

Rekindle the Pauline Priesthood

1. In communion with the whole Church, we are living the **Year of Priests** (19 June 2009 – 11 June 2010) called by Benedict XVI on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney, proclaimed patron of all parish priests of the world by Pius XI in 1929. The Pope determines the motive of the celebration: “Such a year wants to contribute in the promotion of the commitment of interior renewal of all priests so that their evangelical witness in the world of today may be stronger and more incisive.”

This is the ecclesial context that has motivated Benedict XVI to choose the theme for the 44th World Day of Social Communications that will be celebrated on 16 May 2010: “**The priest and pastoral in a digital world: the new media at the service of the Word.**” The theme is developed in the message of the Pope published on 24 January 2010 to support the commitment of all the priests who take up the digital world as a new and precious opportunity for evangelization.

The confluence of the celebration of the Year of Priests and of the World Day of Social Communications in the theme of the **priesthood** requires that we too Paulines, because of our charism to evangelize in the communication of every historical period using all the forms of communication, can offer our contribution of reflection and concrete applications.

2. Blessed James Alberione, a diocesan priest, with the consent of his Bishop, in 1913 assumes the direction of the diocesan weekly *Gazzetta d’Alba* and, gradually, leaves all his commitments in the seminary so as to be able to dedicate himself totally to thinking and living a **priesthood** exercised through the press apostolate.

The conviction that lies at the base of all the thought and work of blessed Alberione is that the presence of Catholics in the press cannot limit itself to the simple production of books and magazines of religious inspiration, but requires something more important: “...priestly hearts are needed, because the mission of the Good Press is part of the priestly mission. Preaching is the main task of the priesthood, writes Benedict XV in his Encyclical” (*Unione Cooperatori Buona Stampa*, 1921, in *La primavera paolina*, p. 143f). To make use of the press for the purpose of evangelization, “a priestly heart and soul is needed. It is an eminently priestly apostolate” (*UCBS* 1926, in *La primavera paolina*, p. 669).

The Pauline charism is based on the **equivalence**, established by blessed Alberione in his initial formulation, between “**oral preaching**” (work of the priest in the parish) and “**written preaching**” (work of the Pauline priest). “Written preaching” is not an alternative to “oral” preaching, but is placed “beside,” even if in full autonomy, as the necessary complement in the context of social and communicative phenomena at the start of 1900.

The ever more large scale abandonment of the faith on the part of the big masses that form their convictions thanks to a non-religious press, leaves the churches empty and the ministry of the parish priest limited to a few practitioners. In the face of this flight from the parishes, Fr. Alberione starts to work, moved by a conviction that will guide him all his life: “The world needs a new, long and profound evangelization.

SUPERIORE GENERALE

...Proportionate means are needed, as well as souls fired up with faith. The suitable means cannot be provided except by the press and ardent apostles cannot be given except by the youth. ...What are needed are missionaries! New missionaries for this new and fecund apostolate" (UCBS 1926, in *La primavera paolina*, pp. 680-682).

I hint to only two reasons why Fr. Alberione thinks not about a simple religious editorial production but about a true evangelization using the press, realized not by lay people who believe but by consecrated priests.

3. The first reason is **ecclesiological** in character, due to the formulation of the time which, simplifying, we can summarize in these terms: the official task of evangelization is reserved to the Pope, the bishops and the priests; consecrated persons and the laity perform as associates. "The Press Apostolate in its substance, origin, object and goal is the same thing as the apostolate-word. They differ only in the manner of execution. Both come from God, have as object the Divine Word and Sacred Science, aim at the salvation of souls. Now it is clear that since the priest is the ordinary and principal minister of the apostolate-word, necessarily he is also of the Press Apostolate" (*Apostolato stampa*, 1933, p. 24f).

Very soon, with the progress of his foundations, Fr. Alberione gives an original form to the ecclesiology of his time, associating to the ministry of the Pauline priest the Sister, the Cooperators, the Disciples and the members of the aggregated Institutes.

Already in *La donna associata allo zelo sacerdotale*, Fr. Alberione has involved the woman beside the priest of the parish by qualifying her work as "almost a priesthood, a true apostolate" (cf *Introduction*); addressing the Daughters of Saint Paul, in order to emphasize the connection of their mission with the Pauline priest, he affirms: "What are you? I would like to say deaconesses, or priestesses! In the same manner people speak about Mary" (*Vademecum*, 92).

Seeing the necessity of associating the Disciple to the Pauline priest, Fr. Alberione observes the history of the development of the religious life and asks himself: "...today, why not give to the lay Brother a participation in the zeal of the Priest, give to him almost a priesthood!" ("*Abundantes divitiæ gratiæ suæ*," 40). In the mind of the Founder, the Pauline priesthood closely connected to communication acts to converge all the apostolates of the Pauline Family in a vast project of evangelization: "The warmth and life-giving light ought to descend from the Pauline priests who have here a great and delicate ministry" (*Ut perfectus sit homo Dei*, I, 20).

Taking into account the ecclesiological reflection that has developed and diversified from the time of Vatican II, the manner of thinking and realizing the unity of the forces of the Pauline Family in an articulated and complementary work of evangelization, can today certainly meet with formulations that are capable of exploiting in a more contemporary way the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the faithful.

A new ecclesiological elaboration of the **Pauline priesthood** would allow the discovery of the originality and audacity of the thought of blessed Alberione that he himself finds confirmed in the Conciliar Decree *Inter mirifica* (04.12.1963): "The Pauline activity has been declared as an apostolate, side by side with oral preaching, declared with high esteem before the Church and before the world" (*San Paolo*, December 1963).

4. The second reason is **theological** in nature, one that has become mature through a confluence of circumstances (the study of Sacred Scripture and of the history of the Church, pastoral sensitivity for a priestly ministry that takes into

account the historical context, the call of the Popes to mobilize for the press, the analyses of the Catholic sociologists regarding the religious situation of the time, etc.), sensed during the adoration at the start of the 20th century and initiated with the direction of *Gazzetta d'Alba*: **God wants evangelization not only through the word but also through scripture**. "God spoke by voice, impressed his words on paper, parchment and ancient monuments. It is always the one and same truth; the one and same Author; the one and same motivation: whether through spoken word, printed word or written word. ...God is the first Writer, the first Apostle of the Press. Let us imitate God" (*Apostolato stampa*, 1933, p. 4f).

For Fr. Alberione evangelization can take on various forms of realization and no means, not even the word, has the franchise to announce God because **God can be expressed in many ways**, even through writing and images: "What about figures? Today men are more lazy than usual, they hurry all the time, but they willingly look at a figure because they are curious. Well, a figure of Jesus on the cross, is it not worth a sermon? How many times a simple look at the crucifix has saved a soul! Religion can be narrated entirely through figures; ...everything can be explained with figures. We must truly say that the Press Apostolate possesses great means to exercise itself" (*Alle Figlie di San Paolo 1929-1933*, 170).

Following the press, with the invention and the progressive consolidation of cinema, radio, television, discs, photography, filmstrips, etc., Fr. Alberione urges the Pauline priestly ministry to make good use of all mass media for evangelization.

Starting from the Decree *Inter mirifica*, the universal magisterium dealing with communication, the Church's reflection and pastoral commitment for communication, accompanying the rise of the various forms of communication, have accomplished an important **evolution of mentality** that can be described between two extremes: from the beginning, when the press is considered an invention of the devil, until John Paul II, who points out to the Church communication as a true "culture" to be evangelized.

The thought of the ecclesial community regarding communication is not homogeneous and this explains why there are also initiatives of religious communication that are very diverse. We Paulines, through the ideas and example of blessed Alberione, want to offer to the Church the service of a **particular style** of evangelizing communication through communication. We are among those who do not believe that the various forms of communication are simple "instruments" or "aids" to evangelization, but we are convinced that they are an original "**new evangelization**" that allows the "incarnation" of the whole Christ in the entirety of present-day communication.

The **global project** of this new evangelization is elaborated for the "**faithful**" of the "Pauline parish" (all those who use communication); the **contents** are the proposal of an integral Christ in the totality of faith (dogma, morals and cult) and a presentation of the human realities in the light of gospel values; the communicating **apostles** are the Paulines who, with Saint Paul as their model, want to translate their experience of Christ so as to "make themselves all for all" with the priestly aim to allow the experiencing of God even in the complexity of today's communication.

5. At almost a **hundred years** from the start of the Pauline charism, we can ask ourselves if, taking into account the changes in our Congregation, we can still offer to the Church our service of thought and concrete works, keeping ourselves faithful to the Pauline priesthood as it is described and lived by blessed Alberione.

In the space of the Founder's existence, the interpretation of the priestly ministry connected to the press and to mass media undergoes a broadening of realization:

from the priest “**writer**,” himself the author of the contents, to the priest “**editor**,” capable of making good use of, with Pauline spirit, the contents of others.

In order to “**rekindle**” today the physiognomy of the Pauline priesthood, we must be aware of some important data: the complexity of the phenomenon of communication with its professional requirements; the secularized concept of existence; the disproportion of the replacement of the Pauline generations with the increase of the age median; civil laws and some imprudent choice in the adoption of enterprise as instrument for evangelization and in the integration of lay collaborators; success in some forms of communication, slow development in others and timid beginnings in digital communication; a lack of specializations of young Paulines, above all in communication; the wealth of studies in philosophy and theology made in specialized centers that however are not accompanied by a systematic theoretical initiation to the Pauline charism and by apostolic commitments of creative responsibility; the initiatives of other ecclesial institutions that, although they don’t have communication as their priority, are ahead of us exactly in what is specific to us; the hypothesis of enclosing ourselves in what we know how to realize and the temptation to minimize or distort our charism by assuming other types of ministry as alternative.

Thanks to God and due to clarity of convictions and persevering fidelity to the Founder, the Congregation offers even today to the Church the value of the Pauline priesthood entirely committed to evangelize employing communication. However, it would be imprudent not to take into account the data just enumerated which concur in the need to “**revive**” the Pauline priesthood in the totality of our charism.

To relaunch the Pauline priesthood through a creative fidelity to the Founder, I think that it is necessary to have recourse to at least **three sources of inspiration**. First of all, the thought and work of blessed Alberione deepened with seriousness: it would be a total betrayal not to consider anymore evangelization through communication as an authentic priestly ministry. Moreover, the assimilation of the universal magisterium dealing with communication: if the entire ecclesial community is mobilized to utilize communication in evangelization, it would be a true paradox if we Paulines, born for this mission alone, should go in search of other ministries. Finally, taking the occasion of our centenary, have the boldness, intelligent and full of faith, to formulate a global project of new evangelization tied to the communication of today, making actual the pastoral sensitivity of blessed Alberione.

In this actualization we can strengthen ourselves with supernatural motivations by meditating on the “**priesthood**” of our Father Saint Paul: “Christ has not sent me to baptize, but to evangelize” (1Cor 1,17) and: “I am a minister of Jesus Christ for the gentiles, exercising the sacred commitment of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15,16).

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