

**THE PAULINE MISSION:
“WHEN ONE’S HEART IS ON FIRE...”**

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“Consecrated life needs mysticism, passion and prophecy.” In 2004, these words launched the first International Congress on Consecrated Life, that urged men and women religious to overcome resignation and disillusionment, prudence and conservatism, and to open themselves with daring to the signs of the times and places, reawakening the attractiveness to a renewed life, faithful to the following of Jesus and filled with enthusiasm for the mission.

Our mission has written the most beautiful pages of our history. A “clear” mission (*make Jesus Christ, his doctrine and his cult known*); an attractive, involving and passionate mission. Initiatives have multiplied. The criterion has been that which Prima Maestra Thecla continually repeated, a law inscribed in the heart of every Daughter of St. Paul: “As long as it does good!” Therefore, go out, set forth, seek, bring the Word of life to the most distant house in the smallest village. Because, as Fr. Alberione always stressed:

... the four pious women who go to communion every morning, the four youths who gather around the pastor every evening are not the whole town, are not all the people: many other sheep are outside the fold and do not go to the Pastor because they do not know him; perhaps they oppose him and do so because they do not know him. All souls need to be saved: it is necessary that the Pastor go to them. Today the way to reach these souls is with the press (PP, pp. 645ff.).

... *are outside the fold...* This was the constant preoccupation of Fr. Alberione, who was always tormented by what he defined as “the great problem” (*Where is humanity going? Towards what goal is it moving, this humanity that is continually renewing itself on the face of the earth?*): it is ours *today*. How can we make ourselves companions *today* on the journey of the men and women of our time? How can we express the prophetic nature of our consecration and communion of life in a mission that follows new pathways that the Spirit is opening?

Temptations and challenges of evangelization today

One temptation that is spreading in ecclesiastical circles (and at times also in our own...) is *resignation*. Even when we succeed in not regretting the past (large numbers of members...), there is a consistent sector of evangelizers who – with good faith and not without sadness and inner discomfort – move forward with routine, “governing the governable,” that is the *ninety-nine sheep* (whose numbers in the meantime have been reduced), because the *lost sheep* (whose numbers in the meantime have increased seven-fold) seem unreachable.

So one seeks to *save the salvageable*, closing the sheepfold gate so as not to loose the remaining sheep and caring for the few faithful, but diminishing in this way the explosive force of the Gospel and thus opposing hope, extinguishing enthusiasm for the mission, minimizing the creativity of the Spirit and abandoning the necessary renewal...

Another emerging temptation is *fundamentalism*. Fundamentalists can be found all over: in certain movements, at times even in churches and convents... They are those who always laugh at the times and its customs, who condemn without appeal “those who do not think like us,” who erect barriers instead of building bridges. They are ones who tend to stress the importance of Christian identity in defensive terms and confrontation, forgetting (or never having known) that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved” (Jn 3:17). They are those who hold that the proclamation of the Good News must use the force of the stones of the temple rather than the weakness of the Cross and the tent of witness: those who bemoan [the lack of] a muscular Christianity for “bringing the world back to God,” thus substituting the yeast for the dough, the seed for the fruits.

Finally, in the church there are also those who, following the Eucharistic logic of the incarnation, choose to be *missionaries*; that is, they seek to live with sympathy¹ for the world; they strive to be companions of the women and men of our time and, instead of barricading themselves and defending themselves against the “enemy,” they warn that this present time is the *kairos*, the opportune moment.

The *missionary challenge* is, therefore, “accompanying the women and men of our time”; it is the pathway of evangelization, of a *new evangelization*, so connatural with our charism. Let us listen to Fr. Alberione:

The world needs a new, long and profound evangelization... Proportionate means are necessary and souls enlightened by faith (PP, pp. 680ff.).

There is an urgent need for new, numerous and young missionaries who are full of willpower and enthusiasm so that our editions, Christian editions, reach all families... (*ibid*, p. 682).

For us, this means rediscovering components of the “Pauline parish”: the ninety-nine sheep outside the fold! “Sheep” who can only be sought by those who feel deeply within themselves a great “thirst.”

For those who thirst for souls as Jesus does: the prayer with which, since the end of 1923 or beginning of 1924, the young Pauline Family was formed by the Founder to unite their own life in a Eucharistic way to that of Jesus, for the salvation of all.

... Feel the divine thirst for souls as Jesus felt it. This is the life of St. Paul: it means to feel his “Christ lives in me”; it means accompanying the Church in her difficult journey today. Always move ahead: like Christ the evangelizer, like Paul the walker of God (RA, April 1949).

¹ *Sympatheia*, that is, the ability to perceive the situations that involve us; it implies preoccupation, participation, desire.

We must thirst, because humanity thirsts.

Suffering humankind of our day thirsts, marked as it is by ever new forms of poverty, violence, wars and terrorism; by the concentration of power, the perverse economic system and egoism; by the need for love and transcendence.

God himself thirsts. And we, created in his image, are also an image of his thirst.

“I thirst.” It is the word of the Man of Calvary. It is an existential condition that renders us thirsty but also *springs of water* by means of our mission which is “beautiful because it is the very mission of Christ” (FSP41, 166). This mission spurs us on continually to *go beyond the sheepfold*, “inventing” always new forms and initiatives of apostolate:

Jesus Christ taught us not to wait for people, but to seek them out. Like the Teacher, the apostle must promote God’s word in the cities, in the towns, and even in the most remote homes. He must cross mountains, sail the oceans, and seek out everyone because all are called to know the way of salvation. His concern must be the individual person, the individual family, and the individual parish. He must establish book centers, train zealous people, frequent all the associations, convince the foreman, the head teacher, people in authority... (AE, 388).

Fr. Alberione: “fire in the soul”

“During a night of adoration, the Lord made us understand that as we begin the new century, we must establish our life on the Eucharist and on activity.”

This is what Fr. Alberione told the Daughters of St. Paul in 1952. A spiritual event so intense and absorbing that it marked a decisive turning point in his life. He understood the profound meaning of Jesus’ invitation: “Come to me all of you.” He intuited in the light of the Spirit “the obligation to be apostles for today,” to “make the Gospel penetrate the masses” using “the new means of apostolate” (AD 14-15).

The effect of that light became an overwhelming interior urge: “He felt deeply obliged to prepare himself to do something for the Lord and for the women and men of the new century with whom he would spend his life” (AD 15). He understood that this mission – which involves others, many others, the *marvelous Pauline Family* – is “to live and give to the world Jesus Christ, Way, Truth and Life,” with the press and with all the instruments of communication that progress would gradually offer humanity. That very young seminarian perceived that technical progress was offering society new and always more efficacious means to communicate. He warned that communication would have a key role in the new century and that, in order to announce the Gospel to all, it would be necessary to give the Church new instruments and new possibilities for her mission.

That “half-blind man, who is being led; and in moving along he is enlightened from time to time” (AD 202) did not comprehend everything right away: there was a progressive maturation in him, an interior waiting, availability to the signs of the

times, to which he was always attentive. Because it is God who guides, God who opens the way: for us it is enough to watch in peace (cf. AD 43-44).

That light accompanied Fr. Alberione's entire journey and nourished his passion for God and for humanity.

This same light involved Maestra Thecla, the apostle who participated in the spiritual experience of the Founder and "translated into the feminine" the original inspiration of the Spirit and the project that derived from it. Powerful expressions of apostolic mysticism poured forth from her passionate heart:

St. Paul said: Woe to me if I do not evangelize; and we also say: woe to me if, having entered this Congregation, I do not place all my strength at the service of God. The greatest disgrace that could happen to a religious is certainly that of not committing herself totally to the service of the Lord, spending her energies only halfway, losing herself in foolishness... The power idea that should inspire us is *souls*. This thought must urge us on. We must be concerned about how we are to reach people and bring them the word of truth and salvation. We must feel tormented by it; we must be preoccupied about how to draw near to them, to bring them the word of truth and salvation. How many souls never hear anything said about God [...]? Who will lead them to God, if not we who have received so many graces from the Lord and who have in our hands such effective means of apostolate? (VPC 140).

Daughters of St. Paul: "Passionate" women

For Fr. Alberione, all apostolic experience is mystical experience:

The apostolate is the flower of true love for God and souls; it is the fruit of an intense interior life. It presupposes a heart that is on fire and that cannot contain and repress this internal fire...

Therefore, there are not two paths (spirituality and mission), but one dynamism that comes from on High, because it is the love of Christ which moves us to the apostolate (cf. 2Cor 5:14):

Everyone to the apostolate! Everything in view of the apostolate! Is there enough love of God in us to desire that this God be known and loved; that his kingdom may come? There must be a fire in our soul with two flames: love for God and love for souls. Our life in love: "The love of Christ urges us on" (RSP, p. 30).

This is what the Final Document of the 8th General Chapter expresses so well:

Apostolic passion springs from a single source: love for God, which compels us to communicate him, and love for humanity, which prompts us to find the right languages and instruments to ensure that our message will reach the hearts of everyone (DC 2001, 31).

This *passion*, already lived by Paul, Alberione and Thecla, is born from the same experience: a personal and vital encounter with Christ Word and Eucharist, which renders the apostle contemplative in action and active in contemplation. In fact, one

who has a real experience of God feels an impelling need to communicate him to everyone:

He exudes God from all his pores; with his words, prayers, gestures, attitudes; in public and in private; from his entire being. Live of God! And give God! (UPS IV, 278).

Right from the beginning, Fr. Alberione opened his sons and daughters to the horizons of apostolic mysticism. He did this in a simple way, in daily life, so that it would be clear how “natural” it is for missionary efficacy. Maestra Assunta recalls:

One morning (I think it was Sunday), [Fr. Alberione] climbed up on a work table in the bindery. He spoke standing there, and we were standing around him. I remember a phrase from that meditation: “When we speak of *mysticism*, it does not mean only extraordinary manifestations, but how to live in communion with God so as to be apostles. You are all called to the mystic life...”²

Fr Alberione immediately indicated the highest summit of apostolic mysticism which the Daughters of St. Paul are to reach:

There are souls who have been invited to rise, in perfect union with God. Almost in a fusion of heart, of will and of mind with Jesus...! May he live in me, love in me, will in me, work in me, carry out the apostolate in me.

During the Interchapter, the Circumscription superiors spoke explicitly of *apostolic mysticism* and *passion* through the lens of redesigning the mission and in view of the continental Encounters for apostolate-administration. They expressed the urgency to

Renew the meaning of mission and *apostolic mysticism*: what it means to be sent, to whom, the *passion* animates us, so as to remotivate us to do something for the men and women and this new century, with a clear sense of our identity as women of God and apostles of the Gospel, and like Paul, courageously face the challenges that are before us.

In the light of all this, it seems essential to me, after stressing the importance of apostolic mysticism, to say a few words about the “passion” which nourishes it and is nourished by it.

The term “passion,” among its many meanings, also indicates tending toward an objective that one desires intensely. In the positive sense, passion is a formidable and unexpected inner urge that generates new energy and moves one to invest every resource in order to reach the goal. Passion involves (and upsets) life, changes criteria and perspectives, makes one forget herself, opens her to sacrifice and fatigue, strengthens her will and energizes her heart. It is not difficult to find confirmation of this in Paul and Alberione, whose passion for announcing the Gospel rendered them great contemplatives and resourceful and daring men of action because

... love, true love, is inventive. When one’s heart is on fire, she thinks of many initiatives and many activities. True love is shown by daily fatigue for the apostolate: it makes one think, organize, run. (HM II, 182).

² A. Bassi, *La missione delle Figlie di San Paolo*, Figlie di San Paolo-Casa generalizia, Rome 2006, p. 60.

Passion for the Gospel “makes us dare to ‘sound the attack,’ not the retreat, or worse yet, to keep silent” (Fr. Sassi); to move forward and beyond, aware that “each stage that is concluded opens the way toward new beginnings. Only those who are clear-minded can see the light of a new dawn, and only those who have learned how to dare can succeed in journeying into a new day, where once again the Lord makes all things new (J.M. Arnaiz).

***Redesigning the mission
so that the Gospel may reach the hearts of all***

I never met Fr. Alberione, but I’ve always had a great nostalgia for him, for his presence in the years of my formation, of his words that enthused and made the first Pauline generations dream. The stories in this regard are numerous.

And if we are surprised by his prophecy that one day the train would pass right through the courtyard of our establishment in Alba to pick up *Famiglia Cristiana* and bring it throughout Italy, we will surely be moved by what Sr. Assunta Bassi recounts in her book of memories:

... while we were shipping the liturgical leaflet *La Domenica*, Fr. Alberione passed by and asked us:

- What are you doing?
- We are making little packages of *La Domenica* – we responded.

And he: - No, you are not just making little packages. You are preaching to many people!³

How important it is that there be a sister at the side of the those in formation, of the young professed who can draw them to “fly high,” throw open horizons even for the humble and anonymous task of serving behind the counter/pulpit of a book center, who can help urge their heart forward through the pathways of the world, who trains them to work, to sacrifice, to renounce, to make reparation, to exercise patience and be heroic.

We cannot acquire apostolic passion well-packaged at a supermarket; neither do we receive it as infused grace at the moment of baptism or religious consecration. Certainly personal gifts are important; the predisposition to enthusiasm, the spirit of initiative, dynamism and daring all count much. Essentially, however, apostolic passion must be cultivated and nourished; it is the fruit of continual exercise at the school of the Master. It is made up of constant searching for the ways of God and vigilant attention to his signs. It requires “intellectual curiosity,” an ability (conquered) to perceive reality and problems in a positive manner, the capacity to enter into dialogue with society, with history, even the most dramatic aspects.

In this apostolate/administration meeting we will certainly gather much input for *redesigning the apostolate in the light of the charism.*

³ *Ibid*, p. 15.

In coherence with what has been said up to this point, I would like to highlight two attitudes that I consider essential for expressing our passion for God and for humanity: *dialogue*, and the capacity to *inhabit* the spheres and forms of our apostolate.

When we speak of our centers, we strongly desire that they become always more places of encounter and of *dialogue*.⁴ But what is dialogue and how do we carry it out?

In order for there to be dialogue, it is necessary to be *among*, *in the midst*. Not *above* (that is, distant, detached, disinterested or with an attitude of superiority), and not *below* (hidden, perhaps because one feels resigned, distrustful or not up to the task...), but on the same plane. Not to make everything level, not to be uniform, not to be and do like the others, but to *put things in common*, to *share* the Truth.

This *being in the midst* is very beautiful. And it is very Christian, very Pauline. This is what Jesus did; he always lived *in the midst* of the others, preaching to everyone, never refusing contact, speaking to the wise as well as to the ignorant, to the rich just as to the poor. Always in the midst. St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, the first missionary did this too in the early days of Christianity.

I have drawn the other “attitude” from those striking insights received during the Interchapter on the theme of *inhabiting* (and of being *inhabited*).

To inhabit [or live in] a place has always been a requirement that shows the missionary identity. At first it is a territory, thus a physical space; the parameters of the Christian community, where one meets or can meet everyone, without excluding anyone. And this is precisely mission: to move, to let oneself be found, to intersect with everyone.

In this sense, to live in is “to provide intermediary places... acts that favor passageways, encounter, welcoming (Bishop D. Pompili). And who more than woman, who has always been a receptive, sensitive “place” disposed to let herself be “inhabited,” can favor encounter? Who more than a woman apostle, who has made space in her life for the Good News, can become a mediation for encounter with the Word, creating the conditions that make this possible for everyone? And who more than us, Pauline apostles, heirs of a charism that marvelously joins spiritual depth, apostolic creativity, the capacity to read the signs of the times, sensitivity, an attitude that empathizes with places and persons?

The first step

In the conclusion of her talk during the Interchapter, Sr. M. Antonietta read an impressive saying of the Desert Fathers:

Once Abbot Lot went to find Abbot Luca and said to him: “Father, as well as I can, I observe the rule, fast some, practice prayer and meditation, keep the silence and, as much as possible, I try to always have pure thoughts. What else should I do?”

⁴ The word *dialogue* comes from the Greek *dià-lògos* (*dià* means *among*; *logos* means *word, discourse*).

The old monk stood up and raised his hands toward heaven, and his fingers were transformed into ten flaming torches. Then he said: “Why not transform yourself into fire?”

May the Holy Spirit grant us the grace to emerge from our narrow “Jerusalem” and to enlarge the boundaries of our heart, helping us to rediscover that motivational charge that stimulates apostolic creativity and leads to fruitful “conversions”...

There are probably many steps to take in order to redesign the mission. Even if they are thousands, let us begin with the first: to rekindle our passion, transforming ourselves into fire!

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