands". At the age of twelve, to the amazement of all, Angelo entered the Junior Seminary run by the Jesuits in the Principality of Monaco. From the window of his room he could see the sea. He dreamt of travelling to faraway places. One day, a Comboni Missionary and Bishop of Central Africa, Antonio Roveggio, visited the Seminary and spoke to the young seminarians about Africa with such enthusiasm that Angelo was simply captivated. In the autumn of that year, 1903, he was already in the Novitiate of the Comboni Missionaries, aged just seventeen years old. Day by day, his passion for Africa increased. However, his Superiors wondered if he was suitable for the Missions in Central Africa, given that he was so thin and delicate. Nevertheless, by 1910 he was ordained a priest at twenty-four years of age and two years later, on 25th August 1912, he left by ship from the port of Trieste on his way to South Sudan.

After a journey of almost two months, Father Arpe reached Wau on 17th October 1912. At first he encountered the usual missionary dramas of the time, "Twice our boat became entangled in the floating weeds of the river



Nile, but when we travelled overland, things hardly improved. We had twenty-four emaciated donkeys on our journey from Wau to Kajoango. I wondered just how long they would last". The donkeys were used to transport whatever was needed for founding a new Mission. On 12th November 1912, they at last reached Mboro among the Ndogo tribe. This is how Father Angelo described the scene when he first arrived, "The village of Mboro is located beneath two beautiful hills. On level ground there is the large, oval compound of the chief, together with the huts of his wives. All around there is a multitude of huts belonging to the local inhabitants; a sure sign that there is no shortage of apostolic work here. It is a splendid location. From the hill I can see a wonderful panorama. Vast plains as far as the eye can see".

Establishing a Mission among the Ndogo people

With the help of a Brother, Father Angelo set about building a small two-room multi-purpose brick house. The two rooms had various functions at different times of the day: a school for children, office and store by day, and by night a bedroom for the Missionaries and a stable for the few goats they had bought from the locals for a supply of fresh milk. Close by they built a church with brick walls and a thatched roof. Father Angelo's nimble and wiry frame served him well in Africa. A tireless walker, he covered countless kilometres to visit Christians scattered among the villages of the area. He remembered how, one evening, walking through the savannah a powerful tornado took him completely by surprise. During the night it rained relentlessly. The village drums were sounded at length,

announcing news of his disappearance, but given the torrential rain nobody dared venture out to look for him. Early in the morning, his Confrères saw him back at the Mission, all smiles, despite being soaked to the skin.

As the years passed, the Mission of Mboro developed as the Christian community there grew and larger buildings were built to accommodate the growing numbers of the Faithful, Catechumens and school children. The arrival of the Comboni Missionary Sisters in Mboro brought a whole new world of possibilities for the women and girls of the area. It was around one of these women, Assunta, and the two men who loved her, that the drama of Father Angelo's death began to unfold.

A promise of marriage broken

Raphael Madangere was a hunter in his forties, who supplied the Mission with fresh meat, and was married to Assunta. However, before being married to Raphael, Assunta had been engaged to someone else – a man by the name of Leo Mbanja. Leo had been called away from Mboro to work elsewhere for a year and so he entrusted his fiancée to his great friend and cousin Raphael, asking him to look after her and naturally to ward off other potential suitors. But when Leo returned to the village, intending to marry Assunta, he found that Raphael and Assunta were already husband and wife. Although stunned at this double betrayal he was a man of great faith who managed to put to one side thoughts of revenge. Leo eventually found another woman and married her. Unfortunately, she was unable to give him children. Assunta meanwhile became the mother of eight children to Raphael. It was very diffi-

cult for Leo to see Assunta and Raphael with this growing family, whilst he was not blessed with children at all. But it was not Leo's heart that grew bitter.

Perhaps it was a guilty conscience at having betrayed the trust placed in him by Leo that became the fount of suspicion for Raphael in his dealings with his wife, Assunta. Raphael became increasingly jealous towards her, and began to suspect that she still loved Leo in spite of all the years that had passed since her engagement to him. He also began to grow very resentful at the high esteem in which Leo, the zealous and fervent Catechist of the Mission, was held by the Fathers. Raphael's hatred of Leo grew and with it a fierce and possessive jealousy towards his wife Assunta. One day, imagining that she had betrayed him, Raphael grabbed Assunta by the throat and beat her violently, trying to make her admit that she had been unfaithful with Leo. Assunta vehemently denied the charge and fled to her parents' home for refuge. The case was subsequently brought before a traditional court which absolved Leo and Assunta from any such wrong-doing. This only served, however, to make Raphael even more enraged. Raphael had spoken several times with Father Angelo about his suspicions. Father Angelo, renowned for his extreme goodness of heart, always did his best to calm Raphael down, by assuring him that Leo was not taking advantage of his wife and that, without any evidence, he had no cause to accuse his wife of infidelity. The flame of jealousy, however, was not so easily quenched.

Consumed by rage with murderous intent

At eleven o'clock on the morning of November 1st 1946,

Raphael met Father Angelo at the Mission Office. It is not known what they said to one another. When Raphael emerged, however, he was very agitated and was gesticulating wildly. He was clearly beside himself with rage. Later that day he went to the home of Leo, where he found the door was closed. He tried the door and then hid behind the hut in order to lie in wait for his victim. Leo came out to see what was going on and was critically wounded with a spear to the chest by Raphael. The killer then ran to his own hut, collected six spears and headed for the Mission, stopping only to hide three of the spears outside the entrance. The Missionaries were in the dining room for their supper. There was a loud banging on the door and Father Angelo went to see who it was. In the open doorway stood Raphael. He immediately thrust a spear into Father Angelo which passed right through his body. With a second spear he attacked another of the Missionaries at table. He then struck the third Missionary with the remaining spear. Raphael turned and fled into the dark courtyard outside, leaving Father Angelo on the floor in a pool of blood and the two Confrères with him badly wounded.

Sadly Raphael was not finished with his deadly endeavours. He ran to where he had hidden the other three spears. Armed with these, he was making his way back into the Mission compound in order to complete the murderous work that he had begun, when he met the Headteacher of the Primary School, Placido Wako (*Placido was the father of the recently-retired Archbishop of Khartoum, Cardinal Gabriel Wako*). "I have done well", Raphael said, "At last I have killed Father Angelo". "Why have you done such a wicked thing?", asked Placido, but the only reply he

received was a menacing look. A fight ensued and in the mêlée Raphael was struck by a spear and fell to the ground. Certain that he has neutralised the threat posed by Raphael, Placido ran to the Mission.

When Placido entered the house of the Missionaries, a grim sight met him and he recalled, "I saw Father Angelo on the dining-room floor all covered in blood. I knelt beside him crying and calling his name but there was no response. I went out to call for help. I had just gone down the steps of the house, when I heard a noise coming from the room where Father Angelo was lying. I rushed back only to find Raphael Madangere near Father Angelo". Even though Raphael had a spear in his chest, he had managed to walk to the room where Father Angelo was, and to ensure the Missionary would not survive the attack had thrust a second spear directly into his heart. Placido continued, "I had no weapon to hand, neither a spear nor a knife. I jumped on Raphael and knocked him down, and managed to hold him still. Looking around, I saw a piece of wood and I struck him on the head until his body was lifeless. I then said to Father Angelo, 'Abuna (*Father*), your attacker is now dead'. Slowly turning his head and unable to speak even a word, he looked at me with eyes full of kindness and forgiveness".

The news of the death of Father Angelo spread quickly. People began coming in from the surrounding villages, mourning with loud cries and wanting to strike the body of his assassin. Confrères from the neighbouring Mission rushed to the scene only to find Father Angelo dead in a pool of his own blood with Raphael Madangere close by, a spear still in his chest, and the two other Fathers seriously

wounded. From the accounts of those directly involved in the tragedy what struck people the most in the midst of such carnage were the words of Placido Wako about seeing only 'kindness and forgiveness' in the eyes of Father Angelo.

The body of Father Angelo was taken to Wau to be examined by the Authorities and was then brought back to the Mission of Mboro, where he had spent thirty-four years as a Missionary Priest, for burial. He was laid to rest in the little cemetery of the Mission, where it remains to this day, as a place of pilgrimage for the members of the Ndogo tribe: a people he had loved and served with dedication, from his earliest days as a priest, and with a kindness that nothing had been able to destroy.

21. Ethiopia: Father Alfredo De Lai

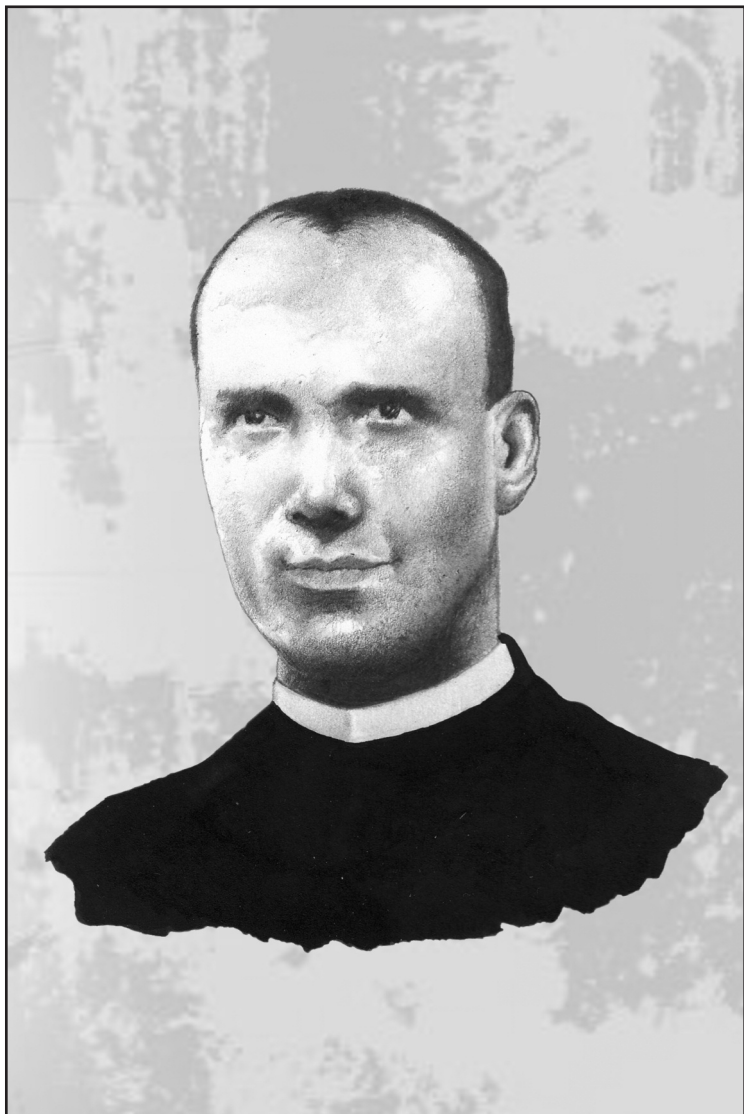
- Always Smiling

It was in the small town of Borgo, in the Valsugana Valley in the North of Italy, that Alfredo was born on September 30th 1913. From his childhood Alfred was known for the constant soft smile on his face and his gentle personality. His mother raised no objections when her son chose to enter the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Trento. From there he went to Brescia for his secondary education and then to the Novitiate in Venegono in the Province of Varese where, on October 7th 1932, he took his First Vows as a Comboni Missionary. He studied theology in Verona and, on July 10th 1938, was ordained a priest there. Less than a year later, on January 3rd 1939, he left for Ethiopia.

A life of witness

The Comboni Missionaries had arrived in Ethiopia, in the Horn of Africa, towards the end of 1935 as Military Chaplains to the Italian troops stationed there. This was part of the compulsory 'Military Service' in Italy at the time. Father Alfredo joined his Confrères attached to the Army Camp in Socotà. From the start, he felt very uneasy in his role as a Military Chaplain and wrote to his Superiors, "Is it right that we, messengers of the Gospel, apostles of peace and ministers of forgiveness should be together with people bearing arms who, willing or not,

COMBONI MISSIONARIES



have come to usurp a land which is not theirs? Is our life a witness or a counter-witness to what we preach?"

With his Confrères, he decided to draw a clear distinction for the local people between the 'cross' on the one hand and the 'sword' on the other and they decided to build a small house of their own, at some distance from the fort where the Army were billeted. Their dwelling was a simple structure, four metres square, made of timber and covered with iron sheets. Without help from the Army, the life of the Missionaries was not easy, but they made do. Some months later, Father Alfredo wrote, "The people understand that we have nothing to do with arms and military force, and that we do our best to share their lot in life". With the arrival of a Missionary Brother, they built a house of mud and stones. They also started a small garden and built a hen-house. In the meantime, Father Alfredo was learning the local language, Amharic, and giving catechism lessons to local children and young adults preparing to receive the Sacraments.

Resist to the last man or surrender?

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini had Italy join the Second World War as one of the 'Axis Powers' on June 10th 1940, after France had surrendered to Nazi Germany, with a plan to concentrate Italian forces on a major offensive against the British Empire in Africa and in the Middle East. The expected collapse of Britain, however, did not materialise. German and Japanese actions in 1941 led to the entry of the United States and Russia in the War. Mussolini's plan lay in ruins. In January 1941 British Forces, assisted by Indian, South African, Sudanese and Ethiopian soldiers,

invaded Italian East Africa (*Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somaliland*) in a three-pronged attack from the Sudan, Kenya and Aden. The Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa fell in April 1941, and the stronghold of Amba Alagi would fall the following month with the surrender of Amedeo, Duke of Aosta, who was the Viceroy of Italian East Africa. British, Sudanese and Ethiopian troops reached Socotà on April 25th 1941.

With enemy troops massing around the town and just thirty soldiers under his command, the Italian Captain ordered the Missionaries into the fort in anticipation of a British-led attack. The following morning, after consulting the Missionaries, the Captain decided there was nothing to do but surrender. Any resistance would have only led to the pointless shedding of blood on both sides. He therefore went to the British Commander to discuss terms and in the interim ordered that all the ammunition in the fort be blown up and the heavy machine guns be put out of action. While the Captain was discussing terms with the British, some of his soldiers arrived with the news that orders had been received from the Italian High Command in Amba Alagi that they were to resist to the last man as Italian troops had done elsewhere. Realising that, without heavy arms or ammunition, resistance would have been simply suicidal, the Captain made an agreement with the British Commander: a number of Sudanese and Ethiopian soldiers would be sent forward and, after a symbolic exchange of fire, the Italians would raise a white flag and surrender.

"For God's sake, stop the killing!"

At around 12:30 a.m., after an hour of both sides firing in

the air, the Italian soldiers laid down their arms and surrendered. That was meant to put an end to the shooting but something went wrong. Upon entering the fort the Sudanese and Ethiopian troops began to attack and kill the unarmed Italian soldiers and set fire to the buildings. Seeing a massacre taking place before his very eyes, Father Alfredo, with a crucifix in his hand, rushed to the Sudanese and Ethiopian troops shouting, "For God's sake, stop the killing!". One of the soldiers snatched the crucifix from Father Alfred's hand and shot him three times at close range with a handgun. Mortally wounded, Father Alfredo fell to the ground. It was Saturday 26th April 1941. He was only twenty-eight years of age and was the first Comboni Missionary to die violently and needlessly on African soil.



22. Mozambique: Sister Teresa Dalle Pezze

- With Courage and Solidarity

She was shot three times. A bullet in the head, one in the chest and a third in her right hip. Sister Teresa Dalle Pezze, a Comboni Missionary Sister, died instantly. On January 3rd 1985, she was travelling from the Mission of Carapira to the port of Nacala in Northern Mozambique. At the crossroads before the town of Monapo rebels from REN-AMO (*the 'Mozambican National Resistance Movement' founded in 1975 as part of an anti-communist backlash against FRELIMO the country's ruling 'Mozambique Liberation Front'*) attacked the army convoy in which Sister Teresa's car was travelling. She managed to get out of the car and hide in the tall grass by the side of the road. The exchange of fire between the soldiers and rebels lasted an hour. During a cessation of fire, Sister Teresa heard a soldier nearby calling her saying, "Mama, can you give me your pullover? My wife is expecting a baby and she is feeling very cold". Although probably taken aback at the request at such a perilous moment Sister Teresa answered with a smile, "Yes, of course". Whilst removing the pullover, she raised it above her head. A rebel sniper on the other side of the road saw something moving. No hesitation. The target was very easy. He fired three times into the tall grass.

Saying 'Yes' to God through a missionary life

Teresa was from the little village of Fane near Verona in the

North of Italy. She was born in 1939. At eighteen years of age, Teresa, like two of her brothers before her, decided to go to Switzerland to look for work in order to be able to support her family. She found work in a textile factory in Baar, a municipality in the Canton of Zug, and accommodation in a local hostel run by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. It was in the adjoining convent, listening to the witness of Religious Sisters working on the Missions and passing through Baar, that Teresa first felt that God was calling her to the missionary life. Once she took the decision to dedicate her life to the Missions, her 'Yes' to God's call was unwavering. Teresa went home in 1961, before the usual time for her annual leave, with the intention of informing her parents, Giuseppina and Giovanni, of her decision to join the Comboni Missionary Sisters and go to Africa to serve the 'poorest and most abandoned'. Her parents were very surprised at their daughter's decision, but finally gave their blessing and Teresa entered the Postulancy of the Sisters in Verona. After proceeding to the Novitiate, Teresa made her First Vows on May 3rd 1964 in the Chapel of the Comboni Missionary Sisters at Cesiolo, surrounded by her relatives and friends. Many commented on her evident great happiness and of her wish of leave for Africa immediately.

A devoted teacher and missionary sister

After training to be a primary school teacher and then travelling to Viseu in Portugal to learn the language, Teresa received her appointment to the Missions of the Comboni Sisters in Mozambique in South-eastern Africa. In a letter sent to her Superior-General she wrote, "Before leaving the Motherhouse, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to

you for your having chosen to send me first to Viseu and then to Mozambique". And in a letter of July 1968 to her family she wrote, "I have finally reached the land of my dreams". Teresa was assigned to the Community of Netia in the north of the country, where her field of work was in education: first as a teacher in, and then as the headmistress of, the Mission Primary School. She always found the time to listen to her pupils, to the parents and members of staff, and to the people turning to her for help or advice. When not in school she loved to go to the outlying chapels of the Mission and pray with the local people, and she suffered greatly when the apostolic work of missionaries was severely restricted by the Colonial Administration in Maputo. The Portuguese Authorities accused missionaries of taking the side of the *FRELIMO* Party (*the 'Mozambique Liberation Front' which was founded in 1962 to fight for the independence of Mozambique from Portugal*) in their armed struggle against colonial rule.

A Missionary in difficult times

With the signing of the 'Lusaka Accord' on September 7th 1974 the Portuguese Government in Lisbon provided for a complete hand-over of power to *FRELIMO* (*'Mozambique Liberation Front'*) without recourse to elections, and formal independence for Mozambique was set for June 25th 1975. People naturally hoped that now they could start to enjoy their newly-found freedom, live in peace and reconstruct their country after thirteen years of war. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case. The new *FRELIMO* Government declared an avowedly atheistic Marxist State. Public worship was prohibited, all private property abolished and, with the wholesale nationalisation of all factories, shops and offices,

'central planning' was imposed throughout the whole country. Within two years a bloody civil war had erupted between the ruling *FRELIMO* Party and *RENAMO* ('*Mozambican National Resistance Movement*') who opposed their attempts to establish a socialist one-party state in the country. The war saw over one million Mozambicans killed in the fighting and a further five million displaced in refugee camps across South-eastern Africa in Malawi, Tanzania, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Atrocities, looting and arson, kidnapping and road ambushes were sadly once again the order of the day.

Greater courage to witness to Christ

Although mission schools were nationalised by the Government, missionaries were allowed to continue to work in them as salaried teachers but they were not allowed to teach or promote religion in any way. In 1976, the Government removed Sister Teresa as the Headmistress of the Mission School in Natia but kept her on the staff and appointed her to teach science. As the only female teacher in the school, she was also given the responsibility of caring for the health of the pupils. This gave her close direct contact with pupils and parents alike. The new political dispensation, however, required a different type of missionary presence in the country and a great love for the people, given all the many obstacles and difficulties placed in the way of the missionaries by the Government. As Sister Teresa wrote, "At first, it was very hard to get used to the new style of life and many could not manage it. We needed even greater courage to witness to Christ. In spite of the Marxist-Leninist propaganda, the sense of God is now stronger and the faith of

Christian Communities is deepening. The Faithful come to pray in the chapel alone for fear of being reported to the Authorities and ask to receive the Eucharist in secret”.

Ready for Martyrdom

Sister Teresa lived with faith, courage and solidarity in a situation of growing suffering, violence and insecurity. Hers was a firm conviction that God was present amidst all the chaos and that through those events, as she often wrote, “Africa is writing its history”. She did not shy away from the risk of a tragic end. She was strongly determined, “not to abandon the people now when the need is greater; it would be like betraying them”, as she wrote to her Provincial Superior after being invited to go to Italy for a period of rest.

The end came on the road to Nacala through a typical act of generosity in offering her pullover to someone in greater need of it than herself. Sister Teresa’s body was transported from Monapo to the Mission of Carapira. A large funeral was held with the participation of many of the Faithful. That day a truce held in the area between *REN-AMO* guerrillas and the Mozambican Army so that people could pay their respects without fear of being caught up in the crossfire. At the Requiem Mass, the Bishop of Nampula, Manuel Vieira Pinto, said of her, “Sister Teresa has made her last offering for the People and for the Church in violent Mozambique”.

She was buried in the cemetery of the Mission of Carapira alongside fellow Catholics killed in the war. A large cross was subsequently erected in memory of the Missionary Sister who knew ‘no frontiers’.



23. Mozambique: Brother Alfredo Fiorini

- *Serving the People*

On a hot and humid afternoon in late August 1992 TAP Flight 836 touched down exactly on time at Leonardo da Vinci International Airport in Rome. In the hold was a large casket carrying the bullet-ridden body of Comboni Missionary Brother, Alfredo Fiorini. A qualified doctor, Brother Alfredo had been killed in Mozambique in an ambush laid by the rebel group *RENAMO* ('*Mozambican National Resistance Movement*') who were fighting against *FRELIMO* (*the country's ruling 'Mozambique Liberation Front'*). Waiting to receive the casket were Tilde and Elio, Brother Alfredo's mother and father; his brother, Fabio, a Priest of the Diocese of Latina-Terracina-Sezze-Priverno; and his two sisters, Patricia and Roberta. Just eighteen months previously, Brother Alfredo had left from the very same airport waved off by his parents, brother and sisters on his way to war-torn Mozambique. The local Bishop, Domenico Pecile, presiding at the Requiem Mass, announced that Brother Alfredo would be buried in the Parish Church where he had been baptised thirty-eight years before saying, "How can we fail to liken Alfredo's service to that of the first Christian Martyrs of Terracina: Cesareo, Giuliano, Domitilla, Felicity and Valentino?"

The path God had chosen

Alfredo was born in Terracina, thirty-five miles south-east of

Rome, in the Province of Latina, on September 5th 1954. Having completed high school, he attended the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Siena in Tuscany from where he graduated as a surgeon with First-Class Honours on July 23rd 1980. After a year of national service, Alfredo decided to join the Postulancy of the Comboni Missionaries in October 1982 in Florence. To his family he was to write: "I did my duty to you by becoming a doctor; with my military service I did my duty to my country; now I want to follow the path which I feel God has chosen for me".

In September 1984 he entered the Novitiate in Venegono in the Province of Varese with the intention of becoming a Missionary Priest and two years later, on May 17th 1986, he consecrated his life to the Missions with his First Vows. In 1986 he left for Uganda, where he was to study theology at the Scholasticate of the Comboni Missionaries in Kampala. The following year, due to the very unstable political situation in Uganda at the time, he moved with his fellow Scholastics to Nairobi in Kenya to continue his theological studies there. In his spare time Alfredo worked in a Church-run Dispensary in a neighbouring shantytown and this experience caused him to reflect deeply about his vocation. Eventually he decided to tell his Superiors in Rome that he no longer wished to become a Missionary Priest but rather a Brother (*a non-ordained Member of the Order*). On February 3rd 1989 he wrote, "The discernment I have carried out with the Formators of the Scholasticate has led me to consider some important aspects of my vocation to the Missions . . . I now request that I be accepted as a Brother in the Congregation of the Comboni Missionaries".

His proposal was accepted. In June 1989, at the age of thirty-five, he was assigned as a Missionary Brother to the Missions of the Comboni Missionaries in Mozambique where he had previously requested to work. His departure for Mozambique was delayed, however, while he undertook a two-year course at the 'Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine' (*the first institution in the world dedicated to research and teaching in tropical medicine*) and a course of Portuguese in Lisbon.

An uphill struggle under sustained rebel attack

On February 3rd 1991 he finally arrived in Mozambique. Alfredo found a country in the throes of civil war with hundreds of thousands dead and millions of refugees. He was assigned to the Mission in Namapa where the local civil and religious authorities had agreed to having a missionary doctor work as the 'Medical Superintendent' at the local hospital. For years the hospital had been under sustained attack by RENAMO rebels. Brother Alfredo wrote: "The hospital in Namapa, where I have been posted, is half destroyed. It is a District General Hospital in need of complete renovation, as it is in ruins after repeated attacks by the guerrillas of RENAMO. We have a total of eighty beds but three years ago the roof was destroyed by mortar fire, and after three rainy seasons the building needs to be completely refurbished. We need in particular to re-equip the operating theatre and the surgical wards. All the personnel in the hospital are Mozambican. My main work will be threefold - surgery, traumatology and obstetrics. We live at a particularly violent time in the history of this people. The daily work of the outpatient department is extensive - oral medicine, prenatal

clinics and maternity services, paediatrics, ophthalmology and minor surgery. I think it is this basic health care which is of most use to the local community”.

New difficulties: the need to put patients first

Alfredo threw himself into the work. The sick, young children, pregnant women and those wounded in the conflict kept arriving. They sheltered in the inner courtyard and on the verandas, carrying with them their pots and pans to prepare food, water buckets and mats to sleep on. They then patiently waited to be examined and to receive medication for their ailments. Unfortunately, however, difficulties soon arose with the Hospital Administrator, who was not a doctor but a fully paid-up member of the ruling party. Not only did rebuilding need to happen, but the personnel, from the nurses to the cleaners, had to be re-trained and their work patterns re-organised – combating absenteeism, re-establishing regular shifts and improving punctuality. A further area of concern was the lack of transparency and accountability with regard to the stock of medicines in the hospital. It was an immense task. Brother Alfredo sought to develop a new workplace culture within the hospital by encouraging staff to place the patient at the centre of their attention at all times. This, he argued, was the basic criterion for all medical care and assistance. His efforts led to increasing tension with the Hospital Administrator and the District Medical Office.

“As God is my witness”

At first Brother Alfredo gritted his teeth and carried on stoically, but towards the end of 1991 he increasingly felt that

he could no longer continue working in the hospital. In the end it was a medical emergency that forced him to resign his post. He referred to this in a report to the District Medical Office of Namapa: "On the night of January 3rd there was another surgical emergency: a patient had a strangulated hernia. I found the operating theatre flooded with rainwater; the laboratory closed thereby preventing a routine test to establish the patient's blood type; and the pharmacy locked. There was no blood serum, sterilized surgical equipment or clean water available. I was watching the patient writhe in agony by torchlight while waiting for someone to bring the key of the generator-room. When the key was eventually found, I was then informed that there was no fuel to run the generator".

Brother Alfredo had had enough and felt it was time to move on. The following morning he sent a letter to the District Health Office in which he listed the reasons why, in conscience, he could not continue to work in the hospital but that he was willing to work out the remainder of his contract at a small rural hospital in Alua run by the Comboni Missionary Sisters. "As God is my witness", he wrote, "I have done everything possible to safeguard the interests of the patients entrusted to my care". The District Health Office agreed to his transfer to Alua.

Finally making progress

Brother Alfredo began a completely new life at Alua. He became the driving force of the small hospital, always full of new ideas and projects, and he began to develop a plan of preventive healthcare through the network of the 'Basic Christian Communities' in Parishes throughout the local

Diocese of Nacala. In the meantime, the war continued in all its ferocity. The ruling *FRELIMO* Government in Maputo was negotiating with *RENAMO* through the mediation of the Community of St. Egidio in Rome. Brother Alfredo was not optimistic. "In recent weeks", he wrote, "over fifty gravely-ill people came to the hospital, the victims of attacks along the roads. I fear that once the ideological and political conflict is over, all that will remain is violence: the rule of the gun, plunder and robbery".

Early in August 1992, he set out for Nacala where he was to meet the Bishop to discuss his plan for primary health education throughout the Diocese. He passed through Nthutu, Namaqueto and Muiravale, the scene of numerous *RENAMO* attacks, and stayed in Nacala until Monday 24th August. From Nacala he planned to go to Carapira and then call in on the Health Authorities in the regional capital of Nampula, the largest city in northern Mozambique, to discuss the proposals that he had agreed with the Bishop. Around 8:00 a.m. in the morning and travelling alone in his vehicle, he left Nacala. On his way back through Muiravale, he was forced to slow down because of potholes in the road. Suddenly, the car was struck by machine-gun fire and Brother Alfredo was hit. He died instantly. He was just thirty-eight years of age. The shots were fired by *RENAMO* rebels positioned on either side of the road.

Shortly afterwards, a convoy of the area's largest employer, the '*Companhia Industrial do Monapo S.A.R.L.*', arrived from the direction of Nacala on their way to Monapo escorted by a contingent of government soldiers. The convoy stopped at a distance from the vehicle of Brother Alfredo which was in a ditch after having been hit by gunfire. The vehicle was still

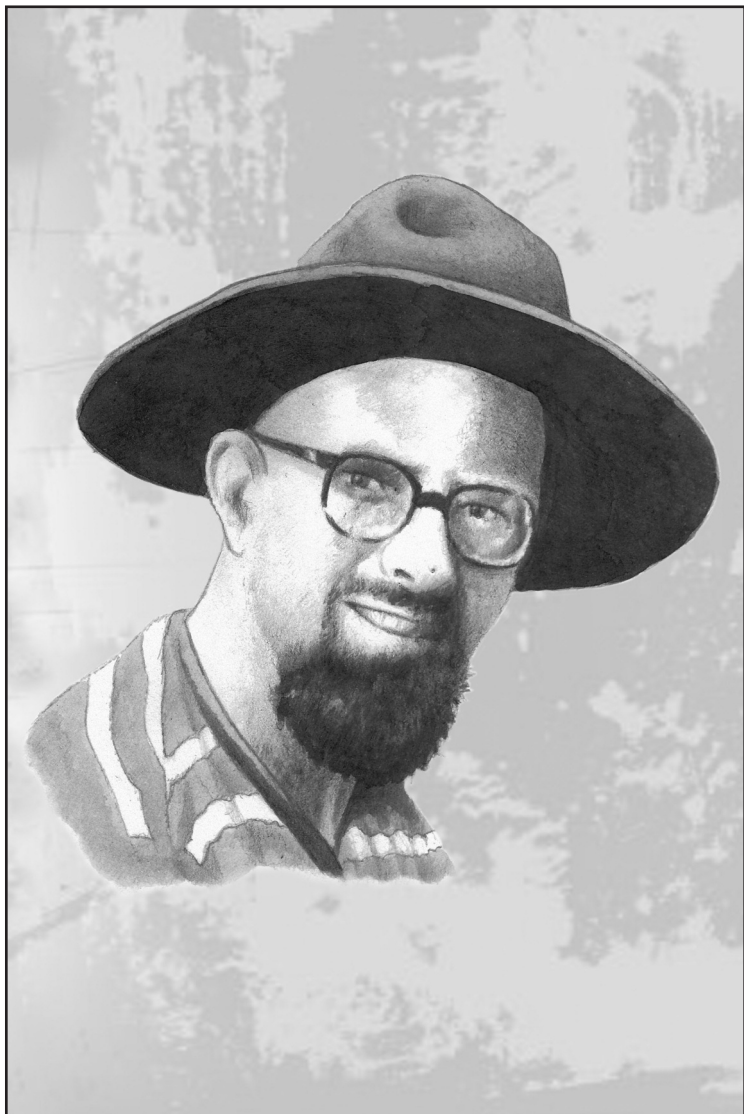
surrounded by guerrillas. The soldiers began shooting at the rebels causing them to scatter and then they approached the vehicle only to find the Brother dead, sitting in the driver's seat but leaning to one side, with his head struck by a number of bullets.

The vehicle, carrying Brother Alfredo's body, was towed to the company's base in Monapo about twelve miles from Muiravale. The Comboni Missionaries in Carapira travelled there and took his body aboard their vehicle, leaving the bullet-ridden vehicle to be collected afterwards.

Finally, some hope for peace

A few months later, on Sunday 4th October 1992, a peace agreement was signed between Joaquim Chissano, President of Mozambique and of *FRELIMO* (the country's ruling 'Mozambique Liberation Front') and Afonso Dhlakama, leader of *RENAMO* (the 'Mozambican National Resistance Movement') at the Community of St. Egidio in Rome. With it came the end of a civil war that had lasted twenty-five years and cost more than a million lives and the displacement of over five million people in refugee camps across South-eastern Africa.

COMBONI MISSIONARIES



24. Brazil: Father Marco Vedovato

- "In death his face seemed so peaceful"

Mirador is a small town in the State of Maranhão in the north-east of Brazil. That Saturday night in October was hotter than usual. In the town square in front of the Parish Church, the silence was broken by a group of three young men who started shouting, singing and playing a harmonica. It was after midnight. Father Marco was tired and the following morning he had a busy schedule of Sunday Masses. From his window he could see the rowdy young men. He eventually decided to ask them to keep quiet as there were many people living around the square who needed to sleep including himself! Opening the front door of the Presbytery he approached the young men and asked them to stop all the noise and allow people to sleep. They agreed, but as soon as Father Marco turned to go back to the house, one of the three drew a .38 calibre pistol and shot him in the back. A few minutes later, Father Marco died from the resultant blood loss, all the while forgiving his assailant. He was only thirty-eight years of age.

"One in the family is enough"

Father Marco Vedovato was born in Sant'Eufemia di Borgoricco in the Province of Padua on April 25th 1930, the third of four children. His family ran a restaurant and grocery store there. Their adjacent home was a meeting

place for regular customers coming to town from the surrounding countryside and the atmosphere was always very lively, especially on market days and public holidays. From time to time, Comboni Missionaries from Padua would go by bicycle to Sant'Eufemia di Borgoricco to lend a hand to the Parish Priest. Giovanni, the second eldest child, decided to join the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Padua as soon as he finished his primary education. Marco liked to sit by the banks of a nearby stream drawing trees and birds. Nature was his passion and he had what it took, his parents thought, to become an artist. And so when Marco asked to join his brother in the Junior Seminary, his mother refused telling him, "One missionary in the family is enough".

Marco was though, from his earliest years, a fairly determined individual and he eventually managed to persuade his parents to allow him enter the Seminary in Padua. In September 1944 in the midst of the Second World War he went on to the Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Brescia to complete his secondary education. Due to the subsequent heavy bombing of Brescia by Allied Forces, the Superiors decided to evacuate the Seminary and send all the boys home. Back in Sant'Eufemia di Borgoricco, the two brothers found that there was a guest in the house: a University Professor had taken refuge there because of the Allied bombing around Padua where he had been living. The man offered to teach the boys Latin, Greek and the Classics. With the encouragement of the Comboni Missionaries in Padua two other students joined the brothers in Sant'Eufemia di Borgoricco, and all four returned to the Seminary in Brescia at the end of the war.

In 1948 Marco, now eighteen years old, joined the Novitiate of the Comboni Missionaries in Gozzano, and two years later took his First Vows on September 9th 1950. He was then sent to the Scholasticate of the Comboni Missionaries in Venegono Superiore near Varese to continue his theological studies, and was ordained a priest in Milan Cathedral on June 15th 1957 by Cardinal (*later Pope and Saint*) Giovanni Battista Montini. His brother, Giovanni, had also studied in Venegono Superiore and been ordained a Comboni Missionary priest four years earlier in Milan by Cardinal (*later Blessed*) Schuster on May 30th 1953.

Visits to the Leprosarium - the start of his missionary life
Father Marco was assigned to the Missions in South Sudan and arrived in Juba on November 30th 1957, just in time to witness the nationalisation of all the mission schools by the Islamic Government in Khartoum. He was one of the last Comboni Missionaries to receive permission to enter Sudan. His first appointment was to the Mission of Kworijik, eight miles from Juba, a town with eight thousand inhabitants. He wrote home, "My work consists in assisting the Catechists who are instructing those preparing for baptism as well as administering the Sacraments. On Sunday afternoon I visit the leprosarium ... What surprises me is the uncomplaining way those suffering from leprosy put up with their suffering and disfigurement". After a period at Kworijik, Father Marco went to the Mission of Lirya for one year, spent a further year at Lafon and then went to Tali, a Mission on the western bank of the River Nile, about one hundred and fifty miles North of Juba.

Unfortunately the political and security situation in Southern Sudan was deteriorating by the day. Attempts by the Arab-led Government in Khartoum to Islamise the whole country had led to armed rebellion by African Christians in the South. The Authorities responded by trying to violently suppress the insurgency through the indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of many innocent civilians and by adopting a 'scorched-earth' policy throughout Southern Sudan. Missionaries, as eye-witnesses to such wanton violence and destruction, were naturally looked upon with grave misgiving by the Government in Khartoum. In a letter to Giovanni, Father Marco wrote, "The Authorities place all sorts of obstacles in our way. We have to ask permission from the Police three days in advance before we plan to leave the Mission compound, informing them where we are intending to go, who we are planning to visit and when we are proposing to return, and then await their response. More often than not permission is refused with no reason given".

On the evening of December 30th 1962, a vehicle arrived at the Mission of Talì carrying five policemen. They arrested Father Marco and took him to the local Police Station where he was charged with possession of a radio transmitter for the purposes of communicating with the rebels. Despite the lack of any evidence whatsoever to substantiate the charge (*the Mission only had a wireless radio*), Father Marco was brought before Court the following morning. He was found guilty and sentenced to two days in prison and one hundred days of house arrest under close police observation. This meant that the Police lived in the Mission.

With the continuing refusal of the Government to renew residency permits, many Missionaries were forced to leave the country. Those who remained had increasing numbers of restrictions placed on their movements, then on their pastoral ministry and finally on their work in health-care, education and development. The fear was that sooner or later all the Missionaries would be sent away from Southern Sudan and so it came to pass. On February 27th 1964 the Government decided to expel the last two hundred or so Comboni Missionary Bishops, Priests, Brothers and Sisters *en masse* from Southern Sudan. The country was left with just one local bishop and twenty-eight local priests to minister to all the Faithful there.

An instrument of God's grace

After a period of rest at home with his Family in Sant'Eufemia di Borgoricco, Father Marco was appointed to a new Mission. This time it was in Latin America. On December 3rd 1965, Father Marco arrived in Brazil. He was appointed to the Diocese of Balsas, two and a half thousand miles from São Paulo, and spent the first year there as Secretary to the Local Bishop, himself a Comboni Missionary, Rino Carlesi.

In March 1968, Father Marco was assigned to the Mission of Pastos Bons, a town in the State of Maranhão in North-eastern Brazil, which was also responsible for the Parishes of Sucupira and Mirador. Father Marco would later be appointed Parish Priest of Mirador. He wrote to a friend: "I have visited some areas where the people last saw a priest fifteen years ago. I had to baptise babies, teenagers and even adults. This work of mine takes a lot of patience and

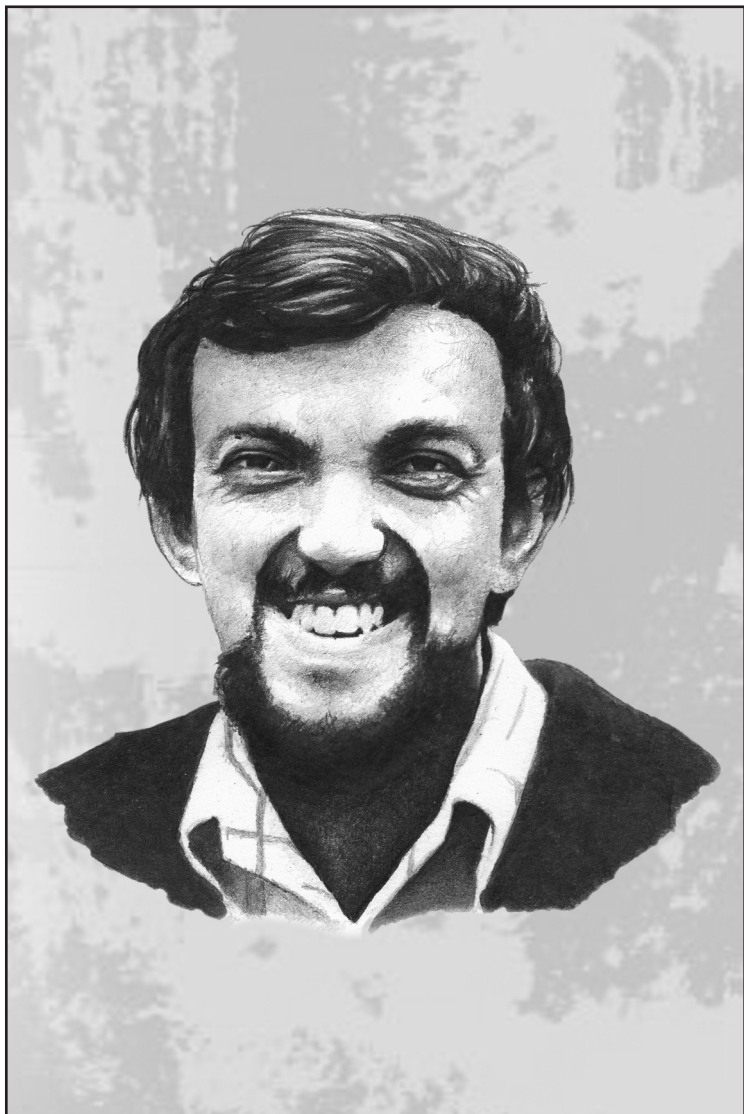
a lot of effort but we Missionaries are instruments of the grace of God and it is the grace of God that counts. I am planning to build twelve chapels with schools and to organise and train a group of women teachers and catechists as I did in other Parishes. I have also started courses in cooking and hygiene to help the women folk”.

On the evening of Saturday 19th October of that year, Father Marco returned from Pastos Bons to Mirador where his death awaited him. He went straight to the Church to celebrate the vigil Mass for Sunday which a good number of people attended. When Mass was over, the Missionary withdrew to the Presbytery, telling the Sacristan that he was very tired and needed to rest. Three young men later appeared in front of the Parish Church. It was after midnight when the shot rang out fired by the man playing the harmonica. Although people living around the square immediately went to the aid of the stricken priest, Father Marco told them that he was dying but that he forgave his assailant. Eye-witnesses at the scene said that Father Marco bore an expression of great peace and, while gazing at the starry sky, passed away.

The body was taken into the Parish Church. Early next morning, Bishop Rino Carlesi arrived and decided to take the body of the slain Missionary to the Cathedral in Balsas. All along the two-hundred-and-fifty-mile journey, people lined the road to honour Father Marco. The funeral party reached Balsas at midnight on Sunday 20th October 1968. The Requiem Mass took place soon after in the presence of a large gathering of the Faithful who then followed the funeral procession to the cemetery just as dawn was breaking.

The infinite love of God

The mother of Father Marco, on receiving her son's missionary cross from Bishop Carlesi, wrote movingly to Giovanni: "My dear son, we have just received your brother's cross and now he is resting in peace. You can imagine with what feelings I clasped that Crucifix to my breast, the Crucifix which his Superiors gave him when he took his First Vows; that same Crucifix that the Sudanese people kissed during his eight years of apostolate there and his beloved Brazilians during his three years of work among them; that same Crucifix that brought such consolation to the lepers and to the dying. Now it is for us to receive and to carry it, as it is the greatest sign of the infinite love of God. It is our strength and only hope".



25. Brazil: Father Ezekiel Ramin

- Martyr of Charity in the Amazon

As the old jeep moved along the narrow dirt-track road through the Amazonian forest, the sunlight streamed down through the thick undergrowth. Some weeks before a group of landless farmers had occupied land on one of the largest land-holdings in the area. The stand-off at 'Katuva Ranch' was potentially very dangerous indeed. Father Ezekiel knew that this could be the spark leading to an outbreak of widespread armed conflict between the landless farmers and the ranchers around Aripuanã: violence that would lead to many unnecessary deaths, and see the farmers by far the worse off.

In the mid-1980s, the area around the town of Aripuanã, on the border between the States of Rondônia and Mato Grosso do Sul, had become a 'hotbed' of tension between large landowners, who controlled most of the available arable land in the region, and local landless peasant farmers. Many farmers had been driven off the land they were cultivating by powerful business interests in order to make way for the large-scale raising of cattle for the export of meat to Europe, North America and the Far East. While much of this land was effectively 'under-utilized', tens of thousands of poverty-stricken farmers remained without any access to a piece of land that they could cultivate.

Justice to be achieved by peaceful means

Father Ezekiel was responsible, on behalf of the Community in the Mission of Cacoal, for the pastoral care of the Faithful in and around Aripuanã. He visited the area around the town on July 22nd/23rd 1985 with Adilio de Souza, the President of the local 'Confederation of Trade Unions', in order to encourage the farmers to avoid confrontation with the security guards employed by the ranchers and to seek peaceful solutions to land disputes. In one of the visits he met the wives of the farmers who had illegally settled on uncultivated land at 'Katuva Ranch'. They pleaded with him to go and convince their husbands to leave and thereby avoid unnecessary bloodshed. The farmers had in fact already been threatened and intimidated by armed guards in the employ of 'Katuva Ranch'. The women said that Father Ezekiel was the only one who had the moral authority to convince their husbands to vacate the land and wait for more opportune times.

It was too late in the day to meet with the illegal settlers at 'Katuva Ranch'. Father Ezekiel decided to return to the Mission in Cacoal (*about seventy miles away*) for the night and set out again for Aripuanã with Adilio de Souza early next morning. At 11:00 a.m. they arrived at the occupied land on 'Katuva Ranch' to find a dozen farmers gathered together, and a group of armed guards hired by the ranch-owners stationed close by. Advising the settlers to avoid all provocation and to steer clear of violence, Father Ezekiel told them: "Justice is achieved by peaceful means, not with weapons. If you take up arms, you will come off worse, because the Ranchers are far more powerful. And that is what their *pistoleros* (gunmen or hired killers) actually

want, so that they can kill you under the pretext of legitimate self-defence”.

Convinced that they had persuaded the farmers to choose a peaceful and non-violent resolution of their dispute with the owners of ‘Katuva Ranch’, Father Ezekiel and Adilio set out for Aripuanã. As they headed off, the armed guards hired by the ranch-owners drove on ahead of them in an off-road vehicle. After a few miles, on a curve in the road, Father Ezekiel and Adilio found their way was blocked by the guards’ vehicle parked right across the road. As Father Ezekiel pulled up short in the jeep, the guards immediately began shooting and aiming all their fire in his direction, at which point he and Adilio jumped out of different sides of the vehicle. Father Ezekiel then shouted, “I am a priest! Let’s talk”. There was no mercy. As he tried to run to the near-by forest he was shot seventy-two times. The *pistoleros* were leaving nothing to chance. It was just after midday on Wednesday 24th July 1985.

“If my life is for you, my death too will be for you”

Although wounded in the attack, Adilio managed to escape into the dense forest and after hours of wandering, came across three of the peasant farmers who had been at the meeting with Father Ezekiel and him earlier that day. Adilio and the farmers eventually found a driver of a pick-up who was willing to take them all to the Mission in Cacoal. The group only reached the Mission at one o’clock in the morning when they informed the Confrères of the ambush. The Confrères immediately left to inform the Local Bishop and the police, but the police would not agree to escort them to the site of the shooting until after

sunrise.

Ezekiel was found lying fifty yards from his vehicle, his body riddled with bullets and shotgun pellets, many fired at close range. His arms were spread like Christ on the Cross. None of his belongings had been taken, and the only thing missing from among Father Ezekiel's personal effects was the wooden cross that he always wore around his neck. His watch was still on his wrist; his wallet and house keys still in his pocket; his personal documents and camera still in the vehicle; and the keys of the vehicle were still in the ignition. In court documents one of the *pistoleros* subsequently admitted to ripping the cross off the chest of Father Ezekiel during the execution. The purpose of the attack was evidently just to murder him.

Father Ezekiel had preached only a few months before at Sunday Mass on February 17th 1985 in Cacoal: "I love you all and I love justice. Let us not condone violence, even if we are treated violently. I myself have received death threats. If my life is for you, my death too will be for you".

A Life of Commitment: love is stronger than death

Ezekiel was born in Padua, a city in the North of Italy, on February 9th 1953 to Amirabile and Mario Ramin, the fourth of six children. While in High School Ezekiel joined the 'Open Arms' Association in Padua and participated in their summer 'Work Camps' that financed micro-projects in the South of the world through the collection and recycling of waste paper and cardboard, glass, metal and second-hand clothes. After completing High School in 1972, Ezekiel surprised his parents, family and friends, by announcing that he was leaving to join the Postulancy of

the Comboni Missionaries in Florence to begin a journey that he hoped would lead him to the priesthood. In Florence he undertook his studies in philosophy and entered the Novitiate in Venegono two years later. Ezekiel took his First Vows on June 5th 1976 and was then sent to England to learn English in view of being assigned to the Scholasticate of the Comboni Missionaries in Kampala for his theological studies. Due to the increasingly precarious security situation in Uganda at the time, it was decided to send Ezekiel to the Scholasticate in Chicago where he studied at the 'Chicago Theological Union', and he was ordained a priest four years later in his home Parish of St. Joseph in Padua on September 29th 1980. After three years working in Italy, Father Ezekiel went to Lisbon to learn Portuguese and on January 24th 1984 left for Brazil, where he was assigned to the Mission of Cacoal in the Diocese of Ji-Paraná in Rondônia, a State in the North-east of the country.

It did not take long for Father Ezekiel to become aware of the plight of the poor in Brazil, and particularly that of the struggle of farmers who had been driven off their land in order to make way for the large-scale raising of cattle for meat exports abroad. In a letter to a friend in Padua, Father Ezekiel wrote: "All around me people are destitute while rich landowners increase their already vast land-holdings by encroaching ever further into the Amazon Rainforest. The *Indios* (at the time more than half of the indigenous peoples of Brazil lived in Rondônia) are being driven out from the territories reserved for them under Federal Law and their ancestral lands are being systematically stolen from them while the Authorities just stand idly by. The

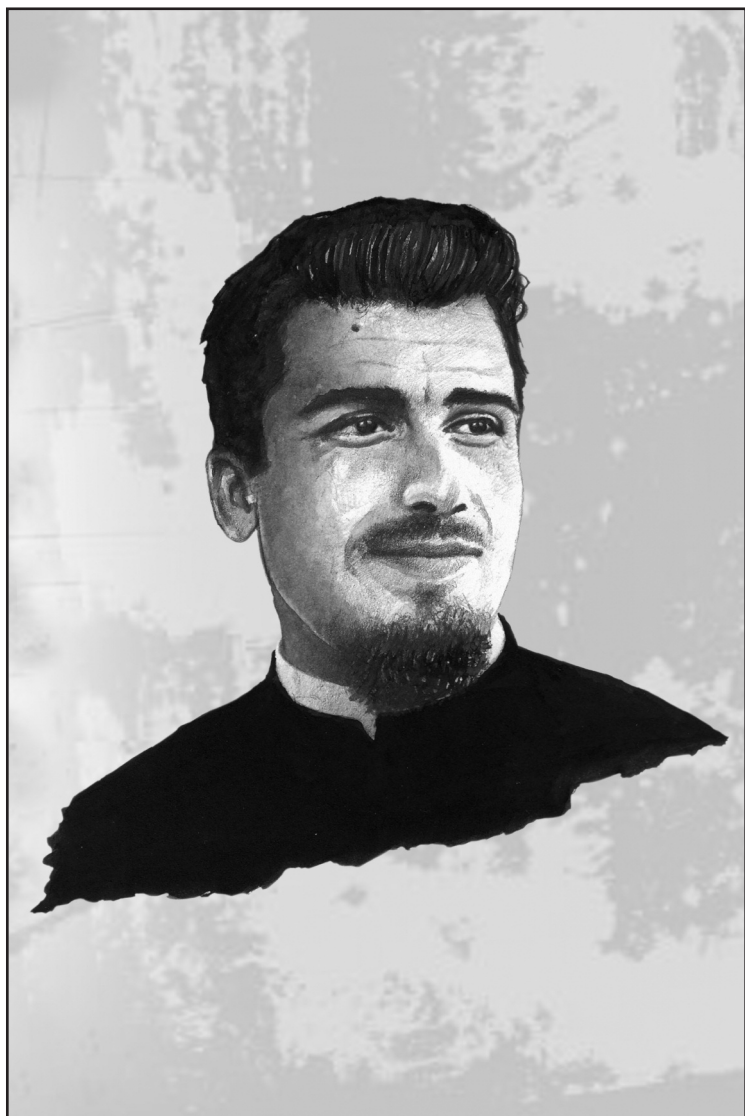
police do not uphold the laws of the country and simply protect the very wealthy and powerful. My eyes find it hard at times to see the presence of God in the midst of such injustice and unnecessary suffering. Yet I know that the Cross of Christ, the solidarity of God with man, shows the way He wants to end this tragedy, not by force or domination but by love. Christ preached and lived this in his own life and death. The fear of death did not make him abandon his project of love. Love is stronger than death". The commitment of Father Ezekiel to those suffering injustice and poverty brought him into conflict with the powerful landowners and with the Authorities in Rondônia and Mato Grosso do Sul. He was killed at only thirty-two years of age and five years after his Ordination. Only two of the assassins were subsequently condemned, to twenty-four and twenty-five years in prison respectively, for the slaying.

Nearly forty years have passed since the death of Father Ezekiel, but the situation in Rondônia unfortunately remains much the same. The Authorities do not appear to have any appetite for much-needed agrarian reform. The landowners, who account for less than one per cent of the population, still hold nearly half of all the arable land in Rondônia, which in the main is given over to the large-scale raising of cattle for export, while some five million poverty-stricken peasants remain without land. It must be said that the peasants too often resort to the deforestation of the rainforest in order to gain land on which to settle, which in turn brings them into conflict with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. It is a vicious cycle of destruction and violence. According to the 'Pastoral Land Commission' of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference nearly

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half of the six hundred and twenty people murdered in land-related conflicts in the country from 2003 until 2017 were living in the States of Mato Grosso do Sul and Rondônia.

On 9th April 2016, the process for the beatification of Father Ezekiel Ramin was opened in the Diocese of Ji-Paraná and in the Diocese of Padua.



26. México: Father Luigi Corsini

- *"If I remain silent, I will fail in my duty
as a Priest"*

In an anonymous letter Father Luigi was warned to stop speaking against certain people in Todos Santos (*All Saints*) or he would be silenced for good. This was not the first such letter he had received but this time the warning could not have been more explicit.

Todos Santos is a small coastal town in the foothills of the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains on the Pacific shores of the Baja (*Lower*) California Peninsula. A Jesuit Priest, Father Jaime Bravo SJ, had founded a Mission there in 1723, and following the Jesuits came the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Missionaries of Saint Peter and Saint Paul and then Local Clergy. In 1948, given the difficulties of the apostolate in Baja (*Lower*) California, the area was entrusted by the Holy See to the Comboni Missionaries. The Apostolic Vicariate (*a territory where a Diocese has yet to be established*) of La Paz was established shortly thereafter. Twelve years later Father Luigi found himself appointed to the Mission of Todos Santos by fellow Comboni Missionary and Vicar Apostolic of La Paz, Mgr. Giovanni Giordani.

The call of the Americas

Luigi was born on December 15th 1928 at Erbusco in the Province of Brescia in Northern Italy. By the age of twelve

he was already in the Junior Seminary of the Comboni Missionaries in Crema, and from there went on to the Novitiate in Venegono near Varese where he took his First Vows on September 9th 1947. He continued on in Venegono with his philosophical and theological studies and was ordained a priest in Milan Cathedral on May 30th 1953 by Cardinal (*later Blessed*) Ildefonso Schuster. After his priestly ordination Father Luigi worked for seven years as a teacher and Vocations Promoter in the Junior Seminaries in Florence and then Crema and, although he had always dreamt of working in Africa, was assigned to the Missions in México. Father Luigi left for México in September 1960 and, after spending a year learning Spanish in México City, was posted to the Vicariate of La Paz. Bishop Giordani appointed him as a Curate in the Mission of Todos Santos.

"Tempted to despair"

Todos Santos is like an oasis in the midst of the surrounding semi-arid countryside, thanks to a rich source of water in the area and guaranteed sunshine all year long, with people working the rich farmland for vegetables, chilies, avocados, papayas and mangoes.

From his arrival in the town Santos, Father Luigi proved a very committed and active young priest who spent much of his time out visiting families. As religious instruction in schools was prohibited by law in México, he set about organising catechesis in the Mission for children and adults alike. The fruits of his labours were not immediately evident. In a letter to a friend back home, Father Luigi described the pastoral situation in Todos Santos as follows:

"In this desert, nothing grows if not watered. But the hearts of these people are more arid than the desert! If I look at the results of my work so far, I would be tempted to despair. Yet I trust in the Almighty who knows how to raise up children for Abraham even out of dry stones".

Little by little his perseverance paid off. The youth in particular were becoming more and more involved in the life and work of the Parish. The tireless pastoral work and the uncompromising preaching of Father Luigi did not, however, please enemies of the Church who still abounded in México from the 1920's when the Church in that country suffered open persecution at the hands of an atheistic and anti-clerical Government. Not only were they unhappy with the pastoral success of Father Luigi, they resented the way he openly expressed disapproval of their views and attitudes. In particular he was warned to be less vocal in his opposition to a group of local school teachers who were Members of the local Masonic Lodge. Father Luigi would not, however, remain silent in their regard, neither in private nor in his preaching. He began receiving death threats, but there was nothing he could do, except to continue working as usual. "If I remain silent", he wrote, "I will fail in my duty as a Priest and become a hired hand who flees when he sees the wolf coming. I will not run away. I will confront the wolf who wants to steal my sheep from me, even if I have to give my life".

Confronting the wolf

Father Luigi's favourite pastime in Todos Santos was to go fishing at a freshwater pond near the sea shore. On the morning of May 7th 1963, at about ten o'clock in the

morning, Father Luigi called on the Sisters in the Mission to enquire about the preparations for the celebration later that day of Mass for Mother's Day, and then went to the Church to see how the work on the roof was progressing. He then set off for the freshwater pond.

At lunchtime there was no sign of Father Luigi. Late in the afternoon one of the Parishioners came to the Mission saying he had seen the Father's car parked at a spot down near the sea shore, in the same place where he had seen it in the morning, but that Father Luigi was nowhere to be seen. Two other Members of the Community decided to go down to the beach and see for themselves. They found the shoes and socks of Father Luigi placed on a rock near the freshwater pond, but there was no sign of him. As it was getting dark, people came with torches and made a search around the pond but found nothing. Eventually two young men dived into the water and, four metres below the surface near where his shoes and socks were found, they discovered the priest's body. It was brought out of the water, and taken to the local surgery. The doctor found that Father Luigi had suffered a broken collarbone and had significant bruising to the upper part of the body, which could all have been explained by his falling into the water, but then no water was discovered in his lungs clearly indicating that he had not drowned but was already dead before entering the pond.

Although foul play was suspected, it was decided to go ahead the following day with Father Luigi's Requiem Mass, with many of the Parishioners in attendance, and his mortal remains were buried in the small cemetery close to the Church. The local radio station, 'Radio La Paz', in report-

ing the incident, described the death of Father Luigi as murder and this led to much disquiet in the State of Baja (*Lower*) California. The police promised a full investigation.

The Governor ordered the body to be exhumed so that a proper post-mortem examination could be carried out. Although the subsequent report found that Father Luigi had died from a violent blow to the head and that his body had then been thrown into the lake, no one was ever apprehended for the crime. He was only thirty-four years of age. The investigation was quietly dropped after all the publicity surrounding the case had died down.

After the death of Father Luigi many in Todos Santos returned to the practice of the Faith. The Mission flourished and the Comboni Missionaries were able to hand it back to the Local Clergy in 1976 with the legacy of Father Luigi assured. The courage of one who had sacrificed his life in speaking out for the right to teach and preach the truth was not forgotten.



‘Supreme Witness’ is an account of the lives of twenty-five Comboni Missionary Priests, Brothers and Sisters who died in the service of the Gospel in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Brazil and México. These were men and women who were killed while giving expression to the love taught by Jesus Christ and practiced in His name: preaching the truths and values of the Gospel; teaching the Faith; visiting and caring for the sick; comforting the afflicted; and promoting the integral development of every human person regardless of race, culture, language or religion.

The redemptive work of Christ is manifested in the lives of such men and women who gave their lives in the service of God and of their neighbour in Africa and Latin America. A constant refrain of Pope Francis, often noting that there are more martyrs dying violent deaths in modern times than in the early centuries of the Church, is to entreat the People of God to keep alive the memory of those who have been martyred for the Faith. Contemplating the martyrs of the past and present is, for the Holy Father, a sure way to leading a ‘full Christian life’, by welcoming in the silence of our own ordinary lives the ‘martyrdom’ of putting our faith into practice day in and day out.

Cover photograph

A chalice belonging to the Community of Comboni Missionaries working in Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Bangui (Central African Republic) which was damaged by gunfire during an attack on the Church by Islamist militants on Wednesday 28th May 2014.