

Sanctification as a couple

History and spirituality of the Holy Family Institute (=ISF)

Every day for some years now in the Eucharistic Celebration at the moment of Eucharistic prayer we hear the name of her husband, St Joseph, invoked in addition to Mary Most Holy. It was certainly a wise and shrewd decision to remind us that both have contributed to the work of redemption, but also to fix in our minds that everything began in a family, even before that, in a couple's relationship.

So, it was God who chose with care the protagonists of the history of universal salvation.

Blessed James Alberione, particularly attentive to the Gospel and social phenomena since his formation, reflected, prayed and involved individuals together with families in his pastoral work first as assistant parish priest and teacher in the seminary and then as founder of the Pauline Family. A testimony to these is the two texts *Notes on pastoral theology* and *Woman associated with priestly zeal* printed in 1912-1915. The latter is an example of the prophetic involvement of women in the pastoral ministry, well one hundred years before the commissions commissioned recently by Pope Francis.

In the following years, we could say that Fr Alberione literally chased the family with the launch in 1931 of the magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* in favor of women and young ladies first and then for all those at home. And again, in a historic volume of the '40s, written by Fr Stefano Lamera ("Little big nest. The problem of the family") - Fr Lamera was the one who concretely and institutionally realized the dream of Fr Alberione about the ISF – the Founder had made the presentation with these expressions: "God, wanting to restore everything in Jesus Christ, disposed of that He should begin His work by presenting to all families a perfect model in the Family of Nazareth. In the Holy Family, fathers, mothers, and children find divine lessons of patience, chastity, filial love, and laboriousness. There Jesus lived, worked, prayed for many years and so the restoration began with the family".

The restoration began with the family

Fr Alberione thought of the family when the breeze of Vatican Council II had brought great news in the ecclesial and social sphere. The family, in itself, constitutes the vital nucleus of society and the ecclesial community. Everything depends, however, on faith in the sacramentality of Matrimony which the spouses must recognize, accept, love and remain faithful to. Then, as now, it seemed that precisely this specific characteristic was in crisis so that a new evangelization was and still is today more necessary than ever before to help the People of God in this recovery.

The Council suggested: "Let the spouses themselves, made to the image of the living God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons, be joined to one another in equal affection, the harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification. Thus, following Christ who is the

principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by His dying and His rising up to life again” (*Gaudium et Spes* 52).

In 1964, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Society of St. Paul, the first of the ten institutions that make up the Pauline Family, the Founder officially communicated in the third person what he had been cultivating in his heart for years: “After many years of prayer and preparation... he founded the “Holy Family” Institute that is part of the Pauline Work” (*Vita Pastorale*, December 1964).

This is an all-round declaration, as only men enlightened and guided by God know how to do, and with unquestionable clarity of origin (God’s will) and purpose: “All spouses and conjugal wishing to strive for perfection, living their married life in a holy way, can participate in this Institute... The special aim of the members of the “Holy Family” Institute is to strive for holiness, making the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony always operative, through mutual love, the Christian education of children, and the exchangeable help for their own sanctification. All this in the practice of the holy vows observed according to their state of life and with active participation in the way of the ecclesial community of which they are part” (ibid.).

Living on God and giving God

“Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel”! (1 Cor 9:16). Saint Paul’s cry, which highlights the common call to mission, is echoed by Fr Alberione’s invitation: “The Apostle is the one who exudes God from all pores: with words, deeds, prayers, gestures, attitudes; in public and in private; from his whole being” (*Ut perfectus sit homo Dei* IV, 278). The couple is then involved in this mission so that they may live the gifts received in Baptism, Marriage and Religious Consecration within the ISF on a daily basis. The sanctification as a couple takes place in the following of Jesus Christ, Divine Master, Way, Truth and Life, as lived by the Apostle Paul who united holiness, that is, the interior life and the apostolate. In fact, he not only imitated Jesus, but showed us Christification, that is, how to let Christ live in us: “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20) and how to bear witness to it from an intense friendship and understanding with Him, cultivated in the annual Spiritual Exercises, in the monthly formation retreats and daily prayer.

On the other hand, Saint Paul is the saint of Marriage, the one who in Eph 5 highlights well how in the love of the spouses all the care of the bridegroom Jesus for the Church, his bride, is concretely manifested. The principal aim of the Institute is therefore to Christianize oneself as a couple, to arrive together at holiness, taking care to bring others to the same goal, beginning with the children.

Nature and purpose of the ISF

The Statute, approved by the Church in 1993, thus outlines the vocation and mission of the members: “The members, “moved by the Spirit” in order to imitate more deeply the way of life of the Family of Nazareth; to live more fully the gift of married life and thus “to sanctify the ecclesial community and the world”; to carry out the apostolate more effectively and everywhere; they commit themselves to seek in marriage evangelical perfection through the vows of chastity, poverty and conjugal obedience, ordering their lives according to the lines of the present Statute” (art. 2).

The members “will develop all their Christian and evangelical possibilities”, “so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men”, especially within the family, the first educational nucleus of society (art. 4).

The members consider the Holy Family of Nazareth as the model and example to be imitated... (art. 5).

The lessons of the House of Nazareth

In a memorable speech at Nazareth, Pope St. Paul VI explained the virtues lived by Jesus, Mary and Joseph, from which the ISF members are inspired: “Here, at this school, we certainly understand why we must maintain a spiritual discipline if we want to follow the doctrine of the Gospel and become disciples of Christ... In the first place, the house of Nazareth teaches us silence. Oh! if the esteem for silence were reborn in us, an admirable and indispensable atmosphere of the spirit... Here we understand the way of living in the family, what the family is, the communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, its sacred and inviolable character; we can see how sweet and irreplaceable is education in the family, we can understand its natural function in the social order. Finally, we learn the lesson of work. Oh! abode of Nazareth, home of the carpenter’s son! Here we wish to understand and celebrate the law, strict but redeeming of human effort; here we wish to ennoble the dignity of work...” (January 5, 1964).

Perhaps what was valid for Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Nazareth may not be valid today, but for all families who want to follow Jesus, the uncomfortable calls to come out of the ego, to listen to the Word of God that comes in secret, in sleep or through the mouth of a child, a partner or a friend, are renewed. Today’s families learn from the three to distinguish between what is unique and unrepeatable and what calls each one to imitation, because it is a spirituality that tastes of eternity, not subject to the fall of fashion. Putting oneself in the mentality of the members of the family of Nazareth means understanding that they have faced the problems of their time - different but no less serious than ours - following step by step what God asked of them, for better or for worse. And they did so by giving all of themselves in fidelity to the divine plan.

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