

The twofold commitment of “creative fidelity”

When we indicate to the Paulines of today “creative fidelity” to the charism of the Founder, we point out to them a double but not simple commitment. A commitment that could be reformulated in these terms: “Creative fidelity to the charismatic fidelity of the Founder.” Therefore, not only fidelity to the charism of the Founder, but also fidelity to the creativity with which the Founder has put in motion the Pauline charism.

Among the many aspects of creative fidelity that interrogate us with force, we choose two over which we pause: the charismatic substance of the Society of Saint Paul and the double expression priest-disciple.

The making of the Pauline religious Congregation

The choice of Fr. Alberione to make of Saint Paul a religious congregation took place in a definitive way when he was a bit less than a forty-year old¹, and after some hesitation in the course of which he seemed to accept even the idea of constituting the Society of Saint Paul as a society of common life (today: *Society of apostolic life*). A trace of this process, delineated with a description more ideal than historical, typical of a retrospective look, is found in the following text taken from AD:

“The foundational project: from organization to common religious life

He thought first of a Catholic organization of writers, technicians, booksellers, Catholic resellers; and [to which] to give direction, work, spirit of apostolate... towards the year 1910 he made a definitive step. He saw a greater light: writers, technicians, propagandists, but *men and women religious*. On one hand, lead souls to the highest perfection, the one of the person who practices also the evangelical counsels and added to the merit of apostolic life. On the other hand, to give more unity, more stability, more continuity, more supernaturality to the apostolate. To form an organization, but a religious one; where the forces are united, where the dedication is total, where doctrine will be more pure. It's a Society of souls who love God with all their mind, forces and heart. [cf Mk 12,30]; they offer themselves to work for the Church, happy with the divine reward: “You will receive the hundredfold, possess eternal life” [cf Mt 19,29]. He therefore was greatly happy considering that part of these souls are militants of the earthly Church and part are of the triumphant Church in heaven” (AD 24).

The eye of the historian interprets this passage of the *Charismatic history of the Pauline Family* rather as a “declaration of intent,” not all of them already realized, but which for Fr. Alberione had instead to be a sure platform upon which to found his apostolic work. Just accepting this “declaration” on the part of his children, expresses with full title the will to be “faithful” and the predisposition to be “creative.” The ideal, in fact, is openly founded on the free divine action (“On one hand, lead souls to the highest perfection

¹ Cf GIANCARLO ROCCA, *La formazione della Pia Società San Paolo (1914-1927). Appunti e documenti per una storia*, in *Claretianum XXI-XXII* (1981-1982), pp. 475-690 + 8 tables. In particular pp. 506-508 and the documents nn.30 and 31 at pp. 562-572.

[...]. On the other, to give ... more supernaturality to the apostolate”). Not only must the creativity of Fr. Alberione be invoked, but also the creativity of God, that creativity that only “souls of the highest perfection” can put to action. Even the historian recognizes the (theological) logic of the Alberionian argument, subjected to protocol, certainly, “with sagacity afterwards,” but is it not typically human to progress in one’s thought, and if necessary to change one’s idea?

Now, it is exactly this progression “towards” an objective – for Fr. Alberione it is to put himself as a mediator between the twofold objective of love for God and love for men – that weighs with all its coercive force on the creativity of the Pauline. Fr. Alberione will offer to his sons and daughters motivations and strong models and not historically polluted: the Pauline spirituality is not “outdated,” it is not conditioned by localized practices, it is not surpassable. The apostolate, on its part, does not fade because it is not tied to means historically conditioned and asks of the apostles (of us) to stay at the level of the times, always putting ourselves – without uncertainties and pause – at the service of men in order to evangelize them through the most appropriate means. Fr. Alberione has asked the most, in order to obtain at least a good apostolic creativity: “The Pauline life has in reality few external mortifications, but it requires a full continuity of sacrifices: in reality, the apostolates require heavy work. They require a habit of sacrifice and generous dedication” (AD 38).

A twofold expression: priest and disciple, one apostolate

One of the areas in which creativity must still be played out is that of the rapport “priest-disciple.” Historically, three stages can be delineated. In a first moment Fr. Alberione attributes the press apostolate to the priest, in all its phases: redaction, technique and propaganda. In a second stage, redaction goes to the priest and propaganda (this one considered close to oral preaching) and the printing properly called to the disciple. Then in a third moment, the priest’s role is redaction while to the disciple go the (printing) press and propaganda. In this frame, redaction becomes the work typical of the priest, precisely because at the base of the apostolic edifice stands the priest whose task, oral preaching, is transferred to written preaching.

This distinction applies now only in canonical terms to the strictly liturgical preaching (the *homily*, cf CIC, can. 767 § 1: “is reserved to the priest or to the deacon”) that interprets in restrictive terms the preceding can. 766 which says: “The laity can be allowed to preach in a church or in an oratory, if in determinate circumstances necessity requires it or in particular cases usefulness counsels it... “.

Fr. Alberione dedicates nn. 39-42 of AD to the description of the disciple. We note in the Founder a clear effort to theorize. However, only historical evolution will know how to transform into Pauline religious praxis.

[39] ... Hence the Lord has distributed throughout the world many generous souls, who he calls to himself to perfection at the side of the priesthood...

[40] And moreover, why cannot they still be made companions in the apostolate? Like one day there arose Institutes in which the religious Priest found the road open to works of zeal and the care of souls, today it is necessary to give to the lay Brother participation in the zeal of the Priest, to give to him almost a priesthood!

[41] The Priest who writes, technical work that the Brother does who multiplies and spreads. This is okay. “*You are a holy people, a royal priesthood!*” Closely

connected in the religious life, Priest and Brother, united in the same apostolate, to prepare for themselves the heavenly crown.

[42] These are the Disciples! Preaching with the use of modern means by the Priest frees itself from a slavery with common workers and multiplies indefinitely; the work of the Disciple which elevates, makes happy and multiplies his activity; God is glorified, the Gospel is announced, souls are enlightened.

The evolution of the rapport priest-disciple has followed the road common to all the religious institutes that had, with various denominations, lay brothers: at first making them participate in some way in the life of the institute, then granting to all the right to vote (active and passive) with the exclusion of the office of the superior at various levels, which in a clerical institute is reserved to the priest.

For us, a particular moment of this journey was constituted by the Special General Chapter of 1969-1971, when by some was floated the possibility of granting the diaconate to the disciples. That manifested, on one side, an evolution of the disciple seen as participation in the priesthood; on the other it left basically intact the distinction between priest (redaction) and disciple (press and diffusion).

Today the theorizing of the Founder is entrusted to our hands and to our “creativity.” We have passed from disciples inserted only as “adjuncts” within the General Council to their actual presence with full titles. We have passed from the disciple-worker to the disciple coordinator and manager.

Today more than ever is incontestable the indissoluble union between the priest and the disciple – and not only in the apostolic area –, for which the single expression (priest or disciple) cannot be lived autonomously, neither can it be thinkable in the various formative segments (human-religious, cultural, spiritual and apostolic) for a separate journey that does not take into account the single Pauline vocation.

It is true that the apostolic horizon of the disciple has widened more, together with his formation, to the area of his responsibilities, while the priest has not always been able to update himself and specialize. Thus, in some cases, an invasion of the field on the part of the priest in areas non genuinely of his competence. Now, between the two, that which requires perhaps to be focalized in order to overcome eventual crises of creativity or identity could be the Pauline priest.

It is the charismatic creativity of a religious Institute like ours that questions us. To respond and to attempt new ways in the open seas is not temerary. It is rather evangelical: “Put out into deep water with your companions and lower your nets for a catch” (Lk 5,4).

For deepening

GIANCARLO ROCCA, *La formazione della Pia Società San Paolo (1914-1927). Appunti e documenti per una storia*, in *Claretianum XXI-XXII* (1981-1982), pp. 475-690 + 8 tables b/n.

On the theme twofold expression: “priest and disciple” cf *Schede di riflessione e di studio: L'identità del paolino nella sua duplice espressione “sacerdote-discepolo”*, in www.paulus.net (Organismi del Governo, SIF, L'identità del Paolino: Sacerdote-Discepolo, 21 gennaio 2009).