

THE “SOCIETY OF SAINT PAUL” 50 YEARS AFTER VATICAN II COUNCIL

As for all religious Institutes, also for the Society of Saint Paul seeing again her history 50 years after the Ecumenical Council Vatican II leads to observation of a contrasting picture, with lights and shadows, which on one hand offer encouragement, and on the other makes her to necessarily reflect in view of a renewed creative thrust.

After the initial misunderstandings...

The Vatican II Ecumenical Council has certainly marked for us an explicit recognition of the goodness of the ideas of the Primo Maestro.

Already many years have passed when the Sacred Congregation of the Religious had written to Fr. Alberione – in 1921 – that it did not see the usefulness of founding a religious congregation for the apostolate of the press; on the contrary, it considered that the press as an apostolate was not fit for the nature of the religious congregation, which enjoyed a theological respect that could not be applied to the press, much less to the press of newspapers and magazines. Still in 1922 the same Sacred Congregation writes textually to the Bishop of Alba, Mons. Re:

«...After pondering well everything, however, it does not believe it to be the case to allow the foundation of a new religious Institute, **much more that the purpose to which the above-mentioned Society tends, in truth a very noble one, can be easily attained even if it remains as a simple union of pious ecclesiastics and laypeople**».

We know that Fr. Alberione had then accepted a compromise while waiting for a clarification to arrive. On his own, he had continued to say and to write that the press apostolate was of “divine institution,” and that the apostolate of the Paulines was simply a continuation of what God himself had done in writing the commandments, in making the prophets write, then the Apostles, then the Fathers of the Church, the Popes and on and on until the Pauline institution.

In the words of our Founder, everything was *editio*, edition, and because of this he did not want that the word “edition” be removed from our logo. In what sense Fr. Alberione understood the word “edition,” we can read both in his first

book *Apostolato stampa* (whose imprimatur signed by Mons. F. Chiesa goes back to 1933), and then in his second book *L'Apostolato dell'Edizione* of 1944. It was only after 1960 that Fr. Alberione succeeded in making inserted in the constitutions of the FSP and the SSP, as the sole end of the Institutions, the apostolate of mass media or instruments of social communications.

...The encouraging aspects...

The Ecumenical Council Vatican II, through the decree *Inter mirifica* of 1963, has sanctioned the need to utilize the means of social communication. It has done this even though with various difficulties, visible by the fact that the text has been approved as a decree and not as a constitution, and perhaps even more in the strong concern about the right use of these instruments and in respect of ethics, present in *Chapter I* of the document (*Norms for the right use of the means of social communications*, nn. 3-12].

More advanced steps have been done through *Communio et progressio* of 1971 – the *Pastoral instruction* “for the application of all the principles and norms of the Council regarding the instruments of social communication” – willed by n. 23 of IM; and above all through *Redemptoris missio* of Pope John Paul II in 1990, which invited overcoming a purely instrumental vision of *mass media* and considering them as a reality of communication and culture; to then arrive to the Pastoral instruction *Aetatis novae* redacted by the Pontifical Council of Social Communications in 1992, which not only inserts communication in pastoral programming, but reminds that communication concerns transversally all the pastoral activity of the Church.

Following these events, our *Constitutions and Directory* of 1984 insert with full title the instruments of communication in the project of ecclesial evangelization of our Congregation and state:

2. The Society of Saint Paul is a religious clerical congregation of apostolic life. It has for its end the perfection of charity of its members, attained through the spirit and practice of the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and fidelity to the Pope, in common life, following the norm of the present constitutions, **and the evangelization of men through the apostolate using the means of social communications.**

68. To make effective this calling **we use for preaching the instruments of social communications: press, cinema, radio, television, audiovisuals, minimedia and the like, privileging those for the masses.** They specify and empower our apostolic presence, giving to it an immediate social repercussion.

All of that constitutes for us, evidently, a motive of satisfaction, because we have then even a theoretical recognition of the validity of the use of *mass media*. This victory has then received a solemn stamp of approval with the **beatification of Fr. Alberione** in 2003.

To that we can add other consoling facts, like the development of the Institute in many nations, to the point of shifting its axis of greater influence from Europe to other continental areas. Or a better systematization of the international apostolic Organisms that handle our apostolate: it is enough to think of the activity of the **CTIA** through the GEC, the CAP-ESW and CIDEP. Nor can we forget the highly productive action of **So.Bi.Ca.In.** in the translation and dissemination of the Bible in many countries of the world.

In vocational and formative pastoral activity: the creation of the **SIF** and of the innovative Institutes of research in the field of communications (in Brazil, Philippines, India, Mexico, etc.). Motives of joyful trepidation are the openings of new Pauline presences in Bolivia in Central America, in Ukraine, the collaboration among the Circumscriptions and fusions in other areas of the world.

...And the providential “challenges” of today’s world

If these events that have taken place in our Institute and inside the Church constitute a light for our journey, we cannot however hide **the shadows** that have accompanied us and still do. They are visible in the lessening of the number of our members; in the closing of not a few houses; in the difficulties that cross our apostolate in some nations (we could say, especially in nations that boast of a more elevated culture like Italy, Germany, England, etc.); in the slowness with which we are entering the new means of communication, while other Institutes have shown themselves to be more agile and more lucid than us; in the fact that we have not yet succeeded in giving a new physiognomy to the “Pauline house,” surpassing the “Alba model” from which for so many years we have drawn inspiration and of which perhaps we have remained prisoners.

The presence of an “apostolic visitor” some years ago, has left some unavoidable draggings that are still visible among us.

And above all, there has been an enormous diminution in the number of Paulines directly committed in the carrying out of the Pauline apostolate. We could say, in the face of so many desertions and difficulties, perhaps absurdly, that today there is a real need for a school of redaction, even more than during the time of Fr. Alberione, to teach Paulines **how** one writes, **how** a research is done, **how** one enters the **mass media** etc. If we think over the words of our Founder, who did not want a publishing house but **Pauline writers**, we cannot help but notice with displeasure how so many occasions have passed by without producing any fruit.

Today however, – perhaps with a little more ingenuity – people are accustomed to say that there are no problems, but that there are only **challenges** and that these can be/must be transformed into **resources** and **opportunities**. On account of which, obviously, not everything is yet lost. The «Mi protendo in avanti...» (I strain forward) is applicable also for us, and above all the «...si sentì profondamente obbligato a prepararsi...» (he felt himself deeply obliged to prepare himself) (AD 15) which Fr. Alberione established as his duty during that long night of 1900.

Of course, we have an enormous advantage compared to Fr. Alberione, because we have more means and more possibilities. Moreover, we cannot say that orientation towards work is missing. In fact, if we return to the conciliar sources, reading with greater attention the allocution ***Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*** with which Pope John XXIII opened the Vatican II Council, we would find phrases like the following:

“It is necessary first of all that the Church never take away her eyes from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the ancients; at the same time she needs to also look at the present, which has involved new situations and new ways of living, and has opened new ways for the Catholic apostolate.”

And immediately after:

“Because of this the Church has not remained indifferent to those wonderful discoveries of human ingenuity, [*mirandis illis humani ingenii inventis*] and to that progress of ideas that we enjoy today, neither has she been incapable of appreciating them honestly.”

It is in the following chapter of *GME*, n. 6, that innovative roads are opened for the “teaching” apostolate of the Paulines. In it the theme of communication is applied with concreteness to the pastoral action of the Church:

“The twenty-first Ecumenical Council... wants to transmit as integral, not played down or distorted, the Catholic doctrine... We, in fact, must not only keep this precious treasure – that is, ‘dogma, morals and cult’ – as if we were concerned with antiquity alone, but with vivacity and without fear we must advance in the work that our time requires, pursuing the journey that the Church has traveled for almost twenty centuries... At present it is necessary that the same doctrine be examined more widely and more deeply and souls be more fully steeped and informed about it, as ardently wish all who are sincere supporters of the Christian, Catholic and apostolic truth; it is necessary that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which must be given a faithful assent, be deepened and displayed according to what is asked by our times. One in fact is the deposit of Faith, that is, the truths that are contained in our venerable doctrine, another is the manner with which they are announced, always however in the same sense and in the same meaning. Great importance is to be given to this method and, if necessary, applied with patience; that form of exposition must be adopted which corresponds more to the magisterium, whose character is mainly pastoral.”

Every word of this last paragraph is for us to be reflected upon and above all to be applied in the various formative and apostolic moments. It is not a matter anymore of solely *printing and disseminating*. The “doctrine” must be ‘more widely and deeply’ studied, and the souls ‘more fully steeped in it and informed

about it'; that is, there must be an adhesion to the 'doctrine,' its own metabolism so as to arrive at an 'exposition according to what is asked by our times' [*pervestigetur et exponatur, quam tempora postulat nostra*].

Three are the terms of the Pauline commitment: accurate **deepening**, and, after an attentive study of **what the times** are asking for, an **exposition** (= communication) that is coherent with respect to the doctrine and to the recipient. The *GME* insists on the correlation between the "deposit of the Faith" and the "**manner**" with which these venerable doctrines "**are announced.**" And, insisting on the "manner" it says: "Great importance is to be given to this method and, if necessary, applied with patience." It is not just a matter of being attentive to the new means, but also of correct valorization of the means and languages in favor of contents and recipients toward whom we lend our service of evangelization. Here is found the heart of the "teaching" work of the Paulines.

The last criterion that must guide our "manner" of making apostolate is the "pastoral" one (on the steps of the Council), and on this we must still work.