



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - September 2015

General Congress - from the President's Talk

Dear friends! A short time ago we finished celebrating the Third General Congress of the Union in Sao Paulo in Brazil (14-18 July, 2015). It was a special time of grace, during which we experienced the joy of sharing the living freshness of our Founder's charism. Through the faces, stories, testimonies, reflections, conversations and celebrations of those who participated, the Lord became present and impelled us more and more to live in and for the love of Christ. All of you, members and collaborators of the Union, were present in the communion of prayer and love which bridges every distance of time and space. Therefore, it seems good to share with you the main points of my opening talk.

I begin therefore by offering something of the gift I have received, by sharing and presenting what I am and what I have most at heart regarding the Union. It is important to acknowledge immediately that it is thanks to the faithfulness of many people, in the present and also of those who have preceded us, that we are what we are today as a Pallottine Family; faithfulness to God who is known and recognised as Infinite Love and Mercy in the inexhaustible richness of the personal history of each one of us.

Part I - Personal presentation

It was the same also for me, already many years ago. It was 1973, at the beginning of the story of my community, Quinta Dimensione. I was a young student, rebellious towards the world. I wanted to start a revolution against society's structures, to change them, overthrow them: I believed that they were what prevented what was good, solidarity, generosity, justice, fraternity. But during a discussion with other students at a meeting, about how to build a better world, it was me instead who was changed, overwhelmed by an expression; it was Fr. Leonardi, a Pallottine, our religion teacher, who said it to me. The phrase is still a model for everything that I live and experience: for there to be peace, love, tolerance, fraternity, truth, listening, in the world, it no use only to change the structures. It is the human being who creates them, we are the ones who create them. Therefore, it is necessary above all to change ourselves and put the Gospel of Jesus at the centre of our lives. I realised then that change had to begin from myself. In this way I began to experience that the Christian life - Pallottine life - is just very simple and also fully human: live, doing to others what you would like done to you. And the world will certainly be made new, also in its structures.

In July 2013, Pope Francis said to the Latin American Bishops: "The "change of structures" (from obsolete ones to new ones) will not be the result of reviewing an

organizational flow chart, which would lead to a static reorganization; rather it will result from the very dynamics of mission”.

I make a long jump in time now to March 30th, 2015, Monday of Holy Week, the day on which the General Coordination Council elected me President of the Union. None of us would have thought, imagined, dreamed of such a surprising novelty: a lay person - moreover a woman - as President of the entire Pallottine Family.

In the long exchange of thoughts and desires between the members of the GCC, at some point my name emerged and everyone looked at me. I did not understand very well; I thought that name was a future, still distant, possibility for the Union. So I got up from my seat and went to the bathroom. At the bathroom door Cheryl Sullivan, another member of the GCC, was waiting for me. I cannot remember well what we said to each other, except that we loved each other and that we would do everything together, in communion. This alone was important, is important.

Before voting, there was a time of personal spiritual discernment. I went into the chapel and placed myself before Jesus, present in the Tabernacle. It was already clear to me that something was going to happen not only to me but also to each of the other members of the GCC and to the entire Union. I said: “Jesus, my Lord, you know who I am. However, if I am to be the person to be chosen, you must give me two things. The first: if this is to happen, that it may not be a recognition of personal qualities, but of the path travelled with the community, grafted through the charism of Saint Vincent Pallotti into the history of the Union. The second: that I would not be elected as a victory between opposing contenders, but that it would be a sign of a strong consensus, of unity. Jesus gave me what I asked. With much joy and awareness, I can say that there was not only my acceptance, but that of every member of the GCC. All of us - we can say - said yes to God and embraced his surprising and ‘revolutionary’ plan.

Up to this point I have been telling you about myself. It is important for me to share experiences since they help us to raise our gaze, no longer fixated on the particular, but looking on the Union and accepting it in its complex entirety.. I would now like to proceed with the second part of what I have most at heart regarding the Union, developing three aspects: memory, capacity to see the present, a utopia directed towards the future (Pope Francis to the Argentine newspaper “La Voz del Pueblo”, May 2015).

Parte II

Memory

I would like to begin by highlighting some aspects of the General Statutes which constitute its foundation in order to draw out from them the common memory of the life and form of the Union in this decade (a little more than a decade). Memory which is common, that is, involving us all, it belongs to us and gives order to our responsibility towards God and others in keeping it fresh and enriching it.

The General Statutes are a fruit of a long and patient communal work, begun in the 90’s, but with more distant historical roots when the Second Vatican Council invited

every Religious Family to return to “the original spirit of the institutes”, to “their special characteristics” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2). And they unite, through a juridical structure, (cf. Parts II – IV) the various parts of the Family (priest and brothers, sisters, lay people), who are already united by a moral bond which comes from the founding charism (cf. Part I).

The General Statutes present this bond through essential spiritual elements: reviving faith and rekindling charity in order to unite all in Christ; calling all - whether religious or lay or clerics - to the apostolate; uniting the efforts of all in service of the Church. And this without interfering with the juridical structure and internal life of the individual parts. In this way the Statutes can be applied to all parts of the Pallottine Family, and each one can be recognised as having equal rights.

The common and essential element of the identity of the charism and of the unity of the Pallottine Family is the Catholic Apostolate. It is the title which characterises its vocation in the Church, the essential element (Cf. *OOCC X*, 196-201; III, 139). Here is the new work in the Church that, in the memory now shared, opens up to this present.

The capacity to see the present

“I would like to make another clarification with respect to the charism: we run the risk of considering it only as a "content", but it is not like this. Each founding charism includes a "content", but at the same time, also a particular "way of being", a "way of proceeding". This is important when it comes to the "updating" a founding charism”.¹ Following the Pope’s thinking, we can in fact say that the “content” of the charism of our foundation, the essential element, is the Catholic Apostolate. But, the Pope says, beyond the content, there is something more: the way of being, the way of proceeding, essential for updating the founding charism.

Much ground has been covered from the approval of the Union to today: the constitution of the GCC, of NCCs and LCCs; the formation programmes; the formation teams with the promoters; the general, continental and national congresses; the admission of new members with the Act of Apostolic Commitment; the Jubilee celebrations; the octaves; the annual action plan; etc. Everything has contributed and contributes, with the grace of God, to give structural stability in the building up of a work as complex and varied as the Union. It is a necessary process in order to incarnate, to concretise, the experience of the Spirit which Saint Vincent Pallotti has left us as a gift, because the following is also true for him: “For the various founders and foundresses, the Gospel was the absolute rule, whereas every other rule was meant merely to be an expression of the Gospel and a means of living the Gospel to the full.”² Our present certainly shines with lights but - in different places and in different ways - shadows also stand out. It is for us to interpret them in a vital manner because,

¹ Mons. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, in the Synod on Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and World, XVI General Congregation, Roma, 13 October 1994, n. 5

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter to Consecrated People, 21.11.2014, I,1.

if on the one hand the human element is always weak, fragile, vulnerable, on the other we recognise that the strength of the Holy Spirit also makes use of shadows in order to carry forward his plan. These shadows, therefore, should not be ignored, kept at a distance or delegated to others, but they are necessary in order to grow, to update the "way of being", the "way of proceeding". And here is my proposal: And here is my proposal: collaboration and communion today require the generating or renewing of a consciousness of the various expressions Union that structural stability is no longer sufficient in order to give meaning to belonging to the Pallottine Family. We understand that it is now necessary to put relationships, direct dialogue between people, at the centre of communion. What would the Church be without the lived experience of the new commandment of mutual love.? What would the UAC be if its members and collaborators did not live among themselves the substantial constituent of charity? "Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another" (cf. EG, 98, 99).

A utopian vision for the future

The utopia directed towards the future is to commit ourselves - "resolve", the Founder would say - to be in communion with each other, renewing every personal and community strategy to foster unity. In the foundation of St. Vincent Pallotti, in his words, we are all called to be co-founders with him.

Conclusion

Let us invite and support one another to follow this path with courageous patience and humility, without doubt Marian in its ways, of the 'care of bonds', conscious that communion must be and become the first form of evangelisation: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another" (Jn 13:35). What makes the Union is communion. And the Catholic Apostolate is its direct, spontaneous, natural radiation. The future generations are already present in us. And this is a certainty which accompanies our commitment to serve God faithfully and with joy in the Union of Catholic Apostolate.

"How much good it does us to love one another, in spite of everything. Yes, in spite of everything! Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!" (EG, 101). No, we will not let ourselves be robbed! Our Lady of Aparecida, pray for us. Thank you for listening!

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