

## The Apostolate of the Example

The prevailing paganisation of social, political, work and sporting relations in our day and age is an obvious fact. Not many Catholics bear witness to their Christian faith in the environments in which they live. The apostolate is a sacred duty: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel”, Christ keeps saying. And it is urgent that we all “allow God to lead us beyond ourselves so that we may reach our truest being” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 8).

Today, as perhaps never before, the apostolate of good example, of Christian witness, is needed. Yes, the soul of every apostolate is prayer, but we have the obligation to be “fishers of men” by all possible means. And one means that is possible for everyone, absolutely for everyone – and obligatory for the duty of consistency – is precisely the apostolate of example.

### The testimony of the Bible

The great figures of history have always appreciated the value of witness and good example in human relations. Pythagoras himself said: “Set good examples: you will be exempt from writing good rules”.

But it is especially in the Bible where we find many examples of the value of witness and good example in the lives of believers. Let us recall, as an example, the account of Elder Eleazar, in the second book of Maccabees, which not only appears as an emblematic and universal example of what fidelity to one’s faith implies, but also teaches the responsibility with which those in authority before others must act.

Eleazar, “one of the most esteemed scribes, dignified in appearance and already well advanced in years”, was forced to transgress the Law, or to pretend to obey it in order to escape death; he, “preferring a glorious death to an ignominious life”, refused to yield to the proposal: “Such pretense is not worthy of our time of life,” he said, “for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, and through my pretense, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals, yet whether I live or die I will not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws.” (cf. 2Mac 6,18-31).

In the New Testament it is clear that the example must be the expression of a truly lived Christian life and, therefore, of the condition of children of God received in Baptism by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The whole of Christ’s life, his words and his works, is a revelation of the Father, to the point of being able to say: “whoever sees me sees the Father” (Jn 14:9).

In John’s Gospel we read that, at the beginning of Jesus’ mission, after the testimony of the Baptist, two disciples followed him. To the question “Rabbi, where do you dwell?”, that is, how do you live, what is your lifestyle? Jesus answers: “Come and see”. They went and “stayed with

him” (cf. Jn 1:35-40). Later, when Nathanael doubts that anything good can come from Nazareth, Philip answers him: “Come and see” (cf. Jn 1:43-51).

While John the Baptist was in prison, he sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah or if they had to wait for someone else. The answer was: “Go and tell John what you hear and see”. (cf. Mt 11:2-4).

Jesus Christ himself in the climax of his teaching referred to the power of example: “I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you”. (Jn 13:15). He is the great model that the Father has given us, and He wants all disciples to become conformed to this divine model (cf. Rom 8:29). Therefore, every Apostle is to imitate Jesus Christ who went about doing good to all (cf. Acts 10:38).

If before it was the works done by Jesus that bore witness to him, he himself announces that after his Ascension it will be the Holy Spirit who will bear witness to the Father and the Son, and that the disciples will also bear witness: “When the Paraclete comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also will bear witness to me” (Jn 15:26-27).

St Paul, for his part, admonishes: “Do all things without murmuring or disputing, that you may be blameless and undefiled, children of God, spotless in the midst of a crooked and misguided generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe” (Phil 2:14-15). And to his disciples Timothy and Titus he recommends: “Show yourself as an example to the faithful in word, in conduct, in charity, in faith, in chastity” (1 Tim 4:12; cf. Titus 2:7). And he himself invites the faithful: “Put into practice what you have learned, received, heard and seen in me” (Phil 4:9); “Make yourselves my imitators as I am Christ’s imitators” (1 Cor 11:1).

And Saint Peter admonishes: “Let your conduct among the Gentiles be good, so that, while they speak of you as evildoers, by careful observation they may glorify God by your good works on the day of his visitation” (1 Pet 2:11-12).

### **Witness and good example in the life of the Church**

All the Fathers and great saints of the Church have been witnesses and promoters of the apostolate of example. St Athanasius said: “Let us preach by example and persuade by our words”, and St Augustine affirmed: “Words teach, examples lead. Only deeds give credibility to words”. St Ignatius of Antioch, for his part, said: “One educates much by what one says, even more by what one does, but much more by what one is”. And Saint Gregory the Great: “One teaches with authority when one preaches by example; for one has no confidence in him whose actions contradict his words. The life of the pious must be useful not only to themselves, but also to others; so that what is not obtained by words, is obtained by example”.

St John Chrysostom again exhorts Christians to illuminate and shine like stars in the night of the century: “We must have a blameless life, so that men who examine us may find in us a mirror of holiness. There would be no need for words, if holiness is shone in our lives”.

“The conversations and the life of the Christian,” says St Jerome, “should be such that his every movement, his every step and his every action should reflect nothing but the grace of heaven”. And Saint Ambrose writes that Saint Paul warns Christians and orders them to remember his profession and to correspond to it, so that, in the midst of unbelievers, they may serve as models with their life, their language, their customs, and shine like the sun and the moon among the stars.

The joyful witness of St Francis of Assisi converted many sinners and awakened many vocations. According to Franciscan history, one day Saint Francis turned to one of his brothers and said to him: “Let us go and preach”. They walked the streets, without stopping anywhere. Francisco did not say a single word. When they arrived home, the friar asked timidly, “Father, have you forgotten?” “What have I forgotten?” asked Francisco. “You said we would preach,” replied the friar. To which Francis added: “We have already preached”. Indeed, Francis’ humble, modest, loving attitude was an eloquent preaching even without uttering a word. Without needing to speak, he kindled in others the desire to be like him, that is, true disciples of Christ.

St Francis de Sales used to say: “An ounce of good example is worth more than a ton of words”. And St John Bosco: “Remember that every Christian has an obligation to help others, and that there is no more effective preaching than a good example. Jesus ‘went about doing good’ (cf. Acts 10:38)”.

The Popes too have often insisted on this reality. The words of St Paul VI on 14 December 1966, in which he encouraged the faithful to “bear living witness to Christ through faith and charity”, are a good example: “The faith of the Christian must not only grow, but manifest itself; it must strive to become exemplary, communicative, documented by that expression which today we rightly call witness”. And he went on to clarify that “the truly Christian life is the first and principal witness that the Christian, renewed by the Council, must give with greater conscience and more decisive will”.

Further on he asserted: “A Christian must be seen to be such, even before he is heard, by his standard of living. This quiet and innate apostolate, the apostolate of example, is accessible to all, it is a duty for all, and it is more necessary today than ever. One must preach in silence with simplicity and with the splendour of one’s own demeanour”.

Recalling then that faith is not enough without good works to be saved, he recalled Jesus’ words: “He who works according to the truth draws near to the light” (Jn 3:21). And he concluded by affirming that this tells us that “we must today give greater consciousness and energy to the moral rectitude of our lives; a tone, a Christian stamp corresponding to our faith; this is the witness that the Church expects from us, this is the apologia of Christ, perhaps the most convincing, that the world can hear today” (cf. General Audience, 14 December 1966).

And in 1974 Paul VI affirmed again: “Contemporary man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or if he listens to teachers, he does so because they are witnesses” (Address to the Members of the *“Consilium de Laicis”* (October 2, 1974).

It is the relationship and union with Christ that should inform the life of the Christian; that lead, therefore, to imitation. The transformation in Christ, which is the fruit of the action of grace, not only respects but also gives splendour to one's personality, in which the love that is God himself shines through. We know how much the Founder of the Pauline Family insisted on this!

The imitation of Christ translates, for the Christian, into the exercise of human and supernatural virtues in ordinary life. Pope Francis affirms that "we are all called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who beyond our imperfections offers us his closeness, his Word, his strength, and gives meaning to our lives" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 121).

### **The thought of Blessed James Alberione**

James Alberione often spoke of the apostolate of good example; various prayers also convey this concern. He already speaks about it in part two (pp. 82-83) of the volume *Woman Associated with Priestly Zeal*.

And in the book *Mary Queen of Apostles*, he applies to Mary, the Queen of every apostolate, the eminence of all apostolates, among them, in third place, the apostolate of good example. The Founder writes: "Third apostolate: example. The virtues make dogmas credible to individuals, like miracles; they make the Christian life lovable; they radiate grace in the heart" (*Mary Queen of Apostles*, p. 9). And then she devotes the whole of chapter VII to explaining what it is, what the fruits are, how Mary is an apostle by example, and concludes by stating that it is an apostolate of all (cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-68).

Perhaps where we can find a more "systematic" teaching of Fr Alberione on the apostolate of good example is in a course of exercises preached to the Daughters of Saint Paul in June 1947. Let us take some ideas from it.

The Founder begins with the affirmation: "Our Mother, Teacher and Queen always precedes us in the apostolate, and ... we can collaborate and participate in her apostolate, and from her receive and with her work: from her, that is, after her example; with her, that is, with her spirit; for her, that is, with her grace and assistance; in her, that is, with her intentions. This would be enough to form a whole programme of life for a Daughter of Saint Paul" (*To the Daughters of Saint Paul, Spiritual Exercises, June 1947, p. 404*).

After explaining the meaning of the apostolate of good example, she affirmed: "Whoever lives well gives example to others and makes an apostolate. This apostolate, however, cannot be the object of a purpose; one must do good and then the example comes of itself. In fact, wanting to set oneself up as an example to others could be vanity" (*Ibid.*). And he says that it is an apostolate exercised by everyone, "because our actions always make an impression on others, either for good or ill; and there can be a life that is scandalous and one that is edifying; one that leads to spiritual destruction and another that helps to serve the Lord better. We all make an impression" (*Ibid.*). And he quotes the Gospel: "seeing your good works, let them glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16). "Alberione told the International Congress of Religious on 6 December 1950: "The example is a silent sermon that starts from life and goes on to reform life."

Fr Alberione affirmed that “we must not only receive the example, but we must give it, even if we are the smallest or the youngest in the house,” and that even in hiddenness a good example is given. He recalls the words of Jesus: “Do as I have done”. And he affirms: “Here is the great example: reading his life, meditating on the Gospel, considering his virtues, we find in him the great means of going as far as the imitation of the Father. Since Jesus pleased the Father, he who does as Jesus does will please the Father”. He recalls the Father’s satisfaction with Jesus and Mary, and affirms that “Saint Paul goes further and says: ‘Imitate me as I imitate Jesus Christ’... and he has come closer to us by the example of his life; and whoever imitates Saint Paul imitates Christ and pleases the Father... whether you imitate Saint Paul or imitate Christ, it is the same thing; the Father certainly likes you” (To the Daughters of Saint Paul, 1947, p. 205).

And, with the concreteness that always characterises him, the Founder affirms: “If one is ill and can do nothing, he should still give a good example through patience, mercy and conformity to the Lord’s will”. And he concludes: “Sometimes words provoke a reaction, but example seeps in and penetrates like oil” (cf. Ibid.).

He goes on to make some applications, inviting us first to “take” the good example. And he recalls the words of St Bernard: “From one you learn the spirit of prayer, from another humility, from this one obedience, from the other the spirit of the apostolate...”. And he invites: “Actually, you too have many good examples from your sisters: learn them! To speak only of the Daughters of St Paul who have passed into eternity, how many of them could be written in biography, because they passed through the earth, perfuming it with the fragrance of the violet, the rose, the lily! It was said of a good man: ‘After his death one cannot praise him better than to say that he left us so many good examples’ (cf. Ibid p. 406).

Finally, he also calls for ‘setting’ a good example. “In what way”? Alberione asked himself, and he answered: “We must give it as Jesus gave it, especially in two virtues: humility and meekness” (Ibid. p. 406).

On the feast of Saint Thecla, in 1948, he wrote to Maestra Thecla Merlo: “The example of faith and holy life converts sinners, stirs up the lukewarm, sanctifies the good. This: because it is powerful with God and with men. The holy life... is a sermon that starts from life and goes to life.

## **Conclusions**

The influence of example, whether good or bad, is incredible. Even more so the bad one, especially when it comes from responsible people in the Christian community: parents, teachers, leaders, priests... “On the chair of Moses sat the scribes and Pharisees. Do and observe what they tell you, but not what they do” (Mt 23:2-3). It is a sad case of people who have the task of teaching and guiding to the good... but are instead sowing discord with words, with teaching, with social networks... and above all with their own behaviour.

Christians must be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, not so much with words as with the attitude of their lives and the influence of good examples. The Christian is called to manifest by his life the life of Christ himself, to whom he is united. The action of Christ and the

Holy Spirit leads to the imitation of Christ, in which the exemplarity of the Christian is found. Not everyone can have the gift of talent, science, eloquence; but everyone has the duty of an exemplary life.

An important fact to remember: words and examples from a heart united with God through prayer: the fruit of good will be much greater, and example is more important than words. B. Martín Sánchez, in his book *El buen ejemplo*, the best preacher, relates an anecdote told by Msgr Tihámer Tóth, which is very significant in this sense: A young and zealous priest was appointed to lead a small town in the Holy Land; with fervour he prepared for his first sermon; he filled it with elevated thoughts and beautiful quotations. It seemed to him that he had delivered a magnificent sermon.

After the Holy Mass, a distinguished Arab approached him and asked him to admit him into the Church. The young priest is beside himself with joy. He cannot help but ask the man: 'Could you please tell me what part of the celebration or the sermon you enjoyed so much that it inspired you to make this decision? The visibly confused Arab replied: Well... actually... it is not that I listened much to your sermon; I travelled all night and therefore slept through most of the celebration. It is not the preaching that attracts me to the Church, but my driver. He is a Christian. In the beginning I laughed at him because of his religion, but now I want to be like him.

The Christian who lives the life of God, that is, the life of grace that has been communicated to him, bears witness, in imitation of Christ, to the image of the Father. Jesus Christ is the way that every Christian must travel in order to reach the Father and truly feel like a child of God. The incarnation of the Word makes this journey of filiation possible. Following and identifying oneself with Christ leads to the divinization of one's own life, which becomes a testimony before others.

It is clear that a good example must be distinguished from ostentation, typical of the Pharisees, which Jesus strongly condemned several times: "Take care not to practise your righteousness before men in order to be admired by them..." (cf. Mt 6:1-18). The reference of our good deeds, therefore, cannot be closed in on ourselves, but must always go to God. That is why Jesus says. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16), reflecting on the good works they observe (cf. 1 Pet 2:12).

The apostolate of example takes the form of an "invitation", a "suggestion". The Christian presents his life to others as an invitation to accompany him in following Christ. It is, therefore, something absolutely far removed from imposition. The only "compulsion" that Jesus exercised in his passage through the earth was that of love. It is God's love for man that ultimately draws man to God.

The root of the good example is consistency of life. The Christian must talk about what he practices and put into practice what he talks about; and both what he practices and what he talks about must respond to his identification with Christ. This is true exemplary conduct: the transparency and authenticity of the Christian life. This consistency of life does not imply the absence of errors or faults, when there is a struggle to constantly correct the rue.

Such a witness, consistent at all times and in all situations, is what the world needs to keep alive its hope in the possibility of an existence more consonant with the essentials of humanity.

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