



ANNUAL LETTER OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL
TO THE CONFRERES OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT PAUL

**The Necessary Metamorphosis
to Live as Pauline “Editors”**

Dear brothers,

The journey that we are experiencing as a Congregation is enriched by a new stage. In light of the objective expressed by the XI General Chapter - “*Let yourselves be transformed, renewing your way of thinking*’ (Rm 12:2). *By allowing ourselves to be transformed by listening to the Word of God, in dialogue with the world in profound metamorphosis, we, Pauline ‘Editors’, commit ourselves to be artisans of communion to prophetically proclaim the joy of the Gospel*” – we will dedicate these pages to a second important aspect of our mission: “*in dialogue with the world in profound metamorphosis.*” If last year we focused on the Word of God as a necessary source for a profound change of mentality, now it is a question of rediscovering the more dialogical dimension of our being Pauline “Editors”¹ which translates into a constant comparison with the current reality, the cultures, the riches and the poverty of today, with the men and women who are our interlocutors.

A world, therefore, that is changing, or rather, that is experiencing a “profound metamorphosis.” In fact, precisely during the works of the XI General Chapter, one of the most important passages was when the Assembly identified in this noun something that goes far beyond simple “change.” The “metamorphosis” is the key to understanding this change of epoch and does not only describe an action, but also traces a direction, within which the meaning of what happens is found. “Metamorphosis” refers to a “meta-form,” to the “*transformation of a being or object into another of a different nature.*”² Drawing, however, on the testimony of Paul in the Letters and on Luke’s story in the Acts of the Apostles, the “metamorphosis” manifests itself as a fall to the ground and then getting up again, an experience of blindness before receiving sight again, being led by others by the hand, the fruit of a revelation that radically changes the person’s identity (Acts 22:1-11). It is therefore what makes a “new creation” possible – new things are born from old things (2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15) – a movement that grafts us onto the Son of God and keeps us in him, so “*all of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image*” (2 Cor 3:18). Baptism – the life of Christ that works in us – is the beginning of this continuous process that involves the entire personal story. In baptism a transformation occurs which brings with it the new day of Resurrection Sunday. In fact, we, like history,

¹ Every Pauline, by his specific vocation, is an “Editor”. This is the “only purpose” – Father Alberione would say – of his life and his action, of his vocation and mission. The Pauline is a man called by Christ and consecrated to be an apostle of communication, to be essentially an “Editor” who gives form to an experience, who writes or translates his personal and community life of faith and encounter with Christ in words, texts, images, sounds, videos, bytes or in any other form that technology gradually develops; but also in experiences and initiatives where every language is at the service of the inculturation of the Gospel with and in communication. One who, after the example of Mary, gives (edit) the Saviour to the world (Editorial Guidelines, no. 1.2).

² Cf. Treccani Vocabulary.

pass from metamorphosis to metamorphosis, from Easter to Easter, “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18)³.

Interpreting the situation experienced by many ecclesial realities scattered around the world, we can say together with André Fossion, that “*the Christian faith today finds itself in a generalized state of beginning or restarting. Whoever says ‘restart’ says at the same time a process of death and rebirth. Today, in fact, we are witnessing both the end of a world and the end of a certain Christianity. Yet it is not the end of the world nor the end of Christianity. Indeed, it is a time of germination, with all the nostalgia and also the relief that this can bring for what dies, as well as the uncertainties and hope for what is born. It is therefore a matter of loss, but also of re-encounters in other places and in other ways.*”⁴

In this letter I imagine sharing with you five steps that correspond to as many reflections along the way: what metamorphoses is the world we live in experiencing (step I)? In this framework, what is essential? The rediscovery of relationships (step II). How can the Word of God shed light on all this (step III)? Bringing with us the gaze of the Word and the experience of salvific history, what do we consider most urgent today (step IV)? What guidelines can we give ourselves to continue walking together as a community, Circumscriptions, Pauline Family, also in an apostolic key (step V)?

I. The Metamorphosis of the World

The advent of the pandemic is just one of the stages of a process that marks our epochal change. Already before, in 2008, the financial crisis that began in the United States had created an upheaval in the banking world and even more so in the lives of workers and families; poverty has become more tangible. Even the wars in Ukraine and in the Holy Land, and beyond, put a strain on the ability to live together and create suspicion among peoples, fuel distrust and extremism. Migrations are perceived as destabilizing and consequently trigger resistance and social tensions. Particular events such as this year’s earthquakes in Turkey, Syria, Morocco and the flooding caused by cyclone Daniel in Libya, completely change the life of a nation. The climate crisis, also addressed in recent days during the COP28⁵ work, and ecological themes, speak to us of a land in suffering.

I.1 The Myth of Growth is in Crisis

Faced with this global situation, only mentioned here, we realize that many principles that support the era we are living in are being put into crisis: globalization is one of these. Let us think about the global market, about the products created to reach every part of the world, where the big brands think in large market areas. The basic idea that runs through our epoch is that there must be a continuous expansion of the world economy, an expansion that we could use another term: progress. In the collective imagination when we talk about “progress” we think of new discoveries – scientific and otherwise – as necessary and desirable goals. Progress in science, medicine, engineering... and in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) can only

³ Cf. Mendonça J. T., *Necessary Metamorphosis. Rereading Saint Paul, in Life and Thought*, Milan 2023, pp. 127-138.

⁴ Fossion A., *What Announcement of the Gospel for our Time? The Challenge of Inculturation of the Christian Message in Bacq Ph. – Theobald Ch. (eds.), A New Opportunity for the Gospel. For a Pastoral Ministry*, Paulinas, Lisbon 2013, pp. 94-95.

⁵ Cf. <https://www.cop28.com/en>.

be positive. Doubt, however, arises when this way of seeing and organizing human life underlies the “myth of growth.” It conceives history as an “*unstoppable unidirectional movement towards a better tomorrow.*”⁶ But “better” in what sense? Is it really true that the more the economic system is free to act, the more it is able to increase the opportunities and life potential of the individual? Today we all feel and are more fragile, societies are fragile, creation suffers... We are all more disappointed by this broken promise, often used for the purposes of the market in need of consumers. It does not matter if in an unbalanced way between generations, between North and South, between present and increasingly compromised future.

The alternative is, of course, not to return to the past, but to wisely read the present with all its contradictions and opportunities. We are all more fragile because the period we are experiencing calls into question our expectations for growth, unreal and exaggerated expectations. Sometimes we live as if our life were just a crescendo: in the economy, in health, in relationships... as if we never or almost never have to face social and personal crises. The pandemic, for example, has told us that a tiny virus can undermine the omnipotence of science, that markets can stop, that human relationships can be frozen. Yes, we are fragile and we must decide what to do with our fragility. Certainly, “*if the criterion is that of the economic statement, of quantitative growth, of the increase in possibilities, then it is legitimate to ask ourselves this and other questions: what should we do with the poor, the immigrants, the depressed, with all those who are not up to the task? of the required performances? Should the group of vulnerable people be considered as a cost to be managed or as an unexpected effect of our growth model that requires a revision?*”⁷

1.2 Artificial Intelligence Changes Us

The epochal transition we are experiencing is also marked by the exponential growth of technology in our life. It is and it will be. The pandemic itself has stimulated a dizzying development of AI, necessary to deal with the many difficult situations, not least the impossibility of meeting face-to-face. AI is already the basis of Facebook and Google and Siri searches. It uses an enormous amount of data that allows it to improve technological performance, whereby it “learns,” “creates” and “generates.” It will be able to predict people’s actions and will continue to change the world of work, communication, health... and everyday life in general. Let us think about ChatGPT,⁸ to its development in our lives, to what it will allow us to know and live in the near future. Thanks to the presence of such highly developed technology, some say that we are entering the time of “*trans and posthuman movement,*”⁹ where we aim to program an efficient man, capable of improving health and therefore happier. A project perhaps far away, but equally capable right now of moving enormous capital with significant financial interests of the technological and pharmaceutical industries. «*Humanity – there-*

⁶ Halík T., *Afternoon of Christianity. The Courage to Change*, in *Life and Thought*, Milan 2022, p. 58.

⁷ Giaccardi C. - Magatti M., *In the End is the Beginning. What a World we will Live in*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2020, pp. 122-123.

⁸ Launched on November 3, 2022, ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence and machine learning-based software developed by OpenAI that specializes in conversation with a human user. Provides answers or is able to do actions such as summarizing texts, translating them or giving opinions. The acronym GPT stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer.

⁹ The transhuman movement was born from discoveries and applications in the digital and biotechnological fields. It emphasizes the potential for human beings on a medical, cognitive, IT and robotic level. The posthuman movement goes beyond a medical and intellectual enhancement because it wishes to cancel the biological dimension, where illness and death exist, to reach an ultra-human condition (Cf. Cucci G., *Posthuman and trans-human. The anthropology of the future?* in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 4130 [2022], pp. 133-145).

fore – has made great strides in the digital age ... Advancements in technology have made new kinds of human interactions possible. In fact, the question is no longer whether to engage with the digital world, but how. Social media in particular is an environment where people interact, share experiences, and cultivate relationships unlike ever before... An awareness has emerged that these platforms can evolve to become co-created spaces, not just something that we passively use. Young people – as well as older generations – are asking to be met where they are, including on social media, because the digital world is “a significant part of young people’s identity and way of life.”¹⁰

While continuously integrating technology into our lives and living “onlife,”¹¹ we are also more aware that the digital world is not always a space of authentic knowledge, of free and transparent information: think, for example, of *fake news*. Furthermore, a certain digital divide still remains between different segments of the population and we realize that social media “transformed users into consumers,”¹² so it is the algorithms that decide what to show us. “The relationship is replaced by connection, a privileged form of interpersonal relationship.”¹³ What will happen to relationships between people?

The theme is so current that Pope Francis has dedicated the message of the next 58th World Communications Day: “Artificial Intelligence and Wisdom of the Heart: for a Fully Human Communication.”

1.3 A Church with Many Questions

The Church is also fully involved in this process. “We come from a centuries-old pastoral practice, in which the Church has been the single point of reference for culture. It is true, it is our legacy. As the authentic Teacher, she felt the responsibility to outline and impose, not only the cultural forms, but also values, and to more profoundly trace the personal and collective imagination, in other words the histories, the cornerstones that people lean on to find the ultimate meanings and answers to their essential questions. We are no longer in that time. It has passed. We are no longer in Christianity, no more. Today we are no longer the only ones who produce culture, nor the first, nor the most listened to.”¹⁴ In fact, it is the big cities that tell us that there are many places where new languages, new symbols and messages that guide life are created. In cities, cultures that have never been seen are emerging and, with a view to the new evangelization, other opportunities for encounters are emerging.¹⁵ What is changing? There is like a rift, a “new species” begins¹⁶ which presupposes the centrality of man with respect to creation; there is a new model of adult who now loves youth and a young body.¹⁷ The way of living the faith in the family and in the community changes, the way of participating in the Eucharist, of dedicating part of one’s time to others... We no longer live in a Christian epoch – especially in the

¹⁰ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence. Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, 18 May 2023, no. 1.

¹¹ “Onlife” refers to all those concrete experiences lived every day while remaining connected to digital and interactive devices and environments. It is an existential condition characterized by an unclear distinction between real and virtual.

¹² Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 13.

¹³ Cantelmi T. - Polidoro P., *Online love. Love in the times of social media. A survival manual*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2023, p. 16.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants of the International Pastoral Congress on the World’s Big Cities*, 27 November 2014.

¹⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 73.

¹⁶ Matthew A., *Francis Option. For a New Image of Future Christianity*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2023, pp. 42-45.

¹⁷ Cf. Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, no. 182.

West – and for this very reason it also changes the vocabulary of the most common words. Terms such as grace, eternity, paradise, truth, natural law, maturity, paternity, sacrifice, renunciation, authority, tradition... are today replaced by pluralism, tolerance, feeling, technique, health, change, corporeity, well-being, youth, sexuality, ecology, communication...¹⁸.

In such a changed context, the basic option, which the Church reiterated with the Second Vatican Council, it is that of dialogue with the world,¹⁹ now proposed again by Pope Francis thanks to the centrality of a humanism of biblical origin that has the person and relationships at heart. There is a need for a new relationship with God, with others and with the environment. And so the Church is called to dialogue, interact and promote the “culture of encounter,” embracing brotherhood as a lifestyle. The crisis or crises we are experiencing, in this sense, are providential because they make us grow and help us rediscover the choice of the conciliar Church: solidarity. “*How wonderful it would be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation could come with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us.*”²⁰ The discovery of technology is followed by the rediscovery of the person and relationships!

2. The Metamorphosis of Brotherhood

A humanity so changed and a Church that makes the culture of encounter its own challenge us in concrete terms, they ask us for new paths and a new vision of society and of the people of God which cannot be fixed by modern criteria of development or progress and even less about globalization or well-being. Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* he says it clearly: there is a need for brotherhood, to look at the face of others in a different way, to weave new friendships so that the life of the Christian becomes a vehicle for the proposal of friendship that Jesus addresses to everyone. This is the time of transformation also of relationships so that humanity’s encounter with Christ is promoted in a new way.

A transformation that takes the form of a process of going out of ourselves and our patterns, requires that we raise our gaze to see new horizons and new faces, to start something new in which to invest our best energies: “*Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone.*”²¹ Terms such as “mixing,” “meeting,” expressions such as “solidarity caravan” and “holy pilgrimage” are fruitful because they express relationship and sharing of the same condition, a “mystical” process that is going out from one’s own narcissism. In a fragmented world there is a need for community, for relationships between people, for communion, where sharing, even social media, allows us to speak of life, share life stories, to the point of praying for each other, starting projects of help, solidarity and integration, in communication with a face in social media “*It is urgent then to learn to act together, as a com-*

¹⁸ Matthew A., *Francis Option*, p. 66.

¹⁹ “*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts*” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 1).

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 31.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 87.

munity and not as individuals. Not so much as ‘individual influencers,’ but as “weavers of communion”: pooling our talents and skills, sharing knowledge and contributions.”²²

This manifests itself in *primis* in proximity to the poor. It is good for us and gives meaning to our mission. The poor not only of means and economic resources, but also of meanings to live for, of peace, of hope, of love. The young and the elderly can be the poor, as well as families, consecrated life itself, men of culture, entertainers, artists, journalists, influencers, directors, art directors, web designers, information engineers... How many poor people to reach! It is necessary to continue to go out, today in a smarter way, and create places of meeting, of social friendship, of fraternity experienced as a “*doing something for the Lord and the men of the new century with whom he would live.*”²³ This going out allows us to live our humanity as Jesus lived it, to the point of forming a “culture of neighbourliness,”²⁴ so here is the trait of care, of generosity without return, of giving space to the other.²⁵ The pandemic, in fact, has taught us that the illness of one person must be treated together so that it does not become the illness of many.²⁶ Hence the need to decide for the poor: “*I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way.*”²⁷

2.1 Taking Care of our Interlocutors

It is time to take care of others. The word “care” expresses the predisposition to “observe” and therefore to know by observing. Of course, knowing not simply in an analytical way, but with the totality of ourselves – mind, will and heart – to the point of compromising ourselves with the other.²⁸ This attitude of going out of ourselves presupposes the ability to relate which is the basis of the formation of our identity as persons, especially in this post-pandemic period, rather than just recovering the things we have lost, it is necessary to bet on quality relationships with persons, on the *integral* growth of the person: *integral*, that is, of all the dimensions that make up the human being, including the horizon of meanings towards which to strive.²⁹ Taking care of others is answering God’s question to Cain: “*Where is your brother Abel?*” (Gen 4:9). It is the question that we find at the beginning of the history of humanity and which is still valid today in the face of the many forms of poverty and trampled humanity. “*The culture of comfort – underlines Pope Francis – which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it does not affect me; it does not concern me; it is none of my business!*”³⁰

²² Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 76.

²³ Alberione J., *Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae*, Società San Paolo, Rome 1998, 15.

²⁴ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards full presence*, no. 5.

²⁵ Cf. Matteo A., *Francis Option*, p. 136.

²⁶ Buffon G., *How to deal with a change of era*, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 25 July 2020.

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangeli gaudium*, no. 198.

²⁸ Giaccardi C. - Magatti M., *In the end is the beginning. What a world we will live in*, p. 133.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 135.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Homily of the Mass during the visit to Lampedusa*, 8 July 2013.

2.2 The Necessary Listening

Proximity and brotherhood are an expression “of a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance.”³¹ The word “fraternity” refers to the meaning of “being born next to another” and therefore to being brothers, to reciprocity, overcoming ethnic or blood ties.³² The “I” is not enough in itself, there is a need for a “social alliance”. “Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures over time, have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community; instead, they tend to disguise and expand the very individualism that finds expression in xenophobia and in contempt for the vulnerable. Digital connectivity is not enough to build bridges. It is not capable of uniting humanity.”³³ There is therefore a need for human gestures even within digital communication and in particular for patient listening to others, even those who are foreigners, those who are looking for a meaning to live for. Listening is the beginning of a dialogue and listening is getting closer, looking at each other, getting to know each other, looking for common points... It happens between generations, between peoples, between persons. Listening affirms that “you exist,” that between you and me there is not only the “like,” but there are questions, fears, hopes and plans for the future, an intentional listening experienced with “the ear of the heart.”³⁴ “In today’s globalized world, ‘the media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which in turn can inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life. [...] The media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God’.”³⁵ To the extent that listening and dialogue find hospitality, they become a culture, the “culture of encounter”: here the points of contact are identified, bridges are built, we dream and plan together.

3. The Word that Illuminates Metamorphoses

“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe” (Heb 1:1-2). Biblical revelation always “happens” dialogically. God does not impose himself in an absolute way, he does not seek “passive instruments” that carry out his will without contaminating it with their humanity: on the contrary, he weaves relationships, initiates dialogues, awaits questions, allows himself to be “conditioned” by the people he asks. This is very evident in the experience of the great protagonists of the history of salvation: the patriarchs, judges, kings, prophets, wise men of Israel. In the First as in the New Testament, yesterday as today.

Three figures help us understand how God reveals himself to the world, accompanying all the epochal changes that the latter goes through. Among the prophets we choose Jeremiah who witnesses the dramatic end of the monarchy and the temple, entering the page of exile with the people; among the apostles we choose Paul, with whom the Christian faith crossed the borders of the West and entered into dialogue with the pagan world; among those who have read the signs of the times of modernity – in a great epochal change – we take our Founder, Blessed James Alberione.

³¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 1.

³² Cf. Occhetta F., *A Great Challenge: Choosing Brotherhood*, in *Vita Pastorale*, 7, July 2023, 11.

³³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 43.

³⁴ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 38.

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 205.

3.1 Jeremiah, the Prophet of the “Stigmata”

No prophet bears the “stigmata” of passion for God and his people like Jeremiah.³⁶ Just listen to some of his expressions: “*I am broken by the injury of the daughter of my people. I am in mourning; horror has seized me*” (Jer 8:21); “*Let my eyes stream with tears night and day, without rest, over the great destruction which overwhelms the virgin daughter of my people, over her incurable wound*” (Jer 14:17); it is still: “*Why is my pain continuous, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?*” (Jer 15:18). These sentences, taken from the so-called “confessions of Jeremiah,” manifest states of mind that reveal how the prophet experiences a sort of identification with God and with the people, experiencing within himself the constant laceration between the prodigal love of the first and the inexplicable harshness of the second: “*My body! my body! how I writhe! The walls of my heart! My heart beats wildly, I cannot be still; For I myself have heard the blast of the horn, the battle cry*” (Jer 4:19). The same image returns in Jer 23:9: “*My heart is broken within me, all my bones tremble; I am like a drunk, like one overcome by wine, because of the LORD, because of his holy words.*” Faced with these passages we cannot only speak of an “empathetic” disposition of the prophet: here there is real identification with the feelings of God and the painful epochal change that is affecting Israel.

In a different, but no less dramatic way, these dispositions characterize the entire prophetic tradition: think of figures such as Moses, Hosea, Isaiah, Ezekiel... Even the wisdom tradition is no exception: in the Psalms the heart is the place in which such experiences they reverberate; in fact, the heart exalts, rejoices, is contrite, melts like wax, trembles, palpitates, meditates, wakes up, dries up, is moved, burns in the chest... always to express a relationship with God contextualized in a precise here and now.³⁷

It seems that, to accompany the processes of change in the surrounding world due to the advent of the Babylonians (7th century BC), the prophet must experience every need first of all on his own person: he is, in fact, the first to have to change. Precisely because Jeremiah experiences and lives what is about to happen, he can become its announcer. The mission – for Jeremiah in particular and for all the prophets in general – it is not the pure execution of the divine will, it is not decided only in the relationship with God as a response to his will; it is embodied in a specific today, it declines starting from the acceptance or otherwise of the people and the more or less strong resistance that they pose. Only being deeply rooted in God allows the prophet not to give in to compromises and to face the challenge, without betraying the mandate received: enlightened by the Word of God, Jeremiah neither embraces the thoughts of the majority nor the choices of the centres of power, but defends the narrow path in which the people can find salvation which is ultimately based on trust in God: in times of exile, while there are those who would like to react with force to the deportation situation, the path is that of surrender and trust, of an uninterrupted dialogue with God that helps us realize that his plan does not fail. For Jeremiah this is “an uphill road,” which makes him, in the eyes of many, an uncomfortable presence to silence. But it is in this context that he will announce a “new alliance,” inscribed in these words of the Lord: “*I will be their God and they shall be my people*” (Jer 31:31-34).

³⁶ Cf. Masters C., *Jeremiah. Mouth of God, mouth of the people. Introduction to reading the book of the prophet Jeremiah*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi (PG) 1994.

³⁷ Cf. Neher A., *The exile of the Word. From biblical silence to the silence of Auschwitz*, Medusa Edizioni, Milan 2010.

3.2 Paul, the Apostle of Change

We find the same dynamic in Paul who, among other things, often recalls the prophet Jeremiah with direct and indirect quotes. Paul does not become an “apostle of Jesus Christ” overnight. If we follow the reconstruction of some scholars based on the autobiographical testimony preserved in the Letter to the Galatians (1:18; 2:1), it took seventeen years, from the experience of Damascus, for Paul to mature as an apostle of the Gentiles. Only after this long period of time – which brought about a progressive metamorphosis in Paul – will he be able to accompany one of the epochal changes in human history produced by the announcement of the Gospel. Only after seventeen years, Paul is ready to cross the door of the West which introduces him to the continent of the Gentiles, Europe.³⁸

What happens in these seventeen years? Paul is “formed,” “shaped” not only by God, but also by the not always linear relationship with the first believers (including the “false brothers” who give him a hard time): let us think, in order, of individual figures such as Stephen, Ananias, Barnabas, Peter, James, Mark; let us think of entire communities like Damascus, Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria; let us think of the first missionary experiences made in Arabia, in Jerusalem, in Syria and Cilicia, and those, shared with Barnabas, in Cyprus, Perge, Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, Derbe, where Paul collected more failures than successes. Yet, as he will say in the Letter to the Romans, “*We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*” (8:28).

Paul knows how to accompany change because his own life was a continuous conversion. And this was made possible by multiple experiences that brought him closer to other early believers, men and women, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, who would later become the trusted collaborators of his ministry. Despite, and also thanks to, all the accidents along the way. As Blessed James Alberione will say, being an apostle, for Paul, is “*burning with that double flame, with the same fire, the zeal for God and his Christ, and for men of every country.*”³⁹ Encounters, successes, failures, misunderstandings, discussions... lead the Apostle Paul to redefine his adherence to and understanding of the Gospel, increasingly handing himself over as a docile instrument of a Gospel that surpasses him.

3.3 Blessed Alberione, Witness of Epochal Transitions

We can compare these two witnesses to Don Alberione, who was also a witness to social and ecclesial changes within which he operated and gave his contribution, involving himself personally. Let us start with the change of century – from the 19th to the 20th – which for us Paulines has a particular flavour because it recalls the prayer vigil of the sixteen-year-old James in the Cathedral of Alba. Precisely in that period, while the process of separation from Christian roots continues in Europe, Italian society passes from a peasant imprint to a more urban and industrial one. It is time for the Encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) by Leo XIII where new and important social issues are addressed. A few years later Pope Pius X responded to “modernism” with the Encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis* (1907).⁴⁰ It is also the period in which there is an acceleration of the development of the press, as well as cinema

³⁸ Cf. Penna R., *Paul, from Tarsus to Rome. The path of a great innovator*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2015.

³⁹ Alberione J., “You will love the Lord with all your mind,” in *Carissimi in San Paolo*, Edizioni Paoline, Rome 1971, p. 1151.

⁴⁰ Reggio P., “Alba: the Socio-religious Environment in the City and its Surroundings” in Various Authors, *Getting to know Don Alberione (1884-1907). Tools for a Biography*, Centre of Pauline Spirituality, Rome 1994, pp. 79-127.

and radio. In the ecclesial sphere, the biblical and liturgical movements prepare the Second Vatican Council. This famous turn of the century is anticipated by the Encyclical of Leo XIII *Tametsi futura* (1 November 1900) as testimony to what the Pope carried in his heart: “The outlook on the future is by no means free from anxiety; on the contrary, there are many serious reasons for alarm, on account of numerous and long-standing causes of evil, of both a public and a private nature.”⁴¹ Leo XIII’s proposal translates into three “necessary conditions” for a new and renewed century: the centrality of Jesus, Way, Truth and Life. These pages stirred the heart of the young Alberione and the answer to this change of epoch was precisely the Pauline Family and the charismatic gift that still fills our hearts with passion today. All this is documented by Primo Maestro in *Abundantes divitiae*⁴² and it is precisely in this autobiography of his that we find how the Spirit led Don Alberione to experience new social and ecclesial challenges according to the heart of the Apostle Paul, opening himself to a social communication that created new means of expression.

A second key passage in the life of Blessed Alberione which makes him witness to an epochal change is the advent and his participation in the Second Vatican Council.⁴³ In the three years of work from 1962 to 1965 the Council Fathers dialogued, listened, confronted a changed society... Don Alberione was present at the Council as Founder and Superior General, he was active even if he never spoke. Yet his presence is fruitful, indeed the work he began in the field of evangelization through the means of communication is fruitful: the Decree on the instruments of social communication *Inter mirifica*, approved in 1963 – 60 years ago – establishes this form of evangelization as an action of the Church. Primo Maestro presents twenty-four proposals to the pre-conciliar Commission. Among these we highlight some: the universal mediation of Mary, the catechism, the Bible with the catechetical notes, the apostolate of the laity, the secular institutes, the televised Mass, the Mass of the Divine Master and in particular the need for a new Dicastery that deals with social communication. To these proposals must be added five personal interventions or observations made in writing during the Council. We can say that for Don Alberione the greatest fruit of this Church event is the certification that “Pauline activity is declared an apostolate, alongside oral preaching, declared to be of high esteem before the Church and the world... The Council has “pastoral” nature as its main character. It concerns spiritual care and the salvation of souls. It therefore deserved second place due to its current and capital importance. These are the means and instruments that can be used for the good of individuals and society as a whole.”⁴⁴ The comment that Don Alberione always makes about the *Inter mirifica* in *San Paolo* of September-December 1964: “The decree represents a confirmation of the perennial vitality and youth of the Church which is not estranged from the world, but expresses its continuous interest in the good of humanity, encouraging studies, discoveries, and giving morally safe rules to animate the wonderful inventions with a Christian spirit of human commitment.”⁴⁵ Always in the same issue, the Founder reiterates the pastoral nature of the Council and the fact that all topics are treated under this approach, even the theme of the tools of social communication which was so dear to him. From here, “live the Council, which is the adventure of the century, become aware of it and give knowledge of it first and foremost to Ourselves and then to Christianity.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Pope Leo XIII, *Tametsi futura prospicientibus*, no. 1.

⁴² Alberione J., *Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae*, 48-63.

⁴³ Cf. Damino A., *Don Alberione at the Second Vatican Council. Proposals, Interventions and “Notes,”* General Historical Archive of the Pauline Family, Rome 1994.

⁴⁴ Alberione J., *Carissimi in San Paolo*, pp. 323-324.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

Jeremiah on the one hand, Saint Paul and Blessed Alberione on the other, show us how God's revelation is not "good news" detached from the world today. Just as there is no revelation without incarnation, so there is no mission without relationship. We cannot bear witness to the Gospel of the "Word made flesh" without being in dialogue with God and the world. And dialogue, as the Greek etymology of the term itself says, means letting oneself be traversed (*dià*) from the word (*lógos*) of the other – with a capital "O" and a lowercase "o" – taking it seriously, always and in any way. It is in this environment that the most precious changes and the most effective metamorphoses begin.

4. The "Necessary" in the Time of Metamorphosis

The reflections discussed so far have highlighted some contexts where change involves us as a Church and Congregation, but they have also tried to highlight the need for fraternity and therefore for listening and dialogue at all levels, signs, these, of a community that in many ways is committed to caring for others, including those who meet in digital networks. This is what, in different contexts and eras, the prophet Jeremiah, Saint Paul and our Founder experienced. In "a world in constant metamorphosis," in a time of radical transformation we move gropingly, often without certainty. But we and no others travel through this very special time.

In fact, using an evangelical metaphor, we are experiencing the same situation as Jesus when he decides to "cross over to the other side," as the Gospel of John reminds us: "*After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee [of Tiberias]. A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near.*"⁴⁷ Jesus passes by and with him the disciples and many people. Crossing to another shore is what the Apostle Paul actually experienced in his travels, where each journey opened up an encounter with a new culture, up to Rome and, perhaps, Spain. This image helps us describe the situation we find ourselves in, a radical mutation, a true metamorphosis, which we cannot stop. And it is not strange if we feel disoriented, insecure, unprepared, because this personal – and congregational – discomfort is good for us and helps us to give a new shape to our mission. Being inconvenienced helps all of us to get out of ourselves, from our stability, from the usual way of living the mission and inserts us into the dynamism of life. The "pain" here is therapeutic, it is the beginning of something new, a jolt of humanity that makes us feel close to those like us who are crossing the sea.

When we walk towards a horizon that we do not know, we proceed step by step, light after light, fragment after fragment, within a process of metamorphosis that goes profoundly: it is not a superficial, only organizational, procedural change, but a much more similar passage to Easter, Easter in our today, engraved in our flesh. The alternative could be to take refuge in *the status quo*, to pretend that everything is going well, without our mission disturbing us... It is by crossing the sea that we become more mature, more aware of our limits and of the desires that are not yet fulfilled. We experience a true process of integration and maturation at all levels only by emerging from our "little I," from our shell... Precisely in John 6, Jesus involves the Twelve to feed the people: they only manage to collect five loaves and two fish. Yet those present are fed. In fact, our task is not to multiply, but to distribute and therefore to live this time united with the Risen Jesus, the source of true transformation and "multiplication": here is our "secret of success." This epochal change is an Easter experience to be lived in Christ.

⁴⁷ Jn 6:1-4.

Distribute, but to whom? Our interlocutors are those with whom we share the story of every day. We are connected with them and together with them we form a network of relationships, even in digital mode. The internet is the place where we all live and it is the place where everyone, in different ways, talks about themselves and what they experience. Digital culture is made up of experiences and not just technology and there is a lot of humanity, sometimes impoverished, on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook... “*Only if the Church is able to give up its own stereotypes to truly listen to the experiences of men and women will it be possible to open new storehouses of hope for everyone.*”⁴⁸ And hope is given by the encounter with the Risen One and with a community, including a digital one, that has experienced Christ. Our exercise to repeat every day is to listen to the new sufferings of humanity, as well as its dreams and become sensitive to them. If there is this awareness within us, there is also the possibility of responding to it with apostolic creativity. There is a need for a new anthropological geography, to know where humanity lives today and intercept its existential distances... the borders inhabited by the human heart. This too belongs to the metamorphosis, to our Easter mentality and apostolic action, precisely to grasp where it is necessary to push ourselves to reach those who have not yet met the Master of new life: “*As long as there are still unexplored ‘borders of humanity,’ that is where the Gospel must be brought.*”⁴⁹ This is the mission of Jesus: to reach humanity that is abandoned and alone, one that has forgotten its identity and experiences such a tragic deformation of its image that it thinks that the Father no longer exists. An authentic relationship with Jesus pushes us to feed humanity today, going to look for it where it lives. Bringing what bread? That of the experience of God, of the Father: this is what Jesus lives, this is what Paul lived, this is what Blessed Alberione transmitted to us.

Hunger is not just a biological need or a social issue. It speaks to us of a shore to reach, of a sea to cross that is mostly unknown and not always familiar. Hunger and every hunger, especially for the Word of God and the Food of eternal life, is what pushes us to accept the journey and be the first to experience a metamorphosis, to face the Easter passage. If it were not like this, we would remain inside our comfortable rooms waiting for who knows who. But our hunger and that of others, like a sting, push us out of comfort. The boy in John 6:9 – the one who gave the bread and the fish – opened his bag, gave everything he had promptly and generously and, thanks to him, Jesus accomplished the unthinkable. It is necessary to open our bags, our warehouses where good bread is found, to donate it in a thousand ways, with creativity, in every culture and language. Let us open our hearts and share with courage and without timidity what is entrusted to us by Christ (1 Tim 6:20): the joy of the Gospel.

5. Keep Walking: Possible Routes

In this last section of the Letter I would like to share some reflections that arise from the journey undertaken and which can involve us both as individuals and as a community. They are suggestions offered to continue reflection. Indeed, “*all that we do, in word and deed, should bear the mark of witness. We are not present in social media to ‘sell a product.’ We are not advertising, but communicating life, the life that was given to us in Christ.*”⁵⁰ In this question there is Life, how to generate Life, how our apostolate participates in this gift of God in Christ.

⁴⁸ Brother Michael Davide, *The Church that will Die. The Art of Collecting Fragments to Knead new Bread*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2023, p. 93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*, no. 77.

5.1 The Apostolate Experienced as “Courage to Change”

Courage does not mean ingenuousness. It is resourcefulness, it is energy that leads to being proactive in evangelization. In this process of radical transformation, our *Editorial Guidelines* – document that acts as a common thread in being Pauline “Editors” – remind us of the importance of making a discernment on apostolic structures,⁵¹ never an end in themselves but aimed at the mission: we are talking about our different editorial realities in all their facets, including real estate. In other cases “courage” is “to give new impetus to some traditional forms of publishing,” while at the same time, to “fully embrace the digital revolution in the three moments of the apostolate: writing-creation (content), production-technical (form, supports) and promotion-diffusion (strategies).”⁵² The change must be made not only in terms of technology, “but above all with respect to concepts and new forms of communication.”⁵³

The “courage to change” also involves the new definition of our continental Organisms, a process which has actually seen us to favour apostolic cooperation according to shared “projects,” rather than operating according to linguistic areas. To give substance to this new phase, special impetus is needed, some pilot projects are necessary; we need to experiment with new paths, aware that there are many areas that require collaboration between Circumscriptions, not least the biblical one and that which concerns the context of “new ways of apostolate in the digital field.”⁵⁴

5.2 Formation as Starting Point

It is not a new theme and we know well how much Don Alberione insisted on the wheel of the Pauline cart of study.⁵⁵ If there is one aspect that we must keep alive, or rather strengthen, especially in this epochal change, it is formation understood as studiousness, as constant passion for in-depth study, research, innovation... and, no less important, for integration⁵⁶ in our lives of what we learn over time. Knowing is the relevant answer to important questions: how to reach our interlocutors and how to take on new apostolic challenges? How to rethink our mission? Which frontiers must we courageously take on? Before us there is something like an apostolic horizon that is continually growing, the fruit of a gaze that goes beyond the present, which seeks to see beyond, to dream, to think of new ways to meet today’s humanity... Where does the Spirit call us to announce the Gospel? And how can we cross the sea of uncertainty, of the fear of taking risks to be where humanity lives?

However, there is a second aspect. The preparation of the individual Pauline must necessarily be shared and therefore become a gift that also involves the community, for an apostolate lived as a community. From this point of view we must continue to create laboratories of ideas, “education villages,”⁵⁷ gymnasiums where one learns to network with everyone’s experiences. Let us think, for example, of the Councils of Apostolate and Formation, but above all of the many forms of participation and sharing of the mission. Therefore achieving

⁵¹ Cf. *Editorial Guidelines. Identity, Contents and Interlocutors of the Pauline Apostolate*, Roma 2018, no. 2.1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, no. 1.3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, no. 2.2.

⁵⁴ XI General Chapter, *Operational Guideline* no. 2.2.2.

⁵⁵ Cf. Valdir José De Castro, *Annual Letter. Study in view of the Mission*, 16 April 2017.

⁵⁶ Cf. I Thessalonians 5:23.

⁵⁷ Pope Francis, “Message for the launch of the educational pact”, in the Congregation for Catholic Education, *Global Educational Pact. Instrumentum laboris*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2020, p. 26.

academic degrees or accumulating master's degrees is not enough. Our mission requires people who act with a relational mindset.

Always with a view to sharing, it is important to enhance our Pauline Centres for Studies in Communication and the Cultural Centres. Sharing means having an open mind. This helps us to give meaning to our study which is always for the mission, it helps us to be concrete, knowing that we live from our work, and that therefore the apostolate must be sustainable – in every sense – otherwise it must be rethought in its concreteness. In an epochal change it is essential to invest in formation to move to the other side.

5.3 Our Communities as Places of Encounter

Even the Pauline community today must be thought of as “open,” a place of encounter. Among us, first of all, but also with those who participate in our mission – including the lay – and with those whom we providentially encounter on our journey, because it is this network of relationships that our apostolate requires. In a time where relationships are in crisis, there is a need for places available to take care of them. It belongs to the “culture of encounter” to create opportunities to get to know each other and plan together. There is a need for communities that show how to live as apostles like Paul with his collaborators, who not only talk about communication, but make communication their lifestyle. Communities, therefore, that draw from their bag – like the boy in the Gospel – the food necessary to feed themselves, food which is also the charismatic legacy of our Founder: universality, pastoral approach, the prophetic passion for God and for humanity. Sharing, breaking, relating... The 100 years of our biblical apostolate – officially inaugurated in January 1924 with the start of the Biblical Society (the future SOBICAIN) – is an opportunity to live in a renewed way that, which from the origins of our history, Don Alberione wanted it to be the meaning of the Pauline mission.

This discussion is aimed primarily at communities but can also be extended to the apostolic realities in which our collaborators are involved. It is necessary to grow with them in the art of dialogue, involving them in the profound motivations, so that they feel part of a mission, of a common project.⁵⁸ Pope Francis, in this last time, is remembering this when he talks about synodality: together it is possible to walk to live our being Pauline “Editors” in a renewed way.

5.4 Life in Christ as a Relationship that Transforms

This fourth suggestion tries to focus on our life as disciples of the Master. The quality of the relationship with Jesus also defines the fruitfulness of being apostles. We thus return to the theme of metamorphosis, of that process which is the vocation of the world, a world – we could add in the light of Mt 17:1-9 – in continuous “transfiguration.” The Gospel episode of the Synoptics uses evocative terms, describing the transfiguration of Jesus according to

⁵⁸ “On the boat of the Church, there has to be room for everyone: all the baptized are called on board to lower the nets, becoming personally involved in the preaching of the Gospel. Do not forget this word: together! I am deeply touched, whenever I speak about opening apostolic perspectives, by that passage of the Gospel in which the wedding feast of the son is all prepared, and people do not come to it. So, what does the Lord, the master of the feast, say? ‘Go out to the highways and byways and bring everyone, everyone: the sick, the healthy, young and old, the righteous and sinners. Everyone!’” (Pope Francis, Homily during Vespers with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, seminarians and pastoral workers, on the occasion of the 37th World Youth Day, Lisbon, 2 August 2023).

the images of the shining face and the clothes as white as light (Mt 17:2). But it is the voice of the Father that explains what is happening and how to interpret this fact: “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*” (Mt 17:5). These words specify who the Son is and in doing so they say who we are. Like the Son we too are loved. In fact, what transfigures Jesus is the love of the Father, certainly a reciprocated love, but also a love that changes, transfigures, a love so strong that, while showing the crucified face of the Son, it reveals the love of God for humanity. The force that changes the way of being, of thinking, of acting, of being apostles... is love, it is experiencing that despite what we are, someone loves us in a radical way. From here comes the “new life” that the Apostle Paul talks about so much.

We thus understand the importance of nourishing ourselves with the Word of God, with the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life, of the Pauline life. We understand the meaning of the Eucharistic Visit. The Eucharist creates a new mentality in us; the Eucharistic Visit “transforms” us, as being with Jesus transformed the Twelve.⁵⁹ It is really necessary not to separate ourselves from this dynamism, an experience that we share as Pauline Family and which asks us to be welcoming people: to welcome the life of God. Only by living this experience can we reach the metamorphosis of which Paul speaks: “*I live no longer it is Christ who lives in me. And this life, which I live in the body, I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me*” (Gal 2:20). Whoever welcomes enters into such a strong relationship that he is transfigured in the image of the Son.

We end this Annual Letter by recalling a fact that a recent volume by Edizioni San Paolo has brought to light. In 1966 Don Emilio Cordero, then director of *Sampaolo Film*, asked the director Pier Paolo Pasolini⁶⁰ to write a screenplay on the figure of the Apostle Paul.⁶¹ Don Alberione was also aware of the project. In 1968 Pasolini began to outline the work. In his notes the places of the Apostle’s mission are replaced: Rome becomes New York, Jerusalem becomes Paris, Athens is Rome, Antioch becomes London, Ephesus is Naples, Damascus becomes Barcelona... the Macedonian of Acts 16.9-10 is a German who invites him to go to Germany... Unfortunately this film never saw the light. Who knows, perhaps here lies the challenge that awaits us as Pauline “Editors”: returning Paul to today’s world to be, like him, men who allow themselves to be transformed by Christ and who, precisely for this reason, know how to accompany epochal changes. Ultimately, this time of ours “in profound metamorphosis” is understandable only starting from the Risen Jesus.

Rome, 8 December 2023

Immaculate Conception of the B.V. Mary



Domenico Soliman
Father Domenico Soliman
Superior General

⁵⁹ Alberione J., *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei*, II, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1998, 104.

⁶⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) was a writer, poet and especially director, an attentive observer of changes in society. As a man of culture he had a certain fame throughout Europe. Among his films, particular mention should be made of *Gospel according to Matthew* (1964); cfr. <https://www.raicultura.it/webdoc/pier-pasolini/index.html#welcome>.

⁶¹ Ciarrapica C. - Bizzozero A., *The dream of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2023, pp. 23-99.