



SAN PAOLO

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“Be imitators of me”
Letter of the Superior general

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LETTER OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

“Be imitators of me”

Dear brothers,

I am happy to offer to your attention my annual letter, centered this year on the *first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians*.

As already in the past years, my intention is to contribute through assimilation of the word of God, to the relaunching of the general objective of the VIII General Chapter: **“To be St. Paul living today. A Congregation that strains forward”**, committing ourselves in particular this year to invigorate again our adhesion to conform to Christ the Master, following the inspiration of the apostle Paul and of blessed James Alberione, so as to be credible and welcoming communities”, which is the objective of the area **“Spirituality and common life”** (cf *Acts*, p. 220).

As for the two preceding letters, the **content** starts from a brief and essential exegetical illustration, continues with a search on how blessed James Alberione has applied to himself and to the Pauline Family the letter of St. Paul and, finally, proposes some hints for meditation and actualization upon which every Pauline is called to reflect.

I am pressed to recall the editorial criterion typical of these letters: I have no will or pretension to say everything. The underlying spirit is rather that of **opening an itinerary** of research to be deepened, by means of opportune initiatives, at personal, communitarian and circumscriptional level.

In such a way that the meditation of all will be able to offer a valuable contribution so as to draw near to the wealth of thought of our Father St. Paul, making use of other **instruments of exegetical research**; the meticulous valorization of the *Opera Omnia* of the Founder will further be able to illustrate **how** the Primo Maestro has made use of the content of the letter for the Pauline Family; the **hermeneutic reading** that takes into account

at the same time of what St. Paul treats and the situations and problems of the Church and of today's society, will be able to offer a useful actualization of them.

Understood in this way, my contribution remains intentionally an **"open" text**, that needs to be widened and enriched through the contribution of the reflection of everybody. We could talk of the writing a "new" letter by Paulines scattered throughout the world, born of the orderly fusion of multiple "readings" of 1Cor.

Considering the resources possessed by the Congregation in the field of informatics and telematics, it is not an impossible project. For some time, in fact, there is on purpose in the official site of the Congregation, the **possibility** and the **opportunity** to share on world level the reflections that the Paulines whether as individuals or communities bring to maturity drawing ideas from the annual letter of the Superior General. For us who love to define ourselves as "men and religious of communication", the valorization of this instrument of participation and dialogue ought to come naturally. The objective is known to all: **to be informed** about what other Paulines have thought and **to inform** what each can offer as original contribution.

I entrust this *desirable mobilization of prayerful reflection* on the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians to the good will of all and to the intercession of blessed James Alberione and blessed Timothy Giaccardo.

THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

"Do not be afraid, but continue to talk and do not remain silent, because I am with you and... I have a numerous people in this city" (Acts 18:9b-10). The words of the Lord to Paul – in part repeated later to blessed James Alberione – are the point of departure of our reflection on one of the most important and lengthy letters of Paul – the 1st letter to the Corinthians. Before entering the biblical text, we shall situate ourselves in time (these data will also be useful for us in 2008 when we shall study in depth 2Cor).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The city

a. History. Corinth was an ancient Greek city of the *Peloponnesus* (the actual Greece. Peloponnesus means "Island of Pelope", one of the sons of Zeus). In 146 B.C. it was destroyed by the Romans. The Corinth of the New Testament was rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. He called it *Laus Julia Corinthiensis*; later on, it became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

b. Politics. When Paul reached Corinth for the first time (year 50), the city was governed by a proconsul named Gallio (Acts 18:12-17). Besides the governor, there was in the city a local elite and a state bureaucracy (public functionaries). Archeology shows that near the central plaza (agora), on the southern part, there was the seat of the Council (a kind of public hall) having a tribune for orators. In the vicinity there was also a big public building whose use is unknown.

c. Economy. Among the five principal cities of the Roman Empire (Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Antioch, Alexandria), Corinth was a big metropolis and enjoyed a strategic position. The backbone of its economy was made up of slave laborers (2/3 of the population). It had two strategic ports: Cenchræ, which con-

nected with the Adriatic Sea and Europe, and Lecheo (Lakeion), on the Saronic Gulf, which connected with Asia. Between the two ports there was a corridor about 6 kms. long, called Di-holkos (=two furrows). A platform pushed on the “two furrows” brought the ships from one port to another. The road from Corinth going to the ports was paved. The life of many slave laborers unfolded around these ports. Others were domestic slaves, in the fields (the lands were in the hands of big landowners) or in the mines and foundries of the famous Corinthian bronze, internationally renowned (1Cor 13:1).

d. Society. Basically, there were two groups: the free (citizens) and the slaves (non-citizens). The population of the city was almost half a million. The elite did not work with their hands (the task of slaves) and they despised the work of slaves. They had access to consumer goods, to recreation (public baths, theater, games, etc.) and to city life, things that were not allowed to slaves. But they made use of the work of slaves. Archeology has brought to light in general monuments and houses of rich people. The 2/3 of the slaves lived in clay houses and, above all, during hot weather, slept on the streets. Corinth enjoyed a sad reputation, because it was a center of vice and pleasures. A word was even coined to express this reality: “korinthiazesthai” = “to Corinthize” = “to live a pleasure life”; and the expression “korinthia kore” (“Corinthian girl”) meant prostitute (1Cor 6:12-20).

e. Religion. Corinth was a polytheist city. Many temples surrounded the wide plaza: in honor of Apollo, Athena, Poseidon, Aesculapius (temple and hospital). Animal sacrifices were offered in them (1Cor ch. 8 and 10). The most famous temple was that of Aphrodite (Venus). According to Strabo, a thousand sacred prostitutes functioned there. They were called “holy” (1Cor 6:12-20; 11:2-16). They had “reserved places” in theaters and cultural shows.

f. Culture. From the cultural point of view, the city shows and puts into action the entire infrastructure of a Greek *polis*. Besides

the wide plaza (agora, 100 x 200 meters) surrounded by porticoes and bazaars, Corinth had an odeum, two theaters, one of which was covered and with a seating capacity for 18 thousand, and even an amphitheater. Cultural festivals were done there. During the time of Paul, Corinth was culturally more important than Athens. Finally, the Isthmian games merit remembrance. They were held every two years (cf 1Cor 9:24-27).

2. The communities

a. Luke’s version (Acts 18:1-8). Luke gives more space to the founding of the Philippian community than to the communities of Corinth. After his let-down before the intellectual elite of Athens (Acts 17:16-34), he comes to Corinth. It is the year 50 (the second voyage of Paul, the terminus of his outbound trip and the beginning of his return). He enjoys the favor of a lodging, working with his hands during the week (18:3). On Saturdays, in the synagogue peopled by Jews and Greeks, he announces Jesus Christ (18:4). The arrival of Silvanus and Timothy from Macedonia (bringing with them perhaps some economic help, cf 2Cor 11:9) allows Paul to dedicate himself full time to preaching (Acts 18:5).

The Jews reject him, so he turns to the pagans. The change of direction is strategic: he leaves the house of the Jewish couple (Aquila and Priscilla) and lodges in the house of a pagan, a certain Justus, beside the synagogue (18:6-7). The house takes the place of the synagogue. It is a step forward, decisive for opening to the pagans. In Philippi there was no synagogue and the faithful met in houses (of Lydia and of the jailer). Corinth has a synagogue, but the faithful form the nucleus of Christians in the houses.

Crispus, the head of the synagogue, together with his family, is converted. Another domestic church is formed in Corinth (18:8). We have, therefore, the following domestic churches in this city: the house of Aquila and Priscilla, the house of Justus, the house of Crispus and, probably, the house of Sosthenes (18:17; 1Cor 1:1).

Paul stays in Corinth for eighteen months and must face a conflict (18:12-17). What is hidden behind all this? The accusation before the proconsul is that: *“This man persuades the people to honor God in a way contrary to the law”* (v. 13). It is a religious accusation with veiled political motives. In fact, in the context of the Roman Empire, the Jews enjoyed privileges (*politeuma* of the Jews), for example, freedom of cult and dispensation from military service... Paul’s accusers, so as not to lose their privileges, try to picture him as a rebel against the law of the Jews (and, as a result, against the law of the Romans). Their tactic does not work. Sosthenes, the new head of the synagogue, is beaten (perhaps because of his conversion), and the proconsul pretends he does not notice.

b. Paul’s version (1Cor 1-4). Coursing through the first four chapters of 1Cor, we discover two things: the behavior of Paul during the eighteen months of stay in Corinth and the profile of these communities some years after their foundation.

1. *Paul’s behavior (also including Apollo’s sometimes)*. Paul did not make recourse to the wisdom of language in order to announce Jesus (1:17; 2:1), that is, he did not copy the methods and the behavior of the intellectual elite – the “wise” (2:4). In order to talk of spiritual realities, he does not use the resources of human wisdom (2:13). The power of his communication has another source: the Spirit of God (2:12); because of this, he behaves like the “crazy”. Even the content of his message is new: he announces Christ the crucified, a scandal for the Jews (Deut 21:22-23) and foolishness for the pagans (1:23; 2:2). He did not imitate the powerful, neither those who enjoy great prestige, but in Corinth has made evident all his weakness, trepidation and anxiety (2:3).

Why did he act in this way? Because the evangelizers are servers of the people for the sake of faith (compare with the Christological hymn in Phil 2:6-11). If there is some precedence (Paul has planted, Apollo has watered), the merit comes from him who makes grow (3:5-9). Evangelization is a service (compare with 9:16). Hence, Paul wants to be considered as a servant of Christ and administrator of the mysteries of God (4:1-2), to

whose judgment he will be subjected (4:3-5). As a servant, Paul belongs to the Corinthians who possess everything, but they belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (3:21-23).

The title of “apostle” does not contemplate privileges. The word that sums it up is “server”. On account of this, the social place of the apostle-server is among the last, as one condemned to death, a spectacle for all (world, angels, men) – the situation of slaves – insane, weak, despised, bearing hunger, thirst, the cold, mistreated; working with his own hands, cursed, persecuted, slandered: the rubbish of the world, the dust of the universe (4:9-13).

The profile is not complete without the metaphor of the evangelizer-architect who puts the irreplaceable foundation, Jesus Christ (3:10-15), and without considering the paternity of Paul, the founder of the communities. Paul does not put himself between Christ and the believers. The latter build up their life and their history on a single foundation, the Lord. Paul is the only father of the Corinthians, because by means of the gospel he has generated them for Christ (4:14-16); he promises to visit them, and, like a father, he can use the rod or love and gentleness (4:19-20; compare with 1Thes 2:6-12 and Phil 1:8).

2. *The profile of the communities after some years*. Paul affirms that the Corinthians are the *church* of God, *sanctified* and *called to be saints* (1:2). Even more: in Jesus they have received all the *riches*, either with respect to the *word* or to *knowledge* (1:5). Their witness to Christ is firm; they don’t lack any gift, and wait for the Revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:6-7).

But there are also some shadows: they quarrel among themselves, forming groups or classes, imitating the unjust society (1:10ff).

There are not many wise among them, nor many powerful people, nor many belonging to high society (1:26). This means that the majority has not had access to knowledge, does not benefit from political participation and does not have property. Their non-participation in *knowledge*, in *politics*, and in the *economy* causes the elite to consider them as “*foolish*” (contrary of wise), *weak* (contrary of powerful), and *vile and despised* (contrary

of noble). But God has chosen them to confound the wise, the powerful, and the noble (1:27-28); compare with 4:8 and 4:9-13), that is, he has made them participants of divine wisdom and power. God has given them what we term as citizenship.

But the Corinthians are still a weak people and children in faith, and the reason for this are their quarrels and divisions (3:1-4). Paul also calls them the “field and edifice of God” (3:9), the temple of God, the dwelling-place of the Spirit (3:16-17); they possess everything, but they belong to Christ, who belongs to God (3:21-23).

During the absence of Paul, some have become proud (4:18) and have become “rich” (economy), “have had all they want”, “have become kings” (power), the opposite of what they were socially (4:7-8). With irony Paul calls them “prudent”, “strong”, “held in honor” (4:10).

3. The letters

a. Paul’s correspondence with Corinth. Putting together data from the Acts and from his letters to the Corinthians, we are unable to reconstruct fully the voyages of Paul to Corinth and his letters sent to this community. The proposal presented here supposes a journey (the second) ignored by Acts and omitted in the letters. During this sojourn, there took place a sharp conflict between Paul and somebody in Corinth. It is also thought that the second letter to the Corinthians is an ensemble of letters gathered into one. Based on this it is possible to make the following reconstruction:

First voyage (year 50). Foundation (Acts 18:1-18).

First letter, lost (see 1Cor 5:9: “I have written you in my *preceding letter* that you don’t mix yourselves with the lewd”). Among the authors, some think that this corresponds to the actual 2Cor 6:14–7:4, above all because of 6:14-18.

Second letter (year 54, from Ephesus). It is the actual 1Cor (brought by Timothy? – cf 1Cor 4:17; see his threat of the rod in 4:20).

Second voyage (year 55, not documented). The conflict against Paul blows up.

Third letter (year 55, from Ephesus). This corresponds to the actual 2Cor 2:14–7:4.

Fourth letter (year 55, from Ephesus. Was Titus the carrier?). Corresponds to the actual 2Cor 10-13, called the “letter written with many tears” (2Cor 2:4). See 2Cor 12:14 and 13:1-2, where Paul says that he is ready to go to Corinth for the third time (the second voyage, therefore, is not documented).

Fifth letter (year 55 or 56, in Macedonia). Corresponds to the actual 2Cor 1:1–2:13 + 7:5-16).

Sixth letter (year 55 or 56, in Macedonia?), carried by Titus. Corresponds to the actual 2Cor 8.

Seventh letter (year 55 or 56, in Macedonia?) to the communities of Achaia. Corresponds to the actual 2Cor 9.

Third voyage (year 56), on the occasion of the international collection in favor of the poor in Jerusalem. He stays for three months in Corinth (Acts 20:3) and writes the letter to the Romans.

b. The first letter to the Corinthians. All the letters of Paul are occasional and, for this reason, pastoral. Saying that they are occasional does not mean considering them of little account, but considering them in their socio-cultural context. We find an example of this in the pericope about the veil of women (1Cor 11:2-16). Behind each of them we can always glimpse a concrete situation, in such a way that we must ask ourselves about what facts have pushed Paul to send a determinate text to specific communities. Another interesting (and important) observation is this: Paul’s theology starts from the life situations of the communities he has founded. He does not theologize for simple pleasure; rather, starting from problems (at times from conflicts), he leads to deep reflections and considerations about persons, communities, God. It is the shepherd that takes care of the sheep, concerned about the communities.

This said, we ask ourselves what has motivated the drawing up of the actual 1Cor. To do that, we shall bear in mind the situation of the Corinthian communities and the fact that Paul

must settle some controversies. He was certainly in Ephesus when he received some news from some of the house of the lady Chloe (1:11; it is not sure if this businesswoman resided in Corinth) and perhaps of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus who had gone to visit Paul in Ephesus (16:15,17). 1Cor 7:1 speaks about a letter of the Corinthians to Paul asking for explanations concerning various questions. The bearers of this letter could have been Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus.

What were the problems that disturbed the life of these communities? *In their daily life there was:* **1.** Quarrels because of the evangelizers, creating factions (Paul, Apollo, Peter, Christ): 1:10–4:21. **2.** Somebody has taken his stepmother as his wife (ch. 5). **3.** The non-Christians judge the quarrels of the Christians (“don’t wash your dirty linen in public”): 6:1-11. **4.** Christians who believe it’s normal to frequent the prostitutes (6:12-20). These are the bad news reported by the household of Chloe.

Starting from 7:1, Paul answers the questions of the letter that the Corinthians had sent. And the number of the problems increases: **5.** Couples that abstain from sexual rapports (7:1-7); **6.** The situation of the separated, of the unmarried, of widows (7:8-9); **7.** Separation of couples (7:10-11); **8.** Marriage between Christians and non-Christians (7:12-16); **9.** Circumcision: yes or no? (7:17-20); **10.** Slaves in the community: what is to be done? (7:21-24); **11.** Virginity (7:25-35); **12.** Interrupted betrothal (7:36-38); **13.** Widows (7:39-40); **14.** Meat sacrificed to the idols – ch. 8 (9) and 10:1–11:1. *During celebrations there was:* **15.** Women who prayed and prophesied with heads uncovered (11:2-16); **16.** The poor who suffer hunger during the Supper of the Lord (11:17-34); **17.** The most longed-for charisms: speaking in tongues and prophesying. And the others? The greatest is love (ch. 12-14); **18.** Does the resurrection of the dead exist or not? (ch. 15). Chapter 15 makes up the conclusion: international collection (see 2Cor 8-9), plans, greetings.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** Study deeply the importance of the big city in the life of Paul and Alberione. **2.** Compare the city where you live with the Corinth of Paul’s time. **3.** Recall memories of the beginnings of the Congrega-

tion and compare them with the foundation of the Corinthian communities. **4.** The change of address (from the house of a Jewish couple to the house of a pagan) has been decisive for Paul. Does this suggest something also to us? **5.** Are there in my community hotbeds of tension as in Corinth? **6.** The communities of Corinth were problematic and have required much work from Paul. Why has he not abandoned them?

II. THE LETTER AND ITS PRINCIPAL THEMES

Address, greetings and thanksgiving (1:1-9). Comparing the beginning of 1Cor with 1Thes and Phil, we notice some differences. In 1Thes we had Paul, Silvanus and Timothy practically equal and without titles; in Phil, Paul and Timothy present themselves as *servants*; in 1Cor there is a clear separation: Sosthenes (cf Acts 18:17) receives the title common to Christians – brother –, while Paul attributes to himself the title of *apostle*, and apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. The letter thus opens itself with a polemic tone (cf ch. 9), giving us presentiments of storms as we go along. That notwithstanding, the Christians of Corinth – most of them foolish, weak, of lowly condition and worthy of contempt (cf 1:26) – are called “church”, people of God, a term that evokes the *qahal* (assembly) of the Old Testament. Paul has been called to be an *apostle*, and the Corinthians *sanctified* (by baptism) and *called* to be saints (cf ch. 5-6), as part of a great communion: the communion of all those who invoke the same Lord, Jesus Christ. The greeting – grace and peace – has the same force as the ones we have deepened previously.

As in most of his letters (except Galatians), Paul starts by *thanking* God, though he knows that the Corinthian communities are weighed down by internal problems and conflicts, as we shall see. The reasons for thanking are the following: **1.** God has granted to them, in Christ Jesus, *grace*. Paul here does not specify, but we know that it’s about the announcement of the Gospel and of its effects: faith, baptism, the formation of their communities in which **2.** The Christians have been graced with all kinds

of riches – in word and in knowledge. Knowing the tenor of the letter, we can be led to see here the irony of the apostle. In truth, the Corinthians were not rich in anything. But in the place of irony, it is possible to discover the pedagogy of Paul: notwithstanding that he writes to problematic communities, he finds reason to be thankful, to look at positively at the life of these communities. **3.** The testimony of Christ is firm among the Corinthians (ch. 8 and 10). **4.** They are filled with gifts and no gift is lacking to them (ch. 12-14). **5.** They wait for the Revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf ch. 15).

Paul sees the relation God (Jesus Christ) and the domestic churches of Corinth as relation of the new Alliance. God has shown his fidelity in Jesus Christ, and the Corinthians, in accepting the Gospel of Paul, have become a people allied to God. Note in 1:1-9 the strong insistence on Jesus Christ (9 times), called *Lord* (5 times). It is the first alarm about divisions in the communities.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** In a climate of thanksgiving, thank God for your baptism, your Pauline vocation, your charism, the journey of sanctification proper of the Pauline Family, the communities scattered throughout the five continents and who invoke the same Lord... **2.** The greatest heritage of the Congregation are persons. Thank God for the wealth of the word and knowledge that are present in the persons that make up my province, region, community... **3.** In a few lines, Paul insists on the importance and centrality of Jesus Christ, the Lord. That happened also in Fr. Alberione. Does it happen in me?

1. Tensions and conflicts in the community

a. Divided communities = weakened communities (1:10–4:21). The household of lady Chloe informed Paul about the divisions among the members of the community, where rival groups were being formed and that involved the missionaries: the group of Apollo (composed probably of the intellectual elite that saw themselves in him – cf Acts 18:24ff), the group of Paul (the majority

perhaps: the fools, the weak, the despicable...), the group of Cephas (who holds the title of apostle as a privilege and implies tasks for the communities) and the group of Christ (cf 1:11-12).

Paul begins by exhorting them to harmony that is translated into unity of spirit and thought (1:10; cf Phil 2:2; 4:2). And starting from these bases, he weaves a long reflection, putting together four themes: **1.** The foundation of the communities is Jesus Christ. He is the center, the reason for the existence of Christians. As a result, **2.** The missionaries are neither the foundation nor the reason for the existence of Christians. What is, therefore, the profile of the evangelizers? These two themes we find interwoven in 1:10-17; 3:1-17; 4:1-13; 4:14-21. All this proves that **3.** The wisdom of God differs from that of human wisdom and shows itself in the cross of Christ. It is for this that **4.** The wise of this world, closed in their own self-sufficiency, do not reach divine wisdom that is revealed to “fools” and received by them. These two themes are put together in 1:18–2:16; 3:18-23. The fact that Paul interweaves four themes in 1:10–4:21 is significant. It denotes that they refer to each other and form a unity.

First theme: The foundation of the communities is Jesus Christ (1:10-17; 3:1-17; 4:1-13). Paul appeals to unity: Christ is only one. Further on (ch 5-6 and 12) he will present the “community, body of Christ” theme. The centrality of Christ lies in the fact that only he (and not Paul) was crucified for all, and even in the fact that all have been baptized in the name of Christ (1:13). Paul, during his stay of eighteen months in Corinth, has announced only the crucified Jesus Christ (2:2), the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:24). Using the image of a civil construction, he compares himself to a good architect who chooses the right for the building up of the community: Jesus Christ. And he warns that nobody can change him or substitute him (3:11).

Second theme: Profile of the apostle (1:10-17; 3:1-17; 4:1-13; 4:14-21). Called to be an apostle, Paul came to Corinth in the manner of the disinherited, identifying himself with them in everything (working with his hands, living out of hospitality and without a

fixed abode). He lowered himself as to social condition; he made himself a *servant-apostle* (note the verb *to send*, which in Greek is *apostello*) to announce to the poor of Corinth a crucified man like them and who has given his life for them, Jesus Christ. He made himself a “fool”, not using the criteria of the elite to talk about someone crucified, a scandal and a folly: “*Christ... has sent me... to preach the gospel; not however with a wise discourse, that the cross of Christ may not be nullified*” (1:17); “*we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the pagans, but for those who are called, Jews or Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1:23-24).

Paul has made this without appealing to “human wisdom”, to the power of knowledge (1:17), identifying himself with the “fools” of Corinth. In other words, he has found the right language to communicate with the excluded and to communicate to them the crucified: “*when I came to you, I did not present myself, in announcing to you the testimony of God, with sublimity of words or wisdom... I came in your midst with weakness and with much fear and trepidation; and my word and message were not based on persuasive discourses of wisdom...*” 2:1,3-4).

The metaphor of the milk (3:2) makes us think of the mother who breastfeeds her baby (compare with 1Thes 2:6-8), and 1Cor 4:14-21 clearly shows in what way Paul realizes his paternity. He calls the Corinthians his “beloved children”, asks that as such they imitate him, since he is their true father, because he has generated them, by means of the Gospel, in Christ Jesus. The image of Paul, who in his role as a father educates his children for the life of the city, is already familiar to us (cf 1Thes 2:8ff; Phil 2:22; cf 1Cor 4:17). Here, put in prominence are the opposites: obedience+meekness or disobedience+the rod.

Another characteristic of Paul the apostle is this: he did not make himself, but was made apostle. He has received a call, a command from above and he is not allowed to discuss or refuse it. There has been a rapture that he was not able to escape, like the one of the great personalities of the past – Moses, Jeremiah... He is simply obeying, executing the command, without a right to compensation (this theme appears with force in ch. 9). The word that expresses well what he means by apostle is *servant*

(*diakonos*): “*But who ever is Apollo? Who is Paul? Servants (diakonoï) through whom you have come to the faith*” (3:5a). Using an agricultural metaphor (3:6-9), he emphasizes that since he truly has been a pioneer and a father in Corinth (“*I have planted...*”), the fruitfulness of the mission is always a gift of God (“*...it is God who has made to grow*”).

Finally, the characteristic of the *administrator* (*oikonomos*): “*Let everyone consider us as servants (yperetes) of Christ and administrators of the mysteries of God*” (4:1). *Oikonomos* comes from *oikeo*, which means to *administer* something that does not belong to me, to act as a *servant*, a *helper*, someone who is subject to superior orders, in the case, Christ. And what is demanded of an administrator? Fidelity, to merit trust (4:2). The text already allows the storm clouds to transpire, the theme of 2Cor. The same transparency seen in 1Thes 2:1ff appears again here: “*my conscience accuses me of nothing*” (4:4).

What would be, therefore, the profile and the social position of the apostle according to Paul? “*I believe, in fact, that God has put us, the apostles, in the last place, as people condemned to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to the angels and to men. We are fools for the cause of Christ, you are wise in Christ; we are weak, you are strong; you are honored, we are despised. Until now we suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness, we are slapped, we wander from place to place, we suffer fatigue working with our hands. If insulted, we bless; if persecuted, we bear; if slandered, we console; we have become the rubbish of the world, the refuse of everybody, until today*” (4:9-13). Condemned to death, foolish, weak and despicable; ill-treated, without a fixed dwelling, working as slaves, cursed, persecuted, slandered, garbage, waste matter: in all, twelve characteristics of a picture that needs no comment.

Third theme: The wisdom of God differs from human wisdom (1:18–2:16; 3:18-28). Paul certainly knows the wisdom tradition transmitted by the Old Testament, above all in Proverbs and Wisdom. For the wisdom books, Wisdom is the ideal companion of every human being. However, what is wisdom? It’s hard to say it in a few words, but we can try an approximate answer: Wisdom is

the sense of life present in every creature, that is, it is identified with the plan of God in creation. In order to acquire it, it is necessary to ask it from God. It begins to become part of our life when we respect God, because the beginning of Wisdom is the fear of the Lord (cf Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Sir 1:14; Job 28:28). And to fear him means to accept that his thoughts and plans are superior to our thoughts and plans (Is 40:13; 55:8-9; cf Ps 92:6-7; 111:2; Rom 11:33-35). The person that walks along this way becomes wise, even if he has not gone to a school or university.

Biblical Wisdom is not culture or erudition. The few “wise” men of the Corinthian communities thought of themselves as such because they knew how to read and write, because they have acquired erudition and academic formation. This type of science/knowledge provokes arrogance in the person (8:1). Man becomes self-sufficient and threatens to occupy the place of God. Paul no doubt knew about this and had in mind the episode of Adam and Eve, deceived by the serpent to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to become gods (Gen 3:1ff).

In ancient Greece, the wise man (that is, the cultured person) normally was also rich and famous. Some considered him a bit inferior to Zeus, the most important divinity in the Greek pantheon. He sold wisdom, did not have to work, lived on privileges. He was a kind of “king of kings”, because he knew the mysteries of the world and knew how to interpret events. They were few who attained wisdom because this depended on the whim of the gods. Hence, they were regarded as the interpreters of the will of the gods. They were the ones who decided what could come from the divinity or not.

God has radically overturned the paradigm of Greek wisdom, because the crucified One that Paul announces – scandal for the Jews and madness for the Greeks – is the ultimate expression of divine wisdom and power (1:23-24). Like Mary in the Magnificat, Paul proclaims that God has chosen what is foolishness in the world to confound the wise (1:27; cf Lk 1:52f).

Fourth theme: The wise of this world do not attain divine wisdom (1:28–2:16; 3:18-28). The basis of this theme – also developed in

Rom 1:18ff – is found in Wis 13:1: “*Truly foolish by nature are all men who lived in ignorance of God, and from visible things did not recognize him who is; they did not recognize their maker, though pondering on his works*”. Closed in their own self-sufficiency, the wise of this world do not discover Wisdom, that is the meaning of life present in every created thing. In the sense of life present in every creature the Sense palpitates, that is, God himself, their author. The culture of the wise, instead of opening the road to wisdom, has closed it. Those who are considered to be the interpreters of the divine will, have not scrutinized the plan of God, what he had prepared for those who love him. On the contrary, “*non of the rulers of this world have known her; if they had known her (Wisdom), they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*” (1Cor 2:8).

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** The wealth of the contents in 1Cor 1:10–4:21 is immense. Read and read again these chapters as texts intended for us and for our communities. **2.** The spiritual legacy of our Founder is Christocentric. What place does Jesus occupy in my daily life? **3.** Are there divisions in my community/province/region? If there are, where do they come from? Am I a creator of unity? **4.** Compare my style of life with that of Paul, servant, mother, father, administrator... **5.** Is the Wisdom of God part of our being and acting? **6.** What challenges and insights do these chapters offer for our mission? Does Paul’s way of expressing himself suggest something as far as the contents of our mission is concerned? **7.** What aspects have caught my attention? What themes still deserve more deepening?

b. “Purify yourselves... to be a new leaven” (5:1-13). The expectation reasserted by Paul concerning the communities is that they be a place of new relationships, without any shadow of the unequal and unjust relationships of the society wherein they live. In so doing, they present themselves to the world as salt and light, giving birth to a new reality. Their encounter with Christ is the turning point between a past of idolatry and a present of new life (cf 1Thes 1:9; Phil 2:15; 1Cor 6:11-12; 12:2). Paul

gets irritated when his communities reproduce the same caprices and injustices of those who do not believe in God (cf 1Thes 4:13). If, in fact, the Christians do not bring about anything new, what are they doing? They are salt that has lost its flavor, yeast that is incapable of leavening.

Chapters 5-6 deal about this. They indicate three big problems of the Corinthian communities. The first of the problems is called *immorality*: a Christian lives as the husband of his own step-mother (ch 5). Lev 18:8, like Roman law, disallowed this kind of relationship, although some rabbi tolerated it among the pagans. The Council of Jerusalem had prohibited this relationship (Acts 15:20). The question, therefore, remains open: the Christians of Corinth do, approve and applaud what the law of the Jews and Roman law disapproved. And let it be noted that, for Paul, even if it is only one person that does it, the whole community in a certain way is committing an error, whether by its approval or by its compromising silence. Because of just one person, the alliance is compromised.

1Cor 5:1-13 begins by presenting the fact (vv. 1-2), continues by indicating the solution adopted by Paul (vv. 3-5) and ends with the argumentation (vv. 6-13) in which he justifies the position that must be taken by the community and states what he thinks of Christians in an environment like Corinth. In spite of the apostle's tough and intransigent stance regarding the one who has erred, we can take note of some aspects that are important for community life: **1.** Paul already has the sentence, but he wants to involve the community: *"I have already judged... it is necessary that... we hand over..."*; **2.** it is not a tribunal, but an assembly in prayer: *"...gathered together in assembly with the power of our Lord Jesus..."*; **3.** the principal aim (cf Mt 18:15-18) is to retrieve the person who has erred: *"...let this individual be given to the power of Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may obtain salvation in the day of the Lord"*. Scholars discuss if this "giving to the power of Satan" represents or not a certain type of excommunication. At any rate, the text shows how important was the fact that somebody belonged to the community and underlines that the provision does not aim to destroy the errant one, but to recover him.

The argumentation (v. 6ff) shows how Paul sees the few Christians who live in a permissive society like that of Corinth. He uses the metaphor of the yeast taken in a negative sense as a principle of corruption. A little amount of yeast (the incestuous one) ferments the whole dough (the community). He asks the Corinthians to purify themselves of the old leaven (their customs before baptism) in order to be new dough (bearers of the new), because they are now free of the old yeast (have abandoned their former lifestyle). And he recalls the Jewish custom of destroying during the feast of the Pasch the fermented foods: *"Let us celebrate, therefore, the feast not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and perversity, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth"* (v. 8).

Paul explains the meaning of a precept written in the past and that bolsters what he has just affirmed (vv. 9-11). He ends by citing Deut 13:6: *"Drive out the wicked person from among you"*.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** Can we affirm that our communities have something special that makes them salt of the earth and light of the world in a society of permissiveness and unequal rapports? **2.** How do we react when our communities come across scandals? **3.** Paul believes that the wrongdoing of one person is enough to put the community and the alliance at risk. What do we think about this? **4.** In spite of the scandal, Paul believes in the recovery of one who has erred. What about us?

c. "But you have been washed, you have been sanctified, you have been justified..." (6:1-11). When they are not anymore salt and light for the world, the Christians reproduce the way of living of the world and risk putting their misdeeds before the eyes of those who do not believe. It is the apex of counter-testimony. We have already seen the divided Corinthians. Now the divisions become deeper and the consequences appear: they have recourse to pagan tribunals to resolve their conflicts.

The tension takes place between wise-strong-noble and foolish-weak-despicable. Perhaps there was a case of theft (v. 7), and

the dispute is brought before the tribunal of the pagans. Certainly, the pagans would note the uselessness of being Christians, because “they are like us, even worse”. Paul **1.** laments that there are divisions among Christians; **2.** he mocks the wise, asking if their wisdom does not produce reasonableness: “*Is there truly no wise person among you who can judge between brother and brother?*” (v. 5); **3.** basing himself on the *politeuma* of the Jews, he suggests that the communities resolve internally their disputes. We would say: “don’t wash your dirty linen in public”.

There were in Corinth various tribunals. Their higher instance was the governor. Even the Jews had their tribunals to resolve questions about their way of living. Since they are unable to live without quarrels, Paul advises the creation of something similar to resolve the conflicts among brothers. The irony against the “wise” is strong: he asks three times “*do you not know...?*”. He argues with what Jesus has said to the Twelve (v. 2; cf Mt 19:28) and he makes use of themes coming from the apocalyptic (the judgment of the angels). Jesus had said severe things against scandal (Mk 9:42ff), and Paul does not react differently: he affirms that it is preferable to suffer injustice than to be unjust, to be robbed rather than to rob. When two people quarrel, in fact, nobody is right. And the pagans will conclude that it is not worth being Christians.

Even here, baptism is emphasized as a turning point. There is a first and an after that oppose each other. Paul, without exhausting the theme, makes a list of a series of “characteristics” (sins) of the “first”. And he justifies why the “after” is totally new: “*But you have been washed, you have been sanctified, you have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*” (v. 11). Baptism has been the point of rupture with the past. In Paul’s communities, baptism consisted of immersion in water (death) and in emergence from it (resurrection). It was the start of a new life.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** Are there conflicts in my community? How do I contribute to overcome them?
2. Make a comment on this affirmation: The best and the worst

“vocational propaganda” is our community life. **3.** We say that “when one does not want, two do not quarrel”, and that “when two quarrel, none of the two is right”. Do you agree? **4.** What is preferable: to suffer injustice or theft, or to be unjust or a thief? Why? **5.** Are religious people better than simple Christians? **6.** Do baptism and the religious profession mean something for me?

d. “...your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Somebody has paid a great price for your redemption; therefore glorify God in your body!” (6:12-20). The last problem pointed out by the household of Chloe refers to fornication (*porneia*), and it openly shows the position of the wise-strong-noble with regard to prostitution (remember the reputation of Corinth concerning this). The expression “*everything is allowed for me*” (6:12) is undoubtedly a *slogan* of the “wise” in their alleged liberty in Christ. In their reasoning we can see a certain materialism that does not believe in the resurrection and places the sexual relation on the same plane as the physical need to eat. Separating spirit and body/matter, they have constructed something like an equation thus expressed: food is related to the stomach as the body (of the Christian and the prostitute) to sexual pleasure. Appetite for food and sexual appetite are just the same thing. And the end of everything – food and body – is destruction.

Paul dismantles the reasoning of the wise going through various passages: **1.** “*Everything is licit for me*”, it is true, but not everything is for the better. In fact, he who does not see boundaries ends by being a slave of his own desires (we can add: he who does not live a relative liberty ends by enslaving others and making them objects). **2.** It is not true that the body relates to pleasure as food relates to the stomach. Why? Because the body of persons has another dominion and destination. It is not only through the spirit that we establish communion with God, but also through the body. **3.** The body of persons belongs to God who has molded it and has made it according to his image and likeness (Gen 1–2). **4.** The destination of the body is not destruction, but the resurrection (ch. 15). **5.** Sexual relation is the deep-

est form of communion. Paul emphasizes it citing Gen 2:24: “*They will be two in one flesh*”: in this way, the spirit/matter dichotomy is overcome. **6.** Now, the community is the Body of Christ, and each one is a member of this Body. Therefore, if a member of this Body prostitutes itself, it repudiates the dominion of God and prostitutes the Body of Christ.

In a city that is full of temples and permissiveness, the Christians introduce some important novelties: **a.** God dwells in the body of every person. The totality of the bodies forms the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit. **b.** The sexual relation assumes sacredness, because it is so deep a communion as to make two persons only one flesh. **c.** The human body reacquires its dignity as image and likeness of God and is destined not to destruction but to the resurrection. Within every being the germ of the resurrection palpitates. **d.** We have been *ransomed* (commercial language regarding the purchase of slaves in the market) for an incalculable price, the blood of Christ. Therefore, we don’t belong to ourselves. We are his.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** The text indirectly touches the theme of chastity. Put it in relation to “you do not belong to yourselves”. **2.** The unhealthy anthropology of contempt for the body does not belong to Paul. Find out the theology of the body and of sexuality present in the text. **3.** “Prostitutes exist because there are men who look for them”. Comment on this. **4.** How do I live my relational liberty? Do I possess things, or do they possess me? **5.** Does this text of Paul help me in my choice of contents, in my communication and in my contact with persons? **6.** Relate this text with the internet... **7.** What aspects have not been emphasized in this reflection? How would you enrich it?

2. “Let us pass to the points about which you have written me”

The 2nd part of 1Cor continues. It brings to the fore the tensions in the community, but the source of the information is another: a letter asking for directions.

a. “Time has run short” (ch. 7). This affirmation is the most important key to understand the lengthy and complex chapter 7. Paul’s preaching still contemplated the imminent second coming of the Lord (cf 15:51). So now the expression “*the time has run short*” (v. 29), an affirmation that puts everything back in perspective. All the themes of this chapter: the married, vv. 1-7; the separated, the single, the widows, vv. 8-9; separation, vv. 10-11; marriages between Christians and non-Christians, vv. 12-16; circumcision: yes or no?, vv. 17-20; slaves, vv. 21-24; virginity, vv. 25-35; interrupted courtship, vv. 36-38; (widowed) wives, vv. 39-40, must be understood in light of this assumption. Including their conditionings.

Let us bear in mind, moreover, the principal consequence of the imminent parousia, that is, the most fitting attitude in waiting for the second coming. In Judaism – basically the religion of the race – the people of God grew numerically in the measure that children, especially boys, were born. From this is the fact that sterility was considered as a divine punishment, that virginity did not receive any consideration in the entire Old Testament and numerous offspring was believed to be a blessing from God.

Starting from Jesus, the perspective has changed. All those who adhere to him and receive baptism are members of the people of God, independently of race. In Paul, this is very clear (e.g., Gal 3:28). In the face of the possible imminent return of the Lord, there is only one urgent exit way: “*to give birth to new children* through announcement of the Gospel, because from this faith depends (Rom 10:14ff). It’s in this way that the people of God increases numerically, in the measure in which adhesions to Jesus Christ through baptism grow. The Corinthians have understood well Paul’s proposal, and some have carried it to exaggeration, saying, for example, that “*it is good that a (married) man not touch woman* (his own spouse)” (v. 1); or unwillingly breaking courtship (vv. 36-38); or, being single or widowed, rejecting marriage (vv. 8-9); or, yet, pretending to get rid of marriage (v. 10f).

Paul clarifies all these questions. To the married he recommends that they fulfill their conjugal duty, abstaining from it

only out of common accord and for a limited time in order to dedicate themselves to prayer. And he makes splendid affirmations concerning mutual belongingness: *“The wife does not have authority over her own body, the husband does; and likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does”* (v. 4). Virginité is emphasized as a gift (cf v. 6), but it is not an end in itself; on the contrary, it is for the Lord, that is, for the Kingdom (cf v. 34). Circumcision and slavery are made relative. As for slavery (v. 21 is difficult to translate), it is opportune to bear in mind the letter to Philemon, and to translate v. 21 in this way: *“Have you been called as a slave? Don’t worry; but if you will be able to emancipate yourself, take advantage of it. One who has been called as a slave, is a free man in the Lord; one who has been called while a free man, is a slave of Christ”*.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. 1. The Corinthians have put everything in perspective starting from Paul’s affirmation: *“Time has run short”*. Have the Pauline mission and the religious profession brought about in me a new vision of all reality? 2. The Pauline Family is a treasury of gifts. Try to discover them. 3. Do you agree peacefully that Paul has not done anything to put an end to slavery? 4. The vow of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom is extremely rich, leading us to a fertile fatherhood/motherhood. Make a comment about it. 5. Paul did not have ready answers for all the questions laid before him by the Corinthians. Does this fact help us pedagogically in our choice of contents, in our preaching, in spiritual direction and in formation? 6. What are the themes in this chapter that merit greater deepening?

b. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (8:1–11:1). A serious problem in Corinth occupies three chapters of the letter: meat offered to idols. We have seen that in the city there were many temples of the pagan gods, where animal sacrifices and sacred banquets took place. Many of the meat came from these sacrifices. The meat that was not consumed in the pagan temples was commercialized in the markets and in the butchers’ shops of the

city. The question is expressed in these terms: can a Christian participate in a sacred banquet in one of the pagan temples? (This was, probably, the only chance the poor had to eat meat). Can a Christian buy meat offered to the idols and afterwards sold in the slaughterhouses or in the markets? The strong, anchored in their “science” and enlightened conscience, said yes, because the pagan gods were not God (8:14; cf Ps 115:1-8). The weak, generally persons whose conscience is not enlightened, saw in this an act of idolatry, because taking part in a sacred banquet in a pagan temple was like making communion with this divinity, in the same way that the broken bread and the blessed chalice (eucharist) are a communion with the body and blood of Christ (10:16ff).

Paul agrees with the strong in matter of principle, because he has always been a convinced monotheist. He is not a simple repeater of the decisions of the Assembly of Jerusalem (cf Acts 15:29). At the same time that he puts in perspective the *“everything is allowed for me”*, affirming that not everything is convenient, equally he puts in perspective the statement *“all of us have knowledge”*, adding that science inflates, while on the other hand love/solidarity builds up. Paul can give the impression that he is a “killjoy”, but in truth he is committed to show that human freedom is always relational, that is, the *free ego* has in front of it another *free ego*. Relational liberty submits itself to solidarity (love), above all if the other ego is somebody that does not have an enlightened conscience. The strong argued that in that way, they ended up losing their freedom in Christ. Paul affirms that in avoiding to eat these meat as not to lose one’s weak brother, we do not lose our interior freedom (cf Rom 14, above all v. 22). The person remains sovereignty free. If he did ostensibly all that he desires, then he would lose himself, losing his weak brother for whom Christ has died (8:11-13).

We ask if Paul does not act as a brake on freedom in Christ (Gal 5:1). The answer is no. Even if he does not say it openly, he believes that one day there will no more be people weak in faith. In the meantime, it is necessary to temper freedom with love for the weak, following the apostle and his option for the poor. The

monumental ch. 9 deals with this. Paul has all the rights that the title of *apostle* confers: he has seen the Lord, can found communities, the communities founded by him should provide for his needs, he has the right to take along with him in his journeys a Christian spouse... He knows a mandate of the Lord concerning this (cf Mt 10:10), argues with examples from daily life and from the Old Testament (1Cor 9:7ff). He has renounced all these privileges and he has not failed in feeling himself free (9:1,19). He has chosen to be *servant* of all (vv. 19-23). As a servant he feels himself at ease, because what he does is not due to his own initiative, but an order from above. He strictly follows this order, feeling in himself all the weight of a possible disobedience: “*Woe to me if I don’t preach the Gospel!*” (v. 16). In this condition, he calls for imitation: “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (11:1).

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. 1. Chapters 8-10 develop other themes that have not been considered here. Look for them. 2. Put yourself in the place of the weak and try to make a reading of the community. 3. Continuing formation helps persons to have an enlightened conscience. What is the importance given to continuing formation from my part and from that of the community? Do I cultivate my spirit? 4. What do you understand by relational freedom? 5. Is there liberty without solidarity? 6. How is it possible that Paul feels that he is free after having renounced so many things? 7. Comment on this: One who has many things ends up being possessed by them. 8. What importance in my life has Paul’s affirmation: “*Woe to me if I don’t preach the Gospel!*”?

c. The women prophesy (11:2-16). Chapters 11-14 throw light on three questions regarding the liturgical assembly: 1. *The veil of women* (11:2-16); 2. *The Lord’s supper* (11:17-34); 3. *Charisms* (ch. 12-14). 11:2-16 is undoubtedly the most badly treated text of Paul, and shows how one cannot make general what is contingent and conditioned socially and culturally. It also serves to understand the rabbinic exegesis of the text from which Paul intends to shake himself off. It is the only place where this

theme is confronted, a sign that it was an occasional directive. Paul certainly did not pretend to attribute universal dimensions to this prescription.

He orders the *wives* to cover their head with a veil during community celebrations, above all when they pray or prophesy (in public and in the assembly). And he makes a complicated reasoning that becomes complicated. The different translations of this pericope show the embarrassment inherent in the text.

We do not know exactly the motive that led Paul to prescribe the use of the veil for Christian spouses during community celebrations. Perhaps to avoid that they would be looked upon as sacred prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite who initiated the devotees of the goddess by means of an enthralling rite, in which dance and loosed hair had an important role. Chapter 14 makes it understood that the celebrations were animated (v. 26ff), without monotony, implying, for example, dance. To protect the women from misunderstandings and, still more, to emphasize that they occupy an important space, Paul orders that they cover their head. The veil emancipated the woman, it did not diminish her. It was a sign of her authority. Bear in mind that even today, in the synagogues, ten men are necessary for the celebration of a cult. The women do not count. The big novelty of this pericope is in the fact that, in a position of equality with men, the spouses can *pray* (in a loud voice) in the assembly and *prophesy* (permanent aspects), on the condition that they cover their head (contingent aspect and culturally conditioned).

Remaining, however, is the prohibition of 14:34ff, which seems to contradict what has been said so far: “*As in all the communities of the faithful, let the women in the assemblies be silent, for it is not permitted for them to speak... If they want... to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home*”. For some, these verses are a posterior addition. But that does not take from them the character of the word of God. What should be done, therefore, to overcome the deadlock and to preserve the principle of Gal 3:28 (“*there is no more man or woman*”)? Paul has found the Corinthian women in an evident disadvantage in front of men as far

as religious questions are concerned. For him, it is clear that they can prophesy (11:5). In 14:34ff we can note the disparity between the spouses: they don't have the same religious formation as their husbands. So as not to debase the celebration, Paul orders the creation of a new space so that they can *instruct themselves* with the help of their husbands.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. 1. Are the women in the Church today more valued than in Corinth during the time of Paul? 2. How do you see the presence of the woman in the Pauline Family? 3. Make the comparison between Paul and Alberione as far as apostolic collaboration between men and women is concerned. 4. What is permanent and what is contingent in this text? 5. In Corinth, the women could prophesy. Referring to this, what can be today the most similar role?

d. Eating and drinking and discerning the Body (11:17-34). The oldest text concerning the Supper of the Lord shows that the Corinthians celebrated the Eucharist. It was an excellent chance to overcome the abyss between the wise-strong-noble and the foolish-weak-despicable groups. The Supper of the Lord started with a fraternal meal, for which each one brought something to share. The rich man, in this way, could realize the hardship of the daily life of the poor man, and the poor man had an excellent chance to feed himself with the specialities of the rich, in the houses of the rich. The sharing of material goods led to the sharing of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus, the Eucharist, font of communion with God and with persons.

But that was not what happened. The lateness of the poor caused the rich to be impatient, and the latter, before the former arrived, devoured everything, perhaps because they did not like the food of the poor. The result: *"Each one, in fact, when he participates in the supper, first takes his own meal and so one is hungry and the other is drunk"* (v. 21), making, in this way, those who do not have, ashamed, and despising the Church of God.

The narrative of the institution of the Eucharist that proposes fraternal communion, brings to the fore some aspects that evi-

denced the egoism of the rich. In fact, during the night when he was *betrayed*, the Lord took bread, gave thanks, *broke and gave*. To deliver oneself, to share, to give are terms that translate the essence of the Eucharist. Bread for all and a chalice that does not exclude anybody indicate the conditions of a celebration.

At the end of the narration of the institution, Paul warns (v. 29): *"because he who eats and drinks without discerning the Body, eats and drinks his own condemnation"*. What Body is it: the Body of Christ or social Body, the community? The question remains open. It is not just discerning the Body of Christ – a perspective that predominated in history –, but equally discerning the social Body, the community. In other words, Paul seems to say that when we communicate with the Body of Christ, we must also be in communion with the members of this Body, the concrete persons of the community, those who have nothing. The warning is serious: *"he eats and drinks his own condemnation"*.

Paul does not recede from this principle. And he orders that all must mutually wait for each other to celebrate the Supper of the Lord. In this way, communion with the Body of Christ and communion with the social Body, the community, remain always strengthened, forming a single reality. Thus he rejects also the intimate aspect of the Eucharist: hunger for bread and hunger for Christ are inseparable.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. 1. We are born of the Eucharist. It makes us Church. "Come to me, all of you". Restore the importance of the Eucharist in the Pauline Family. 2. What does it mean to receive communion without discerning the Body? 3. Does the Eucharist help to overcome the obstacles and the tensions in the community or instead increases them? Is it the expression of our communion with God and with persons? 4. Is there a relation between the Eucharist and hunger in the world?

e. The way that surpasses everything (ch. 12-14). Paul dedicates three chapters to the theme of the "charisms", a sign that this question was very important for the Corinthians. Even here,

as in 11:2-16, it is a phenomenon mainly limited to the Corinthian communities. Unfortunately, there are some who want to make it universal (what happened in Corinth was not exactly the same thing that happened in the Pentecost of Acts 2:1-11). In Corinth, the gift of tongues is exalted and desired as if it were the greatest manifestation of the Spirit. Paul himself confesses that he talks in languages more than all the Corinthians put together (14:18). Talking in languages was a way of praying to God without the aid of the mind, emitting non-articulated sounds (they are not ancient or modern idioms).

Paul does not doubt the existence of this gift of the Spirit. He simply corrects the closed and bloated perspective of those who see in it the greatest (and practically the exclusive) manifestation of the Spirit. He starts by calling to mind the pagan past – insinuating perhaps that the wrong use of the charisms can generate an unjust society and continues widening the horizons of the community: there is a great diversity of charisms, and all of them come from the Trinity: *“And to each one is given a particular manifestation of the Spirit for common use”* (12:7). This affirmation contains the two principal characteristics of the charism: it is a gift and is destined not only to the person, but for the edification of all. Paul insists on the social purpose of the charisms. And he lists down a series of charisms. They are nine, and the gift of tongues occupies the penultimate place, associated with that of their interpretation. Prophecy – another charism longed for by the Corinthians – occupies the sixth place.

With the horizon widened, Paul develops the theme of the body, a metaphor of the community, the Body of Christ. The members of a physical body form a unity in the diversity of their functions. The same thing happens in the community: each one has received a gift of the Spirit for the building up of the Body, the community. There are persons who have the role of the ear, of the feet – know how to listen, bear heavy tasks –, and one who holds functions that are apparently more noble cannot say that he does not need them. In this way it is seen that nobody possesses the Spirit in its totality, and nobody is excluded from the manifestation of the same Spirit.

In the list of the eight functions (12:28-30), speaking in tongues occupies the last place, and the poem of love – the way that surpasses all, ch. 13 – shows that affective and effective love is the sense of all the gifts. Without love that builds up, the gift of tongues is just a deafening noise, and prophecy and science are nothing.

When the foundation is in place, the consequences come (ch. 14). Everything must be directed to the edification of the community, the last end of the charisms. Prophecy is more important than praying in unintelligible tongues. If anyone has the gift of speaking in tongues, he must also be able to translate them or look for someone who can explain them, so that the community may be edified. Otherwise, he must remain silent or talk far away from persons. And, finally, everything should be done in order (the celebrations must have been very rough): let two or three pray in tongues, one at a time, and somebody interpret; let two or three prophesy, one at a time, and the others evaluate if the prophesy comes from the Spirit or not.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** We have received from the Founder a common charism, and from God a personal one. What have we done with them? **2.** The metaphor of the body shows that we are corresponsable. How is our concern for the members of the community? **3.** Comment on this: every member of my community is a gift of God, independently of the role that he holds. **4.** With what measure are we accustomed to evaluate persons? **5.** Why are the more visible charisms not always the most important? **6.** Are there other themes that merit deepening?

f. “Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of those who have slept” (ch. 15). The longest chapter of 1Cor is dedicated to the resurrection of Christ and ours. We have here a clash of cultures and, still more, the chapter shows that the Gospel illuminates and purifies Hellenism. In fact, starting from Plato, Greek philosophy and Hellenism in general despised matter, considered as evil and destined to disappear. The human body was

seen as the prison of the soul, and freeing oneself from this prison was the deepest human longing. This thought has contaminated even the last books of the Old Testament (cf Wis 9:15: “because a corruptible body weighs on the soul and the tent of clay burdens the thoughtful mind”). Luke registers the contempt of the intellectuals of Athens in the moment in which Paul begins to talk about the resurrection (*anastasis*), cf Acts 17:22-34).

The core of the preaching of the apostle and of the Christian faith was received with effort by the believers of Corinth. Some admitted the immortality of the soul, but not the resurrection of the body; others, materialists, denied any possibility of life after death. What was important was to enjoy life – *seize the day* – following 1Cor 15:32: let us take advantage of life – eat and drink – because tomorrow we shall die. Others, finally, had understood only in part Paul’s preaching about baptism presented as to die – to resurrect for a new life. For them, the resurrection took place during baptism. Death cancelled everything.

The consequences of this mode of thinking were and are serious. Contempt for the body and for matter gives place, in a general way, to a cruel underworld: slavery, exploitation, prostitution (6:12ff); in short, profanation and destruction of the dwelling of the Spirit (3:16-17; 6:19-20). If, in fact, we believed in the “I believe in the resurrection of the body” – not only in the immortality of the soul – our position regarding our own body and the body of others would be much different.

In order to talk of the resurrection of Jesus and of ours, Paul has recourse to the catechetical method of the early Christians: receive-transmit-serve: he *has received* (in other places he says from whom he has received, Gal 1:12; 2Cor 12:1ff) and *has transmitted* (in the positive sense of *tradition*, cf Ps 78:1-8). On the part of the faithful, *to accept* and *to remain* firm (15:1-3a). Take note in vv. 3bff of a kind of *Credo*, synthesis of the kerygma: Christ has died for our sins and is risen. The ensuing appearances confirm that he has conquered death. It is this that the eyewitnesses announce and give witness to unanimously. To deny this means to throw everything away: testimony, preaching, faith, salvation.

Christ is risen as first fruits of those who have died (15:20; Rev 1:5 calls him “the firstborn of the dead”). First fruits are the first fruits of an abundant harvest. Rising so as not to suffer death anymore, he has opened the way to the resurrection and immortal life for all. If death had won over Jesus, our life would be tragic and cruel.

Some of the Corinthians were curious to know *how the dead rise* (15:35ff). Paul has recourse to botany, astronomy and theology to try to explain what continues to be a mystery. There is a certainty and a strong light: Christ has won and will win over death for us, so that God may be all in all.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** Is the immortality of the soul more important than the resurrection of the body? **2.** The resurrection of the flesh produces a new anthropology. What is it? **3.** How do I feel: journeying to the end or toward the resurrection? **4.** Comment on this: Without the prospect of the resurrection, humanity gets entangled in a savage materialism or in a paralyzing resignation. **5.** The resurrection (of Christ and ours) is the nucleus of Christianity. Does this fact help me in the choice of contents (teaching, preaching...)? **6.** In chapter 15, are there other themes that merit to be deepened?

g. “Do everything in love” (16:1-24). The last chapter presents various themes in the form of exhortations, news, plans and greetings. We shall emphasize the most significant. **1. Solidarity with the poor in Jerusalem. Paul’s concern for the poor Christians of Jerusalem (the saints)** has been constant (Gal 2:10). When he writes to the Corinthians he is activating an international network of solidarity for the impoverished of the mother Church. He recommends that what the Christians did in Galatia should be done in Achaia (a sign that the contacts of Paul with Galatia have been more than an initial visit and a letter). On Sunday – day when the community meets to celebrate the faith – each one offers what he was able to save. It seems that members in Corinth and Achaia, in whole, have not been very solicitous in

this undertaking (cf 2Cor 8-9). It is as if Paul had a presentiment of it and takes precautions so that the money may not fall into unscrupulous hands (16:3-4; cf the accusation against Paul in 2Cor 12:16-18). He has always wanted to be transparent (1Thes 2:1ff; 2Cor 1:17). **2. Apostolic plans.** From Ephesus where he is, he intends to arrive in Corinth after having visited the communities in Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica). He counts on the help of the Corinthians to sustain the expenses of the journey. These plans have not been realized in full, and that has caused agitation among the faithful (2Cor 1:15; see, in the present letter, the reconstruction of the letters and visit of Paul to the Corinthians). **3. Affection towards his collaborators.** He asks that they receive Timothy well, “because he is doing the work of the Lord”, that they treat him with respect and help him economically. Apollo is called *brother*, and Paul not even remembers the conflicts brought about because of them. He asks esteem for the family of Stephanas, acknowledging their service given to the saints. **4.** His expansive and warm *greetings*, full of affection. There are proofs of mutual affection. Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus are bearers of the affection of the Corinthians. In their turn, the churches of Asia, the couple Aquila and Priscilla, together with the domestic church that gathers in this house, and even the *brothers*, send their greetings. The fraternal kiss is not wanting, the signature of Paul, the prayer so that the Lord may come (*Maranatha*). He concludes with a confession of love: “*With all of you is my love in Christ Jesus*”.

Suggestions for a Pauline reading. **1.** The letter ends talking of solidarity towards the poor (external dimension) and of fraternity among persons of the same community and between communities (internal aspect). Does this help us to perfect our relationships? **2.** Almost always, on recalling his companions, Paul emphasizes the services that they have rendered to the mission. Does this happen also to me? **3.** The manner in which we greet each other (coldly or warmly) is the thermometer of our rapports. Reflect on this. **4.** If possible, synthesize in a few words the messages of 1Cor.

III. BLESSED JAMES ALBERIONE AND THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

The reading and meditation of the text of St. Paul, making use of the results of modern exegesis, have allowed us to accede to the **experience of personal faith** of the Apostle and to his **missionary activity** that lovingly goes down to the concrete situation of a local community, in the case, of the first believers in the city of Corinth.

In order to broaden our reflection and apply it to our being Paulines, it is now necessary to consider how blessed James Alberione has interpreted and valued the contents of the first letter to the Corinthians. What I propose intends simply to be a starting stimulus to attract a more vast personal and communitarian search concerning the thought of the Founder. An appropriate instrument and precious source of documentation are undoubtedly the volumes of his **Opera Omnia** edited until now and accessible to all.

For ease of presentation, we can say that the Primo Maestro interprets and values 1Cor in order to elaborate an **ascetics** of spirituality for the Pauline Family, in order to conform **supernatural vision** to every Pauline apostolate and to nourish our **understanding** of the faith and to live the commitment of our sanctification.

1. Themes for an ascetics of the Pauline spirituality

The beatifications of Fr. Timothy Giaccardo and Fr. James Alberione put the seal of the Church on the validity of the Pauline charism: the **search for sanctity in preaching by means of communication.**

In the tradition of Christian search for perfection, **ascetical theology** is concerned with methods and exercises to make better the sanctity of life in all its aspects. Fr. Alberione, after having closely examined the various methods of Christian perfection, has clearly indicated from the beginning and has constantly called to mind almost with jealousy for fear of pos-

sible deviations, the only way of sanctification for Paulines: **Christification**, on the model of St. Paul: “The process of sanctification is a process of Christification: “*until Christ be formed in you*” (cf Gal 4:19). Therefore, we shall be saints in the measure in which we live life in Jesus Christ; or, better, according to the measure in which Jesus Christ lives in us: “*The Christian, another Christ*”; that is what St. Paul says of himself: “*I live, now not I, but it is Christ that lives in me*” (cf Gal 2:20) (*San Paolo*, February-March-April 1965).

“Not many books of spirituality, no; and not even look for schools of spirituality, because one is the spirituality: to live in Christ Jesus, Way, Truth, Life” (*Alle Pie Discepolo del Divin Maestro*, 1963, 229). “Our devotion and incorporation in Christ is the beginning and the end and the substance itself of our supernatural life: **ascetics and mysticism are here**. Pious practices are helps or results. If we really want to sanctify ourselves, we must avoid the disputes and controversies of the various schools of spirituality, to dedicate ourselves instead to live in ever complete form the life of Christ” (*San Paolo*, June-July 1963).

The goal of Christification proposed by the Founder as spirituality to the Congregation and eventually to all the Pauline Family, is a **courageous choice** in the midst of a quantity of “ways and means of sanctification” that he puts aside with firmness. But since the object of Christification as any other object requires **concrete choices**, the Primo Maestro finds in the person and in the letters of St. Paul the “**the adequate way and means**” for all Paulines.

Through reflections given during retreats and courses of spiritual exercises, through preaching and writings, blessed James Alberione proposes to each and every one of the Institutions of the Pauline Family the **ascetical application** of 1Cor.

Among the passages most cited by the Primo Maestro, without pretending to operate a strict quantitative statistic, the **hymn to charity** (cf 1Cor 13:1-13) returns with insistence: “This is the queen, the soul of the virtues, the compendium of the law, the bond of perfection. St. Francis de Sales, inspired by St. Paul, says in his grandiose language that: ‘Charity never

enters a heart without drawing with itself all the line of the other virtues” (*Prediche alle Suore Pastorelle*, vol. V, p. 18).

The supernatural end indicated by St. Paul “**do all for the glory of God**” (1Cor 10:31) must characterize the whole Pauline life, from the humblest gesture to explicit commitment in prayer and in the apostolate. “*Do all for the glory of God*, yes. Therefore, souls tending towards God, towards sanctity” (*Alle Pie Discepolo del Divin Maestro*, 1964, 381).

To solicit a methodical and constant spiritual work, Fr. Alberione uses the citation: “**One star differs from another in splendor**” (1Cor 15:41). Participation in the glory of God, the Founder interprets, is proportional to our fidelity on earth: “Two people who pass the same day don’t have the same merit during evening: the one who works only for God, what a measure of glory he gains!” (*Mihi vivere Christus est*, 12).

Other **citations** from 1Cor valorized by Primo Maestro: 1:10 – 1:17 – 1:18 – 1:23 – 1:27 – 1:31 – 2:5 – 3:5 – 3:7 – 3:9 – 3:10 – 3:16 – 3:19 – 3:23 – 4:1 – 4:12 – 4:15 – 4:16 – 4:20 – 5:7 – 6:7-8 – 6:9 – 6:15 – 6:19 – 6:20 – 7:7 – 7:29 – 7:32 – 8:9 – 9:12 – 9:16 – 9:19 – 9:22 – 9:23 – 9:27 – 10:17 – 10:22 – 10:24 – 10:31 – 10:33 – 11:1 – 11:23-26 – 12:12 – 12:14 – 12:27 – 12:31 – 13:1-13 – 14:20 – 14:26 – 14:34 – 14:40 – 15:3 – 15:10 – 15:19 – 15:28 – 15:41 – 15:58 – 16:14.

2. Adaptation of 1Cor to the Pauline apostolates

Limiting ourselves only to some references for the apostolate of the Society of St. Paul, the apostolic method of St. Paul “**I have made myself all for all**” (1Cor 9:22) is pointed out by Primo Maestro for written preaching: “The Apostle of the pen makes himself all for all” (*Apostolato Stampa*, 1932, p. 32). The person and the public to whom the Pauline apostle directs himself are a priority element in the communication process of faith. Reaffirming the need for an apostolate that knows how to adapt itself to historical situations, years after the Founder will reassert: “The apostle of the editions makes himself all for all” (*Ut perfectus sit homo Dei*, IV, 120).

Asking himself about the **formation** of the apostle of the editions, Fr. Alberione recalls: "What does such a formation require? A moral formation. Solid virtues, because the apostolate requires hard work and needs the blessings of our Lord", and he cites 1Cor 3:7 (*Mihi vivere Christus est*, 226). Using a language that we could define paradoxical, the Primo Maestro insists: "There is need to form some kind of madmen for the faith and for love; new pyramids with their bases at the top...", and he cites 1Cor 3:19 (*Mihi vivere Christus est*, 211).

The whole cultural preparation of the Pauline is for the **apostolate**: "In this way, science alone *puffs up* (cf 1Cor 8:2). Fill it with charity. More science, but even more charity so that it may become pastoral" (*Mihi vivere Christus est*, 156).

The commitment to **diffusion** is connected with the identity itself of the apostle: "Propaganda constitutes the great problem of the press apostolate. To it are targeted editorial activity and technology. It can be described as the channel through which the truths that spring from the apostle's heart reach souls. The apostolate of the propagandist is like a welfare center: it gets treasures from the Church and distributes them to souls: 'Let each one consider us as servants of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God'" (1Cor 4:1) (*Ut perfectus sit homo Dei*, IV, 87).

3. Interpretation of 1Cor as mirror of the life of faith of the Founder

If we observe the use of the contents of 1Cor on the part of the Founder, whether in view of offering an ascetics for all Paulines or for application for all apostolates, we can glimpse how he has first of all assimilated and lived for himself what he says to others.

Well aware of having received from God a **particular mission** in the Church to give life to "**written preaching**" side by side with "**oral preaching**", Fr. Alberione knows that his pedagogical work will have supernatural effect in the measure in which **he lives what he says** to others.

Recalling the phrase of St. Paul: "**Be imitators of me, as I am of Jesus Christ**" (1Cor 11:1), the Founder comments: "Oh, divine model of sanctity and of perfection! Yes, O Jesus, who follows and imitates you will be a saint!" (*Leggete le Sacre Scritture*, 81).

Reasserting with force that the true founder of the Congregation and of the whole Pauline Family is St. Paul and conscious of his own limits, he asks to disappear after having accomplished his mission, and leaves St. Paul as model.

Making an assessment of his life, Fr. Alberione notes the accomplishments that have been carried out, but he is far from boasting, making his own the spirit of St. Paul who writes: "**I, in fact, am the last of the apostles**" even if "**I have worked more than all of them, not I, however, but the grace of God in me**" (1Cor 15:9,10).

The Primo Maestro has always accompanied his fruitful foundational activity with a methodical **examination of conscience**, applying to himself what St. Paul affirms: "...I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified" (1Cor 9:27) and "...so if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall" (1Cor 10:12).

The example of a life lived in a constant supernatural perspective and the depth of a prayer intimately connected with an intensely laborious life has allowed blessed James Alberione to start all his activity **starting from a special mission**: written preaching. Formulating gradually all the elements necessary to form a group of apostles for the editions, the Primo Maestro has opted for a community of consecrated persons; has formulated a fitting spirituality that gives substance to the whole Pauline life; has adopted the press and the other means of communication to preach the Gospel; has put under his care human formation as the base of a calling so new in the Church. Without an individual and social human formation, the fascinating ideal of the apostle of communication risks not having a foundation. On account of this, like an **expert architect** (cf 1Cor 3:10), the Founder, between 1953 and

1957, has directed to all Paulines seven monographic pamphlets, written for *San Paolo* and now edited under the title *Anima e corpo per il Vangelo* (Soul and body for the Gospel). Among these, one carries as title the phrase from St. Paul in the Vulgate version, “**Bear God in your body**” (1Cor 6:20).

IV. THE PAULINES AND THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

1. Deepening of the Pauline spirituality

Today’s Paulines who meditate 1Cor in dynamic fidelity to the indications of the blessed Founder, head themselves first of all towards a strengthening of their spirituality through the search for an **active answer** to the gift of faith received in baptism and to the call of consecration and Pauline mission.

If we deepen the content of the letter as **baptized**, we can get some convictions about Christian vocation, reaffirmed and explained by St. Paul. As he identifies the addressees of his letter, he defines them as those who “have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and are called to be holy” (1Cor 1:2).

Faith is a gift of God and, at the same time, implies collaboration with the action of the Spirit on the part of every believer, in union with all the other Christians. In other words, a spirituality that is synonymous with sanctity feeds on and in a **triple dimension**: the awareness of having received a *gift from God*, the need for an *active collaboration* that cannot be solitary, but in union *with the ecclesial community*.

Applying this concept of faith to Pauline spirituality, we can clarify it using the **categories of our charism**: faith given in baptism has been enriched by the gift of Pauline vocation; being Christians and Paulines implies a collaboration to live the faith, taking into account the actual historical moment characterized by communication; faith received and corresponded to translates into testimony through communication, addressed both to believers well as those far from faith.

It seems to me that based on these considerations, we understand better the concern and insistent invitation of the Primo Maestro to not decline into a “generic” spirituality”, but to maintain the characteristic “Pauline color”.

In academic teaching, in magazine articles and in book publications, for some time there is as theme the spirituality of communication. We must ask ourselves about the original contribution that we Paulines can offer to this search. Sometimes the literature and teaching about the spirituality of communication are in effect only attempts that invite to further deepening. It is not enough to substitute, almost automatically, theological terms with terms taken from the sciences of communication. Much less it appears productive to anchor human communication to the theology of trinitarian communication, looking for in the divine model the explanation of the hard effort of human communication.

Blessed James Alberione, approaching St. Paul in an original way, ventured interpreting evangelization as a process of communicating through media technology.

Adopting this basic intuition, we Paulines can bring our experience in the **way of thinking and realizing** evangelization by means of communication. Meditating on St. Paul and valuing the interpretation given of him by Fr. Alberione, we can **characterize** the truths of faith explained by the Apostle through **translation** in terms of a spirituality of communication, according to the teaching of Primo Maestro. We must be aware of being capable of offering to the ecclesial community a contribution of example and thought to base the life of faith and evangelization on a **spirituality of communication**.

In synthesis we can say: the forms of communication, whether by media, multimedia or internet are not “**containers**” that can be filled *also* by faith; instead, they are new forms of “**incarnation**” of the faith. Not by chance Primo Maestro makes his own a genial reflection of the future Pope Paul VI: “Monsignor Montini, new Archbishop of Milan, said in a sermon to writers: ‘You take the Word of God and you dress

it with ink, characters, paper, and you send it to the world in that appearance. It is the Word of God, dressed in that way: the Lord *made paper*; give to men that God made paper, as Mary has given to men the God *made flesh*. Made paper and made flesh correspond with each other' " (*Vademecum*, n. 1296).

2. Evaluate facts and problems, starting from the resurrection of Christ

In the light of his faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, St. Paul confronts a **series of problems** that have arisen in the Christian community of Corinth. In their order of treatment, the arguments are: the divisions among Christians who boast of belonging to some preachers of the Gospel instead of to Christ; a case of reprehensible cohabitation; recourse to pagan tribunals; abuse of the body and of freedom; marriage and ties of affection; participation in sacred banquets with meat sacrificed to idols; manner of celebrating the Eucharist in the assembly; the gifts of the Spirit given to the community; the resurrection of the dead.

The cause of these problems is not certainly to be attributed to the malice of the Christians of Corinth, but rather to be sought in the difficult understanding of what is specific in the Christian faith in the cultural context, largely widespread and shared, in which those who have received baptism live. Simplifying, we can say that in the community of Corinth we see the difficulty of the **encounter between Gospel and culture**.

Studying in depth one by one the problems tackled by the Apostle, making use of adequate cultural and theological aids, we can become aware of the **methodology** adopted by St. Paul. Moreover, through a faithful hermeneutic transposition, the Christian community, observing the Church and society today, can **retrace** in them the emerging problems, discovering that some are of a nature similar to those of the community of Corinth.

Reflecting as Paulines, that is, in syntony with our charism, the theological contents of St. Paul and his methodology in discerning and confronting problems present themselves to us as a **model** to assimilate. Exactly to merit for us the name that we carry, the deep knowledge of the **contents** of the Apostle must be a priority for all of us.

St. Paul has not lived as a simple variation of receivers the task received from the risen Christ to direct himself to the "uncircumcised", while to St. Peter were reserved the "circumcised". He has reformulated the presentation of the person and teaching of Christ, taking into account his own receivers. It is known to us how the commitment to extend to a **universal** dimension Christianity lived and thought in **Jewish-Christian** categories has required a true originality in the presentation of the faith in its own contents.

In order "to be St. Paul living today", to which the Primo Maestro stimulates us with resoluteness (cf *San Paolo*, July-August 1954), we must first of all **know** well the originality of the contents and methods of evangelization of the Apostle: his theology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, anthropology, culture, standard of ethical evaluation, etc. In this knowledge we find the roots of our identity and the bases to assimilate ourselves to him today in evangelization.

Making reference to St. Paul, Fr. Alberione has left to our Congregation two novelties to be studied deeply for a "new evangelization". First of all, the need for a **theological synthesis** on Christ, Master, Way, Truth and Life suggested to him by a context of Church, where dogma, morals and cult were separate, thus giving access to a "disconnected" presentation of Christ. Secondly, "written" preaching having equal dignity with the "oral" one. This implies that the proposal of the faith changes not only the instrument that expresses, but realizes a new "incarnation". The communication that the Primo Maestro intends to use for the Gospel is not a simple "**instrument**", but a "**new expressive modality**" that affects even the contents to be adjusted, as far as their expression is concerned, to their own languages.

Meditating and imitating St. Paul sent to the “uncircumcised”, the Paulines are sent by the Church to “communication”. This mission as the Founder has taught us, requires a **unitary project**: a theological synthesis, lived and thought through, to be proposed with all the forms and languages proper of communication. We cannot consider ourselves faithful, either to St. Paul or to blessed James Alberione if we try, even with good intentions, to live and think out the Pauline charism outside a **unitary project** that supports our experience of faith, our acquired theological convictions and ability to give witness to them through communication, surrendering to past and inconclusive nostalgia.

3. Integrality of the Pauline charism at the service of the pastoral of communication

Taking up the invitation of St. Paul: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1Cor 11:1), in the interpretation given by blessed James Alberione, to the Paulines is indicated a **sanctity** that is not a **solitary** relationship with God, but a **social** sanctity that is expressed and becomes mature by means of evangelization in communication. Pauline sanctity is realized in **communication**: listening to God in order to nourish our spiritual life and listening to our receivers in order to give witness to our experience of God using the forms and languages of communication. In this sense, **Pauline sanctity is communication**.

The Pauline is at the same time disciple, who hears Christ the Master, Way Truth and Life, and apostle who translate into communication his experience of faith.

I suggest the meditation at length of chapters 12, 13 and 14 of 1Cor and their application to the totality of the Pauline charism.

Considering with a supernatural look the Society of St. Paul as a whole and the charisms granted by God to every Pauline, we can apply to the Congregation what St. Paul says about the Christian community: “As, in fact, the body, though

being one, has many members and all the members, though being many, are just one body, so is Christ” (1Cor 12:12).

Pauline sanctity is social first of all because it is part of an apostolic mission that is not entrusted to a single person, but to the whole community; **Pauline sanctity values particular gifts inserting them in the organism of the Congregation**. Nobody is useless or insignificant in the apostolic organism of the Pauline missionary community.

Chapter 14 extends the Pauline social sanctity to the universality of the mission that is realized by walking along the “**still more excellent way**” (1Cor 13:13) of charity.

If they are not permeated with charity, no individual gift or community witness through communication are the expression of the dead and risen Christ. Many instruments of research can help us to study deeply this central reality of the Christian life in order to attribute to it the meaning it merits. In the description that he makes of charity, St. Paul formulates a definition that does not exalt the virtue in itself, but in its **communicative dimension**: the Christian is loved firstly by God and it is in the strength of this divine manifestation that he, too, establishes relationships characterized by love. Having received love, the Christian feels that he is enabled to love; loved by God in Christ, has the strength to love his neighbor: **before being one who loves, he is loved**.

Valuing the teachings of these chapters of 1Cor, the Paulines perceive themselves as endowed by God with individual gifts that are made use of for the mission in the **mystical body** of the Congregation; at the same time, permeated by the certainty of **being loved by God** and to **love one’s neighbor in communication**, the personal and communitarian gifts are placed at the service of the announcement of Christ’s death and resurrection.

To do in such a way that these certainties coming from a prayerful study of St. Paul may not remain as reflections only, we must see its immediate consequences for our mission as evangelizers in communication. Our activity is apostolic, not the **work** of mercenaries but **testimony** that springs out from

him who has experienced Christ and has become his apostle, in the spirit of the first letter of St. John (cf 1Jn 1:14). Professional ability in communication is at the service of a spiritual life immersed in charity.

Precisely because driven by the cry of St. Paul: "Woe to me if I did not announce the gospel!" (1Cor 9:16), our testimony becomes effective in the measure that it is **pastoral**, taking seriously the identity of our receivers.

The Pauline apostolate is characterized by an immutable element: its being **pastoral** (cf *Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae*, nn. 82-86; *Vademecum*, nn. 1198-1205) understood as an **act of charity** (cf *Vademecum*, nn. 374, 999, 1068, 1220, 1228, 1232, 1268).

For the sake of **charity in pastoral of communication** we must dispose in strict unity and mobilize the entire life of the Congregation. It is the duty of the General Chapter to formulate the **Pastoral Project of the Congregation** for the six-year period; the Provincial Chapters and the Regional Assemblies, applying the decisions of the General Chapter, are bound to formulate the **Pastoral Project of the Circumscription**. The Superior General with his Council prepares the **Apostolic Project of the Congregation** and the **Ratio Formationis**; the Major Superior with his Council, adapting the directives of the General Government, studies and defines the **Apostolic Project** and the **Project of Vocation Promotion and Formation**. Every Pauline community commits itself with a **Community Project** to live in its own situation the Circumscription Project, the Apostolic Project and the Project of Vocation Promotion and Formation.

The **pastoral of communication** is the thread that unites the entire planning activity of the Congregation at various levels, for the purpose of unifying individual and community effort, as realization of St. Paul's "I do everything for the Gospel" (1Cor 9:23).

With this theological vision we can better understand the genial affirmations of Primo Maestro about the function of **communication** as the "material part" of a "supernatural ef-

fect", in analogy with the mode of action of the **sacraments** and of the **sacramentals**, and as **complete unpublished preaching** equivalent to oral preaching. We can understand how the means and the surroundings that are used for apostolic activity are **pulpit, temple and church**; just as the **evangelical beatitudes** are raised up as paradigm of a new **canticle of creatures** and of a **new spirituality** for a **new evangelization**.

Dear brothers,

At the beginning of this my letter I have invited you to a "mobilization of prayerful reflection".

Now, at the end of the journey, I wish that I have succeeded in tracing some paths of Pauline life in order to strengthen our adhesion to Christ the Master, on the style of the Apostle who "made himself for us a mould, so that formed through him we can reproduce Jesus Christ", as blessed James Alberione sharply notes (*Anima e corpo per il Vangelo*, p. 63).

Rome, 25 January 2007

Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul

Fr. Silvio Sassi
Superior General

CONTENTS

Letter of the Superior general	
“Be imitators of me” : presentation	1
The first letter to the Corinthians	3
I. Introduction	3
1. The city	3
2. The communities	5
3. The letters	8
II. The letter and its principal themes	11
1. Tensions and conflicts in the community	12
2. “Let us pass to the points about which you have written me”	22
III. Blessed James Alberione and the first letter to the Corinthians	35
1. Themes for an ascetics of the Pauline spirituality	35
2. Adaptation of 1Cor to the Pauline apostolates	37
3. Interpretation of 1Cor as mirror of the life of faith of the Founder	38
IV. The Paulines and the first letter to the Corinthians	40
1. Deepening of the Pauline spirituality	40
2. Evaluate facts and problems, starting from the resurrection of Christ	42
3. Integrality of the Pauline charism at the service of the pastoral of communication	44
“Dear brothers” : conclusion	47

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