

The Film Apostolate

1. The origins

Cinema was born in Paris in 1895 when brothers Augusto and Louis Lumière presented the “cinematograph” in the salon of a fashionable café frequented by Parisian high society. It was the fulfilment of the desire to reproduce movement, starting with photography, invented in 1826.¹

The first films made by the Lumiere brothers lasted approximately one minute. The invention became the main attraction at fairs and travelling shows, presenting current affairs or fiction. The lack of sound was remedied by captions, read and commented on by the “Co Artist”, sometimes accompanied by music.

In 1900, cinema evolved and films became more complex. In the United States, Hollywood became a real industry, made up of technicians, artists, actors and producers who made Los Angeles the capital of cinema. Great comic actors, such as Charlie Chaplin, established themselves.

In the 1930s, sound films appeared: dialogues, noises and music were essential to understand the mood of the characters and the type of scene: romantic, dramatic, etc. In the western world, Hollywood filmmaking became established and an organisational model was established that encompassed every sector of film production, from the script, filming, editing... to distribution and cinema management.

In the Italian cinema of the 1930s, films were shot with reconstructed sets in a studio, with the assistance of specialised technicians and with professional actors. Coming from different cultural backgrounds, all the directors had in common the desire to represent real-life; this is why they are called “directors of neo-realism”: they chose to go out into the streets and shoot outdoors, with a reduced number of technicians and with ordinary people acting.

1968 was characterised by cultural movements of protest of the most disadvantaged social classes (workers and peasants) carried out above all by young people: it was the “Protest of 68”. The cinema of the 1970s became an expression of these cultural movements.

2. Cinema and the Church

The relationship between the Church and the world of cinema has a long journey and not always easy path,² made of periodical meetings and clashes. “The relationship between the cinema and the Church is a union that has existed since the dawn of the magic of the seventh art and has continued in films that feature the events of the Church itself but, on the other hand,

¹ Cf. *Enciclopedia Universale Rizzoli Larousse IV*, Rizzoli Editore, Milano, pp. 119-131.

² Cf. ENRIQUE CHUVIECO, *La Chiesa e il cinema: un cammino lungo e a volte difficile*, pubblicato in “Aleteia Team”, il 25.10.2013.

this bond has also been strengthened by the great interest that the Magisterium has always shown in the cinema”.³

Nuncio Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII – on whom Pius XI imposed his reservations, considering cinema harmful to morality – already sensed the immense potential of cinema to spread Christianity.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, Christian themes attracted audiences, and European and North American producers proposed new projects, with major Hollywood figures. It is said that it was Pius XII himself who suggested to Alfred Hitchcock that the sacrament of Confession should be portrayed in images, as it would have been in *I Confess*, featuring Montgomery Clift in the role of a heroic priest willing to martyr himself so as not to reveal the secrets of his penitents.

It was not until 1955 that Pius XII issued his first exhortation to those in charge of the film industry to encourage them to produce works that would make man better.⁴ Two years later, he dedicated his encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* to cinema, radio and television. A year earlier, the *Religious Film Week* in Valladolid (Spain) was born.

In 1959, St. John XXIII testified to the importance of the media for the Church by creating the Pontifical Commission for Cinema, Radio and Television, where he wrote: “It also urges us to consider with particular solicitude all the factors of modern civilisation which affect man’s spiritual life; among these, we must include radio, television and cinema”.⁵

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council solemnly confirmed the dignity of the cinema and the rest of the *mass media* in the document *Inter Mirifica*, which became more concrete in 1971 in the text *Communio et Progressio*. Twenty years later, John Paul II issued the pastoral instruction *Aetatis Novae* on social communications in the new historical context. Subsequently, the Church lists the tasks of the new media and explains how to make proper use of them for the good of human dignity, with Ethics in *Advertising* (1997), Ethics in *Social Communications* (2000), *Ethics in Internet* (2002) and the letter of St John Paul II *The Rapid Development of the Means of the Social Communication*, - in 2005.

Subsequently, both reflections and church documents consider cinema a way to spread Christianity and its values. The inauguration of Vatican television on 22 October 1983 is the culmination of a difficult journey. Then the Church moved forward into the digital age: in 1995 it created the official Vatican *website* and in 2001 it sent the first e-mail in history with the exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*.

In 2008, during the pontificate of Benedict XVI, the Vatican’s *Youtube* channel in five languages was launched. In 2010 the Church became a “blogger” with the *Vatican Information Service*. In 2011, the digital version of *L’Osservatore Romano* appeared. A few months later, *vaticannews.va*, which links the content produced by Vatican Radio to its *Facebook* page and *Twitter* profiles, went online. Pope Benedict XVI uses this microblog, the most famous in the

³ Cf. DARIO E. VIGANÒ, *Cinema e Chiesa. I documenti del Magistero*, Effatà Torino 2002.

⁴ La lungimiranza di papa Pacelli sul potere istruttivo del cinema si è concretizzata anche in incarichi come quello dato ad Augusto Genina affinché portasse sullo schermo la vita di santa Maria Goretti in *Cielo sulla palude*, in cui descrive il martirio della giovane.

⁵ GIOVANNI XXIII, *Boni Pastoris*, Lettera apostolica, in forma di Motu Proprio, 22 febbraio 1959.

world, to send the first 'tweet' of the Catholic Church; a practice that has continued uninterrupted since Pope Francis.

In recent times, various versions of the life of Jesus, such as Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion* (2004), have re-evaluated the importance of cinema and current media in proposing to the world the good news of the incarnation of God made man.

3. The beginnings of the film apostolate

On 11 May 1953, the Sacred Congregation for Religious published an Instruction on the film apostolate.⁶ It began by referring to Pius XI: "It is one of the necessities of our time", wrote the Pope in his encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*, of 29 June 1936, "to watch over and work so that the cinema is no longer a school of corruption, but rather becomes a precious instrument of education and the elevation of humanity".

After affirming that those in charge "follow with vigilant care the serious problem of the cinema", he acknowledged that the cinema, "among modern amusements, has taken a place of universal importance" and praised "the multiplication of initiatives aimed at safeguarding the spiritual interests of the faithful and exercising a moralising influence in the field of the cinema industry".

And he reiterates: "Particular mention should be made of cinemas run – often at great sacrifice – by priests or religious who care for souls or carry out specific educational and social apostolates, which not only ensure healthy entertainment for the people and, in particular, for young people, but are often an effective instrument of formation and human and religious elevation". He then warned of the "difficulties encountered by Catholic cinema owners due to the scarcity of morally sound films and the financial burden".

He again cites the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*, which stipulates "that in every country the bishops should create a permanent national review office, which would promote good films, classify others and pass on this judgement to priests and the faithful". And without naming anyone, it speaks of "religious institutes which have as their proper aim, sanctioned by the constitutions approved by the Holy See, the apostolate in the field of cinema, not only through the projection and distribution of morally sound films but also through their production".

Finally, he offered some prescriptions for the good functioning of these cinemas.⁷

16 November 1959 was an important date in the history of the relationship between cinema and Catholics: John XXIII inaugurated the *Vatican Filmoteca*, bringing to fruition the intuition of his predecessor Pius XII.

⁶ SACRA CONGREGAZIONE DEI RELIGIOSI, *Istruzione sull'apostolato del cinema*, 11 maggio 1953.

⁷ Fonte: *Le cinéma dans l'enseignement de l'Église*, Poliglotta Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 1955, pp. 96-100.

Cf. DARIO EDOARDO VIGANÒ, *Il cinema dei Papi, Documenti inediti dalla Filmoteca vaticana*, Marietti 1920.

PAPA FRANCESCO, *Saluto ai rappresentanti di ACEC-SDC in occasione dei 70 anni della Comunità*, 7 dicembre 2019.

Three years after the end of the Great War, Pius XII had already set up the Pontifical Commission for Educational and Religious Filmmaking in Palazzo San Carlo, on 30 January 1948, and immediately began to set up a small screening room on the ground floor of the Palace, which would later become a sort of 'papal cinema', still the centre of the *Vatican Film Library's* activities today⁸.

John XXIII immediately showed a change of attitude in the management of the outlook towards the cinema and the media in general, while presenting undeniable continuity with the previous pontificate.

If the *motu proprio* "*Boni pastoris*" of February 1959 made the position of the Pontifical Commission for cinematography, radio and television even more solid, the radical difference in the Pope's approach to the mass media compared to previous pontificates, and the openness towards the world of cinema shown during the years in which he was Patriarch of Venice, aroused expectations throughout the world. This situation leads in certain film circles to the anticipation and, at times, the misrepresentation of signals of openness and innovation, which must be curbed by the interventions of the Vatican authorities.⁹

On the 70th anniversary of the *Associazione Cattolica esercenti Cinema* in Italy, Pope Francis reminds the members of this association that post-war Italian cinema is a great school of humanism. And he entrusts Catholic film associations with three tasks: communion, creativity and vision.

On the 70th anniversary of the *Associazione Cattolica esercenti Cinema* in Italy, Pope Francis reminds the members of this association that post-war Italian cinema is a great school of humanism. And he entrusts three tasks to Catholic cinema associations: communion, creativity and vision.

Finally, the Pope exhorts to "build communion", but "also communion between associations and organisations in the Catholic world that deal with cinema, to transmit the beauty of being together in the events you promote. Without communion, the aggregation lacks soul", and he also urges them to "live your passion and your competence with an ecclesial sense and style: this is the best medicine to avoid falling into self-referentiality, which always kills".¹⁰

Re-reading those passages means placing oneself at the centre of a transformation that intercepts the interests of media scholars. On the other hand, it was precisely the Secretariat for Communication of the Holy See (which became a Dicastery in 2018) that, since its establishment in 2015, has fostered the attention of researchers on these issues, with the relaunch of the *Vatican Filmoteca*, which became the venue in 2017 for a study conference for the 60th anniversary of the encyclical *Miranda prorsus* of Pius XII, in collaboration with the *Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa*.

⁸ La Filmoteca Vaticana custodisce il materiale filmato sulla storia della Chiesa, a partire dal 1896, con il documento del *Papa Leone XIII nei Giardini Vaticani*. Sono catalogati circa 8.000 titoli.

⁹ Cf. DARIO EDOARDO VIGANÒ, *Il cinema dei Papi, Documenti inediti dalla Filmoteca vaticana*, Marietti 1920.

¹⁰ PAPA FRANCESCO, *Saluto ai rappresentanti di ACEC-SDC* in occasione dei 70 anni della Comunità, 7 dicembre 2019.

4. The intuition of Fr Alberione

Fr Alberione was not the first to think that the cinema could also be used for the proclamation of the Gospel; but already on 6 January 1938, he began the film apostolate. The undertaking presented insurmountable difficulties, beginning with the mistrust with which the new invention was viewed, even more so if it was used by a religious congregation. Nevertheless, the Founder affirmed, “Since the cinema is the most important and urgent apostolate of our time, and also the most complex and difficult, we must unite all our forces and collaborate with zeal and a spirit of sacrifice to achieve it.”¹¹

In fact, Blessed James Alberione had a very high awareness of the great importance of the film apostolate – of the “*cinema*”, he said with old-fashioned pronunciation –. These are his words: “When I arrive at the foot of this hill (the little hill where the headquarters of Sanpaolo Film stood at the time, on Via Portuense in Rome) and I approach this house, I feel something of the responsibility that we have in this sector and of the dangers that exist for those who are not delicate; so I think of the great merits that those who dedicate themselves to it with delicacy, with faith, with prudence, with constancy, reap. I always place the entire apostolate of the cinema in the chalice of the Mass, knowing a little – I won’t say everything – of the good consequences, of the good fruits that can be hoped for from it. And I always ask that those who dedicate themselves to it have the virtues and be guided by the light of God...”¹²

And he prays to Mary: “Keep your gentle hand on my head, guard my mind, my heart, my senses, O Mary, Queen of beauty! May she inspire the art of filmmaking and guide towards the end all the good that this apostolate can accomplish and achieve”.¹³

In fact, in 1937, Fr Alberione asked the subdeacon, Fr Gregorio Delpogetto, who lived in Alba, to go to Rome, both for experience in the cinema and as an organizer. Reading an article in *L’Osservatore Romano* about the life of Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia, he invited two cinema-loving priests – Don Roberto Mozzachiodi and Don Luigi Lenta – and told them: “We must begin the apostolate of cinema: let us go and make an hour of adoration at the tomb of Saint Paul.”¹⁴ So he wants to ensure that their mission is successful. And so began Sanpaolo Film – initially called REF (*Romana Editrice Film*) –, approved by Monsignor Carlo Stoppa, Bishop of Alba, in 1956, and as a legal entity, by the President of the Republic Giovanni Gronchi, in 1957.

With the collaboration of external missionaries, a far-reaching historical-apologetic film was planned: *Abuna Messias*, produced by the newly founded REF, financed by the Società San Paolo and directed by Fr Delpogetto, although the actual producer-director was Fr James Alberione, who used the young man to avoid committing himself directly to the risky financial venture.

The truly colossal enterprise presents the life and works of Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia, the great evangeliser of Ethiopia. The film was a great success – as well as some criticism for its

¹¹ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, gennaio 1948, *Gli strumenti della comunicazione sociale nel pensiero del Primo Maestro*, 1964 p. 12.

¹² GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Predicazione sull’Apostolato* 1951, p. 309.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ GIUSEPPE BARBERO, *Il sacerdote Giacomo Alberione. Un uomo – un’idea*, p. 527.

final political background – and in 1939 it won the *Golden Lion* and the *Coppa Mussolini* at the 7th Venice Film Festival. The Holy See encouraged Fr Alberione: “You, Father, go ahead, do not stop; the Lord will bless you more and more. Ecclesiastical authority approves of the work of the Society of Saint Paul also in this, as in the apostolate of the press. Please dedicate more people to it”.¹⁵

This experience served the Paulines to prove in the field how onerous it is to engage in the apostolate of the cinema, quite different from that of the press, for which they had already acquired solid experience. On the one hand, this experience demonstrates the enormous apostolic courage of the Founder, and on the other hand, it makes the Paulines more cautious, despite their desire to continue “doing something” for the “moralisation of the cinema” – as they said at the time.

After the pause imposed by the war years (1940-1945), they resumed with greater vigour in 1946. In the St. Paul Bulletin, the Founder gave the directives for the film apostolate, commented on the relevant Constitutions, presented a historical synthesis of the film apostolate carried out by the Pauline Family, and offered a long list of films made or rented by Sanpaolo Film; he stressed that ‘this work of ours must always be carried out in the concept of apostolate: not of pure relief’.¹⁶

In 1955 the new film studios were inaugurated in Villa San Giuseppe in Via Portuense, which became the headquarters of *San Paolo Film*¹⁷ – previously they had been located in the undercroft of the shrine of the Queen of Apostles –.¹⁸ Thus began a long story: *Il Figlio dell’uomo* (*The Son of Man*) came along, considered a realistic experiment in cinematic Gospel – Pasolini confessed to having watched it several times before his *Vangelo secondo Matteo* (Gospel according to St. Matthew). Next came the series of 53 catechetical documentaries, later 80, a challenge to traditional pastoral teaching, which was encouraged by Monsignor Montini (the future Paul VI) on behalf of Pius XII – at the time of Don Emilio Cordero’s direction –.

After a few films for children, films on religious commitment were launched: in 1950 *Mater Dei* with a script partly written by Fr Alberione, who was always present at the shooting and even involved in a part, as was Maestra Tecla: it was the first colour film in Italy. It was Monsignor Montini who blessed the first film shoot in the crypt of the Sanctuary and praised its intuition. *San Paolo Film* then undertook the expensive projects of three biblical films: *The Patriarchs, Saul and David* and *The Great Leaders*, a pioneering project if we think that only 40 years later would cinema and television invent the biblical genre to the praise of critics. In the seventies, a co-production with RAI produced *Le avventure di Pinocchio* by Luigi Comencini.

¹⁵ GIUSEPPE BARBERO, *Il sacerdote Giacomo Alberione, un uomo – un’idea*, Roma 1991, p. 528.

¹⁶ *San Paolo*, settembre-ottobre 1947.

¹⁷ Il nome dell’iniziativa è nato con le parole staccate e con la “n” (San Paolo Film), poi è diventato comune l’uso del termine con la “m” e tutto attaccato (Sanpaolofilm).

¹⁸ “È simbolico – dice Don Alberione – che oggi sotto la chiesa si preparino gli stabilimenti per il cinema e per l’offset. Sentire il dovere dell’apostolato. Chi sente, previene; chi sente, occupa intensamente il tempo. Desiderare di illuminare tutte le genti. Ed è la radio che oggi può illuminare le genti; è la stampa; è il cinema. Sentire la bellezza di questa missione. *Omnia facio propter evangelium*”. (*Per un rinnovamento spirituale*, p. 29).

But above all, the aim is to promote cinema, not only religious cinema, among the people. Films produced by *San Paolo Film*, others made in collaboration with or purchased directly from production companies, and a rich catalogue of films was created. This led to the creation of parish cinemas, which contributed so much to the cultural growth of Catholics in countries such as Italy, Spain, England, etc. The intense and effective work of dubbing and editing films to “16” and “super 8” format was carried out for many years by the *San Paolo Film Agencies* and *Video centres*, under the direction of Fr Attilio Monge; then came videotapes and DVDs.¹⁹

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In April 1960, to the first Paulines who had come from all over the world – summoned to Ariccia for a month of Spiritual Exercises – Fr Alberione also spoke about the apostolate of the cinema, recalling the words of Pius XI: “For the cinema has a psychological power on the human spirit that can be said to be suggestive because it grasps the whole man and affects all sensitive and spiritual powers... Effectiveness which, combined with its extension, can seriously shake or strengthen – according to whether the cinema is good or bad – the four cornerstones of human coexistence: youth and the family, the social order and the religious order.”²⁰

“Perhaps his greatest regret [for Fr Emilio Cordero], as well as for all of us,” confessed Fr Attilio Monge, “was that he had tried many times to make a film about the Apostle Paul, after whom the Pauline Family was named: at least three important scripts remained in the drawer, including those by Vittorio De Seta and Pier Paolo Pasolini: the latter on the eve of production, which did not happen for reasons beyond our control.”²¹

5. An enormous challenge for the sons and daughters of Fr Alberione

The cinema,” writes Fr Alberione, “contains within itself the beneficial and maleficent power of the theatre, photography, the press, radio, the living word, painting, etc. The consequences on a soul, in an institute, in a parish, in society, in international relations, in the Church are incalculable: for better or for worse.”²²

The value and urgency that Blessed James Alberione attributed to the film apostolate is extraordinary, and he taught his followers as follows: “We need to give great importance to the cinema. To feel responsibility. We see that in the church the number of faithful listening to the Word of God is low, while the cinemas are full of people until one o’clock after midnight. There is a large number of people from all walks of life and of all ages, not excluding young people on whose psychology the cinema has an influence, for better or for worse.”²³

¹⁹ Cf. SIMONE MORENO, “Quando arrivo ai piedi di questa collina...” in “Il Cooperatore Paolino”, n. 4 aprile 2003.

²⁰ Citato da Don Giacomo Alberione in *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei III*, Roma 1998, p. 205.

²¹ ATTILIO MONGE, *Sulle orme di don Alberione* in “Il Cooperatore Paolino”, settembre-ottobre 2010.

²² GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle figlie di San Paolo*, “Regina Apostolorum”, dicembre 1948.

²³ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle Figlie di San Paolo* “Meditazioni e Istruzioni”, 18 marzo 1957.

In any case, Fr Alberione wanted to make it very clear that the activity of the cinema is an apostolate, and he always placed it together with other means: "The press, the cinema, radio and television constitute today the most urgent, the most rapid and the most effective works of the Catholic apostolate. It may be that times will reserve other better means for us. But at present, it seems that the heart of the apostle cannot desire anything better to give God to souls and souls to God".²⁴

And he explicitly states: "Filmmaking for us is the apostolate. The apostolate consists in this: to make Jesus Christ, the divine Master, known. Just as the evil that the cinema spreads is immense, so too is the good that it promotes."²⁵

Fr Alberione was aware of the difficulties that this apostolate presents, but he nevertheless insisted that it must be faced with courage, relying on the help of God: "It will be said that this apostolate is difficult. Good is always difficult. So, either renounce it or, with courage and the grace of God, face the difficulties and work hard, fight hard, until the end."²⁶ "We are too small in the face of the large film production organisations, rental organisations, etc. We are really 'the small step'. We are really 'the small step'. All said and done! Small in every sense of the word: economically and in terms of organisation. But God is with us, if we are good and if we all pray."²⁷

Enthusiasm, courage and faith are needed: "The apostolate of cinema, in order to be ever more fruitful, intelligent, effective and ordered, requires, more than any other apostolate, generous dedication. This is the fruit of a profound interior life."²⁸

Fr Alberione was aware of the fundamental importance of the formation of parents and educators in this field: "To form educators and parents who know how to keep in the right balance with regard to children... Parents and conscious educators have the duty to choose, measure, accompany, correct...".²⁹

Collaboration, also on an international level, is perhaps more necessary than ever in this sector: "we will have to convince the big companies that it is necessary to have, along with Catholic art, literature and press, technically perfect and Christianly inspired, also a Catholic film industry, that is, one that deals catholically with any subject, sacred or profane, instructive or recreational. More often than not, it will be necessary to commit Catholics, individuals or collectives, to take on financial commitments... It will be of great benefit to promote and support reciprocal international collaboration".³⁰

To honour Blessed James Alberione, the prophet of the communication of the Gospel, on the 50th anniversary of his death, it is to be hoped that the cinema sector can resume, with due updating, its effective presence on the frontiers of communication, as a current form of apostolate. Only a great spirit of faith, together with the apostolic ardour of the blessed Founder,

²⁴ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei I*, [1960], p. 330.

²⁵ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle figlie di San Paolo*, "Regina Apostolorum", dicembre 1948.

²⁶ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Predicazione sull'apostolato* 1951, p. 320,

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 329-330.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 319.

²⁹ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Apostolato dell'Edizione*, nn. 460-461, p. 340-341.

³⁰ Ibidem, n. 470, p. 347.

will be able to help us continue with creativity on the demanding path of evangelisation in the world of multimedia communication of our time.

Fr Alberione's apostolic farsightedness opened up an immense field for the mission: "The cinema has opened up a new and immense field of activity and responsibility for the religious apostolate".³¹ He invites his sons and daughters to keep their eyes open to every new possibility: "Time, circumstances and good-will may suggest other means of action".³²

It makes one think of what Blessed James Alberione would have done if he had been given the opportunity to experience the phenomenon of *peritelevision* – which so heavily conditions people's lives today – and to use today's satellite, computer and telematic systems of analogue and digital communication...

Don José Antonio Pérez, ssp

³¹ Ibidem, n. 454, p. 337.

³² Ibidem, n. 472, p. 348.