
World Mission Day. Zambia: Sister Patrizia and the "judo club" for survivors of abuse

There are times when the mission follows daring and unpredictable paths, making the most of missionary creativity to attain exceptional goals. That was the experience of Comboni missionary Sr. **Patrizia Di Clemente**, born in 1978, serving in Zambia until 2019. She founded a martial arts club in Lusaka for girls survivors of violence and abuse. "When an enterprise is necessary and for a good purpose, there is always a way to make it happen", she declared. "When I arrived in Lusaka in 2008, I soon realised that with regard to the tragedy of abuse the situation of parentless young girls (among them were 13 and 14 year olds) was dramatic," Sr. Patrizia recalled. "A group of 90 orphan girls who had arrived from the villages were entrusted to my care, and I felt that they had to be able to defend themselves." *These orphaned youths had been placed "under the guardianship" of uncles, grandparents and relatives who employed them as domestic servants in their homes, "where they were frequently at risk of abuse, manipulation and even exploitation and violence", said the Comboni nun.* Sister Patrizia was born in Bergamo, Italy, she has a degree in educational science and is currently completing a postgraduate course in relational counselling in Italy. Her commitment to addressing the psychological and integrated development of the human person is a priority for her. "I started thinking that I could open a judo club just for them," she said. This martial art has its inherent rules and an inspiring underlying philosophy: concentration, self-balance and self-esteem contribute to overcoming obstacles", explained the Comboni nun. "A young girl can develop the skills to knock down an older boy. This gives her strength and it becomes a source of self-esteem."



Until then, the Comboni Missionary Sisters had offered them sewing classes and literacy courses, but "we thought it was just as important for orphaned young girls to be able to defend themselves." "One day", she recalls, "a 19-year-old Italian volunteer showed up at the mission and asked if she could have a month's work experience in the summer. When she arrived I discovered that she was a judoka", said Sister Patrizia. "That's when it all started: we launched a pilot workshop. We borrowed some tatamis from the Franciscans who were already running an advanced judo course in Zambia."

Training in martial arts fosters discipline, and we eventually extended martial arts classes to children with disabilities, including deaf-mutes and those with visual impairments, and it worked for them too." Sister Patrizia contacted the Zambian Judo Association. They provided the Comboni Sisters with uniforms and "tatamis", the wooden mats used as flooring for the entire gym. The practice of judo has brought out many young women's skills and talents. They found their way and inspiration for their future. *"I started studying the local idiom when I first arrived in Africa," Sister Patrizia remembers. "I spent entire months immersed in the local culture and traditions."* There were rites of passage and initiation rites to learn, the meaning of birth and death, events that mark the stages of life with the participation of the entire community. Sister Patrizia described the hard work and the creativity involved in integrating these traditional initiation rites with the teachings of the Gospel. "We invited to the mission the older members of the community and the sages tasked with accompanying the youngest in rites of passage. Frequently the 'guardians' were responsible for the parentless girls, but the latter were also at risk of being manipulated by them", she remarked. *"We therefore decided to approach the first two initiation stages using a combination of elements of nature and creation, disregarding the more physical and extreme practices, in order to convey positive values to the girls."* It was the missionaries' role to accompany them in this process. "Before the girls performed the rite, we did it ourselves with the Sisters. We prepared the room, with clay figurines, sculptures and paintings narrating the different stages of a person's life according to the values of the tribe. It all starts with the relationship with God, with Creation, with respect for oneself and for others."

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