

Don Alberione's "Donec Formetur": a new formula for holiness

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We may be too shy to admit it but, at the back of our minds and deep in our hearts, we all long for that same goal that motivated the lives of Blessed Giacomo Alberione and Blessed Timoteo Giaccardo. That goal is holiness. Indeed, if we are not desirous to achieve holiness, we would rather be somewhere else doing something else than reading reflections like this.

Perhaps it is about time that we openly admitted that like our Founder Blessed Giacomo and Blessed Timoteo, we, too, want to become saints no matter whether this has become old-fashioned or not.

Actually, becoming a saint has gone out of our daily concerns not because we do not want to but mostly because the word 'saint' and the phrase 'becoming a saint' have been among the most misunderstood and, perhaps, most prejudiced expressions today. In fact, when one openly claims he wants to be saint, he is taken, on the mildest, a weirdo and on the wildest, out of his mind.

The truth is that, I think, we seem to have lost track of the real meaning of sanctity that is why we also are confused as regards becoming a saint. A saint has been mistaken for one who is outside the ordinary kind of mankind, or else one who belongs to the past, or one who has done so great deeds that we, ordinary mortals, would simply be outside the list even of the possible saints, something which, you know, is not true. Holiness is the vocation of all and it comes with our baptismal consecration, strengthened by Confirmation and, to many of us, made a life-project through our religious consecration.

If there is one effect the recent beatification of Don Giacomo Alberione, our Founder, has brought about, I believe, it is to remind us that that holiness is precisely for ordinary mortals. Many of the older members of the Pauline Family have seen, met and spoken to Don Alberione when he was still alive. He was real but now he is but one step to being included among the list of saints. We could very well say with St. Augustine, "If he made it, then why can't I?"

More important yet is this: Don Alberione's beatification, the recognition of his holiness, also validates the spirituality he lived to reach there, a spirituality that has become the heritage of the Pauline Family. We can directly say that if Don Alberione is in heaven now, then, the path he followed and has left behind as inheritance of every Pauline must be a good one. I can comfortably tell myself that if I lived my life following the spirituality with which Don Alberione lived his life, then, I can strongly hope that when I die, I might not be proclaimed a saint but at least I can hope to be welcomed into the Father's embrace in heaven and share in the inheritance of eternal life Christ has won for us and the Father has set for us and the Holy Spirit has made ours through his indwelling.

So, what is this inheritance left to us by Blessed Alberione?

The inheritance is captured in essence precisely in these words of St. Paul to the Galatians (4:19): "My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ *be formed in you*" (*Donec formetur Christus in vobis*).

These words of St. Paul point to what holiness is all about: it is making our lives take the form of Jesus Christ or letting Jesus Christ form us into him. It is transforming

our mind to that of Christ-Truth, our will to that of Christ-Way, our heart to that of Christ-Life, so that in the end, we could say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I that lives; it is Christ who lives in me.”

If there is something we can honestly be proud of as a Pauline Family, I believe it is first and foremost because we have received as an inheritance a new understanding of what a saint is and a refreshing manner to become one, following the footsteps of Don Alberione who, himself, drew inspiration from St. Paul.

In this paper, we wish to reflect precisely on this theme while tracing our steps back to the tradition that, although has produced great saints, seem to have lost its appeal through the years and assumed new features that make an old reality – becoming saints – a new feature: conformation in Christ.

Saints through the years

In the early stages of the Church’s history, only the martyrs were considered saints. The first list of saints – the canon -- was a list of martyrs especially during the times of persecution of the first Christians by the Roman Emperors. Holiness found its greatest expression in those who were willing to give up their lives rather than give up their faith in Jesus. And many actually embraced death rather than deny their faith. To lead this list were certainly the Apostles, including St. Paul, then the first Popes and then the martyrs.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, when the great persecutions ceased and Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe, saints included great men, the “Confessors”, who spent their lives defending the faith from heretics and taught the faith to non-believers and whose lives were known to be example of genuine Christianity. Many of them were known for their holiness and were acclaimed saints by the people for, by then the Church did not have a system for determining who was a saint or who was not. We might say that saints were considered so by popular acclaim.

The first authority to allow the veneration was the bishops. After due investigation on a person’s holiness, people were allowed to venerate these deceased members and pray for their intercession. In turn, bishops would communicate to other bishops the information.

Basically, saints were those persons who lived their lives in the heroic practice of virtues, especially of faith, hope and love. Church authorities recognize the heroicity of their lives and recommend them for the people as an example to follow and as a friend and intercessor before God in heaven.

Obviously, such a definition of who the saints are creates a certain distance between the “ordinary faithful” and the “holy ones,” something that made sanctity less accessible to “ordinary faithful.”

Perhaps, this is one reason why becoming a saint has become less attractive because all of us consider ourselves belonging to the “ordinary faithful” and not with the “holy ones.”

Becoming a saint, however, remained to be the main attraction that Don Alberione offered to the first Paulines. In 1918, he already told his first followers: “Only two things irritate me: that I am not good enough and that you are not holy enough.” Amazingly, too, one of the prayers he urged his children to pray was, “Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, make us saints!”

Oddly, today even this prayer seems to have been relegated. I suppose not really because we no longer want to become saints but because we find it difficult to understand sanctity in terms that are not intimidating but are real and livable. Perhaps, we can have a closer look on the issue.

Becoming a saint from Don Alberione's time to today

Becoming a saint seems to be one of those religious pursuits that have been very much conditioned by how people thought and also by the socio-economic conditions of the times. History has always produced saints on the manner saints were thought of and defined at the moment. At first there were the "martyrs" and then "the confessors" and then the "virgins" and so forth...

During Don Alberione's time, the simplest understanding of holiness prevailed. Considered saints were those who performed good deeds and avoided sin. This could easily be understood.

Don Alberione lived at a time when authorities were struggling against what they considered real threats to the Church and the "souls" of the faithful. This was a time when civil governments were finding their own way separate from the Church, this was a time when new ideologies and movements were rising and having very strong influence on people: liberalism, socialism, communism, modernism, Freemasonry as well as many other isms that made the Church feel threatened. Earlier, the Church had already lost its civil power during the war of the unification of Italy. The Pope ceased to be also king of the Papal States. At the same time, socio-economic conditions in Europe were terrible due to various blights that affected potatoes, the staple food of many in Europe, and the pests that killed many grape vines especially in Italy. Then, there also was the passage from an agricultural economy to the industrial one that displaced so many people and disrupted the more sedate and secure life in farms. Furthermore, the air of war was blowing across Europe itself. In fact, in no time World War I would break.

In reaction to all these, the Church had assumed a defensive stance and tried to rally the faithful around the leadership of the Pope, the bishops and the clergy. This was a time when Church authorities made their power felt with threats of excommunication and condemnation.

At the same time, this was a time when, in Italy, so many founders and congregations emerged, all with the ideal of holiness and with the goal of alleviating the lives of a people so impoverished.

Thus holiness was easily perceived, as "Dedicating one's life to doing good and avoiding evil."

This concept of holiness fitted well with the spirit of the times. The rallying of the faithful had brought about the preponderance of the law. Doing good was equivalent to obeying not just the ten commandments but also those of the Church, from the obligations to receive communion and go to confession at least once a year to the detailed obedience to rites as well as performing those charitable deeds that had to mark a good Christian's life. Consequently, the issue of sin and evil was defined by the law, and the law was in the hands of the clergy. This was a time when moral theology was based more on Canon Law than on the Gospel.

Likewise in living spiritual life, devotions had preponderance. The faithful were encouraged to receive the sacraments, practice devotions to Jesus especially under the title of the Sacred Heart, to the Blessed Virgin and the saints. It seems, however, that the motivation was more to seek help in one's effort to do good and avoid evil. An overview of the prayers of devotion would easily reveal that the dominant feature of prayer and devotion was petition, to ask for help in one's effort to be and do good and in one's effort to avoid sin.

This was the dominant thinking of Don Alberione's time. In many of Don Alberione's writings, foremost of which is *Donec Formetur Christus in vobis*, as well in his meditations, Don Alberione spoke in these terms. He could not have done otherwise for it would have been easy for him to be misunderstood by his own people and branded a modernist and sidelined by the Church. How Don Alberione actually lived his spiritual life, as we shall see later, was something else...

This idea of holiness as marking one's life with good deeds and avoiding evil would pervade until the eve of Vatican Council II in the sixty's.

Vatican Council II would introduce a rather radical thought as regards holiness most especially in the document *Lumen Gentium* (no. 9): "At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness..." "Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification'. However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called 'evangelical'" (no. 40).

There are two points here that are worth underlining. The first is the universal call to holiness: every human person is called and destined to holiness, not just the clergy and the religious but all the baptized; not just Christians but all human beings... The second point is the proposal of "perfection of charity" as the goal towards which those who would want to pursue holiness have to tend.

Confronted with what followed in the history of the Church, we can immediately notice a remarkable reaction especially to those who "practice the evangelical counsels:" they rushed towards the direction of the "preferential option of the poor." Trends of this kind bloomed after the Vatican Council II and led many to a life in pursuit of perfection in charity by getting involved in social action and espousing the lot of the poor. Among these trends we can mention, "evangelical radicalism," "the theology of liberation", involvement with politics and positive action as regards social problems. In effect, a number of people dedicated themselves to the poor, especially in missions in the depressed areas in the world with some dying as martyrs of charity.

The post Vatican Council II has produced great men and women like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John XIII, and many others who have died in obscurity while literally giving their lives in love for God and neighbor.

A setback of this, however, happened with the awareness that no matter what the religious did for the poor, the poor remained. Religious demonstrated against multinationals, against the rich, against the exploiters of the poor; they demanded social justice to the point of hoarseness. In some instances, like in the Philippines, they succeeded to drive away a president known for his dictatorial ways. "People power" was very much a socio-political-religious movement that was very strong immediately after Vatican Council II. Perfection in charity was holiness and perfection lay in giving one's life for God and for the people.

Strangely, though, when the desired effect of the strong movement in the Church--especially among religious--in favor of the poor did not produce the desired effects, there came in some kind of disillusionment: the poor became even poorer, social injustice became even stronger and new threats to society, including new sicknesses like

AIDS and SARS arose. Many began to ask, “What has gone wrong? Where did we fail?”

There followed and still continues a re-thinking especially in the ranks of the religious, the “professionals” of holiness. Taking the cue from the Pope, the religious, seeking for answers to their own questions, studied more deeply their origins and the original charisms of their founders. They eventually realized that, in effect, there ought to be unity between prayer and action, with the preeminence of spiritual life and the pursuit of holiness.

Marking this period, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life issued, on 19 May 2002, an enlightened document, “*Starting afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium.*” Amazingly, this document proposes a more relevant and livable definition of holiness.

The document states (no. 9): “*In imitation to Jesus, those whom God calls to follow him are consecrated and invited to continue his mission in the world. Indeed, consecrated life itself, guided by the action of the Holy Spirit, becomes a mission. The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed in Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in history for the salvation of all.*”

Worth pointing out here are two elements: 1) holiness is presented now as being “conformed in Christ”; 2) the mission of the religious is “to make Christ present and active in history for the salvation of all.”

For us Paulines, this is a very liberating statement. For one thing, it actually synthesizes our ideal, our concept of holiness, something we can duly celebrate during this special *Alberione Year* for sanctification.

The path to holiness: the book *Donec Formetur Christus in vobis*

Time and again, we were told that the path to holiness is the path of being conformed to Jesus Master, Way, Truth and Life. Don Alberione, in an effort to offer an aid to his children in this, underwent month-long spiritual exercises and, with his notes, presented a variation to St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. What came out of these notes is the 110-page booklet, *Donec Formetur Christus in vobis*, first published by Don Alberione in 1932.

Its most recent edition, at first in Italian and then in Spanish and in English, was published by the “Centro di Spiritualità Paolina” in 2001, is equipped with a lengthy introduction by Fr. Antonio da Silva which provides a very rich background of the book and explains its setup.

Among other things, the Introduction states (no. 4): “*Donec formetur Christus in vobis traces the frame of reference of the Pauline life by presenting, by way of maxims, the features of the Pauline spirit that must be read under the light of the charismatic history, so that it may then be received in reflection and in prayer, and embraced in a style of life that is at the same time a fertile ground and an active witnessing of a special mission.*”

The same introduction, however, warns: “... *it is not a book written for a discursive reading wherein a systematic exposition of the themes is developed. One has not to take it even as a collection of outlines or disconnected summary notes put together for occasional purposes. Instead, Donec formetur is a document, well structured as a whole and in their individual parts, prepared in a modest format with the well-aimed and lasting intentions.*”

Although the book indeed is a “frame of reference of the Pauline life,” for one whose background of philosophy, theology and knowledge of the Italian Pauline experi-

ence is limited or perhaps nil, reading and studying *Donec Formetur* become a real challenge that only a few could comfortably face.

Is there an easier way of finding out what is the path of holiness in the Pauline Spirituality? Can we put this path in more understandable and livable terms? To answer these questions comes less daunting as we are led back to the experience of St. Paul and Don Alberione much more than to their writings. In effect, there exists a parallel in the spiritual life of St. Paul as well as of Don Alberione which has repercussions in every Pauline's spiritual life. Let us have a closer look.

The experience of St. Paul and of Don Alberione

With a bit of effort, we could see a parallel in the spiritual experience of St. Paul and Don Alberione. We know that Don Alberione drew from St. Paul the framework of his spiritual life and we know that Don Alberione wants Paulines to look on St. Paul as their "father, teacher, exemplar and founder" (*DF*, 3).

Card. José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints, during his homily at the thanksgiving mass at the Basilica of St. Paul the day after Don Alberione's beatification on 27 April 2003, said: "*Undoubtedly, Don Alberione has taken to himself the fullness of St. Paul's apostolic straining forward. If it is true that the heart of Paul was the heart of Christ, we can affirm that the heart of Don Alberione was the heart of Paul!*"

A closer look on the lives of St. Paul and of Don Alberione reveals more than just a similarity but a marvelous manner with which Jesus deals with his choice souls. In the lives of these two great models, we see, in fact, a pattern or a style with which Jesus relates with his chosen ones and leads them to conformation to him.

Contrary to the usual understanding of holiness, in the experience of St. Paul and of Don Alberione, the starting point of the journey is not the person called. And the question is not that of the young man who asked Jesus in the Gospel (Mt 19:16), "Master, what good must I do to gain eternal life?"

The right question should be, "What good has God done in order to make me want to follow him and live a life that is according to his commandments and his will?"

In both St. Paul and Don Alberione we see this pattern with which Jesus Master related with them and brought them to holiness. The pattern follows four different stages: 1). Stage of preparation; 2) An intense spiritual experience; 3) Perception of a mission to carry out; 4) Establishment of a personal relationship based on submission to the Father's will; 5) Christification.

1. Stage of preparation. We know for a fact that in the life of St. Paul, the hand God was at work even before he actually became an apostle. In his own words, St. Paul writes to the Galatians about his early experience (Gal 1:13-17): "*For you heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions. But when [God], who from my mother's womb has set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; rather, I went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus...*"

Thus St. Paul recognizes two things: 1) God's setting him apart and calling him through His grace and 2) that he had been a zealot for Judaism before his conversion.

He admits, though, that God had a special predilection for him to confer on him “his grace.”

In the case of Don Alberione, referring to himself in the third person, he writes in *Abundantes Divitiae Gratiae Sua (AD)*, these very first lines:

“Were he to comply with your request and tell you something of what he still remembers and that you consider useful for the Pauline Family he would have to recount a twofold story: [first] the story of God’s Mercy so as to sing a marvelous ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus.’

“And then, the humiliating story of his lack of conformity to the overabundance of divine love and [his need] to compose a new and sorrowful ‘Miserere’ ‘pro innumerabilibus negligentis, peccatis et offensibus.’

“Every day he meditates on the various facets of this second story, contemplated piece by piece, and sheds tears in his colloquies with Jesus, hoping for complete forgiveness through the intercession of Mary and of St. Paul.”

In this confession, Don Alberione admits that, like St. Paul, he was a continuous object of God’s predilection from his youth onwards that he received an overabundance of God’s graces. Likewise, he, being a sinner, admits that he does not deserve at all such an overabundance of graces.

In both St. Paul and in Don Alberione, we see a recognition of God’s hand even from the early stages of their lives. While St. Paul admits to being well-intentioned in his early years, he too admits that he was a persecutor of Christ’s followers. Don Alberione, meanwhile credits to divine generosity whatever was worth telling those who asked him to write something about his experiences as founder.

Subsequently, Don Alberione would write about “times of greater grace” (AD, 7):

“He had times of greater grace that determined his vocation and particular mission

“The first [was] his vocation to the priesthood; the second, the special direction his life was taking; the third, the move from the idea of an organization of Catholics to that of an organization of religious. Deo Gratias et Mariae!”

2) An intense spiritual experience. For St. Paul, this intense spiritual experience is narrated by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:1-9):

“Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell on the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ He said, ‘Who are you, sir.’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will told what to do...”

St. Paul realized that there was identification between Jesus’ followers he was persecuting and Jesus himself. This was an initial insight of his understanding of Jesus as someone present in this life and was capable of establishing a relationship and had plans for his people, including himself.

In the case of Don Alberione, we read these lines from *AD 13-15*:

“The night that divided the last century from the present one was crucial for the specific mission and particular spirit in which his future Apostolate would come to live and be lived out...”

“Particular enlightenment came from the Host and a greater understanding of that invitation of Jesus, ‘venite ad me omnes’; he seemed to fathom the heart of the great Pope, the Church’s call [for help], and the Priest’s true mission... He felt deeply

obliged to prepare himself to do something for the Lord and for the women and men of the new century with whom he would spend his life... ”

Here we notice that Don Alberione saw in the many experiences he had as a young man, the presence of Jesus who was inviting him for something great and special to him that would determine his future life. This intense personal experience of Don Alberione finds parallel in the experience of St. Paul: this would mark Alberione’s life onwards as the encounter of Paul with Jesus marked this apostle’s life.

In both instances, however, we can notice that if St. Paul did not know exactly what Jesus had in store for him, so did Don Alberione. Both knew that they were recipients of a special mission but they did not know the details of this special mission. If St. Paul went to Ananias, Don Alberione consulted Canon Chiesa and many others, too.

3. Perception of a mission to carry out. St. Paul knew quite clearly that this Jesus he met at the road to Damascus had a special mission for him. He, however, did not know what this was and Jesus was not quite specific about it, either.

Jesus told him: *“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.”*

Subsequently, Paul would meet Ananias who had this revelation: *“Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites, and I will show him what he will have to suffer in my name.”*

Though St. Paul would be told of what the Lord planned of him, he surely did not know exactly the details of this plan that he had to retire to the desert for three years to have things more clearly.

On the part of Don Alberione, we read this self-revelation (AD 20): *“His mind and his heart became so fixed in the Eucharist, the Gospel, the Pope, the new century, the new means, on Count Paganuzzi’s thinking regarding the Church, and the need for anew band of apostles, that from then on these things always dominated his thoughts, his prayer, his spiritual work and his yearnings. He felt an obligation to serve the Church, the women and men of the new age, and to work with others in an organized way.”*

It is obvious from here that Don Alberione experienced that he had a particular mission to carry out, a mission that was definitely much bigger than himself and, at the same time, of so much consequence to life as it was something he felt he received from Christ. Such a mission, very much like that of St. Paul, remained to be yet vague. The young Alberione did not know the specifics of that mission as much as St. Paul did not know exactly what was at store for him.

This perception of a mission that remained to be vague, in both St. Paul and in Don Alberione, became the basis of something very fascinating: it became the basis of relationship between St. Paul and the Jesus he met on the road to Damascus. Likewise, Don Alberione’s perception of the “obligation to serve the church, the men and women of the new age, and to work with others in an organized way” became the basis of his relationship with the Eucharistic Jesus.

We might even dare say that Jesus played a trick on both St. Paul and Don Alberione: Jesus did not reveal the details of their mission so that both Paul and Alberione would remain attentive to him through the years that would follow. St. Paul would discern the paths through which his Master would lead him during his journeys and Alberione would spend hours before the Eucharist in order to find out what moves the Master wanted him to take in his mission of founding the Pauline Family and starting the apostolate of the media.

In effect, one mark of Don Alberione's piety and Eucharistic devotion is this attentive listening as to what the Master would want of him even to the least details of his as well as the Pauline Family's life and mission.

4) Establishment of a personal relationship based on submission to the Father's will. Certainly, the intense spiritual experience St. Paul had in his encounter with Jesus led him to this special personal relationship with Christ. Eventually, he would confide to the Galatians (Gal 1:11-12):

"Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

It would seem that this revelation took place during the three years that he spent in the desert after his conversion. Eventually, St. Paul would read in the events of his life what directions the Lord might be giving him as he went on carrying out the mission that he believed was his.

He would write to the Ephesians (Eph 1:8-9): *"In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth."*

In the same manner, the intense spiritual experience of Don Alberione led him to remain attentive to Jesus' presence in the "signs of the times." At length, Don Alberione would confide (AD 43-45):

"Providence worked in accordance to God's ordinary method: fortiter et suaviter. [This method is] to prepare the ways and bring them together according to His purpose, to provide the light and help needed, to make one wait in peace until He comes to begin always from the bare necessities, to act in such a natural way as to be unable to easily distinguish grace from nature, but, certainly, [employing] both.

"Conversely, it is not the case to force God's hand. It suffices to be on the alert, to let oneself be guided, and to strive in one's various duties to employ mind, will, heart and physical strength...

"The actions of a human being are so imperfect, unsound, inadequate and dubious that one is duty bound to put everything back into the hands of God's Mercy and to allow oneself to be guided. He never forced the hand of Providence but always awaited God's sign."

In both St. Paul and Don Alberione, the intense spiritual encounter with Jesus and the perception of a mission became the basis of a relationship with the Risen Jesus that would last all their lives and would characterize their spiritual journey to holiness.

Even here, we could already perceive that for both St. Paul and Don Alberione, the idea of holiness as a goal seems alien.

St. Paul was preoccupied with the person of Christ and so was Don Alberione. Both were determined to accomplish the will of God for them and for the people they served regardless of their being unworthy and of the great pains and trials they had to undergo. St. Paul would mark this last in his letter to the Philippians (3:7-11):

"[But] whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of

his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Don Alberione, in turn, would confide to the first group of Paulines making their month-long spiritual exercises in 1960 (UPS 16-17):

“It might be helpful to go over some particular aspects of our beloved Congregation. I am coming to the end of my life and there is no point in deceiving myself; as well, I am speaking to you, brothers well qualified and endowed with many merits.

“As regards the component parts of the Pauline Family, I was guided every step of the way by obedience concerning their foundation, development, spirit, expansion, and apostolate.

“In a matter of such great responsibility three ingredients have proved necessary: the assurance of divine inspiration, the advice of the spiritual director, dependence on the legitimate superiors.

“These are the ways that the Church teaches and makes available ‘in in vanum currerem aut cuncurrissem’ (lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain). These were the ways I followed exhaustively, making use of the insight of people more learned, pious and trustworthy.

“I have felt the hand of God; a fatherly and wise hand, in spite of the countless shortcomings, for which I recite, trustingly, in the Offertory prayer: ‘pro innumerabilibus peccatis, offensionibus et negligentis meis’ (For my innumerable sins, offences and negligences)...”

From these, it would seem that both St. Paul and Don Alberione were not bothered by the question whether they had become holy or not. For them, what counted were the persons of Jesus and God himself who showed them mercy and had given them mission.

It is understandable that St. Paul would be much more affirmative of the grace and mission he had received but he never gave any sign that he took credit as regards whatever success he may have had, considering that he was living in a still troubled and confused stage of Christianity. If he had any success, so St. Paul would affirm strongly, it was due to Christ, and Christ crucified.

In the same manner, Don Alberione did not lay any claim on being holy or a saint. On the other hand, he remained convinced of his “innumerable sins, offences and negligences” and gave all the credit to “the hand of God”. Amazingly, it is precisely in this that we can affirm categorically that Don Alberione did live the theological virtues, most especially faith, to a heroic degree. This alone already counts him among the saints.

5) Christification. St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians strongly affirmed the goal which Don Alberione would welcome as the apex of spiritual life or holiness. St. Paul writes (Phil 3:12-14):

“It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue in my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]. Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus.”

From these lines we come to understand that holiness is “attaining perfect maturity” in being taken possession of by Christ Jesus. This is equivalent to the conformation in Christ that the most recent document on religious consecration mentioned above refers to. What is notable in this is that while on earth, no one really achieves full conformation in Christ but is in continuing journey, suggesting perhaps that the dynamics of Conformation in Christ would further continue in heaven.

In Don Alberione's part, we read in *Abundantes Divitiae* this beautiful summary of his spiritual experience and how he passes it on as his heritage to his Pauline Family (AD 93-95):

"The Pauline Family strives to fully live the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Way, Truth and Life, in the spirit of Saint Paul, under the gaze of the Queen of Apostles.

"There are not many details in [the Pauline Family], or unusual devotions, or excessive formalities. The aim is to live in "Christ the Master and in the Church. The spirit of Saint Paul is drawn from his life, his Letters and his apostolate. He is always alive in the Church's dogmatic and moral teaching, in her worship and in her organization.

"A secret of success is to model oneself on God by living in Christ. Thus the notion of living and working in the Church for the Church; of being wild olives grated onto the living olive, the Eucharistic Lord; of reflecting on and nourishing oneself with every word of the Gospel, in accord with the spirit of St. Paul – [is] always to be crystal clear."

From all these, we can confidently welcome the model of holiness that Don Alberione, basing on St. Paul, proposes for us. The challenge remains: to be able to say at the end of our lives, "... yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved and given himself up for me."

My checklist on the path to holiness

Here, comes most handy the saying of St. Augustine, "If they (St. Paul and Don Alberione) made it, then why can't I?" If St. Paul and Don Alberione were the vanguards of the spirituality our Founder has passed on to us and they are saints, then, we can easily affirm that we can adopt their spirit and make it our own and live by the hope that we, too, may reach holiness.

Along this line, the stages we mentioned above could very well be our own checklist in our journey to holiness. The stages are as follows: 1). Stage of preparation; 2) An intense spiritual experience; 3) Perception of a mission to carry out; 4) Establishment of a personal relationship based on submission to the Father's will; 5) Christification.

St. Paul and Don Alberione lived their own lives and went through their own trials and tribulations but, as we have seen above, their relationship with God, their path to holiness both went through the aforementioned stages. Should we not feel safe, too, if we check on our lives following these stages and supplying the details related to them? This is worth trying and finding out.

1) My stage of preparation. Both St. Paul and Don Alberione looked back into their lives to identify "the hand of God" that gradually led them, through people and events, to the various turning points in their lives. St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, (Phil 3:4-6) speaks of his background with rather emphatic words:

"If anyone else thinks he can be confident in the flesh, all the more can I. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee, in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless..."

Between the lines of this expression of St. Paul, there is no recrimination of any sort. He considered all these a blessing. In our perspective, we can safely affirm that all the early experiences of Paul were a preparation for that great moment of change that, in the same letter (Phil 3:7-11), Paul affirms:

“[But] whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and [the]sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

On his part, Don Alberione considered the persons, the events and the circumstances of his life as a child as very much a part of God’s call to him. He would mention as “time of greater grace” his teacher’s asking him what he wanted to become when he was but six years old. He was enlightened to say he wanted to be a priest. This was but among the first “lights” Don Alberione would call in his journey to God...

It becomes obvious now that in our spiritual journey, the best question is not to ask the same question and official asked Jesus in the Gospel (Lk 18:18), “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” to which Jesus answers, “... No one is good but God alone” as if to rebuke the official for asking the wrong question.

At times, in our eagerness to live a life pleasing to God, the first question we ask is the same as what the official asked: “What must I do to go to heaven?” This question puts us in the center stage of our spiritual life where we ought not to be in the first place. At the center stage there is the “supreme good of God” as St. Paul puts it. Consequently, the better question to ask is, “What has God done to me?” In short, the real start of spiritual life is the discovery of God who has done wonderful things to me and has chosen to love me not because of me but in spite of me.

In the experience of the Chosen People, relationship between them and Yahweh began from the strong experience of being liberated by God from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. This convinced them that they were a special people and God loved them.

In the same manner, I could begin living my spiritual life with the recognition that even before I was born, God has given me his predilections and during my early years, God has manifested his love for me through people like my parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, parish priest, neighbors, friends and in circumstances where, instead of evil befalling me, good became my share. In short, it is good to start my spiritual life with the recognition that, like St. Paul and Don Alberione, there was a stage of preparation for me, too, where God’s hand was on my head.

In effect, I would do well to look back and reflect on my past in order to find out in what specific circumstance, through who specific persons did God show his love for me and prepared me...

2) My intense spiritual experience. In St. Paul, we identify this intense spiritual experience in his encounter with the Risen Christ on his way to Damascus which encounter marked the key turning point of his life which, time and again, he wrote about in his letters: Christ showed his mercy on him changed him from a persecutor of the Church to his Apostle.

In Don Alberione, we see this intense spiritual experience during the night that separated the two centuries, December 31, 1900 and January 1, 1901 (cf. AD 13-17). He was but 16 years old, still on probation at the Seminary of Alba, frail as ever, just out of a moment of strong youth crisis that followed his dismissal from the Seminary of Bra and the strong refusal of his father to support him further in his studies in the seminary. The strong spiritual experience must have created in the young Alberione the conviction that, in spite of himself, the Eucharistic Lord had special designs for him...

In various degrees of intensity and in varying circumstances, every person intent to pursue the path to holiness could not have but experience similar intense spiritual experience where God allows himself to be experienced in a very intimate manner by the person called.

Here, one would do well to look back in his life and identify those specific moments where God personally intervened and showed his love and protection to him or her.

Those specific moments need not be spectacular as that of St. Paul's conversion or as dramatic as Don Alberione's four-hour adoration at the turn of the century. It may just be a moment when one feels God very strongly, a moment when one feels so alive because he is especially loved by God.

Surely, the effort has to be made to find this out.

One example is what an elderly lay brother told me as regards with his decision to enter the religious life: "I was listening to a sermon when the priest asked emphatically the question from the Gospel, 'What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?' The question kept on ringing in my head. When someone came to invite me to join a congregation, I went. I thought the religious might give me an answer."

St. Therese of the Child Jesus would tell his father how God had written her name in heaven when she saw a constellation of stars forming the letter T, the initial of her own name. This childlike awareness actually led St. Therese to live what we now call the spirituality of the little flower: offering back to God, as a response to his love, the simple things we do and suffer each day...

A couple confided to me that they could not resist the invitation to join the Pauline Cooperators when, during their moments visiting the Blessed Sacrament, they found out that their only daughter was writing notes to Jesus in the Eucharist telling him of her life with them and telling him how she loved him.

These and many others could be an example of that special moment of grace which ought to be the starting point of one's spiritual life. It brings about, in fact, the realization that God is not some distant reality, "up in Heaven" who "judges heaven and earth" but very much a living being mysteriously hidden in the circumstances of life but manifests himself in ways and manners that one least expects.

In short, that special moment of grace in one's life establishes God as the loving transcendent person in the other end of a beautiful relationship and is the center of this very special love relationship between God who chose to become man so that man – I – can share in God's life.

God shows his love and the natural response to respond to that love follows.

At times, even the manner with which one has to respond to God is also gracefully given in terms of a call, a vocation, and a mission to carry out. This was the case of St. Paul and Don Alberione. It might as well be our case.

3) Perception of a mission to carry out. In the end, the intense experience of God as well as the manifestation of his call or mission becomes the foundation of an intimate personal love relationship with God. This intimate relationship with God actually constitutes what we call spiritual life. What is spiritual life if not the cultivation of a love relationship with God who has chosen to love us first not because of us but in spite of us? What is spiritual life is not having God at the center stage of one's life and one becomes an actor of a love story that is destined to be lasting, fruitful and self-fulfilling on earth and designed to have a happy ending on this life and endless joy on the next.

Consequently, arises in the person the desire to respond to this love of God. He or she opens her eyes to life and sees it with a different outlook. Life is nothing but the

moment allotted to him to both experience God's love and to show his own response of love to that love. Thus, he realizes, too, that he cannot just sit down and watch the world go by. He has to join hands with God in his desire to bring salvation to all. He has to be one with Jesus and share in his mission.

Truly, one who experiences God's love and call cannot but go out and express his response the call by acts of love, by active service, by expressions of his love for God.

In the process, he realizes that between him and God, there is a great gap. Thus, he comes to believe truly what St. John wrote in his letter (1Jn 4:12): "No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us."

When he strives to render service to his brothers, when he tries to perform his duties, when he performs the apostolate, the spiritual soul actually has, at the back of his mind, this strong desire to love God back. This, in fact, is his basic motivation in the performance of his duties, in carrying out his mission. In effect, we cannot say we love God if we do not love our neighbor and we cannot say we love our neighbor and yet do nothing to alleviate his pain or share with him our joy, etc.

4) Establishment of a personal relationship based on submission to the Father's will. When a person reaches the point of awareness that he is loved by God whom he loves in exchange and when he realizes that to show his love for God, he has to cultivate life in the spirit with him as well as render his services to his neighbor, by then, he actually establishes an intimate personal relationship with God.

This relationship is basically founded on one's surrender to God and his love. It is based on one's determination to do what God wills and designs for him for one realizes that his eternal happiness and his supreme good is in God and to subject himself to God's designs and to do his will is the best thing he could do to love God back.

In the case of St. Paul, this will was to bring the Good News to the Gentiles. To Don Alberione, it was to do something for the people of the new century with whom he would live; it was to evangelize through the media.

To us, God's designs may neither be spectacular nor dramatic. This does not matter that much. What matters is that we do whatever God's will and fill in his designs. After all, we are members of Christ's mystical body and in that body there are many parts with various functions. It is not what function we do but how we do it for the whole.

The realization of this aspect makes one discover a new sense of self-worth and a new source of joy. Knowing that one lives his life meaningfully with effects that transcend this life, knowing that one does things for God who has loved him first and knowing that he is but a part of an evangelizing Mystical Body, all these offer a person new reasons for hope and new meanings for further dedication to whatever he may perceive as God's will for him.

The same realization makes him experience the very real need to cultivate that intimacy that God has allowed him into. He, thus, prays.

His prayer now goes beyond the confines of formulas and enters the level of intimacy between two beings who deeply love each other, between a loving God and a loved soul, between a Father and a Child, between a Master and a Disciple, etc. In this level, the Eucharist becomes a deeply intimate moment wherein a person listens to God's words, participates in the Sacrifice of Jesus, and receives Jesus in communion during which he allows himself to be transformed into Jesus himself. Likewise, his visits to the Blessed Sacrament become very intimate encounter between Jesus sacramentally present and one who comes to share such a moment of being. Likewise, the entire arc of the day is completely colored by the love relationship that is lived through earthly

realities where one is no less dedicated for he knows such earthly realities are the concrete occasions for making present the transcendent ones.

He still continues with his “devotions” but this time it is not in the same spirit of his fathers when Jesus, Mary and the saints were approached mainly for assistance in one’s struggle to do good and avoid evil. His devotions now consist in the experience of union between those persons who already enjoy the glories of eternal life, with those persons who still are in various stages of purification after death and the entire People of God journeying on this earth. He now shares with them the same love of God and seeks their assistance and guidance in his efforts to love God back. Likewise, with the people who are his co-pilgrims, he strives to establish communion so that Jesus becomes even more present in their midst and he contributes in creating that environment wherein Christ is brought to maturity in each one. His ideal with the rest of the pilgrim Church is to already become a sign of God’s Kingdom even here on earth.

5) Christification. One of the strongest indications of true love, so am I told, is this desire to lose one’s identity in the person loved. In the spiritual life based on the relationship of love between God and man, it becomes the soul’s strongest desire to be identified with the God he loves.

As if to second to this strong desire, God offers as gift to man the possibility of sharing in his divine life.

Jesus became man so that through his death and resurrection, man might share fully in God’s life. Just as Jesus took human nature in Mary’s womb and shared human nature with the rest of humanity, his death and resurrection made it possible for human nature to share in his divinity. Thus, the possibility of “becoming Gods” has been offered to mankind in a relationship based on love.

The relationship based on love demands freedom for one can love only when he remains free. Thus, God offers his love but never forces it to man. He offers his life but man shares in that life only with the response of faith. He offers intimacy in the Trinitarian Life but man can share it only when he strives to love God back.

Thus when a soul welcomes these offerings of God, he enters into the process of being transformed into Christ.

The transformation in Christ is life and as life it grows towards maturity. And the maturation takes place when one decides to enter what we may call a “sustained dialogical relationship with God in Christ.” This relationship lasts a lifetime and never really reaches completeness. One can never really tell he is fully Christified. He can only affirm that he is on the path of Christification for he strives to respond to God’s will for him as he lives on in life.

For him, God’s will assumes different features. When young, that will may come in the guise of formation or preparation for an adult life of service and dedication. When mature, it may consist in active involvement in very concrete and material apostolic activity. Then, later, that will may take the guise of sickness, old age, sufferings and finally death.

One who lives intimately his relationship with God and is open to doing God’s will for him no matter what it is believing that doing God’s will transforms him into Christ, is not daunted by anything. On the other hand, he lives in the secure awareness that God loves him and he tries to love God back. This awareness becomes the source of that joy he experiences through life. And in that joy he bears witness to the Good News. His life becomes the Good News alive.

Then, death ceases to be something to fear. In fact, death becomes a much-desired final passage to a life of full maturation of that love relationship begun and cultivated on

earth in the form of one's conformation with Christ, which will continue forever in the next life

Consequently, death becomes the longed-for passage that would lead one to finally "see eye-to-eye" the God who chose to love one first and then gave the chance and the possibilities to love him back. What greater joy is there than for one to finally meet the "beloved" that the Song of Songs would intensely sing about and be one with that "beloved" forever?

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