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THE MARIAN SPIRITUALITY OF FR. JAMES ALBERIONE, FOUNDER OF THE PAULINE FAMILY

*Sr. Marianne Lorraine Trouve, F.S.P.**

Introduction

That authentic Marian spirituality must be apostolic was central to the Marian teaching of Blessed James Alberione, the founder of the Pauline Family. Throughout his life, he strove to develop a spirituality that was both profoundly apostolic and Marian. His favorite title for Mary, "Queen of Apostles," was, he felt, the term which best expresses Mary's important role in the Church's mission of evangelization. The *Collection of Masses for the Blessed Virgin Mary* states that many religious institutes honor Mary as Queen of Apostles, "prominent among these are . . . the Pious Society of St. Paul for the Apostolate of the Press, and other institutes owing their origin to the Servant of God, Blessed James Alberione."¹

As Pope John Paul II beatified Fr. Alberione on April 27, 2003, he said, "In the heart of that chosen priest . . . beats once again the heart of the Apostle Paul who, won over by Christ, sought to announce him as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life.'" Attentive to the signs of the times, Fr Alberione did not only open the modern "pulpits" of the media to evangelization, but conceived of his work as an organic action in the Church and at her service. This insight gave rise to ten institutes in all,²

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¹*Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, vol. 2, *The Sacramentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 86.

²These comprise the following: five religious institutes—the Society of St. Paul, the Daughters of St. Paul, the Sister Disciples of the Divine Master, the Sisters of Jesus the Good Shepherd, and the Sisters of Mary, Queen of Apostles; four secular

which, in the same spirit, continue the work he began.”³ From its humble origin in the poor city of Alba in Piedmont, Italy, the Pauline Family has spread throughout the world.

Short in stature but a giant in the work he accomplished, Fr. Alberione developed a spirituality that stands on three pillars: devotion to Jesus, the Divine Master; to Mary, Queen of Apostles; and to St. Paul the Apostle. Although he was called “the Theologian,” Alberione was primarily a man of action and left others to develop the theological bases of these devotions. His writings on Mary, which total over 1700 pages⁴ in Italian, were homilies, meditations and conferences he gave over the years. Although he never wrote a formal treatise on Mariology, his Marian thought is gleaned not only from his informal writings but also from his work and the manner in which he dedicated himself to Mary. This work includes a “writing” in stone, the magnificent Queen of Apostles Basilica in Rome. During World War II, he solemnly promised the Blessed Mother that he would build a church in her honor if all the members of his religious institutes were protected during the war. They were, and he kept his promise. This huge church, which now serves as a parish, is part of the Marian legacy Fr. Alberione left to his spiritual sons and daughters.

Early Influences

Alberione’s Marian spirituality was rooted in his childhood experiences. On April 4, 1884, he was born on a farm in Fossano, a small town in Piedmont, north Italy. Shortly after his birth, his mother brought him to the nearby shrine of Our Lady of the Flowers to dedicate him to the Blessed Virgin. As he grew, his mother often brought him to the shrine with her to pray. He “breathed in” this atmosphere of popular piety that had such a strong Marian character.

institutes—Institute of Mary of the Annunciation (for women), of St. Gabriel the Archangel (for men), of Jesus the Priest (for priests), and the Holy Family Institute (for families); and the Union of Cooperators.

³John Paul II, “Put Out into the Deep’ Like the New Blessed,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 18, 30 April 2003, 8.

⁴Renato Perino, S.S.P., *Mary Precedes Us on the Journey of Faith and Mission* (Rome: Society of St. Paul, 1987).

In an autobiographical text explaining the origins of the Pauline Family, Fr. Alberione made it clear that Marian devotion was prominent in him from the beginning of his priesthood. Recalling his days as a teacher in the seminary, he wrote (referring to himself in the third person): "He placed his ministry under the protection of Mary, Queen of Apostles, and he taught the student clerics and young priests to do the same."⁵

Another text explains how the devotion to Mary as Queen of Apostles actually began in his young institute. "On December 8, 1919, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the clerics and aspirants came to me to ask under what title we would invoke Mary and what would be our devotion, e.g., Help of Christians, Mother of Divine Grace, Mother of Good Counsel, etc. I had already given thought and prayer to this and so my answer was: 'Invoke Mary under the title Queen of Apostles; first, for the sanctification of apostles; second, that those who were helping the apostles would receive their reward; and third, that both apostles and faithful would be all together in heaven.'⁶ Alberione took that original inspiration and developed it throughout his long life.

Sources from Which Alberione Drew

In developing the devotion to Mary Queen of Apostles, Alberione drew on several sources. Among these were the writings of Blessed William Chaminade, founder of the Marianists, and St. Vincent Pallotti. Both of these saints had given their institutes an apostolic Marian spirituality.⁷ Another major influence was the teaching of Pope Leo XIII.⁸ As a seminarian, Alberione had been deeply influenced by Leo's encyclical *Tametsi Futura*, on Jesus Christ our Redeemer. From this he

⁵James Alberione, *Abundantes Divitiae Gratiae Suae* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1993), 85.

⁶"Sermons of Fr. Alberione on the Queen of Apostles," 234, cited in Perino, *Mary Precedes Us*, 14.

⁷Maria Capello, F.S.P., "Mary, Queen of Apostles in the Thought of Primo Maestro" (photocopy; Daughters of St. Paul, internal use), 2.

⁸Rosario Esposito, S.S.P., *L'enciclica Tametsi futura e la notte eucaristica del secolo* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 2000).

drew inspiration for centering all of life on Jesus Master, the Way, Truth and Life.

A major source for Alberione's Marian teaching was Pope Leo's encyclical *Adiutricem Populi*. There the pope wrote of Mary:

With wonderful care she nurtured the first Christians by her holy example, her authoritative counsel, her sweet consolation, her fruitful prayers. She was in very truth, the Mother of the Church, the Teacher and Queen of the Apostles, to whom, besides, she confided no small part of the divine mysteries which she kept in her heart.⁹

Three titles, "Mother, Teacher and Queen," became favorite terms for Alberione, forming a type of refrain in his Marian prayers.

Alberione later acknowledged his debt to the pope: "Leo XIII shows how Mary was a Teacher to the apostles and the first Christians, because she wonderfully strengthened the faithful with the holiness of example, the authority of counsel, the gentleness of comfort, and the effectiveness of her prayer."¹⁰ In addition, four terms from this encyclical would become the pillars of his Marian spirituality: Mary was the Mother of all humanity, the Queen of Apostles, the Mother of Unity, the exemplar and sustainer of universal prayer.

The first two references would be incorporated or "enshrined" in the art and architecture of Mary, Queen of Apostles. Mary as the Mother of Unity became the inspiration for Alberione's biblical initiative promoting ecumenism—"Ut Unum Sint." He developed the fourth point in an extended prayer called "The Way of Humanity," which was a meditative prayer/reflection on salvation history.

In the early 1920s, Alberione established his first two institutes, the Society of St. Paul (priests and brothers) and the Daughters of St. Paul (women religious). Many young people

⁹*The Papal Encyclicals 1878-1903*, ed. Claudia Carlen, I.H.M. (5 vols.; Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath Publ. Co., 1981), 2:376.

¹⁰James Alberione, *Carissimi in S. Paolo. Lettere, articoli, opuscoli, scritti inediti (1933-1969)* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1971), 1333.

had already joined the fledgling congregations, and Alberione wished to form them in the way of an apostolic Marian devotion. He drew upon the heritage he had received from Chaminade, Pallotti and Pope Leo in three basic ways:

—First, he wished to impart a biblical underpinning to this devotion to Mary, Queen of Apostles; here he drew from the Gospels of Luke and John, and he saw the image of Mary in the Cenacle as a key icon:

The first devotion that we find in the Church is the devotion to the Queen of Apostles, as portrayed in the Cenacle. It lessened a bit and became obscure with the passing of centuries. You have the sweet mission of gathering the faithful around Mary, Queen of the Apostles. You are to reawaken this devotion. . . . Let us return to the sources. At the sources we find Mary, Queen of the Apostles, and if it was so at the beginning of the Church, there is nothing more certain than to draw from the ancient Faith. The water is purer when it is taken from its source.¹¹

—Second, Alberione wrote new prayers to Mary that expressed this apostolic spirituality. The prayer formulas popularly in use at the time were largely drawn from St. Alphonsus. He found that the content and style of these prayers, with their florid language, did not suit his purpose.

—Third, through preaching, retreats, articles, academic courses and systematic meditations on Mary, Alberione catechized his young followers, inculcating in them a profoundly apostolic spirit. He not only informed but also inspired them with his charismatic way of challenging and appealing to the young. In 1928, he published a book entitled *Mary, Queen of the Apostles*. Although it was printed under the name of Fr. (now Blessed) Timothy Giaccardo, the material was based on Alberione's preaching, which Giaccardo wrote down and edited for publication.

¹¹James Alberione, *Haec Meditare*, vol. 8, 1947-48 (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1949), 80.

Significant Aspects of Alberione's Marian Spirituality

Alberione's Marian spirituality is found more in his life and work than in his formal writings. He gave this summary of his spirituality: "The Pauline Family strives to live fully the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Way, Truth and Life, in the spirit of St. Paul, under the gaze of the Queen of Apostles."¹² The phrase "under the gaze" of Mary indicates his distinctive approach. He saw everything happening under Mary's gaze and direction. The works of the apostolate and the development of his religious institutes were all done under Mary's "direction." Alberione saw Mary as a mother who cares about everything that concerns her children. For him, Marian devotion was not so much a matter of particular practices or special types of devotion. Although he was greatly devoted to the rosary and wrote a number of Marian prayers, his Marian spirituality was more a matter of living in a Marian "climate." It was not a matter of some devotions or prayers, but of a profoundly Marian orientation of life; it was a matter of *devotion*, rather than devotions.

Living in Mary's Presence

This characteristic, however, made Alberione's Marian spirituality a bit difficult to pin down. The key thought quoted above suggests it is a matter of living in Mary's maternal presence. Living under Mary's gaze—this is the essence of his Marian spirituality. Living under someone's gaze means living in that person's presence. For Alberione, Mary is present in the life of each Christian through every stage, from birth to death. Because presence implies relationship, living in someone's presence means being in a relationship with that person. Mary's presence is an active force.

Marian devotion makes her present in our lives, set within the context of what Alberione called the "pact" with the Lord. The pact or covenant was first at the beginning of the institute, when scanty resources had to meet great demands. The pact was rooted in a spirit of faith that God will supply all our

¹²Alberione, *Abundantes*, 93.

needs—material as well as spiritual. In extending this pact to Mary, Alberione wrote:

Today something must be done between us and Our Lady, a kind of pact must exist between her and us. I looked for something in this regard that would express well what I would like to tell you, and it seems to me that this is the most fitting: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm" (Song 8:6). It is a seal of love, a strong seal, because love is strong as death. It would be good for us to reflect on this thought, which tells us what our devotion to Mary most holy should be.

To set Mary as a seal upon our heart and upon our arm means to set devotion to Our Lady as a seal upon our whole life, that is, to live in such a way that she is always before us, presiding over our studies, our spiritual work, our apostolate: *that she be always present in our entire life.*¹³

Christocentric Focus

The Christocentric focus was central for Alberione. Marian spirituality had one purpose: to bring people to Jesus. Although most of his life's work took place before Vatican II, in certain ways Alberione anticipated the themes of the Council: *Lumen Gentium's* emphasis on the Christocentric nature of Marian devotion was consonant with his teaching:

Mary was created for the apostolate to give Jesus Christ to the world: He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life; He who is Teacher, Priest, Victim, God! "God willed us to have everything through Mary." Jesus is the Apostle: "We have our high priest and apostle, Jesus Christ" (Heb 3:1). Mary is the apostle with Christ, in dependence on Christ, sharing in the apostolate with Christ.¹⁴

Because his fundamental orientation was to Jesus the Divine Master, the Way, Truth and Life, Jesus was the center of everything. The Christian life begins at baptism and grows "until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). This was Alberione's fundamental project of life. He viewed it almost as a new incarnation of Jesus.

¹³"Sermons of Fr. Alberione on the Queen of Apostles," 133, emphasis added.

¹⁴James Alberione, *Ut Perfectus Sit Homo Dei* (Rome: Societ  San Paolo, 1998), 267.

Here precisely is Mary's role. The main goal of our life is that Christ be formed in us to the point where we can say "It is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me" (Gal 2:20): here Mary plays a key role. Just as she formed Jesus in her womb, bringing the Word Incarnate into the world, so she forms Jesus in us. Alberione wrote:

As Mary carried Jesus in her womb from the moment of the angel's words, so she bore the Church in her heart from the moment she heard her Son's words: "Woman, behold your son." She carried the child Jesus in her arms; she carried the newborn Church in her arms.¹⁵

Alberione compares this to a new incarnation of Christ: through Mary, we are transformed into Jesus. This transformation occurs in our mind, will and heart. Alberione saw Jesus—Way, Truth and Life—in relation to the three faculties of the human person—mind, will, and heart. He abbreviated this relationship into devotion to "Jesus, the Divine Master." But here "master" does not signify a lord, overseer or a taskmaster, but primarily a teacher. Jesus is a master who has the heart of a shepherd. Similarly, he constantly referred to Mary as our "Mother, Teacher and Queen." As Mother, Mary forms the life of Jesus in us; as Teacher, she, the first disciple of Jesus, instructs us how to be disciples also; and as Queen, she leads us on the way to her son.

Mary as Mother

Alberione developed the Catholic teaching on Mary as the Mother of God and our spiritual mother. In his homilies and meditations, he often referred to her as Mary-Life.

She shared not only in the grace acquired by her Son Jesus, as happens with us, but with Jesus and dependent on him, she competed to produce it in her life, and especially during the Passion of her Son by sharing in his sorrows.

¹⁵James Alberione, "Spiritual Exercises, 1960" (Daughters of St. Paul, internal use), 514.

Mary obtained grace for us especially in three moments:

At Nazareth she conceived us. . . . She generated us on Calvary. . . . She generates us one by one at the baptismal font.¹⁶

These statements reflected the traditional Marian teaching in the early twentieth century. In consenting to become the mother of Christ, she consented to become mother of all his members. On Calvary, Mary offered her own sufferings in union with those of Jesus, and received the mandate from him to become spiritual mother of us all in the person of John.

Perhaps his most original contribution was the relation of Mary as Mother to the specific work of his apostolic institutes. Evangelization with the means of social communication was his primary concern. This involved all forms of media, with a special emphasis on the printed word. He was fond of saying that Mary “brought forth” the Savior—in Latin, *edidit*. Mary then was the “editor” who brought forth the life of Christ in us. Alberione chose the word *editions* to describe the work he was doing—the apostolate of the editions. He wrote:

The first edition: from all eternity the heavenly Father is the “Editor” of the Son. . . . The divine Son is the “Editor” of the Gospel. . . . The Holy Spirit is the Author and “Editor” of Sacred Scripture. The second edition: Mary “edits” the Word become man. Mary is also the Mother, Teacher and Queen of Editors and of the editions.

With this in mind, he wrote this prayer:

O Mary, you who brought forth the Divine Incarnate Word, you who are the Queen of Editors and of the editions, you who are the life of every apostle, look mercifully upon me and bless this work which I perform with you and in you.¹⁷

Mary as Teacher

“Our devotion toward Jesus, the Divine Master, will be perfected if it is prepared for and preceded by devotion to Mary,

¹⁶Alberione, *Ut Perfectus*, 506.

¹⁷Eliseo Sgarbossa, S.S.P., *The Marian Prayers of Father Alberione: History and Commentary* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1988), 78.

Teacher.”¹⁸ Alberione often spoke of Mary as a teacher, especially in the sense that she is a model of virtue. “When we say that Mary is Teacher, we almost always intend to say: ‘Mary, teacher of virtue.’”¹⁹ But there was also another dimension: Mary was the teacher of Jesus and then of all Christians. Mary was the teacher and also the first disciple of Jesus:

Jesus is our Teacher inasmuch as he is Way, Truth and Life; and Mary is therefore our teacher because she has sanctity, wisdom, grace and life. Jesus is our one and only Teacher. Mary is our teacher in association with, in dependence on and in relation to Jesus Christ.²⁰

Because she was a disciple, she became a teacher. Mary was the teacher because of her profound knowledge of God, her holiness, and her close association with Jesus.

In Mary there were the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge. . . . Mary lived out all these mysteries: in the Annunciation there is the knowledge and the operation in her of the Blessed Trinity; in her is fulfilled the Incarnation, the divine nature coming together with the human nature, given by Mary, in the unity of the one person.²¹

Mary participated in the mysteries, and her prayerful reflection allowed her to draw out the vital meaning of the mysteries. In bringing Jesus into the world, Mary in a sense was a teacher because she made possible Jesus’ divine mission of teaching and preaching. In one of his prayers to Mary, Alberione declared: “You gave the world the book to read, the Eternal Word.”

Mary as Queen

Alberione referred most frequently to Mary as “Queen”:

The Blessed Mother can be addressed with various titles . . . but from you she expects the title Queen of Apostles, and she expects devotion in conformity with this title.²²

¹⁸Alberione, *Carissimi*, 1331.

¹⁹James Alberione, quoted in “Regina Apostolorum,” internal bulletin of the Daughters of St. Paul, December, 1959.

²⁰Alberione, *Ut Perfectus*, 504.

²¹Alberione, *Ut Perfectus*, 508.

²²James Alberione, *Predicche del Primo Maestro* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1954), 50.

He often referred to the way Mary “reigns” in heaven, that is, to her maternal mediation on behalf of the Church, and specifically for those in the Church called to a more direct apostolic and evangelizing mission:

We honor Mary under the title of Mother and Teacher, but above all, under the title of Queen. To her we entrust all vocations and all the apostolate, so that she may be the inspirer, protecting all the souls who consecrate themselves to her. We are to offer all that is in us to Mary so that all will be offered to Jesus.²³

Reason for Marian Devotion

For Alberione, devotion to Mary has two primary purposes: growth in holiness and the apostolic mission: “Devotion to Mary, which is a part of the Pauline spirit, has two ends for us: our religious sanctification and the pastoral apostolate, that is, reaching souls.”²⁴ These two goals were related, because holiness bears fruit in apostolic zeal. The more completely we are configured to Christ, the more we will give ourselves wholeheartedly to mission.

Jesus Christ is the Master; he is the Apostle of the Father. We are to know him always better. . . . Who will reach the point of identifying himself with Christ? The way to reach this union is Mary. One who is more devoted to Mary will unite himself more intimately to Jesus Christ.²⁵

Mary and Evangelization

Alberione’s Marian spirituality is profoundly apostolic. Mary is an apostle because she gave Jesus to the world. As his mother, she had a unique vocation and gave Jesus to us in a way that no one else ever could. But on the spiritual level, every baptized Christian is also called to bring Jesus to the

²³James Alberione, *Meditation to the Sisters* (photocopy; Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1951).

²⁴James Alberione, *Meditation to the Sisters* (photocopy; Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1936).

²⁵Alberione, *Haec Meditare*, 8:131.

world today. So Mary is our model for evangelization. As Alberione put it: "By nature Mary is essentially an apostle. She came to give Jesus, to bring life to souls, to be mediatrix and distributrix of grace. To deprive her of this aureole would be to remove her reason to be—it would destroy her. Jesus is the Apostle for this reason: 'I have come so that they may have life' (Jn 10:10). Mary came to bring us the Life—Christ. She is an apostle in the prophecies, in life and in heaven."²⁶

Ever involved with communicating the Gospel, he liked to say that Mary "published" Jesus. He also wrote: "Publishers possess the word. They multiply it and distribute it clothed in paper, type and ink. On the human level, they have the mission that Mary had on the divine level. She was the Mother of the Divine Word. She contained the invisible God and made him visible and accessible to us by presenting him in human flesh."²⁷ In the Church Mary still takes on this maternal role in regard to those God calls in every age to continue the apostolic mission. Alberione developed Mary's role as apostle in four points:

- 1) Mary has accomplished and accomplishes everything that all the apostles accomplish together. Every apostolate is radiating of Jesus Christ; it is to give something, if we can use the expression, of Jesus Christ. . . . Mary gave us the whole Christ, Way, Truth and Life.
- 2) Mary has the role of training apostles in every age, giving them support and crowning them with success.
- 3) Mary is Queen of the Apostles because it is through her that we must work for the evangelization of the world.
- 4) Mary is Queen of the Apostles because, apart from her care for all, she carried out particular apostolates and continues to do so.²⁸

Alberione recognized six examples of Mary's participation in the apostolate; these are her interior life, good example, suffering, the word, action, and above all else, prayer.

²⁶James Alberione, *Maria Regina degli Apostoli* (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1948).

²⁷Alberione, *Carissimi*, 599.

²⁸Alberione, *Ut Perfectus*, 514-516.

Marian Prayer and Iconography

Alberione's Marian devotion was expressed in a special way through prayer and iconography. Within his institutes he established a special observance for the feast of Mary, Queen of Apostles, with the Mass texts that had been approved for the Pallotines. He wrote about thirty specifically Marian prayers, which were included in the Pauline Prayerbook. Of these, the Chaplet to the Queen of Apostles is the one that best expresses and synthesizes Alberione's Marian devotion.

Along with the prayers, Alberione used iconography to depict Mary as Queen of Apostles in a way that would show her relationship to the Church's mission. To this end he commissioned a special painting and a statue, and, finally, built the magnificent basilica in Rome dedicated to Mary, Queen of Apostles. A key feature of the picture is that Mary is shown holding Jesus out to the world, presenting him to everyone. This posture represents her essential role, to give Jesus to the world. Every apostle does the same thing in different ways. In this era when the Church is calling us to engage in a "new evangelization," the Marian spirituality of Blessed James Alberione has the potential to ignite the spark that will enflame the world with the Gospel.