

Presentation of Fr. Alberione's book
'DONEC FORMETUR CHRISTUS IN VOBIS'

by **Fr. Andres R. Arboleda**

Introduction

As if to mark and assist the development of that awareness of being Pauline Family, something we mentioned in the preceding reflection, and as if a re-enforcement of the verbalization of the Pauline Family Unitary Project, during these last few years, there have been a rediscovery and a growing interest on a booklet that Fr. Alberione wrote and wanted published in 1932. The booklet is entitled, "Donec formetur Christus in vobis" ("Until Christ be formed in you" [Gal 4:19]).

Basically, this booklet is a strong confirmation of the Unitary Project we have been talking about. I personally recommend, at this stage of our history as Pauline Family, that we study this book as well as the book on the Unitary Project as they mark the history and growth of our Pauline Family as well as manifest to us how we have been faring and the direction to take amidst the many changes and challenges that are going on in our Congregations, in the Church and in the world, more notably due to the decrease of the number of vocations joining us, the increase of elderly and sick members and in the world of media itself.

In fact, I believe we have reached a stage in our history when we must ask questions not only regarding our charismatic identity but also our place in the Church as well as in the world of mission and apostolate.

Somehow, "Donec formetur" leads us back to that very issue that occupies the central point of religious consecration: holiness, becoming saints. If during the time of Fr. Alberione becoming saints was the matter-of-fact accepted goal of consecrated life, today it seems that we have become too shy to admit it and, much less, talk about it, in spite of the fact that this objective hasn't changed at all. At the back of our minds, there still is that longing that we be saved if not become actually saints. Thus, we go back to the essential elements of our spirituality so that we might let this longing become our life, perhaps, on a different level of understanding. Thus we long for a clear-cut definition of our being and of our spirituality and mission which, fortunately is provided us by this statement: "To give to the world Jesus Christ, Way, Truth, and Life."

The first generation of Paulines did not need that definition we seek. They had Fr. Alberione and all that they had to do was listen to him and be infected by his zeal and spirit.

The second generation of Paulines, represented by those Fr. Alberione called for the 1-month spiritual exercises (the elders) in 1960 and their immediate successors, were too busy building the infrastructures and organizing so that it would only be in the Special Chapters of the 70's that focus is again on our identity and spirituality.

With the decrease of new vocations, the growing old and getting sick of many of our members and the advent of information technology, we realize that we ought to change if we want to remain the same, we ought to go back to our roots in order to main-

tain the charismatic and spiritual legacy of the Founder and then look ahead with confidence regardless of the new trials and challenges we face. We now feel the need to refresh our grasp on our spirituality and charism so we may renew our enthusiasm and determination and so that we may make them appealing to the youth of today. Likewise we need to review our apostolate if we want to remain relevant to the changed and changing Church today.

It is because of these that the rediscovery and study of “*Donec Formetur*” assume their importance today.

History of the publication

“*Donec formetur Christus in vobis*” is a booklet, 10 x 16 centimeters or 5 x 7 inches in size, having but 110 pages. It is composed of short chapters, generally containing brief outlines of reflections or meditations that are usually numbered 1 to 3. If there was the need, Fr. Alberione further divided paragraphs into points marked by small letters a) and so forth.

The original language used is, of course Italian, and the terminologies and concepts were those of the theology and spirituality of his time: early 1920’s onwards, long before the changes that Vatican Council II would promote. The statements are very concise and require reflection. Generally, these are taken from the New Testament and often in Latin.

Published in 1932 by Fr. Alberione, the booklet did not quite have that response Fr. Alberione must have hoped. Perhaps this was because the need for it was not yet felt or perhaps the booklet itself is not meant to be read the way other spiritual books are read, or perhaps because it was highly patterned after St. Ignatius Loyola’s “*Spiritual Exercises*” that it required more than just reading as it is more of a guide for retreats. If ever, when rediscovered, the booklet was subject to study or reference material for spiritual exercises and retreats as well as for formation.

This is understandable because the language and presentation are not easy and inviting. They were after all notes made by Fr. Alberione during the many 1-month spiritual exercises he made and subsequently refined during the years before its publication.

The book is not an easy reading even for Italian-speaking Paulines who, in effect, already lived the substance of what Fr. Alberione wrote. For Paulines of different language, mentality and culture, the book is a veritable challenge. Consider, for example, that the theology and spirituality Fr. Alberione referred to have already undergone the impact of the changes effected by Vatican Council II.

To make the book easy to read and understand, Fr. Antonio da Silva of the Center of Pauline Spirituality first considers “*Donec Formetur*” as a proposal for a life program. Then, he asserts that this life program and the book itself assume greater weight when we confront them with the way Fr. Alberione went through the different stages of his life and the way he lived what he wrote. It is for this that in order to have a better grasp of the significance of the book, we somehow need to also know at least the basic features of Fr. Alberione’s life and how he responded to the charism he received.

For our purposes, however, the long introduction written by Fr. da Silva is worth reading attentively. It is furnished with abundant notes and references that are either unpublished documents or unknown or little historical facts. For example, the introduction

traces how Fr. Alberione developed Pauline Spirituality itself, the devotion to Jesus Master Way, Truth, and Life, to St. Paul and Mary, Queen of Apostles.

The introduction also traces the influence of other spiritualities on Fr. Alberione and how he took the best from these and made them components of our spirituality. Fr. Alberione, if we may make a comparison, was like the Japanese who would take inventions from other sources and produce completely new products that would flood the market.

For our purposes, let us state that Fr. Alberione drew much of the method and content of Pauline Spirituality not just from St. Paul but also from the spiritual and theological heritage of his time, from the writings of authors like Swoboda, Krieg, Canon Chiesa, and others as well as from the experiences of men like St. Benedict, St. Dominic, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Charles Borromeo and others. He also drew much light from the Magisterium of the Church of his time like Pope Leo XIII's *Tametsi Futura*, and others.

More in detail, Fr. Alberione learned from Krieg the three ways contained in "Donec formetur": The way of Purification – Theology of the Father; the Way of Illumination—Theology of the Son and the Way of Union—Theology of the spirit. From Canon Chiesa, he learned the three faculties of man that corresponded with Jesus qualifications: Truth-mind, Way-will, Life-heart. Most important of all, is what he drew from St. Paul: Holiness is incarnating Christ through the transformation of the mind, will, and heart to that of Jesus. Anent to this is the understanding that spiritual life is a relationship between the Trinitarian God and the soul in a vital dialogue from where follows Christification or holiness.

It is further good to note here that Fr. Alberione's spiritual journey reveals much on how he has formulated our spirituality. He captures this in the very first paragraph of "Abundantes Divitiae" (AD 1).

"Were he to comply with your request and tell you something of what he still remembers and that you consider useful for the Pauline Family, he would have to recount a twofold story: [first] the story of God's Mercy... And then, the humiliating story of his lack of conformity to the overabundance of divine love..."

The dialogical experience – God calls, I respond; God calls further, I respond further – that characterize Fr. Alberione's experience, is latent in the "Donec Formetur". And this is a novelty in spiritual life as it puts at the center the Triune God and we as the beloved in a relationship of love that transforms us into God, the Lover. This we shall see further on in our reflection.

The structure and the content of *Donec Formetur* practically capture the content and the method with which we are transformed into Christ. If only for this, we can say that the study of the book is a must for every Pauline priests, disciples, sisters, consecrated lay persons and lay persons, in short, for all.

Already published in Italian, now we are waiting for the Spanish and English translations already in the press. The book is especially recommended for Spiritual Exercises, especially the 1-month kind, and for novices.

Now let's have a look at the contents of the book.

The contents of "Donec Formetur"

Essentially, the booklet traces the path to Christification. It is made up of five Chapters with an initial preamble, after the mode of the “Spiritual Exercises” to which Fr. Alberione refers, suggesting that it is best used for spiritual exercises.

Fr. Alberione writes in the Preamble:

“The Spiritual Exercises and the Novitiate are *exercises* of virtues, of pious practices, of divine thoughts, in order to let the old man die and let Jesus Christ live in us.

“After having purified the mind, the will and the heart, we need to exercises our mind in the divine thoughts, in that piety, and virtues with which afterwards to continue our life and enter into eternity” (DFst, 9).

The body of the book is made up of principal chapters:

1. Via purgativa (the way to purification) – Glory to the Father
2. Via illuminativa (the way to illumination) – Glory to the Son
3. Via unitiva (the way to union) – Glory to the Holy Spirit.
4. Mezzi di grazia (means of grace)

Added to these, too, are Nozioni utili (useful notions) as well as an appendix containing those notes included in the handwritten notebook but were excluded from the published book.

Each of the principal chapters contains a series of reflections now in very concise and outline form related to the subject matter. Each short reflection is made up of paragraphs numbered 1 to 3. Rigorously, Fr. Alberione followed the pattern Truth, Way and Life. The first paragraph corresponds to Truth; the second, to Way; and the third, to Life.

Take this example. The reflection on happiness:

“1. The heart, the soul longs for complete happiness, that which entirely satisfies man, eternal. (Truth)

“2. Now this does not consist in wealth, in honor, in pleasure, in moral and intellectual goods. In fact they are quite temporal. (Way).

“3. Foolish is he who disordinately goes after temporal goods, he shall not be satisfied in life; he shall be desolate in death, he is afraid of eternity. (Life).

“Desire them only inasmuch as they are means for heaven; rather, fear them prudently lest they become traps for us to perdition.”

This Truth, Way, Life pattern is rigorously followed throughout the many reflections so that the book itself follows a certain consistency and rigor...

Even a cursory reading of the book by one still unfamiliar with theology and spirituality, one would notice that Fr. Alberione’s terminology and ideas are so conditioned by his time. His preferred authors and the magisterium of the Church as well as the devotionism of his time weigh heavily on this book. Viewed from today’s point of view, one would easily be tempted to consider the book totally outdated. The fact, however, is that beyond Fr. Alberione’s terms and concepts, there is an underlying spirituality that was new then and still new today.

The first chapter already leads us to the novelty of the spirituality: Path to Purification – Theology of the Father. Highly dependent on the mind, Fr. Alberione leads the reader to meditate on God, the Father and discover him through creation, and discover where man stands before this God. Thus the challenge for purification before this great God. The series of 17 short reflections that the chapter contains leads to this conclusion:

“a) We come from Heaven, we are going to Heaven. Let us hold on to the only and secure path; should we get lost, let us go to confession; if we are on the right path, let us speed up our journey.

b) In the Annual Exercises, one specifies the yearly program; in the monthly retreats, one goes through it point by point; in the weekly confessions, one makes reparation, draws enlightenment, strength; in the daily examination of conscience, one keeps control.

c) That we may become Saints, let us incarnate God in us; we need to put in our own worth: “we with God”; and that is: Annual, monthly, weekly and daily examination of conscience; daily meditation, spiritual direction and confession, thereby giving value to our efforts.

“Donec formetur Christus in vobis.”

Still following the pattern of Truth, Way, Life, Fr. Alberione calls the second chapter “Via illuminativa,” the way to enlightenment or the Theology of the Son.

The opening salvo of this second part is a striking question: “Will I be saved?” This question he answers by references to the parables of the ten virgins in the gospel and the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price.

Then Fr. Alberione reflects on the mystery of the incarnation, writes a prayer to Jesus Master that, and meditates on Jesus Truth, Way and Life and the means of grace, to conclude with the theology of St. Paul.

In the general conclusion he draws towards the end of the booklet, he writes this conclusion for this Way of illumination—Theology of the Son:

“Jesus Christ is the *way* to heaven, the only way, the secure way; he is the *truth*, because he guides the mind in a manner that does not err, he supernaturalizes it, makes it divine; [he is] the *life* through which the mind shall always adhere to Jesus Christ and the heart and life shall be kept in the journey marked by Him. The conclusion of the second part is: *live* in Jesus Christ until the “vivit in me Christus”: mind, heart, life. Fruit of the second part is choices: vocation; or manner of following it; or a special point.”

A conclusion of this chapter is a long reflection on the theology of St. Paul. This is an instance where we can understand why our spirituality is called Pauline.

The third Chapter is entitled “Via Unitiva” – Way to Union. Like the two preceding Chapters, this chapter is made of different reflections that are, as usual, divided into three parts marked by numbers 1 to 3, with further subparagraphs distinguished by the alphabets a to c.

The topics of reflection mainly refer to the Holy Spirit present in the Church and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. The conclusion of the Chapter reads:

“One journeys with Jesus Christ in three manners: in the path of the commandments, Christian life; in the path of evangelical counsels, religious life; in the path of zeal, apostolate.

“Everything is accomplished in the Holy Spirit: inasmuch as the life of Jesus Christ, so is the life of the Church, that is, the supernatural life of the souls is communicated, developed, perfected, consummated in the Holy Spirit. Hence our main concern is dual: in order that Jesus Christ is formed in us. Cooperation with special resolutions and prayer with the abundance of practices of piety.”

Within this Chapter, curiously, there is a relatively long chapter on the Apostolate of the Press where Fr. Alberione establishes the three parts of the apostolate: To write, to print, and to spread mainly the Holy Gospel and then the other matters worth publishing. He also affirms, remember that this was in the 1920's when the other media were not yet existing, that the Press is "in its substance a divine institution" whereby the entire arc of Christian doctrine is made available to the masses.

Basically, the book covers the encounter with God the Father in the first Chapter, where one discovers God's love and one's sinfulness. The encounter with the Person of Jesus, the Father's revealed Word and the gift of his divine life that leads to choice of state of life takes place in the second chapter and in the third, the determination is set to follow Christ's footsteps more closely in the life of apostolate after the model of St. Paul and the Queen of the Apostles.

As a further aid, Fr. Alberione enriches the book with other reflections that he gathers in the main title of *Nozioni Utili*, Useful Notions, mainly on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Presented this way, it would seem that there is nothing new about the book. Made subject to a long retreat and thoughtful meditations on the parts of the book, however, would reveal that the book contains more than what the texts say. In fact, it is both a sketch of Fr. Alberione's spiritual experience that led to the formulation of the Pauline spirituality and contains the outline of a program of life proposed to all Paulines.

One last note on the contents: in order that we can better approach this highly synthesized book of Fr. Alberione on our spirituality, we also have the courage to exercise what we now call "creative fidelity" and "inculturation."

Creative fidelity and inculturation

By "creative fidelity" we mean that exercise of studying documents of the past with the eyes of the present, and having the courage and perhaps daring to analyze the document while having in mind the present developments in the field of theology and spirituality as well as the creativity to draw from the documents the essential features that normally do not change and are applicable to the present.

For example, Fr. Alberione's writings are very much conditioned by the terms, concepts, and outlook of his time. Most of these are now dated or have changed, more especially after the revolution that started with Vatican Council II.

To stress a point. Fr. Alberione's ideas of the Church were those of his times. We cannot see in his writings the definition of the Church as the people of God. We see more of the besieged and threatened Church of the times. Then, there also is a strong influence of devotionism, that is, a very strong emphasis on devotions as set of prayers and practices to condition one's self to remain in God's grace and advance in holiness. Furthermore, there seems to be a rather magical approach to the Sacraments. Now we know that these and others have given way to new studies in theology and reforms in liturgy.

Creative fidelity also encourages us to find in Fr. Alberione's writings those elements that are quite prophetic. For example, his Trinitarian approach to holiness dates very much ahead of his time. Emphasis on this would come only with the celebration of the Jubilee Year when the three-year period of preparation was marked by Pope John Paul II's focus on the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Another example of the prophetic in Fr. Alberione is his dialogical outlook in our relationship with God. This is adequately captured with this statement of his:

“The Lord lights the lamps ahead, as one journeys and when needed; he does not light them all at once at the start when they are not yet needed; he does not waste light; he however gives it always “at the opportune time” (San Paolo, April-May 1959).

In a more prophetic manner, we can say that creative fidelity is the exercise of reading the text with one part of the brain and confronting what is read with the developments on the subject matter with the other part of the brain.

An example of this is Fr. Alberione’s insistence on the Apostolate of the Press. Perhaps during his time the press was really the most effective means of communicating the Gospel but now, it is no longer so. Pope John Paul II himself has admitted it with his very recent promotion of the Internet. The question now is how would we read Fr. Alberione’s words in the light of these new developments. What are the permanent values in those words that we can apply today as regards the apostolate of the media? What adjustments will we have to make in order to remain faithful to the thought of Fr. Alberione and yet relevant today with the new means of communication?

All these are a part of what we call creative fidelity.

Creative fidelity leads us to another exercise: inculturation.

By “inculturation” we mean more than just “Filipinizing” religious rites and practices like adding native touches to liturgy. Neither does it mean translating terms into Filipino or using native language to convey theological contents.

By “inculturation” I refer to the end-goal of our spirituality, which is that of putting on Christ till Christ is formed in us. Obviously, we cannot put on Christ other than how God created us, made us be born in our own country, live in our own cultures complete with a baggage of socio-cultural, economic and political experiences as a people. We can only be “Christified” the way we are: Filipinos.

Consequently, we cannot and should not pretend to live Pauline spirituality other than what we already are. We cannot copy the way Italians, or Spaniards or Americans or South Americans live Pauline spirituality. We have to live it our way with who and what we are.

This thought spares us too from literally understanding and living Fr. Alberione’s teachings. Fundamentalism or literal interpretation of the words of Fr. Alberione is out of the question.

Likewise, we will have to be prudent. We cannot carelessly take our being Filipinos as an easy excuse of not listening to and following the directives of higher superiors or to excuse our getting into apostolates that are outside the specific range of our mission by saying it is what is needed by our people. I, for example, cannot justify my neglecting my apostolic assignments in favor of direct pastoral services by saying that it is needed by the people. We will have to be careful regarding this.

Here, I would like to note, too, the importance of the Inter-congregational Team on Pauline Spirituality that, I am glad to know, is already formed and is functional. As I already mentioned it to the members of this team, their role is like that of a starving mother nursing a more starved child. The mother chews the bread of the Word of God and of our spiritual heritage, chews this bread and with the well chewed bread feeds the child. The study in creative fidelity and in view of inculturation thus becomes the main task of this team.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that “Filipinizing” Pauline Spirituality is not an impoverishment of the same spirituality. On the other hand, it is an enrichment because the same spirituality assumes new features and characteristics as those belonging to specific peoples.

The responsibility of creative fidelity and inculturation lies on every Pauline’s shoulders. No one but us has the responsibility of Filipinizing spirituality and translating it into livable terms and actually living it.

Likewise, let me note that, along the line of St. Paul’s and Fr. Alberione’s experience, we actually learn Pauline Spirituality by actually embracing it as our way of life and as our way of relating with God and with one another. Much of our spirituality is not learned by sitting down and reading. It is learned by actually trying to live it seriously. Remember that God does not light all the lamps at once, but he never fails to light those lamps we need as we move on and in opportune times.

To conclude, let me point out that if Fr. Alberione attracted many vocations when he was alive, it was because those who met and knew him saw in him someone more than he was. So it must be with us. In the last analysis we are asked to tell the story of Jesus in the way we think, will and love so that people will come to know, love and serve Jesus, too. If we succeed in this, new vocations will never be wanting.

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