

Living the memory of a historical Audience **On the 50th anniversary of the meeting with Pope Paul VI¹**

This month marks the fiftieth anniversary of the memorable audience in the Clementine Hall in the Vatican, where on June 28, 1969, our Founder Father James Alberione, with the Capitulars of the Pious Society of St. Paul and a large representation of the Congregations and Institutes of the Pauline Family, was received by Pope Paul VI, Supreme Pastor of the Church.

The historical, social and political context of that period was marked by strong agitation and tensions; we remember especially the 1968 phenomenon of youth protest.

In the Church, the Second Vatican Council ended a few years ago, interrupted by the death of Pope John XXIII and completed by Pope Paul VI, his successor. The great assembly gathered and reworked the numerous instances of renewal at the biblical, liturgical, pastoral level, etc., including that which represented an absolute novelty, concerning the means of social communication and sealed it with the drafting of the *Inter Mirifica* decree.

The Special General Chapter of the Society of St. Paul (1969-71), convened specifically to adapt the Constitutions to the regulations deliberated by the Council, was thus able to deal with the questions concerning the apostolate in the light of this official acceptance by the Church.

From the heartfelt and dense speech of the Pontiff, given in this audience, which preserves, after some time, its perennial value and its authoritative strength, we will try to draw some precious inspiration.

Having expressed his regret at having been held up by occupations that had preceded the meeting, the Holy Father largely rewarded the anxious expectation: "And now - he said - we are pleased to meet with you and with all our heart [...] to have you present today, to be able to reflect on your activities, and to be able to bless you". What better conditions for a decidedly family atmosphere!

Most probably no one like Paul VI, free of prejudice, has followed with attention and understood the "apostolic" nature of Alberione's work as an authentic, necessary "preaching" of the Gospel to the man of today, in the variety of his media expressions favoured by technological progress, but also in the variety of institutes of his religious Family. In fact, after having reviewed them, he lists the specific apostolates: "Yours is the apostolate of the editions, the main one; Yours is the liturgical apostolate, the parish apostolate, the vocational apostolate, and the one for the intensity of Christian life in various categories of people".

Observing the varied Pauline editorial panorama and its prodigious expansion, the Pope highlighted - as he defined them - two practical virtues: that of "continuity", that is of constancy and perseverance in apostolic initiatives and that of the "capillarity" of diffusion.

¹ The event was published, in addition to an article in *Il Cooperatore Paolino, Mensile della Famiglia Paolina* (n. 9-10 sep-ott 1969) / *Carissimi in San Paolo* (pp. 550-555), in a special "Special Issue" of *San Paolo*, with extensive photographic service. Our Fr Giuseppe Barbero also reported it in the volume *Il Sacerdote Giacomo Alberione, un uomo - un'idea*, (pp. 898-900).

These virtues have their foundation in the moral and spiritual evangelical virtues that are able to recognize and provide for the priority and urgent needs of humanity.

The mode of “propaganda” that the Daughters of St. Paul have carried out so admirably in the past, made up of sacrifices and profuse energies without saving, and that the Holy Father has significantly compared to the industriousness of ants or to the industriousness of bees, is no longer obviously feasible today, but requires new creativity.

The consideration of modern civilization, capable of “creating magnificent instruments” but incapable of “creating masters” that give primacy to the Word and to Grace, led Pope Paul VI to appreciate us in this way: “You have been able to unite these two things: the instrument with the end, the purpose, the content that the instrument must have”.

How can we fail to recognize here the anxiety of Father Alberione to form apostles who, in the school of Jesus Master, Way and Truth and Life, with a “spirit of fidelity and sacrifice”, in detachment from personal honours and interests, seek to “give the technical instrument its effectiveness”, its character of pulpit, of teaching, to spread charity in truth, charity of truth?

In a crescendo of recognition, Paul VI came to attest the Society of St. Paul as a significant reality in the history and life of the Church, for having been able to realize, “*ante et post litteram*”, and many postulates of the Council in the field of social communications. It seems clear to the Pontiff to attribute all this to the concurrence of two wills: that of a humble man and faithful servant and the paternal one of the extremely prodigal Lord in blessing those who entrust themselves totally to him. For this reason, with words of passionate admiration and veneration, he directs everyone’s gaze to the Founder: “Here he is: humble, silent, tireless, always vigilant, always gathered in his thoughts, that run from prayer to work [...], always intent on scrutinizing the ‘signs of the times’, that is, the most ingenious ways of reaching souls, our Father Alberione has given the Church new instruments to express itself, new means to give vigour and breadth to the apostolate, new capacity and new awareness of the validity and possibility of its mission in the world and with modern means”. As a seal of this authoritative witness, the Primo Maestro is given the Cross “*Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*”.

A few years later, in 1974, in a subsequent address to the Pauline Family, Paul VI again defined Father Alberione as a marvel of our century and presented him again as a model to be faithfully imitated. To the question posed to the audience: “Would you be happy if we made him blessed?” - followed by thunderous applause - the Pope united an unexceptionable provocation: “It takes time, it takes time. But look, it is up to you to make him blessed, to canonize him, to show truly that he has been a superior phenomenon of religious, Christian, spiritual life and you with your fidelity give the document of proof, testify that he is worthy of being so honoured and so recognized”.

Today, fifty years after that audience, in a rapidly and radically changed global context, much has changed even in the Pauline Family, which lives the responsibility of continuing its work in the sign of fidelity to the charism, especially in the formation of apostles who make Pauline holiness their way of life. In this regard, the precise indications of Paul VI remain always relevant and a constant point of reference: “Always have a clear conscience of one’s

vocation is very important. In this way you must renew your intentions and your plans; reinvigorate your hearts with that adherence to Christ the Lord, of whom Saint Paul, your and our inspirer and protector, was and still is master and example. You have embraced a great cause. And every great cause, while it is a source of spiritual energy and demands love, dedication, and sacrifice, involves great responsibilities, great duties, and therefore also risks and dangers... Whoever proposes the apostolate as the goal of his life, the powerful apostolate of the media, must always have before his conscience the responsibility that is to exert an influence on the minds of others, on the lives of men, who are, near or far, our neighbour, that neighbour we must love and serve as Christ loved and saved us. This sense of responsibility and this Christian love will always guide the guiding and selective criteria of what we want to communicate to others”.

The Pauline Family, with the precious charismatic inheritance received from the Primo Maestro, in this era of the culture of communication is challenged, by the ever more dizzying development of digital technologies with their multiform languages, to take every opportunity to transmit salvific contents in keeping with authentic humanitarian progress. Guided by the directives of the Council documents and by the subsequent contributions of the Magisterium aimed at regulating a subject in constant and rapid evolution, is called to live its apostolic mission in full respect of the moral laws, rights and dignity of man, but above all in fidelity to the cause of the Truth of the Gospel for which the Apostle Paul totally gave himself.

Finally, the Pauline Family can now rely with confidence to all its needs, in addition to the intercession of the Apostle of the Gentiles and of our blessed Founder, also to that of Paul VI, already raised to the honours of the altars, who enjoys with them the fruit of the common faithful service to the Bride of Christ, a fruit which the Pauline Family itself must be able to multiply to the glory of God and for the good of humanity.

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