

COMMUNION, COLLABORATION, AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY
WITHIN THE UNION AND OUTSIDE
JUNE 23, 2018

Dear Participants in the 2nd US National UAC Congress, brothers and sisters!

First of all, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and joy to the NCC and its President, Fr. Greg Serwa, who wished, in their goodness, to invite me here and share a few thoughts on communion, collaboration, and co-responsibility within the Union and outside.

Also a special word of thanks to Duke and the Organizing Committee.

It's an honour for me to be present on behalf of the global Pallottine Family. I see it as a sign that bears witness to the growth of communion among us, an enduring fruit that only the Spirit of God, through the intercession of St. Vincent Pallotti, can give.

And the awareness that in our Pallottine Family all its vocations, congregations, institutes, groups, individuals, communities and activities constitute a richness and are not a reason for fear or division, can become a sign of joyful hope for the universal Church.

Therefore I am also grateful to all those here in the States who worked and have been working for promoting the communion of all Pallottines in the charism of our Founder. In a special way we all here want to remember with gratitude Fr. Noel for being such a precious witness to Pallotti's spirit.

Those people were and are being urged on by the conviction that it's in unity that we can see more clearly our responsibility in facing the challenges of humanity, since - quoting Pope Francis' words - "the Union of the Catholic Apostolate, is the bearer of the charism of Saint Vincent Pallotti" and this charism "opens new horizons for participation in the mission of the Church" ¹.

In recent months, since the General Assembly in January, the GCC in April and after various meetings and dialogues I've had with members of the Union in Rome and worldwide and also with the 3 Superior Generals, I reflected on what communion and co-responsibility

¹ cf. Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the SAC, 10 October 2016

really demands from me and from us, when it comes to communicate a lived-out experience.

Here are some aspects that stand out for me, and that I'd like to share with you:

1. Pallottine spirituality - that is the experience of the Holy Spirit in Pallotti – is our peculiar way of translating Christian faith into life, our peculiar way of living Christian life: all can be apostles/disciples, witnesses of Christ, all are called and are calling others to sanctity. And sanctity is to live our call to the full.

Pallottine spirituality puts vocations (married life, religious life, priesthood, lay consecration) in the right place. In fact our ideal is not to get married, not to be a priest, not to be a religious or a lay-consecrated.

Our ideal is God, and God is Love. We must be love as God is love. Vincent Pallotti did this: "My God I am without charity: You are charity in essence ... My Jesus destroy all of my Life. Give me your Charity, and make me live, and be transformed into your Charity"².

If - in who I am and what I do - I give too much importance to my own vocation, if my Ideal is being a consecrated lay-woman, I will clothe myself with something that can deviate others from recognizing Christ as the Life of my and anyone else's life.

So, at the centre of Pallotti's charism there is always Love, infinite love and mercy, and it incarnates in every vocation.

In particular, when I met with the pallottine spirituality in 1974, I was fascinated by those words of his that can be read as the synthesis of all of his actions: *the practical exercise of charity*.

As an Italian, I grew up in a Catholic setting; I knew that the Gospel was read and meditated on in church, but this saint suggested that I put it into practice. I tried it out and, like you, made a discovery: living the Gospel meant to exercise charity practically, to let Jesus live within me. (in my case, I wanted to change society but the first surprise was that the Gospel was changing me.)

2. The second aspect concerns our fundamental attitude. We must make a distinction between God's gift – which is the charism – and ourselves. We all know that the charism per se is God's, it belongs to Him. It's not ours, not even St. Vincent's. He and we, his children, are its bearers.

² OCCC X, 674-5

Last July I was in Canada. While visiting the Museum in Calgary of the well-known Canadian Mounted Police with Maria Domke and Fr. Rosenbaum, I was struck by the words with which the Indian Chief, Little Crowfoot, opposed the colonizers who wanted his tribe to barter their pastures in exchange of alcohol and weapons.

He said: no, the land does not belong to us; we belong to the land.

We can say that too when speaking of the Pallottine charism. It belongs completely to everyone. So no one can say, "This part does not belong to me", nor "This part belongs to me". It belongs completely to everyone. The UAC is all just one heart, there are not two or more hearts. In Pope Francis' language, those who are at the centre and those who are at the peripheries, form this one heart.

I think this is something really beautiful that pushes us with more courage to find the joy of going forth into the world, fully trusting in God, and be creative in the face of every present and future challenge. For love, in the words of Saint Vincent, is infinitely creative: "The pious Union does not have a new objective, but the eternal law of charity"³.

This is very healthy because it enables communion amongst us and helps us to build up relationships grounded on mutual respect and recognition of each other's gifts and dignity; it also helps us not to be discouraged when we see that we are not at the level of the charism.

It is very important to set off again with new trust in God's gift. We will never reach it, but, nonetheless, God - through our Founder - has called us, and gave the charism to us.

This is the first idea, which is also important for all works in the Church after the death of their founder, because the dazzling light that came from the founder is absent and we see who we are. Personally my conviction is that as members of the Union we should be focusing on our responsibility to draw always on the "source" of the charism, which is Pallotti, his life, his words and all he did as founder of the UAC.

And also to be attentive to the issues of the world that require new understanding and new responses from us, with the courage to express that which is in the charism that has not yet been expressed.

³ OCCC IV, 317

3. A third aspect concerns our service to the Church and society. As you all know, from 2015 to today I've been to many countries where the Pallottine Family is present: Brazil and the Amazons, Poland, Ireland, Germany, Congo, Rwanda, Italy and London, India, USA, Ukraine, Canada, Australia.

Everywhere I've met persons (priests, brothers, sisters, laity, seminarians and candidates, sick, elderly) who live in an intense way their conviction and commitment to follow Jesus and attract others to Him, calling all and uniting the efforts of all in service of the Church, in service of humanity.

And they are not super-talented, nor are they born perfect. Imitating their Founder, St. Vincent Pallotti, they have recognized God's infinite love and they have been following it and serving others ever since.

From them I've learnt that there is no other path for following Christ than living alongside the brother or sister that the Lord places beside us. Simply put, discipleship/evangelization is first and foremost about the other, not about the disciple/evangelizer.

This is ultimately what St. Vincent meant with the expression "being a co-founder" of his work. I gratefully acknowledge that the gift of the Holy Spirit is still at work here and today.

In all of those places, among many wonderful things, I've seen a much wounded humanity because of:

- war: in Ukraine, in Congo and in Rwanda;
- injustice and poverty: in the Amazons and in the Brazilian favelas;
- marginalization or abuses on minors: in Congo and in Italy; on the sick and disabled: in Poland and in the leprosarium in India;
- exploitation of indigenous populations: in Canada and in Australia;
- denial of quality life to refugees and asylum seekers: in Germany, USA, Australia, Italy.

This has meant to me to get to know the history of a people through the light of truth, to get to know from within the true causes of all unjustifiable suffering.

For example, on my first day in Keshero, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Fr. Eugène took me to the orphanage "La Flamme d'Amour" ("The Flame of Love). I can never forget the innumerable children that had found love in that extremely poor shelter. They

welcomed me with their smiles, kisses, hugs, dances, songs and highly improbable musical instruments. When I saw them, I thought of a famous passage in a book describing a man in Auschwitz who had taken his life by hanging himself and had on him a piece of wood with these words written on it: *where is God?*

Looking in those children's eyes I realized that question didn't fit the scene I had before my eyes. It had to be rephrased. God was here and had made home at the Flame of Love and wherever there be an individual or a people that suffers as a living image of the crucifix.

The question therefore cannot be *Where is God?*, but: *where is Man? where are we? where am I? Why does man - who is created in the image and likeness of God - make other human beings – them too, living images of God – live a life of poverty, injustice, starvation, despair?*

Most certainly I've learnt that the true causes of every unjustifiable suffering are not habitually communicated through the official media. When listening to and seeing how the members of UAC are involved in these "peripheries" serving their neighbours, I realized two things:

- a. Serving the needy, those who suffer means to serve the truth and "unveil" through the practical exercise of love the lies of the rich and powerful. This is the revolutionary courage of unselfish love;
- b. Being an apostle/disciple means to become one with every neighbour's suffering unreservedly, for their sake and for God's sake.

4. Then the subject of co-responsibility in communion and for communion. What kind of co-responsibility today, or how to understand coresponsibility anew? We know that Pope Francis speaks frequently about the model of the Church as a polyhedron, where all the faces of the polyhedron have their own role and there is not a dogmatic uniformity imposed by central management.

I believe and I am convinced that reading st. Vincent Pallotti's writings and seeing what he did, everything ... we are a Public Association particularly suited to this model. Because the model of communion is just that, as Pallotti always said. It is a trinitarian model, where every part is important. It is not that there is no leadership, or no centre, but it is not a centre that makes everything uniform.

And Pallotti did a great many things of this kind, which were polyhedric. The plurality of missions, vocations and commitments in our Union often brings a rich and unexpected new understanding of particular aspects of our charism.

5. The centrality of collaboration from the beginning. This is certainly a priority of our Founder and one of the key words in his writings. For our Founder, all are called to collaboration, not just like-minded people.

On 9 April 1835, he made the first list of members of the new Foundation. From the beginning, the composition of the list itself gives us an interesting insight into the context of collaboration. There were 10 priests (diocesan and religious) and 6 lay faithful. Altogether there were 12 Italians, 1 English, 1 French, 1 from Iraq, 1 Basilian Abbot from Armenia; there were three rites - a universal group that could only function in the spirit of collaboration and co-responsibility.

One can say that Pallotti's primary idea was God's call to all to collaborate with Him and with each other. His secondary idea was to apply this ideal to any concrete apostolate. He did not mean us to cling to structures. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte - At the Beginning of the New Millennium -* (2001) St. John Paul II concludes n. 43 with a relevant warning: "Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth".

There are clear echoes of our Founder here: "...love, and if love is missing, the entire moral body, which was founded through divine mercy for the good of people and for the greater glory of God, will collapse" (OOCC VI, 438).

Furthermore, collaboration is a cardinal point we need in order to offset a long history of the separate development of Institutes, communities, vocations in the UAC. In the General Statutes, collaboration is set out as one of the key priorities of the Local, National and General Coordination Councils.

In this regard the General Statutes encompass a unifying vision of all the faces of our polyhedric Union and enable us to discover new insights on our charism. No one Institute, community, or person, can fully define our charism. This in turn leads us to think of all others, and of our entities "as integral part of me".

6. Two final aspects: one on formation and the other on creative faithfulness.

- Regarding formation, it is important to form and be formed to use the three languages of the mind, of the heart and of the hands together. It is necessary to learn to think well, to listen well and to work well. Work too, because work is not only a means of living, but is something inherent to our being human persons, and therefore also a means for knowing reality, understanding life.

From the Enlightenment we have inherited this unhealthy idea that formation means filling the head with concepts. And the more you know, the better you will be. No, formation must touch the mind, the heart and the hands.

Forming ourselves and others to think well, not just to learn concepts, but to think well; forming ourselves and others to empathize well; forming ourselves and others to do good. In such a way that these three languages are interconnected.

- Creative faithfulness entails the challenge of being faithful to the original inspiration and together being open to the breath of the Holy Spirit and setting out on the new paths that he inspires. And this requires humility, openness, a *synodal attitude* (as Pope Francis would say), a capacity to risk.

But how can we meet and follow the Holy Spirit as Union at the local, national, international level? By practicing discernment as a community. That is, by gathering in the spirit of the Cenacle to hear what the Spirit tells us today as a Christian community (cf. Rev 2:7)⁴ and to discover together, in this atmosphere, the call that God lets us hear in the historical situation in which we are living the Gospel.

Francis invites us today to become artisans of community discernment. It is not easy to do this, but we must do so if we wish to have this creative faithfulness to Pallotti's charism and if we wish to be docile to the Spirit for the service of the Church and of society.

⁴ "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches"

Conclusion

We, Pallottine Family, are still at the beginning of our journey, at the start of everything. This being at the start means that we must look ahead, that we must do something to move forward.

We must get together to beat the challenge of this world which needs the Gospel, which is in extreme need of seeds of Gospel life that then grow and transform it. And we can do it by handing on to others our experience of communion.

Our charism is a powerful help and encouragement for us. The charism is a gift of God, so we mustn't feel proud about having received this charism, but with humility we must be aware of the charism and do all we can to hand it on to the Church and the society around us.

I think that for the Union at this time the irreversible path to faithfully follow Pallotti's experience of the Spirit is to renew our personal and communal commitment to be united as brothers and sisters, and to love one another as Jesus loved us to the end.

Mary will intercede for us and accompany us on the journey to be united with God and among us so that we may find Him always in our brothers and sisters.

Thank you for listening.

Donatella Acerbi