

THE PASTORALNESS OF THE PAULINE CHARISM IN THE CHURCH OF TODAY

1. A “pastoral” appreciated by the Church and in line with Vatican II

While commenting on the book *La Teologia della Pubblicità* (The Theology of the Publishing Industry) by Fr. Rosario F. Esposito, Fr. Domenico Grasso, a teacher of Pastoral Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University starting from the 1960's and a conciliar expert – a drafter of the decree *Ad Gentes* on the missionary activity of the Church –, said very meaningful words to have it understood what was the appreciation given to the Founder, to his family and to the work carried out by them as pastoral service and as evangelization according to their specific charism:

«James Alberione is one of the most notable figures of the Catholic advertising world of the last fifty years. As the Founder of the *Society of Saint Paul*, already present in the five continents, he sensed since 1914, year of the foundation of the Congregation, the determining importance that the means of social communications, the so-called «mass media», would have had on the diffusion of the Kingdom of God. On account of this he gave life to a whole series of Congregations and Institutes, male and female, whose primary end was to work for the propagation of the Word of God, especially of catechesis, through all the means that modern technology placed more and more every day at the service of the apostolate. Since then the “Pauline Family” has been in the forefront of all the initiatives that Catholic propaganda has come up with to assure for the diffusion of the Gospel the contribution of those means that nobody hesitates to define with the Council as wonderful. He has been one of the precursors of the decree *Inter mirifica*, in which has entered all that Alberione had supported and realized in more than fifty years of apostolate».¹

Fr. Grasso perceives the conviction of the Primo Maestro regarding the diffusion of the Word of God done through the instrumentality of the press, cinema, radio, television, discs as pastoral work and true preaching, which equates the rotocalcos with the “pulpits” and the specific Pauline work and apostolate with the “ministry.” The Jesuit expert however specifies: «Alberione does not systematically develop these concepts, satisfied with affirming them as evident in relation to the Pauline

¹ Cf *Gregorianum*, 51, 1970, pp. 763-765.

doctrine that all belongs to Christ». And then to manifest from there the Alberionian “everything-ness,” with an entirely missionary value:

«This “everything-ness” does not only concern the means through which to present the message. It also concerns the whole man and all men for whom it must be presented (the missionary and the methodological dimension), and in particular its content which is Christ. Christocentrism is the keyword in the thought of Fr. Alberione, that which has oriented all his preaching, his effort to exploit all that could radiate Christ in a world dominated by the phenomenon of socialization due in great part to the mass media. He knows that the world cannot do without Christ, as, on the other hand, Christ, in order to be a Savior, cannot do without the world».

Finally, in showing how these ideas have then been appropriated by theology and by catechesis, he insists however on the Alberionian originality:

«without noticing it, he has been the first, at least in Italy, to lay the foundations of a theology of the earthly realities, the same that had to develop later and inspire so many documents of the Council. These have been the ideas that led the Pauline Family to an efficiency that many industrial societies could envy».

From the intervention of Fr. Grasso we can pick up some basic lines that point out not only the intuition and pastoral initiative of our Founder, but also stimulate our “pastorality” as Pauline Family. It refers to our frontline position in initiatives directed to assure a capillary expansion, whether in the diffusion of the Word of God, or of the doctrine of the Church, totally loyal to the magisterium, as Fr. Alberione himself has always wanted.

2. “Pastoral” in the foundational phase

Coming out from the Council, Fr. Alberione had manner to intervene several times about a theme very dear to him, that of the Word of God, well represented by the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*. Moreover, he felt himself involved, through his work, in the new concept of the Church as people of God (*Lumen Gentium*), that puts her as a criticizing and prophetic presence in dialog with the contemporary world (*Gaudium et Spes*). This last document which more than any other expresses the pastorality of the Council, due to its attention to man and to the situation of humanity, found in Fr. Alberione an attentive disciple. He saw confirmed in it the pastoral ideals of his young years and the journey made to bring them to fulfillment.

In his preachings to the Pauline Family and in particular to the Sisters of Jesus the Good Shepherd – who in it are set up to enter into the pastoral *soil* of the dioceses

– several times he said that he anticipated the times, precisely because of the pastoral direction given.

«From 1910-1911 we began the pastoral work, our pastoral writings and the pastoral books. This was started in the Pious Society of Saint Paul, and this was her direction. [...] Everything must draw inspiration from pastoral, because all the Pauline Family is ordained to pastoral, but you represent, in this part, the best part»².

Furthermore: «When I reached the priesthood, the first thing was to attend to pastoral. Of this pastoral there was no talk in Italy. There was only some movement that came from Germany»³ and he called to mind *Vita Pastorale* which was the first magazine of its kind in Italy in those years (1913). Some years beforehand, in 1960, in a homily for the lenten period, also to the Shepherdess Sisters, he affirms:

«There is no pastoral that is not in Jesus Christ, if we want to talk of a pastoral that is correct, wise and deep. And this pastoral cannot be considered diversely better than to meditate “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” The pastoral action is complete when it takes these three fundamental elements. See how Jesus worked. His pastoral was not only the pastoral of circumstances, of environments, of the time when he did his mission. It is the pastoral of every time, of every place, of every people. There is no other pastoral than that one... And therefore ... study Jesus Christ the Master».

3. A pastoral that starting from the 90's faces a new area

The pastoral animated by the Pauline spirit lowers itself down to the reality of the ecclesial journey, is attentive to the signs of the times and to their evolving. Today it is marked principally by the evolving of the culture of communication. As the document *Aetatis Novae* reminded us in the 90's, communication knows a considerable expansion which influences deeply the culture of the world in its complex, and in n. 4, the same document insists in affirming that:

«The upsetting that is taking place today in communication presupposes, more than a simple technological revolution, a complete rearrangement of what by means of which **humanity grasps the world that surrounds it, and verifies and expresses its perception of the same**. The constant availability of images and ideas, as their rapid transmission, even from one continent to another, have some consequences, together positive and negative, on the psychological, moral, and social development of persons; on the structure and functioning of societies; on the exchanges between one culture and another; on the perception and transmission of values; on ideas about the world; and on ideologies and religious convictions».

² G. Alberione, *Alle Suore di Gesù Buon Pastore*, 1965, SERMON V.

³ *Ibidem*, predica VIII.

Based on this, the document specified that:

«Media have the capacity to affect not only the modalities, but also the contents of thought. For many persons, the reality corresponds to what the media define as such; that which the media do not recognize explicitly appears to be insignificant. Silence can also be imposed *de facto* on individuals or groups that the media ignore; even the voice of the Gospel can find itself reduced to silence, without however being entirely suffocated»⁴.

So our announcement goes to insert itself in the area of the contents of thought. And our pastorality as a Family comes to clash with them or to meet them.

«The power that media has to strengthen or destroy the traditional points of reference in matters of religion, culture and family underlines well the pertinent actuality of the words of the Council: “In order to use correctly these instruments, it is absolutely necessary that those who make use of them know the norms of the moral law and observe them faithfully in this sector”».⁵

Alongside this affirmation is to be placed that which – very important for us – picks up communication in its inclusive and transversal reality:

«The work of Catholic media is not only a supplementary activity that is added to all those of the Church: **the social communications in fact have a role to play in all the aspects of the mission of the Church.** Thus we must not be satisfied with having a pastoral plan for communication, but **it is necessary that communication be an integral part of every pastoral plan** since it has in fact a contribution to give to every other apostolate, ministry or program»⁶.

As Fr. Sassi has well specified in his programmatic letter for the III year in preparation for the Centenary of the PF: «The **spirituality** that the Primo Maestro lays as the foundation of all the Institutes of the Pauline Family has the same “**pastoral**” and “**missionary**” character: in prayer with our recipients because we must be saints in order to make others saints».

Therefore there is need for a spirituality that animates the Pauline pastorality which is expressed in the apostolic area, and here quoted is the passage that concerns the press apostolate:

«The Pauline redactor finds himself in a special condition. In what sense? He is a preacher, not using the word, but paper, film. The preacher must always do two things, and proportionally the writer, and that is, ask himself: Who do I have in front of me? Who do I address? He is to consider in front of him the readers or those who he hopes will be such one day. He is to consider before him that public, or better, that group of believers he

⁴ *Aetatis Novae* 4

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 17

wants to reach. Take into consideration their souls; this after communion and the visit. Jesus is way not only for me, but for my readers. He is way for those who I want to address, for whom I want to inculcate something. Jesus is truth; it is not enough that you make spiritual reading for yourself. You have an office for redaction, and what truth do you want to communicate? Ask for the grace of an increase in faith for ourselves and then to communicate it to the reader or to the group of persons we want to reach; and if we pray, pray for all the readers; and we pray to have the grace to understand their needs, to find the ways to arrive at those hearts. ...And so we carry all our readers in our hearts when going to communion, and we carry everybody in our hearts when we do our visit to Jesus the Master»⁷.

The sense of the sacred that pervades the places of the apostolate comes to be for the Primo Maestro a transplanting in the same places of the attention had for the places of cult. Significant in that regard is what he recommends in 1936 to the Daughters of Saint Paul about the apostolate in the bookstore as a place in which the Master “sits” in order to teach:

«Do in such a way so that the Divine Master sits down willingly as during his discourse on the mountain; make holy the bookstores through your silence, your modesty, your zeal, your prayers. Have you thought that the bookstore is a Church? Let your bookstore be always a Church: let it always be the place of your sacrifice, of your mortification, of your love for souls. Let Saint Paul stand out in it: He offers to all the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the letters he holds in his hands. If you do not consider the bookstore as a Church, what will it become? It is frightful to think about it: a meeting place for chatter and gossips; a danger for your hearts and a distraction for your spirit; a desert where nobody looks for bread and water, a vain and good for nothing commerce for souls. May the Lord make you open holy bookstores, one for each diocese; may he decide to close all vain bookstores. Make yourselves salt and light. Be prudent and simple».

The evolution of the bookstores has followed the evolving of society, but we must ask ourselves if this sense of the sacred remains in the places of our apostolate through the presence of consecrated persons of the Pauline Family.

Today a new way of looking is asked of apostles. Through equivalent words the Superior General Fr. Silvio Sassi confirms this in his recent letter in which he invites us to look at the evolving of the communications phenomenon:

«The various texts offered by the universal magisterium that have accompanied the evolving of the phenomenon of communication, the systematic study of the change of the nature itself of communication, which from a conglomeration of technologies to communicate has become a true culture and today, thanks to the digital language, is a second environment of individual and social life, are a constant stimulus for the Pauline charism to “convert itself” so

⁷ G. Alberione, *Alle Figlie di San Paolo. Spiegazione delle Costituzioni*, 1961, n. 433.

as to be more pastoral and to renew itself in thought and initiatives in order to remain young and of today»⁸.

The believer must today be capable of making adequate choices, watching over what he meets every day in his journey, capable of scrutinizing and going beyond what is immediately given; but at the same time he must keep his original identity from which he has had life and continues to receive it.

4. A pastoral in line with the Church of today

«The era of globalization imposes with force so that communication can reach the most remote corners of the real world – Pope Francis said in his *Message for Social Communications Day 2014* – in the areas created by the new technologies, in the social networks, to make emerge a presence ... that listens, dialogs, encourages». For the fifty years of *Inter Mirifica* the Pope has specified that this occasion becomes a motive to discover a journey in evolution, a grown and gradual attention of the Church to the phenomenon of communication and to the instruments used with ends to evangelize.

Within that *message*, the affirmation of Pope Francis: «Communication is not an instrument! It is another thing...» should make us reflect also about our specific fields in the apostolate. It would seem to attest that, yes, the instruments have evolved, but this implies that the Church is solicitous to assume always new sensibilities and forms, aware that «the communications panorama has become little by little for many a “life environment”», a network where persons communicate, expand the limits of their knowledge and relations.

The pastuality assumed by the Church in which we operate through our specific charism is that which moves toward life, encountered in the place where she has had a new evolution, with new possibilities of sharing and modalities of communication. The Pope does not take into consideration if this type of new communicating carries out in itself negative modalities, but he picks up first of all the positive and then passes to interpellate the responsibility of the operators of communication, affirming: «We must ask ourselves: what role must the Church have with her operative and communicative realities? In every situation, beyond the technologies, I believe that the objective is that of knowing how to insert oneself in dialog with the men and women of today so as to understand their expectations, their doubts and their hopes».

⁸ Don Silvio Sassi, *Il carisma paolino è pastorale*, Letter of the Superior General of the Society of Saint Paul in the third year of the triennium of preparation for the centenary of foundation, 2013, n. 7.1.6.

The Church, in this time of globalization, becomes aware of her mission which consists in offering a point of view deeply alternative to that of a culture which is ever more arid and dehumanizing.

A pastorality impregnated with authenticity, after the modality of critical vigilance, will be able to assume a liberating and heartening prospect. From several places there has been manifested a hardship in establishing the price paid by the fragmentation of being, by the laceration of the person involved on several fronts of modern society. In following a vain trip towards materialism, today's time has picked up the title of "era of sad passions," with consequent attitudes of critical inability, trivialization, resignation, breathed in various contexts, from the private to the public sphere, and to (and why not?) the religious sphere.

So here the pastoral concern of the Pontiff to go meet a mistrusting and disappointed humanity... sad to say also due to a certain type of Christianity. It is therefore important to operate concrete choices without ever forgetting the essential that comes to us from that Pauline spirit which from our beginnings has characterized us.