

## The Pauline Charism

### at the Service of the Gospel of Peace

First of all, I would like to offer my best wishes to all of you for your 100-year history. I think this is a beautiful opportunity for reflection because it should not be taken for granted that one will necessarily live more than a hundred years. After all, nothing is eternal. Effectively, the question to ask is what the charism proper to one's institute is and how should it be lived in the light of the present times.

We have spoken about evangelization for years but we have not carried out the work of evangelization precisely because our efforts were based on will power and, at times, on proselytism. To communicate the Good News, one must know how to communicate, how to speak. The Church's great limitation with regard to evangelization was that she had a hard time commu-

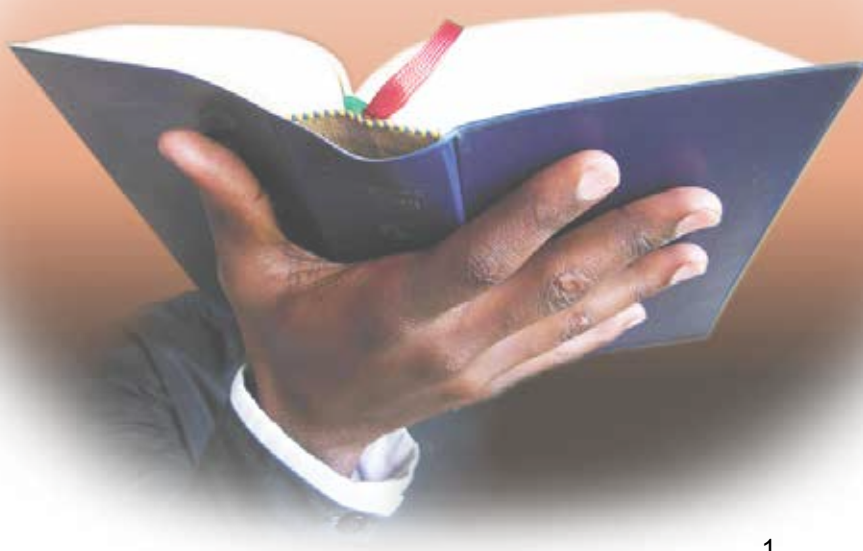


nicating. This gave rise to Fr. Alberione's intuition to return to Paul so as to begin to communicate with people once again. This was also the fundamental idea that, after Vatican Council II, emerged in Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, in which the Pope says that *the Word of God circulates by means of human dialogue* (cf. ES 80-82). We must know how to dialogue with one another if we are to circulate—the Word of God. But how does one communicate? I would echo the conclusion of the talk just delivered by my friend, Archbishop Celli: to communicate, it is vital to know how to listen, and listening to the Word of God regenerates the heart. On the day of Pentecost, those who listened to the Apostle [Peter] felt as if their hearts were on fire, as if they were being reborn.

The heart is the center of life, the center of one's rapport with humanity.

Consequently, I would like to speak about the great intuition of the Pauline priests and sisters, of Maestra Thecla and Fr. Alberione, to give central place to the Bible. This is not something that should be taken for granted; *Dei Verbum* is also taken for granted, but it shouldn't be. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Archbishop of Turin visited one of the parishes of his diocese. Seated in an armchair, he said to the parish priest: "Give me a Bible. Before going into the church, I want to read an excerpt from it." The parish priest replied, "Of course, Your Excellency. But you

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will have to stand up first." Astonished, the Bishop asked, "Why?" and the priest explained, "Because one of the legs of the armchair you're sitting in is broken and the Bible is holding it up."

There were Bibles in our world, but we lost sight of them because they were holding up broken armchairs.... The Bible served to support our thoughts but not to nourish our hearts. So disseminating the Bible should not be taken for granted! In 1934, Maestra Thecla wrote: "Take the Bible to people. Offer it in Latin and Italian—as a single volume or in booklet format. Let each person choose the edition he/she prefers. After the person has made a choice, ask him/her to write a declaration on a piece of paper stating: I bought this particular Bible.... I like it.... I am happy with it.... It is a beautiful edition, etc. Then when you go to the next person, show him/her the declaration and so on. Have everyone write down a few words or at least sign the paper. Not everyone will agree to do this, but the majority will. Try it in the name of the Lord."

I think this is very important because it captures the idea of what it means to disseminate the Bible, namely: to place the Word of God in the hands of the people of God. Alongside the Liturgy, this was the biggest accomplishment of the Council, and Thecla

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and Alberione intuitively understood this. And they also understood that on the human level it is important not to force the Bible on people, but to allow them to choose the edition best suited to them, to have them write a declaration, to tell others what they think of the Bible.....

I believe that this is a decisive point, a true turning point and—if you will permit me to say—one that has just begun, namely: to once again place the Bible in the hands of the people of God; to cultivate devotion to the sacred Word and listen to what it has to say. This gives rise to the desire to communicate the Good News. It gives life to the typically Pauline passion that Thecla described in this way: "There are many souls waiting for salvation and few workers for the Gospel. Just think: half of humanity still does not know God and the other half knows and serves him so little.... We must form missionary hearts: generous hearts that are detached from their own comforts and ready for everything."

This is what I see in the Pauline charism: the profound connection between a heart that listens to the Word of God and a missionary heart inflamed with the desire to communicate with others and—specifically—to communicate the Word to them. I put the two together: not only to communicate in general but to communicate the Word of God.

We can speak about how modern Maestra Thecla was. It is enough to point to her "Decalogue of Quickness." This brief list might seem somewhat



functional and even a little silly here and there, but we should be careful because when we read the writings of past generations the things said sometimes seem “silly.” Why? Because it is the language of yesterday! The Decalogue reads: “Be quick: quick on the telephone and in the parlor; quick and uplifting when speaking; quick in correspondence; quick in greeting others; quick in the book center; quick in acting, and also quick in the confessional...”

Maestra Thecla is a modern figure, but is she a figure of global stature? This, I think, is the challenge. Our global world is much more literate than the world of a hundred years ago—the world of her time. But in this more literate world, do we know one another better? I think there are immense swaths of humanity that can be classified as ignorant literates. When I say “ignorant,” I mean people who do not know others and who allow themselves to be swept away by emotional reactions because today each person—even those living in the most remote parts of the world—is in contact with many other realities.

### **To Communicate with Others**

Today ignorance of others triggers not only emotional reactions but also fanaticism. And here we touch on a current problem: one cannot live in a global world without culture. But today “culture” can be likened to the smattering of English that allows you to get around an airport, find a hotel or restaurant—just enough knowledge of the language to get you around the world or else remain lost.



Nicola Chiaromonte said: “Believers and non-believers are the minority. Most people are *mis*believers,” which is another way of saying “ignorant literates.”

And here lies the challenge, dear friends: to communicate with others; to communicate so as to reach out to them and get to know them. The theme of war and widespread violence is linked to this. Today, the Mediterranean basin is going through a time of terrible violence. We have only to think of ISIS and its incredible capacity to communicate a message of violence: the images of Copts being beheaded are a horrendous but effective message. Violence does not spring solely from distance and ignorance but primarily from its powerful capacity to communicate. So then, here is the big challenge: what does it mean to communicate peace, to cultivate a culture of peace and encounter, of mutual knowledge, in a world marked by great distances, great ignorance and wrenching violence? As you all well know, the massacres in Rwanda were fostered by the broadcasts of Thousand Hills Radio Station, a sower of hate. The media can be powerful instruments for fomenting violence.

### **“Stay where you are”**

The story of the Daughters of St. Paul is connected to World War I (the “Great War” which Italy entered in 1915). During the war, Alberione said: “Stay where you are,” and Maestra Thecla added, “We are in heartfelt union with the sufferings of the world.” The story of the Via Antonino Pio community in Rome is linked to the World War II era, during which the sisters—like many other Institutes—offered hospitality to those displaced by the fighting. What does it mean to live in peace and communicate peace in a time of violence and war? This is extremely interesting and it is the challenge of our times: to communicate—to cultivate—a culture of encounter, a culture of peace, in a world that is not tranquil, in a world challenged by fanatics. We are challenged by the culture of fanaticism, but we must not react to it. Instead, we must foster the growth of a different culture—one that creates communication between worlds, persons and religions, thus nourishing a culture of peace.

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## Women on the Front Lines of Communication

I'd like to share with you a personal memory. Many years ago, Fr. Perino (at that time Superior General of the Society of St. Paul) invited me to address a group of superiors of the Pauline Family who were gathered at Ariccia. He asked me to speak about the Pauline Family. I sat down to study the theme assigned me and at a certain point I found myself thinking: "Good grief! This is a jungle—an incredible intertwining of Institutes, Congregations, laity and priests!" But then, upon reflection, I became convinced that the idea of the Pauline Family was an intuition that meets the challenge of our global world: it represents a diversity of conditions and genres and faces the complexities of the world by means of many paths that are not homogeneous but that harmonize with one another. In a very masculine Church—which today is still too masculine and in which it is hard to live genuine fraternal relationships precisely because the presence of women is insufficient—Fr. Alberione from the outset wanted the presence of many feminine Institutes: not in the kitchen to serve the men but on the front lines of communication. This is very important because often when male and female Congregations are paired, the purpose of the women is to serve the men and do their laundry. Instead, Fr. Alberione believed that women should play a lead role in the communications apostolate.

And here I think the idea of communications should be paired with the idea of the *culture of the family*, which involves not only attention to the family nucleus but also attention to the complexity of the world and of communications by means of



many different approaches and sensitivities operating in harmony with one another. Perhaps we have not thought about this enough—it is an idea we must rediscover. And I want to repeat that the culture of the family is a culture of peace.

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I would like to conclude with two very brief reminiscences. I too remember the FSP book center in Rimini. I'm a few years younger than Archbishop Celli so maybe by then the sisters were no longer visiting the families with their heavy book bags or maybe they were making the men carry them.... I remember that during the Council I would go to the book center to buy the documents as one by one they were printed and in fact I still have those booklets. And here is what I want to say about your FSP book center: together with an abundance of titles, it radiated a fresh and cordial atmosphere. It had broken the restrictions of the label "Catholic book center" to become a center of culture—including religious culture—and therefore a center of ecumenism, not in the technical sense of the word but in the sense of *openness*. Frankly speaking, visiting the book center in later years, I no longer had the same feeling. But a few months ago I visited the renovated FSP book center in Mozambique. In that place in which the instruments of Catholic-Christian culture are so rare, I re-experienced what I had felt so many years ago in Rimini: a fresh and open spirit and a cordial communication that seemed to say, "Here is what we have to offer—choose whatever you want and if nothing appeals to you then we will just have a pleasant conversation and part as friends."

I think this spirit has always been proper to the Daughters of St. Paul and that a hundred years have not dulled its luster.

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