



ANNUAL LETTER OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL
TO THE CONFRERES OF THE SOCIETY OF ST PAUL

POVERTY
Path to freedom, fraternity and service

Dear Brothers,

Poverty¹ is the topic on which I propose to reflect this year. Besides being one of the three vows that characterize the consecrated life, it is also one of the “four wheels” of the “Pauline cart”. This means that for the Pauline, poverty is one of the foundations of his life, together with piety, study and the apostolate.

In the Annual Letter on the Apostolate² we referred to Pauline as a “man of communication”, that is, to a person called not only to evangelize with all the languages of analogical and digital communication, but also to be himself a man who seeks to live a true communication (communion!) with God, with others and with himself, so as to give his contribution in the construction of a “culture of encounter”.

This person, on whom the growth of the apostolate depends to a great extent, is also the subject called to live poverty and to assume it in the context of his mission, that is, in the midst of the richness of possibilities that the culture of communication offers today, as our Founder warns: «*The institute must be poor and rich at the same time. Poor for our individual observance of poverty, rich for the means of the apostolate*»³.

This Annual Letter - which was preceded by the Letters on holiness, study and the apostolate - is intended to offer some points for reflection on poverty from a Pauline perspective. Initially it makes some considerations about poverty as a proposal for those who want to follow Jesus and, especially, for those who belong to the consecrated life. It then presents some aspects of the poverty experienced, first of all, by Jesus himself and then by his disciple Paul, underlining three concrete realities in which the Apostle expressed it and which for us Paulines are important references: the life of communion, work and solidarity with the poor. In the end, the Letter also makes a brief reference to the prayer of *the Secret of Success or Covenant* which, against the background of poverty, expresses our trust in Jesus Master, an attitude that is indispensable for facing the challenges of our mission in the culture of communication.

¹ [In the notes, the translation of the bibliography is limited to works published in English]. There are two letters already written on poverty by as many Superiors General: Don Raffaele Tonni, *La povertà di Cristo è la nostra ricchezza* (The poverty of Christ is our wealth), in San Paolo n. 5, Dicembre 1976; Don Renato Perino, *Lettera del Superiore Generale per l'anno 1986-1987: “Lo spirito di povertà e di amore. Gloria e segno della Chiesa di Cristo”* (Letter of the Superior General for the year 1986-1987: “The spirit of poverty and love. Glory and Sign of the Church of Christ”), in *Documenti dei successori di Don Alberione*. Vol. 2, pp. 101-127 (available on the web: www.paulus.net/doc/archivistorico/successori_2.pdf).

² Cf. *Annual letter of the Superior General, Apostle Communicators, for a culture of encounter*, St Paul n. 452, September 2018, pp. 54-75.

³ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 446.

I. A proposal valid for all Christians

Poverty is one of the aspects that characterize Pauline life. However, before being a particular value, it is an invitation addressed to all Christians, that is, to all the baptized, who set out to follow Jesus. When Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (cf. Mt 19:16-26) asked the young man to leave everything, he was not speaking to a religious, but to a rich person, attached to his goods.

It is appropriate to consider that *«for the Gospel poverty is not an advice, but a fundamental choice for all believers. The 'prophetic' form of poverty is a counsel; but poverty as a way of life is a minimum condition for believers: "Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor," is the proposal to become Christians (cf. Mt 19:21). As long as he remains a rich man, that is, he lays the foundation of his life in possession, he is an atheist. Until he chooses God as the foundation of his life, he cannot be saved. This is an essential religious condition, not advice. It is the foundation of following»*⁴.

If poverty is an invitation to all Christians, then what does it mean for us, who have embraced it as an "advice" and as one of the essential dimensions of Pauline life? What does living as a poor person consist of in our community and apostolic context? Before seeking an answer, let us remember that the Second Vatican Council, referring to the members of the consecrated life, wrote: *«Religious should diligently practice and if need be express also in new forms»*⁵. In this statement there is something familiar to us, because, certainly, one of the new forms of expressing poverty is that lived in the context of Pauline life, that is, of consecrated persons called to evangelize in the field of communication.

Before the Council Fr Alberione had already summarized his teachings on Pauline poverty during the extraordinary course of spiritual exercises in Ariccia in April 1960 as follows: *«Pauline poverty has five functions: renounces, produces, preserves, provides, builds. It renounces to administration, to independent use, to comfort, taste, preferences; everything has in use. He produces with his diligent work; he produces so much to give to works and people. It preserves the things it has in use. It provides for the needs that exist in the institute. He builds, correcting the greed for goods»*⁶.

If the poverty of "Pauline colour" is characterized by these five functions, it must however be considered that at the base of this particular form of expressing poverty there is the evangelical proposal. Otherwise, the risk is to fall into a functionalist practice of poverty, in view, that is, of an unbridled search for efficiency. Don Raffaele Tonni, former Superior General, observed this: *«The difficult balance between apostolic efficiency and evangelical poverty is, among all, the most delicate point of our vocation, and the one that raises the greatest problems, giving rise also to considerable abuses when a profound Christian sense is lacking»*⁷. Therefore, one of the challenges is to seek harmony, recovering the evangelical meaning and Christian sense of poverty to see how these reverberate in our specific style of consecrated life.

2. Poverty as detachment and freedom

We can look at poverty in many ways. Indeed, when we talk about this dimension, we enter into a very articulated and ambiguous sphere of meaning. These include those which give it a negative connotation, which do not indicate a value, but rather an evil which must be eradicated⁸. Among the situations that we can place in this area are, for example, misery,

⁴ Rinaldo Fabris, *Paolo evangelizzatore e pastore*, Assisi, Cittadella editrice, 1982, p. 69.

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 13.

⁶ James Alberione, *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei I*, 447.

⁷ Raffaele Tonni, *La povertà di Cristo*, op. cit.

⁸ Renato Perino, *Lo spirito di povertà*, op. cit.

poverty, oppression, marginalization, hunger, alienation, ignorance, etc. We cannot forget, in this regard, the degradation of creation, which is closely linked to social poverty⁹.

We are aware that the poverty we are referring to here is something totally different. We find its true meaning in the Old Testament, with an expression that is then taken up in the Gospels: “The poor of Yahweh” (*anawin*) of which the Bible speaks are those who trust in the God of the covenant and expect salvation only from him, thus setting aside any other covenant other than that of God. Under this light, Biblical poverty is seen as the disposition of entrusting one’s self completely to God¹⁰. To be poor is to become small before God and men; it means to recognize one’s own indigence and impotence, leaving aside attitudes of inner or outer pride, moving away from dreams and plans of self-exaltation.

Poverty – in the common Christian sense and, even more, in its radical form, as it is proposed in the consecrated life – presupposes two great connected objectives: to detach oneself from things (among which we also include ideas, people, places, etc.) in order to “attach oneself” to God. As our Founder makes clear: «*But first we must attach ourselves to God, that is to say, to love, and when we love God, behold, the things of the earth are still used, we still go to eat, we still dress, we still live in a house, but all this to serve better, to love the Lord more*»¹¹.

To live as a poor person, therefore, consists in a complete entrustment to God as the only and supreme good and in the detachment from earthly goods for the love of God and men¹². In this sense, we can say, with Blessed Alberione, that to become poor is «*to free the heart from stumbling, from attachments, from those things that prevent free flight*»¹³. According to him, «*he who has affection, even with a single thread, is like a tied bird: he cannot take flight towards the heights of holiness*»¹⁴.

The detachment from “things”, in the society in which we live today, is a great challenge. In fact, we live in a world with a multiple offer of things to consume, which often invades families and sometimes even our own communities, with the risk of generating an individualistic sadness, which springs from a comfortable and bitter heart, and from the search for superficial pleasures. In this context, we are called to live in poverty, not as a canonical law to obey blindly, but above all as an option that leads us to acquire true freedom.

3. Poverty between the Gospel and the law

Poverty, as an evangelical counsel, is born from the personal commitment to follow Jesus radically. It cannot result from a canonical imposition, even if canonical and institutional laws help to avoid abuse in the case of possible non-observance of this vow. This is what the Second Vatican Council says in this regard, addressing those who are in the consecrated life: «*With regard to religious poverty it is not enough to use goods in a way subject to the superior’s will, but members must be poor both in fact and in spirit, their treasures being in heaven (cf. Mt 6:20)*»¹⁵.

In this sense, poverty directed exclusively to material things is not enough, if then the heart remains insensitive, if this observance does not lead to liberation with a view to a true experience of God and service to our brothers and sisters. With regard to material things, poverty cannot be reduced to “saving”, even if saving is positive in order to avoid excesses. In other words, the “vow of poverty” is not a “vow of saving”. Sometimes someone can be a very good saver, but so affected by a closed heart that he can get to the filthy. In fact, a pov-

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 16.

¹⁰ Cf. *Documents, Special General Chapter 1969-1971*, Rome, General House Society of St Paul, 1982, n. 439.

¹¹ James Alberione, *Alle Suore di Gesù Buon Pastore*, Roma, Casa generalizia Suore Gesù Buon Pastore, 25 maggio, 1984, 452.

¹² Cf. *The Constitutions and Directory of the Society of St Paul*, art. 33.

¹³ James Alberione, *Alle Figlie di San Paolo. Meditazioni e Istruzioni 1957*, Roma, Casa Generalizia Figlie San Paolo, 2013, p. 439.

¹⁴ James Alberione, *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei I*, 453.

¹⁵ Vatican Council II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 13.

erty that does not arise from internal convictions but that refers only to external things can generate petty attitudes about the things themselves.

Evangelical poverty is that which coincides with “poverty in spirit”, which is born of a free and adult personal option, which leads to attachment to God, to openness of heart, to detachment from things and people, to generosity, to the breaking of self-preferentiality. Jesus said: *«Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven»* (Mt 5:3). “Poor in spirit” are those who have nothing to preserve and who entrust themselves totally to the Lord: he is their defence and their wealth. In other words, it is a disposition of the soul, a condition of the spirit that makes man an act for the Kingdom of God¹⁶.

“Poverty in spirit” cannot become an abstract principle. For us, the warning given by our Founder to the Sisters of the Daughters of St. Paul applies: *«Do not be as abstract as those who, in order to always look at the stars, end up falling into the well»*¹⁷. True poverty in spirit is poverty that is lived from within (that is, from being) and is expressed externally with attitudes of humility, simplicity, altruism and generosity. On the contrary, the “rich in heart” are those who sit down in their self-sufficiency, in pride, in selfishness. They are those who do not need God or their brothers and sisters. In fact, *«once we think we are rich, we can become so self-satisfied that we leave no room for God’s word, for the love of our brothers and sisters, or for the enjoyment of the most important things in life»*¹⁸.

If a consecrated person does not try to be poor in spirit, he will never be poor in fact! It is poverty that comes from within man, that motivates him to seek the experience of authenticity in material poverty. It is poverty in spirit that makes us look for the basic motivations of life that are inspired above all by the Good News of Jesus and, in our case, by the Pauline charism. It is to assume a simple lifestyle, stripped of “things”, which leads to the capacity for donation, service and sharing. Otherwise the person will be a simple “saver”, will live “poverty” as his personal obligation, and therefore with difficulty, and will certainly produce few good fruits.

4. Jesus, the Master of Poverty

Jesus, who knew how to detach himself from everything to dedicate himself totally to the project that God the Father entrusted to him, is our first reference for poverty. Not only does he make speeches about poverty, but he takes on this dimension as a true and proper personal way of life. Jesus, our Master, was born poor, was the son of the poor and worked as the simplest of artisans¹⁹. As disciples, we are called to enter his “school of poverty”.

As our Founder observed, *«many souls love humility, but not humiliation, others love poverty, but not deprivation, and if they have to make a sacrifice there are no more, they love doing nothing, which is contrary to poverty. Jesus taught us poverty not so much by words, but by example»*²⁰. The poverty of Jesus is concrete, beginning with the “poverty of being”, that is, the experience of lowering (*kènosis*).

Jesus’ *kenosis* is a poverty embraced because of the Kingdom: *«Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross»* (Phil 2:6-8). The radical and authentic poverty of Jesus consists, therefore, in the annul-

¹⁶ Cf. the note in *La Bibbia. Nuovissima versione dai testi originali, Nuovo Testamento*, vol. III, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), Edizione Paoline, 1991, p. 86.

¹⁷ James Alberione, *Alle Figlie di San Paolo. Meditazioni e Istruzioni 1929-1933*, Roma, Casa generalizia Figlie San Paolo, 2005, p. 296.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Gaudet et exsultate*, n. 68.

¹⁹ Cf. James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 444.

²⁰ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 457.

ment of his person, in the renunciation of imposing his “being God”. As Saint Paul says: «*Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich*» (2Cor 8:9).

The “poverty in being” is manifested concretely in Jesus in his option to live materially as a poor person, that is, to have a simple life, like the great majority of his people. Jesus knows that wealth in itself imprisons the heart of man, leading him to dominate over others, generating a fearful, selfish and limited security to his own “I”. Among the riches there is money. Jesus is aware of the risks. For this reason he can say: «*No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth*» (Lk 16:13)²¹.

In addition to freedom in the face of wealth, Jesus expresses his poverty in taking up work. The Son of God works. What we invoke as Master, Way, Truth and Life has worked: «*A God who redeems the world with domestic virtues and hard work until the age of thirty! Redemptive work, apostolic work, tiring work*»²².

The poverty of Jesus is also expressed in simple relationships with people. A poverty that led him to welcome everyone, especially the marginalized of his time: children, women, public sinners, the sick... He addressed attitudes of compassion, welcome, listening and mercy to all. In fact, «*his tenderness was for the disinherited. His preaching was aimed at elevating the people*»²³.

Like Jesus, we are called to make our way of *kènosis*, to join him in emptying ourselves to be free in the mission. For our part it means detaching ourselves from material goods but also from our “ego”, from pride, selfishness, narcissism, arrogance, ambition, from the mania of being judges of others, from the temptation to occupy the first places (and sometimes the very place of God!).

The poverty lived by Jesus is an invitation to his disciples, past and present, to abandon themselves in a confident way in the hands of the Father, to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and to be aware that all other things concerning the fundamental needs will be given to us in addition (cf. Mt 6:33). The Apostle Paul has radically taken this path. Jesus' model of poverty is at the basis of Pauline poverty, which we have received as a charismatic inheritance.

5. The Apostle Paul and poverty

Among the disciples who have assumed poverty in the radicality proposed by Jesus there is certainly Saint Paul, who for us is the prototype of an apostle²⁴; he is the one who exercised the true apostolate of the editions²⁵; he is the one from whom we must take the spirit, the mentality, the love of Jesus Christ and the love of souls²⁶. From Paul, the Pauline also learns to live poverty as apostolic availability.

In fact, Saint Paul assumes evangelical poverty which generates total liberation in him, to the point of taking him to service, to mission. With him we learn that «*evangelical poverty, in the spirit of Jesus Christ, is not only detachment, but is much more: it is liberation from the bonds*

²¹ “Wealth” here is the translation of the term “mammon”. Mammon is power or property, and as such it is a reality opposed to God. “*It is not only about money in the technical sense, but about economic power, which kidnaps man in a totalizing, paralyzing and alternative way to God*”, in Victoriano Casas Garcia, *Povert *, in Angel Aparicio Rodriguez, Joan Maria Canals Casas (diretto da), *Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata*, Milano, Editrice Ancora, 1994, p. 1250. Jesus took another path. He lived the religious attitude of the poor man of Yahweh, abandoning himself completely in the hands of the Father, entrusting him with his whole person, until the extreme gesture of the cry on the cross at the moment of his death: “*Father, in your hands I commend my spirit!*” (Lk 23:46).

²² James Alberione, *Abundantes divitiae*, 127-128.

²³ James Alberione, *Catechismo sociale*, 289.

²⁴ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 641.

²⁵ James Alberione, *Carissimi in San Paolo*, p. 809.

²⁶ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 654.

that would keep us bound to the earth, and at the same time it is impetus to multiply our strengths and use all means at the service of God and the Gospel»²⁷.

In following Jesus, Saint Paul also makes his *kènosis*, which leads him to break with certain religious convictions, which closed him in a world of precepts, to the point of reaching open hostility against those who thought differently from him. Paul himself speaks of the detachment he experienced from his past as a Pharisee, beginning with his encounter with Christ: «Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith» (Phil 3:7-9).

The poverty experienced by Saint Paul is also visible in his ability to detach himself from the desire to possess his own country, language, native land, etc., to belong to Christ, to the whole world, to all people... to the point of giving his life for the Gospel. In this perspective, so that the Gospel might be known and received by the people, Paul suffers from hunger, thirst, nakedness, which are the basic needs listed by Jesus: «Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear» (Mt 6:25).

St. Paul teaches us that poverty leads to a sober life and freedom from false security, including that of money: «If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains» (1 Tim 6:8-10). It is worth noting that Paul reminds us that the love of money is the root of all evils!

The poverty that the Apostle Paul lived is a value that he assumes as a way of life, it is the basis of important areas of existence, which he himself promoted in his evangelizing activity and which today are fundamental in the following of Jesus, especially for us Paulines. Among these we want to underline the life of communion, work and solidarity with the poor.

5.1 The life of communion

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, Saint Paul assumes poverty as a method, a way of life, an exercise in emptying oneself of the superfluous; not as a mere ascetic, but as a way that opens space to others, first of all to Christ Jesus and his Gospel, showing us that the proclamation of the Gospel is not a solitary activity. In fact, he constantly exhorts us to *koinonia* (“communion”)²⁸, to the communion of one with another in Christ, that is, to communion with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, which has its foundation in love. Paul insists that being a Christian consists in entering into this life of communion.

Paul speaks of communion with Christ through incorporation into him through his body when, for example, he makes his discourse on the Eucharist: «Is it not a sharing [*koinonia!*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [*koinonia!*] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread» (1Cor 10:16-17). Communion in Christ leads to communion with our brothers and sisters. Communion becomes fraternity.

²⁷ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 449.

²⁸ «In the New Testament the word *koinonia* (often translated as ‘communion’ or ‘fraternal communion’) links together a number of fundamental concepts such as unity, common life, sharing and participation. The verbal form from which it derives means ‘to share’, ‘to participate’, ‘to have a part in’, ‘to have something in common’ or ‘to act together’. The noun can express brotherhood (fraternal communion) or community. Usually it expresses a relationship based on participation and a shared reality (cf. 1Cor 10:16)», in Giovanni Cereti, *Comunione*, in Giuseppe Barbaglio, Giampiero Bof e Severino Dianich (a cura di), *Dizionario di Teologia*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), San Paolo, 2002, p. 256.

Authentic communion with Christ, whose journey presupposes the continuous exercise of poverty, leads the Christian to share with his brothers and sisters all that he has received from the Lord, that is, his talents, his spiritual gifts, his material, moral and intellectual goods. Looking at our Pauline reality, we can affirm that feeling in communion and living communion is fundamental for community life and for the development of the apostolate, two realities that are not opposed to each other, but complementary: a community for the apostolate²⁹.

5.1.1 In communion in the community

The Christian community, in the Pauline conception, is a body in which each member, in communion with others, has his own importance and function. “Communion” in this sense does not mean uniformity, but unity in the diversity of gifts: *«For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another»* (Rom 12:4-5).

Concretely, the life of communion is relationality. The quality of a community depends on the quality of its relationships (with God and with others). In turn, relationality depends on communication as a capacity to listen, to seek out the other and to recognize his otherness, breaking the closed circle of self-sufficiency and self-preferentiality.

Relationality leads to fostering the capacity for dialogue, understood as that dialogue which makes each one recognize the riches of the other, without fear and with simplicity, welcoming and understanding the other as he is, appreciating all his riches, listening to his needs, to serve him promptly and forgiving his deficiencies and errors. It is a relationship of reciprocity. Such way of dialogue demands a continuous “emptying”.

Looking at our communities, we see that in certain places it is still difficult to live unity in the diversity of gifts. It is urgent to regain the sense of common life, to seek the path of a true *koinonia* in the concrete reality in which we live. The situation becomes serious when, despite the fact that the Eucharist is celebrated assiduously, it does not yet have an impact on life, it does not create “communion”.

It is not enough to live together, as Blessed Alberione warned. Even in the boarding school, in the pensioner’s house, in the barracks, etc., one lives together, but there is no common life there³⁰. So, what does “common life” mean? The Founder himself responds as follows: *«It means unity of thought, unity of works, unique direction in speaking, unity of feelings, unity of the end. All must contribute to the principal and secondary ends: personal sanctification and the apostolate»*³¹. One of the ways to build unity, as we are reaffirming, is “poverty”, in the deepest sense, as the availability of openness to God and to the brothers, in view of the mission.

5.1.2 In communion in the apostolate

The poverty experienced by the Apostle Paul is expressed in his continuous effort to relate with the people involved in his pastoral work and with the different communities he founded. Paul teaches us that poverty requires living in gratuitousness, founded in turn on the gratuitousness of salvation, paid dearly by Jesus on the cross but freely offered to all. A gratuity that leads to work in collaboration, in synergy.

In fact, Paul does his work of evangelization online. Evangelization is not a solitary work. However brilliant his apostolate was and however particular his vocation, it was always a common initiative at the service of the Gospel³². We know from his letters the great num-

²⁹ *«Since the purpose of the Society of St. Paul is achieved through an eminently communal apostolate, all members should cultivate fraternal collaboration and friendship, and help one another to correspond to the common vocation»*, *Constitutions and Directory of the Society of St. Paul*, art. 15.

³⁰ Cf. James Alberione, *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei I*, 284.

³¹ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 540

³² Cf. Jean-Michel Poffet, *Paolo di Tarso*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), San Paolo, 2002, p. 100.

ber of collaborators in Christ who worked with him, who helped to build communities and who preached the Gospel³³. In fact, Paul «was helped by numerous collaborators who formed a network around him. This circle of collaborators developed from the interaction between Paul and his communities. With this “team” he addressed his announcement to both the Jews and the Gentiles, although this last group seems to have been his first goal»³⁴.

Our Founder spoke many words about apostolic work in co-responsibility, in synergy, even if, of course, he never really used these words. The comparison of the apostolate with an “orchestra” is a classic example that expresses this idea: «The Pauline apostolate requires a strong group of editors, technicians and propagandists. Everyone has to agree, as do the artists who present a beautiful work. How many untied, disorganized will and energies are exhausted in desires, in attempts, in disappointments! It is necessary that all together the bread of spirit and truth be prepared»³⁵.

The apostolate carried out “in communion” leads us to see the other, the Pauline or the layman who works with us, not as a competitor but rather as a collaborator. It is certainly a challenge to live communion not only as a reality reserved for the community environment, but also as an experience that is lived, yes, communally, but that is expressed in the mission.

The ecclesiology of communion and participation, which we often spread through our publications to others, is a model to be put into practice also in our apostolic organization, considering that true evangelization begins from within, a prerequisite for our message to be credible. This means that we must certainly consider the laws of industry, commerce, the world of work, etc., which must be taken into account with regard to the nature of our apostolate. However, such cold and sometimes exclusionary market norms cannot prevail in our human relations. In fact, «there was no need for a religious institute to make industry! You don't need people consecrated to God to do business!»³⁶.

5.2 The dignity of work

Saint Paul, following the example of his teacher Jesus, concretely manifests poverty by living as a worker. If Jesus was a manual worker (cf. Mk 6:3) and the son of a carpenter (cf. Mt 13:55), the same was true of Paul, a tentmaker (cf. Acts 18:3). In order not to weigh economically on his communities, he himself affirms that he was struggling by working with his own hands (cf. 1 Cor 4:12). Let us remember that, in Paul's time, «free men did not work with their own hands. As a boy Paul learned a manual trade: setting up tents. With this work he maintains himself in Corinth and Thessaloniki and during his travels, when he has run out of supplies and no longer has the generous help of the community of Philippi or other brothers, he works with his own hands»³⁷.

Even though Paul, considering his ministry, is aware of the right to be supported by the community (cf. 1 Cor 9:14-15), he renounces it so as not to be a “burden”: «You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God» (1 Thess 2:9). For Paul, «no Christian, because he is part of a community of solidarity and brotherhood, must feel entitled not to work and live at the expense of others»³⁸.

For Saint Paul, the Christian community is not opposed to the civil community with regard to the responsibility for work. Work is an obligation for all, it is a natural duty. Blessed

³³ We can see the many friends and collaborators of Saint Paul, for example, in chapter 16 of the Letter to the Romans.

³⁴ Lambertus J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paolo il missionario. Alle origini della missione cristiana*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), San Paolo, 2006, p. 297-298.

³⁵ James Alberione, *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei I*, 288.

³⁶ James Alberione, *Haec Meditare II*, Alba-Roma, Figlie San Paolo, 1942, pp. 173-174.

³⁷ Rinaldo Fabris, *Paolo evangelizzatore e pastore*, op. cit., p. 75.

³⁸ Antonio Bonora, *Lavoro*, in Pietro Rossano, Gianfranco Ravasi, Antonio Girlanda (a cura di), *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), Edizioni San Paolo, 1988, p. 785.

Alberione also follows the same line when he affirms that «work is a natural duty for all. Jesus Christ also worked. Moreover, it is a duty of charity, a secret of merit and happiness, and a contribution to the common good»³⁹. Hence his well-known admonition that «religious life for the lazy is in one respect a great misfortune. If they had been in the world, they would have worked for the law of necessity [...] and would have a less serious account to render to God, and would give less scandal in community, and would be more virtuous»⁴⁰.

But what work? Considering the reality of our life and mission, Fr Alberione has an enlarged vision of work. For him, two basic elements enter into the work: activity and useful end. In this sense, in addition to manual work, there are also intellectual work, interior work, moral work, spiritual work, etc.⁴¹ «We imitate God more when we work, when we keep our intelligence active in learning things, our health by being active and by doing, our needed energies in order to pray, because prayer is a tiring work! Therefore, we must think that poverty is manifested in work. Let us produce for ourselves and for others»⁴².

Pauline life, associated with the requirement of the vow of poverty as evangelical counsel, requires us to be authentic workers. «The apostolate is the means of life for our homes, because this is our ordinary way of life; charity and offerings are subsidiary»⁴³. On the other hand, work becomes practically impossible when one lives in the midst of riches, which atrophy human energies, converting the person into a slave of laziness and comfort. It is therefore urgent to return to the sense of poverty!

5.3 Solidarity with the poor

The Apostle Paul opened himself to all in the proclamation of the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 9:22). These include those who lived poverty in the negative sense of the word. Sensitivity to this category of poor people is present in the life and pastoral care of Saint Paul when, for example, he organizes a collection for the Christian community in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8-9) to provide for his material needs.

This “international collection” against hunger is not reduced to a simple collection. «For the Apostle Paul the collection is more than a simple gesture of mutual help. Economic solidarity (*koinonia*) is a necessary form of fraternal love»⁴⁴. Paul calls it “service”, “work of charity”, “generous favour”, “sacred service”, etc. He is aware that this action cannot be an imposition, but rather something that every Christian is called to offer according to his generosity, which must have as its reference the generosity of Jesus.

Paul is aware that the contribution must not be forced, because that would not be generosity. Therefore he writes: «Let each one give according to what he has decided in his heart, not with sadness or by force, because God loves those who give with joy» (2 Cor 9:7). And he makes it clear that «The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully» (2 Cor 9:6). Following in the footsteps of Jesus, Saint Paul therefore motivates Christians to be open to the needy.

Sensitivity to the poor and the sick must dwell in the heart of the Pauline and in the pastoral care of communication, following in the footsteps of our Founder who, in his time, stated: «The life of Jesus Christ is the law and the way for all. He was equal and impartial among discords, competitions, social classes; but he did not hide his deep sympathies and special cares and defence for the proletarian class, for the poor, for the suffering. Precisely because they are weak.

³⁹ James Alberione, *Catechismo sociale*, 120.

⁴⁰ James Alberione, *Carissimi in San Paolo*, p. 1085.

⁴¹ Cf. James Alberione, *Alle Famiglie Paoline*, Roma, Edizione Paoline, 1954, p. 50.

⁴² James Alberione, *Voto di povertà, Raccolta di Grottaferrata*; quotation reported in *Documents, Special General Chapter 1969-1971*, n. 443.

⁴³ James Alberione, *Carissimi in San Paolo*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ Victoriano Casas García, *Povertà*, in Angel Aparicio Rodríguez, Joan Maria Canals Casas (directed by), *Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata*, op. cit., p. 1258.

Impartiality does not mean insensitivity for those who suffer secular injustices and bullying, [for those] who must defend their tearful achievements»⁴⁵.

This sensitivity for the poor appeared in our Special General Chapter (1969-1971), an event which, among other objectives, had the concern to update our Pauline life in the light of the Second Vatican Council. It is suggested here that on local, provincial or general level some initiatives should be taken in line with raising awareness in our communities regarding the continued presence of the poor in the world and to keep communities generous in the spirit of poverty. For example, the annual celebration of a Day of the Poor could possibly be held together by the entire Pauline Family, or some initiatives on local level could be organized in favour of the poor in the area we live⁴⁶.

If this initiative did not go ahead, however, in a certain way it anticipated the “World Day of the Poor”, called by Pope Francis at the level of the universal Church, whose objective the Pope himself explained as follows: *«This Day is meant, above all, to encourage believers to react against a culture of discard and waste, and to embrace the culture of encounter. At the same time, everyone, independent of religious affiliation, is invited to openness and sharing with the poor through concrete signs of solidarity and fraternity. God created the heavens and the earth for all; yet sadly some have erected barriers, walls and fences, betraying the original gift meant for all humanity, with none excluded»⁴⁷.*

This exhortation is addressed to all, even to us, because with our apostolate, in and through communication, through analogical and digital means, we too can do our part. And the important part we can offer is in helping the Church to form a *«new mentality in society»⁴⁸* inspired by the Gospel. As we have already said above, our charity, in the context of our apostolate, is to offer humanity the bread of truth.

First of all, Jesus Christ is the “bread-truth”⁴⁹, to be offered to humanity, in a world full of hunger and thirst for love, justice, hope, solidarity... and also a desire for life. Our Founder exhorts us as follows: *«Just as at the door of the friaries, in general, in the past, soup was distributed, bread was distributed and it is still made in many places, so at the door of the friaries the truth must be distributed. What man needs: to know God, to know his eternal destiny»⁵⁰.*

Updating one of the many challenges of today, we can say that we must continue to present the truth in a cultural context where, especially with the development of the digital environment, the possibility of spreading “fake news” is growing. It is part of our mission, for example, to fight false news⁵¹, always proclaim the truth and denounce when it is manipulated and mystified.

Solidarity with the poor (in every sense!) is an invitation to break the institutional self-preferentiality and to look at the concrete reality of the people, a reality *«men and women of our time, with their wounds and their anxieties, their doubts and the fears they bear in their hearts to seek to offer them encounter with the God of hope who tears down the wall of indifference and offers a motive of life, a motive of hope»⁵².*

⁴⁵ James Alberione, *Catechismo sociale*, 289.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Documents, Special General Chapter 1969-1971*, op. cit., n. 459.

⁴⁷ Pope Francis, *Message for the First World Day of the Poor: “Let us love, not with words but with deeds”*, 19 November 2017, n. 6.

⁴⁸ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 1337.

⁴⁹ Cf. James Alberione, *Carissimi in San Paolo*, p. 124.

⁵⁰ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, n. 1045.

⁵¹ Cf. Pope Francis, *Message for 52nd World Communications Day: “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). Fake news and journalism for peace*”, 13 May 2018.

⁵² Dario Edoardo Viganò, *Communication models for the Church in today’s world*, in *Acts of the 2nd International Seminar of Pauline Publishers*, Rome, 2017, p. 101.

6. The Covenant

The theme of poverty, some aspects of which have been developed in this Letter, is offered as a proposal for reflection rightly in the year in which we celebrate the Centenary of the prayer *Secret of Success or Covenant*, which was recited for the first time by Blessed Alberione, with the first Paulines, on January 6, 1919.

The *Secret of Success* is the prayer that expresses our trust in Jesus and the recognition that all the graces for carrying out the apostolate come from him, despite our inadequacy in everything. Poverty is the basis of this prayer which, in its original version, was written in the form of a bill of exchange signed by Fr Alberione and Fr Giaccardo, and subsequently translated into the formula of a bilateral pact, stipulated between the Paulines and Jesus Master, and having as witnesses St Paul and Mary Queen of the Apostles⁵³.

Considering the various limits of the formation of the first young people to carry out the Pauline apostolate and the few material resources of the beginnings of the Society of Saint Paul (and of the Pauline Family), the content of the *Secret of Success* - which in truth is a true and proper “covenant” - shows total trust in Jesus. One entrusts oneself to the fact that the Lord will give holiness, science and skill to work by learning four by one, giving holiness ten by one, five by one in the skill of work and six by one of material goods. In return, those children committed themselves to do everything possible in study, work, prayer and the practice of poverty; to do everything only for the glory of God; to work one day for the work of the good press⁵⁴.

Prayer expresses a “negative poverty”, which concerns the human person, that is, the insufficiency in spirit, in science, in the apostolate and in poverty itself. On the other hand, we recognize the need to enter into the dynamic of a “positive poverty”, one that leads to humility, to the recognition of one's own limits and to confess that all the graces and also the fruits of the apostolate come from fidelity to Jesus and to his Word.

Times have changed since the time when the *Secret of Success* prayer was composed. The field of communication has changed, especially with the arrival of digital technologies. The concrete questions of the world are becoming more and more complex (ecclesial, social, political, cultural, ecological, etc.). The need to adapt the language to each interlocutor becomes more and more urgent. The challenge of not losing the dimension of pastoralism, universality and prophecy of the apostolate and the importance of working ever more closely with lay collaborators also becomes insistent. And, in the midst of so many demands, logically we continue, as Paulines, to feel “insufficient” in everything.

This awareness requires continuous preparation to carry out our commitments, especially in the formation and apostolic areas. In this perspective, even for study – in the sense of “studyiness” as we have inherited from the Founder – we need “poverty”, that is, the humility of recognizing that we always have something to learn. The same can be said of the continuous search for holiness, which needs humility to let itself be guided by the Spirit of Jesus in order to respond to the challenges of our mission today.

In the light of the Covenant, we are aware that «we can fail, with our own inconstancy and weakness in faith, but God does not: He never fails»⁵⁵. On this path of trust, we are, therefore, called to live the poverty that springs from the Gospel and that illuminates the “Pauline poverty” with its five functions (renounces, produces, preserves, provides and builds), decisive actions for the increase of our apostolate in the culture of communication.

⁵³ Cf. Raffaele Tonni, *La povertà di Cristo*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Cf. Giuseppe Barbero, *Il Sacerdote Giacomo Alberione. Un uomo - un'idea*, Roma, Società San Paolo, 1987, p. 296.

⁵⁵ James Alberione, *Per un rinnovamento spirituale*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), Edizioni San Paolo, 2006, p. 45.

Dear Brothers, poverty is a “value” that is part of the identity of the “Pauline man of communication”. As we have said, the exercise of poverty, which presupposes an “emptying”, is an essential path for carrying out the Pauline mission which, among other things, presupposes a life of communion, the valorisation of work and openness to the concrete needs of the people, and especially of the poor.

Poverty, however, makes sense because we live it, in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul, as a following of Jesus. In this regard, the words of Pope Francis are opportune: *«Is Jesus enough for us or are we looking for so many securities in the world? We ask for the grace to know how to leave for the love of the Lord: to leave riches, to leave nostalgia for roles and powers, to leave structures that are no longer adequate for the proclamation of the Gospel, the burdens that hold back the mission, the ties that bind us to the world. Without a leap forward in love, our lives and our Church become sick with “self-congratulation and egocentricity” (Evangelii Gaudium, 95): we seek joy in some passing pleasure, we lock ourselves up in sterile chatter, we lie down in the monotony of a Christian life without momentum, where a little narcissism covers the sadness of remaining unfinished»*⁵⁶.

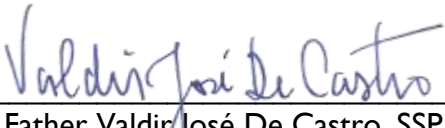
Before concluding, I would like to ask some questions as proposals for a reflection on poverty, among the many others that can arise from the heart of each one: what does poverty mean in our lives as consecrated Paulines? What can we highlight from the poverty lived by Jesus, by Saint Paul and by Blessed Alberione? What is the concrete relationship in our lives between poverty and holiness, study and the apostolate? What is the level of our sensitivity to our recipients and interlocutors, especially the poor? What do we do in concrete terms? How are our human relationships in our communities and in the apostolate, and what does poverty have to do with them? In what way can poverty help us in our apostolic work and to launch ourselves into new initiatives?

In conclusion, “poverty” should be for all of us a true way of approaching God, our confreres and the people of God, whom we are called to serve. It will help us to open our hearts so that dreams can sprout, prophesy can be raised, hopes can flourish and relationships can be established. May the life of poverty help us to be a “Synodal Congregation”, whose members walk together, seeking in listening, welcoming, forgiving and dialogue to proclaim the Gospel with their own lives and with the means of our apostolate, in the culture of communication.

At the end of this letter we address Mary, Queen of the Apostles. She, the “Servant of the Lord”, lived poverty to the full and, prophetically, in the “Magnificat” she recognized the action of God in history on behalf of the poor: *«She overthrew the powerful from their thrones, she raised up the humble»* (Lk 1:52). May Mary accompany us in the following of the poor Jesus, so that our poverty, lived in the Pauline style, may lead us to freedom, fraternity and service to the people of God through communication.

Faternally.

Rome, 26 May 2019
6th Sunday of Easter


Father Valdir José De Castro, SSP
Superior General

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Homily, Holy Mass and Canonization of the Blesseds: Paul VI, Oscar Romero and others*, 14 October 2018.