

## **PENANCE and MORTIFICATION** **in the Practice and Teaching of Blessed James Alberione**

The strong time, favorable weather, of Lent turns out to be a very precious opportunity to get to know better and reflect together on the themes of penance and mortification according to Blessed Alberione.

1. **PENANCE** is understood both in the etymological sense of repentance, of invitation to conversion, of more precise orientation to God in the journey of conformation to the Divine Master; and both in the concrete sense of "works of penance".

In his work *Short Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, in reference to Ash Wednesday, Fr Alberione writes: "Lent prepares us to participate in the fruits of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus with penance and good works". And, in agreement with other authors, he too calls Lent "a great retreat made by Christians all over the world, who are preparing for new life, and resurrection in Christ. Imitate the withdrawal and fasting of Jesus. A "great retreat", then. Marked by "penance" and "good works".

It is known that the Founder has not established special corporal penances for the Pauline Family. But what he had proposed on the occasion of his spiritual exercises, lived in 1922 it is not surprising: "I will reduce food even a little from the necessary – I will provide for rest in order to mortify me – I will use the discipline three times a day in a spirit of penance and as a preventive – if it is not enough I will add the hairshirt". It is natural to ask ourselves: why did Fr Alberione – and probably also Don Giaccardo, Maestra Tecla, Madre Scolastica, Bro Andrew Borello, etc. – not hesitate to resort to penances of that kind?

But, knowing well our fragility, Fr Alberione preferred to orient ourselves to positive penances, that is, to the maximum application in all the commitments of our day. He is still driving us with very timely directions. Here is what he recommended in the morning meditation on February 27, 1952, Ash Wednesday:

"What penances to propose for Lent? We could recommend quite a few. Patient charity is the first penance; benign charity... (cf. 1Cor, 13,1ff); patient charity with everyone, and also with ourselves. Another penance: common life, punctuality at every hour: "my greatest penance is community life", said St. John Berchmans.

Another penance: the quick, diligent exercise of the apostolate, carried out with a supernatural spirit.

But this morning I want to advise and propose, before any other, the penance of prayer, of devotion: which includes all the practices of piety of the day, the week, the month, the year.

1. Do all these practices; make them entirely.
2. Do them in the spirit of the Constitutions. Honouring Jesus Master the Way, the Truth and the Life; practice to this spirit, especially the Visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament. There are Visits that need to be radically reviewed and improved.
3. Study the Divine Master. Read the Gospel; try to understand it, to understand it well.

Intensify the practice of virtues: humility, charity; and prefer in this Lent prayers of penance, such as: the *Have mercy on me* [Ps 51/50], the *Out of the depths* [Ps 130/129]... Thus we will prepare for a Holy Easter.

"Beyond invitations to the most usual forms of penance – patient charity, common life, diligent exercise of the apostolate carried out with a supernatural spirit – it strikes at that unusual expression "penance of prayer". But what he meant by those words is clear like the sun! "Do the whole practices of piety"; to live them "by honouring Jesus the Master the Way, the Truth and the Life (that is, by Pauline method), especially the Visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament "; commit to "studying the Divine Master" by reading the Gospel and trying "to understand it, to understand it well"; intensify the practice of the virtues of humility and charity!

2. Linked to the theme of penance is that of **MORTIFICATION**. If the theme of penance is more linked to a time of the year, the theme of mortification is much broader; it occupies all year round and all aspects of our person, as it is closely connected with the path of cristification.

Already in the Preamble of *Donec formetur Christus in vobis* the Founder highlights "the exercise of mortification"; and, referring to St Ignatius, emphasizes the purpose of mortification: "to form the will to be indifferent to the created things: health or illness, praise or humiliation, wealth or poverty, etc.". Therefore, after recalling Jesus' example – "Christ himself did not look for his own pleasure" (Rom 15:3) – he adds: "Mortification of intelligence, memory, will, fantasy, heart, external senses. This in detail: thereby these holy excesses and frequent repetition may soon produce the habit and the death of the old man" (DF 11-12).

Later, Fr Alberione inseparably binds mortification with mission, the apostolate. In *Saint Paul* of January 1951, he strongly recalls that "everyone is held to, and everyone can exercise, the apostolate in some form". And, like other times, he enumerates the types of apostolate: the apostolate of the example; the apostolate of prayer; the so effective apostolate of inner life and suffering; to fulfill their social duties, which are always a contribution to the mystical body of Jesus Christ.

He points out, therefore, that "the true apostolate is a gift, as opposed to selfishness, ambition, vain glory, the foolish desire to promote oneself". It requires a lot of mortification, then. In fact "the apostolate supposes the spirit of sacrifice, sacrifice of money, time, health, esteem. It includes disappointment, criticism, opposition, often even from those from whom these are least expected; perhaps even from people whose eternal salvation you seek, or who received benefits...". Hence:

"To understand mortification well. There are negative and positive mortifications. Do not exhaust ourselves with privations, but fortify the organism to zeal. Conveniently completed apostolates are a positive mortification. Do not compress, but develop energies and use them for the glory of God for souls: in teaching, administering the sacraments, dedicating ourselves to extraordinary and traditional apostolates. *Jesus fatigued by travelling.*"

The Founder therefore wishes that "we understand well" mortification. He wishes, of course, that we do not neglect negative mortification (small but significant renunciations or physical privations to strengthen the will), but he wants to orient us decisively to positive mortification. We would not be far from his thought if we changed the term mortification into "vitalization": this is in fact what Fr Alberione means!

A few years later, in 1954, he returned to the theme in *Saint Paul*. He entitles the discourse: *The law of mortification*, and it states vigorously:

"It is universal. Any good, if you want to do it, requires either to deny something inferior or to make some effort.

*So for spiritual good, prayer, study, apostolate, religious observance, etc. Recreation, cleaning, living in families and societies, trade, regulated nutrition, health preservation, gaining trust and esteem among men, etc. also require mortification. (...).*

Universal because it extends to all being: mind, heart, will, fantasy, eyes, touch, language, memory, every passion. (...).

The purpose of mortification is positive, that is, to cooperate in the right direction.

The word sounds almost *mortuum facere*, that is, establish the will as the queen who can direct the eye, the memory, the language and the fantasy; now directly and now indirectly; as if they were corpses that do not oppose.

Three maximum goods we shall have from mortification if they are right: salvation, perfection, apostolate.

The various names with which mortification is indicated clarify the concept, the necessity, the end.

In Sacred Scripture it takes many names: it renounces: "he who does not renounce..."; self-denial: "denies himself"; mortification: "If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death your sinful deeds, you will surely live" (Rom 8: 13); death: "you are dead"; burial "buried with", stripping: "stripping you"; fight: "good fight."

Today we often hear: "reform, self-government, detachment, educating the will, putting on God, living in Christ, orienting oneself towards God; effort, sacrifice, vigilance."

The text is of extraordinary importance. And so very much timely!

From the "law of mortification" one cannot in any way be exempted, since – as he will say on another occasion – "no good can be obtained in the world without sacrifice, without mortification". Mortification has as its purpose "establishing the will as queen", brings great goods, and has a very clear Evangelical foundation. It is also remarkable that the Founder himself proposes other types of penance: "self-government", "to educate the will", up to "be vested up in God", or even "living in Christ". How engaging it would be if the very term mortification immediately evoked to each of us to be clothed in Christ!

Finally, if we wanted to link the theme of mortification to Lent, here too there would be a timely suggestion from the Founder. Speaking to the communities of the Pauline Family in Rome on March 5, 1952, he stated:

"In Lent, especially, let the mortification of the morning be generously done: the prompt rising, in penance of our sins. To start the day well, it means to start life well. A scholarly, virtuous youth, a youth of a firm character, prelude to a manhood rich in activity, merit and socially useful. How beautiful it is, in the morning, in time, to find ourselves all united at the feet of Jesus in order to receive from him the light, the grace necessary to begin the day with him and then quickly go to the apostolate!".

Perfect. Who will be the first to accept this invitation?

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