

LIVE ONE OWN'S TIME: LIKE PAUL

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Premise

An attempt to match and compare two very different personalities: Martin Luther and Don Giacomo Alberione.

– Affinity: the respective movement has been launched in Paul's name, although with different, nonetheless fruitful, ecclesial impacts, (cf. *Tischreden*, Einaudi, 351).

– Diversity: Luther's Paul is the theologian, proponent of justification through faith (polemical dimension; attention to the individual; depth); the Paul of Don Alberione is the Christian committed to an active apostolic presence (constructive dimension; attention to universalistic dimensions; extension).

1. The starting point: Jesus Christ!

Without the event on the way to Damascus, Paul most probably would not have been what he was, that is, he would not have shown interest on those who would instead become the focal point of his ministry: the Gentiles!

He would not have undertaken any missionary journey. It is argued whether there existed any Jewish proselytism at the time of the Christian origins; the only real indication is in Gal 5:11: "As for me, brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished."

He would not have written anything (much less the letters).

He would not have demonstrated that sensitivity to his time, which, instead, marks his Christian identity.

If one forgets the impact he received from Jesus Christ in his life, one would run the risk of explaining his activities with mere sociological or cultural, or, worse, psychological categories.

Instead, his encounter with Christ is the true hermeneutic key of the whole of his biography as Christian and as Apostle.

Let it be marked well that the missionary impulse came to St. Paul from the encounter with the Risen Christ. The mere contact with Jesus on earth, in fact, did not push the disciples to undertake apostolic activities outside the confines of Israel and of Judaism. It is instead the glorious

Christ who, while assuring his constant presence, imprints on the apostles the strength of a testimony that does not only go “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), but above all shows that there is not “any person profane or unclean... and that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:28,34).

2. The choice for “the others”

Paul is the typical personality of the Christian origins which has thrust out of one’s own circle. Although sometimes he refers to the “outsiders” in the sense of dissociation (cf. 1Cor 5:12; 1Thes 4:12; also Col 4,5), in fact his interest is precisely for them. The sense of “the outsiders” is functional only in limiting clearly the sphere of the Christian community; although it comports separation, it has but a pastoral value, but not certainly theological or, much less, historical-salvific.

The scandal that he feared raising as regards the first step he took as an Israelite (cf. Rom 9:3: “my brothers, my kin according to the flesh”). He has overcome the fence that limits (limited) and instead separates (separated) Israel from the rest of the people, from the *goyyim*, about whom one reads in Is 40:15,17: “Behold, the nations count as a drop of the bucket; as dust on the scales... before him all the nations are as naught, as nothing and void he accounts them” (cf. also Gal 2:15; Eph 2:12)!

Texts like Rom 1:5 ought to be read:

“Through him [Christ] we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, *among all the Gentiles*” (cf. 11:13),

and above all Gal 1:15-16:

“But when [God], who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, so that I might proclaim him *to the Gentiles*...”

The new Pauline conception of openness to the “others” comes to the Apostle only from his Christological faith. It does not come from a personal interior crisis. Not from a reflection on the negativity of the Mosaic *Torah*. Not from the pitiful consideration of a universal condition of sin. On the contrary, for Paul, the solution precedes the problem” (E.P. Sanders), that is, the discovery of Christ and of the brilliance that falls on his face (cf. 2Cor 4,6) allows him to perceive the existence of a condition of negativity outside him (cf. Phil 3:7-8: loss and rubbish).

In any case, Paul's apostolic commitment presupposes its Jewish matrix, noticeable on many levels (biblical, theological, messianological, eschatological). It has never been detached from it. Thus, the proclamation of the Gospel constitutes also an encounter among cultures, which is not renounced. Paul is a Jew "in Christ". He never speaks of a substitution of Israel by the Gentiles!

What counts for Paul is the "crossing over the differences" (A. Badiou), that is, of the distinctive details: it is the staying within while having a universe to proclaim and to live

Read 1Cor 9:19-23:

"Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All that I do for the sake of the gospel. So that I too may have a share in it,"

and Phil 4:8:

"... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worth of praise, think about these things" (cf. 1Thes 5:21: "Test anything; retain what is good").

3. Confrontation with his moment

The temporal "today" that he lived also implies a qualitative "where"; it is not to be understood only in the temporal sense as much, above all, as something cultural: it is the culture of the (Jewish and) pagan world of the time that he knows and utilizes. It deals, therefore, with an *hic et nunc!*

The great events of the moment, that is of the years 40-50 (cf. murder of Caligula, then of Nero, the reign of Herod Agrippa, the Roman procurators in Palestine, the literary event of the writings of Seneca, Persius) have not left any trace in Paul's letters. One would say that all this for him, in the Stoic way, a *adiàphoron*, a matter of no consequence.

To him two things matter: (1) the passing on of the Gospel and (2) the

state of man to whom the Gospel is addressed.

This state is essentially perceived from a point of view, not as an issue of politics (cf. Rom 13,1-7) as much a religious-cultural issue. This, however, has visible exceptions, either religious (the absent of an anti-polytheistic polemics: cf. 1Cor 8:5; as much as Rom 1,18-32 deals appropriately with anti-idolatry) or moral (absence of treatment of debated issues: fate and freedom; the *hedoné*) or social as well (slavery). All these aspects are taken into consideration only on the side, in reflex: the Gospel cannot but end in having influence on them.

The theme that denote cultural connections between Paul and his surroundings:

- universalistic openness
- the art of communication:
 - *places*: synagogue, home, agorà, areopagus;
 - *means*: aside from spoken word, the letters (cf. epistolography; rhetorics)
- Enochic Essenism: the idea of Sin prior to sins (Rom 5:12ff)
- temple-community versus temple-building
- mystery cults and union with the cultic God (Rom 6:1-11: baptism; 1Cor 10:16: Eucharist)
- the Christological concept of the *parousia* (1Thes 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; + 1Cor 15:23) (2Cor 6:2)!

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