



# Rereading Comboni's *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* in the Light of Today's Africa

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## Introduzione

A hundred and fifty years have passed since Daniel Comboni articulated his perspicacious *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*<sup>1</sup>. And it is only right and opportune that we reread the plan in the light of today's Africa. The essence of marking the anniversaries of important milestones in life is that they usually offer us the opportunity to reflect, with the benefit of hindsight, on the experiences of those involved, to relive their passions, to look back over the intervening period of time to evaluate how far we have come, what we have achieved or not achieved, the progress we have made, how far we have grown, what we have learned, and on the basis of all these, project for the fu-

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ture. As noted by Benedict XVI in *Africae munus*, “Men and women are shaped by their past, but they live and journey in the present and they look ahead to the future”.<sup>2</sup> The task I am undertaking in this essay is really a complex and arduous one. First of all, the intervening period between 1864 when Comboni wrote his *Plan* and now is relatively very long, and the history of not just Africa but of mankind generally in this period has indeed registered very significant and undreamt of transformations. Moreover, Africa is a very vast and complex continent. Talking about today’s Africa, one may ask, to which Africa are we referring? It would surely be difficult, if not impossible, within the confines of this singular essay, to encompass the profoundly complex circumstances of the entire African continent. Godfery Onah was of course correct in his observation that the most complex and mysterious continent of the planet, in its profundity, never really lends itself to easy classifications and divisions. The danger is that often scholars, including Africans, out of laziness or ignorance, usually attribute to the whole of Africa what concerns only a small part. He insisted that contrary to what many ignorant non-Africans are often made to believe, Africa is certainly not a small village of primitive jungle, where everybody lived and still lives in the same way.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it would be delusive to pretend to offer anything more than a grossly limited view of what constitutes the reality of today’s Africa. I can only highlight a few common characteristics, which can be verified in varying degrees in different parts of Africa. Other features may only concern some specific parts of the continent, but may not be applicable to other areas.

My reflection will be developed under four broad headings:

1. Historical Context of Comboni’s *Plan*
2. Comboni vis-à-vis his Time
3. A Look at the Present Circumstances of Africa
4. Relevance for Today’s Africa

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<sup>2</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Esortazione Apostolica post-sinodale, *Africae munus*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G.I. ONAH, “Le responsabilità dell’uomo africano oggi e l’impegno per domani”, in A. TREVISIOL (a cura di), *In ascolto dell’Africa*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2012, 39.

## Historical Context Of Comboni's *Plan*

A necessary starting point for rereading Comboni's *Plan* in the light of today, I believe, is to first of all situate it within the very context in which it was written. This will help us to more beneficially appropriate the riches offered by Comboni's project for our time and chart better course for the future, given that interest in the past is not an end in itself, but only serves to offer direction for the future.<sup>4</sup> The Akan people of Ghana have a symbol called "Sankofa" which is visually and symbolically represented as a mythic bird which while flying forward looks backward bearing an egg in the mouth. The egg is a symbol of the future, and the implication of Sankofa is that we necessarily have to go back to our roots if we have to move forward. In other words, we must turn back and appropriate the best of the heritage of our past, in order that we may achieve the full potential to move ahead.<sup>5</sup> So, to better appreciate the significance of Comboni's *Plan* for today's Africa, it is important to go back to his time, to his circumstances, to what the world was like at that time, and to how Africa was conceived then in relation to the rest of the world: for which Africa was the plan drawn, what was Africa then like, how was it conceived? Answering these questions are necessary in understanding some of the statements made by Comboni and their relevance for mission in Africa today and in the future.

Comboni wrote his plan in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, the 19<sup>th</sup> century marks the golden age of European imperialism. Shaped by the Enlightenment mentality, and exacerbated by the socio-economic changes geometrically taking place in Europe on account of the Industrial Revolution, Europeans became convinced of the superiority of their cultures and institutions over the rest of the world. They viewed different human cultures as if they were in a sort of continuum from "primitive" to "developed". And the criteria for assigning different peoples to different positions was on the basis of the level of material culture, advanced economic status and the size of political institutions. Following this criteria, northern Europe was on the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, "Sankofa", in <http://www.uis.edu/africanamericanstudies/students/sankofa/> (14/09/2014).

apex of the continuum whereas countries which were not “mature”, “developed” economies like those of southern Europe, Arabs, Chinese, Native Americans and other groups were assigned lower positions. Non-Muslim black Africans were almost at the lower end of the continuum, just a little above the Australian aborigines who were at the very bottom. This mentality was best incarnated in the German philosopher of this period, G.W.F. Hegel who would audaciously contend, for instance, that history moved from East to West, from “childhood” in China, through India, Persia, Greece, and Rome, attaining “adulthood” in Western Europe. According to him, “Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning”.<sup>6</sup> Surveying one continent after another, and assessing their cultures or lack of it, Hegel argued that “Chile and Peru are narrow coastal territories, and they have no culture of their own”.<sup>7</sup> With this mentality, the Europeans established themselves as masters of all others in almost every field. They set out to colonize the rest of the globe, seeing colonialism as a civilizing mission, that is, trying to bring the torch of civilization to the hitherto dark corners of the globe; they felt they had the mission of bringing Western civilization to the peoples they perceived to be backward.

Inextricably connected with their sense of cultural superiority was also a conviction of religious superiority. Bosch affirms that “It was only logical that this feeling of superiority would rub off on the ‘religion of the West,’ Christianity. As a matter of fact, in most cases there was no attempt to distinguish between religious and cultural supremacy – what applied to the one, applied equally axiomatically to the other”.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, just as the European colonizers saw it as their duty to “civilize” and “enlighten” people in the rest of the globe, the Christian missionaries felt the divine vocation of bringing the light of their religion, and thus salvation to peoples still dwelling in darkness and wallowing in the shadows of death. In fact, already during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a certain intertwining between Christian mission and colonialism was evident, such that “since the sixteenth century, if

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Introduction, Reason in History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1975, 197.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> D. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2012, 298.

one said 'mission,' one in a sense also said 'colonialism.' Modern missions originated in the context of modern Western colonialism".<sup>9</sup> By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this intertwinement was no longer in doubt; and both colonialism and mission assumed the common goal of rescuing the "savage" and "pagan" nations from the grips of ignorance, darkness, blindness and superstition and bringing them into the glorious abode of knowledge, enlightenment, vision and light in which the West was already dwelling.

*Pari passu* the superiority complex of the colonizers and missionaries in relation to other cultures and peoples was their inability to look critically at their own culture or to appreciate what is good in others. As Bosch aptly reckons,

The problem was that the advocates of mission were blind to their own ethnocentrism. They confused their middle-class ideals and values with the tenets of Christianity. Their views about morality, respectability, order, efficiency, individualism, professionalism, work, and technological progress, having been baptized long before, were without compunction exported to the ends of the earth. They were, therefore, predisposed not to appreciate the cultures of the people to whom they went – the unity of living and learning; the interdependence between individual, community, culture and industry; the profundity of folk wisdom; the properties of traditional societies – all these were swept aside by a mentality shaped by the Enlightenment which tended to turn people into objects, reshaping the entire world into the image of the West, separating humans from nature and from one another, and "developing" them according to the Western standards and suppositions.<sup>10</sup>

It was actually this "presumed" cultural inferiority of other nations that the colonizers used to justify their "civilizing mission" and legitimize their actions. But we know that more than this, colonialism was primarily motivated by economic purposes. Following the collapse of slavery, and with the ascendancy of industrialization, European factories needed raw materials to boost their productions. They saw in Africa a fertile ground for the acquisition of their raw materials as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 301.

well as the marketing of their products. Added to this economic reason was also the political motive. With the rise of nationalism among different European nations, there was competition between them which was also expressed in the expansion of their colonies. The different nations were to demonstrate their strength by the number of colonies under their control. This led to the Scramble for Africa (1885-1910) with the result that within twenty five years, the whole of Africa was colonized.

Africa, at this time, of course enjoyed an overdose of Western denigration. After three centuries of decimating slave trade, the Europeans were unequivocally convinced of the cultural inferiority of the Africans. Even those who helped in abolishing slavery did not help the situation as they argued that Africans could not help themselves and so were to be “protected” from slavers. Some of the European explorers who went to Africa, like Mungo Park and Henry Morton Stanley, fed their people with limited information about the continent so that Africans were portrayed as childlike and/or warlike; books were written which popularized the conception of Africa as “the dark continent”. Directing his gaze to Africa, Hegel wrote without fear of contradiction:

In Africa proper, man has not progressed beyond a merely sensuous existence, and has found it absolutely impossible to develop any further. Physically, he exhibits great muscular strength, which enables him to perform arduous labours; and his temperament is characterized by good-naturedness, which is coupled, however, with completely unfeeling cruelty (...). Africa (...) has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture. From the earliest times, Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world; it is the land of gold, for ever pressing in upon itself, and the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night...In this main part of Africa, history is in fact out of question. Life consists in a succession of contingent happenings and surprises. No aim or state exists whose development could be followed, and there is no subjectivity, but merely a series of subjects who destroy one another.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *op. cit.*, 172, 173, 177.

Africans were presented as subhuman, with neither history nor culture, without science, religion or morals. It was the same Hegel to write:

The characteristic feature of the negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity – for example, of God or the law – in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being. The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being which is other and higher than his own self. Thus, man as we find him in Africa has not progressed beyond his immediate existence. As soon as man emerges as a human being, he stands in opposition to nature, and it is this alone which makes him a human being. But if he has merely made a distinction between himself and nature, he is still at the first stage of development: he is dominated by passion, and is nothing more than a savage. All our observations of African man show him as living in a state of savagery and barbarism, and he remains in this state to the present day. The negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness, and if we wish to understand him at all, we must put aside all our European attitudes (...) nothing consonant with humanity is to be found in his character. For this reason, we cannot properly feel ourselves into his nature, no more than into that of a dog, or of a Greek as he kneels before the statue of Zeus (...) intractability is the distinguishing feature of the negro character. The condition in which they live is incapable of any development of culture, and their present existence is the same as it has always been. In the face of the enormous energy of sensuous arbitrariness which dominates their lives, morality has no determinate influence upon them. Anyone who wishes to study the most terrible manifestations of human nature will find them in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

We cannot overestimate the magnitude of harm done on the African psyche by such negative classification of Africans. This is not a forum to squarely address that. Suffice it, however, to observe with David Lamb that “their cruellest legacy on the African continent was a

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 177, 190.

lingering inferiority complex, a confused sense of identity. After all, when people are told for a century that they're not as clever or capable as their masters, they eventually start to believe it".<sup>13</sup> In a presentation still in the context of rereading Comboni's *Plan* in the light of today's Africa, Theresa Okure, alluding to a theatrical work, *My Fair Lady*, captures vividly what could be the consequence of talking negatively about a situation one intends to change. In this play, Henry Higgins was dedicated to teaching the chief protagonist, Lisa Doolittle, how to speak perfect English, that is, the Queen's English and not that of the streets. But while doing this, he always called her by her street name – Lisa. On the contrary, however, Dr Pickering, a friend to Henry, always called her Miss Doolittle, a title used for a Mistress. When eventually Lisa began to speak perfect English, she thanked Dr Pickering for what he had done for her. When Pickering protested, insisting that he had done nothing, which in reality was the case, Lisa responded that he always called her Miss Doolittle, and that it was her effort to be worthy of that name that helped her gradually become a true Mistress. Consequently, talking negatively about a situation one intends to improve rather than lead to the desired improvement may eventually reinforce and worsen the negative situation.<sup>14</sup>

This, in a nutshell, was the conception of Africa at the time Comboni articulated his *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*.

### Comboni Vis-A-Vis His Time

There is no gainsaying the fact that Comboni, with his *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*, really achieved a stupendous *tour-de-force*. But just as man, a spatiotemporal being, is born and grows within a particular historical, socio-cultural and geographical context, and his person and thoughts are significantly shaped by the realities of such context, in different ways, Comboni certainly was not entirely weaned from the apron strings of the historical epoch that nurtured him; he proved himself indeed a true child of his time. His language

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<sup>13</sup> D. LAMB, *The Africans: Encounters from the Sudan to the Cape*, Longman Press, London 1986, 140.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. T. OKURE, "Leggendo il Piano e Le Regole del Comboni del 1871 delle Suore Missionarie Comboniane", *Simposio sul Piano per la Rigenerazione dell'Africa e sulle Regole del 1871*, Verona dal 13-17 maggio 2013, in *Atti del Simposio*, 147.



and style, his conception of colonialism and Christian mission, his notion of Europe and Africa as well as his anthropological vision of Africans and Europeans and their relationships bear the stamp of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European mentality shaped by the anthropology of the Enlightenment. Like his contemporaries, Comboni understood colonialism and Christian mission as truly “civilizing mission”. Different terms used to qualify Africa and her inhabitants, littering the entire pages of his *Plan*, easily reveal that Comboni had enough dose of the Enlightenment influence.<sup>15</sup> However, one wonders if Comboni is to be held culpable for such mentality. He was only being faithful to the spirit of his time. And if blame is to be allotted, it should go to the entire system that nurtured such prejudices, for as our people would say, it is difficult, if not impossible, to go into the river and avoid being soaked in water.

Be that as it may, in many other ways, Comboni really proved himself prophetic, surpassing the wildest imaginations of his time. Lifeless bodies, they say, float upon the water and swim downstream, but those endowed with the spirit are able to swim against the current, and so influence the courses of history. Though significantly influenced by the mentality of his age, Comboni did not, like a lifeless piece of wood, just allow himself to be carried downstream by the tide. Rather, moved by the Spirit of the charity of Christ, he had to courageously swim against the current, taking very heroic and revolutionary initiatives, as glaringly evidenced in his *Plan*. The selflessness and effrontery, missionary vision and foresight expressed in the *Plan* cannot but be unequivocally lauded. To have conceived and articulated such a plan at the time he did portrays his acute intelligence, profound insight and marvellous foresight. At a time when innumerable missionaries were decimating on account of harsh and unbearable conditions in Central Africa, and others were despairing and giving up every hope of success, inflamed by the spirit of the charity of Christ and solicitude for his Gospel, the entire thought of Comboni's life was still directed to Africa and her peoples, and he was willing even to shed the last drop of his blood in order to win these people to Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid*; P. KIPROY, “Una lettura antropologica del *Piano per la Rigenerazione dell’Africa e delle Regole del 1871* (Cap. 10 in particolare)”, Simposio sul Piano per la Rigenerazione dell’Africa e sulle Regole del 1871, Verona dal 13-17 maggio 2013, in *Atti del Simposio*.

This expresses his profound missionary spirituality; indeed a faithful imitator of his Master who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (*Mt* 20: 28). His was indeed an ambitious project, sounds utopic, but he was specific about his goals and objectives, explicit about the roles each person or organ had to play to meet these objectives, clear about the processes to arrive at the desired destination and open in his relationships with all who would be helpful in achieving the desired goal. And in the world of business, it is said that extraordinary action by ordinary people yields extraordinary results. His *Plan* may have sounded unrealizable at the time it was laid down, but in these past 150 years, we can all bear witness to what extraordinary results it has yielded, and then pay deserved homage to his exceptional genius. The generous and bounteous fruits it has born through the years, especially through his congregations – both male and female – for the Church in Africa, the universal Church and the entire humanity, bear eloquent testimony to this fact.

At a time when Africa was indiscriminately occupied and dominated, stratified and exploited, St Comboni demonstrated a burning passion for Africa and her people, not for any personal interest, but for their integral good and salvation. Cardinal Arinze, in his presentation of the cause for Comboni’s beatification, best captures the situation. Insisting that “Daniel Comboni was truly a precursor and prophet of what Africa was to be”, he affirmed that “In Comboni’s time many thought of Africa in terms of exploration, occupation, division or dominion. Others dreamed of Africa to be helped, civilised, educated. But they too saw Africa as an object not as a subject. But this was not how Comboni saw it...”<sup>16</sup> Granted the fact that he was influenced by his age in some of his utterances, in deed, Comboni desired the good of Africa and her people. Like St Paul, who, decrying the lack of conversions to Christ among his fellow Jews, expressed his willingness even to be accursed for the sake of his kinsmen by race (cf. *Rm* 9:3), he was ready to shed even the last drop of his blood for their sake.

At a time when a person like Hegel diffused his derogatory conceptions of Africa, sustaining that Africans were bereft of history, ra-

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<sup>16</sup> AGENZIA FIDES, Saint Daniel Comboni Father and Apostle of Christian Africa, in <http://www.fides.org/en/news/pdf/852>, (21/08/2014).

tionality and a soul, St Comboni demonstrated his great confidence in the African and in his ability to take his life in his hands. His entire project was the regeneration of Africa by Africans themselves; his design was that of establishing centres and institutes in strategic parts of Africa for the formation of young Africans who would ensure the realization of this project:

The plan, therefore, which we propose is: the creation of innumerable Institutes for both sexes to surround the whole of Africa. These would be carefully situated at the least possible distance from the interior of the continent, in stable and fairly civilized areas, in which both Europeans and Africans could live and work. These men's and women's Institutes, each situated and set up according to the regulations of the canonical provisions, would admit young African men and women with the aim of educating them in the Catholic religion and in Christian civilization and of thus creating a group for men and one for women, destined each in its own way, gradually to advance and to spread into the African interior, there to plant the faith and civilization they have received.<sup>17</sup>

He acknowledged the human, intellectual, and religious capacities of these young Africans and was confident that after some period of formation in these centres, they would be able to carry on with the spread of Christian faith and civilization in the other parts and manage their own affairs:

Once the religious and civil education has been completed in the Institutes, the Administration will do everything in its power for the benefit of an individual student of either sex who leaves the jurisdiction of his or her Institute, giving help and advice so that they may be enabled to keep to the healthy religious and moral principles which were impressed on them through the teaching imparted to them. From each of these Institutes surrounding the great African peninsula there will be formed groups of men and women destined gradually to transfer themselves into Central Africa with the aim of initiating and consolidating there the saving

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<sup>17</sup> D. COMBONI, *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa*, 2764, 2765.

work of Catholicism, and of setting up Mission Stations from which will shine out the light of religion and civilization.<sup>18</sup>

Of outstanding importance is the type of education Comboni envisaged for the young Africans. It is not one just directed to the development of the intellect or to any isolated dimension of the human person; it is rather one which today has come to be known as integral formation, that is, a formation directed to the human person in the integrity of his dimensions – physical, spiritual, moral, social and intellectual. Cognizant that “mens sana in corpore sano”, Comboni was concerned not just with the spiritual good but with the social and material good of his subjects. According to him,

...in general, the education to be given to all the individuals of either sex who belong to the Institutes surrounding Africa must be characterized by the following goals: to impress and plant in their souls the spirit of Jesus Christ, integrity of behavior, firmness of faith, the principles of Christian morals, a knowledge of the Catholic catechism and the basic elements of necessary human knowledge. Besides this, all the men will be instructed in the practice of agriculture and in one or more skills of first importance; and every woman will be similarly educated in the most necessary of women’s skills. Thus the former will become honest, virtuous, useful and active men and the latter virtuous and capable mothers and wives. We believe that this active application to work, in which we want all the members of the African Institutes to be involved, will have a powerful influence for the moral and spiritual good of the individual Africans...<sup>19</sup>

From the body of those formed in this way will eventually emerge catechists, teachers, artists and instructors. Comboni envisaged the handover of the direction of the Church in Africa to the local clergy and religious, and advocated the establishment of Catholic universities in strategic parts of Africa to promote further intellectual formation of the indigenes. Such initiative at that period of history is

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 2771, 2772.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2770.

to be considered indeed monumental. Moreover, the fact that women were also included in this plan at the epoch remains phenomenal.

Comboni was born, grew up and carried out his ministry at a time when Africans were still decimated, subjugated and dehumanized by the pernicious Slave Trade perpetrated by the Western powers. His *Plan* was a project for an all-rounded emancipation of Africans from the different forces oppressing them. He desired to liberate them from the yoke of poverty and social evils, from the shackles of oppression and ignorance, and more especially from the bondage and blindness of one who has not known the salvation God has destined for all men in Christ. It is on record that in 1880, with unflagging determination, St Comboni made his eight and last journey to Africa, to unite with and encourage his missionaries in their continuing struggle against human slavery. For him, the African was part of a common human family with a common Father who is in heaven. He recognized "the unsullied treasures produced by her in such abundance" for the benefit of the human family.<sup>20</sup> These thoughts about Africa at that time in history really show that he was miles ahead of his age, and his dreams for Africa then definitely appeared unrealizable, if not crazy. However, the experience of years has proved that these were not just empty and illusory day-dreams but indices of a sober mind imbued with deep spiritual insight and angelic foresight.

### **A Look At The Present Circumstances Of Africa**

In these hundred and fifty years since the appearance of Comboni's *Plan*, Africa, as we have earlier pointed out, like the rest of the world, has undergone unthought-of transformations. We have also underscored the complexity of present-day Africa which makes any attempt at classifying it or penetrating the profundity of its reality illusive and practically impossible. The Fathers of the First Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa were surely correct in their observation that "Africa is a huge Continent where very diverse situations are found, and that it is necessary to avoid generalizations both in evaluating problems and suggesting solutions".<sup>21</sup> This does not

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2741.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 40.

imply that there aren't some common elements which could be applicable in varying degrees to different parts of Africa. In fact, the same Synod Fathers were candid to admit that "One common situation, without any doubt, is that Africa is full of problems. In almost all our nations, there is abject poverty, tragic mismanagement of available scarce resources, political instability and social disorientation. The results stare us in the face: misery, wars, despair. In a world controlled by rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected".<sup>22</sup>

One thing that has continued to haunt the African psyche is the horrendous experience of slavery and colonialism. Granted the fact that Africa and her people are today in an era termed *postcolonial*, the effects of colonialism has not left the African. Benedict XVI was clear that "Africa's memory is painfully scarred as a result of fratricidal conflicts between ethnic groups, the slave trade and colonization".<sup>23</sup> And as Onah incisively observes, "whether he wants it or not, the colonial experience is by now part of the African's understanding of himself. Contrary to what some promoters of cultural romanticism would want us to believe, the idyllic pre-colonial Africa no longer exists (not even among the Masai); it is no longer recoverable and perhaps, no longer even desired by Africans themselves today".<sup>24</sup> Moreover, notwithstanding the end of historical colonialism and relative political independence for different African nations, their freedom is still very much limited, as "Today too, the continent has to cope with rivalries and with new forms of enslavement and colonialism",<sup>25</sup> and often, neo-colonialism and new forms of slavery have proved to be more dangerous than their historical precursors.

But even though the situation is like this, hope is not lost for Africa. Pope Benedict XVI is optimistic that "There are thus many reasons for hope and gratitude. For example, despite the great pandemics which decimate its population – such as malaria, AIDS, tuberculosis

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Africae Munus*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> "Che lo voglia o no, l'esperienza coloniale ormai fa parte della comprensione di sé da parte dell'Africano. Contrariamente a quanto ci vogliono far credere alcuni fautori del romanticismo culturale, l'Africa idillica pre-coloniale non esiste più (nemmeno tra i Massai); non è più recuperabile e forse, neanche desiderata dagli stessi Africani oggi": G. ONAH, *op. cit.*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Africae Munus*, 9.

and others – diseases which medical science is still struggling to eliminate once and for all, Africa maintains its *joie de vivre*, celebrating God's gift of life by welcoming children for the increase in the family circle and the human community".<sup>26</sup> John Paul II made a similar observation, noting that "The peoples of Africa respect the life which is conceived and born. They rejoice in this life. They reject the idea that it can be destroyed, even when the so-called 'progressive civilizations' would like to lead them in this direction. And practices hostile to life are imposed on them by means of economic systems which serve the selfishness of the rich. Africans show their respect for human life until its natural end, and keep elderly parents and relatives within the family."<sup>27</sup> Really, one thing that cannot be removed from the Africans of all ages is their joy in living; they love life, enjoy it and celebrate it. Even in the most awkward and desperate of conditions, their joy in living is never compromised.

Another phenomenon inscribed in the DNA of Africans and with which they can never part is their deep religiosity. John Mbiti has described Africans as a notoriously religious people.<sup>28</sup> Comboni, following the mentality of his time, had reduced everything about this inalienable characteristic of the African to fetishism. But this has been proved a misnomer. Fetishism is a term first introduced by the Portuguese, that is, the first Europeans to establish commercial contacts with Africans in the 15th century, to describe the religious practices of the Africans. They called the objects and articles of religious value like talisman and amulets which some Africans whom they met used to wear *fetiçi*. And they imagined that the religion of these Africans was constituted by a cult and adoration of these objects. But the whole religious experience of the entire Africa cannot be reduced to a cult of such objects, which though elements of the religion, always occupy a secondary place. In fact, no religion of the world can be reduced to fetishism. The same is applicable to other derogatory terminologies which have been used to define the traditional religious reality of Africans like totemism, animism, paganism, antenatism, etc.

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<sup>26</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Africae Munus*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London-Ibadan-Nairobi-Gaborone 1969, 1.

Though African traditional religion may contain some elements of these –isms, none of them captures fully the profound reality of African religious reality; at most each can only give a very limited and partial view of what constitutes African traditional religion.<sup>29</sup>

This deep religiosity of the Africans accounts for the way Christianity has today gained formidable ground in many parts of Africa. Comboni, in his time, was concerned about spreading Christianity to the remotest parts of Africa, planting of churches and raising up an indigenous clergy and religious to pilot the affairs of these local Churches. Today, this dream seems to have been realized beyond his wildest imagination as empirical statistical data easily reveals Africa's ascendancy in the growth of Catholic presence. At the same time, Africa records the greatest increase in the growth of priestly and religious vocations. At a time when many parts of Europe and America are lamentably hit by steady decline and dearth of fresh vocations to the priesthood and religious life, Africa vibrantly basks under a providential and graced moment of bountiful vocational harvest. This phenomenal fecundity of the African Church in generating young priestly and religious vocations both testifies to the vitality of the Catholic Church in Africa and points to the great promise and hope which the continent holds for the universal Church in her evangelizing mission. Already, back in 1969, Pope Paul VI had told Africans, "Africans, you are now your own missionaries".<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging the dynamism of the African Church as God's grace to the Church, John Paul II had this to say: "it is a young and robust Church, full of hope and dynamism. Certainly it was once founded by European missionaries, by Italians, French, Germans, Polish and many others. Even today, there are different missionaries. But now this Church is prepared to become herself missionary, perhaps towards us. Should we lose our strength, it will be the Church of Africa that will come to our aid".<sup>31</sup> In *Ecclesia*

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. P.K. SARPONG, "Religione tradizionale Africana e inculturazione del messaggio Cristiano", *Religione e Sette nel mondo*, 3 (1996), 83-84.

<sup>30</sup> PAUL VI, Address to SECAM, Kampala, 31 September 1969, in AAS 61 (1969), p. 575.

<sup>31</sup> "è una Chiesa giovane e robusta, piena di speranza, di dinamismo. Una volta certamente è stata fondata dai missionari europei, da italiani, francesi, tedeschi, polacchi e tanti altri. Anche oggi ci sono diversi missionari. Ma adesso questa Chiesa si prepara ad essere essa stessa missionaria, forse verso di noi. Se a noi mancheranno le forze, sarà la Chiesa d'Africa



in Africa, he made it clear that Africans are “now responsible for the evangelization of the Continent and of the world”.<sup>32</sup> The African Church is of course gradually rising to this responsibility, as today, they are missionaries not only to themselves but also to the whole world. The same Pontiff acknowledged with gratitude that “The missionary Institutes founded in Africa have grown in number, and have begun to supply missionaries not only for the countries of the Continent but also for other areas of the world. A slowly increasing number of African diocesan priests are beginning to make themselves available, for limited periods, as *fidei donum* priests in other needy Dioceses — in their own countries or abroad”.<sup>33</sup> Really, as Onah pointed out, “The christian message is shaping the life and culture of Africa in a way that perhaps not even the Africans are yet capable of appreciating it enough”.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, with regard to the spread of the Christian faith, the major problem today in Africa is not about making Africans accept Christ, rather is about the great challenge posed by the unbridled proliferation of different Christian confessions. Apart from the necessary dialogue which the African Christians have to seek with other religions, particularly Islam and the African Traditional Religions, urgent dialogue with Pentecostalism in Africa today really appears imperative.

In fact, the Africa that Comboni had before him has so much changed today and still continues to evolve every day, it is in continuous movement. The centuries old observation of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman author, naturalist and philosopher, Plinius Secundus, “Ex Africa semper aliquid novum” (Out of Africa there is always something new)<sup>35</sup>, even today retains its validity. The cultural, social, political, economic and religious situations of the continent have experienced and are still undergoing enormous changes. Many of Comboni's dreams for Africa

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a venireci in aiuto”: Giovanni Paolo II, *Omelia di Giovanni Paolo II*, Parrocchia di San Bernardino da Siena – Domenica, 17 aprile 1994, in *Insegnamenti* 17/1 (1994), 945-946.

<sup>32</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 56.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>34</sup> G. ONAH, op. cit., 38: “Il messaggio Cristiano sta plasmando la vita e la cultura in Africa in un modo che forse nemmeno gli Africani sono ancora in grado di apprezzare abbastanza”.

<sup>35</sup> Cited by J. NJUE, “African Humanism ‘Ubuntu’. The Spiritual Lung for the Future of Humanity”, in A. Trevisiol (a cura di), *In ascolto dell’Africa*, op. cit., 27.

have been realized in terms of the development of their human resources. Africa can today boast of different institutions of learning, and a lot of her sons and daughters have been trained in different fields of human endeavour, and they are making very visible impacts, not just in Africa but in different parts of the globe.<sup>36</sup> And this leads us to a pre-eminently significant new feature which Comboni in his wildest dreams could never have conceived at his time; it is the so called phenomenon of globalization, that is “the *explosion of worldwide interdependence*”,<sup>37</sup> if we may borrow the expression of Benedict XVI. The whole world has become a little village, and Africa is part of this village. There is hardly anything that happens in one part of the world that does not find resonance and repercussion in other parts of the world. Even though one may not attribute the problems of Africa to globalization, it remains true that “there is no African problem today that can be understood without engaging the globalization discourse”.<sup>38</sup> As Benedict XVI affirms, “Like the rest of the world, Africa is experiencing a culture shock which strikes at the age-old foundations of social life, and sometimes makes it hard to come to terms with modernity”.<sup>39</sup> All these and more constitute the context and horizon of Africa today. Now, with all these changes in Africa and beyond, does Comboni’s *Plan* still have some relevance for Africa and her people? That is the thrust of the next and final part of our reflection.

### Relevance For Africa Today

As he was dying on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1881, aware that his missionary adventure would outlive him, St Daniel Comboni is reported to have said: “I am dying, but my work will not die”. Surely, his good works continue to live after him, in his writings, in his numerous sons and daughters spread in different parts of the planet, and not least, in the many souls he has touched, and especially in Africa. His *Plan for the*

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. L. MONSENGWO PASINYA, “Pour que l’Afrique puisse un jour assurer son destin dans l’histoire du monde”, in *La documentation catholique*, 2325 (2004), 1017-1022.

<sup>37</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> S.C. ILO, *The Church and Development in Africa*, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Oregon 2011, 163.

<sup>39</sup> *AM*, 13.

*Regeneration of Africa* also maintains vital validity, notwithstanding the innumerable changes that have taken place both in Africa and in the entire world since it was written. For one thing, the ultimate aim of the *Plan* was the enhancement of the Church's evangelizing mission, and this is an enterprise which remains perpetually valid for the entire Church until the birth of a new heaven. The Church of Christ cannot in any way evade her missionary vocation since she is by her very nature missionary. Consequently, it is not a question of whether Comboni's *Plan* still has relevance today, this is taken for granted; the question rather is how to contextualize his vision in the changed and continually changing circumstances of Africa and the world today.

A first important point to note in the application of Comboni's *Plan* in the context of today's Africa is the need for a purification of language. Definitely, if he were to live in the present epoch, he wouldn't be applying to Africa, her peoples and culture or to any human group and culture the numerous negative and derogatory categories that punctuate the different pages of his *Plan*. Contemporary studies have demonstrated the injustice of applying such epithets as "primitive", "savage", or "pagan" to peoples, races and cultures. There are really no people who can be said to be bereft of culture, and no culture can claim superiority over others. Granted the fact that some negative elements may exist in a particular culture, but they do not constitute the substance of the culture, and so cannot warrant a bracket denigration of the entire culture. There is also no culture that is pure. What is called for is an interaction of cultures so that through their reciprocal exchange and cross-fertilization, the negative accretions and elements of different cultures may be purified or eliminated, and then they may be reciprocally enriched by acquisition of positive elements found in other cultures.

This is exactly the idea behind the notions of inculturation and interculturalism prized dearly within Christian circles today. Christianity has a culture of its own, and is not a monopoly of any particular human culture, neither is it entirely alien to any culture. When it comes into contact with a culture, it injects Christian values into the culture while at the same time assimilating also the positive values of that culture which are not alien to it. According to John Paul II, inculturation is the "the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures

and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church".<sup>40</sup> The implication of this is that inculturation proceeds in a sort of reciprocal movement; the one who inculturates is at the same time inculturated. The reciprocity of inculturation brings about reciprocal acculturation in the sense that the action of inculturation, while on the one hand it inserts new elements in a given culture thereby enriching and consequently bringing about some changes in it, on the other hand, it at the same time produces in some way acculturation in the subject that inculturates insofar as the contact with a new culture makes it assume new elements from the encountered culture in order to establish a reciprocal communicability and comprehensibility.<sup>41</sup>

An ineluctable task which should really concern African missionaries and missionaries to Africa should be that of treasuring the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Africa and seeing how effective inculturation could be enhanced in the continent.<sup>42</sup> As Benedict XVI noted in his Homily at the opening of the Second Special Synod of Bishops for Africa, "Africa is the repository of an inestimable treasure for the whole world".<sup>43</sup> He went ahead to clarify that "When Africa's treasures are mentioned one immediately thinks of the abundant riches of the territory which have unfortunately become and continue to be a cause of exploitation, conflict and corruption. The Word of God, instead, makes us look at another patrimony: the spiritual and cultural heritage, which humanity needs even more than raw materials".<sup>44</sup> The illustrious Pontiff insisted that Africa "represents an enormous spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope".<sup>45</sup> This is not to imply that everything about African cultural and spiritual heritage is golden. There are certainly some negative elements which have to be purified or eliminated; and here lies the es-

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<sup>40</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter, *Slavorum apostoli*, (2 June 1985), n. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. C. LAUDAZI, "Andate e portate frutto". *Elementi di teologia spirituale della missione*, Teresianum, Roma 2009, 118.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. J. EGBULEFU, "Successful Inculturation of Christianity in Africa", *Seminarium* 32/1 (1992), 102-120; L. SANTEDI KINKUPU, *Dogme et inculturation en Afrique. Perspective d'une théologie de l'invention*, Karthala, Paris 2003.

<sup>43</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the opening of the Second Special Synod of the Bishops of Africa, (19 March 2009).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

sence of the inculturation: they will be purified through an authentic encounter with the Gospel.<sup>46</sup> As envisioned by Benedict XVI, "Open to the redeeming grace of the Risen Lord, Africa will thus be illuminated increasingly by his light and, letting itself be guided by the Holy Spirit, will become a blessing for the universal Church, making its own qualified contribution to building a more just and fraternal world".<sup>47</sup>

A really striking insight of Comboni is the project of regenerating Africa by Africans themselves. We can hardly overestimate the enduring relevance of that initiative. Amartya Sen in his capability approach to development stresses "individual agency", by which is meant "the ability of people to help themselves and to influence their world"<sup>48</sup>, people "being actively involved in shaping their own destiny".<sup>49</sup> For Paul VI, "Man is truly human only if he is the master of his own actions and the judge of his worth, only if he is the architect of his own progress".<sup>50</sup> Comboni recognized the agency of the Africans; he had confidence in the rich human resources of Africans and believed they can become architects of their future development. Comboni envisaged that these Africans be trained in Africa for two reasons: either they are unable to survive or fit into the way of life in Europe, or when they succeed and are formed outside their particular context, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for them to fit into their local situation when they come back. One may not contest the ineffable wisdom expressed in that provision. Definitely, pastoral effectiveness among their people requires that Africans be masters of their cultural milieu and environment, and this can be best achieved when they are formed within this same milieu. Nevertheless, limiting their formation just to the confines of Africa may not bring about the most wonderful results. Sometimes, it is important also to look at one's context from outside to see the things which one will never be able to see from inside. Ex-

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. J.U. OZIOKO, "African Spiritual Heritage and the Church's Universal Mission", in D. SCAIOLA (a cura di), *Percorsi di spiritualità, La missione nel mondo di oggi*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2014, 51-72.

<sup>47</sup> BENEDETTO XVI, Homily at the opening of the Second Special Synod of the Bishops of Africa.

<sup>48</sup> A. SEN, *Development as Freedom*, Anchor Books, New York 2000, 18.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> PAUL VI, *Populorum progressio*, n. 34.

perience has proved that, contrary to Comboni's submissions, Africans are able to survive, fit in and effectively pursue their goals in Europe, America or elsewhere. In as much as I wouldn't advocate that they remain outside perpetually or for unreasonable durations, it is my conviction that their formation outside Africa, when this is possible, will help them see their situation from outside, compare it also with what they see in other places, widen their horizon, and then enrich the contributions they can make for the growth of their continent. It is on record that the earliest African heroes who fought for their independence from colonial rule were not trained in Africa. It was their contact with other cultures and peoples that opened their eyes to their situations and equipped them to mortally fight for African liberation.

Moreover, even though the responsibility of the regeneration of Africa lies primarily on the Africans, the missionary responsibility of Africans is not limited to Africa. Just as Daniel Comboni, a European saw a sort of emergency situation in Africa and threw in his entire weight into remedying the situation, African missionaries should also be able to look beyond their geographical confines to other parts of the globe which call for missionary attention. John Paul II, as we have seen, did not mince words in entrusting them with this responsibility. Of course, Comboni at his time would never have dreamt of a new era of evangelization "particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel".<sup>51</sup> African missionaries have great responsibility in this era, and Comboni's *Plan*, I think, offers great impulse for this enterprise. At the same time, African regeneration does not have to be left only to Africans, they cannot be self-sufficient islands. There is need for mature, prudent and responsible exchange and reciprocity with other peoples and cultures.<sup>52</sup>

Of equally inestimable value is Comboni's design of constructing Institutes and Universities in different strategic parts of Africa. Edward Said has argued that "There has been no major revolution in

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<sup>51</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. S.C. ILO, *op. cit.* 126-145.

modern history without intellectuals".<sup>53</sup> Echoing him, G.I. Onah maintains that "even if one struck out the word 'modern' from this affirmation by Edward Said, it would still be true".<sup>54</sup> This is because "no society in history can record a transformation so radical as to be regarded as a revolution without the contribution of intellectuals (...) the intellectual raises questions, challenges the way things are and imagines how they could become".<sup>55</sup> Following Amartya Sen's conception of development as freedom, Onah concludes that "education, being a way to freedom, is both a *type* of development and a *means* of further development. Education brings out the best in a person. It polishes one's talents and increases one's potentials. Education enhances personal development. It also equips the individual to make a more personal and meaningful contribution to society".<sup>56</sup> All these express the perennial relevance of Comboni's vision for Africa. He desired the education of the African, and as we have earlier highlighted, not any type of education, but an integral education, one that touches every dimension of life. The collapse of the educational system in different parts of Africa today really calls for concern, and the establishment of institutions and universities dedicated to such holistic formation remains an imperative for African future development. How golden it would be if African missionaries could rise to the dreams of St Comboni in this direction!

It is significant that Comboni, in his *Plan*, called for the unification of the energies of different missionary congregations for the realization of his project. This is an evangelical strategy which appears very valid for the African Church today. We have acknowledged the fecundity of missionary religious vocations in Africa; congregations and institutes – both local and foreign – are multiplying in their numbers in Africa and a lot young people are responding to God's call and are embracing missionary religious vocations. We can hardly quantify the richness embedded in the charisms of these congregations and institutes for the Church in Africa. But then, is it possible in our day to

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<sup>53</sup> E. SAID, *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York, 1996, quoted in G.I. ONAH, *Intellectualism and the Development of a People*, A Publication of the Association of Nsukka Professors, Nsukka 2011, 24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 24-25.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

unite and harness all these riches for greater fecundity of the apostolate in Africa and beyond? Sometimes, it is the case that individually, these religious bodies work very effectively, but when they have to undertake common pastoral projects and programmes, it becomes very difficult. Comboni's intuition today makes a clarion call for greater collaboration and cooperation between different religious congregations and institutes in Africa. Our traditional African wisdom teaches that "*united we stand*"!

A final significant element I would highlight, which also expresses Comboni's profound missionary spirituality, is his communion with the Church. He never thought of realizing his project outside of or independent of the Church. His well-articulated *Plan* was addressed to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, and through this organ, to the Santa Sede apostolica. At the conclusion of the *Plan*, he humbly submitted that should the Holy See not deem it wise to approve of his design, he would be very happy to surrender fully to always adorable disposition of divine Providence, and that would also be occasion to loudly exclaim with the great Apostle: "*servi inutiles sumus*". What a humility! After the example of Christ who came not to do his will, but the will of the one who sent him (cf. *Jn* 6:38), Comboni was conscious of the fact that his *Plan* was not for the accomplishment of his personal mission, but for the realization of God's mission historically prolonged in and by the Church. This sounds a really vital message for Africa missionaries today, who, sometimes in their zeal for the propagation of the Gospel, may think that they can do without the Church and her leaders.

## Conclusion

To conclude, let us give ear to the exhortation of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Remember your leaders, who preached the word of God to you, and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, take their faith as your model" (*Heb* 13, 7). Our reflection on the legacy left by St Daniel Comboni in his *Pian* and its relevance for Africa after 150 years is not just a sterile encounter meant to warm the susceptibilities of the intellect, rather, it should serve as a catalyst of beneficial evolution, rousing us to a lively imitation of his evangelical fortitude. St Comboni has journeyed the path of life, and left indelible



footprints on the sands of time. He loved Africa with passion, and sought the integral good and development of Africa. In his homily during the canonization of Comboni, St John Paul II underlined that “We need evangelizers with the enthusiasm and apostolic outreach of Bishop *Daniel Comboni*, an apostle of Christ among the Africans. He relied on the resources of his rich personality and solid spirituality to make Christ known and welcomed in Africa, a continent he loved deeply. Going further, the saintly Pontiff added: “How could we fail, also today, to turn our gaze with affection and concern to those beloved peoples? Africa, a land rich in human and spiritual resources, continues to be scarred by many difficulties and problems.”<sup>57</sup> Comboni has handed the baton over to us, and he was convinced that his work shall not die. Shall we then allow this glorious flame entrusted to us to quench in our hands? Africa is waiting, and the whole world is watching, that the noble dreams of our hero may not end in illusion, but may continue to bear bountiful fruits for Africa and for the entire humanity, to the greater glory of God and His kingdom.

**Summary:** The hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Daniel Comboni's *Plan for the Regeneration of Africa* offered a propitious occasion for reflection on the enduring relevance of Comboni's project for the Church's evangelizing mission especially in Africa. Beginning with a documentation of the historical context within which Comboni articulated his *Plan*, the essay tried to situate the *Plan* in its context. Analysing the present circumstances of Africa, it concentrated on articulating some elements which highlight the conditions necessary in order that Comboni's *Plan* might maintain its relevance in today's Africa.

**Key Words:** Africa, Daniele Comboni, Church, Mission, Missionary Spirituality, Inculturation, Evangelization.

**Sommario:** Il centocinquantésimo anniversario del *Piano per la rigenerazione dell'Africa* di Daniele Comboni ha offerto una occasione favorevole per una riflessione sulla attualità permanente del progetto per la missione evangelizzatrice della Chiesa soprattutto in Africa. Partendo con una documentazione del contesto storico nel quale Comboni articolò il suo *Piano*, il saggio ha cercato di situarlo nel suo contesto. Analizzando le circostanze attuale dell'Africa,

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<sup>57</sup> JOHN PAUL II, “Homily for the Canonization of Three Blesseds, 5 ottobre 2003, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2003/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_2003\\_10\\_05\\_canonizations.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_2003_10_05_canonizations.html) (12/09/2014).

si è soffermato ad articolare alcuni elementi che mettono in evidenza le condizioni necessarie perché il Piano di Comboni potesse mantenere la sua attualità nell'Africa di oggi.

**Parole chiave:** Africa, Daniele Comboni, Chiesa, Missione, Spiritualità missionaria, Inculturazione, Evangelizzazione.