

UGANDA



THE LONG ROAD OF THE FIRST



On the occasion of his 90th birthday, many friends traveled to Gulu to spend a day with Fr. PIETRO TIBONI. An occasion to retrace the steps of fruitful life: from that first “yes” under the cherry trees to the one of today in Lacor hospital. Never forgetting that “infective joy” that he brought to Africa 50 years ago.

BY MARIA GIOVANNA COMETTI

Here in Uganda many of us know Fr. Pietro Tiboni or have at least heard him talk once. A Comboni missionary since 1957 in Sudan and since 1970 in Uganda, who has celebrated his 90th birthday on April 6th, 2015 and his 65th anniversary of Priesthood two days later. A group of friends decided to go to Gulu. He lives in a small community attached to the Lacor hospital in Gulu, and has been there since February 2014 because of his health problems.

The day of celebration still lives in the heart of Kizito Omala, a statistician from Kampala, “Twenty-two of us, adults and our children, set off to Gulu, trekked the bumpy and slippery road for almost all the day. No one was exhausted because of the company and the awaited encounter with our friend.” When we reached Fr. Tibo, we found him quite weak, spending a lot of time sitting in an armchair. Nevertheless, when you look at him you see a man certain of the love of Jesus and of his love for Him. We sang many songs for him, we also presented to him the Papal blessings, a letter from the apostolic Nuncio in Uganda and from Fr. Carron as well as cookies that he likes very much. We were very glad for Carron’s words that described Tibo so well: “The Lord has given you such time in your long life because in you, the memory of this first love became ever deeper and more fruitful. I want you to witness to us the freshness and vitality of the encounter

with Father Giussani, who brought the experience of contemporary Christ to your life. And God makes glad the youth of your heart.” Tibo looked at each of us and with a childlike face told us, “What I am is His and I love you with the heart of Jesus.” Already our hearts were full of gratitude.

MISSIONARY VOCATIONS. The following day, seven priests concelebrated Mass for his anniversary. Five of them have a special bond with Fr. Tiboni: Fr. Alfonso Poppi and Fr. Guido Cellana, both have discovered their missionary vocation through the encounter with him, Fr. Martin Agwee from Palabek, Fr. Sebastian Odong one of his first students in Kitgum Seminary and Fr. Edo Moerlin, fondly referred to as the “first born.” While we were following the celebration, it came clear to our eyes that since the early morning, Fr. Tiboni’s desire was to say the Mass, all inclined to encounter Jesus, present in the Eucharist. This unconditioned love for Christ reminded us of his extraordinary personal story as Tibo has described to us several times: “I still remember as a very clear picture: I was under two cherry trees, now they have been cut, on the hill, property of my parents, above the SS. Peter and Paul church in Tiarno. It was both a clear and even inexplicable feeling. I had a prayer from my heart, I asked Jesus to make me a missionary. This feeling was never as clear as it was that day. I spoke about this >>

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» with Fr. Vigilio, my parish priest, who took me seriously and decided to sustain that prayer of mine that was at the same time my vocation.” From that intuition, we know that a journey began in which Fr. Tiboni prepared himself to live for the mission *ad gentes*, in the footprints of Daniele Comboni, whose charism always fascinated him. “My Rome is in Africa,” he answered to the superior, Fr. Fabro, who wanted him to remain in Rome for further studies in philosophy. “I am a Comboni missionary and I admire all the Comboni missionaries, because they are ready to give their life.”

Now, looking at him through the witness of his friends, one can see the steps of his personal story. For this reason we decided to ask his friends to describe their lives in the light of their encounter with him.

INTO THE BUSH. Fr. Peter Malagasi, one of his students in Tore seminary, Sudan, remember how Fr. Tiboni was a great example for him, “He was teaching at the Seminary, but what struck me was his big charity. He was going on foot into the bush, even for 2 or 3 km, to pick a child affected with tropical ulcers, his name was Butili, he was carrying him up to his home, washing and dressing him, medicating him and feeding him. Then he was carrying him back to his village, and he was doing this gesture several times. People loved father so much: it was a miracle to see a white person who was carrying a black one on the shoulders.” In the very hot climate of Sudan, he moved around only with the white robe and nothing else because he often gave away his shirt and trousers. In case of necessity he asked a rich American brother whose wardrobe was well filled.

In 1964, all the missionaries were expelled from Sudan and Fr. Tiboni,



Here and on the previous page, Fr. Tiboni during some moments with the CL community in Uganda in the 90's.

after some years in Italy, was appointed to Kitgum, Uganda at the beginning of 1970. There he met a group of friends who had decided to leave Italy for the mission because of their experience lived in the Movement of Communion and Liberation. “Evidently from a mission’s point of view, Enrico and the others were not impressing me so much, they were like dwarfs in comparison with the Comboni Fathers. Nevertheless, I saw something in them that I could not find anywhere else,” confesses Fr. Tiboni, “the fact that they put Jesus Christ at the center of everything and the communion they lived among themselves were for me of an extraordinary importance and this was intriguing.”

Fr. Tiboni began to understand the origin of that friendship the following year, when Fr. Giussani came to Kitgum. He describes, “When I met him, my curiosity grew unlimited. I do not remember a word about our encounter, but the impression he made on me was of a presence of something exceptional. When I encountered Fr. Giussani, all my life

has been to recognize his charism. And so I do now, because it regards Christ and Jesus Christ is infinite, he is inexhaustible.”

“ARE YOU READY?” Fr. Giussani was so impressed by this encounter that he entrusted the group of missionary friends to Fr. Tiboni. Fr. Edo explains, “Thirteen days later Fr. Giussani was back in Milan, and fixed me an appointment. I will remember forever the welcome he gave me. His first words were, ‘Are you ready to obey Fr. Tiboni throughout your life?’ After three times, my third answer was unforgettable. ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘on your word I will pay out the nets, but now, will you tell me who Fr. Tiboni is?’ The answer Giussani gave was clear enough: ‘Fr. Tiboni is a Comboni missionary, I met him in Kitgum with our friends, and I acknowledged him a thousand time a hundred! Our mutual understanding was so great and deep, that I asked him to guide our friends in their presence in Uganda. I will ask Msgr. Manfredini to introduce you to the Bishop of Gulu for ordination and



incardination in Gulu Diocese.”

Three months later, Fr. Edo landed in Entebbe and Fr. Tiboni met him at the airport. His new life began on September 17, 1971. “During the 43 years so far, life can be read as a time to learn sonship, watching the way Tibo follows Giussani. A sentence of Laurentius the hermit can describe my existence, ‘Then I understood that I would have spent all my life in making memory of what had happened to me.’”

Fr. Alfonso Poppi is a priest of the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo and the parish priest of Kahawa Sukari in Nairobi. He left Italy following the invitation that Fr. Giussani had extended to the whole Movement requesting that some young graduates could join those who had already started a missionary presence in Uganda. That is how he began, in 1973, to teach mathematics and physics at a High School in Kitgum, the same school where Fr. Tiboni was giving lessons on Divinity. This man who was radiating a light, an infective joy and goodness struck Fr. Poppi. He was transparent, sincere,

ironic, and joyful and had a constant positive attitude towards all. He could correct everyone with a smile. “Just three months were enough for me to decide that my way would be the priesthood. On August 15, 1980 I was ordained priest.”

FOR THE GLORY. Michael and Anne Nganda have been married since August 1989. Michael teaches mathematics at Makerere University, and Anne is now a Public Relations Officer of a diocesan hospital, in Kampala. Anne describes, “The familiarity with Fr. Tiboni grew over time so that even when we came to realize that children were not forthcoming, he helped us to understand that the vocation to marriage is God’s call to contribute to His greater plan.”

“On my part as a man,” Michael adds, “was also a feeling of being less man! The cultural outlook was killing. In our culture if you do not have children you are as good as dead and it is something unbearable!” They remember Fr. Tiboni telling them that they did not marry for simply their selves but that they did so for the glory of Christ; if they got children it was for the glory of Christ and not having was also for the glory of Christ. “He used to say that God would give us very many children in the world, he was speaking about those that would come to Christ because of our witness. In our society and our tribe we are nothing, in the Catholic Church we have been introduced to the love of Christ that has helped us to look at ourselves with dignity and gladness.”

Adolf is a doctor in Kampala who has been following Fr. Tiboni’s health during the past three years. He adds that Fr. Tiboni’s personality really has something of the steadiness and durability that characterizes a “rock,” the meaning of his name. He is a missionary priest through and through who has fascinated Adolf by embrac-

ing everybody. “I am very grateful to him because he did not invite me to himself but to Christ who makes him happy and open to everything” as Fr. Tiboni witnesses, “In the morning I never know what the Movement is, because the Movement is the encounter with Christ. I do not know during my day how I will meet Christ, but I ask that I may meet Him and in the evening I know what the Movement is, how I encountered Christ and there is always something new. This waiting means always to start again.”

LIVING THE PRESENCE. Rose Busingye explains, “When Fr. Tibo spoke to me about the Movement of Communion and Liberation, I did not understand what it was, and so he gave me an article by a certain Giussani. I remember that I was struck by the fact that the Italian priest asserted that God had become flesh, of our same flesh. In front of this affirmation I ran immediately to Fr. Tibo to ask him if that flesh had to do with my flesh. He answered yes. ‘Because if man were able, God would not have come to Earth. Instead, he came for me and for you.’ From that moment I began to look at God as something interesting, because before I had not thought that God could not mix with me, a sinner. It seemed impossible. I began to think that maybe God could have a place for me in his heart.”

Even now when you ask Fr. Tiboni what experience he is living, given that he is dependent on others for everything and is living a particular solitude, he replies with a feeble but assertive voice, “I am living in the condition to experience the presence of Jesus Christ as savior, and I taste his death and Resurrection as something real for me now. I thank the Lord who gives me all this for Him and for the Mission, and also for you all.”