

## ***The Comboni Sisters in the United Kingdom Creating bridges of solidarity between worlds***

By Sr Graça Almeida, CMS

As a teenager I believed everyone should do something to make a difference for the improvement of the human race. I was naturally attracted by the authenticity of a courageous life.

“Baptised and Sent” is the missionary message of Pope Francis for October, which he declared to be a special spiritual month. As he writes: *“Each of us is a mission to the world, for each of us is the fruit of God’s love”*. The vocation of being sent and become a seed of God’s love in the world, builds up that human goodness as a universal and global experience. It is not enough to be sent, there is a personal decision to make.

I was touched recently by the spontaneous expression that flew innocently from the mouth of a child: *“How can there be so many good people in the world!”* The student at St Patrick’s College in Talawakelle, in Sri Lanka, had touched the positivity of life. He, who comes from a background of a hard life on the tea plantations, remained surprised when his teacher - Sr Beatriz Gallan, Comboni Sister - told him that the people in the United Kingdom were committed to raise funds to upgrade the computer and science laboratory of his school.

The vocation of a Comboni Sister is precisely to create bridges of solidarity among distant and separated worlds, to bring together in one heart the rich and the poor, those who have and those who are in need. I can’t help thinking of a sculpture by an unknown artist of Mozambique. There are two figures kneeling one in front of the other with their both hands stretched towards each other. The attitude is the one of great respect and veneration, as when something sacred is happening. With one hand they give and with the other they receive. I see in this sculpture the miracle of two realities of people that come together to share what they have and both grow in the experience of being children of God.

### **Holy Roots**

The Comboni Sisters who have missions in 32 countries in four continents, have been, since their foundation in 1872, a “bridge” of encounters among peoples, religions, races and cultures. They carry the same spirit of their Founder, St Daniel Comboni (1831 – 1881), whom at the age of seventeen gave his life to create equal opportunities where human dignity was trodden underfoot by the practice of slave trade in Central Africa. That was the *raison d’être* of his Plan for the Regeneration of Africa. His homily, in the Cathedral of Khartoum, as first bishop of Sudan, (11/5/1873) is an icon of the spirit that even today moves us in our actions. *“The rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the young and the old, the masters and the servants will always have equal access to my heart.”*

For the Comboni Sisters, today, in Chiswick, this means to create that sacred space that gives each person the opportunity to find their inner treasure. Our method is to facilitate the development of a spiritual dimension in the lay person to open her/his heart to missionary action, both here and overseas.

Three years ago we were inspired to renew our way of being present in London by opening the Comboni Centre for Spirituality and Mission at 2 Chiswick Lane. It was blessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2016 by the late Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor.

Sisters Graça and Natalia who run the centre, organize and lead regular prayer meetings, day retreats, and courses for couples, youth activities and volunteering opportunities. Based in West London's leafy

Chiswick, in her witness, a lay person, who frequents the place, told us that *“the Comboni Centre is an oasis of peace and calm in today's fast moving, high-tech world”*.

### **Connecting United Kingdom with the missions overseas**

Our activities in the United Kingdom are an open window that looks towards the missions overseas. The Mission Appeals are a great opportunity offered to the sisters by the Bishops Conferences to reach out to the parishes with the gift of their witness. During their approximately 90 visits in one year, the sisters encourage the Christians to live their baptism and to support other churches in the missionary world.

It is important for us to involve lay people in our projects. In the last school year (October 2018-July 2019) time and energy were given to support “Schooling for Children in Sri Lanka”. The Old Spitalfields Market, at Liverpool Street in London, was an interesting stage for events aimed to raise solidarity awareness and collect funds for the project. The programme started in the market in October, with the support of a group of dedicated lay volunteers who worked tirelessly with the Sisters. The activities went from selling pizza vouchers, donated by Pizza Italia in October, to the Christmas Carols in December, and the Intercultural Music Festival in May. We closed the project with a fantastic Barn Dance, organised by the Cenacle of Missionary Prayer, on the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

The Comboni Sisters are grateful to the music performers at Old Spitalfields Market: The Gospel Choir, the A Wing and a Prayer group, the Ugandan Junior Choir, The Filipino Choir, from Our Lady of Victories Church, in Kensington and the Portuguese Folk Dancers. The performance was completed by remarkable talented children. They danced Irish music and read poems and stories: Give me Hope, Set my Dreams Free; Children are a gift of God. We acknowledge Joana Okello, Ella Cawthome, Abraham Aemero. The great singing talent came from the 11-year old - Sofia Sulas – who was most admired by the audience for her Solo.

I noticed a sense of joy in all who worked for the project when getting out after “being sent” to do something good for others. In the words of Mathew 5:13-14, they were the people whom the Gospel calls *“The salt of the earth and the light of the world”*.

We would love to invite you to participate in some of our activities, or to sponsor one of our interesting projects that we are starting this October: 1) Bringing Young People and Senior citizens together for an IT programme. 2) Young Couples Course with little children.

You are most welcome to contact the sisters at [combonicentre16@gmail.com](mailto:combonicentre16@gmail.com)